



THE
SATELLITE
AGENT

A NOVEL

BY
ERIC VINCENT

FROM THE PYRAMIDER TRILOGY



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From the PYRAMIDER Trilogy
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01

Nepal, Sunday May 1st, 2005

Victoria's tears burned her cheeks, but at the speed she and Prasad were riding, she couldn't remove a hand from the reins to dry them. Prasad rode several meters vanguard, guiding Victoria along a narrow brink cut into a sheer cliff side. The hoofs of their Marwari horses beat furious polyrhythms into the dusty path. Fathoms below, an emerald and jade mosaic of barley fields glistened under a sky so infinite, Victoria swooned with vertigo, might she go reeling off into outer space at a sudden tilt of the horizon's azimuth. Something like that seemed possible today. For this emergency escape, along these soaring trans-Himalayan paths, came in the wake of witnessing the assassination of Sher Khan.

At fourteen thousand feet above sea level, the ancient city of Qo Nustang is accessible only by horseback, or on foot. Disciples of Sher Khan trekked the distance to him in pilgrimage, the privation a test of their authenticity. His doctrine of Zen simplicity and trans-ethnic solidarity spread via written manifestos, tape-recorded interviews, and digital video clips carried back to modern civilization like spiritual contraband, and posted on websites, blogs, and YouTube pages.

But Victoria Penrose arrived at Qo Nustang impartial to Sher Khan's mystic celebrity. It was the music which brought Victoria to this global perimeter: the exotic chanting of its monastery's Buddhist monks, monks like Prasad, the tanned and bearish guide who'd escorted Victoria here. She noticed Prasad glancing back to make sure she was still with him. Then he swiveled his head forward again, as they raced down the mountainside.

Victoria's week at the monastery went fine until the end. The monks humored her with enthusiasm, while she captured their lyric chants on her flash recorder. The cult of Sher Khan's charisma hummed safely in the background, under the vigilant eye of that female Chinese colonel, Ying, and her platoon of khaki-clad guards.

With Sunday morning came the outdoor ceremony: a low-hanging sun gracing Sher Khan's outstretched arms, his youthful visage, ochre-toned skin, piercing brown eyes under a shrub of kinky brown hair. *Like Jesus*, Victoria thought. At that, his head pitched back, his chest ruptured, and Sher Khan crumpled to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been scissored.

Victoria ran to him, yanking off her headscarf. The Chinese colonel, Ying, fixed on Victoria an accusatory stare, as if she were somehow culpable. Then Ying and her guards became infuriated from shouting into two-way radios which responded with silence. The entire Chinese platoon mounted their horses, and charged off towards the ridge. Victoria tried to use her headscarf to tend to Sher Khan's wounds, but he was gone. She was glancing about in manic disbelief when Prasad said to her, "You should go."

Victoria stood, gripping the blood-soaked headscarf, watching the billowing trail of dust Ying and her equine squad kicked up as they sped toward the ridge. Victoria gazed upon the spectacle of it as if trapped in a nightmare to endure before waking. Prasad broke her spell by persisting, "I have seen that look Colonel Ying set upon you. You should go. I will escort you. Now."

Now, racing away from Qo Nustang, Prasad glanced back to confirm she was still with him. Then he swiveled his head forward again, as they hurtled along the Khali Gandaki river valley, Victoria's tears still flowing, still burning her cheeks.

I can't leave yet! she tried to call out to Prasad. But it came out a whisper, and she knew she was already gone.

02

Five years later to the day.

Under a timbered cathedral ceiling, the final ensemble in the evening's program drew its performance to a close. Applause erupted from the hundred or so stocking-footed audience members sitting on the living room floor. Victoria Penrose walked to the center-stage microphone with a bright smile, the concluding ritual of her monthly living room concert series. Clad in tight jeans and a tan micro-blazer, body relaxed with yoga-honed poise, her rippling mane of blonde hair hung to the small of her back, and her jade-green eyes glistened with joyful appreciation at the happy gathering.

Standing against the backdrop of her chocolate-brown Mason & Hamlin concert grand piano, she thanked the featured artists of the night, noted the date of the next salon concert, and invited those who didn't have to wake early the next day to hang around and socialize. Then she headed for the kitchen because, as usual, that's where the biggest mess would be. Most of the attendees filed toward the stairway to retrieve their shoes from the street-level vestibule and depart. In their wake, a usual squad of bohemians remained to help Victoria clean the place, and polish off what was left of the wine and hors d'oeuvres.

Tristan Boumann called out, "Yo, Vic, another *amazing* night!" He held a glass of red wine in one hand, while using the other to scoop cocktail party detritus from the Persian area rug covering the center of the room. Lanky and rakish, with smoldering blue eyes and tousled blond hair, Tristan played electric guitar in a combo that performed in the night's program.

Victoria held a garbage bag open in the middle of the kitchen floor. As Tristan plunged a clutch of trash into it, she said, "Thanks so much for helping clean, Tris." She closed the trash bag, turned to stash it under the sink, and hesitated at the sight of a white business envelope taped to the stainless steel door of her refrigerator. She tucked the trash bag away, and pulled the envelope off the fridge.

Wine Donation was hand-written on the front of the envelope. “Tris? Did you leave this?”

He stood next to her and looked at the envelope. “Can I *claim* that I did?”

She tore the envelope open. It contained a folded letter, and a twenty-dollar bill. She opened the letter, and began reading. She glanced at Tristan and said, “That’s a little spooky.” She folded the letter, stuffed it in the hip pocket of her blazer, and glanced around the apartment, saying, “At every one of these salon concerts, we get at least one or two weirdoes. At least this one was considerate enough to leave a tip.”

• • •

Later, while undressing in bachelorette solitude, Victoria pulled it from her pocket, reopened it, and glanced it over.

A book proposal in the form of a puzzle, hand-delivered inside my residence. Who would have the nerve?

She took the letter to her desk, and sat in front of a Mac Pro desktop workstation. She woke the machine, and opened Mail. The letter from the fridge mentioned an email. She had several in her inbox, from addresses she recognized. One was tagged as Junk, from a strange address, *byelove223*. She opened that one. The text field was empty, but a jpeg was attached. She read the letter.

Dear Miss Penrose,

I understand you are a satellite agent for Shipp Literary Media. I am developing a book proposal, and would be honored if you had time to review it. However, due to the exceedingly delicate nature of the content material, I must inform you of both the project, and my identity, in an encrypted fashion. You will find an email in your inbox, attached with a jpeg image of a painting of a bridge over a stream. Contained within that image, is further explanation of this matter. If you were to import the image

into Photoshop, and apply the filters listed below with the precise settings given, the relevant message will emerge.

Below that was a table chart, listing various Photoshop filters such as Noise, Unsharp Mask, Invert, Hue/Saturation, and so forth, each with corresponding settings listed in the table.

How did he know I have Photoshop?

She laid the letter on the desk, and clicked open the jpeg. As the letter promised, it was a Japanese watercolor painting of a bridge over a stream. She got up, and later returned with a mug of camomile tea sweetened with a dab of raw country honey. She opened Photoshop, imported the image, and began applying the filters in the order and settings specified in the letter. At one point, she stopped and gazed at the new image emerging.

Steganography. Ying schooled me on this.

Sipping her tea, she reminisced how roughly a year and a half after the Nepal incident, she traveled to San Francisco for a series of concerts of new original compositions. At the opening night reception, she spotted Ying in the crowd, which was a real shock. The last time they'd seen each other, they were in the impossibly remote Himalayan kingdom of Qo Nustang, where Victoria clutched the murdered Sher Khan, while Ying, the Chinese colonel in charge of Sher Khan's security detail, shouted into a two-way radio. Now, in a concert hall in San Francisco, wearing formal clothes and cultivated smiles, they sipped wine under chandeliers. Victoria initially thought she was hallucinating. But Ying's visage was patently distinctive: the aristocratic curve of her cheeks, a physique like an Olympic swimmer's, jet-black hair cut in bangs to her eyebrows, and the way her narrow yet alert eyes seemed to notice everything without seeming probing. When Victoria caught that gaze, Ying shook her head once and closed her eyes, a gesture Victoria interpreted as *Pretend you don't know me.*

Moments later, Ying approached Victoria with a cordial smile and an outstretched hand, and said in her clipped English, "I very much enjoyed your performance of your works, Miss Penrose." They shook hands, Victoria playing

along. After Ying walked off, Victoria realized a folded paper was stuck to her palm. She deposited the note in the hip pocket of her formal blazer, and began making her way to her backstage dressing room. She locked herself inside, read the note, and smiled in wonderment. The paper was inscribed with a clever critique of Victoria's recital. But it was not Ying's critique of the music which was clever. Rather, through emulating the numbering systems utilized in music theory, Ying had seemed to embed her phone number in the message. It was something only the composer would recognize, because the numbers were uncorrelated to the musical arrangements. Victoria's hunch was confirmed when she dialed the number, and Ying answered: "I knew you would get it."

The following morning, the two of them walked through a misty fog in a quiet park below the Golden Gate Bridge. Their elbows entwined as they strolled the dewy grass, Ying explained steganography, the art of concealing information, in all its uses and variations. One variation, known as blog steganography, they would utilize to communicate in subsequent years, posting exchanges in the comments sections of a round-robin list of blogs scattered far and wide across cyberspace.

Now, in the nocturnal quiet of her Philadelphia apartment, Victoria shook off this trance of reminiscence, and went back to work on the mysterious jpeg from the aspiring author. In increments, the hidden image emerged more clearly. She tried not to read it, concentrating instead on implementing the sender's intricate instructions. *This person picked the right girl to send this to*, she mused, recalling how her friends over the years observed an obsessive-compulsive streak in her. Her father, a renown cardiologist, would console her the trait was a factor in her success as an artist.

At last, the final setting applied, she sipped what was left of her tea, and gazed in awe at the computer screen. A ghostly residue of the Japanese watercolor painting remained. But super-imposed on it was a text message, written in multi-colored brush strokes. It read:

After you record the phone number at the end of this message, delete this

jpeg, and any copies you may have made of it, using the Secure Empty Trash function under the Finder pull-down menu. Your calls to that phone cannot be traced, because it is a special phone called a Telemetric, designed by an engineer working for British Intelligence. My professional name is Galileo, which I was known by in the global intelligence community. Now retired, it occurs to me I could find comfort in writing about the tradecraft. Feel free to reach me at the supplied number if you are interested in helping shepherd this project to fruition. If not, no hard feelings, just make sure you remember to delete this message, and do not mention this, or me, to anybody, ever.

Victoria glanced around her apartment and shivered at the thought, *This Galileo fellow was here tonight, inside my home.*

She read the message again, got up, and returned with her cellphone. She brought up the numeric keypad, stared at it a moment, and glanced back at the number on the computer monitor.

I should just trash this email, and forget all about this.

Her forefinger hovered over the phone's touchscreen.

But I'm not going to do that, am I?

She typed Galileo's phone number into her phone. She stared at the number, memorizing it, then stored it, leaving the name blank. Then she typed an email to Beverly Shipp, her old friend and CEO of Manhattan-based Shipp Literary Media:

Unless you wave me off, I'm coming up for lunch tomorrow (oops, today now).

03

In mid-town Manhattan, a black stretch limo awaited Victoria in Pennsylvania Station's canopied carport. She climbed into it, and emerged later at the Museum of Modern Art. In the museum's restaurant, The Modern, a hostess escorted Victoria past a long white marble bar, and beyond a frosted-glass wall. There, ensconced in a semi-circular booth in the center of the sleek Bauhaus-inspired dining room, was venerated New York literary agent Beverly Shipp. She stood for Victoria. They embraced with an intimacy unique to dear friends, kissing each other's cheeks, then settled into the curved black leather bench and ordered lunch.

After the waiter went off with their order, the two ladies glanced out at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden on the other side of the dining room's two-story glass wall. "So," Victoria said, unsure how to proceed.

Beverly folded her hands on the white cotton tablecloth. The gold-embroidered cuff of her black Chanel blazer receded enough to reveal an Audemars Piguet watch. Wearing simple but elegant diamond earrings, Beverly's black and silver hair framed her round face in arabesque curls and waves. She filled the vacuum of Victoria's hesitation: "So. Something's up with you. Since you're still single, I'll take a wild guess that it has to do with a man."

"You could say that. But I've never met him, although I'm certain he was in my apartment last night."

"Please tell me you notified the police."

"Not yet. I had a salon concert last night. He apparently attended, and left behind an intriguing book proposal, but with an edict to not discuss it with anyone."

"But since I'm not just anyone, you're perfectly entitled to discuss it with me."

Victoria leaned toward Beverly and whispered in her ear, "He claims he used to be a spy."

Beverly's expression became more opaque than usual. Victoria relaxed into the circular leather couch, and mirrored Beverly's agnostic gaze, adding a subtle nod. Restaurant ambience clattered and chattered around them. Instrumental trip-hop emanated from the ceiling like a clockwork pulse to the big city's workday. Beverly murmured, "Not that we're simply in this for the money, heaven forbid. But do you know what kind of revenue *those* sorts of memoirs often produce?"

"Of course. Who doesn't like a good spy tale? I can't wait to see the manuscript."

"How convinced are you?"

"That he really was...?" Beverly nodded. Victoria went on, "You should've seen how he contacted me. It was hidden inside an email, as a jpeg attachment, very creative. After having gotten to know Ying, I feel like I've got a sense of... she calls it *the tradecraft*."

Beverly made a discreet glance around the dining room. "You know, I have this one client who's from that world, and he's written about it. He might know how to figure out if this man of yours is for real or not. He's in London, but I'd be willing to contact him on your behalf."

"Do you think that's a good idea? What if they know each other?" They quieted for their approaching waiter, who corked and poured the Riesling Beverly had ordered, set the bottle in a chrome-plated ice bucket, and left them alone. They sipped the wine. Victoria cooed, "This is so good. You have the most exquisite taste of anyone I know."

Unfazed, Beverly murmured, "Tell me more about this email. Discreetly."

Victoria leaned towards her, eyes outward, and began, "He left an envelope taped to my fridge, disguised as a donation for the wine fund. Lot's of people do that. The wine fund, I mean. I guess they got tired of the cheap boxed wine I was serving. But this envelope had instructions for decoding a jpeg it said was in my email. And it was. No text, just a jpeg of a Japanese watercolor painting. The note had a set of Photoshop settings to apply to the picture, and they transformed it into a written message."

"Steganography."

“Yes. It gave me goose-bumps, Bev, watching that pretty painting transform like that. It didn’t seem like something easy to do.”

“It’s not. I’m fairly convinced myself, just by that.”

Their entrées arrived.

• • •

After a busboy cleared their dishes and the waiter topped off their wine glasses, Beverly said, “You know, Vic, balance is important. You’ve been working awful hard over the past few years. But I have to ask. Do you ever unplug?”

Victoria sipped the wine, and said. “I always feel unplugged. There’s no difference. Work is escape for me.”

“Escape from what?”

“Not from. To. I feel compelled to move forward.”

“Since Nepal?”

Victoria smiled with sad eyes and said, “Am I *that* noticeably different since then?”

Beverly tapped on Victoria’s bare ring finger, “Vic?”

“Oh, that’s right, I’m a divorcee now. I guess that qualifies as noticeably different.”

“I wasn’t being judgmental.”

Victoria sighed, “You could be excused, though. I drove Richard crazy after I returned from Nepal.”

Beverly became firm, “He should have understood, and given you breathing room.”

“Richard wasn’t mature enough to do that. I was supposed to be his artsy little trophy wife. My little adventure in Nepal...” Victoria trailed off.

Beverly cut in, “It made him look small. You were doing important work. He was the arrogant hedge-fund master of the universe, and you outshined him. If he couldn’t handle that?” Beverly shook her head, “Then he didn’t deserve you. He certainly proved it with that nasty divorce he put you through.”

Victoria almost smiled, “That was his way of saying, *I’m the powerful one*. And he did make that point in a way, because my creative output fell off a cliff. I’m only just now getting back to full stride.” She shot a serious glance at Beverly, “You asked me why I don’t unplug lately. There’s your answer.”

Beverly nodded in approval, “If that’s therapeutic for you, then by all means.”

Victoria relaxed into the curved couch, swirling her wine in its glass, a pensive look etched on her brow. “You know what was therapeutic? Seeing Ying in San Francisco. I was so frightened when I first spotted her. But it was such a relief to talk with her about Nepal. It gave us closure. Seeing what happened to Sher Khan, and then that awful divorce, yeah, it knocked the innocence out of me. But Bev, we *all* have to go through things like that eventually. I might be different after Nepal. But for Ying to come and find me, that kept me from going seriously insane. Before that, I was blaming myself for Sher Khan’s death.”

“Why would you do that?”

Victoria shrugged, “I was naive. I thought my work in Qo Nustang drew unwanted attention to the place. Ying convinced me otherwise. She told me about the intrigue around that situation. Political stuff. Sher Khan was being used. Ying suspects she was being used, too, but doesn’t know why. So many mysteries...” Victoria paused, and shook her head. “I have to shut up. I promised Ying I wouldn’t discuss it with anyone. I know, you’re not just anyone. But I promised her.”

Beverly patted Victoria’s arm, “I understand.”

• • •

Elbows entwined, the two women exited the restaurant into the adjacent sculpture garden, strolling under a warm afternoon sun. Beverly said, “I have to get back to the office. You’re welcome to come.”

“I’d love to, but I have to get back to Philadelphia, and get started on new music for Koresh Dance Company. Roni needs rough drafts of the scores so he can start rehearsals. And there’s this business with my spy.”

“Oh, yes, your spy. Remember my offer. Should you need help with that, we have a client in London.”

With a sly grin, Victoria said, “James Bond?”

“Don’t joke. The man’s former MI-6. I’ll FedEx you his book. It’ll floor you when you see the title. He had to write it under an alias. Chilling stuff. I’m surprised the British service hasn’t bumped him off for it.”

“You’re making me a little paranoid about what I might be getting into.”

“You should be. Take every precaution with this fellow of yours. He didn’t tell you what his name is, I suppose.”

“He said he goes by what he admits is a pseudonym, but said the intelligence field knows him by it.”

“Whisper it to me.”

Victoria put her lips near Beverly’s ear, and whispered, “Galileo.”

Beverly halted, scraping the asphalt with the heel of her shoe.

Victoria stopped, and murmured, “What, Bev?”

“The very *thought* of a book by a spy who goes by the name *Galileo*...”

Victoria stage-whispered, “I know! What a great name for a spy! It’s too juicy to pass up! Why do you think I rushed up here on short notice? I *knew* you would like this!”

Beverly motioned they resume walking, and murmured to Victoria, “If you meet with this man, make sure you do it in a public place, with people around. The more crowded, the better. And call me the very moment you have any issues with him.”

04

Twilight's dusky glow permeated Victoria's loft apartment when she dialed the phone number listed on the encrypted email. Galileo answered, confirming he'd sent the email. Victoria was surprised by his American accent for some reason. He spoke in a calm, world-weary tone, sounding reticent, as if conflicted in his overture to go public in publishing his career exploits. That only intrigued Victoria further.

He agreed to meet her the following day at a location near her apartment. He seemed to be feeling out the situation as much as Victoria, and that felt comforting to her. He didn't hint at objecting to her condition that they meet in public. "That's fine," he replied. "The more crowded, the better," he added, echoing Beverly Shipp's advice.

In what Victoria thought was a quaint throwback to a bygone era of spycraft, Galileo insisted they synchronize their wristwatches. He explained that he didn't trust the consistency of cellphone clock accuracy across various mobile service providers. He would appear at the exact designated minute at her table. She didn't know what he looked like, but he'd been inside her home, and thus would recognize her. Therefore, she must not be late, he said, because if he didn't spot her upon his arrival, he would vanish, and the venture would be considered dead.

In a final detail, he taught her something he called a *go-code*. "When I approach your table, I will say, *Cynthiae figuras*. Repeat it back to me, please."

"*Cynthiae figuras*."

"Correct. You will reply, *Aemulatur mater amorum*. Repeat it back."

"*Aemulatur mater amorum*."

"Correct. Those words will connect us, and only those words, in that exact order. If there is any other thing said, we both will exfiltrate."

That night, Victoria serenaded herself to sleep pondering this cryptic phrase, *Cynthiae figuras aemulatur mater amorum*.

The next day, Philadelphia's sylvan Rittenhouse Square was well-populated in the general sense, and more so around the French-windowed bistro called Rouge, enough to satisfy the condition they meet in a crowded public place. Rouge features an alfresco dining area spanning a flank of the tony public square. Out there, Galileo could not corner her in any way. A shout or two would bring plenty of attention, and alert a police presence vigilant in that patrician district.

Dressed in a smart red blazer and skirt ensemble, she arrived at Rouge early, secured a sidewalk table for two, tipped the hostess, and waited, checking her watch more often than her usual habit.

With one minute to go still, a red and white medical emergency vehicle roared up to the curb and halted next to her table, its siren blaring and lights flashing. Dark-gray smoke engulfed her table. Staccato bursts of machine gun fire vibrated in her bones. All around, people screamed in primal fear. Something canvas-like got shoved over her head, blackening her world.

She tried to flail her arms about, but her attackers restrained her from behind. Something jabbed her neck, and her whole body went numb. She got lifted up, and her bare calves dragged over something metallic. She was thrown to a hard floor and pinned to it. A sudden momentum forward yanked her pinned body into a queer angle. She felt the surging of the truck's transmission vibrate through the floor. The siren continued wailing throughout. They hollered at her to shut the fuck up and stop her screaming.

05

It felt like being hauled around like a bagged animal. She could feel them descending several flights of stairs. With the descent came a toxic odor. Victoria's ankles and wrists were bound with something sharp and unyielding. The rough canvas hood was suffocating her, inducing gag reflex, and she whipped her head around to stave that off. That feeling of helplessness, being carried to God knows where for what seemed like an eternity, and her imaginings of what gruesome violations might be inflicted on her by these people, it all terrified her. She struggled to control her bowels and her bladder, and to keep from vomiting.

I told Beverly his name. Galileo. She will tell somebody.

The fallacy of that assumption got slapped in her face the moment they ripped the hood off her head. The woman who'd slapped her shrieked in anger, "*WHERE IS GALILEO!*"

That grotesque odor, it burned her eyes and choked her palate. They had her fastened to a metallic chair. She struggled to adjust her eyesight, but the odor hit her right away. She'd been to enough third-world countries to know what their sooty streets smelled like, but those were rustic odors, tolerable. This one felt caustic like toxic waste, and the air felt dank and humid beyond claustrophobic.

A gleaming silver switchblade snapped open in her face. A young man's voice, his accent Russian, snorted, "I'm going to cut your fucking nose off, and you won't be so fucking pretty anymore. How's that sound, you little bitch?"

The Asian woman, the one Victoria now realized had slapped her, shouted, "Chill the fuck out!" while pushing the Russian away. She brought her face down to Victoria's level, and snarled, "He's serious, you know. He'll cut your fucking nose off. I've seen him do it. You won't look the same. No man will ever want you. So you better talk to *me*, before I turn you back over to *him*. Got it? Now, talk to me. Galileo. We have business to settle with him. And your skinny little white ass is not going to get in our way, because we will slice you up like sushi and eat you

and move on. Got that, you skinny little fucking blonde whore? So, where do we find Galileo?”

Victoria, now weeping, said, “He was supposed to meet me at that restaurant. The one you took me from. If you waited two more minutes, he’d have been there.”

The Asian woman stood, glancing at the other two in the room, the Russian, and Victoria now realized the other man was a plump, older Asian man. They didn’t speak, but seemed to be throwing non-verbal codes around at each other. The Asian woman crouched back down to face Victoria and snapped, “How do you know Galileo?”

“I don’t know him. He contacted me.”

“Why?”

Victoria shook her head, “I don’t know.”

“You’re lying, you stupid bitch! You don’t know who you’re fucking with! We’ll torture it out of you if we have to! It will be much easier for you if you tell us, *now!*”

Victoria sobbed, “I don’t deserve this! I’m just a musician! I’m not a part of your world!”

The Asian woman wiped the tears from Victoria’s cheeks, and asked in a melodic, girlish voice, “You’re a musician? What do you play?”

Victoria sniffed and said, “The piano.”

“The piano. Well, then, it would be a shame if you lost your fingers, wouldn’t it?” Victoria glared at the Asian woman, who continued, “My boyfriend here, he gets off on carving up pretty little girls like you. It makes my cunt wet watching him do it. And I don’t like you, Victoria Penrose. I think you’re a spoiled little bitch. You must think you’re so fucking talented and sophisticated. I could strangle you myself, right now, just for the fuck of it, just to watch the life drain out of those pretty green eyes of yours. But we have work to do. Galileo. One way or another, you are going to lead us to *him*, or you are going to lead him to *us*. Understand?”

Victoria closed her eyes and nodded.

The Asian woman unleashed a slap across Victoria’s face and screamed, “Wrong answer!”

Victoria moaned through her tears, “What do you want from me?”

“Something tangible!”

Victoria shouted, “I don’t know what else to tell you!”

The Asian woman stood and called out, “Valerey!”

The muscular blond Russian knelt beside Victoria and leered into her eyes, his face inches from hers. He had a wide, flat face, with a distinctive cleft chin, and his eyes were weirdly gray, even in their pupils, like he lacked a soul. He took her hand in his and said, “I’ll be kind with you, since you’re so small and pretty, and I’ll start with your pinky. That won’t be so bad, no? Losing a pinky? You will still be able to play your piano, only one-tenth less so.” He positioned the switchblade between her pinky and ring finger. “But what I’m hoping is after I’m done carving the pinky from your hand, you will realize that we are serious, and we really do expect you to help us find this asshole who calls himself Galileo.”

Victoria glared at him. Her body convulsed against her restraints. But what triggered those convulsions, more so than the imminent prospect of losing a finger, was her rage at the smug expression of entitlement on her tormentor’s face. As she was thinking that, a rosette popped open on the side of his skull. His eyes became crossed, and the switchblade hit the floor with a clatter. A heartbeat later, the Asian woman let out a frightened moan. Victoria glanced up. A crimson flower erupted on the woman’s forehead between her eyes. The plump Asian man fell to the floor in a somersault, and fired several shots across the room from a firearm he’d kept hidden until then, while his two comrades crumpled to the floor with a nauseating lifelessness.

Victoria glanced to her left, at the sole doorway to the room. A dark-haired man stood there, of average height and slim build, dressed in a trim khaki business suit. He had his right arm straightened across his chest, pointing a pistol at the plump Asian man now sitting on the floor.

The man at the door pivoted his right foot into the room, facing the Asian man, his pistol still aimed down at him. The Asian man, his eyes moist, clutched at a dark stain spreading on his shirt over his heart. His gun fell to the floor as he became unable to call the strength to continue gripping it.

The new arrival let his outstretched arm fall to his side, loosely gripping his pistol, its barrel pointing akimbo at the grimy floor. His scruffy black hair gleamed in Italianate waves, and his face was fair, angular, emotionless. He stood possessed of a Zen stillness and a gothic presence, a vampiric angel of death.

The Asian man's chubby face, eyes welling with tears, came to resemble a tragedy mask. He gazed up at his assassin as if witnessing an apparition. What the intruder did next chilled Victoria to her very core: taking his gun in his left hand, he reached his right hand out to the Asian man, his index and middle fingers extended together like a wand, and made the sign of the cross while murmuring, "Lord Jesus, receive this man's spirit."

The chubby Asian man dimmed his eyes, squeezing out tears, which rolled down his round cheeks, leaving reflective streaks. He made one subtle head-nod, then slumped over in stillness. Victoria wasn't aware that she could hear his breathing, until she realized it had stopped, and an unreal silence blinked over the room. The entire sequence, from the Russian man's skull sprouting an opening, to the Asian man's final breath, had unfolded in the space of about four seconds.

06

“I knew him,” Galileo said, motioning to the now-deceased Asian man.

Victoria was certain the dark-haired man in the khaki business suit was Galileo. She recognized his voice from their phone conversation. Even if her musician’s ears were not so finely tuned, there would still be no mistaking that combination of the husky timbre, and the laconic, world-weary tone. But she couldn’t compute what he’d just said, so she repeated it back to him in an exhausted rasp: “You *knew* him?”

“Yeah. His name was William. He was an okay guy. I wish I didn’t have to do that.” Brushing a curving lock of black hair from his forehead, he turned in her direction. For the first time, she got a good look at his face. Prominent among his angular features, were jet-black eyes set at a shallow bias, as if he’d had a Polynesian grandparent. He furrowed his dark brow and pointed at the brawny blond Russian man sprawled on the floor next to her. “This one, I know his older brother. They’re both sadists. I never cared for either one of them.”

Victoria couldn’t believe what she said next, but then, she couldn’t believe *any* of what was happening: “What about the woman,” she asked. “Did you know her?”

Galileo glanced at the Asian woman’s lifeless body splayed on the floor. A look of disapproval flashed across his face. “No. She’s new to the biz. I have no idea who she is. I do know she’s a little sloppy. But that worked to my advantage...” Galileo glanced at Victoria, “And yours.” He tucked his gun inside his suit jacket, and said, “*Cynthiae figuras.*”

She replied almost in whisper, “*Aemulatur mater amorum.*”

“Are you okay?”

“They stabbed something into my neck, and it’s made my whole body numb.”

“I might be able to help you with that. Let’s cut these binders off you.” He knelt down, produced a small cutter as if it came from inside his sleeve, and snapped off what Victoria now realized were those white plastic wrist-cuffs seen

on the TV cop shows. She tried to shake out her freed arms and legs, but they were still numb. “Let me guess,” he placed his fingertips on the side of her neck, under her left jaw, “They hit you right here.”

“How did you know?”

“That’s an accu-pressure point.” He massaged that spot with his fingertips. “Better?”

She pulled her body upright on the chair, “A little.”

He placed his hands on her upper shoulders and kneaded at the muscles there. “Carefully roll your head around in circles while I do this.” She complied, and felt her composure returning. He went on, “We gotta get out of here, right now. Do you think you can move?”

“Yeah.” She arched her back. “I feel a lot better now.”

“One more thing. I’m not a perv, okay? But I’m going to tap on your chest a couple of times. It’s going to give you an energy boost,” and he did, firmly with his fingertips, right between her breasts, four times. “That should stimulate your adrenaline. Here.” He put his arm around her and helped her up. “Look around, see if any of your things are here.”

“There’s my bag. They spilled all my stuff out.” She knelt down and started scooping it all back in.

He knelt to help her. “You can’t leave anything here. Make sure you get every tiny thing. The shoes you were wearing, were they red patent leather?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“I found them upstairs in the ambulance. So we got those. You got your phone?”

“It’s right here. It looks like they were going through the contacts. They wouldn’t have found your number. I memorized it.”

“Good work.” They stood. She moaned, cowering into him. He said, “Try not to look at them.”

The three executed bodies splayed around them, and the pungent odors they began to emit... it was all hitting her at once. She buried her face in his chest and moaned, “Who *were* these people?”

“Amateurs, who fancy themselves pros. They’re a freelance rendition team. Were. The official services outsource them when they aren’t willing to get their own hands dirty. At least two of them, my former friend William here, and the Chilean guy I found upstairs, were trained here in the US by a company called Redlake.”

“Did you say *Redlake*? The same Redlake that got in all that trouble in Iraq?”

“The one and only. Redlake is the biggest mercenary army in the history of warfare. War corporations like theirs have been spawning all kinds of spinoff enterprises, like this one. C’mon, we gotta get outta here. Stay close to me.” Hugging each other, Galileo leading the way, they hustled out the door, along a dark corridor, up a flight of creaking metal steps, along another dark corridor, and up another flight of steps that opened onto a wide landing, where they approached a rusted fire door. “Stay here.” He inched it open a crack. A knife of sunlight spread into the dark warehouse. He peeked around, then held his hand out behind him, “C’mon.”

She grabbed his hand, and he pulled her outside. She shielded her eyes from the sun as if she’d never seen it before. She called out, “Where are we, and how are we getting out of here?”

“We’re in the food distribution district of South Philly, and we’re taking a cab.”

“Did you say a *cab*?”

He reached inside the red and white medical vehicle, the one that screamed up next to her table at Rouge, and emerged with her shoes. “Yes, a cab. Is that okay?” He handed her the shoes, and started walking along the side of the warehouse, she following. About fifty yards on, they turned a corner. A black and brown taxi cab sat parked there, its polished body gleaming in the sunlight. Galileo marched to it and opened the rear passenger door, holding it for Victoria.

Noticing the cab was otherwise uninhabited, Victoria asked him, “What did you do to the driver?”

“I’m the driver. It’s my cab.”

“You drive a cab? Is that, like, your cover?”

“No, it’s, like, my job. I’m a driver.”

“That’s your *job*?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing, I just...”

“Look, I gotta do *something*. I can’t just sit on my porch, whittling sticks.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Galileo motioned to the cab, “Can we get going please?”

“Where are we going?”

“The airport.”

“The airport? Why are we going to the airport?”

“We have to get you out of the country for a few days.”

Victoria scowled at him, “Are you crazy?”

“Yes, but that’s beside the point.”

“Where are we going?”

“Best bet, Havana. It’s close, and the commies will watch out for us. They love it when Americans escape to Cuba, and the music there is amazing. But you need a camo. Here.” Galileo walked to the trunk, keyed it open, and reached inside, pulling open a black duffle bag.

“What’s a camo?”

“Alter your appearance.” He emerged brandishing a black baseball cap, and a rubber band. “Put your hair in a pony tail, then put this cap on.”

She started pulling her hair back. “What the hell is happening?”

“I think the CIA sent those people.”

“You *think*?” She rolled her eyes, “Of *course* the CIA sent those people!” She took the rubber band and reached it behind her head. “You used to work for them, and now you want to publish a book about it.” She put the baseball cap on. “So now they want to kill you, but they couldn’t find you, so they came after your literary agent instead!”

Galileo shook his head, “Not exactly.”

Victoria nodded her head, “Yes, exactly! Those people abducted me because you dumped your memoir on me!” She snapped her fingers in his face, “Hello!”

He retorted, “You’ve got the chronology reversed. I contacted you, because I knew you were being watched. I don’t mean since last Sunday, Victoria. For *years*

now. I've still got friends inside the Agency, and they keep me informed of what's going on."

She shot him a face full of skepticism, and snapped, "Why on *earth* would the CIA be watching *me*?"

"You don't know? They don't send rendition teams into crowded cities 'cause they're having a slow day at the office, so you tell me. Why would they have an interest in you?"

"*If* I knew, I wouldn't tell you. *You're* the one who wants to spill the beans about your experiences with the tradecraft. I keep *my* experiences with the tradecraft to myself! And speaking of that, so much for your supposedly unhackable cell phone!"

Galileo shook his head no, "They didn't hack my phone, or else they wouldn't have bothered with you. They were out to get me, remember?"

"Then how did our meeting get blown?"

"They must have intercepted the email I sent you. Which tells me that email address is blown."

"Well, gee, I'm so glad I was able to find that out for you!"

Galileo made a theatrical show of checking his wristwatch, "Can we have this discussion later please? What does your blazer look like turned inside out?"

She pulled her bright red linen blazer off, turned it inside out, and put it back on. It was now a brown nylon blazer. "I look like a homeless person."

"It works. I like it." He ducked back into the trunk, rummaged around, and pulled out a worn pair of denim blue jeans. "Put these on. I won't look." He turned back to the trunk, rummaging some more.

Victoria unzipped her skirt, let it fall to the pavement, and pulled the jeans on. "They won't stay up."

"Knew you were gonna say that." He held a belt out to her. She threaded it through the belt loops and cinched it tight around her waist. She bent over and rolled the cuffs up a few times, then stepped into her shoes.

Galileo stepped back, looking her up and down: the black baseball cap, the bushy blonde ponytail, the funky brown thrift-store jacket, the insanely baggy

jeans, their rolled cuffs falling around the red patent leather shoes. He nodded in approval. “It works. I like it. It’s very Cyndi Lauper.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. Let’s go.”

07

Victoria gazed out at derricks and cranes looming over the edges of the Delaware River. Galileo sped the car south on Interstate 95 through the South Philadelphia Shipyard district. Victoria noticed Galileo's taxicab was unlike the clunkers she was accustomed to hailing in town. It was clean, the bucket seats were upholstered with real leather, and the ride was smooth. Its overall response to Galileo's handling of the car felt like its engine and suspension were calibrated for high-performance.

She also realized, aside the successful go-code exchange, he hadn't yet formally introduced himself. She thought about that a moment, then called out, "So, in conversation, do people actually call you *Galileo*?"

He glanced back at her, "My friends in the biz call me Gal. For my everyday life, I've got a normal-sounding alias."

Victoria was only half-listening. She had her face pointed down at her cellphone in her hands. She called out, "Why can't I get phone service?"

Galileo called back, "There's a scrambler in the car. Keeps us from being geo-located. Probably how they found you. You should turn that thing off and remove its SIM card before we get to the airport." He donned a khaki driver's cap, and chrome-framed aviator sunglasses with teardrop-shaped lenses. Victoria thought he looked more like a chauffeur than a taxi driver, and told him so. He called back to her, "I do that, too. I also own an armor-plated limousine. There's a high-end market for limo drivers who know tradecraft, and it pays well. Not that I do it for the money."

"Do you have a girlfriend, Gal?"

"I'm kind of in-between girlfriends right now." He winced a little and continued, "My ex-wife has been trying to fix me up with the divorced moms in her school district, but it never works out. I get bored real easy. It's always been a problem with me."

"Do you have children?"

“A son. He graduates high school this month. Won a full scholarship to Harvard on his soccer skills.”

“You must be very proud of him.”

“I am. Of myself, too. I coached his school’s soccer team the last two years. This past year, we won the state championship.”

“You’re a high school soccer coach?” He nodded yes. She mused, “What a nice, normal life you’ve made for yourself.”

“Yeah, until this came up.” He glanced at her in the rearview, “Let’s get this sorted out, so we can both go back to normal lives.”

• • •

Galileo parked his taxi in an obscure corner of Philadelphia International Airport’s matrix of parking lots, then he and Victoria set out trekking toward the A-East Terminal. Victoria said, “Why A-East, Gal? That’s for domestic flights.”

“It’s also for charters. Here’s what we’re gonna do. Clip this badge on.” He handed her an official-looking laminate brandished with the PHL logo and claiming her name was Lydia Johnson. He clipped one to his suit that had him as Captain Nigel Hirst. It now struck Victoria how Galileo’s wardrobe, down to the aviator glasses, made a seamless transformation to a jet crewman’s costume. He continued, “We’re going out onto the tarmac. Wherever I lead you, don’t look behind you or around, or the cameras will pick you up. Always face forward in the direction I walk us in. I know where all the cameras are in this airport.”

“There must be an awful lot of them.”

“Four hundred and sixteen.”

“You *counted* them?”

“I’ve got this arrangement with a friend who works here. He’s going to accidentally let me take off with a charter jet that was reserved for somebody else.”

“Won’t he get in trouble?”

“No, because he fixes the mistake with the other client, and I’ll funnel cash back to my friend to cover the cost of the plane.”

“And it includes a pilot, and a crew?”

“No need. I’ll be doing the piloting.”

• • •

The ‘friend’ Galileo referred to, Victoria found out shortly, was named Malcolm Taylor, a stocky, middle-aged African American with an easy smile and a hint of a southern accent. Dressed in khaki cargo pants, and a matching khaki shirt with pockets on the sleeves and epaulets on the shoulders, Malcolm resembled an exiled third-world monarch. He and Galileo greeted each other with *Yo, dog*, and *Sup, dog*, respectively, slapping each other’s backs in a bro-to-bro semi-hug as they shook hands neighborhood-style. As the three of them proceeded across the busy tarmac, Malcolm said to Galileo, “Okay, here’s what I’m gonna for you today, good brother...”

They proceeded into an easy banter that mixed technical jargon and street slang, the sort of patter that made it obvious they had been doing this for some time, and had their routine down to a science. Victoria found it dizzying, and she was already dazed and amazed at how easily Galileo had slipped them past airport security and onto the tarmac. A blinding realization crashed over her: *This Galileo man is for real, and he really is going to fly me to Cuba*. She announced: “Mister Malcolm! If this is going to take a while, I *really* have to use the ladies room!”

Malcolm pointed to a nearby building, “Go into that garage, sweetheart, there’s one in the back.”

“Be careful!” Galileo called to her as she made off in that direction.

She swiveled her head and called out to him in mid-stride, “I’ll phone you if I get lost coming back.”

08

Back inside the airport, Victoria checked her watch as she headed for the A-West terminal. The British Airways gate looked crowded. She scoped out the TSA staff. It was predominately male. She strolled the lounge, and spotted three candidates. She picked the one who's carry-bag sat splayed open in the seat next to her.

BBC News coverage of violent demonstrations against the G-20 summit played out on the television on the wall of the lounge. Victoria walked up behind the lady and said, "What is that awful business on the telly?"

The woman pointed at the TV and exclaimed, "Oh! How *awful!* Those *stupid* children! They should be out looking for *jobs*, instead of attacking our poor bobbys! What a *dreadful* society we live in!"

Victoria spun around and headed for the ladies room. There was a short line for the stalls. She waited, making casual smiles at the other waiting and departing women.

A stall opened up, her turn. She slipped in, shut the door, and locked it behind her. Sat on the toilet, and extracted the boarding pass from the British woman's pocketbook, folded and stuffed it inside her own handbag. Extracted the passport, stuffed it in her bag. Stood up, placing the British woman's pocketbook and her own side-by-side on top of the toilet tank. Removed her blazer, turned it right-side out so it was bright red again, and put it back on. Checked the hip pocket. Her skirt was still folded up there. It helped the skirt was small and lightweight, and now she was now glad she tucked it there when Galileo had her don the blue-jeans.

She kicked her shoes off, undid the belt, let the jeans fall to the floor, pulled the skirt on, and stepped back into her shoes. Picked the two pocketbooks from the shelf and dropped them on the floor. Laid the blue-jeans across the toilet tank. Took off the black baseball cap and laid it on the jeans, along with the stolen pocket book and the phony PHL badge. Rolled all that up inside the jeans into a

neat cylinder. Pulled the rubber band off her hair and threw it into the toilet. Shook her hair out. Picked her pocketbook up off the floor, pulled out her iPhone, and dialed Galileo.

He answered, “Hey. Got the plane. Just waiting for you.”

“I’ll be right out. So sorry. A woman thing came on. Must have been that beating I took by those people. Brought it on early and I wasn’t prepared. I’m cleaning up now.”

“I figured it was something like that. Malcolm’s gonna be by the hanger. He’ll point you to the plane when you come out.”

“Thanks. Give me five minutes.”

“Remember, turn off your phone and remove the SIM card before you come back out.”

“Okay.” She terminated the call, tucked her phone away, and slung her bag over her shoulder. Checked her watch. Grabbed the blue-jeans with the stolen pocketbook rolled up inside, and exited the stall.

At the end of the row of sinks, a trash bin, and in there went the blue-jeans package. Checked herself in the mirror. The hair on the top of her head was damp with sweat from wearing that black cap on the hot tarmac. From the sink, she pulled little palms of water and dampened the rest of her hair to match, then tossed the big kinky blonde mess back over her shoulders.

It works, as Galileo would say.

She checked her watch.

The last minute. Wait until the last minute.

She undid the top two buttons of her blouse, exposing cleavage, and hiked her skirt up towards the point of impropriety, a little something to distract the TSA staff. She checked her watch.

Thought he could spirit me off like the stupid bimbo my ex-husband took me for.

Thirty seconds.

And I totally don’t believe the story about the Harvard-bound son. Soccer-dad, my ass.

Fifteen seconds.

I'll teach him a bloody lesson.

She hustled out the lavatory door and straight for the gate. A commotion stirred in the lounge, which she ignored. The TSA personnel were starting to close up shop. “Wait for me,” she called out in a girlish voice, holding up the boarding pass. She plopped her handbag on the x-ray conveyor, slipped off her shoes, and walked through the metal detector. A burly, smiling TSA agent handed her pocket book back to her, his eyes glued to her décolletage. His two fellow male TSA guards manning the gate seemed frozen over whether to focus on her creamy thighs, or the white lace bra peeking from under her blouse. The one female officer on duty was too busy grimacing in disapproval at her coworkers to pay attention to Victoria. She slipped her shoes back on, and sprinted to the gangway tunnel.

At the end of the gangway, the hatch was being pulled shut from inside. She called out, “Wait, please!” The stewardess pushed it back open. Victoria ducked through it, and stepped onto the British Airways jet bound for London Heathrow Airport. A stewardess walked through the cabin announcing, “Two-minute warning before we require you terminate cellphone usage during takeoff!”

09

A gleaming white Gulfstream 200 sat parked on the tarmac at Philadelphia International Airport, awaiting a taxi slot for takeoff. In its cockpit, Galileo slouched in the pilot's chair, wearing his aviator sunglasses against the fierce afternoon glare. One of his feet was perched on the instrument panel, tapping on it in tempo, as he hummed, *Get on your boots... get on your boots...* Then he buzzed his lips together, mimicking the fuzz-guitar melody of that recent U2 single.

A click in his headset interrupted this miniature a cappella performance. Malcolm Taylor's voice oozed in the headset like warm molasses: "Yo, good brother, you better get over here, like, pronto."

"Aw, shit, I don't like the sound of that."

"Jus' get over here."

Galileo pulled his foot off the instrument panel, peeled off the headset, powered down the Gulfstream, checked the pockets of his trim khaki business suit, and made for the hatch.

• • •

Malcolm raised his thick black eyebrows for emphasis when he looked up at Galileo and repeated, "Yo, I'm *tellin'* you, your little lady *bounced*, like a *bad check*."

Galileo, standing in the open doorway with his back to the tarmac, shook his head and said, "London? Are you kidding me?"

"Not this time, good brother." Malcolm sat at the operator's desk inside the terminal's support vehicle dispatch house, a rectangular tan-brick building that grew out of the side of the A-East Terminal like a spare limb. In between exchanges with Galileo, Malcolm eyed a video bank, while crooning instructions

and directions into the mouthpiece of a headset. Through a large window opposite the desk, he spied the activities outside on the tarmac. Afternoon sun streamed into the utilitarian room.

Galileo lumbered over to a chair in the back of the room, off to the side of the operator's desk, in shadow. He slumped into the chair, put one foot up on the desk, ran his hand through his wavy black hair, and stage-whispered, "*Fuck!*"

Malcolm replied, "Ain't that some shit."

Galileo looked at the hand he'd ran through his hair, and said, "I left my cap in the Gulfstream cockpit."

"Don't go back for it. The crew's headed there now."

"Shit. I'm getting old, Malcolm. How'd I let that girl walk off like that?"

"Shit, dog, I didn't think nuffin of it either! She acted like some sweet little girl! I fell for it myself, na-mean? When she didn't come back, I called around. Some lady got pick-pocketed at the British Airways gate. Then someone at TSA let it slip they recognized her from the news of that crazy shit in Rittenhouse. That looked like some *crazy* shit. They lit that restaurant the fuck *up*, yo!"

"I know. They were going out of their way to get my attention."

"They must've got it. My condolences to their families, unless you let any of 'em go."

"Nah, I dispatched the whole crew."

"Word, but what about this girl? She ain't gonna go blowin' up that British Airways flight now, tell me that!"

"No!" Galileo wrinkled his brow and shook his head. "She's just a musician. You think they'll report it?"

"Who?"

"The TSA crew."

"And get their stupid asses fired? Prolly not. But somebody will. How bad did you want this girl, dog? Is she, like, some kinda national security threat?"

"No, no, no. I was just running protection for her. I guess she didn't trust me. I suppose I can't blame her. I'm losing my touch, Malcolm. That's why I got out of the biz."

“You *been* out of the biz, good brother! That’s why I was surprised to see you back here. I just didn’t wanna say nuffin in front of the lady. Shit dog, it’s easy enough for *you* to hijack a plane to Cuba. That’s like a normal day at the office for you. But you pick up a girl from around the *way*? You gotta *know* she gonna be freaked the fuck *out* by that shit!”

Galileo grumbled, “Yeah, and she cuts back into the gate and boards a British Airways flight she didn’t have a ticket for, and *nobody* stops her.”

“Don’t look at me! That shit ain’t *my* fault. *That* is some ca-ray-zee shit. Yo, you don’t see that, like... *ever*. Not since nine-eleven, anyway. You *sure* she ain’t in the biz?”

“You don’t think I’d know? Malcolm! She’s not in the biz! Okay?” Galileo pulled his ringing phone from his suit pocket, “Hello.” A pause. He wrinkled his brow and shook his head, saying into the phone, “It’s because you don’t spend enough time stretching your hamstrings. No, listen, I’ve told you this a dozen times. If you don’t stretch your hamstrings, they tighten up and pull on your lumbar, and it’s got nowhere to go from there. That’s why your back is sore.” Another pause. He closed his eyes, pulled in a deep breath, and snapped, “Look, I’m busy with something right now. Just make a hot bath with Epsom salts and soak in it. Your mom’s got a carton under the sink in the bathroom, I saw it there the other day, go look.” He put his phone away and stood up, gazing out at the airport tarmac. “Alright, so, how much time do I have?”

“What? Before Homeland gets wind of it, and comes swoopin’ in here, turnin’ the place upside down? Any minute now. You better scoot.”

“Can I scoot to London?”

“How much cash you got on you?”

“How much will I need?”

10

When Victoria Penrose boarded the British Airways flight and took a seat, it was not the one specified on the stolen ticket. The flight, like many in the midst of the Great Recession, was only partially full. That allowed her to pace the cabin and scope out an area away from the designated seat, where investigative eyes might pry if word about her lift at the airport got signaled to the plane.

She scoped out a girl, petite like her, a “riot girl” in black leather, spiky bleached hair, and plentiful chrome accessories. Victoria took a seat within her view, phoned a brief call to Beverly Shipp, strapped in, and waited.

Once the plane was aloft, she made off to the restroom, pulled the SIM card from her cellphone, dropped it in the toilet, and flushed. Waited a moment. Dropped the phone itself in, and flushed again.

She returned to her adopted seat. The riot girl eyed her. Victoria pretended to ignore her, then glanced back. The riot girl, checking her out, looked away.

Victoria settled in her seat, pondering how, if Galileo was right, she should alter her appearance before she disembarked at Heathrow.

“Want a snifter?”

It was the riot girl, sitting next to her, squirming with post-adolescent sexuality. Victoria could literally smell it coming off the young girl’s skin. “Sorry? What do you mean, a snifter of what?”

The riot girl produced an unmarked plastic bottle. “I figured out how to slip creature-comfort past the fascist airport security. Dizzy twits. They made me throw away me toofpaste, but I got this through.” The girl spoke with a thick Cockney accent, and her voice had the jaunty pitch of a twelve-year-old. “Here. I’ll have the first sip, so you know it’s not a roofie.” She took a pull, swallowed, then offered the rest to Victoria.

“Thank you, don’t mind if I do.” Victoria put the little bottle to her lips, took a brief taste of it, then drained it. “Mmm, Jamisons.”

“You know it.”

“Love Jamisons.” Victoria handed the bottle back to the riot girl. “My name’s Lydia.”

“I’m DJ Gamma Ray. You’re nuclear.”

“Nuclear?”

“Hot. Can we ride together? It’s a long flight.”

Victoria found something unnervingly arousing about this little-girl voice coming from such a rebellious persona, and telling her she’s hot. “Yeah, Gamma Ray. Let’s ride.”

“What’s your story?”

Victoria thought for a moment, pondering her biography, then said, “I’m escaping an abusive husband.”

Gamma Ray sighed and said, “I could tell you were in a jam. You’ve got it written all over you. Abusive bloke, eh? Been there. Fuckhead. Let’s iron-girder the fucking wanker.”

“Iron-girder?”

“Murder.”

“That’s very kind of you, Gamma Ray, but we’re flying into Heathrow. We can’t go murdering people. There’s lots of cameras everywhere. Anyway, he won’t be there. His people will. Private security, that sort of thing. I appreciate the offer, but you’d best stay out of the way.”

Gamma Ray seemed encouraged by that latter bit, like a master thief being assured a safe is unbreakable. She looked Victoria up and down, and said, “I’ll fair-trade you through the airport. We’ll switch outfits, right, and I’ll provide you cover.”

“So generous of you. I might take you up on an outfit trade. This suit’s a Donna Karan.”

Gamma Ray caressed the suit jacket’s sleeve, “I quite fancy it. Killer fabric.”

“But as far as the other stuff, there’s one other problem. He’s got someone in customs. As soon as they spot my passport, which I stole, well, it’s up. So you really should just make off after we disembark.”

“Hmm.” Gamma Ray pursed her lips, thinking. “Lemme get another Jamisons.” She popped off, and returned with another little plastic flask. “I’ve got

an idea.” She took a sip, and offered it to Victoria. “If the passport’s a problem, right, we’ll deep-six it. Flush it down the loo, that is. You can’t get red-carded for it if you’re not carrying it.”

“Pardon? I don’t... but how would I get through customs without...” Victoria paused, then said, “That’s actually not a bad idea.”

Gamma Ray brandished an iPhone and scrolled through her list of contacts. She pointed at Victoria’s handbag and said, “We’ll ejector-seat that. Stuff it in the overhead compartment. Tell customs it got lifted while you were bo-peeping. Had your passport and ID in it. The shit got nicked. Wasn’t your fault.” Victoria sprouted goose-bumps at Gamma Ray’s pixie voice issuing these edicts with supreme confidence. Her small, pretty face and spiky platinum pompadour glowed in the dimly lit airliner cabin by the light of her iPhone, as her thumbs tapped at the touchscreen. “There.” Gamma Ray turned the screen around to Victoria. “You are *her*, now.”

“She does sort-of look like me,” Victoria said. “You’re thinking a similar ruse to the one I worked at Philadelphia International.”

“And if it worked once, it’ll work again. Between here and London, right, I’m going to teach you to speak with a Cockney accent. And while we’re doing that, you are going to memorize some information. We’ve got seven hours. If we get cracking, we should be able to pull it off.”

Victoria began liking what Gamma Ray had in mind. From her extensive piano training as a sight-reader, Victoria knew she was good at memorizing things.

Gamma Ray continued, “And we’ll rehearse. We’re going to work together, right, and produce a bit of theatre at Heathrow.”

“You think this will work?”

Gamma Ray lowered her voice, “Listen, mate, I’m an international bad girl. I’ve done things that would uncurl your cunt-hairs if I told you about them. This will work. We’ll *make* it work.”

“But you’ll be breaking the law.”

Gamma Ray lowered her voice more, “Please, Lydia. I break the fooking law all the time.”

Exasperated, Victoria decided to give it one last try, “Gamma Ray, I lied. There’s no jealous husband.”

“But you *are* on the lam from *somebody*, right?”

Tears welling up in Victoria’s eyes, she bit her lip and nodded yes.

Gamma Ray persisted, “Who? You can tell me. Coppers? FBI? CIA?”

Victoria chuckled through her tears, and said, “Take your pick.”

Gamma Ray’s face brightened. “Wow! How punk rock is that? We’re like sisters!” She brushed the tears from Victoria’s cheeks with her little thumbs. “I really want to do this, Lydia. Are you in?”

11

Chief Detective Ernie “Sully” Sullivan examined a row of three divots in a concrete wall. The air stank like the men’s room in the last bus stop to hell. Sully tuned that out by concentrating on his task, and waiting for sensory-adaptation to kick in. He trained his keychain magnifying glass on each of the three divots, noting how they all were flayed on their upper-right perimeters, throwing a wider radius than at their lower-left orbits. Sully turned his gaze back, to his left and down ten degrees. Across the room in that vector path, a plump Asian man sat slumped in a lifeless prayer. A handgun was found lying on the floor next to him, three spent rounds in its magazine. Now Sully knows where those slugs went.

His Nextel squawked with the voice of his partner, Detective Craig Gamble, murmuring, “Sully, Homeland’s here.”

Sully dropped the keychain into the hip pocket of his iron-gray suit jacket, pulled the radio from his belt, and said in his gruff South Philly-Irish accent, “Roger that, Craigo. Send ‘em down.”

Battery-powered photographer’s lamps set up around the grimy, windowless sub-basement illuminated a gruesome display on the floor. The Crime Scene Investigation team snapped photographs and drew chalk outlines. Sully, six-foot, stocky, with close-cropped silver hair, has the sturdy face of a vintage film star. He took a step back into a corner to survey the overall scene, straightening his narrow black necktie against his white business shirt. At a mini-lab set up in the opposite corner, a white-coated technician dabbed samples onto square glass plates and snapped them into tiered and labeled cases. Everyone in the room has powder-blue hospital booties stretched over their shoes.

Shoes. Sully hears them hitting the floor outside, and knows by the sound they belong to the US Department of Homeland Security agent walking up the corridor. Agents tend to wear a certain kind of shoe, and have a distinctive walk. Agents walk with purpose. This one appeared at the threshold and stopped, glancing about with curious eyes, a tall, lanky, dark-skinned African American.

His suit-and-tie ensemble is agent-worthy crisp, likewise the plate-glass shine on his black patent leather shoes. He said in a rich and friendly baritone, a jazz radio announcer's voice, "How's it going, gentlemen? Who's the C.O. here, if y'all don't mind me asking?"

Sully walked over to him. "That would be me." Sully extended his hand. "Chief Detective Ernie Sullivan, Philly P.D., organized crime task force."

The agent shot a friendly smile at Sully and shook his hand, "Pleasure meeting you, detective. Special Agent Ozzie Jones, US Department of Homeland Security." Everyone in the room stopped what they were doing, turned to glance at the agent, then resumed their tasks. Jones continued, "My partner, Special Agent Manny DeLeon, is up on the street, checking out that side of it. But I told him to stay out of the way, and just observe."

Sully nodded in approval, "Thanks for coming out here on short notice."

"Not a problem, detective."

"Sully. My friends call me Sully."

Jones nodded, "Okay, Sully. Say, you look familiar."

"We met about a year ago, in Viña Del Mar, Chile."

Jones snapped his fingers and said, "The Interpol conference."

Sully nodded, "The Americas Regional Interpol conference. You sat on a panel discussion about..."

They said it in unison, "Transnational organized crime."

Sully continued, "And you mentioned you ran the fusion center here in Philly, so I approached you..."

Jones cut in, "At the bar, at..."

In unison, "The Marina del Rey."

Jones continued, "That's why I didn't remember you right away, because those mojitos..."

Sully cut in, "They were mojitos in *name*, only."

"That bartender was trying to poison us."

Sully grinned, "He didn't know who he was dealin' with."

Jones returned the grin, "We closed the place, *that*, I remember."

"And you gave me your card."

“And you remembered me.”

Sully motioned to the crime scene, “Well, *this* reminded me of you.”

Jones nodded, and glanced over the crime scene, “Okay, let’s discuss this. So, you’re organized crime squad. How’d you get called in on this?”

Sully shrugged, “That’s what it looked like to the brass. Eleven-thirty, give or take, a local woman’s abducted from a restaurant in Rittenhouse. And the kidnappers made a real fucking ruckus of it.”

“We heard about that.”

“Yeah. They used a red and white EMT van, fire department issue. Dressed in medic overalls. Camo’d in sunglasses and caps. They jump out, detonating flash-bangs, firing machine guns in the air, a real Hollywood production. They grab this one little lady, throw her in the truck, and drive off. The restaurant personnel, they ID’d the woman. She’s a regular at the restaurant, place called Rouge.”

Jones nodded, “I’ve been there with my wife for Sunday brunch on occasion.”

“Been there for drinks a few times myself. My wife loves the place. We find out, this woman, the one these merc’s abducted, her name’s Victoria Penrose.”

Jones clamped his hands on his hips and scrunched his brow, “Why’s that name ring a bell?”

“She’s like a minor celebrity around here. Composer, musician. Classical, jazz, ‘at sorta thing. Successful at it. Not big like Madonna. But get this. Her parents are kinda connected.”

“What kinda connected?”

“Politically.”

“Ah. Which is why I’m here.”

Sully raised an index finger, “Not quite, Agent Jones. What I’m about to show you, might get you interested in this case, instead of just patting me on the back and thanking me for keeping the Feds informed.”

Jones nodded, “I’m listening.”

“The parents are well-to-do. So the brass is thinking, it’s a kidnapping, by a group, and what’s that? Organized crime. So they blow up my PDA.”

“How’d you find this crime scene so fast?”

“With an assist from Tactical Division. First thing, I call Tac-D, request they throw choppers in the air, scoping for wayward EMT’s. They spot the one parked upstairs. Seemed like a weird place to leave an EMT, and none of the hospitals had a call to this location. So we drive out here, and find this mess.”

“Nice work.”

Motioning to the three bodies splayed around the room, Sully continued, “Note they’re still dressed in their medic costumes. Their change of clothing, street clothes, were hanging on that pipe over there. So they had this all mapped out. They gather here, get changed, drive to Rittenhouse, bag the girl, bring her back here. They had her restrained to that metal chair. It had hair like hers on it, and fiber samples matching what she was spotted wearing at the restaurant. And we found a woman’s ring on the floor, antique-looking, with a gold dragon engraved on an onyx shield. Her parents ID’d the description, said it’s the Penrose family coat of arms, going back to the Renaissance. The ring belonged to her great-grandmother. So we can be pretty sure it was Victoria Penrose they had here.”

“Coat of arms, the Renaissance. A genuine blue-blooded girl.”

“Not an implausible target for kidnapping.”

“Hardly. Suspects?”

“Yeah, an ex-husband, and it was a messy divorce. Sent cops to his office, in the Stock Exchange. He wasn’t there. Get this. The guy’s yachting in the French Riviera.”

“Nice alibi. Sounds like he’s loaded.”

“Is he ever. But we gotta wait for the gendarmes to sort him out, and that could take days.”

Ozzie gestured to the room, “Back to square one for now.”

Sully nodded, “Back to square one.” He gestured to the room, “Each of these merc’s had a sidearm. Only one of them got his unholstered and got shots off, this Asian guy over here on our left, and he hit nothing but this wall over here. My guess is, these three were shot in the space of about three seconds. And for each of them only getting hit once, the gunslinger sure knew where to place the shots. Agent Jones, can I ask what’s your take on this so far?”

“Ozzie. Call me Ozzie.” Jones stared around the room for a moment, then said, “My take? My take is, it’s awful nice to see a local law enforcement outfit that knows what the fuck it’s doing.”

“You don’t normally see that, Ozzie?”

Jones chuckled, and said, “Don’t get me started. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Let’s go upstairs, and I’ll show you where it gets interesting.”

Jones pointed an index finger up, “I like that understated sense of humor of yours, Sully.”

• • •

“Here’s the driver’s licenses they were carrying.” Inside a mobile crime lab parked outside the warehouse, Sully slapped the four photo licenses onto a white counter, side by side, like he was dealing cards - slap, slap, slap, slap.

Jones pointed at the first one on the left, “This is the stiff you found in the trunk of the rental car parked next to the EMT van.”

“Correct. He was up here on street level when he got it. Must have been the first of the four our shooter encountered.”

Pointing at the next one over, Jones said, “This is the Asian male, the one who got the shots off.”

“Correct.”

Moving to the next one over, Jones continued, “This is the girl. Shame, she’s a pretty one.”

“Correct on both counts.”

Jones pointed at the last one, and nodded, “This one... I recognize that name from somewhere. Vesczack.”

Sully pointed at the card, “Notice this Valerey Vesczack is the only one of the four with a foreign license, from the Ukraine. The other three were carrying US drivers licenses. So we went through their street clothes, and found passports for each of the four. I’m going to lay out the passports next to their corresponding

drivers licenses.” Opened to the photo-ID pages, Sully slapped the passports down, again, like playing cards - one, two, three, four.

Jones exclaimed, “Bingo!”

Sully nodded, “Same thing I said. Only one matches up.”

“Valerey Vesczack.”

“Which probably means he’s...”

They said it in unison: “The ringleader.”

Jones continued, “He didn’t bother with a legend. What does that tell you, Sully?”

“He assumed he had local cover?”

“Local cover.” Jones nodded, “Good point.” He looked down at the counter, studying the ID documents arrayed on it. “So the two Asians are actually Peruvian nationals, and this José Carbone is a Chilean national.”

“And this could be a coincidence, Ozzie, but you’re aware of how Redlake Security has recruited heavily from both Chile and Peru.”

“You read my mind, Sully.”

“It makes my hair stand on end a little, just thinking about it.”

“I get what you said earlier now.”

“That’s why I requested you personally come out here, and check this out. I knew you would get what was going on here. And recently, I talked with someone you may know, or know of, named Julian Breton.” Jones twitched his head and blinked his eyes. Sully continued, “Commander Breton keyed me into what’s been going on with companies like Redlake, the war corporations, and their spin-off operations.”

Jones glared at Sully, “You *know* Julian Breton?”

“You understand, I can’t go into detail about that.”

“Understood. Let’s get back to the matter at hand. Victoria Penrose. *She* obviously didn’t cap these people. But we still don’t know who did, or what happened to her, either, correct?”

“What happened to her? Get ready for this. CSI estimates these four people were killed at around twelve-hundred, just shortly after Miss Penrose was abducted from Rouge. At around thirteen-fifteen, Miss Penrose materialized

inside the A-West Terminal at Philly International. She then proceeded to the British Airways lounge, where she lifted a woman's purse, then used the stolen ticket to board a British Airways flight to London-Heathrow Airport."

Jones's face toggled through several stages of incredulity, then he finally exclaimed, "Da *fuck*?"

Sully nodded, "True story."

"Did you notify..."

"Interpol? That's why..."

"Shit, that's right, sorry." Jones stuck his head out the rear door of the truck and hollered, "Manny! We gotta get a yellow notice for Victoria Penrose up on Interpol, pronto!"

12

When the British Airways flight touched down at London-Heathrow Airport, DJ Gamma Ray was wearing a bright red Donna Karan blazer and skirt ensemble. Victoria, now clad in black punk rock attire, had her hair pulled back into a painfully tight ponytail, a hairstyle Gamma Ray said was called a “council-housing facelift.” Gamma Ray also instructed they feign having a complicated time disembarking. The effect of their stalling was so they would be among the last ones to leave the plane because, as Gamma Ray explained, they wanted be the last ones to approach the customs desks, when the agents already had enough of touchy travelers and were eager to go on break. They were also to scope out the youngest-looking agent, and if he had piercings, even better.

Emerging from the gangway tunnel into the airport concourse, Victoria’s cheeks were streaked with black eyeliner, ostensibly from weeping. Gamma Ray walked behind Victoria, eyeing her with feigned annoyance.

Gazing upon the pathetic sight of Victoria moaning and sobbing, the young Mediterranean-looking agent with pierced ears called out, “Wot’s all this here!” Gamma Ray slapped her passport down on the desk and said to the agent, gesturing toward Victoria, “This one had a little mishap on the flight.” Victoria noticed Gamma Ray had altered her speaking voice: it was now slower, deeper, and less aggressive. She sounded responsible now, as if she’d suddenly aged ten years.

The customs agent, a honey-skinned fellow with a Cockney accent almost as thick as Gamma Ray’s, said to Victoria, “Come now, miss. Wot’s the problem?”

Victoria raised her hands as if to begin explaining, but could only sob louder, unable to get the words out. Gamma Ray cut in, “Her handbag got nicked while she was sleeping off a bender. The bint was fairly shit-faced when she boarded at Philly. Sat the row ahead of me. Was like riding in the bottom of a bloody vodka bottle the whole flight. Gonna have to wash it off me clothes when I get back to me flat.”

The agent replied to Gamma Ray, “Guess you didn’t spot the bloke who nicked it.”

“Sorry, didn’t. Saw her board with a black patent-leather jawn, ‘bout yea-big. Had me face in rags the whole flight. Didn’t see nuffin.”

The agent said to Victoria, “I suppose your passport was in the bag, correct?” Victoria nodded. “Well, young lady, you know I can’t just let you enter the country without a passport.”

That was Victoria’s cue, and she exploded into it: “Wasn’t just me passport I lost! Was me brand new iPhone! Just bought it! Worked on me uncle’s chipper six months, saving me pounds for it! And my keys! My flat’s on the fifth fucking floor! Not like I can just knock a hole in the window and climb in, is it? The locksmith charged me sixty fucking pounds last time I locked me-self out! And now all me paper’s gone! Don’t have a fucking quid to me name! How the *fuck* am I supposed to get into me flat, now?” And on she went, including a river of details about the neighborhood, the name of the locksmith, who the council housing manager was, and how she’d already gotten on his bad side, right, so it’s not like she can just kick down the door to her fucking flat, now, is it?

The customs agent glanced at Gamma Ray, his eyes wide, mouth hanging half open. Gamma Ray rolled her eyes and said, nodding at Victoria, “Quaint, how these council-housing toughies break down so easy, innit?”

When Victoria got to the part about how she might have her period any fucking second now, the agent put his hands up and said, “Enough! Just tell me your name and address, please!”

Victoria recited the information Gamma Ray helped her memorize. While the agent typed it into his computer, she moaned, “And how the fuck am I going to get back to me flat with no quid?”

Gamma Ray said, “I’ve got a driver waiting outside, luv. We’ll give you a lift to your flat.”

Peering into his computer screen, the agent said, “Well, it appears you are who you say you are.” Then he glanced at Gamma Ray, and took a second look at her passport. “You, on the other hand, Miss Raymond, *you* look familiar for some reason.”

She leaned toward the agent and murmured, “A-K-A Deejay Gamma Ray.”

The agent’s face lit up, “I *knew* I recognized you! That Fergie remix is bad-ass!”

Gamma Ray flashed him a modest grin, “Thanks, mate!”

“Been touring the states?”

“Nah, just Philly, was in the studio with Amanda Blank.”

The agent’s eyes grew wide, “Get *out*! What was *that* like?”

“*Luv* working with her. Keep your ears open for a remix of *Shame On Me*, by yours truly.”

“Oh! *Luv* that song! Cahn’t wait to hear your mix!”

Victoria moaned, “I have to pee!”

Gamma Ray motioned toward Victoria, “Why don’t I get this one home before she melts all over the gate.”

“Please!” The agent waved his hand at Victoria as if shooing a fly, “Thank you!”

Gamma Ray took Victoria by her elbow, and said, “Come along, Miss Hap, off you go.” As they walked on, Gamma Ray glanced back at the customs agent and called out, “I’m spinning at Fabric tomorrow night, put you on the list if you like.”

The agent called out, “Think I’ll take you up on that!”

“You’ll be under Heathrow Customs. Bring guests if you like.”

13

Victoria murmured, “You were absolutely brilliant back there.”

Gamma Ray squeezed her arm, “It’s not over ‘til we’re in the tube.”

“I might have a friend waiting.” Victoria halted, gripping Gamma Ray’s arm. “Wait. There’s a man at two o’clock, like a limo driver, holding a sign that says *Beverly Shipp*. That’s a code, she’s someone I know.”

Heathrow’s vast, glass-canopied Terminal Five concourse bustled around Victoria and Gamma Ray as they stood staring across it. Through the swarming commuters, they spied an Irish-looking man, late-middle-aged, dressed in a dark-gray suit. He glanced down into a PDA, his thumb working it as he held up the cardboard sign with his other hand. Gamma Ray murmured, “What if he’s an impostor?”

“Oh, god.”

“I’ll approach him first.”

“No, Gamma.”

“I’ll be fine, Lydia, we’re in a crowd.”

“Be careful. Wait.” Victoria pulled Gamma Ray close, and murmured in her ear, “Ask him what he knows about Beverly Shipp that just anyone wouldn’t know.”

“Good idea.”

Victoria watched in vigilance, as Gamma Ray weaved her way through the pulsing crowds of commuters, gradually approaching the Irishman. He seemed to sense her approach, and glanced up at her. Gamma Ray stopped in front of him, and said something. His ruddy face stared back at her, then he wrinkled his brow in annoyance, and said something while nodding down at his PDA.

Gamma Ray turned and scurried back. She rushed up to Victoria, grabbed her, and whispered in her ear, “He says your mum taught Bev in college, and that you better fucking hurry, because your face just went up on the Interpol website.”

Victoria grabbed Gamma Ray's arm, and they spun off, rushing for Terminal Five's nearest exit. The Irishman cut in front of them, marching forward with a heavy and purposeful stride, carving a wake through the crowd. Victoria and Gamma Ray fell in behind him. He pulled a tweed jeff cap from his suit jacket's hip pocket and jammed it onto his partially bald head. In spite of his age, Victoria thought he seemed sturdy enough to knock down anything in his path.

The three of them emerged onto the sidewalk on Wallis Street. The Irishman glanced back and murmured, "Get in the Citroën."

Straight ahead, a tall, beefy black man in a black leather trench coat and round spectacles held open the rear passenger door of a vintage black Citroën. The Irishman made a subtle head-nod toward the Citroën as he passed it.

The black man said in a suave London accent, "Good evening, ladies, in you go." Victoria and Gamma Ray slipped inside the Citroën. He shut the door once they were all inside, opened his driver-side door, and climbed in. The right side of the car's suspension bounced as it took on his considerable weight. He shut his door and announced, "My name is Lawrence of London, and I will be your driver for this part of the evening."

Victoria turned to look out the rear windshield of the Citroën. She spotted the Irishman climbing behind the wheel of a vintage black Jaguar idling behind the Citroën. The Irishman pointed his finger at Victoria and swirled it, motioning her to turn back around. She did, but not before noticing an attractive gray-haired woman in the front passenger seat of the Jaguar.

Lawrence of London maneuvered the Citroën out into traffic. Speeding along Wallis Street, he announced, "Listen carefully. You with the silver hair, take off that red jacket, and replace it with the black one tucked in the floor-well at your feet. You'll also notice there is a brown lady's wig tucked down there. You with the curly blond hair, don that brown wig, please. The black jacket was originally for you, but I see you've attended to that already."

Victoria and Gamma Ray went about following his instructions. As they did, the car veered left, then right, speeding along Western Perimeter Road. The Citroën lurched off the main road, turned onto a small street, and sped in the opposite direction. Gamma Ray called out, "To where are we headed, Lawrence?"

“To a secure location. But first, we’re gong to pull a switcheroo, a little something to knock peepers off your trail. Do you have those outfits all in place?” Not waiting for confirmation, he craned his head up, examining them in the rearview, and exclaimed, “Good girls!”

Lawrence wrenched the Citroën onto a dark, leafy side-street, and braked short in a quick jolt. A few seconds later, the vintage Jaguar roared up beside them, skidding to a halt. The gray-haired lady stepped out, opened the back door of the Jaguar, then yanked open the back door of the Citroën. She snapped, “Let’s go, you two, get a move on.”

Victoria and Gamma Ray wiggled out of the Citroën and climbed into the rear of the Jaguar. The gray-haired lady made a dramatic move of slamming both doors shut simultaneously, then spun around and slipped back into the Jaguar, flipping her door shut. Gamma Ray whispered to Victoria, “How smart! These blokes are pros!”

In unison, both cars lurched in reverse, tires squealing, then pivoted in forty-five degree turns opposite each other, and shot off in opposite directions.

The gray-haired lady glanced back at Victoria and Gamma Ray and said, “You two, fasten your seat belts and sit tight, looking like typically bored and unhappy English children, at least until we get on the M-5, fair enough?” She turned back around as the car raced out into a violet London twilight.

14

An exotic blonde woman with a tightly-wrapped hourglass figure emerged from behind the cockpit door. She announced to the cabin, in Russian, “You may now un-belt yourselves, if you choose.”

Galileo, having taken a seat as far to the back of the Gulfstream’s cabin as possible, tried to ignore her. He tried to ignore everything. Fidgeting in his seat, he pined to summon the stillness and coldness and other-worldliness that used to get him through... just about anything.

Here he comes. This is proof my powers have deserted me.

The approaching man’s voice was thick with a garish Russian accent, “How is my devilishly handsome stow-away doing back here?”

Galileo winced, then flashed an insincere smile back at the morbidly obese man approaching him. Khodovsky, Malcolm Taylor said his name was. Realizing his reluctance to engage would only encourage his host, Galileo answered, “I’m fine, thanks.”

Khodovsky wore a lime-green suit of a lightweight silk that billowed as he waddled up the cabin aisle. His face was bloated at every feature, his hair style dated firmly in the 1970’s. Reeking of a designer cologne that smelled like bug-spray, Khodovsky squeezed himself into the empty seat across the aisle from Galileo. He then launched into a long and pompous narrative about the various influential people he knew and intended to do business with, in Europe in general, and in the UK in particular. And while Khodovsky babbled on, Galileo noticed how his muscle-bound security detail, all dressed in identical black silk suits, staked out perimeter positions in the cabin of the plane.

They’ve got my money, surmised I’ve got more on me, so they’re going to take it, and throw me overboard. Great.

Galileo cut into Khodovsky’s blather: “Excuse me for interrupting, but you mentioned Yevgeny Petroff a moment ago.”

“Da? You know who Mister Petroff is?”

“I happen to be acquainted with Yevgeny.”

Khodovsky’s eyes widened, now gazing upon Galileo as if having discovered a rare and valuable artifact. “You know this man? I’m going to meet with him the day after tomorrow! You will accompany me, no? You will help smooth the introduction, yes?”

Galileo couldn’t help the uncomfortable twitch he reacted to that with, and knew Khodovsky spotted it, but went ahead, “No. Sorry. Yevgeny Petroff is a busy man, and he’s not expecting me. Just drop me off in the UK, and you can go about your business, and I’ll go about mine.”

“That is a rude thing to say to your host, my mysterious American friend.” Khodovsky reached his hand out, and a bulky black satellite phone was placed in it. He said to Galileo, “He is not expecting you? Fine. I will telephone him, and invite him to expect you. Fair enough?”

Galileo blinked and shook his head, “As you wish.”

A self-satisfied smirk on his face, Khodovsky punched on the phone’s keypad and put it to his ear. “Yevgeny Petroff, please. Please tell him it is Mister Khodovsky, for just a quick word. Yes, I will hold.” Khodovsky glanced at Galileo and said, “By what name does he know you as?”

“Tell him I’m the president of Venus Telescope.”

Khodovsky looked into the phone, “Mister Petroff? Yes, I realize our appointment is two days away. I am however curious, could you verify the legitimacy of a passenger on my plane who claims he is acquainted with you? He claims he owns a company called Venus Telescope.”

Galileo could overhear Petroff barking at Khodovsky on the other end of the connection. Khodovsky became very pale and serious all at once, saying, “Da, da, da,” into the phone. Then he glanced up. “He wishes to speak with you,” Khodovsky said, handing the phone to Galileo.

15

After Malcolm Taylor changed into his street-clothes, he exited Philadelphia International Airport's employee locker room, and walked into a phalanx of black-clad, flak-jacketed men toting M4 carbine automatic rifles. At the rear of the platoon stood a tall, lanky, dark-skinned African-American man in a crisp dark suit, a silver shield affixed to the jacket's lapel. The sleek official intoned in the rich baritone of a jazz radio announcer's voice, "Are you Malcolm Taylor?"

Malcolm hesitated, then replied, "Yes, I am."

"I'm Special Agent Ozzie Jones, US Department of Homeland Security. Let's you and me go have ourselves a little chat."

• • •

The rectangular room was as bright as it was stark, and utterly silent. Every surface was white, except for a two-way mirror set into one of the long walls. A rectangular table was welded to the floor in the middle of the room. White globes concealing closed circuit video cameras were set into each ceiling corner. The interrogation cell belonged to a classified Homeland Security facility beneath the airport, a facility which almost no one outside of federal law enforcement knew existed.

Malcolm Taylor sat in a utilitarian metal chair, his wrists shackled to iron rings built into the table, ankles shackled to rings built into the floor. He'd been strip-searched, which yielded nothing sinister, so he was allowed to re-dress, except for his belt, which was withheld. Two flak-jacketed Homeland Security officers stood on either side of him, holding their M4 carbines ready.

Special Agent Herman DeLeon sat across from Malcolm. Chubby, shy of medium height, with short curly black hair and light-brown skin, the agent's first name was pronounced *Air-mahn*, but everybody called him Manny, and he was

descended from Ponce de Leon, the Spanish explorer who discovered the island of Puerto Rico. A laptop computer sat on the table in front of him. In a calm and casual manner, DeLeon queried Malcolm about his personal life, political views, favorite sports teams, hobbies... a seemingly random array of small talk. Unbeknownst to Malcolm, he was being digitally recorded and scanned by layered voice analysis software on DeLeon's laptop, the interrogator's equivalent of a sound-check.

Malcolm answered every question, warily, but without much hesitation. After about fifteen minutes, Ozzie Jones entered the room, shutting the thick metal door behind him, and said, "Sorry to keep you all waiting." DeLeon closed his laptop and stood, moving to a counter against a far wall, on which he placed and re-opened the laptop.

Jones took DeLeon's former place at the table. He said to Malcolm, "I was just going over the airport surveillance footage, Mister Taylor. At about thirteen hundred, a dark-haired man in a khaki business suit, and a blonde-haired lady wearing a black baseball cap, were walking on the tarmac with you. Can you tell me who those people were, please, and what they were seeing you about?"

Malcolm replied, "Langley."

"That was the man's name? Langley?"

"No. I was instructed that if something like this ever occurred, I'm to tell you to call Langley, and ask for the Deputy Chief of the Operations Directorate."

Manny DeLeon looked up from his laptop and glanced across the room at Malcolm.

Jones glared at Malcolm a moment, then said, "Who instructed you to tell me this?"

"What I jus' told you, is all I'm allowed to say."

Jones glanced at DeLeon. They stared at each other in silence a moment. Jones turned to Malcolm and said, "You watch too many fucking movies, bro."

Malcolm dimmed his eyes at Jones, "How so?"

"How so? They don't call it that anymore, that's how so."

“I know, they changed the name in, I dunno, two-thousand-six? It’s called the Clandestine something or other now. When I started with them, it was called the Operations Directorate. Guess I’m still used to calling it that. You got a pen?”

“What do you need a pen for?”

“To write down my social security number.”

Jones pulled out a pen, “Okay, give it to me.” Malcolm recited the nine-digit number. Jones copied it down on a pocket-sized note pad. “Okay, excuse me a moment while I make the call. If this is a joke, you’re gonna see what I get like when a dumb-ass brother wastes my time with jokes.”

Jones stepped out of the room, shutting the door behind him, and stepped behind the two-way mirror. He pulled his phone out, but took a moment to look Malcolm Taylor over before he dialed. Malcolm turned his head to look at the two-way mirror. If Jones didn’t know better, he’d think Malcolm was staring him in his eyes. Jones scrolled through his contacts list, hit the key, and put the phone to his ear. A few rings, then a pleasant female voice answered, “Good evening, national intelligence. How may I direct your call?”

“Hi, I’d like to get patched into the [REDACTED] at Langley, please. DHS Special Agent Ozzie Jones.” Jones read the operator his badge number, then recited [REDACTED].

“One moment, please. Okay, you’re clear, Special Agent Jones. I’m patching you into the system. Enjoy the rest of your evening.” The connection rang a few more times. Again, a female, cordial as a hotel concierge, answered, “Good evening, Central Intelligence Agency, Langley headquarters. How may I direct your call?”

“Good evening. Could you connect me to the senior M.O.D. at National Clandestine Service, please?”

“Certainly, one moment please.” More rings, then the first male voice in the string: “National Clandestine Service.”

“Hi, this is DHS Special Agent Ozzie Jones. Who am I speaking with?”

“Good evening, Special Agent Jones. How can we be of assistance?”

“Sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“I’m the executive assistant to the Deputy Director of Clandestine Service, Admiral Blaine Pollack.”

“Am I speaking with Admiral Pollack?”

“No, Agent Jones, you’re speaking with his executive assistant.”

“Roger that, but I still didn’t get your name.”

“Alex Asterlane.”

“A-S-T-E-R-L-A-N-E?”

“Congratulations, Agent Jones, you nailed it on the first try.”

“Winged it. Lucky guess. Listen, Alex Asterlane, I’m at Philadelphia International Airport with a tarmac employee who I caught smuggling an international fugitive.” Jones stopped there, and waited. Silence. “Mister Asterlane?”

“I’m still here. Go ahead, Agent Jones.”

“Well, when I began questioning him, he said to call your office.” Pause. “Mister Asterlane?”

“I’m listening.”

“Do you guys have an agent working at PHL?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“So, this guy’s bullshitting me. Fine, I’ll just have him locked up in a federal prison.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Yes, and a social.” Jones recited the spelling of Malcolm Taylor’s name, and his social security number.

“One moment, Agent Jones.” Long pause, then, “I’m checking our database. Can I ask who the fugitive is?”

“We haven’t verified the exact identities beyond aliases yet.”

“Identities? So, there’s more than one? You said *a* fugitive, Agent Jones.”

“Most fugitives have multiple aliases, Alex. What’s the word on this Malcolm Taylor?”

“He does some work for us.”

“So, you *do* have an agent at PHL.”

“He’s not an agent. He’s an associate.”

“An *associate*?”

“We outsource on-call associates for assisting our agents.”

“Can you tell me who the agent was he was assisting today?”

“I didn’t say he was.”

“But there *was* a CIA agent operating at PHL today.”

“I didn’t say that, Agent Jones! I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t put words in my mouth!”

“Alex, chill. I didn’t put words in your mouth. Look, you have an associate stationed here at PHL. Airport surveillance footage has him on the tarmac with unauthorized personnel. We’re simply trying to ascertain if there’s a connection between that, and the abduction of an American citizen named Victoria Penrose.”

“Agent Jones, you’re well aware that we do not conduct operations on American soil. Any inference that we were in any way involved with that will be taken up with your superiors.”

“I didn’t infer that. But Malcolm Taylor might, if I throw him in a federal prison for aiding and abetting.”

“And if you do that, Agent Jones, we’ll send a team of lawyers to Philadelphia, and tie up your office for months, during which Admiral Pollack will lobby to have you demoted and transferred, and there goes your case, *and* your career path, and try getting either one of them back.”

“You don’t have to be an asshole about this, Asterlane.”

“Good luck with your case, Agent Jones.”

Silence. Jones looked at his phone. Call terminated.

Jones stalked back into the interrogation room, slammed the door behind him, stood over the table, and snapped, “You are a *funny* man, Malcolm Taylor!” Malcolm looked up at Jones, who went on, “You know why that took me so long? I’ll tell you why. Because I believed you. So, when the first guy at Langley said, *No, we never heard of Malcolm Taylor*, I had him transfer me to his superior. You wanna know what *he* said, Malcolm?”

Malcolm stared down at the table, not replying.

“He said, *Let me do an extensive computer check*. And after he did, he said, *We have nothing on file regarding anyone named Malcolm Taylor*.”

Malcolm stared at the table in silence.

Jones leaned into Malcolm and snapped, “Who were those two people on the tarmac with you?!”

Malcolm shook his head in silence.

Jones leaned closer and bellowed in Malcolm’s ear, “DO YOU KNOW WHAT A FEDERAL PRISON IS LIKE?”

Malcolm winced, shook his head, and finally said, “Do what you gotta do.”

Jones straightened up, folding his arms across his chest. Cooling down, he continued, “Malcolm, bear with me, because I don’t get this. If you’re with the Agency, why would they hang you out to dry like that? I mean, they *know* I’m gonna throw you in a federal prison. Shit, dog, I even *told* them that. I said, *I’m gonna throw his black ass in a federal prison!* But some snarky whiteboy on the other end told me, *Well, I don’t know what else to tell you.*”

Malcolm bit his lip, and shook his head.

Jones continued, “I mean, if you’re working for the Agency, you’re doing it out of patriotism, right?”

Malcolm looked up at Jones and said, “As a fellow black man in America, you know patriotism only gets you so far.”

Jones nodded approvingly, “Word. So, you were doing it for the money then.”

Malcolm looked down at the table and shook his head.

Jones continued, “I know you weren’t, because the CIA don’t pay jack shit. I got a nephew who makes more money waiting tables than half the people I know at the CIA. So if it wasn’t about the money, and it wasn’t about patriotism, then why in your right mind would you hang your black ass out to dry for the motherfuckin’ CIA?”

Malcolm remained silent a moment, then murmured, “Shit just happens sometimes.” He looked up at Jones and added, “You know?”

Jones stared down at him, nodding. “I know, good brother, believe me.” The two stared at each other a moment. Then Jones walked around the table to the two-way mirror. He sliced his hand in front of his throat and said, “Can we shut off all recording devices, please? Thank you.” He turned to the table, his back to

the two-way mirror, and said, “Can we clear this room, please? I’d like to have a private word with our prisoner.”

Manny DeLeon stepped to the door and held it open. The four Homeland Security officers filed out. DeLeon followed them, shutting the door behind him.

Jones took a moment to allow silence to settle into the room. Then he murmured, “It’s not you I’m after, Malcolm. I’m simply trying to locate and protect a law-abiding American citizen who was abducted at gunpoint from a Philadelphia restaurant, and I could use your help. *She* could use your help. Just a few questions. Just shake your head no, or nod yes. My body is blocking the camera on the other side of the mirror.”

“I thought you told them to turn it off.”

“I don’t trust *anybody*.”

“I hear you, good brother.”

“Okay. Here we go. The young woman who was on the tarmac with you. Did she appear to be in good health?”

Malcolm thought about that a moment, then nodded his head yes.

Jones thought for a moment, then said, “Did you discern a coercive relationship between her and the man she was with?”

Malcolm shook his head no.

Jones folded his arms across his chest, and stroked the tip of his chin. “At one point, she walked off, leaving you and the other man. Why did she do that?”

Malcolm mumbled, “To use the restroom.”

“Seriously.”

“She said, *Mister Malcolm, where’s the ladies room?* When I hear *Mister Malcolm*, I think of my daughters’ friends, because that’s what they call me. That’s why I didn’t think nuffin of it.”

“What about the white dude she was with? The dark-haired guy in the light-brown suit?”

“Langley.”

Jones threw a hand in the air, “We’re back to that again.”

“I can’t say nuffin more. You know how the game is played.”

“Yeah, but you don’t know if that girl deserved to get dragged into the game. I’m trying to get her *out* of the game.”

Malcolm nodded, “I understand that. She seemed like a nice girl to me.”

“Then tell me. Who was the white dude she was with?”

His eyes distant with uncertainty, Malcolm mumbled as softly as he could while still being audible to Jones, “I’m tellin’ you, you gotta talk to Langley about that dude. I don’t know his name. I don’t know what he does. And I honestly can’t tell you how or why I ever got mixed up with him.” He added in a plaintive rasp, “*And that’s all I can say.*”

“No, no, listen, Malcolm, you got one more chance...”

Malcolm cut Jones off, “*No I don’t!* After you jus’ dragged me in here in front of everybody? And went calling them on the phone, throwing my name around like a chicken leg in a pig pen? No, I don’t got no more chance. My life won’t be worth a piece o’ sheep-shit in your got-darn federal prison. Be worth even less if you let me outta here. You must have no idea what kinda people you’re talking about. I ain’t got no more chance. You done fucked me up good, mister.”

Jones stared at Malcolm a moment, in silence. Then he turned to the mirror and put both his hands up, beckoning with his fingertips. The door opened, and Homeland officers poured into the room, followed by Manny DeLeon.

Jones announced, “You can unlock Mister Taylor. He’s free to go.” Malcolm closed his eyes and shook his head. One of the Homeland officers pulled a set of keys from his belt and began opening the shackles. Jones added, “Please escort him back to his department head’s office. Assure his manager that we made a mistake, that we’ve ascertained he’s done nothing improper, and he can resume his airport duties immediately. Tell them that loud and clear. Make sure everybody hears you.” As Malcolm stood, Jones handed him his business card, saying, “Be sure to contact me if anything arises you think I should know about.”

Malcolm accepted the card, and said, “Thank you, good brother.” Malcolm walked out, escorted by the Homeland officers.

• • •

Agents Jones and DeLeon remained in the interrogation room, ensconced at its center table in solitude. Jones had an elbow perched on the table, his chin resting on his palm, fingertips on his cheek, eyes half-closed. DeLeon alternately typed and peered into his laptop computer. Jones eventually broke the silence, grumbling, “Langley. That’s a Whiskey Tango Foxtrot, Manny.”

DeLeon nodded, “And not just *anybody* at Langley. How uncooperative were they?”

Jones pulled his hand from his chin, flopping his forearm on the table, “The dude I spoke with? Here’s how much of a prick he was. He was such a prick, his attitude was a de-facto admission they’re involved in this.”

“That wasn’t very intelligent. How does an idiot like that get such a high-ranking job at Central Intelligence?”

Jones thought about that, then said, “He was no dummy, this dude.”

DeLeon glanced at him, “You think he was trying to game you?”

Jones shook his head no, “It was hubris. He thinks Homeland’s a bunch of flat-footed cops with our heads up our asses.”

DeLeon peered back into the computer screen, “Well, there’s enough of us who are...”

Jones finished his thought, “You could excuse a propellerhead at Clandestine Service for assuming that, I know. Got anything?”

“Besides the obvious stuff the layered voice analysis picked up? That Malcolm Taylor was lying when he said he didn’t know who the dark-haired guy in the khaki suit was? Or that he was also lying when he said he didn’t know what the guy did?”

“Like we needed fancy computer technology to figure that out. Were you shocked the computer told you all that, Manny?”

“Totally.” DeLeon sat up, still peering at the computer. “But check this out. This Victoria Penrose lady has an interesting little sideline.”

“Sideline?”

“Yeah. She’s a satellite agent for a seriously glitzy New York literary agency, called Shipp Literary Media. S-H-I-double-P, as in papa.”

“Did you say *satellite agent*?”

“According to the agency website, that’s her title. Check this out. One aspect of Miss Penrose’s work as a musicologist, is traveling around the globe, and bringing back field recordings from exotic locations. So all this traveling exposes her to potential book projects, which she refers to the agency. And according to my research,” DeLeon looked up from the laptop, “It’s been a lucrative bit of moonlighting over the years. I mean, I’ve heard of some of these books, and they’ve made some of their authors kinda famous. It’s really kind of astounding.”

Jones laughed, shaking his head, “Da *fuck*? Just when you thought this jawn was goofy enough...”

“Wait, Ozzie, that’s just a warm-up!”

“Oh, shit. Okay, partner, sock it to me.”

“According to Miss Penrose’s cellphone records, she made a call, from here in the airport region, at about one-thirty this afternoon.”

“Right around the time her British Airways flight was taking off.”

“Bingo. And guess who she called?”

“Not the literary agency.”

DeLeon nodded, “Yeah, the literary agency.”

“Da *fuck*?”

“Then, her phone goes entirely off the grid. AT&T tells me they think its SIM card has been removed, because they can’t get a fix on it.” DeLeon shook his head at the laptop screen, and leaned back in his chair. “Explain this to me. You get black-hooded by an insane gang of machine gun-wielding mercenaries. They strap you to a chair in a sub-basement of a vacant warehouse. Some GQ-looking guy rolls up and pulls a Jason Bourne on all of them. He takes you to the airport, slips you past security, and out onto the tarmac. You slip away from the guy, steal a boarding pass, hop a plane to London, and the one and only phone call you make... is to your *literary agency*?”

“Not your parents, not your boyfriend, not the police...”

They said it in unison: “Your fucking literary agency.”

Jones rubbed his face and said, “We got a plane ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go.”

“New York.”

“The Big Apple.”

“Skyscrapers...”

“...And *everything*.”

16

The walls of the study are lined with leather-bound books. A whisper of pipe tobacco sweetens the air. Curled into a tufted leather armchair, Victoria Penrose is now a brunette, wrapped in a silk robe and sipping a mug of hot chocolate. Earlier, the gray-haired lady - her name's Kay and she's the Irishman's wife, it emerged - cut Victoria's hair to shoulder-length, blew it out straight, and dyed it black, touching up her eyebrows and lashes to match. Then Lawrence of London snapped a mug-shot of the newly brunette Victoria, and was now off in a darkroom developing it for what would be a new, albeit counterfeit, passport for Victoria. They explained this was, in tradecraft lingo, her *paper-trip*. Elsewhere in the sprawling mansion, Gamma Ray's punky clothes were being laundered. Victoria let Gamma keep the Donna Karan suit as a gratuity for her strategic service.

The Irishman strolled in, clutching a snifter of brandy, and settled into a matching armchair at a right angle from Victoria's, saying, "My nephew Terry just phoned to say he got your girlfriend home all right. Interesting one, she is, ought to be working for us." An off-white oxford shirt cloaked his solid frame, tucked into gray slacks. He sipped his brandy, face partially in shadow. Subdued amber light glowed from a floor lamp behind them. After a comfortable interlude of silence, he said, "How are you feeling, luv?"

"Better, thanks. I really don't know how to thank you, and Kay, and Lawrence. You've all been so generous, not to mention courageous." She wiped a tear from one eye, then the other. "Sorry, I've been through a lot today." She sipped the hot chocolate. "This is so good!" She smiled at the Irishman.

The Irishman smiled back, sipped his brandy, and said, "Perhaps this is an appropriate time to formally introduce ourselves."

"Bev didn't tell you my name?"

"Pardon, but in my world, we don't automatically assume the name used is the name given."

“Well, my name is Victoria Penrose.”

“In your case, it’s both. Victoria Penrose. A perfectly lovely name. It suits you perfectly.” The Irishman reached his large hand out to her, “Peter Stamp, at your service.”

Victoria reached her hand out and took his, “Pleasure meeting you, Peter Stamp.”

Peter reclined into his chair, sipped his brandy, and said, “Now, our hospitality puts you under no obligation to discuss the cause of your ordeal. But I would be remiss not to offer an ear, if you think it might help.”

Victoria touched her forehead, “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“You could start at the beginning.”

Lawrence of London strolled into the room, exclaiming, “Yes! Please do! I want to hear *everything!*” Dressed in an olive-green turtleneck and brown slacks, he brandished a blue booklet, “And speaking of tradecraft, *this...*” he handed it to Victoria, “Is your new passport.”

Victoria placed the hot chocolate on a side table and took the passport. She opened it, and gasped, “It looks just like a real passport!”

A diabolical grin alighting his face, Lawrence retorted, “It *better*, or we’re *all* in trouble!”

“And I’m a brunette now, how weird. And my name is Yvonne Landsberg.” She looked up at Lawrence, “Any relation to the one who sat for Matisse?”

Lawrence winced. Peter yelled at him, “Crikey! You and your blasted modern art kick! Someone’s bound to catch that!”

Lawrence protested, “Sorry, but we’re fresh out of dead people at the moment! And this *was* on rather short notice!”

“Well, stop standing around the middle of the room, it’s distracting. Go fix yourself a drink and join us normal humans in a seated position, fer cryin’ out loud.”

Lawrence pointed at Peter, “Mind your manners for a change. And no, I won’t be socializing, thank you very much. I’ve still got the Telemetric business to attend to.”

Peter shot Lawrence a curious look and muttered, “You’re outfitting her with a Telemetric?”

“She’s going to need a phone, you toe-rag! And we can’t have who-knows-who tracking her to our clubhouse!”

Victoria said, “Did you say *Telemetric*?”

Lawrence replied, “Yes. It’s a mobile telephone that... well, it’s kind of a long story, actually.”

Victoria, almost in trance, muttered, “You can’t trace it, or eavesdrop on it, I know. Galileo has one of those.”

Lawrence and Peter glanced at Victoria, and exclaimed in unison, “*WOT?*”

TO BE CONTINUED...

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[REDACTED].