



The Great Game

Book Two of the Counterpoint Trilogy

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While *The Great Game* has originally been conceived as a stand-alone work, it is now the middle book in *The Counterpoint* trilogy. The prequel, called *The Metronome*, has been published in August of 2014. The sequel, called *The Outer Circle*, will be published in April of 2015. *The Great Game* and *The Metronome* are largely independent, with only a minor overlap amongst the characters. *The Outer Circle* brings the heroes of the two earlier books together to conclude their journey.

The Great Game
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This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and events portrayed in it are the work of author's imagination. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, events or entities is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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PREFACE

“Virtue is more to be feared than vice, because its excesses are not subject to the regulation of conscience.”

— Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*

A small piece of colored cement sits on my desk. My cousin chipped it from the fallen Berlin Wall back in 1989. The event that seemed destined to change the world. As a popular article claimed, it was nothing less than The End of History. Western democracy has won once and for all. No more conflicts over which society is the right path, no more games of great states, no more inefficient centrally controlled economies.

Years later, it’s hard to be so sure. The building of Western-style democracies in many countries proved to be a challenge. Political, financial, and trade tensions persist. Despite good intentions, something is not quite working. And there are people and countries that are just waiting for the democracies to stumble. Perhaps things are not so clear-cut. Perhaps history has not ended yet.

This is, of course, a work of fiction. The story is set in 2022. Like any story set in the future, it is entirely imagined. We can’t predict the future, we can only look at possible scenarios from our time. This book is about one such possibility. But what are presented in the story as facts of the time of writing are indeed facts in real life. And if some elements look hard to imagine, back in the early 1980s one would have been laughed at for suggesting that in a few short years people would be dancing on top of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union would be no longer.

The name of the book—*The Great Game*—is derived from a term given to the strategic rivalry between the British Empire and the Russian Empire for supremacy in Central Asia. The term was later immortalized by Rudyard Kipling. It is used here as a moniker for struggle between great powers—a struggle where sometimes seemingly inconsequential characters may end up playing a prominent part.

PART 1: DON'T SPEAK WITH STRANGERS

“Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning,
without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested.”

— Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

Wednesday, 4/20/2022, 11:46 a.m. CST, Beijing, China

The man enjoyed his view of Southern Sea Lake in Zhongnanhai imperial garden. From all his blessings—prestigious job, immaculate house where they hosted parties for high-ranking party members, two children attending the most sought-after universities, sizable bank accounts—this view was the one thing that he looked forward to each morning. Looking out of the window of his corner office on East Chang'an Avenue, he felt a part of the elite poised to rule the world. Beyond the lake, the new World Industry Tower with its golden spire was towering over the old Wangfujing Cathedral. Which nineteenth century French painter said that train stations were the new cathedrals? He could not quite remember. No matter. The trade and industry towers were the twenty-first century cathedrals, right here, in Jicheng. The man liked to use the ancient name of Beijing, reminding himself that it stood here for over three thousand years.

The phone buzzed, causing him to grimace. He was about to leave for a scheduled lunch with the minister. His secretary should have known better and just taken a message. The man turned away from the window, walked back to the desk and stabbed the speakerphone's button with an impatient, "Yes?"

The secretary said apologetically that the foreigner on the phone had insisted it was very important to let her boss know that John Tomms—he'd made sure she spelled it T-o-m-m-s—was calling.

The man gasped. He knew this call would come one day, but it still momentarily stopped his heart.

His secretary's words brought him out of his paralysis. "Sir, should I put him through?"

He picked up the receiver and forced out a strained, "Yes."

The voice on the phone said in slightly accented English, "Your secretary certainly guards the access to you well. I apologize for

skipping pleasantries and jumping right into business, but we have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Certain documents that we discussed before are being offered for sale to your counterintelligence bureau. You will have to do something about it.”

“How can I?”

“Find a way. How can you not? You know the consequences. Good-bye.”

“Tomms” was right: he knew the consequences. Disgrace, arrest, likely a bullet to the head. He could try to run, might be able to escape, go undercover. Some of the bank accounts were numbered; he’d have money. But he wouldn’t be able to get his family out of the country without raising suspicion. No, he’d have to find out what was going on and stop it.

He pressed the speakerphone’s button again. “Mei, please call the minister and reschedule the lunch. Tell him that I am very sorry but there is an emergency that I have to deal with. Cancel all my calls and appointments for the rest of the day. Get General Tsao on the phone. Tell him I must see him urgently.”

Friday, 4/22/2022, 11:24 a.m. PDT, Seattle

SeaTac airport shuttle train swayed gently as it made its rounds between the terminals. Two flight attendants in bright blue uniforms giggled and winked at each other while slightly nodding in the direction of a man that towered over them a couple of feet away. He was Caucasian, in his early forties, his face partially covered by designer sunglasses. Louis Vuitton bag hanging off his shoulder, unbuttoned expensive raincoat revealing a tailored suit. His muscular build and well-cared-for face combined to project an image of a college athlete that had become a successful, self-assured businessman. One of the girls smiled at him in an “I know it’s just a short ride but why not flirt a bit” manner.

Usually he would have smiled back, perhaps started a conversation, but not this time. He cursed himself for not going straight to the gates. Misdirection was generally a good rule, except when it was not. He’d made a show of loudly interacting with the agent to buy a ticket to Los Angeles, hoping to send his pursuers to the wrong terminal. But of course on a day when nothing went as planned, he got stuck in a slow security lane, and the two operatives that had followed him managed to get their tickets and catch up. Now they were in the same shuttle car, openly watching him.

He couldn’t let them see where he was actually going. Even though they would not be able to get on his plane, they’d know the flight number, and with their network, someone would be waiting for him at the destination. So he got off at the N gates stop for the plane to Los Angeles, although the flight he was planning to take would board in a couple of hours from one of the C gates. The two agents dutifully followed. They’d gotten through security, which meant they did not have weapons, and neither did he. He thought he could take care of one of them, but taking on two was unwise. He had to separate them.

Time for an old trick. The man stopped, put his shoulder bag on a seat, opened it and moved the papers inside, while blocking the view with his body. He scanned the occupants of a half dozen tables in the bar near the LA departure gate. A family with small kids, two elderly women, a man in his thirties absent-mindedly sipping a beer, a young woman swaying to music on her headphones, an overweight middle-aged man loudly talking on his phone, another younger man looking at some papers. He couldn't linger; he had to appear to know exactly what he is doing. He moved forward to one of the tables.

Friday, 4/22/2022, 12:52 p.m. PDT

“Any idiot can face a crisis.
It is day-to-day living that wears you out.”
— attributed to Anton Chekhov

Mount Rainier came into view. Whenever David flew to Seattle, he tried to get a seat on the right side of the plane going north and on the left side coming back, so he could see the mountain. The view reminded him of Maui, his favorite vacation spot, with Rainier rising from the clouds the way Haleakala volcano rose from the ocean.

It was early afternoon on Friday and the flight was not busy. An Asian man across the aisle was arguing with a flight attendant over changing seats without permission, and David wondered why it was such a big deal. No one occupied the seat next to him. A woman David’s age in the aisle seat tried striking up a conversation. He politely mumbled a response but did not reciprocate and avoided eye contact. David wasn’t good at casual small talk, and the woman’s loud manner and even louder dress turned him off. The woman gave up, put on video glasses, and became engrossed in some show. David thought that he should look into getting a pair of video glasses too. The first generation of glasses-based video devices did not do well, but the devices were making a comeback. The new generation’s electronics were built into optical frames and hard to detect.

David thought it was a pattern: first generation devices, be it personal digital assistants, video glasses, or home delivery drones, would fail due to unintended consequences. Then the next generation would fix these errors, but eventually bring on their own repercussions. He reclined his seat and picked up the *Economist* magazine that a friendly stranger had given him in SeaTac airport. It felt strange holding a print version, most periodicals went digital only. The magazine’s headline read “Ides of March: *Et tu*, California?” The

editors must have been fairly confident in their readers knowing the history of Ancient Rome. Although, the picture below was quite descriptive: dark-blue-colored states from Minnesota to Virginia cut off diagonally from red-colored states in the south and center of the country, and another dividing line separated the light blue-colored Pacific Coast states of California, Oregon, and Washington.

David stuffed the magazine into the pocket of the seat in front of him; he didn't feel like reading it. He did keep the green manila folder that the magazine was in, figuring he could use it if he ever got his cluttered home office organized. He wished that he and Thomas Mann, the man who'd given him the magazine, had exchanged e-mails or phone numbers. It was nice to experience a bit of unexpected travel camaraderie.

David looked at his watch, which annoyingly made him view his pulse and blood pressure in addition to displaying the time. They got delayed by a few minutes because a couple of passengers were late for the flight, but he was still going to land at LAX before 3:00 p.m. There was no point in going to the office today. Nothing was urgent enough that it couldn't wait until Monday. Just before takeoff, he'd called his friend Jim and arranged to meet at four on the public tennis courts in Santa Monica. Jim had been laid off during the last "reduction in force"—RIF'd as they called it—and was glad to get out of the house rather than continue searching the Internet for reasonably-paying jobs. They would hit a few balls, have an inexpensive dinner out, and then David would go home and have a weekend to himself. That's how he liked it these days, peaceful and quiet.

David stretched in his seat, flipped through the music on his phone, mostly a collection of hits from the 1960s to the '90s, turned on Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run," and closed his eyes. He never got into wearable gadgets, preferring an old-fashioned hand-held phone instead. David pretended that he was performing the song in front of thousands. He was so lost in this daydream that he missed the

flight attendant offering drinks until she was two rows away. David was thirsty but figured he'd have to wait until they landed.

He was listening to "Glory Days" for the second time when the plane reached Los Angeles. David grabbed his carry-on and made his exit with the rest of the passengers.

He stopped by a restroom. While washing hands, David looked in the mirror and fell into a habit that went back to his childhood: he would take his time studying himself in front of the mirror, as if to make sure that he actually existed and wasn't just a ghost, a figment of his imagination. Mid-thirties, carefully combed hair, dressed in dark gray slacks, wrinkled bluish shirt, navy blue jacket. He was conscious of his slightly crooked nose that never looked right after that bicycle accident twenty-plus years ago. Secretly he'd often wondered if changing his appearance would help. Maybe adding tattoos, growing a beard, or wearing an earring. But none of that felt natural. He wished he could stand out by other means, like being an athlete or an intellectual or even a master of social situations.

David marched across the terminal and the LAX loop to the parking structure where he'd left his car during his trip to Seattle. His 2009 Honda Accord was the first brand new car he bought when he got his job after college. It was starting to show its age. He hadn't replaced it earlier because he and Judy had been saving money for the house, and now he couldn't afford to. Most cars had jumped up in price following the 2019 crisis.

The parking cashier said, "One hundred twenty dollars." David pulled out his phone to pay, but the cashier silently pointed to a handwritten sign: "Phone payments not available, use CC or cash." As David handed over his credit card, her phone rang. She answered, turned away from him, and started chatting and laughing.

David said, "Excuse me, can I have my card and receipt?" She gave him an indifferent look and continued talking. David pulled a few times on his right ear, and then caught himself and took a couple deep breaths. Finally, she returned his card and a printout, and he drove off.

Traffic heading north on Sepulveda Boulevard was light, prolonged recession had its advantages. People were walking, carpooling, bicycling, or just staying home. A gigantic billboard on the corner of Sepulveda and Manchester showed California Senate's majority leader confidently looking south, ostensibly into a bright future. The sun was rising from the ocean behind him. David thought that unless some cataclysm took place, the sun would be setting, not rising. But whoever made the billboard did not bother with such details.

He had just enough time to stop off at his place in Culver City, change clothes, and grab a tennis racket. But he needed to buy tennis balls. Didn't want to burden unemployed Jim for that. David turned left on Manchester Avenue into a Big 5 parking lot. He moved with speed, but when he reached the cashier's line, the one person ahead of him took forever. David looked at his watch—3:14. He was on the verge of running late. Finally, he paid \$4.99, plus the twenty percent luxury goods city tax, and hurried out of the store to his car.

The parking lot was half full, but as luck would have it some idiot in a dark blue Lincoln Navigator was idling right behind his car. The Asian-looking driver wearing a beige jacket had his window down. His arm, with a huge chronometer watch on the wrist, reached out to adjust the side mirror.

David went around the Honda and started to say, "Excuse me, sir, but would you mind—" He never had a chance to finish. The rear door of the Lincoln swung open, and he was grabbed from behind and unceremoniously thrown into the back seat. Whoever pushed him climbed in next, and David found himself squeezed between two bulky men.

The door slammed closed, and the car sped out of the parking lot.

Friday, 4/22/2022, 3:15 p.m. PDT

The Lincoln raced west on Manchester. The man in the front passenger seat turned around and asked, “What did Julius tell you?”

David was too stunned to do anything, except stammer out, “Wh-what?”

This man was Asian as well, probably in his thirties, with combed-back hair, wearing a light black jacket, large aviator sunglasses, and a white T-shirt. For whatever reason, the voice sounded familiar. He patiently repeated “What did Julius tell you?”

Something hard—perhaps a gun—pushed into David’s side, and the voice on his left growled, “Answer the man.” The voice had a Mexican accent, although in Los Angeles it didn’t seem like an accent at all. David started raising his arm to his right ear, but it was grabbed and pinned down. He stole a quick look to his right and saw a beefy guy with a shaved head. The guy wore a Lakers T-shirt, and some kind of a snake tattoo peeked out on his neck.

David had never had a gun pointed at him before. The last three years had given David a number of shocks, but nothing like this. Drawing on coping methods he’d learned, he took a deep breath and stammered, “This is some kind of mistake. I don’t know any Julius.”

They laughed. The one in the passenger seat, sounding like a bad imitation of a straight-to-Blu Ray movie, said, “We can do it the easy way or we can do it the hard way. We have your travel bag. It’s in the back of the car. We know you were talking to Julius in Seattle; we know he gave you the papers.”

The car made a hard right turn on Lincoln Boulevard and raced north, swerving between lanes. Traffic was still light. David’s mind continued to spin: *They have me confused with someone else? Or is this about the Air Internet project?* He did talk to engineers in Seattle; he did get some papers and some computer files. They were in his carry-on together with his computer. But he didn’t recall anyone named Julius at

the meeting. Maybe he just missed the name. There were at least two dozen people there.

David tried to control his voice. "If you want design review documents and presentations, they're in my bag, and detailed files are on my computer. I can walk you through them if you like."

Whatever he said seemed to take the man in the passenger seat aback, because he looked at David for a few moments before saying, "Yes, you will 'walk us' through everything. Why are you calling them design review documents? Are you trying to be funny?"

"Well, that's what we call them. If you get me my bag, I'll show them to you."

At that point the driver apparently lost patience, because he turned around and screamed at David. "Stop fucking around! We want the Shulman file, and we'll beat it out of you if you don't give it to us!"

The driver was still glaring at David when everyone in the car was thrown forward hard. The Lincoln had rear-ended a stopped delivery truck. David hit his head on the edge of the driver's seat and blacked out for a moment. When he came to, the car was filling with steam from the radiator. The two men in front were moaning against air bags. The Mexican on his right seemed dazed. So was the guy on his left.

Someone opened the door asking, "Are you OK?"

David thought, *I am certainly not OK*. He climbed over the guy on his left, pushed past would-be rescuers, and started limping away. He did it instinctively, without conscious planning. He was now in the middle of the Lincoln and Washington intersection, but traffic had stopped, people rubbernecking the accident. His legs and left arm felt numb, and there was a throbbing pain in his left temple. David heard people calling to him, and cars honking, but he kept walking, thinking only *What the hell was this about?* Walking as fast as he could, away from those strange people asking questions that he could not understand.

He crossed Lincoln, moving west, ducked into an alley, came to one of the smaller Venice streets, and started running. He kept thinking, *I have to move at least ten blocks away*. He wasn't sure why it was

ten. That number just stuck in his head. He heard rapid, labored breathing, looked back in fear, and realized that it was his own. After zigzagging through a few streets and running across Venice Boulevard, he passed through an area filled with auto body shops. David stopped, looked around. Nobody was following him, despite incessant barking of the dogs alerting their owners to something suspicious in the neighborhood. He leaned against a telephone pole with his hands on his knees, and paused to catch his breath, sweat running down his face.

Friday, 4/22/2022, 3:38 p.m. PDT

There was a small ethnic eatery on the corner. East European something or other. The adrenaline was wearing off, the panic that gripped his mind subsided a bit. Numb, tired, and in urgent need of sitting down, and trying to understand what just happened, David walked into the restaurant. The only person he could see there was a waitress.

She gave David a strange look and said, “Any table you like.”

He sat at a table in the corner facing the door. It was something he’d read in spy novels—sit in a corner where you can watch the door—but never had to think about before. The waitress came to the table, put down the menu, and asked if he wanted something to drink. David was tempted to say “Martini, shaken not stirred,” but he bit his tongue and replied, “Coffee, black,” because that was the only other thing that came to mind. He felt momentarily James Bond-ish, but then another deflating thought intruded: *James Bond would have dealt with those assholes instead of running away scared shitless.*

His voice must have come out weak, because she said, “Excuse me?”

“Coffee, black, no sugar.”

“OK.” The waitress lingered and said, “You don’t look so hot. What happened?”

David was stumped. He didn’t make things up easily, but how could he explain what just took place? He cleared his throat, “I was walking and I got into a fight.”

The waitress nodded. “It happens around here. I hope the other guy looks worse. There is a restroom in the back if you want to clean up.”

As he often did, David thought of himself in third person, picturing how ridiculous he must look to the waitress. Getting beaten up in a fight. *Pathetic.* He thanked her and walked to the restroom.

Despite the dim bulb and peeled mirror, David could see that he indeed did not look hot, with dirt and blood smeared over his face and shirt. He washed up and combed his hair. Blood still seeped from a cut on his forehead, but the bathroom did not even have paper towels, so there wasn't much else to do.

When he came back to his corner table, there was a cup of coffee waiting for him. It felt good to drink the hot liquid and let his pulse settle down. The waitress returned carrying two paper napkins, one wet and one dry. She wiped the cut on his forehead with the wet one, dried it with the second napkin, and then pulled a Band-Aid from her pocket and applied it to the cut. She did all this in a businesslike manner, without saying a word. David felt like he was being treated by a nurse.

The waitress said, "Now that you look somewhat presentable, would you like anything to eat?"

David felt nauseous and thought that a bite of food would help. "What do you recommend?" he asked, actually looking at her for the first time. Before she was just a blurry figure. He liked looking at women, and even in this half-crazed state he took in her appearance. Not a beauty but attractive and a bit exotic-looking. About five foot six, high cheekbones, shoulder-length black hair with yellow highlights, wearing faded jeans and a light blue T-shirt that read "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Her face had an olive complexion, a small button nose and thin lips, but it was her bright greenish eyes that stood out to him. They were matched by simple silver earrings with green stones. No rings, no obvious cosmetics, fingernails nicely trimmed but not painted. The T-shirt was low-cut and showed some attractive cleavage. Her pose, with one hand resting on the corner of the table, seemed to strike a note of casual confidence, as if saying *yes, I am here to serve you, but I am not a servant*. She had a slight accent that he couldn't place. He would have guessed her to be in her mid-twenties, except for the crow's feet around her eyes, giving away that she'd likely crossed into the thirties territory.

“People seem to like cheese *nalesniki*.” Seeing David’s puzzled look, she helpfully added, “They’re kind of like crepes or burritos with cheese.”

David nodded OK, and the waitress disappeared in the direction of a kitchen he could hear but not see.

Now that he was able to steady himself a bit, David started to arrange the facts in his head. That was his training after all—solving problems by applying logic. He’d been kidnapped by four people, two of them Asian and two probably Mexican, who wanted to know what someone named Julius told him and whether he had some “Shulman file.” Was this related to the aircraft Internet service he’s been working on? It had to be. He simply could not come up with anything else he knew that could possibly be of interest to anybody. His previous project involved upgrading a satellite system for a network of gas stations, and who the hell would care about that? He caught himself thinking again that he’d been wasting his life on stupid projects, but chased the thought away. He had other things to deal with right now.

Unfortunately, the kidnappers now had the documents and his computer. He’d have to go to the police. What was he going to say on Monday at work? With another RIF coming up soon, he really did not need this. Losing his job in this economy? Thankfully, he had no dependents. But then, after the market crash and the divorce, he didn’t have any savings either.

The waitress came back with a plate of two burrito-like things and refilled his coffee. He thanked her and started absentmindedly eating.

Something did not quite add up. The project wasn’t particularly secretive. Julius was a fairly distinctive name, and he was pretty sure he hadn’t heard it in Seattle’s meetings. And the guy in the front seat was surprised when David mentioned design review documents. Still, he didn’t have a better theory.

David looked at his watch. It was 4:17. Just about an hour since he was at Big 5. His car was still there in the parking lot.

The waitress came over. “My shift is ending. So unless you want to order something else, would you please pay?”

David glanced at the bill, which added up to \$15.27, and fished twenty dollars out of his wallet. At this point, he remembered that Jim was waiting for him at Santa Monica tennis courts. He reached into his shirt pocket for the phone, but it wasn’t there. Must have fallen out somewhere along the way. David said to the waitress, “Please keep the change, but can I borrow your phone for a quick local call? Just to tell my friend that I’m running late?”

The waitress looked at him suspiciously, her hand reaching into the right pocket of her jeans and staying there. David added, “I must have dropped mine.”

She said, “Sure,” and handed him an old iPhone 8.

Fortunately, David had a good memory for numbers and was able to get Jim’s right. Jim answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Hi, it’s David.”

“David? That’s not your number.”

“I know. I lost my phone.”

“I know you did. People who found it called me a few minutes ago because my number was the last call you made. They wanted to know how they could get it back to you.”

“Really? What did you tell them?”

“I told them I’m waiting for you on court number three, and they can bring the phone here. They said they’ll do that. When are you coming over? We have only forty minutes left on the reservation.”

“Well, I had an accident and I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can make it. Would you mind getting my phone from them, and I’ll swing by tonight or tomorrow morning to pick it up?”

“Sure. Are you all right?”

“Yes, fine. I’ll tell you more when I see you.”

“OK. Do you still want to have dinner tonight?”

“Perhaps. I’ll go home, take a shower, change, and call you from the landline.”

David ended the call and thought how nice it was that someone found the phone and was actually trying to get it back to him. There really still were some good people in this world. He needed a cab. The waitress was not nearby to ask for permission to make a second call. He Googled a taxicab number, called it, and gave them the address from the menu, then put the waitress's phone on the edge of the table. The restaurant started filling up.

The waitress with the "education" T-shirt came to get her phone and put it into the handbag hanging off her shoulder. As she was walking away, the handbag erupted into finale of the "1812 Overture." She fished out the phone, answered, listened for a few seconds, then turned and asked, "Is your name David?"

"Yes."

She handed the phone back saying, "It's for you."

As David took the phone from her, he recognized Jim's number. But the voice on the line wasn't Jim's. It was the voice of the passenger seat guy saying they want the information and David better give it to them voluntarily or....

David's hands went cold, panic again gripping his insides. He ended the call.

Friday, 4/22/2022, 4:26 p.m. PDT

David knew that hanging up was not the right thing to do, but his brain short-circuited, as if he went unconscious for a few seconds. He had to think before he could talk to these people, and he couldn't do it on his feet. He heard something and looked up.

The waitress was standing in front of him saying, "Hey, are you all right?" There was a decidedly less friendly edge to her voice, as in "I've had enough of your drama." David silently handed her the phone. She shrugged, took it, and turned to leave.

David found his voice. "Wait!"

The waitress turned again with a short, "Yes?"

David stammered a bit and finally said, "Look, I don't quite know how to explain this, but the people who just called are pretty bad guys."

A frown of distrust crossed her face. "And why is this my problem? There are many bad people in this town."

"Because they think I have something they want, and they now have your number."

"So what?"

"Well, I think it's easy to find people by their phone numbers."

The waitress fumed. "Damn it! I try to be nice to you, and you involve me in some shit?" With her accent, it came out as *sheet*.

"I am really sorry. It's hard to explain. You can walk away, but I think you should know what's going on. It might be nothing, but I'm not sure."

"Why should I believe you? How do I know you're not BS-ing me?"

"No, I swear. Look, my hands are shaking. I called a friend of mine from your phone. He was waiting for me at Santa Monica tennis courts. A few minutes later they called me—or rather you—from his phone. They must have taken the phone away from him."

The waitress studied him for a moment. “You do look like you’ve seen a ghost. I’m planning to meet some friends on Santa Monica Promenade for dinner and a movie. I was going to work out at the YMCA first, but I guess I’ll listen to you instead. We can go to the Promenade and you tell me the story.”

“OK.” David shrugged, wondering if he should have just kept his mouth shut.

“Do you want to follow me in your car?”

“I can’t. My car is at the Big 5 parking lot on Manchester and Sepulveda.”

“Then how did you get here?”

“I was kidnapped. I escaped and ran.”

“Now I know you’re BS-ing me.” The waitress turned. David watched her walking away. After a few steps she stopped, turned around again, and came back to his table. “Show me your driver’s license.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I want to know your name.”

David produced his wallet with the license.

She said, “David Ferguson, Culver City,” and typed something into her phone. David got curious. “What are you doing?”

“I texted your name to one of the friends I’m meeting with later tonight,” she said. “Just in case. And I have pepper spray in my pocket, so don’t try anything. I’ll drive you to the Promenade; you can make your way from there. Let’s go. My car is two blocks away.”

David followed the waitress out the door. A cab was pulling to the curb just as they walked out, but David decided to stay with the waitress. To go through yet another explanation would have been way too complicated for his current condition.

“Why were these people trying to reach you by calling my number?” she asked.

David started explaining but then said, “Let’s sit down, and I’ll tell you the whole story from the beginning. I can’t make sense of it myself.”

David had not been in this area in some time. It had clearly taken a turn for the worse. A few houses were boarded up, some in a state of disrepair. They walked by a few broken-down cars that nobody bothered to tow away. The not-so-faint smell of garbage assaulted him. Over the past few years LA had separated into well-to-do gated communities, run-down areas overrun by gangs and poverty, and the in-between pockets of shrinking middle class trying to keep their heads above water. This part was descending into the second category.

The waitress moved with a purposeful stride until they came to an old Nissan Leaf. She opened the trunk, reached into one of the two gym bags there, and got out a T-shirt and an LA Kings cap. “These are my roommate’s. Why don’t you change? You still look like hell and your shirt has blood on it.”

David glanced around. The waitress turned away, and the street was empty, so he quickly exchanged his dirty shirt for a tee that sported a faded “Life is short, pedal hard” encouragement, and put the cap on to cover the Band-Aid.

As they drove off, the waitress said, “My name is Maggie.”

“I’m David.”

Maggie chuckled. “I know.” Then she added, “The full name is Margarita, but I shortened it.”

David said, “The full name is David,” and immediately felt silly over making a stupid joke. To cover it up, he asked, “How many miles do you get on this?”

“The manual says up to seventy-five. With this old battery, maybe fifty. But it gets me around town as long as I’m careful to plan how far I go. And it’s still much cheaper than buying gas.”

They drove north on Main Street, crossed over Santa Monica Freeway, turned left on Colorado Avenue and right on Second Street. Right in front of the parking structure between Arizona and Santa

Monica Boulevard, Maggie pulled into an open space. She said, “In Santa Monica, if you have an electric, they let you park at meters for free. I’ll move it after a couple of hours to save money. Let’s go to the coffee shop by AMC theaters.”

David knew the place and did not particularly care for it, nor did he need any more coffee. But Maggie told him rather than asked, and he was always a bit intimidated by such forcefulness. Besides, he felt guilty about involving her in something that couldn’t possibly be good.

The Third Street Promenade was more popular than ever. It was one of the few places where you could walk and mingle with hundreds of people in relative safety without spending much money. The retail shops went a bit downscale, but most managed to survive, benefiting from the traffic. Street performers created a cacophony of sounds. Sometimes too many would pack into a single block, leading to fights, which would be quickly broken up by the Santa Monica Police. That was another advantage: while bigger LA had cut down on their police department, Santa Monica had staffed up. It turned out to be a good investment; heavy police presence kept things in check.

As Maggie and David walked into the coffee shop, she said, “Small latte, please,” and went to grab the only open table.

David was again annoyed by her bossing him around, but he obediently went to the counter and ordered a small latte for her and a green tea for himself. While waiting for the beverages, he remembered what he thought was a line from an old Jason Bourne movie: “When you walk into a room, check where the exits are.” Having been here before, he knew that the place had an exit in the back, into the alley that bordered the parking structure next to where Maggie had left her car. Jason Bourne would have known what to do in this confusing mess.

The latte and the tea arrived. David grabbed them and went to the table, where he sat facing the front door, feeling smart and resourceful.

Maggie thanked him for the latte and said, “OK, let’s be clear: I am here with you because I want to know who has my number and what they want. What’s going on?”

“I was on my way from the airport—”

“Why were you at the airport?”

“I was coming back from Seattle.”

“What were you doing in Seattle?”

“Attending engineering meetings. I’m working on a project creating higher-speed Internet connections to airplanes—”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you know how these new 5G phones download from the web at a hundred megabits a second?”

Maggie said nothing, but the look on her face was an unmistakable *what the hell are you talking about and why should I care?*

David stepped back. “In other words, you can download an ultra-high definition movie in about twenty minutes. Even your 4G phone”—he nodded to her bag with the iPhone 8 in it— “can download such a movie in an hour. But the airplane Internet connections are ten times slower, and with the Web 3.0 full of videos this is not enough even for browsing. We are trying to make it much faster.”

Maggie said without enthusiasm, “OK, I understand. Very exciting.”

“So, I was driving from the airport and decided to stop at Big 5 on Sepulveda—”

“Why?”

Jeez, she is an interrupting kind, David thought. “Let me continue for a couple of minutes, OK? I was planning to play tennis with my friend Jim, so I stopped to get some tennis balls. When I got out, there was a car blocking my way. These people pushed me into their car, stuck a gun in my side—”

“Why did you tell me that you got into a fight?”

“Well, I couldn’t really go into the whole story when I just met you.”

“So you lied to me.”

“Give me a break, did you want me to say ‘I was kidnapped, now I want some *nalesniki*?’” David hissed.

“It’s *nalesniki*.”

“Whatever!”

“So what did they want?”

“They wanted to know what someone named Julius told me and whether I had Shulman’s file. But I don’t know anyone by these names.”

“What about the people you met in Seattle?”

“I don’t recall anyone like that, but there were a lot of people there.”

She sipped her latte, her eyes on David. “So what happened then?”

“They crashed the car, and I escaped and ran to your restaurant. I called Jim from your phone, he said that some people found my phone, dialed the last number, and were bringing it to the tennis court.” He felt an urge to shock her. “Next thing I know, your phone rings and it’s the kidnappers calling from Jim’s phone!” David leaned forward delivering this, both hands pressing at the table, trying to convey *see, I told you this is serious*.

But instead of acting concerned, Maggie tapped her lip with her forefinger and said, “Hmm ... I read a book recently about industrial espionage being a lot more prevalent than people realize. Do you think this is related to this Internet project you were working on?”

David shrugged, somewhat deflated by limited impact of his dramatic effect. “Probably. That’s the only thing I can think of.”

“Maybe one of your company’s competitors trying to steal the technology?”

She didn’t seem to take this too seriously. Sensing her indifferent tone, David himself started wondering if it was just a case of

overzealous industrial espionage and his life would return to normal soon, with something interesting to talk about for years to come.

Having nothing else to add, he turned the conversation to Maggie. When David asked if waitressing was her main job, she bristled a bit, saying, “Not every waitress is an aspiring actress.” But then she explained that she was in graduate school studying economics at UCLA and waitressing part-time to support herself. The accent in Maggie’s throaty voice sounded more pronounced, if somewhat uneven: sometimes “th” came across as “zzz” and “w” would come out as a “v.” David thought that she must have been in the country for a long time and worked on her pronunciation, but the learned muscle memory was not always complying. He was just about to ask where she was from, when a woman’s rising voice from the next table interrupted their conversation.

“I can’t believe they kill people for a cell phone now!”

David turned to the woman and asked, “What are you talking about?”

She pointed to the TV screen hanging in the corner. The news was muted, but captions were running along the bottom of the screen: “Murder on Santa Monica tennis courts. According to eyewitnesses, the victim was killed for his cell phone.”

Maggie followed his gaze to the screen and drew a sharp breath. David’s insides turned into a block of ice again. After almost convincing himself that he had overreacted, he was back in the nightmare.

Maggie said, “Maybe it’s someone else.” But her strained voice betrayed that she didn’t quite believe that.

They sat in silence, following the TV screen even as it switched to other topics. David lowered his eyes to look at the street where Friday night crowds were gathering and a mime started performing to a small group. His body tensed at the sight of the Navigator driver in a beige jacket peering into a restaurant’s windows across the street.

“He is here,” David whispered to Maggie.

“Who?”

“One of the kidnappers. He is wearing a beige jacket.” He saw Maggie’s eyes grow frightened. “Let’s quietly get up and go through the back door.”

Maggie slowly picked up her purse from floor, and they rose to leave. She looked back at the window. David followed her glance and realized that the man in the beige jacket was now standing there, looking straight at him.

Things happened fast after that. The man rushed to the front door. David grabbed Maggie’s hand, and they started running to the back. A chair tipped over and fell to the floor. One of the people waiting for a table moved forward and collided with their pursuer. David and Maggie ran into the alley. The coffee shop door slammed shut with a bang. They ducked into the parking structure, and the door was pushed open behind them. They ran through the cavernous parking building and out to the street where the Leaf was parked. Then they were in the car driving north on Second Avenue. As they passed the entrance to the parking structure, David saw the man in the beige jacket standing by the arm-gate looking at the cars leaving. Luckily, they drove past without being seen.

In silence, Maggie turned left on California Avenue, caught a green light across Ocean Avenue, and went down the Incline to Pacific Coast Highway, or PCH as everyone called it. Maggie was gripping the steering wheel and staring straight ahead, as if to tune out everything else.

Friday, 4/22/2022, 5:37 p.m. PDT

They drove north on PCH, past a small homeless tent city that had grown up on the hills adjacent to the road. After crossing Temescal Canyon, Maggie finally spoke, her voice hoarse. "There are a couple of chargers at the supermarket on the corner of Sunset and PCH." One of the charging stations was available. They parked and plugged in the Leaf. Maggie marched off into the market. David meekly followed. She stopped at the apples stand and started rearranging the stack of Granny Smith's. When David said, "Hey," she snapped at him.

"Damn you! Couldn't you find some other restaurant to walk into?"

One of the supermarket workers came over and in an unfriendly voice asked, "Can I help you?"

Maggie walked away to the frozen foods section. There she abruptly turned to David and said, "How did he find us?"

David shrugged. "Luck?"

"Don't be an idiot! They knew you were on the Promenade and nobody could have told them that because you did not know you were going there. They tracked you!"

David checked his pockets and the front of his pants. Nothing except for his wallet, Honda keys, and a comb. "What about my shirt?" They went back to the car, got the dirty shirt from the trunk. Nothing but the boarding pass.

Maggie asked, "Why are you pulling on your ear? Something wrong with it?"

David shook his head. "No, just a nervous habit." Then he got it: "They're not tracking me; they're tracking you!"

"How?"

"Your phone."

Maggie stared at him for a moment, grabbed the phone from her purse and turned it off. She then leaned with her back against the car,

covered face with her hands, and rocked back and forth. “Oh, sheet, oh, sheet.” Her accent grew more pronounced. David awkwardly shifted from one foot to another.

Maggie abruptly withdrew her hands and said, “If that’s what they were doing, they might already have this location. We have to get out of here.” They unplugged the Leaf, and headed east on Sunset, away from PCH. When they came to Pacific Palisades, she pulled into one of the side streets and parked.

“I didn’t really believe you at first,” Maggie said. “I thought you did get into a fight and then made up a story to pick me up or get a ride.” When David didn’t say anything, she continued. “We have to go to the police. I don’t need any trouble, I don’t want some crazy assholes following me.”

David agreed. Since the murder took place in Santa Monica, they figured they should go to SMPD. Neither of them had ever been there (or to any other police department for that matter), and they were afraid to turn on the phone to find directions. Fortunately, the Leaf had a navigation system. It would have been easiest to get back on PCH, but they avoided it and went up to Lincoln Boulevard and then down Pico, where there was a line of people stretching for two blocks.

Maggie explained. “There is a soup kitchen on Pico.”

Maggie—who, David was figuring out, maintained her practical streak no matter what—parked at an electrical charger, and they walked over to the police headquarters. David would have preferred to park right next to the entrance, even if it was illegal. But he steeled himself with a manly motto: “If she’s not afraid, neither am I.”

Maggie told the man at the reception desk that they may have information about the murder on the tennis courts and would like to speak to detectives handling the case. They were told to sit in the waiting area. David watched Maggie out of the corner of his eye. She reached for her phone but then must have remembered that she dare not turn it on.

Her knee was shaking nervously. It made him feel better. He tried to focus on his breathing, calm himself down. Only a few people were waiting; there were no screams; nobody was cuffed to a chair. It could have been a reception room in a doctor's office. He caught himself pulling on his ear and wished he'd gotten into that cab, gone back to his car, and then home where he'd be left alone.

A man appeared at the reception desk and was directed to them. He introduced himself as Detective Megrano and took them to a small room with a table. He sat at one side and pointed to chairs on the other.

Detective Megrano looked to be in his fifties. Slightly overweight, gray hair, neatly dressed in dark slacks, short-sleeved light blue shirt, and a black-and-gray tie. He held himself very straight, which made him appear almost as tall as David, even though he was at least a couple of inches shorter. Megrano opened a small notebook and asked for their names.

“David Ferguson.”

“Margarita Sappin.”

“So what can you tell us?” Megrano asked, his tone skeptical.

David sat forward. “Was the victim’s name Jim Plasche?”

Megrano’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Please stay here. I’ll be right back.” He left the room and returned a minute later with a large thirty-something African-American man with a shaved head. He introduced himself as Detective Chander.

Upon hearing David’s and Maggie’s names, Chander said, “A call came in just a few minutes ago, saying that you”—he pointed at Maggie—“did not show up for a meeting but texted his name”—and he pointed at David.

Maggie blushed. “Yes, I forgot about that.”

Chander nodded. “OK, I guess it’ll be a part of the story.”

Megrano asked, “How do you know the victim’s name when it hasn’t been made public yet?”

Maggie exhaled as if saying *Oh shit, this is indeed connected.*

"It's a long story," David said. He wiped sweaty palms on his pants. "I was speaking to Jim right before the murder, and I was called from Jim's phone right after that conversation."

The detectives remained silent, so David launched into the story. Maggie added how awful David looked when he showed up at the restaurant, and how they had figured out that they were being tracked. Megrano was taking notes. Chander interrupted a few times asking for additional details.

When David finished, Megrano continued his note-taking for a while and said, "So you think they want engineering design documents from your meeting in Seattle?"

"I'm not sure," David said. "But that's my best guess. Either that or they have mistaken me for someone else."

Megrano shook his head. "People rarely kill for technical documents."

David swallowed hard, cleared his throat, and asked softly, "How did Jim die?"

Megrano paused, studying David, then replied, "Knife to the heart. It was quick."

Everyone went quiet for a minute. *I led them right to Jim*, David thought, the guilt threatening to paralyze him. He looked off to the side to pull himself together.

Chander asked, "Could you identify the men?"

"I could identify the two kidnappers in front, but probably not the ones in the back seat. Except the one on the right had a snake tattoo stretching along his neck. Also, the voice of the front passenger sounded familiar, but I'm not sure why."

Maggie added, "I saw the man in the beige jacket briefly. I might be able to recognize him."

Megrano said, "You probably want some water," and both detectives left the room. Megrano came back a minute later with two plastic cups. Maggie and David sat quietly, as Megrano went over his notes.

When Chander returned, he said, "I confirmed an accident on Lincoln and Washington around three thirty today. Five people ran away from the car; four of them were picked up by a black Mercedes sedan. By the time LAPD arrived, there were no witnesses who could identify people or give them the license of the car they left in. It was noted in the report that people who left in the Mercedes came back to the crash to get some things. The Navigator was reported stolen from a driveway in Playa Del Rey sometime after one in the afternoon."

"Let's go look at some pictures," Megrano said. They went to another room that was dark with a flat-screen TV connected to a computer.

Chander turned on the TV, sat at the computer and asked, "Could you tell whether the Asian kidnappers were Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Thai?"

"I don't think they were Japanese or Thai," David said, "but I can't really be sure."

Chander nodded. "See if you can recognize anyone." For the next thirty minutes the TV screen flashed hundreds of faces. A couple of times David asked Chander to pause but kept shaking his head no.

Chander finally said, "I think we've had enough for today."

Megrano looked at David. "Is your Accord still in Big 5's parking lot?"

"Should be," David replied. "I'm planning to call a cab and go get it."

Megrano said to both of them, "It might not be safe. I'll arrange to have it towed to the police yard. There might be some clues in the car. You'll be able retrieve it from the yard tomorrow. It's entirely possible they are tracking you via cell phone, so it's best you continue to keep it off. You can use it for a quick call as long as you move to a different location after that. Be careful in how you use computers, limit use of social networks, especially the ones that track your location. Also, it's probably best if you don't go home yet. These guys are clearly willing to kill. Do you need a place to stay tonight?"

Maggie said she could crash at her friend's place near UCLA. David mumbled that he was OK. The detectives took David's and Maggie's contact information and handed them their cards. Megrano arranged to meet them at noon tomorrow at Maria's Italian Kitchen diner on Pico.

Friday, 4/22/2022, 8:29 p.m. PDT

Chander walked them over to Maggie's Leaf and watched them drive away. When he came back, Megrano was still sitting in the same room going over his notes. Chander said, "I wish we had someone to send with them, but the department staffed up on glorified security guards, not detectives. At least they weren't followed. Do you believe their story?"

"I do," Megrano said. "But they're still suspects for now. They are probably OK as long as they don't do anything stupid, like go home. The people who tried to kidnap Ferguson must be the same ones that killed Jim Plasche. People on the adjacent court said two burly men—one wearing a Lakers T-shirt—approached Plasche. There was an argument, Plasche fell, and they took his phone and ran to a black Mercedes sedan."

"No license plate?"

"No such luck."

"Well, the Lakers T-shirt worn by a large Mexican guy narrows it down to about fifty thousand people in LA."

Megrano got up. "I'll go call a towing service and take a look at Ferguson's car. Why don't you check if anything interesting happened in Seattle today? I doubt this is all about engineering documents, but we don't know what they want. And neither, it seems, does Ferguson. Unless he is playing some clever game here."

"So you want to use him as a bait?" asked Chander.

Megrano shrugged. "It might be our only way to draw them out. Whoever they are."

Friday, 4/22/2022, 8:32 p.m. PDT

Maggie watched Chander in the rear-view mirror as they drove off.

“Why don’t you drop me off at the Holiday Inn on Colorado?” David said.

She pulled over and turned to him. “You have no car, no clothes, no computer—and you want to go to a Holiday Inn?”

“The detective told us to not go home. I’ll get a room and walk to the station tomorrow. I don’t have anyone I can just barge in on late at night without notice.”

Maggie raised her eyebrows and stared at him. It wasn’t that she hadn’t seen him before, she just hadn’t looked very carefully, not expecting to be around him for longer than an hour or two. He was well built, broad-shouldered, not great looking but handsome, with a high forehead and a mop of soft dirty-blond hair with a few silver speckles. Brown eyes, unfocused, unsure, nothing special. His nose seemed slightly bent, an imperfection that actually made his appearance more interesting. Save for the borrowed T-shirt, he seemed like a careful dresser. His manner was not easy and he did not seem to know what to do with his hands. The air he projected was that of an affable but not a confident person, lacking that bit of arrogance she liked in men. But she enjoyed his voice. It wasn’t deep but had a certain stumbling melody to it.

It was tempting to do as he asked, to drop him off and hopefully never see him again. He seemed to bring bad luck. With a pang of conscience Maggie thought, *He did tell me about the danger*. She waived it off. *But would it be better to have him nearby, to keep an eye on him?* These people had her number and probably her name and address. How could she go about her life now? What did they want? No, she needed David, he was the key to figuring it out.

Maggie shook her head. “You Americans are so damn proper. You don’t even have friends you can go to without making a reservation. Why don’t you come with me? My friend has enough room.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked. “I mean, offering to take me to your friend?”

Maggie shrugged. “I guess I’m sentimental. You could have walked out of the restaurant without warning me and gone to hide away somewhere. Then those guys would have found me. And with your other choice being Holiday Inn ... but don’t get any ideas.”

She turned right at a Santa Monica Freeway on-ramp heading east then on 405 San Diego Freeway going north. As they passed the UCLA exits, David asked, “Aren’t you going to your friend near UCLA?”

“No,” Maggie said. “I changed my mind. We’re better off going to my friend Andrei in Sherman Oaks.”

“Andrei? Is that a Russian name?”

“Yes.”

“Are you Russian? I didn’t think Margarita was a Russian name.”

Maggie nodded. “I’m from Ukraine, only part-Russian. Margarita is not a common Russian or Ukrainian name, but my parents are big fans of Mikhail Bulgakov who wrote *The Master and Margarita*, so they named me after the heroine. I like Maggie better. Andrei, and I came to the US at the same time to study at UCLA and have been friends since.”

The Leaf wheezed its way up the Sepulveda Pass and started picking up speed going downhill. Maggie said, “Before we get there, you should know that Andrei is not exactly in a regular business.”

“What do you mean? Drugs?”

Maggie shrugged. “I don’t ask and I don’t judge. Neither should you. We were studying together, and he is really smart, but he chose a different path. Perhaps he was the smarter one.”

David protested. “Why are we going to him, then? Don’t we have enough problems with ... with ...”

Maggie cut him off. “David, we are sheep being chased by wolves. And sheep should not look for protection with other sheep, but with wolves instead. That’s why we’re going to Andrei. He has a big house and bodyguards. Believe me, I would rather be going to my own apartment than to someone’s house. But if I can’t do that, I want to go to the safest place I know.”

Friday, 4/22/2022, 9:16 p.m. PDT

They got off just before Route 101 and wound their way southeast into the hills. Maggie navigated a maze of narrow streets, passed two private security cars, and turned into a driveway with a large gate. She buzzed security and in response to “Hello?” answered in Russian. A long exchange followed, but the only word David understood in her conversation was “Maggie.”

The double gate slowly opened, and they rolled down a wide driveway to an enormous white house. David couldn’t help letting out an awed, “Wow!”

Maggie laughed. “Yes, he bought four houses, razed them all, bribed someone in the city department, and built this.”

As they got out of the car, the front door of the house opened, and a man in a white polo shirt and khaki shorts came out. He had the air of a successful and confident young lawyer or investment banker. His wavy dark hair looked coifed, as if each strand was carefully laid in place. “Sabina!” The man opened his arms, smiling broadly, and greeted Maggie with kisses on both cheeks. David thought, *Sabina? What the hell?*

“This is my,” she paused, “friend David.”

The man vigorously shook David’s hand. “Andrei.” He inquired whether David spoke Russian, then said they’d make sure to use English. Andrei’s paunch and reddish face betrayed a sedentary lifestyle involving drinking. His gaze did not feel friendly even if the words were; David felt like Andrei was looking past him.

There was an ashtray outside, with a few cigarette butts sticking out of it, an unusual site for smoke-unfriendly LA. They walked into an enormous vestibule with a staircase. On the way, David whispered to Maggie, “Sabina?” She waved it off “old joke.” A giant chandelier hung from the ceiling. Everything was either white or gold. David

jealously thought that the house looked over-the-top nouveau riche opulent—just what his ex-wife would have liked.

Andrei asked what they wanted to drink. Before David had a chance to respond, Maggie said, “We have quite a story to tell you, but I am dying from hunger, and I’m sure David is, too.”

Andrei led them into the kitchen, where they met two men who introduced themselves as Alex and Oleg. Both were tall and blond, probably in their late twenties, and looked like they worked out with weights at least four hours every day. Alex gave Maggie a hug and looked at David questioningly, while Oleg smiled broadly showing crooked teeth and shook David’s hand with vigor. Tons of dishes came out of two fridges, with Oleg supplying Russian names like *pelmeni*, *kotlety*, *pirozhki*, *blini*. Like the vestibule, the kitchen was over-the-top: two giant refrigerators, an enormous island with a sink in the middle, big marbled counters. Here, too, everything was in white, except for the black marble of the counters.

Two more people came into the kitchen, an older man by the name of Petr, and a pretty young woman who gave Maggie an insincere air kiss.

“Tamara,” the woman said, as she touched David’s hand. Then she wrapped her arm around Andrei. David could not help but stare at her: shiny long black hair, perfect nose, thick lips. Her face looked like all parts of it had been worked on by LA’s best plastic surgeons. Her breasts definitely appeared to be part nature, part medical art.

“Welcome,” said Petr, a gaunt, balding middle-aged man. He smiled, but David felt he eyed the newcomers suspiciously. Or perhaps it was Petr’s natural expression, a mixture of a pout and misgiving. With sunken cheeks, deep-set eyes, and thin bluish lips, he looked like a skull with skin stretched tight over it.

A miniature black poodle ran into the kitchen, his paws click-clacking on the floor. He sniffed Maggie and then turned to David and growled. David tried offering the dog his hand to sniff and get familiar, but the dog snapped and barked.

“Teddy, behave yourself!” said Tamara, with no reproach whatsoever in her voice. She picked up the dog, who continued snarling at David. David had a dog in childhood and generally got along well with man’s best friends, but Teddy clearly took a dislike to him.

While David and Maggie were eating, Maggie took charge of telling the story. As she put it, she’d heard it by now twice and had to practice presenting it herself. Awkward and fidgety, an unwelcome guest in a rich man’s house, David was grateful for playing a supporting role. While both Maggie and David tried to inject some humor into their storytelling, none of the listeners were laughing.

In the process, Maggie still managed to put away a well-packed plate of food. *She doesn’t seem to worry about her weight*, David thought. Right now he didn’t have much of an appetite.

At the end, Andrei faced them, hands on hips, and asked, “Do you trust these detectives?”

Maggie and David looked at each other and nodded. “They seemed to be sincere,” she said.

“I know who to trust in LAPD,” Andrei said. “I don’t know much about Santa Monica PD. In any case, you are safe here. It’s after ten, and I’m sure it’s been a long day. Why don’t you get some rest, and we’ll talk again in the morning.”

They went upstairs, with Tamara escorting Maggie and Andrei taking care of David. Andrei asked, “You probably need some clothes?”

David shrugged. “They stole my bag. But I’m fine. I don’t need anything.”

Andrei insisted and took him to a couple of different closets, handing out shirts, pants, and pajamas, while saying that they might not fit perfectly but would be OK for now. As Andrei showed him to his room, David tried to thank his host.

Andrei just made a motion with his hand, saying, “You’re a friend of my friend; you are welcome,” and left.

Friday, 4/22/2022, 10:21 p.m. PDT

The room had a bookcase. As was his habit when in someone else's house, David looked at the books Andrei had. He realized that they were not real paper books, but decorations. Instead, there was a late model tablet with an extensible screen on the nightstand. David turned it on. Books on the tablet were, for the most part, thrillers. Many titles started with "Murder." That brought up an image of Jim, who hardly weighed more than 160 pounds, trying to fight off the attackers—and of a blade penetrating his chest. Jim was one of David's few remaining friends. They'd had lunches together at work until Jim was RIF'd about four months ago, played tennis, and had dinner from time-to-time. Two lonely guys. Jim was forty-two, never married; he had a sister somewhere in Nevada.

David thought, *It's just not fair. Why him?* He wondered if he could risk attending Jim's funeral. If he hadn't lost the damn phone, Jim would still be alive. David shivered, feeling cold.

The room itself felt chilly, even though it was warm in the house. It could have been a hotel room. David figured he'd use the PJ's. He'd be uncomfortable sleeping in someone's house just in his underwear. But he wouldn't touch the rest. He wanted to take as little as possible from the rich, successful Andrei. As it was, just being here made him feel like a failure.

David took a long hot shower, brushed his teeth, changed into the PJ's and climbed into bed. He lay there, restless and uneasy in this big luxurious house. He couldn't help thinking about the house he and Judy had saved so long for—and never got. She would have liked this one.

Judy ...

"Hey, listen to this," she called out. The scene replayed in David's memory, not for the first time. It was the morning of September 6, 2019. He was about to leave for work. His career was going well, and

Judy's real estate work provided the extra income for investment. The TV was on and the news anchors were talking excitedly about China introducing a new gold-backed currency, the "jin huobi."

"What does it mean?" asked Judy.

David pursed his lips. "Probably nothing."

Commentators and the stock market agreed, shrugging it off with snide indifference: "Who cares? Maybe they should get a 'hobby' instead of 'huobi.' Hah-hah." At the water cooler people laughed about the silly Chinese and, it being Friday, conversation turned to the weekend and college football.

He didn't get to watch football that weekend; Judy dragged him out to look at open houses in Manhattan Beach. He'd done well in the soaring stock market and they'd had enough down payment to afford a house close to the ocean. That was what Judy wanted—to live by the ocean with a Sub-Zero fridge and Viking appliances. Children were going to come next, after they settled into their yet-to-be-found house. But by Sunday evening the news on the Internet had turned troublesome: Russia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and a host of other countries had joined the China initiative, proclaiming that the world needed new reserve currency, one not dominated by a single country. The dollar was down big on Asian exchanges, and so were US stock futures.

Monday morning the market declined sharply, circuit breakers were triggered, and exchanges were closed after just a few minutes. The President went on TV urging calm and talking about an "orchestrated financial attack on the US system that will not succeed." Some talking heads on TV were advocating using military force, but others pointed out that one can't really go to war because people want to use their own currency. At least it did not lend itself to a strong moral ground. Which might have been overlooked, except going against China and Russia was not the same as taking on Grenada or even Iraq. The week was spent in nervous agitation. Everyone sensed that something had changed dramatically, as if their ship had hit an iceberg below the

waterline. No changes on the deck yet, but water must be pouring into the engine room.

On Monday, September 16th, David logged into his brokerage account hoping for a miracle. Some moments live in our memories, and this one was a nightmare that David kept reliving over and over. The house down payment and most of their savings had been wiped out by forced liquidation. Trading on a margin worked well on the way up but proved a killer in a crash. He was not alone; the big market drop punished millions. The dollar had lost twenty percent that day.

After about twenty minutes of upsetting memories galloping through his mind, David bit into his hand to stop the torture. He was tired but too wound up to sleep. Getting out of bed, he left the room, carefully noting which of the dozen doors it was, and descended the stairs to the kitchen. Maybe he'd grab a glass of water or find another distraction of some kind.

Alex, Oleg, and Petr were there, all drinking tea, which they offered to David. "Can't sleep?" Petr asked.

David nodded. Petr left the kitchen, came back a minute later, and handed David a prescription bottle. It said "Ambien. Saratov, Petr" on the prescription label.

David was no stranger to Ambien. He thanked Petr and took a pill.

He started drinking his tea, and they made a small talk. David explained what he did at work—while the trio pretended to be interested—and then asked them what they did. Alex and Oleg indicated that they'd previously been in the military, Petr avoided the question. Instead, Petr started conducting an interview: where David lived, how long he was in his current job, whether he was married, did he have any relatives in LA. Petr's manner of speech was stilted and flowery.

David answered politely, but grew tired of it, finished his tea, and excused himself. The Ambien started kicking in. He made his way up the stairs, carefully counting to the right door.

Then he fell into bed and dropped into a deep black hole.

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 7:35 a.m. PDT

David and Jim Plasche were playing singles. David hit a deep shot and rushed to the net for a volley. But instead of going after the ball, Jim pulled out a gun and ran to the net screaming at David, “What did Julius tell you? Where is Shulman file?” Jim started firing, the gun making a booming noise.

David woke up. *Where the hell am I?*

The loud knocking continued. He crawled out of bed, still half asleep, and pulled open the door. “What?”

A woman with bright green eyes and yellow streaks in her dark hair almost hit him, as her hand continued a knocking motion. “What’s wrong with you? Time to get up.”

David mumbled something about being groggy from Ambien.

“Well, take a cold shower and come downstairs,” Maggie said, her annoyance visible as she turned and marched off.

He almost called after her, saying, “You look cute when you’re angry.” But he thought better of it. She might actually bite his head off for a bad joke.

David wished he was in his quiet home, away from these people. He usually tried to start his day with a short meditation, a few minutes of calm. But today he could only manage a few deep breaths—and slamming his hand against the pillow a couple of times. He showered and shaved. In the morning’s light he saw that his clothes consisted of someone’s exercise T-shirt and a pair of dirty gray slacks. His jacket was in the Accord and his bloodied shirt in Maggie’s car. He dressed in the borrowed Andrei’s clothes: a too-tight white shirt and khaki pants.

Heading downstairs, his head still cloudy, he ached for strong coffee and a cigarette, even though he’d quit smoking eight years ago on Judy’s insistence. Fortunately, there was plenty of coffee in the kitchen, where the whole gang from last night was already eating omelets.

David drank two cups, and his head cleared up a bit. He'd meet with the detective in a few hours, get his car back, go home, and hopefully start putting this mess behind him.

Finally, Andrei looked at Maggie and David and said, "OK, what's the plan?"

Everyone started talking at once. Then Maggie raised her hand and said, "Look, let's take turns here. I, for one, would like to let my roommates know that I am OK and get my computer back and some clothes. I live in a large apartment building with many people going in and out, so even if anybody is watching it, it's easy to go and get my stuff."

Andrei nodded. "Makes sense. Call one of your roommates. Oleg will go and get your things. David, do you want Alex to get your stuff?"

David hesitated, uncomfortable with the idea of his privacy being invaded. He'd been in the Culver City place for almost two years now, and it was probably past time to hang some pictures on the bare greenish walls to make it appear as if the person living there actually cared how the place looked. His half-eaten breakfast from Wednesday was still on the kitchen table. No, he did not want anyone going in. "I'm renting a small house, and if it's being watched it will be difficult to go in without being noticed."

Maggie reminded everyone that she and David were supposed to meet Detective Megrano at noon. It was agreed that Petr and Alex would just happen to have lunch at Maria's Italian Kitchen at the same time. David didn't like the idea, but there seemed to be no diplomatic way to tell them to bug out.

Andrei said he'd arrange for temporary cell phones for Maggie and David. Alex asked whether it would make sense to call the kidnappers on David's phone, but it was judged premature.

Everyone now seemed out of ideas until David, fortified by a third cup of coffee, said, "If I can borrow a computer, I'd like to see who Shulman is."

Maggie chimed in with, “That’s a good idea,” which made David feel like he got a compliment.

They were shown to a study with a large ultra-hi-definition iMac. Maggie put on green-framed cat-eye glasses and said, “Find Shulman.” The computer responded with “Camp Shulman in Maine,” displaying a map on the screen.

David carefully pronounced, “Find a person named Shulman.” The first Shulman they hit on was named Julius, which made both David and Maggie jump.

“Unfortunately, he died thirteen years ago,” David said.

“You are a fast reader.”

“Yes, always have been, starting from childhood.”

After going through dozens of Shulman’s, Maggie said, “None strikes me as a likely candidate to produce a file that kidnappers would want.”

David agreed. “True. We aren’t getting anywhere.”

Oleg came in. “Maggie, here’s your computer and a bag of clothes that your roommate gave me. Also, your running shoes.”

“Oh, thanks!” Maggie was clearly happy to get something to change into.

“And here are a couple of disposable phones, one for each of you.”

David was reluctant to accept the phone on top of Andrei’s clothes, but he told himself this was for emergencies only and he’d compensate Andrei later. Plus, these were cheap phones.

Andrei poked his head in. “You better start getting ready.”

Maggie went to change and came back in a sequined turquoise shirt and a short white skirt. She still wore the same earrings and the combination suited her well. Andrei and Oleg applauded, and she waved them off. While she wanted to take the Leaf, Andrei insisted on them taking his gray Audi A11, while Petr and Alex followed in a Mercedes ML398.

David was actually happy to be out of the Leaf because now he could drive rather than be a passenger. And the A11 was the most luxurious car he'd ever driven. The car started by asking them if they wanted to relax and let the car do the driving, but David wasn't comfortable turning the controls over to a machine. Even a crash-proofed one, with radar, sonar, driver's alert, and all. Besides, he liked the dashboard that looked like a video console, showing him the cars around him and traffic ahead, with warnings of being too close and needing to apply brakes.

Maggie began pushing at the A11's touch-screen, flipping through endless menu items. After a minute, this irritated David. "What are you trying to do?"

"Find radio stations."

He pressed an "Audio" button to the left of the screen and then "Satellite Radio." Maggie fumbled with menu options some more and settled on the "Jazz – Female vocalists" option. The singer's smoky voice filled up the car, singing of love meaning more than shiny trinkets we lust after.

Maggie's high-riding skirt distracted David. He tried to stay focused on the road, reminding himself that she thought he was a sheep. He didn't like to think of himself as a sheep. Partly because that was one of the ugly words Judy had thrown at him when she'd left. Together with "loser."

As they turned on Sepulveda, heading south, he wondered about the ease of the whole situation with Andrei. He'd been always reluctant to rely on others and had a hard time accepting Andrei's hospitality.

As if reading his thoughts, or at least some of them, Maggie asked, "What do you think of Andrei?"

David chose his words carefully. "He certainly is a very thoughtful and considerate host."

"But you want to leave, don't you?"

"Very much so," David admitted. "You were right to go there; it makes perfect sense. But I can't wait to go home."

Maggie nodded. “Andrei can be quite charming. Besides, he’s having fun with the situation. He likes puzzles. But don’t mistake it for more than that, and don’t do anything stupid. He has no great scruples when it comes to dealing with people.”

David nodded, thinking that there must have been some personal experience behind these words. Regardless, he’d be back at his own place soon, and he’d make sure to get Andrei something nice as a thanks.

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 11:55 a.m. PDT

David parked the Audi on Malcolm, just behind Maria's Italian Kitchen. The ML398 parked on the other side of the street. Petr and Alex nodded to them and went in first. David and Maggie followed a minute later and saw Petr and Alex sitting three tables away from Megrano, who was already waiting at a corner table with a cup of coffee.

"Hello, Detective," Maggie said, as she and David joined Megrano.

The waitress brought two more menus. After they ordered, Megrano asked, "Did you two find places to stay?"

"We're both with friends," Maggie said, her tone making it clear she would not offer more.

Megrano slid David a sheet of paper with a name and a phone number on it, saying, "That's the only thing of interest we found in your car."

David glanced at it. *Jeff, 425-555-9123*. "That's Jeff Moskowitz, the person who organized the meeting in Seattle. I remember calling him from the car to verify arrangements."

Megrano nodded. "And, sorry to say, they did break the lock on your car's trunk."

"My carry-on was there," David said.

Megrano shook his head. "Not anymore. And we checked the crashed Lincoln. It didn't have your things either. They must have thought you had something of importance if they got your bag out after the accident."

David said, "It was a change of clothes, travel accessories, and my computer. But I might be able to get the files and the list of people at the meeting from Jeff."

The waitress brought their lunch. After a few minutes of quiet eating, Megrano asked David, "You were on Alaska Flight 422 leaving at 12:10 p.m. from Gate N9, right?"

“Yes, that’s the flight. I told you yesterday. I think the gate was N9 indeed. Why?”

Megrano ignored the question. “What time did you get to the airport?”

“Let’s see. I stopped by the company’s offices at 9:00 a.m. to review the action items with Jeff, left about 10:15 or so, and drove from Bellevue to the airport, dropped off the car ... I think I was at the security checkpoint just after eleven.”

“Did you go straight to the gate?”

“Yes, after security I took the train to the N gates and waited for my flight there. I had a drink at the bar near the gate.”

“Were you by yourself all that time?”

“Yes. Wait. I did talk to another traveler at the bar for a few minutes.”

Megrano’s eyebrows lifted. “What other traveler?”

“Some guy joined me at my table. Said his name was Thomas Mann.”

“Were all other tables in the bar taken?”

David shook his head. “Not at all. There were several open tables. He was just friendly, wanted to chat.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Weather, sports, economy. We just talked for maybe ten to fifteen minutes. Then my plane started to board.”

“Did he say much about himself?”

“He mentioned he was in the import/export business. And that he was flying to Vancouver.”

“Did he offer you anything?”

“No...yes. He gave me a magazine.”

“Magazine?”

“It was *The Economist*, with ‘*Et tu, California?*’ on the front.”

Megrano sat forward, growing agitated. “Do you have the magazine?”

“I left it on the plane, stuck it in the pocket of the seat in front.”

“Which seat were you in?”

“I think it was 16A. I still have the boarding pass and can look it up.”

Megrano wrote it down. “Was there anything in the magazine? A piece of paper perhaps? Or some writing in the margins?”

“I didn’t see anything. But when Thomas gave it to me, it was in a green manila folder.”

“Where is that folder?”

“In my carry-on bag.”

“And the folder had no marks on it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Can you describe that Thomas Mann person?”

David thought a moment. “He was tall; I’d say six foot three or so, late thirties to early forties, well-built. Dark brown hair with a bit of gray in it. Wearing a business suit.”

“Why didn’t you mention him before?”

“I didn’t think of it. He was just a guy in the bar that I talked to for a few minutes.”

“Any distinguishing features?”

“Let me think ... I think there was a small scar running down from the left corner of his lip. He seemed athletic, someone who might have been a football player.”

“Did he speak with an accent?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Was there anything unusual about his behavior?”

“He looked behind him a couple of times and explained that he didn’t want to miss his flight. Can you tell me what this is all about?”

Megrano went back to his Fra Diavolo pasta. Maggie was frozen in her seat, looking from Megrano to David and back. The waitress returned to refill Megrano’s coffee and David’s and Maggie’s water glasses.

Megrano took a deep breath, had a sip of coffee, and said, “We’ve been in touch with Seattle. Yesterday at 12:40 p.m. a body was discovered in the men’s room near the N gates in SeaTac.”

Maggie inhaled sharply. David felt cold; the fear was back. He croaked, “I know nothing about this.”

Megrano reached into his pocket and pulled out two folded pieces of paper. He unfolded one and showed it to David, “Do you recognize him?”

“No. Is he the one who got killed?”

“Yes. You didn’t see him sitting close to you at the bar or anything like that?”

“I don’t recall seeing him. I wasn’t really looking around. Who is he?”

“He flew to Seattle from Shanghai two days before. A sales representative for a telecommunications company.”

Megrano unfolded the second piece of paper. “They sent me an airport security camera shot of the victim with another person. Do you recognize him?”

“Yes! That’s the guy who was in the Lincoln’s passenger seat! He was asking me about Julius and what Julius gave me. That’s why his voice sounded familiar—he was the man that the flight attendant argued with over a change of seat.”

“His name is Wei Liao. He also arrived in Seattle from China a few days ago. Supposedly he works for an oil company.”

Maggie broke in. “He must have come in on the same flight as David.”

Megrano nodded. “Obviously.” David thought that it must have been difficult for her to keep silent all this time. Megrano called for a check and continued, saying to David, “Not only did he come in on the same flight, but there also must have been a team already waiting for him at LAX, ready to grab you. I think it would be best if you come with me to the station, so we can look at some pictures, see if we can find who Thomas Mann is. You can then pick up your Accord.”

Maggie said, "What about me?"

Megrano shrugged. "You can go to your friends."

"Really?" Maggie raised her voice. "Just like that? I can't go home. They know how to find me. You can't protect me! And you tell me to go as if I paid a fucking traffic ticket and everything is fine?"

The restaurant was now pretty full for lunch, and some heads turned to see the source of the noise. Megrano must have figured that it was easier to let her come along than to deal with the commotion, because he said, "Fine, let's all go."

As they stood up to leave, David saw Alex trying to get the waitress's attention. Outside, Megrano pointed to his unmarked Ford Crown Victoria and said, "Follow me, but you know the place. You can park in the police cars section."

As David and Maggie were getting into the A11, they could see Petr and Alex running out of the restaurant. The cavalcade of three cars headed west on Pico toward the police station.

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 1:43 p.m. PDT

David and Maggie parked next to Megrano's Ford and saw the ML398 cruise by. In a few minutes, they were back in the familiar room, with Detective Chander running the show. The first projected image was that of an Asian man.

David protested. "Thomas Mann was Caucasian, not Asian."

Chander said, "Understand. We'll get to him. Yesterday we showed you pictures of Asian males with criminal records. Based on what happened in Seattle, we ran the database query on Chinese citizens, twenty- to thirty-five-year-old males that came to Los Angeles recently."

Maggie perched the cat-eye glasses on her nose and sat at attention, demonstrating that she saw the perpetrator and was ready to nab him. Pictures kept flipping through the screen. David's eyes grew tired. After close to an hour, everyone seemed ready to give up, when Maggie jumped and screamed excitedly, "That's him! That's the beige jacket from the coffee shop! I mean, he's not wearing a beige jacket in the picture, but that's him."

David confirmed that this was indeed the driver of the Lincoln who'd found them on the Promenade. Chander clicked a few keys on the computer and read, "Qin Dong, came here three years ago, studying finance at USC."

Megrano turned to David. "You sure the other two were not Chinese? You didn't have a good look at them, right?"

David replied that he did not have a good look but was pretty sure they weren't Chinese.

Megrano told Chander, "Let's try to find Thomas Mann." The screen filled with Caucasian males in their forties. After thirty minutes or so of "no" head shakes, Megrano said, "OK, we may need to bring an artist to help draw the guy." He turned to David. "Do you still think this has to do with the project you are working on?"

“I don’t know what to think.”

“The man killed at the airport was supposedly working for a telecommunications company. Didn’t your project involved telecommunications?”

“Yes, it had to do with high-speed connections to airplanes.”

“Then it’s a possibility. Can you get the documents from the meeting in Seattle?”

“I suppose so. I can call Jeff and ask him to e-mail them to my personal e-mail account.”

“Why don’t you do that?”

Megrano pushed a speakerphone to David. David took the paper with Jeff’s number and dialed it. Since it was Saturday, Jeff’s voice mail at work came on. But it did give his cell phone number in case it was “urgent.” David thought, *It’s pretty urgent for me*, and dialed the cell.

Jeff answered, with what sounded like kids voices in the background. “Hello?”

“Hi, Jeff, it’s David Ferguson.”

“David? Ah, yes, David from LA. How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks. I am sorry to bother you on a Saturday, but I have to put together a report for Monday morning, and my computer completely crashed. I can’t get any documents and I can’t get into my work e-mail. Can you please send me documents from the meeting to my private e-mail?”

“Well, you know we aren’t supposed to put the company’s documents on non-company e-mail ...”

“Jeff, I know, but I’m up a creek here. My computer is fried, and they have another RIF coming up. I’ve got to get that report done. Look, it helps you, too, to push this project.”

“OK, no problem. Give me your e-mail, and I’ll send you the documents when I get home tonight.”

David dictated his e-mail address, then thought of one more question. “Jeff, just one more thing ...”

“Yes?”

"I am trying to remember the last name of Julius from the Thursday meeting."

"Julius? There was no Julius in our meeting. You mean Julia Bishow from the phased array antenna design group in Everett?"

"Yes, sorry. I misspoke. I meant Julia."

"The attendance list from the meeting is in the documents with everyone's name, phone, e-mail ... She's married, by the way."

"OK, thanks."

As David hung up, Maggie commented, "You seem to have a reputation for hitting on married women." Both Megrano and Chander laughed involuntarily.

David blushed. "Very funny." He turned to the officers. "Assuming I get the documents from Jeff, this is my company's confidential information. I should not be sharing it with these people. I will definitely lose my job, and Jeff may lose his."

Chander nodded his head in understanding and said, "We can approach your company, explain the situation, and probably convince them to let you share the information. We could also try to get an order from a judge." He turned to Megrano. "How long do you think it'll take?"

"I have no idea. I never had to do anything quite like this. Today is Saturday. I doubt we'll get all this done before Wednesday. And we don't even know if that's what Plasche's killers want. So we may waste all this time for nothing. In the meantime, the two of you"—he nodded at David and Maggie—"remain in danger."

"Can't you edit the documents?" asked Maggie. "I know nothing about this, but there are probably some things that you can change that would make the documents appear legitimate, but be essentially useless?"

"Yes," David said. "I can do that. It will probably still get me in trouble, but I'd feel better about this. Now, how would I get edited documents to these guys?"

“Good question,” said Chander. “We’ve been tracking both yours and Jim’s phones. Jim’s phone has been off all the time. Yours is off most of the time but turns on for five to ten minutes a few times a day, every time in a different location. So they realize that they are possibly being tracked, but they do want to keep a channel of communication open to you.”

“But I can’t call them if they are off most of the time.”

“No, but you can send them a text. Just do it from a computer.”

Megrano got up. “Let me know when you hear back from them. And here’s the address where your car is. Show them your ID, and they will release it to you. Be careful.”

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 3:41 p.m. PDT

When David and Maggie left, Megrano turned to Chander. “Did you check that Audi license?”

“Yes. It belongs to Andrei Chernov, a figure in LA’s Russian mafia. So does the Mercedes SUV that followed you.”

“So our friend David here may have a dark side to him?”

“I actually think it’s his friend Maggie. She came here from Kiev about the same time that Chernov came from St. Petersburg. They both were at UCLA for a while. She continued while he dropped out in favor of more lucrative work.”

“But David says he just met her yesterday?”

“Yes, it’s a bit puzzling. Do you really think that Chinese are after his engineering documents?”

“No, I doubt it. But we have to make a connection somehow.”

“I thought you weren’t going to tell him about the murder at SeaTac, since Ferguson is a suspect?”

“I changed my mind. Whoever did this was a real professional killer, and I know it was not Ferguson. The body was discovered in a stall at 12:40, but the cleaning person had been there only twenty minutes earlier. So the murder took place after Flight 422 left with Ferguson on board. The victim had a boarding pass for 422 – he did not miss the flight because he was killed, he first missed the flight and then he was killed. I figured by telling Ferguson I might be able to get some detail that wasn’t covered yet. Now we know there was someone there who called himself Thomas Mann, unless Ferguson made it up.”

“Do you think he made it up?”

“I couldn’t administer a lie detector test there, but no, I don’t think so.”

“I noticed you didn’t mention anything about the Green Lake shoot-out yesterday morning?”

“No. I wanted to hold this back, and we’re still not sure whether there is a connection.”

“So, do we start looking for this ‘Thomas Mann’?”

“Our priority is finding the people that killed Jim Plasche, and I doubt that ‘Thomas Mann’ was directly involved. Besides, the captain won’t send any of us to Seattle to investigate. But I’m pretty sure there is some connection between ‘Thomas Mann’ and Plasche’s murder. I understand that two people got their boarding passes but did not get on the Alaska 422 flight. Since neither checked in luggage, the flight took off. One of them was the man who was killed in the restroom. The other one’s boarding name was John Simptson, most likely not a real name.”

“OK. Let’s see what we can find about the two Chinese men that Ferguson identified, figure out any connections between them and local Mexican gangs.”

“Yes, also contact Alaska Air to see if we can track down the *Economist* magazine.”

“Let’s divide and conquer, then. Here goes another weekend. My wife won’t be happy.”

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 3:54 p.m. PDT

As was his second nature, Colonel Fai Hsu changed his watch to Pacific Time when he boarded the Air China flight from Beijing to Los Angeles. He was susceptible to jet lag and every little bit helped. He had to try to keep his mind sharp, think through things carefully. After all, if some of his subordinates and his superiors had taken more—or even any—time to think, they would not be in this mess. And what a mess it was. He liked American war movies that he watched for practice in English, especially *Saving Private Ryan*. So he thought of this situation using a term he'd picked up in that movie: FUBAR, fucked up beyond all recognition.

Fai Hsu went through a mental checklist of what he knew. Friday evening in Beijing he'd been getting ready for the weekend. His family had just finished dinner, and they were deciding which movie to watch when the phone rang. All of a sudden he had to rush back to the Ministry of State Security (MSS). He'd known about the operation in Seattle, but it was not his direct responsibility. Besides, everything was supposed to go peacefully. All Julius wanted was a \$5 million down payment of the \$79 million price tag for the file. And they agreed to give it to him. After all, that must have been a tiny portion of the profit from the operation. Even he, a lowly colonel, had a chance to subscribe and walk away with a nice purse. He could only imagine how many billions were skimmed by the people up the food chain.

Fai did not know why the decision was made at the last moment to not pay but to instead try to capture Julius. Perhaps they could not agree on who would put up the \$5 million? Something did not make sense. Not only was the new mission improbable, but because it was concocted at the last moment the team was all wrong too. They'd pulled in some of the deep plants in Seattle that were not ready for a “cloak-and-dagger” type action. They had not even properly planned for the possibility of Julius having an accomplice. So five agents

showed up at Green Lake Park, things got out of control pretty much immediately, and three of them got killed.

The remaining two managed to follow Julius to the airport and into the terminal. They stayed close to him, so they knew he'd bought a ticket to LA. By the boarding gate, Julius met with his other accomplice—later identified as David Ferguson—and gave him a manila folder, presumably with the file. Julius did not board the plane, so the two agents split up. One followed Ferguson; the other one followed Julius and ended up dead. Julius disappeared.

The agent who boarded the flight at least had the presence of mind to send a message to Beijing. He'd switched seats and observed Ferguson, albeit at a bad angle. He saw Ferguson retrieve the folder during the flight, and it was not empty, but he could not see what was in it. The team in LA had little time to react. They assembled two agents and two local gang members (*We've been putting people in LA for years and that's all we get on a short notice?*), stole a car, and followed Ferguson in two cars from the airport. Grabbed Ferguson, grabbed his carry-on, so far so good—but the moron driver did not watch the road! Ferguson escaped after the accident; the agents and helpers were picked up by the following car. Then the absurdity reached a crescendo when they tracked Ferguson's last call and ended up killing the man. They lucked out getting Ferguson's other number, but decided to call and threaten him instead of following it quietly. And after all that, when they found Ferguson they let him escape. Now all they had was an empty folder.

Fai shook his head. It was easy to question things after the fact, but still, people had to make better decisions. He didn't know what happened to Lei Kao who oversaw the operation, but since they sent Fai it probably was not good. Now Fai had to make sure it did not happen to him as well. He'd worked too long and hard to get to his position.

His parents had not finished high school, but he'd worked his way and graduated from prestigious Tsinghua University with a degree in

electrical engineering. He'd been planning to work in computer design, but the Party had other ideas. He was called to serve his country in the Ministry of State Security and worked for seven years in the Scientific and Technological Information bureau before transferring to Counterintelligence. His analytical skills made him particularly good at his job. He complemented his engineering training with deliberative patience and the skills of a chess master.

Fai Hsu reminded himself to trust his instincts. Certain things in this assignment didn't add up. He could not grasp the logic of the change in Seattle's operation. Knowing the true purpose of the operation was always important, and he was not sure he had it. However, there wasn't much to do now. Good thinking couldn't compensate for lack of information. Fai decided to take a nap. He would need to be well rested by the time they landed in LA.

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 4:11 p.m. PDT

David and Maggie retrieved the Accord. David said, “Look, I really appreciate you taking me to Andrei last night; I was pretty shaken up. But now I have my car back and I should go take care of myself and—
“

“No, you look.” Maggie cut him off. “I know how you feel, but don’t rush. First, you are safer at Andrei’s than you would be on your own. And I’m safer, too, at least until we figure out what’s going on. Second, you will offend Andrei if you just take off. Even worse, you’ll make him suspicious. And last, if you’re not scared, then you should have your head checked out. Two people were killed yesterday. Something big must be behind all this.”

David thought, *Then why the hell are you making stupid jokes about married women?* “What ‘something big’? I went to Seattle for an engineering meeting.”

“Well, if we knew what it was we wouldn’t be having this conversation, right? And your friend Jim would probably be alive. Come on, just think about it. We’re both in well over our heads. We have a better chance if we stay together for now.”

David had to admit to himself that she was right. Besides, he was still frightened to be on his own, even though he would never mention it to her. Maybe one more night. At least he’d have his car and be free to leave whenever he wanted.

Maggie climbed into the A11’s driver seat, and a different three-car cavalcade took off: the Audi, followed by the Honda, followed by the ML398.

David found himself alone in his car. Finally, some quiet, some thinking space. He tried to go back to his meeting with Thomas Mann, to reconstruct the encounter. *He had gotten to the gate about 11:20. There was still half an hour until boarding, so he went to the bar and treated himself to a*

local amber ale. Seemed like a proper way to say good-bye to the Pacific Northwest. That was when a tall man in a gray business suit came to his table:

“Hi!”

He looked up in confusion but, disarmed by the stranger’s smile, smiled back. “Hi.”

The man continued. “I’m sorry, I hope I’m not intruding, but I have a few minutes to kill before my flight, and I’d rather do it in a conversation with a fellow human being than drinking alone. Would it be OK if I join you?”

David awkwardly half-rose from his chair. “Yes, please, be my guest. But my flight will be boarding soon.”

The man took off his raincoat, commenting how he really did not need it on this trip, and introduced himself. “Thomas Mann. Not related to the late famous writer.”

“David Ferguson.”

“Pleased to meet you. Going home?”

“Yes. Got here Wednesday morning and heading back to L.A. What about you?”

“Just a quick trip from Vancouver. It used to make more sense to drive, but it takes an extra hour to get through the border now. Let me see how my flight is doing.” Thomas looked back.

A waitress materialized and asked Thomas what he wanted to drink.

“Do you have Newcastle?”

“No. The only imported beer we carry is Heineken.”

“OK, Heineken then.”

David cleared his throat and picked up an almost empty bowl of bar nuts mix, but the waitress had already moved away. Thomas called out to the waitress in a booming voice, “Can we get the bowl refilled, please?”

“Of course.” The waitress smiled. David wished he could be so assertive and confident.

“So what brought you to Seattle?” asked Thomas.

“I work for Space Systems, came here for engineering meetings.”

“How are you being affected by all this political turbulence?”

"It's not good. Lots of layoffs. That's one reason I came here, trying to be engaged in an active project. What about you, what do you do?"

"I'm in the agricultural import/export business. Things have gotten more difficult, but people still have to eat. I don't travel as often now. Used to come here over the weekend to watch the Huskies. Personally, a Notre Dame fan. I hope that college football won't be too affected. Would be a shame to lose some of the great rivalries."

The Announcer's voice came on. "Alaska Flight 422 to Los Angeles now boarding. All passengers with boarding tickets should proceed to gate N9."

David said, "I am sorry, that's my flight. I have to get the check for my beer."

Thomas waved his hand. "Oh no, please allow me. My flight isn't boarding yet. I'll have my drink and take care of the check. Thank you for your company. I hate waiting by myself in airports. No, no, no, please put that bill away. It's my pleasure. Hey, would you like this magazine? I just finished reading it. It's quite interesting."

Thomas reached into his shoulder bag and got out a green manila folder. As he passed it to David, Thomas slightly flipped the cover, showing the Economist magazine inside.

"Thank you." David took the folder and left for his gate.

Loud honking brought him back to LA and the present. Alex and Petr were behind him, pointing to the light that had turned green. David pressed on the gas pedal, still baffled. Besides the magazine being inside a folder, there was nothing that he could think of as an unusual detail from his encounter with Thomas Mann.

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 5:03 p.m. PDT

Andrei was huffing away on a rowing machine in a home gym. Maggie recapped their discussion with Megrano. Andrei grew visibly perturbed, stopped rowing, turned to Petr and Alex, and asked them something in Russian. As the discussion in Russian continued, David's frustration rose. Maggie gave him a guilty look. At least she had the courtesy to be embarrassed.

Andrei grabbed a towel, wiped his face, and turned to David. "Comrade, you got yourself into some serious stuff with the Chinese. You honestly don't know what this is about? Don't lie to me; I don't like when people do that."

Yeah, you probably kill them, David thought. Then he swore to Andrei that he did not know what it was about, except possibly his communications project.

Andrei looked concerned, in contrast to yesterday. He got even more serious when Oleg said, "I saw something on the news today about a big firefight in Seattle." Andrei grabbed glasses with supersized frames and said, "Firefight in Seattle." The glasses must have had voice recognition. His lips moved as he read the report and then pressed on the edge of the frame and a screen projected on the wall. "Yes, there was indeed a shoot-out yesterday morning in a park by Green Lake. Three people were killed and one is in a critical condition. The identities are being withheld, but one of the dead was a Chinese national." Andrei tried to make his voice sound low, but it was not his natural timbre. Being stressed made him slip into a higher pitch. He went to a sink built into the wall, washed his hands, threw a towel into the corner and left the gym.

David went to the study, thinking that he should just say good-bye and drive off. Teddy tried to attack him on the way, but David snarled back. This took Teddy by surprise, and the little dog ran away yapping.

David sat down at the iMac and checked his e-mail. There was nothing from Jeff yet.

He started Googling “Shulman” again. Then he thought maybe it wasn’t spelled the way it sounded, the way the beige-jacketed driver had screamed it at him. He tried a different spelling. David changed it to “Schulman,” and while there were quite a few Schulmans, nothing grabbed him as obviously relevant. Then he tried “Schulmann,” and the first result was about Jonathan Schulmann who’d been killed in the same explosion that had killed presidential candidate Mitchell Williams in 2020.

David once read that in the 1960s people used to ask: “Where were you when JFK was killed?” In the 2020s the question was: “Where were you when Mitchell Williams was assassinated?” America had been divided for twenty years between “red” and “blue” states. There’d been separatists in “red” states before, generally considered crazies by most. But after the 2019 financial crisis the movement spread, fueled by “we warned Washington years ago” sentiment. The 2020 presidential election campaign was bitter and divided, pitting the incumbent president against Texas governor Mitchell Williams. Williams was assassinated while campaigning in Pennsylvania. The perpetrators were not found, furious Williams’ supporters declared the resulting elections invalid. Tensions kept boiling and in the spring of 2022 Texas announced that a “separation referendum” will be held in September. A number of other states followed with their own referendum plans.

Polls in the “red” states ran in favor of separation. Polls in the “blue” states ran in favor of letting them go. The government argued that no state had a right to secede, but just like 160 years before, arguments fell on deaf ears. The country was holding its collective breath, waiting for the outcome of upcoming referendums. Meanwhile, new political parties were rising to challenge the two-party establishment. One was headquartered in David’s neighborhood, the Reform party led by Jeff Kron. A neighbor tried to get David involved in in earlier in the year, but David begged off.

Anticipating a possible break-up, internet-based services sprang up helping people to trade houses, so they could move from “red” to “blue” states, and vice versa. The Pacific Coast states had been among the blue ones, but ended up being cut off from their brethren by the red states. It did not take long for some ambitious politicians to decide that geographically this didn’t make much sense. Why run for governor of California if you could run for president of California? So California set its own referendum. Of course this presented Washingtonians and Oregonians with a dilemma of whether or not to join with the Californians.

David started reading the article about Jonathan Schulmann when he heard “Wow!” behind him. Startled, he looked back to see Maggie standing there squinting at the screen in those ridiculous cat-eye glasses.

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 5:25 p.m. PDT

Earlier, Maggie had stepped into the bathroom to give herself a brief timeout alone while she calmed her nerves and got her churning stomach under control. How many people involved with this were now dead? And the bad guys had her phone number, probably her name and address as well. Andrei was clearly concerned, and that was not good. Yes, she and Andrei were friends going back eight years, were more than friends at one point, but Andrei was moving in different circles now. If she became a liability, who knew how he would react?

When she was about to flush the toilet, Maggie heard voices outside the door. She quietly sat back and waited. Andrei and Petr were speaking in Russian.

Andrei said, “Who did she bring in here? I should kick that David character out. Devil take him! I don’t want the damn Chinese on my tail. Won’t be good for business.”

“Let’s not rush,” Petr said. “The Chinese don’t know he’s in your house. I think he knows more than he is letting on. There might be some opportunity here.”

“What opportunity? The fool doesn’t know anything!”

“We can’t be sure. And even if he does not know much, the Chinese think that he does, which makes him potentially valuable. Let’s give it a couple of days.”

Andrei grudgingly agreed. Steps faded away.

So David has at the most two more days, Maggie thought. She went to his room. He wasn’t there. Not in the kitchen either. She wandered toward the study. David was indeed there, so intently staring at the computer’s screen that he didn’t hear her come in.

What was she going to tell him?

She could not get back to her life, to be free or safe—both things essentially the same under the circumstances—without figuring out

why these people were after them. And David was the key to this puzzle. But she also couldn't keep him at Andrei's if it got too dangerous. She had to play for time a bit longer.

Looking over David's shoulder, she saw the headline on the computer screen: "Jonathan Schulmann killed in the Williams explosion." Below the headline there was a picture of a man in his forties, smiling broadly, intelligent eyes, prematurely gray hair.

She gasped. David turned around.

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 5:41 p.m. PDT

She sat down next to him, and they started learning about Jonathan Schulmann. After a few minutes, Maggie fetched her laptop. It was an old 2D computer, but it started quickly and without asking to log in. She said, “It’s a small screen, but I am used to it.” David thought she had trouble with him controlling the display.

Schulmann had joined the Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) in 2017, after working for three years at the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), and before that being a partner at a well-known Washington, DC, law firm. His name was tied to successful prosecutions of large insider trading cases at the SEC and to investigations into the manipulation of various commodity markets at the CFTC. Some had wondered why he’d left a successful legal practice for much less financially rewarding work at government agencies, even speculating that he’d been interested in a political career.

His name was mentioned in the context of a commission that would be formed “to get to the bottom of what happened in the 2019 dollar crisis.” Jonathan was killed September 10, 2020 in the explosion at the Ritz Carlton in Philadelphia, together with Mitchell Williams. His death was overshadowed by that of Williams and hadn’t received much attention. A couple of obscure blogs speculated that there was some significance to Schulmann being there, but mostly it was assumed to be a collateral damage.

Maggie turned to David. “Are you sure he said Schulmann’s file?”

David shrugged. “I think that’s what he said. I’m not sure of anything. It was pretty crazy. Maybe I didn’t hear correctly. I don’t know what I could possibly have to do with this stuff. Do you think I got it wrong and he said something else?”

Maggie was silent for a minute. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s about your engineering documents. But all those killings. And the police seemed really interested in that Thomas Mann character. We should try

to find out more about Jonathan Schulmann. He was investigating the 2019 crisis. What do you know about it?”

David spread his arms in mock irony. “Besides it wiping me out and destroying my marriage? Not much.”

“What happened?”

David looked away. “I was aggressive in the market, trying to make money for the kind of house my wife—I mean, my ex-wife—wanted. When the market crashed, we lost pretty much everything. And then Judy’s real estate business took a dive. She couldn’t take it. She needed safety. What about you? Weren’t you affected by the crisis?”

“Yes, but I didn’t have any wealth to lose. I could not get by on my teaching assistant stipend any longer, rent and food costs went up. My parents started sending me additional money, and I had to take on part-time waitressing, a bit of income plus free food. But then a bloodied stranger showed up, and I’m not sure I have that job any longer.” She gave him a wry smile.

David shook his head. “Sorry. But you’re the economist. What do you know about the crisis?”

“Not as much as I should. I’m studying to be a historical economist; I specialize in particular periods, mostly of many years ago.”

She tapped her lip with her forefinger. “You know, my advisor at UCLA is an economics professor. He knows a lot of people and would be a good person to talk to. I’ll call him.”

Maggie got up to go. David said, “Wait, please. I know we just talked about this, but the way Andrei asked questions, I don’t think I should stay here much longer.”

Maggie hesitated and then nodded. “Andrei might be getting concerned that this is getting too big for him to be involved in. I tell you what, it’s almost seven. Too late to make other plans for tonight. Let’s stay here and think about this tomorrow.” She left to make a phone call.

David logged back into his e-mail, still nothing. One thing was for sure, he would leave Andrei's house tomorrow at the latest. But where would he go? During his marriage, it seemed that eventually most of their friends were Judy's friends, and when he and Judy broke up, he lost touch with many of them as well. Besides, being David's friend had become a dangerous business. He thought of going to his parents in Massachusetts, but he'd be jeopardizing them, too. David remembered King Theoden's words from *Lord of the Rings*—"No, my lord Aragorn, we are alone"—and felt sorry for himself.

Maggie's "Hello, Earth is calling!" interrupted his gloomy thoughts. He involuntarily smiled. "Are you too tired?" she asked.

"No, why?"

"I called the professor. The old guy has nothing better to do on a Saturday night and said to just come over. He's not far; in Brentwood."

"OK." David wondered if "the old guy" actually wanted some peace and quiet on Saturday night, but Maggie just would not take no for an answer.

Her hand hooked the air. "Why don't we grab something in the kitchen and get going then."

By now David had figured out that the kitchen was the focal point of Andrei's house and that there were no formal dinners. People would just gather around the monster island counter. So he was not surprised to find Andrei, Tamara, Oleg, and Alex there. While they were grabbing some *pelmeni*, Maggie explained that they were going to Brentwood to do some research with a professor from UCLA. She did not go into details and said that it was probably a "wild goose chase."

Andrei said, "Oleg, take the Audi and drive them."

David protested that they had cars and would be fine, but Andrei insisted, either trying to be a good host or keeping tabs on them. David wasn't sure which.

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 7:54 p.m. PDT

“It is incumbent on every generation to pay its own debts as it goes. A principle which if acted on would save one-half the wars of the world.”

—Thomas Jefferson

Oleg was driving fast. David sat in the front, Maggie in the back. She’d changed into jeans and a different blouse.

Maggie asked, “Oleg, where are you from?”

“Saint Petersburg. Grew up on Vassilevsky Ostrov.”

“Big family?”

“No, I am the only child. Never knew my father. My mom raised me.”

“How did you end up in LA?”

“It’s a bit of a story. Back in high school, I was running with some pretty bad company. My mom had two jobs to make ends meet and was too busy and tired to control me. I would have ended up in jail if not for my uncle. He was in the army, so he arranged to get me into SpetsNaz, figuring only they could break me.”

David turned to him. “What’s SpetsNaz?”

“Special Forces. Six months of training, pure hell. Less than half of us made it. But my uncle was right—I was a stubborn SOB. I stuck it out. Anyway, that’s where I met Alex. Alex was the one who got the job with Andrei. He talked me into coming here when Andrei needed another enforcer.”

Maggie leaned on the back of David’s seat in order to continue talking to Oleg, and David caught a scent of her perfume.

“Are you close with Alex?”

“Yes, you could say that. I’d do anything for him.”

“Anything?”

"I owe him my life. We fought in Central Asia together. I got captured at one point. They wanted to videotape cutting my head off. Alex got me out of there."

This all was light years away from David's world. "So how long have you worked for Andrei?"

"About two years now."

"And how do you like it?"

"It's OK. I like working with Alex."

"What about Petr?"

"Petr has been Andrei's main 'advisor' since well before I showed up. I think he's got his own interests." Oleg didn't seem too fond of Petr.

"What about Tamara?" Maggie said.

"She showed up recently. Don't know if she'll be around for too long. Andrei likes change. I think Tamara's in it for the money."

They got off 405 and onto Sunset, turned left on Barrington, then right on one of the small side streets and parked in front of a one-story ranch house. Maggie was first out of the car. She marched to the door and knocked.

A man in his sixties opened, looking a bit like a shorter and plumper version of Sean Connery. Bold features, fleshy face, neatly trimmed short white beard. He wore a tweed jacket, white shirt, and a bow tie.

"Margarita, dear, it's been a long time! You have forgotten your old professor."

"Hello, James. It's only been three weeks. And you know it's Maggie."

"I know. I also know your parents named you Margarita after Bulgakov's immortal novel, and I refuse to Americanize it."

James and Maggie hugged. Maggie introduced David and Oleg.

James bowed. His eyes were warm and friendly. "James Bowen, at your service. Ferguson, is that Scottish?"

David confessed that it was.

“Well, I am Welsh myself, and it’s a pleasure to come across a fellow British islander in the colonies— even if a few generations removed.” To Oleg he said, “And it’s great to meet one of Margarita’s compatriots.”

Maggie started right in. “We wanted to find out about—”

Bowen interrupted her. “Let’s first proceed to the study and, like civilized people, get ourselves a drink.”

James moved through the house, with Maggie, David, and Oleg trudging after him. They came to an old-fashioned study, lined with books, a fireplace, two chairs, a couch, and a small bar. James said, “I am personally having sixteen-year-old single malt Lagavulin. What can I offer you?”

David and Oleg opted for Lagavulin as well, while Maggie chose brandy. James took one chair, David the other, Maggie and Oleg sat on the couch.

“Now that we’ve been properly equipped,” James said, “what are you interested in?”

Maggie said, “We’ve been trying to follow some of Jonathan Schulmann’s work. Do you know of him?”

James’s folksy expression changed. After a pause, he replied, “I did not know him personally. I know someone who probably knew Schulmann well. Can you tell me why you ask?”

Maggie hesitated. Then she said, “It came up in some context. We’re not really sure ourselves. We want to understand what he might have been looking at.”

James nodded. “OK. You know that he was killed in the same blast as Williams. Most people thought it was an accident and that he was not the target. Some people thought otherwise. This much we know: he was investigating suspicious trading prior to the 2019 dollar crisis. Combine this with the murder of a presidential candidate, and all kinds of dangerous theories can be constructed.”

David spoke up. “What exactly happened in 2019? I know the headline reporting, of course, but I haven’t studied the events too

deeply. First, I was trying to put it out of my mind due to personal losses, then other things started happening.”

James set his glass on a small table. “All right. As I said, I can introduce you to someone whom I believe knew Schulmann well. As to what happened in 2019, the US dollar lost its exclusive reserve currency status. The US dollar has been the king of currencies since anyone alive can remember, but it was not always so. The British pound had been a reserve currency for a long time before that. All the way to ancient Rome there were reserve currencies. And having one bestowed advantages on that nation.”

Oleg interrupted. “If this is so advantageous, why would anyone let it go?”

James got up and took a few steps around the room. “I’m sorry, I guess I can’t help but slip into my natural role of standing in front of a class and lecturing. The best answer I can give you is—human nature. Having a reserve currency is a great responsibility. It’s like having a blank check to print money that will actually be accepted outside of that country’s borders. As Benjamin Franklin warned, at some point people realize that they can vote themselves more money. So they elect politicians that do it for them. And the privilege gets abused to the point that it can’t be sustained anymore. It’s not possible to create money out of thin air without consequences. Especially when others are just waiting to snatch this privilege away from you.”

James comfortably slipped into his teacher persona, now standing in front of Oleg and gesticulating excitedly. “Centuries ago the Roman Empire debased its currency into oblivion—and that was with coins. When governments figured out that they could make money out of paper or even out of electrons, they really went to work. It’s common for our age to assume that we are so much more developed than our predecessors, that this time will be different. But human nature has not changed nearly as much as technology has. Gold may well be a barbarous relic, but using a gold standard at least puts a brake on a government’s abilities to destroy its currency. Despite all the creative

justifications by Nobel prize-winning economists of governments piling up ever greater debts, the truth is as simple as your parents told you and as Adam Smith described it over two hundred years ago: just like households, countries that borrow beyond their means get ruined.”

“How much debt is too much?” asked David.

“It’s hard to draw a precise line. Generally, you don’t want your debt to exceed your annual gross domestic product or to grow faster than your economy. Since the early 1980’s our debt has been piling up much quicker than our resources. From 2001 to 2013 the economy grew by 50%, but the federal debt tripled and surpassed the GDP. And then there were literally hundreds of trillions of unfunded promises to the American population for social security and healthcare. It was becoming clear that the US government was not going to be able to meet its obligations.”

“And that’s when the Chinese stepped in?” David was leaning forward.

“The Chinese, the Russians, the Brazilians, and others. The genius of what they did was in recognizing that none of them was capable of displacing the dollar’s reserve status alone, but together—and by throwing gold’s convertibility into the mix—they were able to do so. Margarita, help out your old professor—why did the Chinese do this?”

Maggie hesitated, surprised at being put on the spot, but she quickly recovered. “Well ... by 2019 they were trying to get their economy based more on domestic consumption than on exports. It’s a typical progression for developing countries. And when your economy becomes more dependent on domestic market, it creates a reason to strengthen your currency. Also, the reserve status of the US dollar was tied to the OPEC countries requiring that payments for oil be made in dollars. When China became the largest importer of oil, it put them in a position to dictate different terms.”

She leaned slightly forward as she spoke and David caught himself looking at the opening of her blouse and then looked away, still

smarting over the “sheep” comment, but attracted to her confident attitude. And nice legs.

“Thank you, Margarita. The Chinese were gradually building the international position of their currency for years. What happened in 2019 was not a surprise, their actions were probably motivated by combination of politics and economics. Some believe that this was done more out of weakness, many of their companies had dollar-denominated debts and had to do something drastic. The jury is still out on how this will turn out. Regardless, the manner and the timing of the attack were surprising. Obviously those who knew the plan were in a very advantageous position.”

James stepped back to the table to refill his glass.

“I hope you all enjoyed this small lecture. Now, tell me ... why are you interested in Jonathan Schulmann?”

David attempted an awkward dodge. “Well, we can’t go into the details ...”

“Look,” James said, “it’s the second time I asked this. You want me to introduce you to someone who knew him. What I told you so far is public knowledge, with some of my commentary. If you want to dig deeper, you have to tell me why.”

David felt the pressure of three sets of eyes trained on him. “I’m not trying to hide things from you. It’s just that someone was killed yesterday because I phoned him. And I don’t know why. I don’t want to put you in danger.”

James pursed his lips and sat down. “I appreciate that, but I am sixty-eight, my wife passed away two years ago, we had no children—I’m not afraid to ask or answer any questions. If you want my cooperation, you have to tell me what’s going on.”

David looked at Maggie, trying to ask telepathically, *What should I do? He’s your friend.*

Maggie slowly nodded.

David went ahead and recounted an abbreviated version of what took place in the past two days. James listened attentively, head slightly tilted to one side.

When David finished, James said, “Thank you. I will try to help you. I’ll contact Margarita when I have something. Be careful.” He got up, signaling an end to the evening.

Saturday, 4/23/2022, 10:11 p.m. PDT

Oleg and David waited by the car as Maggie hugged James good-bye.

Oleg winked at David. "I see that you're looking at Maggie. You'd like to try your luck with her, eh?"

David mumbled something incoherent.

"She can be a real ballbreaker. Andrei may have had something going with her way back, but he likes his women simple."

Maggie came back to the car, cutting off the discussion.

"There's something I don't get," Oleg said as he accelerated onto the 405 Freeway.

David adjusted his seat belt. "What is that?"

"According to the old guy, Americans have gotten worse off after 2019. I figure the Chinese and the Russians should have gotten better off then. Now, I came here in 2020, so I don't know what it was like before that, but I can see that for many people things are tight. Yet I also know that in Russia things have not gotten better. A few are doing well, but not the ordinary people. I send money home to my mom so that she doesn't have to work two jobs anymore. For most people there, it's still hard."

"A few are doing well here, too," Maggie said. "I guess the well-connected ones benefited regardless of the country."

When they got back to Andrei's house, David went straight to the computer to check his e-mail. There was a message from Jeff with a bunch of attachments. David glanced through them. Most were marked "Confidential." One was a document from Julia Bishow describing an improved design of the phased array antenna to be installed on airplanes that would improve signal-to-noise ratio by six decibels and increase the throughput four times. David figured maybe that was what the kidnappers were interested in and they just confused names between Julius and Julia. Or they might have assumed an antenna engineer would be a man. Or this was all a giant mistake.

He went through the documents and created edited versions, with key portions removed or changed. When Maggie joined him, David explained about the documents and his thoughts about the name confusion. They decided it was time to text the kidnappers.

David set up a new e-mail address and sent a “have files, need contact e-mail” text to his own phone number. A knot formed in his stomach as he realized that events would start unfolding now—and he had no idea where they would lead. He tried to hide his anxiety, when he sensed Maggie observing him.

“So where are you from?” she asked.

“I grew up in Mansfield, Massachusetts. Near Boston.”

“Large family?”

“Not really. Two parents and an older brother.”

“What does your family do?”

“Both my parents are physicians, my father a cardiologist, my mother an oncologist. My brother also went into medicine. He’s an orthopedic surgeon. They all went to Harvard Medical School.”

“But you didn’t go into medicine?”

“No, I studied engineering at Purdue for five years; got my master’s degree there. My parents never seemed to forgive me for not following them into the medical field, the only field they considered worthwhile.” David was happy to tell her more. He was uneasy among the strangers at Andrei’s and having a personal conversation gave him a bit of comfort.

Maggie ran a hand through her hair. “How did you end up in LA?”

“The usual story: got a job offer while at school, came here for an interview, fell in love with wide beaches and golden sunsets. What about you?”

She yawned and smiled. “It’s really late. I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

Maggie left, and David couldn’t help feeling disappointed. Interest from a pretty woman was flattering. In almost two years since his marriage breakup, David had not had a single serious relationship.

Maggie didn't ask him about his job beyond what he'd told her in the coffee shop, and he did not volunteer answers. Judy's ambition had been contagious; around her he'd been ambitious as well. He'd gotten one promotion, was in line for another, but the 2019 crisis changed everything. It was hard to push for a promotion when every couple of months more people were being RIF'd, and there were tons of people desperate for a job. And without Judy to push him, he just did not have the drive.

Exhausted, David returned to the cold bedroom he'd been in yesterday and managed to sleep without Ambien that night.

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 7:25 a.m. PDT

In the morning David woke up at least knowing where he was. He dreamt again last night, but this time Jim Plasche was not there. It was his more typical dream, the kind he'd had at least weekly over the past two plus years. He was in a castle surrounded by hordes of creatures he could not see. There were no other defenders; he was all alone. The massive gate was being pounded from the outside. It was slowly giving way after each blow. As the gate was about to be breached, he would invariably wake up, never seeing the attackers.

He got out of bed thinking that this was also the last night he was going to spend in Andrei's house, although he had no idea where he'd spend the next one. David took a quick shower and proceeded straight to the study, anxious to check his e-mails. His newly set up e-mail had a message: "send file to acegik951@gmail.com." His personal e-mail had a note from Megrano to get in touch ASAP. Both were sent this morning.

David went to the "Grand Central," as he started thinking of the kitchen. Everyone except for Tamara was there. Maggie, in shorts and sports bra, her face and shoulders glistening with sweat, looked like she just came back from a run.

Andrei greeted him with, "What's new?"

David shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing." He added that he was going to take his car and get some clothes. As much as he appreciated what Andrei offered, he needed something more in his size. Andrei nodded. *He didn't offer any assistance*, David thought. *He clearly wants me out and soon.*

David had a cup of coffee with a bagel, went back to the study, and replied to Megrano, saying he had an e-mail address from the kidnappers. He then sent an edited copy of Julia Bishow's file to "acegik" with the message: "Here's Julia's file. I have more if interested."

Megrano's response came immediately, saying he'd be in the office by eleven.

As David was heading toward the door, Maggie intercepted him. "So where are you going?"

He repeated that he was about to do a bit of clothes shopping, adding that he was planning to leave Andrei's place later today. Maggie asked him not to rush, saying she'd talk to Andrei. She wanted to do a bit more research into Jonathan Schulmann and the dollar crisis of 2019, also check with James Bowen about the introduction he promised. David thought with a certain admiration that she hounded people until she got what she needed. He felt guilty about not mentioning the e-mail exchanges, but he'd subjected Maggie to enough danger already, and Megrano must have thought it was not necessary to involve her. Even yesterday he didn't want her to come to the station.

David went to a shopping mall and got himself a pair of jeans, a couple of shirts, T-shirts, underwear. He changed in the dressing room, and put Andrei's clothes he'd been wearing in a bag. He felt better wearing his own things. He thought of buying a computer but decided to hold off. Perhaps he'd get back his work computer soon. Plus he had an old one at home. It was time to see Megrano.

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 10:35 a.m. PDT

“One mark of a great soldier is that he fights on his own terms or fights not at all.”

— Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Colonel Fai Hsu was looking at the computer screen. Ferguson’s e-mail came in more than two hours ago, but Fai continued analyzing the scenarios. He was still jet-lagged from the trip, so he had to take a bit of extra time to plan.

He was thinking of the situation in dispassionate facts. He had no respect for the shoot-them-up computer games that young people were crazy over. He played Go and chess. Before you start shooting, you’d better take your time to figure out who to shoot at and how. As Sun Tzu said: “Ponder and deliberate before you make a move.” And Fai believed in planning five moves ahead.

He organized his thoughts:

Negatives

- People killed in Seattle and LA, police are investigating,
- Julius’s accomplice in Seattle is in a hospital under police supervision, impossible to get to
- The green folder was found in Ferguson’s carry-on, but Ferguson retrieved the file from it and hid it somewhere
- Ferguson has a network in LA and they are helping and protecting him
- Last night’s search of Ferguson’s house was fruitless

Positives

- They do have access to both LAPD and Seattle PD systems and getting information from them
- They know where Ferguson and his accomplice are hiding, source of information is unknown, but according to the MSS it is reliable

- Eight properly trained agents at his disposal and two safe houses, one in Malibu and one in Hidden Hills

Fai tried to get into Ferguson's mind but couldn't; the evidence allowed for different and incompatible possibilities. The e-mail was confusing. Either Ferguson did not know what was going on or he was masterfully manipulating them by pretending that he did not know what was going on. After all, the art of war was the art of deception. Fai added things up and leaned towards the latter. Ferguson had accomplices, he'd fooled them with the green manila folder (why keep it and hide the file elsewhere?), and he'd escaped their agents twice.

The second escape showed signs of training. The agent had seen Ferguson and his female accomplice run into the parking structure, and he'd waited by the gate, but they'd never shown up. Two other agents arrived and combed that parking garage—nothing. Ferguson must have had another car waiting nearby. Fai wondered why Ferguson had gone to SMPD. Perhaps he knew that MSS did not have any visibility there and wanted to present him with yet another adversary.

Fai pondered the next move on the chessboard and figured he did not have many options. He had no way of contacting Julius directly. He couldn't reach Julius's accomplice at University of Washington's Medical Center. In any case, Seattle was too "hot" after four deaths, and the MSS's network there was vulnerable at the moment. This left Ferguson. Fai had to get and question him. Fai's advantage was that Ferguson thought he was well hidden, when in reality he was not. Time was of the essence, so Fai formulated his plan.

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 11:08 a.m. PDT

David parked his Honda at SMPD's offices. It was Sunday morning and the place was not too busy, but both Megrano and Chander were waiting for him at the reception desk. They headed inside to an already familiar room. David told them about sending a file to "acegik" this morning.

"Anything?" asked Chander.

"I haven't been at a computer for about three hours."

Chander pushed a keyboard over to him. "Please check."

The account was projected on a big screen. No response. Megrano and Chander read earlier e-mails and had David open Julia's antenna document and explain it in simple terms.

Megrano said, "OK, all we can do is wait. Meanwhile, there was a shooting in Seattle two days ago, and we think it might be related. There was a witness who was jogging around the lake that morning, and he recognized the person who was killed in the restroom by the N gates as one of the people running away. A man involved in the shooting is still alive. He's at the UW's hospital under twenty-four-hour police protection."

"Were any of the people involved in the shooting Chinese?"

Megrano nodded. "The three who died were. The one in the hospital is not."

Chander added, "A person by the name of John Simptson had purchased a ticket for Alaska Flight 422 on Friday. But he never boarded the plane or went through security, at least not with the 422 boarding pass. The name and the credit card are not leading anywhere. It was probably your Thomas Mann. Speaking of the plane, we tracked the 737 that did that flight. It left Seattle at nine thirty this morning and should be landing in LAX in about twenty minutes. Why don't we take a drive to LAX and check to see if we can find that *Economist* magazine?"

They got into Megrano's Crown Victoria and headed to the airport. Megrano parked at the curb and flashed his badge to the indignant LAX officer.

Must be nice to park anywhere you want, David thought.

They got to the gate as Seattle's passengers almost finished disembarking. Megrano's and Chander's badges got them on the plane. Chander reached into the back pocket of seat 15A and pulled out a magazine with the "*Et tu*, California?" headline. Then the three of them sat at a table in the nearest bar and went through the magazine page by page. There were no marks, nothing that would distinguish the magazine from one just purchased from a newsstand.

Megrano got up. "OK, let's take it back for analysis." From the tone of his voice, it was clear that he did not expect much.

Back at the station, Chander made David log into the e-mail account again. Still nothing. Chander wrote down the account and the login. They obviously did not want to depend on David to see the response.

"How can we get in touch with you?" asked Megrano.

David pulled out the disposable cell phone he got from Oleg and read them the number.

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 1:42 p.m. PDT

When David left, Chander said, “Well, that was a dead end.”

“Not entirely unexpected. Had to check it out. Wish they would let us go to Seattle,” Megrano said. “I better get home. My wife is complaining about all this work on the weekends. Especially now that the kids are out of the house. She reminds me how I promised her that we’d travel when the kids were in college. Instead I work more than ever.”

“Why don’t you take time off and go somewhere together?”

“As a matter of fact, I just booked us tickets to Italy for June. Expensive, but she always wanted to see Rome and Venice and Florence, and we just never had the chance. I’ll take two weeks off.”

“Good for you! I wish I could head to Europe, but with two little kids and one detective’s salary, I’ll have to wait.”

“How is your better half?”

“Joan is worried about her parents. Their savings have been wiped out, and you can’t get far on Social Security these days.”

“That’s for sure. And the kids?”

“About what you can expect from seven- and four-year-old boys. Turning the house upside down, wearing Joan out. I promised to play some basketball with them today.”

“Well, you better get home then.”

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 2:28 p.m. PDT

David drove his Accord back to Andrei's house. He figured he'd return Andrei's things, say good-bye, and check into a hotel. He did not want to risk going home yet, but he'd go to work tomorrow. He would have to explain that his work computer had been stolen. Then he'd probably get RIF'd for sure.

He had to brake when he turned into the street. It was blocked by police vehicles with flashing lights. A medical emergency van was in the driveway. A police officer tried to stop him, but Andrei—who was talking to another officer—waved him through.

Oleg was sitting on front steps with his head in his hands. David tapped him on the shoulder:

“What happened?”

“There was an attack. I was away at lunch with Andrei, Tamara, and Petr. Alex and Maggie were in the house. They killed Alex and took Maggie.”

David walked past Oleg into the house. There was a body on the floor, with blood seeping from under the cover. Police were milling around taking pictures and talking. Nobody paid attention to David. He went up to the second floor, to the room that Maggie stayed in. Maggie's computer was on the nightstand, with the green cat-eye glasses sitting on top. David grabbed the computer, put the eyeglasses in his shirt pocket, and went back downstairs.

As he was walking out, Oleg came to him. “I will call you tonight. I have to get these bastards. For Alex.”

David nodded and snuck out the door.

PART 2: TAKEN

“[T]here is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one’s own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes.”

— Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 3:12 p.m. PDT

David drove to a coffee shop on Ventura Boulevard. He had not eaten since the morning's bagel, and he didn't believe in thinking on an empty stomach. Something his mother had taught him in childhood and the habit stuck. He remembered about Andrei's clothes in the trunk, he'd meant to return them, but it didn't seem to be relevant anymore. Another person dead because of an association with him.

He bought a large coffee and a sandwich and opened Maggie's computer to take advantage of the free Wi-Fi. Thankfully, the computer did not use biometrics. Maggie clearly did not bother with security. Feeling guilty about snooping, he checked her e-mail. There was a message from James Bowen to contact him. David checked his own e-mails, but there was nothing of significance. He went back to Bowen's message, thought about it, typed a reply: "This is David. They took Maggie."

Bowen's response came quickly. "Why don't you come over? Here's the address."

David's plan had been to go check into a hotel, but he figured that could be done later. Maybe Bowen had some new information. Schulmann's name was still the only lead David had; clearly the antenna files did not help. He stopped at a computer store to buy a power supply for Maggie's laptop, then continued to Brentwood.

Bowen opened the door before David even had a chance to knock. They sat in the living room, and David recounted the events of the day. Bowen got up to get them both water.

David asked, "How long have you known Maggie?"

Bowen said, "It must be at least five years now. I met her when she was a senior taking a class about economics of the early United States that I taught at UCLA. She would often come see me during my office hours to discuss subjects. She was older than most of my students and

more serious. We'd become friends and would try to meet for lunch at least once a month."

Bowen sipped his water, looking past David as if replaying the events in his mind. "Maggie has a quick mind and real curiosity. I never could get her interested in current events, though. She always seemed more comfortable with things of the past. She chose the Civil War period for her research."

Bowen's eyes focused on David. "As I said, my wife and I did not have kids, and I would occasionally 'adopt' one of my students as a surrogate son or daughter. Maggie's been my 'adoptee' for the past few years. So, what are you we going to do about her?"

"What do you mean? We have to get her back!"

"David, you've only met Maggie two days ago. Police already know about her being taken. It's a dangerous situation, and the safest thing for you is to lay low or even disappear. You probably can't help her in any case. You should just let it go."

David had not really thought about disappearing. He could go into hiding until things blew over. For all he knew, they may have killed Maggie already, like they killed Jim and Alex. He imagined himself driving to New Mexico and living quietly in Taos, away from prying eyes. He wasn't sure why Taos came to mind. He'd never been there but liked pictures of red adobe houses he'd seen in movies.

David saw himself sitting in a small bar, having a drink in memory of Jim and Maggie. The feeling that went through him was that of loathing. He felt bad for Jim, but there was absolutely nothing he could have done to save him, since he had not even known his friend was in danger. But with Maggie ... he could try to do something about it. Or he would have to live knowing he'd had a chance to help her and did nothing.

David's body physically shuddered from imagined shame. He looked up to see Bowen watching him intently. "Yes, James, I guess I could let it go. But I won't."

The moment the words left his mouth, he felt awkward, thinking it sounded pompous and silly. One legacy of his childhood psychology treatments was a distaste that David had developed for important-sounding words like “compassion” and “empathy” that well-meaning therapists kept training him to practice. An ex-girlfriend had once told him he was not compassionate enough because he would not march with her to collectively protest treatment of animals in a far-away land. But for David compassion was an individual act. Maggie was in danger because of him. Could he really do anything? In any case, the statement was out; it hung in the air; it was now real.

Bowen brought him back. “OK, then. I am sorry I had to ask. I wanted to know if I’m with someone I could trust to not leave me behind if things go bad. Now, we know that the engineering file you sent them did not solve the problem. They want something else, and the only real clue we have is the name Schulmann.”

David said, “Before we start solving puzzles, I want to give them a reason to keep her alive.”

“Forgive me, you are absolutely right. Please go on.”

David felt that he finally was able to logically think through the options, rather than react to what was going on. It gave him a slight sense of control and confidence. “I think they—I mean the people that got Maggie—went to Andrei’s to get me.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I left after 9:00 a.m. saying only that I was going to pick up some clothes and come back soon. They did not get me, so they took Maggie, thinking she would either know something or lead them to me.”

“So someone in Andrei’s house might be working with them,” James thought out loud. “Now you have to convince the kidnappers that you have what they want, while at the same time that Maggie does not know much, and if they harm her they won’t get the file.”

“Exactly. We don’t want them thinking that she knows anything. I offer to trade her for the file.”

“No, no, no! First of all, it’s too simple and quick, and you don’t even have anything to trade. Second, you are supposed to be a mercenary, not someone willing to exchange information of great value for a girl. And it’s inconsistent with you meeting Maggie only two days ago, as she has likely confessed.”

“OK, what do you suggest?”

“We don’t offer anything yet. We communicate that we have the file, that their attack was a bad mistake. That grabbing a low-level operative who knows nothing is not going to help them. But we protect our own no matter how lowly they are in the organization, so if they harm her the price will increase again, and we will shop the file to someone else. Keep them guessing and communicate from a position of strength. What do you think?”

David didn’t feel anything even close to being in a position of strength. But he liked the professor’s strategy. “OK, let’s do it your way.”

Opening Maggie’s computer, David searched for Wi-Fi and then asked, “What’s your Wi-Fi password?”

James laughed. “My dear chap, you are trying to log into the neighbor’s network. I am afraid I don’t have anything like that, but there is a cable plugged into my computer in the study.”

David shook his head, and they moved to the study. The message to “acegik” went out.

“I still don’t quite understand why they think I know anything,” David said. “Is it because of my conversation with Thomas Mann, or whatever his real name is?”

James smiled. “I think I might be able to answer this. When you described the events yesterday, I first thought it was a case of mistaken identity. But this Thomas Mann connection was too much of a coincidence. I suspect he picked you out of the crowd in order to send his adversaries down a wrong trail.”

“You mean he picked me at random?”

"I doubt it was completely at random; these people are trained. He bought a ticket to LA, so he was looking for someone likely flying to LA. He may have seen you checking the gate. He also wanted someone who would look like he could be an operative, so he chose a tall male, young but not too young."

David rubbed his forehead. "Wait. You're saying that jerk set me up? Just like that, out of the blue?"

"I think so. Didn't that detective tell you how someone was killed in the terminal? Approaching you may have been his way to split the pursuit. Speaking of operatives, who can we trust to share this information with?"

"What? You want more people involved?"

"My dear David, I was in the Royal Welch Fusiliers back in the '70s, but I am sixty-eight and I don't even own a gun. And I'm sure you are in good shape, but—please don't take offense—you are no James Bond. We need information, and we need firepower. We are dealing with people that have both. Who can you think of?"

David didn't take offense, figuring he was more like anti-Bond. "I think we can trust Oleg."

"Oleg? Is that the chap who was here last night?"

"Yes."

"I am very happy to hear that, because if he is the traitor in Andrei's household, we'll likely be dead soon. But why do you believe you can trust him?"

"Alex was his close friend who saved his life. He wouldn't set him up like that."

"And you said he was SpetsNaz? That certainly would be useful. How can you get in touch with him?"

"He's going to call me. I have a pre-paid cell phone."

"Good. What about the detectives? Did they seem to be competent? Trustworthy?"

"Yes, I think so. But they are primarily interested in finding Jim's killers."

“Most likely the same people that kidnapped Maggie. And we do have to find out more about the man wounded in the shoot-out. He might be our only connection to Thomas Mann. Do you want to contact the detectives?”

“All right.”

James continued. “I e-mailed Maggie this morning because I heard back from the friend of mine who’d worked with Jonathan Schulmann, and he agreed to meet with us. I think we should try to arrange a meeting with everyone in our small group and do it as soon as possible.”

David protested. “Shouldn’t we try to find out more first? At least hear back from the kidnappers?”

“David, our adversaries move fast. You sent them a file this morning, and they came after you just a few hours later. We have to match them or we’ll always be a step behind. You do the e-mail thing, I’ll call my friend, and let’s go get some dinner.”

David fired off an e-mail to Megrano saying that they should talk. Then he and James walked to an Italian restaurant on San Vicente.

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 4:48 p.m. PDT

“I could live here,” thought Fai Hsu, while enjoying a panoramic view of the Pacific through the glass-covered west side of the living room. The house was perched above the beach on the west side of PCH. They did not call it “Pacific Coast Highway” for nothing. The road almost literally hugged the shore, except for a narrow strip of houses separating the asphalt from the sand and the waves. Hsu did not think this was the most practical place to live, with the waves crashing at one side and the cars flying by the other door. Still, the view was spectacular, especially in the early afternoon as the morning fog was burning off and retreating into the ocean. They probably would have gone to the more secluded Hidden Hills place, but both neighboring houses were empty at the moment and the ability to drive off the PCH into the garage and close the door gave them some privacy.

However, bad luck continued. They were supposed to nab Ferguson and hopefully reach some closure. Hsu’s people used the code provided to unlock the service gate and observed the house for a few minutes before going in. There was one man and one woman as they expected. Then it all went wrong. The man turned out not to be Ferguson but an armed guard, who decided to play hero and opened fire even when faced with five attackers. They shot him, but he badly wounded one of the agents who was now moaning in the smaller upstairs bedroom. Following the shoot-out, there was no choice but to grab the woman and get out of there before police or private security services arrived.

The woman was also upstairs, locked in another bedroom. Non-physical interrogation yielded that she was Margarita Sappin, a graduate student at UCLA. They had already learned this earlier from checking the cell phone number that was last used by Ferguson. She claimed to have met Ferguson two days ago when he walked into a restaurant in Venice where she’d been waitressing to earn a living. Ferguson told her

that some people were after him and had killed his friend Jim, but Ferguson did not know exactly why. He suspected it was over confidential information from a technical meeting in Seattle he'd attended. Yes, they'd met with police—what else were they supposed to do? Police showed them many pictures, including that of a man who was killed in the Seattle airport right when David was there. She thought the police may have suspected Ferguson of killing that man and making up a story to cover it up. She ran with Ferguson from the coffee shop; she was scared by the murder of Ferguson's friend. She took him to her friend Andrei Chernov because she felt sorry for him; he was afraid to go home and did not know where else to go.

Fai Hsu was considering four scenarios:

- neither Sappin nor Ferguson know anything and this was a masterful setup by Julius
- both of them are in on the blackmail and she is a superb actress
- Ferguson is Julius's associate, but Sappin is an innocent bystander being used by Ferguson
- last, but not least, they are both Julius's associates but with different levels of trust, so she knows perhaps more than she let Fai know but not much.

Fai Hsu could not yet eliminate any of the scenarios, so he ranked them in the order of probabilities. He thought it unlikely that they both knew everything that had been going on. Even with this being LA, she could not be such a great actress. He also thought it unlikely that they both knew nothing. Too many convenient escapes for this to be just blind luck. Plus the source of the information that took them to Chernov's house—and whose identity he did not know because the information was coming from Beijing—thought that at least Ferguson may have been connected to Julius.

Of course, if Sappin was an innocent bystander and had nothing else to share with them, they had no use for her. Fai was a firm believer in prevention - the best way of dealing with accidents was to avoid them in the first place. The optimal course of action then was to

have Goa Chon conduct a less friendly interrogation, see where it leads. Then call the gangsters from Compton to get rid of the body. That was one thing they were good with.

Then Ferguson's e-mail came. Fai spent the last twenty minutes looking at it. He did not like the tone; he did not like the threat. Ferguson was up to something.

Fai stared at the imaginary chessboard. He prided himself on anticipating his opponent's move, but this adversary continued to puzzle him. Ferguson may have another connection to the MSS, and now he would probably go directly to Beijing and make it look like Fai Hsu's screw-up led to a much higher price. The worst part about this was that the screw-up was in Seattle, but now they'd try to make Fai the fall guy. Those who changed Seattle's operation were only looking to deflect the blame, and if there was one thing that these behind-the-desk bureaucrats in Beijing excelled at, it was pinning the fault elsewhere.

At least the e-mail proved Fai's analysis was mostly correct. They were not innocent, and she did not know as much as Ferguson. But she must know something, otherwise why would Ferguson care? Until he figured out Ferguson's game—what he had and whom he knew—Fai decided he'd have to play along. Handing her over to Goa Chon for interrogation would have to wait.

The colonel sat at the computer and typed a short, carefully worded response: "Your colleague is safe. Need proof of the information. We have to meet."

Now if the Internet reports were correct, someone survived the Green Lake shoot-out, but who? Judging by the available information, it probably was Julius's associate. Fai Hsu needed to find out from Beijing. It was Monday morning there, so Hsu typed up a report and sent it out. And then his mind turned to a particularly unpleasant subject: the wounded agent. They had basic medical stuff with them, but not to the point of dealing with stomach wounds. And they

couldn't very well take him to the hospital. The colonel decided that for now they'd keep the poor guy sedated and see what happened.

Hsu turned to look through the glass side of the house. On the horizon the sun was approaching the greenish-gray water and the clouds were coloring in gold. "I could live here," he thought again. He also thought of his family. Like most Chinese, he and his wife, Shu, had been hoping for a boy. When they'd had a girl, his father could not hide the disappointment. But when Fai saw the baby, he did not care. She was a part of him, she was precious. That's what they called her: Zhen, "precious."

Since both Fai and Shu were their parents' only children, they were able to get permission to have a second child. Fai's being in the MSS helped, too. When they had the ultrasound and found out that the second child was going to be a girl as well, the doctor asked if they want to have an abortion and try again. Fai and Shu did not sleep that night, and Shu's eyes turned red from crying. In the morning they decided against the abortion. Fai's father never understood, but as much as Fai honored his father he did not care. They named her Li, "beautiful." Zhen was already in college, Li still in high school. It was not easy to be a father of two young girls, and he worried about the men they were seeing. He wondered how their weekend went and how soon he'd be able to see them again.

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 5:19 p.m. PDT

James took David to dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant called Branzini's. San Vicente Boulevard used to be full of expensive restaurants. Most were still open, but not busy. "At least there is no wait these days," Bowen commented.

Branzini's scene was straight out of *The Godfather*: white-clothed tables, dark wood and red décor, dim lighting, Nino Rota's music pouring from loudspeakers. A prim older waiter hurried over. "Mr. Bowen, how are you today?"

"Fine, Sergio, fine. Thank you for asking. Can you get us a quiet table in the back?"

Bowen ordered a bottle of Chianti and said to David, "I know their menu by heart. The osso buco is quite good, and so is the scaloppini. From the pastas, my favorites are the mushroom risotto, the beef ravioli, and the goat cheese gnocchi. And may I say, being in a stressful situation is all the more reason to enjoy your food."

Sergio poured wine and took their order. David opted for a Caesar salad and ravioli. When the waiter left, David asked, "So you are from Wales?"

"Yes, born in Cardiff in 1953 and lived there until 1965 when our family moved to Coventry. Studied history in Warwick University, then military service, a couple of years of boring work. I managed to get into the London School of Economics and somehow sweated out a PhD from them."

"What brought you to California?"

"A woman. Back in 1982 I'd met Julie at a party in London. She was American, and I couldn't convince her to move to the UK, so I applied for a job at UCLA. Chased her until she agreed to marry me. She probably felt too guilty to say no after I moved all the way here. Hard to believe I've taught at UCLA for thirty-eight years now. I came

to like it here, grew into my little act of an eccentric Brit. Julie died from cancer a year and a half ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. Towards the end, she was more worried about leaving me all alone. It was right after the financial crisis and the Williams assassination. It felt like the world was ending.” James paused. “Let’s change the subject. Do you know how Margarita got her first name?”

David nodded. “She said it was after some Russian book.”

James laughed. “Some Russian book? Even by standards of Russian literature, *The Master and Margarita* stands apart. You should learn more about the story; it will help you gain insight into her and where she comes from.”

“Is it a love story?”

“Yes, it is. But not the usual sentimental kind. In *The Master and Margarita* you have mischievous Satan in Moscow and innocent Jesus in Jerusalem, talking cats and vampires, poets and communists, Judas and Pontius Pilate. The author, Mikhail Bulgakov, wrote it before World War II, but it was not published until much later.”

“Why?”

“Bulgakov knew this book was a death sentence for him and his family. He even burned a partially completed manuscript at one point.”

“You mean he wrote the book knowing that it couldn’t be published? That’s insane.”

“No, David, it’s not insane. He had to express himself. Perhaps he hoped that it’d be published at some point, when the evil that took over his country had been defeated.”

David’s phone rang. “Hello?” He turned to James. “It’s Oleg.”

“Ask him if he can come by at 7:30. That’s when I invited Frank.”

David spoke into the phone and hung up. “OK, 7:30. He knows the address.” As he was tucking the phone into his pocket, it rang again. “Hello?” He whispered to James, “It’s Detective Megrano.” The detective resisted his suggestion to come by at 7:30, but with newfound

confidence David simply said, “It’s important.” And he dictated the address.

“I’ll give you the book, you should read it,” James said, continuing where they left off. “Maggie told me her parents were related to Bulgakov, albeit distantly. Margarita of the novel leaves everything and becomes a witch in order to reunite with her love. Maggie does remind me of the book’s heroine. You might as well know, since you are trying to be her knight in shining armor: there is an edge to her, and it can be sharp.”

Knight in shining armor? What nonsense! David thought, although he felt flattered.

David and James finished their dinner, and James convinced him to split a tiramisu. David thought that James was right—a sense of danger seemed to have sharpened his taste buds, and he enjoyed his food more than usual.

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 7:17 p.m. PDT

When they got back from dinner, David rushed to the computer to check his e-mail. There was indeed a response from “acegik,” asking for more information. David read it to James out loud.

The professor said, “We’ll have to show them something to make them believe that we have what they are looking for.”

The doorbell rang. James went to answer it and came back with an elderly gentleman. “Frank Gorman, David Ferguson.” Blue veins delineated an intelligent face. Despite being clearly in his seventies, Gorman stood very straight, had most of his hair—although purely white—and shook David’s hand with vigor.

The doorbell rang again. James hurried back and David heard him say, “Oleg, good to see you again. And you must be Detective Megrano? Please come in.”

James ushered everyone into the study where an extra chair had been pulled over to make room for five. “Can I offer everyone a drink before we make a round of introductions?”

Frank asked for cognac, Oleg and David chose scotch, Megrano said with an unhappy face, “Nothing for me, thank you.” He remained standing, leaning against the wall.

Bowen poured drinks in awkward silence. Then he said, “Let me begin. I am James Bowen, professor of economics at UCLA.” He turned left to Frank, who introduced himself.

“Frank Gorman. I recently retired, but before that I was an attorney at SEC. I believe that’s why I was asked to come here.”

They continued clockwise. “David Ferguson, computer engineer at Space Systems.”

“Oleg Khmelco, bodyguard.”

“Robert Megrano, SMPD detective.”

James looked pleased with himself. “I know this all looks very strange, but there is a reason you all are here. There is a rather unhappy

story unfolding. Some bad guys are after this young man here.” He nodded at David. “They already killed at least two people and kidnapped a woman. It’s the hope of saving her that led us to call you here. Some of you know parts of the story, some may know more than I know, but Frank here knows nothing. Both for his sake and because we may all benefit from going over the events, David, why don’t you tell the story from your point of view?”

Recounting the events, David felt like he was in a strange dream. He’d had this feeling many times over the past two days, but at least this time the surreal sensation was not mixed with a stomach-clenching fear. Instead, he was almost euphoric, irrationally believing that they would collectively figure this out, get Maggie back, and everything would return to the way it was. Maybe not great, but normal.

When he finished, Bowen jumped in again. “As I said, I believe you all may know something that may help. We have some clues but more questions than answers: who are these people and what do they want? Who is Thomas Mann? How did they find Andrei’s house?”

Oleg took his turn. “At about ten this morning Andrei said we were going to Il Tiramisu for lunch. We had reservations for five at noon. Maggie probably could have come, but she didn’t ask and Andrei did not offer. Perhaps she wanted to wait for you.” He nodded at David, which made him feel both guilty and glad. “Alex was a gentleman and asked to stay. I think he liked Maggie and was glad of a chance to be alone with her. We left at 11:40. At about twenty minutes past noon Andrei got an alarm from the security service. When we got back, Alex was dead, and Maggie was gone.”

Megrano by now lost some of his initial indifference. “Was the alarm set by break-in?”

“No. They walked in through the service gate. The gate is secure, they must have had the code. Alarm was raised when people heard that shots were fired. The security service claimed that they got there in a few minutes, but whoever did it was gone.”

Megrano said, "I knew about the shooting, but I didn't realize it happened so quickly after you left. It looks like someone in the household was communicating with the kidnappers just this morning."

"Yes, somebody told them when we were leaving and gave them the security code. I don't think it would have been Andrei, he could have just ordered Alex to leave with us."

David said, "So it must have been Petr or Tamara?"

Oleg nodded. "Yes. I think it was Tamara. Petr's been with Andrei for over four years, well before Alex and me. Tamara moved in only a few weeks ago." Oleg swallowed hard, composed himself. "I will kill whoever did this. But Alex did not go without a fight. He had at least five bullets in him, but he got one of the bastards."

"What do you mean?"

"There was blood by the door and outside, must have belonged to one of them."

James said, "Detective, before I ask Frank to tell us about Jonathan Schulmann, is there anything that you know and are willing to share?"

Megrano hesitated. After some internal struggle, he said, "OK. But I think I'll have some of that scotch now." He accepted a drink from Bowen. "We never thought it was about the engineering documents. We looked at the 'Shulman' angle, but didn't use the right name. I'm afraid we don't have anything on 'Thomas Mann.' David identified the Lincoln's driver, and we are going through his contacts and activities. We are getting a search warrant to check out his place and his phone logs."

"You didn't do that yet?" David said.

"You identified him only yesterday, and this is a weekend. We should have it tomorrow," Megrano said. "We were focusing on trying to find the two Mexican guys - according to eyewitnesses, they are the actual killers of Jim Plache. But we don't have much to go on, except knowing from David that they're big and one has a snake tattoo."

Bowen asked, "Don't you think it's strange that the Chinese are working with Mexican gangs?"

“Not necessarily,” Megrano said. “It’s somewhat unusual, but when there is money to be made, everyone will cooperate.”

Oleg nodded. “Yes. We work closely with Mexicans in some areas. Alejandro manages Compton and Adams areas for us.”

“Who is that?”

“Someone we outsourced a part of the drugs business to. Alejandro has his own group of a dozen people.”

“So this is another gang?”

“No,” Oleg said. “He’d be offended if you called him that. Alejandro is a businessman, just his line of business involves illegal substances. He does not like these gangsters that wear colors, flash signs, and shoot people in the streets. He is pretty well educated and connected.”

Megrano got interested. “Do you think he can help look for the people that killed Jim Plasche on the tennis courts?”

“I’ll ask.”

Megrano was not finished yet. “I believe that the answer to this puzzle is in Seattle. There was a shooting there on Friday morning. Three Chinese males are dead; one of them arrived a day before from Shanghai. One Caucasian is in a hospital in critical condition. Then another recently arrived Chinese national has a ticket on the same flight as David, but ends up dead in a men’s room instead. One other passenger does not board the plane. And in a trashcan near the gate, police found a bag with a light overcoat, a hat, and glasses.”

“You think that was Thomas Mann, or whatever his real name is, who didn’t board the flight and killed the man in the airport?”

“Yes. That’s why we can’t seem to find anyone on security tapes who matches the description that David gave us. He sets up David by making it appear as if David is his associate, gets his two pursuers to separate, kills the one that stays with him, and disappears. He must have had another flight booked earlier. We tried to pick him up from security cameras but could not establish which flight he went on.”

James asked, “So who do you think we are dealing with?”

Megrano shrugged. “Don’t know for sure. But given the scale, it’s not some run-of-the-mill mafia dispute. If I had to guess, I suspect we are not dealing with mafia at all, but with the MSS.”

“What’s MSS?” David asked.

Frank spoke for the first time since the introductions. “The Chinese security apparatus. Kind of like the Chinese KGB.”

Megrano continued. “I wish we could talk to the shoot-out victim who is now in UW’s Medical Center. But from what I understand, he is not talking, and in any case, our captain won’t send us to Seattle. The budget is tight, and he doubts it’s related to Jim Plasche’s murder.”

Frank said, “Perhaps I can help. The mayor of Seattle is an old friend of mine. We attended UW’s Law School together. I’ll call him tomorrow morning.”

“Great, thank you,” Megrano said. He turned to Oleg. “One more thing. Since one of the people in Andrei’s household is a traitor, it would be helpful to start following their movements. Can you attach GPS trackers to the cars that Tamara and Petr usually drive? I can give you a couple that are very difficult to detect and then we can follow them easily.”

David asked, “Do you have a tracker on my car?”

Megrano smiled. “No. I usually would need a court order to do this. Plus, we weren’t sure you were worth tracking. No offense, but we never seriously considered you to be a suspect.”

Bowen clapped his hands. “Thank you, this was very useful. But there is a whole other topic for us to discuss: Jonathan Schulmann.” He turned to Frank.

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 8:53 p.m. PDT

Maggie was lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. The small room contained a twin bed with a thin pillow, a table with a pitcher of water, two chairs, and a nightstand with a lamp and an alarm clock. There was a window, but the shutters on the outside were almost closed, and during the day it allowed only small slivers of light. No way to open the shutters or to break the window—she'd thrown a chair at the glass, but it only bounced back and hit her on the leg. There were two doors: one led out of the room, the other to a tiny windowless half-bathroom with a toilet and a sink, no shower.

This morning Andrei and his entourage had left for lunch. She'd stayed behind. Maggie did not particularly want to go with the group and needed to catch up on her UCLA studies. With all the craziness of the past two days she'd had no chance to work on her research. She didn't think David was coming back to Andrei's house and wondered if she'd ever see him again or if he'd go into hiding and disappear. Might as well. He had turned her life upside down.

She'd felt better after taking her customary morning run. Alex had also stayed behind. He tried to engage her in a conversation, which after a few minutes irritated Maggie. He smelled of smoke and she had to get to her studies. Just as she excused herself and started walking up the stairs, leaving Alex in the vestibule, the door opened and two men with guns walked in. She watched from about one-third of the way up. Alex reached for his gun then staggered as he was hit by a bullet. But she heard no gunshot sound. He'd managed to fire twice with loud booms before collapsing on the floor that was quickly filling up with blood. Three more men ran in. Maggie turned and tried to run upstairs, but someone caught her ankle and brought her down. Two pairs of legs went past her to the second floor. Heavy footsteps rushed around, men shouting excitedly in another language. It sounded like Chinese. She understood one word clearly—"Ferguson."

One of the men had good command of English and he roughly turned her around, screaming at her, “Where is Ferguson?”

She shook her head. “He’s not here.”

The two men returned from upstairs. The one standing above her must have been the leader because he gave a command, and the other two lifted Maggie, quickly taped her mouth, tied her hands behind her back, and half-carried, half-dragged her out of the house. She kicked one of her captors in the shin as hard as she could. He yelled and swung to hit her. The other man shouted, “*Zhi!*” The fist stopped inches from Maggie’s face.

She saw two others carrying a man who was bleeding and screaming in pain, and she thought, *Alex got one of them*. They ran to the service entrance where two SUV’s were idling. She was forced into the second SUV, and it took off just as sirens sounded in the distance.

There were three men in the car with her: the two that brought her out and the driver. All were Asian. They were talking loudly and didn’t look happy. She heard “Ferguson” multiple times. The car turned north on Van Nuys Boulevard, crossed Ventura Boulevard, and got into a left turn lane for Ventura Freeway North. The driver turned back, looked at Maggie, and gave an instruction. Maggie was lifted and unceremoniously thrown on the floor, with two pairs of boots holding her down. She felt the car accelerating.

Maggie stared into the dirty floor, feeling numb and scared. She hated having no control over things that were happening to her. *Damn it, why did David have to walk into her restaurant?* She was so angry, she screamed into the masking tape and tried to grab the leg that was pressing on her right shoulder. She was rewarded with a kick.

Maggie tried to keep her mind from panicking by guessing where they were. They stayed on the freeway for what she thought was about ten minutes before slowing down, stopping, and then turning left. After a few minutes the car started climbing uphill in a series of hairpin turns, then proceeded downhill. Maggie was sliding back and forth on the floor, prompting the men holding her down to laugh. She figured

they were heading west by one of the canyons connecting the Valley with the coast, probably Topanga or Malibu. They turned right, and beneath the noise of traffic she thought she heard the sound of crashing waves. The car stopped, a turn signal was on, they made a left, and everything went dark as if they were in a cave.

Maggie was lifted and dragged out of the car. Lights came on. She realized they weren't in a cave but in a large garage. Two other cars were there, one of them the second SUV she saw by the service gate. Two people carried out the wounded man, who seemed unconscious.

They took Maggie into the house. She caught a glimpse of the ocean, but her captors proceeded to the second floor, pushed her into a small dark room, and closed the door. She found herself in the middle of the room she was in now, with her hands still tied behind her back and her mouth taped. In semi-darkness, she saw a bed and went to sit on it. Her hands and shoulders were hurting, the skin on her face was stretched by tape—and she had to pee.

Maybe that was what kept the despair at bay, because Maggie struggled clumsily with her bound hands to get off the bed, marched to the door, and started pounding it with her right foot.

After a few minutes, a large balding man opened the door and angrily barked in heavily accented English, “What do you want?”

Maggie just as angrily moaned into the tape. The man reached out and yanked the tape off, which made Maggie scream in pain.

The man repeated, “What do you want?”

“I need to go to the bathroom.”

The man pointed at another door inside the room. Maggie spat out, “My hands are tied, you fucking moron!”

The man looked like he was going to hit her, and Maggie instinctively took a step back, but he slammed the door and left. She heard some voices, and then the man came back, untied her hands, and left without saying a word.

In the bathroom, Maggie washed and inspected her face in a small mirror over the sink illuminated by a single bulb. The tape left a big red

mark, and on her right temple there was an imprint of a shoe. She massaged her hands, shuffled back into the room, turned on the lamp on the nightstand, and inspected the place for a possibility of escape. The door was locked, so was the window. She picked up one of the chairs and threw it against the window, to no avail.

Maggie sat on the bed again. For some reason, all she could think of now was that she would be missing her shift at the restaurant tonight and had to let the owner know.

The door opened, and two men came in, the balding thick one she saw earlier and an older man who looked like he was in his late forties or early fifties. That second man was dressed in a nicely tailored light gray suit with a white shirt, no tie. He wore wide-framed, expensive-looking glasses, and his face looked well cared for. The man carried himself with a confidence that signaled to Maggie that he was the leader of this group.

He sat in one of the chairs and said in slightly accented but good English, “Please don’t get up. You are Margarita Sappin, correct?”

Maggie replied, “Yes, and who are you?”

The man smiled and offered, “You can call me Mr. Chao. Now, I am going to ask you a few questions. I understand you are angry”—he pointed to the second chair still lying on the floor next to the closed window—“but if you want to live, you will answer truthfully.”

After that, “Mr. Chao” proceeded to politely question Maggie about her relationships with David Ferguson and Andrei Chernov and the events of the past two days. Maggie described everything except for their research into Jonathan Schulmann and their meeting with James Bowen. She was hoping to keep her old professor friend out of this. Mr. Chao kept circling back and going over the same events trying to uncover contradictions in her story. After about an hour, he stopped, thanked her, and got up to leave.

Maggie was sweating by that point. She said, “Wait, I told you everything. Why don’t you let me go? I don’t know where this place is.”

Mr. Chao politely declined. “I am afraid you’ll have to be our guest for a while longer, Ms. Sappin.”

Maggie shot back angrily, “Do you lock all your guests as prisoners and starve them?”

Mr. Chao smiled and told the balding man to make sure Ms. Sappin was properly fed and comfortable. The younger man came back a bit later with a plate of two sandwiches and a can of soda.

Maggie ate because she thought she had to keep her strength. She figured that her kidnappers really wanted David, and she just got in the way. There was really nothing that they needed her for. And they did not seem to have any qualms about killing people.

That was when Maggie realized that Mr. Chao was going to kill her. She started to cry. It was all so absurd! She’d been working her shift, some bloodied guy showed up, and now she was going to die. She felt sorry for her parents back in Kiev. She longed to get back to her life. She liked what she was working on, enjoyed her independence, her morning runs around the campus, her little tidy room. Maggie shared her three-bedroom apartment with two others, but she’d been there the longest, so the owner gave her a break on the rent to watch the place, and she liked being in charge. Proper, serious graduate student on one side, boy-toying chocoholic on the other, but always in charge. She was only thirty-two; it wasn’t fair she should die like this. Couldn’t somebody, anybody, come rescue her please?

Maggie wiped the tears, got up and checked everything one more time, her mind working furiously on ways to escape. Nothing. She lay down on the bed, wishing she had for comfort a few of the stuffed animals she shared her bed with at home. She expected the door to open any moment and the balding man to come take her away. She tried to imagine how they would kill her. She wanted to be prepared to go with dignity.

But the door remained shut.

Eventually Maggie drifted into an uneasy sleep to the sound of the waves that somehow managed to penetrate the thick window glass.

Sunday, 4/24/2022, 9:12 p.m. PDT

“I believe that banking establishments are more dangerous than standing armies; and that the principle of spending money to be paid by posterity, under the name of funding, is but swindling.”

—Thomas Jefferson

The circle of men at Bowen’s house all turned their attention to Frank Gorman and the subject of Jonathan Schulmann.

Suddenly in the spotlight, Frank hesitated. “What is it you want to know? Just about his SEC work? Or more?”

Megrano spoke up. “Well, if people are willing to fly in from China and kill for some information related to Schulmann, I guess we need to find out as much as possible. You can never tell which detail will prove important.”

Frank stood up, rubbed his hands, and began pacing the floor. “I guess I’ll start from the beginning. I met Jonathan in 1998. I was teaching a class in Georgetown’s Law School, Jonathan was a student. One of the smartest kids in the class, but without arrogance. Very idealistic. Most kids said the right things, but they were there for the money. Jonathan wanted to do good things. I think he got it from his parents. I met them; they were old-fashioned Jewish liberals, believing that welfare and chicken soup could cure all that’s wrong with the world. The kind of families that came originally from shtetls in Poland and Russia. Those who stayed in the old country didn’t survive the Holocaust. I’ve often wondered how people maintained their faith in God after that, but that’s neither here nor there.”

Frank took a sip of his cognac. “I was happy to give Jonathan a recommendation to intern in a law firm. They hired him after graduation. He practiced corporate law, mostly defending corporate executives from paying for whatever shenanigans they did trying to screw shareholders, taxpayers, and what not. Got married, got

divorced, no kids, made it to partner. A few times a year we would meet for coffee or drinks. I was at the SEC by then. I thought Jonathan had lost his idealism and became your typical successful lawyer. But then he changed. I think his father's death in 2013 affected him. He did not have much family left after that, only a sister in Phoenix and a niece that he loved very much. Maybe his father said something, or maybe Jonathan felt that he'd missed his calling. Who knows? But soon after his father's death, Jonathan left the law firm and went to work for the CFTC."

"What exactly is the CFTC?" asked Megrano.

"The CFTC stands for Commodity Futures Trading Commission. They follow commodity markets, making sure they aren't being manipulated. You know, things like oil, grain, copper, cocoa. They also get involved in regulating Forex, the exchange of currencies. Jonathan already had some knowledge of what was really going on, having been on the other side. He worked there for three years before running into problems."

"What kind of problems?" James was leaning forward, digesting every word.

"He saw some things that bothered him. He did not tell me at the time but it was something that went beyond the usual squeezes and arbitrage; it was illegal systemic fraud. Kind of like subprime mortgages in 2008 but on a smaller scale. In any case, he must have gotten close to something or someone big, because he'd been told to stop by his higher-ups."

"Who was that?" Megrano asked, his expression alert and attentive.

Frank shrugged. "The CFTC is run by five commissioners appointed by the President with the Senate's consent. I understand the order came from one of the commissioners, but I don't know which one. I do know that Jonathan did not take kindly to being ordered like that. When he'd been told to shut down his investigation, Jonathan didn't want to stay there any longer. I'd left the SEC by that time and moved from Washington to LA to be close to my kids and grandkids.

But I still had my connections, so I helped Jonathan join the SEC. The place fit him better than the CFTC, and he quickly made a name for himself with a few big insider trading cases.” Frank paused to sip his drink. “Then the 2019 dollar crisis hit. Do you remember how following the 9-11 attacks there were rumors of some large bets made to profit from them?”

“I certainly remember,” Bowen said. “Wasn’t there a major news network reporting this?”

“Yes, it was CBS reporting a huge amount of put options on United and American Airlines. Put options are bets that the price of a stock will go down. Stocks of these companies had been cut almost in half following the attacks, so whoever bought the puts made a ton of money. Reports of highly suspicious activities had also been made by the German Bundesbank, *Wall Street Journal*, the Swiss Banking Authority, and others. There were a number of statistical studies that concluded that a significant amount of trading was done by people that had inside knowledge of the coming attacks.”

“But didn’t the SEC investigate?”

“Yes, it did. The investigation died down and nothing ever came out of it. Some people claimed later that the SEC was muzzled when the trail led in an uncomfortable direction. I don’t know. But the bets were real, made by people who knew about the attacks. They made a lot of money and got away with it. It received less attention in the 2019 turmoil and subsequent events of 2020, but there were huge bets in stocks, in gold, and especially in currencies. Many people don’t know that currencies exchange markets dwarf stocks, bonds, and commodities, with a daily volume in 2019 of around five trillion dollars. Usually these markets don’t move too fast, but when there is a sudden big drop in a major currency, the impact is enormous. And there was a huge drop overnight in the most important currency of the time.”

“So there were unusually large bets prior to the 2019 crisis?” Bowen asked.

“Oh yes. Surprisingly, there wasn’t a lot of publicity about it. I last saw Jonathan in May of 2020. His work brought him to LA and he came to see me. He was investigating positions across multiple markets that benefited from the crash. He said there was a steady hidden buildup starting months in advance. Positions were taken in puts against the market indexes, in shorts against certain stocks, and especially against the dollar. It was done carefully and stealthily, but when the markets opened on September 16th he estimated that those who’d set up these positions walked out with over a trillion dollars.”

“A trillion?!” David and Oleg exclaimed in unison.

“Yes, that’s what he’d said. Of course, it’s a zero sum game, so parties on the other end of these trades lost that much. Jonathan had told me he believed that the method and the timing had been carefully planned in advance. And some people knew the setup and made a whole lot of money off it. He was trying to find out who. I had not heard from him after his visit in May. A few months later he was killed in the explosion with Mitchell Williams.”

Frank sat down, signaling that he’d finished his talk about Schulmann.

Oleg spoke first. “A trillion dollars? People get killed for much less.”

Frank cautioned him. “As an old lawyer, I’d say you might be jumping to conclusions. From what I understand, the only connection here is a question that David heard under quite stressful circumstances. He may have gotten the name wrong. This situation may have nothing to do with Jonathan Schulmann.”

“I think there’s more to it than that,” Megrano said. “They clearly are looking for some information and they’re putting significant resources into it.”

James agreed. “There is at least a possibility of a connection here. And we have to get back to the people holding Maggie with something. We have to take a chance. David and I will do some research and try to come up with a response based on what Frank told

us tonight. Let's recap: Oleg is going to contact his friend Alejandro to help look for the two Mexican guys from the team that tried to kidnap David, Robert will get GPS trackers to Oleg, and Frank is going to call his friend in Seattle."

Everyone got up to leave. James turned to David. "I think it's best you stay here."

David shook his head. "I'd rather not. I already have Jim's and Alex's deaths on my conscience."

James put a hand on his shoulder. "I understand. But you shouldn't go home yet, and it may not be safe to use your credit card at a hotel. We don't know the full capabilities of your adversaries. Plus we can get going on our research first thing in the morning." He smiled. "Most of all, I would appreciate the company."

David took one of the spare bedrooms, wondering if he would ever get back to his own place. James handed him an old-fashioned paper book with a giant black cat on the cover. "Here's *The Master and Margarita*. I don't know about you, but reading a book helps me to relax. Otherwise, I just rehash the same thoughts over and over. As you go through the book, you'll see that Bulgakov used Aramaic names for events taking place in Judea two thousand years ago. It was the language people spoke there at the time. So Jesus is Yeshua Ha-Nozri, Jerusalem is Yershalayim. I happen to like it. And remember, the novel's Margarita sells her soul to the devil."

Monday, 4/25/2022, 7:06 a.m. PDT

David woke up with some difficulty after staying up late reading the book. He could follow the plot but had to keep circling back to try to discern the meaning. The Devil, using the name Woland, indeed came to Moscow circa 1935 and preyed on unsuspecting Muscovites, especially the greedy and callous ones. It was not the usual “hoofs and horns” evil creature but a cynical, almost sorrowful man with great powers. And in a parallel book-within-a-book by a writer known only as The Master, in the first century’s Yershalayim Pontius Pilate was sentencing Yeshua Ha-Nozri to die on a cross. Pilate saw that Yeshua was a kind and naïve man that believed in everyone’s goodness and feared pain. Pilate wanted to spare him but was afraid to do so. And the Master was a sad and burned-out writer, who gave up on love and on life.

It took David a few moments to orient himself, but then he remembered where he was. He glumly thought that he was getting used to waking up in strange places and wearing strange PJ’s (this blue flannel pair was loaned to him by Bowen).

He found James already in the kitchen carefully making a pot of tea. Thankfully for David, the kitchen had a coffeemaker, although teas in the pantry greatly outnumbered coffee choices. After breakfast, they decided to head to UCLA. Bowen suggested they could work in his office and perhaps do some research in the university library. Both were anxious and concerned about Maggie. They had to come up with some new information to keep the charade going.

Largely out of habit, David sent an e-mail to his boss at the company, letting him know that an urgent family matter came up, and he’d need a few days. By now he doubted he’d ever make it back to work.

James asked to walk “I need my exercise.” They made it to Sunset and turned east. The right lane was mostly occupied by bicyclists, with

much honking from cars darting between lanes. There were quite a few pedestrians as well, mostly UCLA students.

“How was the book?” asked James.

“I got to the end of Part One, then became too tired.”

“Wow, you are half-way through it. So, you have met all the main characters, except for Margarita. What do you think of Woland?”

David shrugged. “He comes across as cynical rather than evil. He tempts people at times, but for the most part they sin on their own.”

“Yes, very much so. He is testing them, but they exercise their free will. Even when one is tempted, he chooses how to act. And so do societies ...”

“Societies do what?”

“Collectively choose how to respond, which road to take.”

They came to a bridge across the 405 Freeway.

“It is interesting how the events take place almost two thousand years apart,” David said, “but they still feel connected.”

“Yes, reminds one that some questions are eternal. Do you like the Master?”

“He seemed to be a talented writer that gave up and turned his back on everything. Is that how Bulgakov saw himself?”

“There are probably some things in common, but I doubt it. Bulgakov had been persecuted like the Master, but he did not give up. The book is a testament to him not giving up.” Bowen’s health watch gave a warning beep. He stopped and took a few deep breaths. “I’m sorry, I have to bring my pulse under control. We’re almost there. Back to the book—there are many possible interpretations. I personally think that the Master should be viewed together with Yeshua and Pontius Pilate. The Master gave up struggling and just wanted peace. Pontius Pilate knew that what he was doing was wrong, he did not want to do it, but he chose to conform to the wishes of his Caesar. Only Yeshua did not give up and did not conform. He did not expect eternal life, he was physically weak, he was afraid of pain, he had a

chance to submit, but he could only tell the truth even in the face of danger.”

“So do you see this as a religious book?” asked David.

“No, I don’t. At least not in a sense of advocating a particular religion. I don’t think it was by accident that the author chose Aramaic names and that neither Yeshua nor others resemble the characters in the Gospels. I see it as an argument that, though we live in a material world, we can’t ignore spiritual questions. Without spiritual strength, the material world corrupts us.”

James rubbed his temples. “Of course, that’s my view. Ultimately, the novel not only entertains but makes you think and question. Perhaps that’s the mark of a great book.”

Monday, 4/25/2022, 8:52 a.m. PDT

Bowen's office at UCLA looked pretty much like other professors' offices David had seen at Purdue: small, lots of books, desk and floor cluttered with papers. There were two chairs, a large one for Bowen behind the professor's desk, and a smaller one for visiting students in front of the desk. There was a second desk in the corner as well. Conveniently, there were two computers, a desktop and a laptop. Bowen was only teaching one class that semester and did not have visiting hours on Monday, but just in case, he marked his online calendar as being "out of office."

James and David decided to divide their efforts: James would focus on investigating trades in gold and currencies around September 6, 2019, while David would look at stock trading.

Sensing nervousness on David's part, James said, "Remember, we don't have to find a smoking gun. We really don't stand a chance of finding one quickly and without help. We only have to find enough to keep them thinking that we may have a smoking gun."

David took the laptop at the small corner desk and started researching. He could see that the bets against the US market and some of the larger, more liquid stocks had been slowly but steadily rising since early 2019. The crash exposed some of the entities that bet the wrong way, especially the ones that could not meet their obligations. It was less clear who benefited directly. David noted names of some funds and companies that had the resources to acquire their less fortunate competitors. There were some Chinese, Russian, Dubai, and Brazilian names there.

He proceeded to look at blogs and commentaries of the time. As could be expected, there were suspicions and rumors galore, together with calls for investigation. Schulmann's name had been mentioned in the context of the SEC looking at some of the charges. Most of the

rumors died down toward the end of 2020, as political divisions took the center stage.

Then David had a small breakthrough: in one of the angry discussion forums the name of Mark Androssian was mentioned as someone who found out too much and was killed for it. Androssian had been an executive at one of the investment banks that went under in 2019. He'd posted his suspicions on a couple of blogs, including some specific names of companies and people. Androssian died in a single-car crash on a winding New Jersey road in February of 2020. Police blamed the ice. After his death, someone suggested on one of the forums that Androssian was also posting on various sites under the handle "Sept6researcher." David searched for everything he could find on Androssian and "Sept6researcher." While many blogs, sites, and posts had been taken down, enough survived in caches and archives to start painting a picture.

As a computer engineer, David thought of the resiliency of the Internet data. Androssian did not have direct proof, but he dug under the surface and correlated enough data to accuse some entities. The two companies he fingered in particular were Changzoo Tongren from China and Novaya Energya from Russia. In both cases he traced a flow of puts and NASDAQ index shorts that were made through multiple intermediaries. Each transaction was small enough to not look extraordinary, but together they added up to outsized bets exceeding \$30 billion. David researched the two companies and found they had been characterized as commercial entities with ties to their respective governments.

Bowen's desk phone rang. James answered and said, "Hold on, let me put you on speaker. David is here."

Frank's voice came through. "I called the house, nobody was there, so I figured I'd try your office. I spoke with my friend in Seattle today, explained a bit about the situation and the young woman's life being in danger. He'll try to help and get whatever information he can.

Promised he'd call me back this afternoon. How are you guys progressing?"

David explained what he found about Mark Androssian tying Changzoo Tongren and Novaya Energya to suspicious trading.

Frank said, "This is good information. Exactly what I would expect—the positions were taken through multiple levels of intermediaries, each transaction being inconspicuous, designed to hide the real monster bet behind all of them. Tracing these transactions won't be easy, especially without the level of access that the SEC and the CFTC would have."

James reported that he did not have a lot of luck. There were clearly big positions that benefited from the dollar's fall, but he wasn't able to get beyond the information that was readily available in the public domain.

Frank explained why. "I would venture that most of this trading was done off-market, in so-called "dark pools." This has been going on for years, to help companies hide their orders. Private brokerages, such as Goldman Sachs's Sigma X, run such exchanges. They operate under fewer regulatory and public disclosure requirements than public exchanges and the trading data is not easily visible."

"How can we get access to it, then?"

"The brokerages must still record their trades to so-called "national consolidated tape" as over-the-counter transactions. It's possible to purchase access to the 'tape,' UCLA likely has it, but the reports are not as detailed as what you get on major exchanges. Without a regulatory access you can't get the raw data about the transactions. You can, however, use the tape to get information about trading done by particular brokers. Companies usually have their preferred group of brokers that they conduct business through. If you make a list of brokers that Changzoo Tongren and Novaya Energya used and correlate it against the transactions these brokers made— companies often use the same brokers for equities and Forex transactions— you

might get some useful data. It won't be a proof, but it might be sufficient to imply that you know more than you do."

After hanging up with Frank, James suggested they walk over to UCLA Management Library and then head to Ackerman Hall for lunch. As could be expected on a college campus, there were posters everywhere. David thought that the content of the posters felt different from his college days: political leaders smiling and holding children or shaking hands with students, young people with clenched fists declaring war on inequality, reminders of civic duties, etc.

At the library, James found a research assistant he'd worked with before and asked her for a record of Forex transactions recorded on the consolidated tape and involving the US dollar for the twelve-month period starting October 1, 2018. The assistant exclaimed, "We can't do a printout. That's an enormous amount of data." David replied that they would take digital format. The assistant nodded and said she'd have it in the professor's mailbox in an hour.

The cafeteria had a giant poster of a smiling woman proclaiming, "Proper diet is your duty!" It was a popular poster around the country. Jim Plasche claimed that it cost him his job: he'd publically made fun of it in the Space Systems' cafeteria, incurring the wrath of the company's Chief Happiness Officer.

Just as David and James got their food and sat down for lunch, David's phone rang. It was Oleg, who was on a speakerphone with others. One of them introduced himself as Alejandro, and asked for a description of the two Mexicans that had kidnapped him on Friday, particularly the one with a tattoo. David walked to a somewhat private location outside and gave the best description he could muster.

Monday, 4/25/2022, 11:34 a.m. PDT

“Mr. Chao” had just left Maggie’s room. She took a deep breath. Her hands were shaking, but she was still alive.

She hadn’t slept much last night. A nightmare of being chased and trying to run away had woken her. When she’d looked at her watch, it was 5:47. The room was dark. Heart racing from the nightmare that was all too real, she sat in her tiny prison, breathing the stale air and listening to the waves. There was nowhere to run.

When the first knock came at about 8:00 a.m., she thought, *this is it*. She prayed silently and remained seated on the bed, afraid that her legs wouldn’t hold her if she stood up. But it was the balding man with a sandwich and a cup of coffee. *This restaurant only serves sandwiches*, she thought and laughed. The man looked at her like she was insane. She stared back defiantly. A thought came to her: *If they plan to kill me, why are they feeding me?* Her appetite returned.

When the man came to get the tray, she tested the situation by asking for a toothbrush, toothpaste, and another cup of coffee. The man scowled, but brought everything a few minutes later. Maggie’s spirits lifted a bit more.

She brushed her teeth, sipped lukewarm coffee, and thought. What she told them yesterday was probably the only thing she could have done in her condition, but probably not the best for her survival. She basically said she did not know anything, and Mr. Chao seemed to believe her. Why are they keeping her alive? Probably because of whatever David or Andrei told them. Or they came to believe that she knew something. So they must have thought that David knew something too. Yesterday she’d portrayed David as a clueless bystander who didn’t know what was going on. She actually believed this to be the case, but it was possible she was wrong and he’d played her for a fool. Regardless, she had to subtly change her story to allow for the

possibility that he was not innocent, and neither was she. Being innocent was not a good thing here.

Maggie wished she had some dark chocolate to help her think. She always kept a stash in her room and in her purse, grabbing one or two whenever she was stressed or had a craving, which was at least a dozen times a day. She became rather religious about making her daily run around UCLA campus, hoping that it would prevent her chocolate addiction from affecting her figure. Of course, at the moment, neither chocolate nor running was available.

By the time Mr. Chao came back, Maggie had a knot in the pit of her stomach, knowing she was on an interview with a possible life or death outcome. She crossed her arms so he couldn't see her hands shake. Mr. Chao went over the same ground as yesterday, and Maggie gave similar answers but allowed some additional nuances. When he asked about her job at the East European restaurant, she added that it was recommended to her.

"By whom?" Mr. Chao asked.

She hesitated. "It was suggested by people from Kiev." Even more reluctantly, she admitted that on her last visit to Kiev she was invited to a meeting with the SZRU, the Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Agency, that she had been hearing from them from time-to-time, and had received a bit of money in checks and cash. She claimed she was not asked to do any work for the SZRU yet, but had been told that she would be called upon. Maggie stuck to her assertion that she had not known David before Friday, but allowed that she was not sure David came to that particular restaurant by accident. She also admitted that David's story did not seem quite plausible, and she suspected that he knew more than he told her, but she could not be sure. However, when Mr. Chao started probing a possible connection between Andrei and David, she was firm that they didn't know each other previously. It was enough that Andrei's house had been attacked; Maggie did not want to repay his hospitality with a betrayal on top of it.

Like the day before, Mr. Chao would repeatedly circle back and ask similar questions from different angles, attempting to catch Maggie in a contradiction. Particularly tense moments happened when he started questioning her about Schulmann. Maggie said that Ferguson did bring up the name, but she did not know what Ferguson knew. Eventually, Mr. Chao must have concluded that he wouldn't get much more out of her, and he, together with the big balding man, left the room.

The knot in Maggie's stomach unclenched a bit. She thought that she avoided major mistakes and allowed for some new possibilities for Mr. Chao to think about. Perhaps as long as they were not sure about her exact role, they would keep her alive. And at the moment that was all she could do—try to stay alive and hope an outside help.

Monday, 4/25/2022, 1:58 p.m. PDT

Back at Bowen's house, David ran the file that the research assistant sent over against some names from Androssian's research. Many of the brokers and intermediaries that Androssian fingered in helping to cover market shorting by Changzoo Tongren and Novaya Energya had also been prominent in establishing dollar shorts during that period. After discussing this with Bowen, David crafted a careful response to "acegik," offering a "small sample of data available for publication" and listing some of the equities and Forex transactions that they suspected could be linked to Changzoo Tongren. They decided to leave Novaya Energya out of it for now. He replied using Maggie's computer.

Oleg called. Alejandro's people had identified the man with the snake tattoo as belonging to a particularly brutal Compton gang, and Oleg had stopped by Santa Monica, relaying this information to Megrano and picking up a couple of GPS trackers.

When Bowen's home phone rang, it was Frank with news from Seattle. The man wounded in the Friday shooting at Green Lake was still drifting in and out of consciousness, and the doctors were not sure whether he was going to make it. The deputy was allowed ten minutes with him and pleaded for means to contact Julius because a young woman's life depended on it. He came out with an e-mail address that Frank read to David.

David sat at Maggie's laptop and typed a message: "Hello Julius—or is it Thomas Mann? My name is David Ferguson. I am the man you approached at the bar near gate N9 at SeaTac airport, just before noon on Friday, April 22nd. People are pursuing me for the Schulmann file. Two men have been killed and a young woman has been kidnapped. You have the information they want. Please help to save her life."

David looked back at James who was standing behind him reading. James nodded. David hit "Send."

They went back to their research into the world of Forex brokers, knowing that they were racing against the odds, but hoping that some breakthrough would come. The activity at least kept them busy rather than simply anxious.

Monday, 4/25/2022, 4:27 p.m. PDT

Fai Hsu was pondering chessboards, trying to figure out the ending of the Fischer-Spassky game number six from 1972 on the real one in front of him, as well as the high-stakes imaginary chessboard being played with Julius and David Ferguson. Additional interrogation of Sappin yielded that she had a connection to the SZRU. Unfortunately, the SZRU was not a high-priority organization, so there was no way to quickly verify this through Beijing. Her meeting with Ferguson now appeared to be not entirely unplanned. And assuming that the latest information from Ferguson checked out, he was not an innocent bystander. Fai's initial analysis appeared to be correct: the Julius–Ferguson meeting in Seattle airport was not accidental, and Sappin was a low-level associate.

Why did Ferguson go to the police? Did he want to maintain his cover as a law-abiding US citizen? This carried the danger of police discovering who he really was. One possibility was that Ferguson did not have enough associates in LA and wanted to use local police to eliminate Hsu's team in order to revenge their attacks and to convince people in Beijing that they had to meet his demands. Hsu thought to himself that he was getting too focused on being an attacker and should not forget about playing defense.

He read Ferguson's latest e-mail carefully and then forwarded it to Beijing. Only they could verify whether the data was “real” or something that anyone with Internet access could figure out in a few hours. That would ultimately unlock the mystery of Mr. Ferguson.

He thought about the wounded agent. They were not equipped to deal with stomach wounds. The man was dying a painful death, but they couldn't take him to a hospital and jeopardize the whole operation. The colonel decided that there was no point in further torturing someone he couldn't save. It was time to give the man a lethal injection and call the idiots from Compton to get rid of the

body. It was sad, but the agent's family would be well taken care of back in China. He'd be a hero.

Monday, 4/25/2022, 5:42 p.m. PDT

James motioned to David. “Let me show you my little hobby.” They walked past the study. James opened a door on the right and turned on the lights. Shelves along the wall held dozens of chess sets. James proudly pointed: “This is Alexander the Great vs. Darius, here’s George Washington vs. the British, Napoleon vs. Kutuzov, Rommel vs. Montgomery, Frodo and his Lord of the Rings fellows vs. Saron and the orcs ...”

“Do you make them all by hand?”

“I started that way, but then some smart people invented 3D printing.” James pointed to a machine in the corner. “I get to do the creative part and leave the hard work to the machine.”

David gently picked up a figure of an Elvish archer from the Lord of the Rings set.

“Are you a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien stories?”

James nodded. “It’s funny to admit this at my age, but yes, I am. Remember, I grew up close to where he was raised. I feel like we are on a quest of our own now.”

“James, you asked me earlier, now let me ask you—why are you doing this? I mean, helping me. And please, don’t tell me you are sixty-eight and have nothing to lose. It doesn’t explain anything.”

James laughed. “You are right, being old is not a reason to do or not to do something. Of course, this is partly about Maggie; I do have a soft spot for her. But mostly I am doing this for myself. I sense that there is something ugly behind this. I want to know the truth, I want to know what happened, I want to see justice done. I was born in 1953, close enough to the most horrible war the world has ever seen. And this horror was brought about because people in Germany voluntarily ridded themselves of individual responsibility, knowledge, and judgment in favor of a strong state, mistakenly thinking they would gain security. I am not drawing parallels; I am saying that we don’t

know exactly what happened in 2019, what took place below the surface. And I think we, the people, deserve to know. We are all worse off if we don't."

"And what do you think people would do with it?"

"Hard to tell. The choices are similar to what we discussed this morning: abandon a moral choice and conform to Caesar like Pontius Pilate did, give up like the Master, or speak the truth like Yeshua. I honestly don't know what we as a society will do if the truth is ugly. We had a greed-fueled financial crisis in 2008. It caused tremendous suffering, but nobody went to jail, and we took it in stride. Perhaps by now we are too complacent, too dependent on the government, to do anything. Perhaps we reached the point where expediency replaced long-held principles. I can only control what I do, and I don't want to be silent in the face of wrong."

The phone rang. It was Megrano. He had news: they started trailing the members of the Compton gang that Oleg and Alejandro helped to identify and hit a possible jackpot. The two men that fit the description drove to a Malibu house on PCH, between Topanga and Malibu Canyon's, parked in the garage, stayed there for a short time, and drove off. The house was rented to a Chinese national who was supposedly out of the country. The original tail went with the Compton car, but a new car was on the way to watch the Malibu house.

Next, Frank called again. Upon hearing the news, he said he'd come over.

David checked his e-mail. There were two messages. One was from "acegik," asking again for a meeting. The other said: "What was I drinking at the airport, what color was my tie, and which college team was I rooting for?"

Wound up in anticipation, David typed back: "Heineken, blue with yellow stripes, Notre Dame."

Monday, 4/25/2022, 6:58 p.m. PDT

He drove past the house, going north on PCH, turned around and drove by again. It seemed like an awkward place for a “safe house,” but Megrano came to appreciate the logic of it: there was no convenient observation point. No houses across the road, obviously no houses on the ocean side, no view into the house from the top of the cliff on the east side of PCH. He risked having a car with two detectives parked across the street, telling them to stay down as much as possible. The two members of the Compton gang were taken an hour ago with a dead body in the trunk. They admitted to picking it up from “a group of Chinese in Malibu.” They had not confessed to killing Jim Plasche yet.

The captain did not want them to approach the house at this time, especially since it was outside of Santa Monica. Megrano contacted LAPD for assistance. Unfortunately, all SWAT teams were busy dealing with situations in other parts of the sprawling city and could not get here until after dark. They didn’t want to risk a night operation, so it was decided to wait until the morning.

Megrano did not agree, but had no choice in the matter.

Monday, 4/25/2022, 7:07 p.m. PDT

Response came from the Beijing office. Ferguson's e-mail had been analyzed and found "sixty percent credible." This must have meant that some of the information was not publicly available. Fai actually liked this percentage assigning; it fit into the world of nothing being black and white, only shades of gray. It was difficult for a total stranger with no inside knowledge to get to sixty percent within three days. Fai had at least a reasonable probability proof that Ferguson was involved and that the agents pursuing him from Seattle were on the right trail.

But there was another piece of news from Beijing that added a new dimension to the game. Julius had contacted the MSS. He was not happy about Seattle's attack but still wanted to do business, albeit at double the price. Beijing was concerned that even paying out one man still left the second one to sell to someone else. *Human greed* thought Fai. Possibly Ferguson got hold of the file and now wanted all the money, not realizing that Julius was alive.

But Fai had to consider a more ominous possibility: that the Julius/Ferguson team continued working together, that they were planning to conduct their business directly with Beijing, and he—Fai—was a puppet to be eliminated as a lesson to the higher-ups. The colonel called in his team, went over the evacuation plan, and told everyone to keep an eye out for any suspicious activity in the area. After letting everyone go, he called Goa Chon back. Goa Chon was an explosives specialist and the colonel told him to wire the house.

After building up the defenses, Hsu went back to his computer. He responded to Ferguson requesting a meeting. Then he made a move in his replay of the Fischer-Spassky 1972 game. It seemed like Spassky had a better option in the thirty-fifth move that could have saved the game for him.

Monday, 4/25/2022, 7:12 p.m. PDT

“What is prudence in the conduct of every private family
can scarce be folly in that of a great kingdom.”

— Adam Smith, *The Wealth of the Nations*

Frank came in carrying a shoulder bag and wearing a big smile. “It seems you might be able to get your girl back tomorrow. Allow me to open a good bottle of wine in anticipation. I had my eye on this bottle of Stags Leap Cab ’14 for some time. I brought two just in case, plus a bit of food from a deli on the way.”

As they situated themselves in the living room with wine glasses and small plates, Frank looked at his glass against the light and commented, “A bit of snobbishness that I allow myself. I truly enjoy a nice glass of wine, not just because it became fashionable some time ago. Moving to California was helpful in that sense. I can drive up to Central Coast or take a short flight to Napa. Plus, the weather is great and I am much closer to my children. My ex-wife moved them to the West Coast when she remarried, and I didn’t get to see them nearly enough. The only problem with being retired is boredom. I started losing my *joie de vivre*. So I very much appreciate you involving me in your adventure. I know our luck will be turning soon. But enough about me.” Frank took a sip and asked James, “What were you talking about before I came? I don’t want to interrupt.”

James laughed. “Believe it or not, we were discussing whether the American people would care about the truth if it’s ugly.”

“And your conclusion?”

“We did not come to one.”

Frank nodded. “I was rereading Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. He understood how unique America was, because it built a society that did not evolve around the government. He warned that the

danger to such a society comes from within, from acquiescing to a soft tyranny of a benevolent government.”

“What tyranny?” David protested. “We are a democracy!”

Frank shrugged. “You can be a democracy without true liberty. The more people depend on the government, the more society is covered by a net of rules, the more wealth gets concentrated in a few hands, the less effective is the liberty. Yes, you have democracy in that you go and vote periodically, but the liberty is illusory because the bureaucratic state behaves the same regardless of who nominally is in power.”

“And one way to reduce liberty and allow a bureaucratic state to grow was in spending trillions that we don’t have,” James interjected.

“Spoken like a true old-school economist,” Frank said, and both he and James laughed.

David politely munched on one of the snacks that Frank brought and picked up the conversation. “But we had to spend the money in order to provide essential services.”

James shook his head. “My dear David, how is it fair for the government to spend year after year the money it does not have and has no chance of repaying? Who’s going to pay this debt but the younger generation? We as a country used to perform “fiscal gap accounting”, showing how much of a debt burden we were leaving to the next generation. We stopped because the numbers looked horrible, by 2013 the “fiscal gap” exceeded \$200 Trillion. An American child born in 2013 came into the world with hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. Yes, of course, there were people saying that deficits don’t matter. Someone can always find a scientific-looking argument for whatever point of view suits him or her. In the end, economics must be grounded in common sense. Otherwise, it’s just an exercise in perpetuating self-delusion. Throughout history, nations have committed financial folly thinking that they can have something for nothing. We were taking goods from the rest of the world, and we were paying for them with money being created out of thin air. At

some point there was a price to be paid, the only question was when and how.”

“But don’t we have to take care of others? Share the wealth? Isn’t this a good, humane thing to do?” David asked.

“I agree that as a society we should take care of those that can’t take care of themselves. But in order to share the wealth, we have to be able to continue creating it.”

“Many a revolution started with sharing wealth,” chimed in Frank.

“Yes, and once the looting was over, despots arose. If wealth could be created out of thin air by governments, all countries would be prosperous. Wealth is not there to be handed out in a ‘fair’ manner according to a code that some politician holds. It is created by individuals, not government bureaucrats.”

David shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I always believed that government should help people.”

James tilted his head to one side. “Your heart is in the right place, but it’s the wrong question to ask, at least of an economist. The real question is: how should the government help? When I was teaching, I tried to describe this in the way that young people could relate. Remember how in *The Lord of the Rings* Gandalf refused to take the Ring of Power because he believed he’d use it to do good but the power he would wield would lead to terrible results?”

“Yes,” David said, “I remember that part.” He figured by now that James had quotes for every occasion.

“Gandalf knew that he did not have the wisdom to wield such power. Nobody does. Most attempts to redesign economic systems started with a desire to do good, but the results were almost invariably bad. Ability to run the state is like having this ring of power. It’s a folly, a comforting but false philosophy, to assume that the business of running a modern economy and finance can be left to a small group. Just as Adam Smith recognized long time ago.”

“James, our young friend is talking about compassionate government. Are you saying there is no role for compassion in the

matters of the state?” Frank was enjoying the discussion. He opened a second bottle, his normally pale cheeks flushed with color.

James shook his head. “Compassion is a noble feeling, and it works just fine in simple situations. But in the complexity of economic life, the answers are not quite so obvious. The government is not capable of determining every single decision in a way so as to increase the overall welfare. How do we decide which compassion is wise and which is foolish, what produces the maximum well-being for everyone involved? It’s not possible for anyone to possess all the virtue and knowledge in order to do that.”

Frank smiled. “Yes, I know. But it sure has not stopped people from trying. I guess you’re saying that the power of unexamined virtue is a dangerous thing.”

James nodded. “It’s a paradox that we have to live with. Democracy is like a plant that can only flourish in the right conditions. If we don’t allow for inequality, democracy dies. But it will also die if the inequality becomes too extreme, as the rich elite grabs the political power. If we don’t let people fully exercise their material strivings, the society loses the vitality that only comes from self-interest. But if we lack the spiritual strivings, the material pursuit will destroy the society through greed. Human nature needs both. And when we try to transcend that nature, no matter the intent, we create nightmares.”

He smiled and finished his wine. “David, don’t pay too much attention to us. We are two tipsy and cranky old guys quoting a bunch of dead men. I think that crankiness and tendency to preach rise in proportion to the dimming of sexual desire, that’s why old people are this way. People have tried to master society for thousands of years, and will probably always continue.”

Frank stood up. “Let’s drink to that. And to those that seek the truth and refuse to conform. Thank you for the company. It’s getting late, and I suspect we’ll have a busy day tomorrow.”

Tuesday, 4/26/2022, 8:58 a.m. PDT

A car with only a driver left the house at about 8:20. One of the unmarked cars was following it now. The LAPD management was hesitating, but Megrano did not want to wait any longer. The two adjacent houses showed no sign of occupancy and most likely were empty. He and Chander and half a dozen SWAT officers entered them through the neighboring houses, while trying to keep the residents there quiet. Megrano tapped his bulletproof vest for good luck and gave a signal.

He, Chander, and the SWAT team climbed the walls on both sides and surrounded the house. Megrano knocked on the door. "Police! Open Up!" There was no answer. They broke down the door and rushed inside with the guns drawn.

Tuesday, 4/26/2022, 9:26 a.m. PDT

James and David were on pins and needles that morning, waiting for a call from Megrano. The night before, David tried to continue reading *The Master and Margarita* but found it impossible to focus.

He kept checking e-mail, but there was nothing from Thomas Mann *aka* Julius. They stayed around Bowen's house, absentmindedly trying to research Forex trading intricacies, but their minds were elsewhere. A TV was droning on in the background, tuned to Channel Five, a local station.

Rising excitement in an anchor's voice penetrated David's consciousness. "Special report!" breathlessly announced a blonde woman in her thirties, clearly not accustomed to big news happening during her shift. "Big explosion in Malibu!" Video from a hovering helicopter showed a row of houses on a narrow strip of land between PCH and the ocean. A big plume of smoke rose from one of the houses, surrounded by cars, fire engines, and ambulances. The anchor screeched, "PCH is closed in both directions, the number of casualties unknown!"

David felt like a bag of ice was poured over his body. "Megrano and Maggie," he murmured, stunned.

He and James watched the TV silently. The picture on the screen switched to a couple living a block away. Presumably this was as close as a reporter could get. The couple appeared to be in their fifties and looked happy to be on TV, but they obviously had no clue what was going on, and had nothing to say except, "There was a big explosion!" The reporter kept extending their fifteen minutes of fame by asking inane questions such as, "How big? How would you compare it to an aircraft flying over?"

Bowen could not take it anymore and stormed out of the living room.

They tried calling SMPD, asking for Megrano and Chander, to no avail. Unconfirmed reports started appearing on the Internet that it was a SWAT operation gone badly, with police suffering significant casualties. Frank called, and after him, Oleg.

Then a response came from Thomas Mann / Julius: "So, you survived so far. Who is the woman and why should I care?"

David was not in the mood: "She is just an innocent person who was caught in this. You have what they want. How much is human life worth?"

The man on the other end must have been at his computer because the answer came back quickly: "Is she your girlfriend?"

David: "No. Just a person who was trying to help me when I was running for my life."

A reply came: "I am sorry to hear that. But I am not sure what I can do to help." David: "You have the information they need. You can trade with them for her life."

After a few minutes: "Sorry, I can't do that."

David: "Why not?" He waited for the next reply, but the conversation was over.

Instead, an e-mail came from acegik: "Now that your attack has failed, I reiterate my suggestion to meet. If we don't hear from you, in twenty-four hours, we will kill your associate."

Tuesday, 4/26/2022, 11:08 a.m. PDT

“In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity.”

— Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*

Fai Hsu liked good execution, and he liked being able to outsmart his opponent. Looking at a TV screen in the Hidden Hills safe house, he was pleased with accomplishing both. Thanks to his anticipation of the opponent's move, they were able to detect surveillance of the Malibu house early in the morning. And thanks to their preparation the night before, they snuck out right under the noses of the attackers. It also helped that Beijing warned them that based on the intercepted computer traffic at LAPD there was an attack coming. By then Hsu's team was ready to go. They left in the SUV that appeared to have only one person, but five others, including Margarita Sappin, were hidden on the floor of the second and third rows. One person was on rotation of watching Ferguson's house, and two getaway cars were waiting in Topanga Mall's parking structure. These two people left the day before and stayed in Hidden Hills. One of the cars cut off the pursuers in the structure. By the time police found the SUV, it was parked and empty while the team was halfway to the other safe house. Fai knew he inflicted harm on Ferguson's team. His superiors in Beijing would know about this success and his star would rise. Perhaps he wouldn't have to go into the field anymore. “General Hsu” had a nice ring to it.

He'd considered getting rid of Sappin back in Malibu. There was additional risk in bringing her along, and he was not a man to take on unnecessary risks. But he knew she was of value to Ferguson and the game was not over yet. Now he was glad he'd kept her alive, he had an extra piece to play in the match. Hsu felt more comfortable than at any point since the start of this operation. He had the upper hand.

It was good to feel this way. Perhaps this operation would earn him the long-awaited promotion. He tried “General Hsu” on his

tongue. He was a winner. And so was his country. His parents never finished high school and toiled their lives in poverty. His grandparents lived and died in their villages; no schools for them at all. His great-grandmother lost her family in the Nanking Massacre in 1937. Foreigners had dominated his country for centuries. But now ... after the USA broke up, China would be unquestionably the strongest country in the world, with the largest economy and the most sought-after currency. And he would join the top echelon, the select few that would determine the world's affairs. "General Hsu," he tried again.

Tuesday, 4/26/2022, 11:47 a.m. PDT

David found James in the kitchen and told him about the messages. James nodded dejectedly. David sat at the table, took a few deep breaths, and reminded himself to focus. One step at a time. They needed more data to keep the game going, perhaps even to trade information for Maggie. Assuming she was still alive, thinking positive. They'd managed to convince the kidnappers earlier that they had something, but they wouldn't get much further by blindly searching the Internet, at least not in the time they had. They had to find some actual files of Schulmann's. David figured he probably hid his work somewhere safe but might have left some work-in-progress, downloads of his research at the SEC. Of course he'd been dead for almost two years. David thought, *I wonder what are the archive policies at the SEC?*

David asked James to get Frank on the phone. "Frank? David and James here. Did you know anyone who worked in IT at the SEC?"

After a brief pause, Frank said, "Yes, the SEC has a large Office of Information Technology that runs the whole EDGAR system, processing financial information from all listed US companies. I worked with them often and know a few people there. I was friendly with Fred Womack, their second-in-command. But he was only a few years younger than me. I don't know if he is still there. Why are you asking?"

"I want to see if there are any archives of Schulmann's work left."

"OK, that makes sense. Let me see if I can reach Fred. Why don't you and James come over here, and we'll have a little working session?"

David and James drove to Frank's place that was located at the end of a small street in a canyon dividing Santa Monica from Pacific Palisades. With PCH closed, traffic was a mess and the drive took them almost an hour. The house was perched on a cliff with a

panoramic view of the Pacific. Frank greeted them, saying, "We're in luck, Fred still works there and will call me soon."

David thought that "luck" was not the word he would use today.

When the phone rang, Frank went through usual "it's been a long time" pleasantries and then asked Fred if he would mind being on a speakerphone. Frank introduced James and David and gave Fred a brief synopsis of the situation.

Fred listened silently. Then he asked, "So what it boils down to is that you have to find some of the information that Schulmann uncovered in order to save that young woman's life?"

Frank said, "Yes, basically that's it."

"Do you think this information cost Schulmann his life?"

"It's possible, although Schulmann might have been a collateral damage in the Williams assassination. At least that's what the investigation concluded. Many people have been killed in LA and Seattle over the last few days, and it's likely that the killers are looking for Schulmann's information. Fred, I just want you to know what you might be getting into."

"What about you?"

"I knew Jonathan for many years, and I want to get the people that killed him."

Fred was silent for a minute. "OK. The way it works here is that people are supposed to back up their computers at least weekly. The backups are redundantly propagated to four servers in two physical locations where the data stays for three years, and every six months we sweep their backups onto tape-based offline storage. Since Schulmann was killed about two years ago, his data should still be on servers, but also on tape. Hold on, it will take me a minute to check the servers."

They heard a keyboard clicking then "Damn!" More clicking. "Damn!!!"

Fred came back on the phone. "There is nothing on the servers. All directories under Schulmann have been erased. I went into e-mail

archives and there are no e-mails originated by Schulmann or e-mails where he was the one of the recipients, going almost three years back.”

Frank asked, “What does it mean?”

“It means that someone broke into highly secure SEC computer systems and erased Jonathan Schulmann from existence. And somehow nobody noticed!”

“But didn’t someone investigate Schulmann’s death and wouldn’t they have made a separate copy?”

“Of course there was an investigation. We had FBI coming and asking questions, but everybody thought he was just a victim of the attack on Williams, and I don’t think anybody was looking too closely. Perhaps there was nothing that appeared suspicious, perhaps investigators did not bother checking since SEC’s is ostensibly one of the most secure systems in the world.” Fred’s voice was filled with angry irony.

“So is everything gone?” David asked. They didn’t have the time to investigate the investigators. He just needed the files.

“Not necessarily. There is still the offline storage. Let me call there and have them mount the appropriate tapes, and I’ll call you back.”

Frank turned on the TV. The local news was still all about the tragedy in Malibu. “Three police officers are dead,” a newscaster said, as the faces of Megrano and Chander flashed on the screen. Frank, James, and David watched in silence.

Fred called back. “The October 2020 backup tape is missing.” He was clearly upset. “His department’s servers were swept into offline backup at midnight on October 1, 2020. They are telling me they have tapes from April 1, 2020 and from April 1, 2021 – but not from October. So whoever erased Schulmann from the cloud servers has also taken the backup tape covering his last few months.”

David said, “That probably explains why the e-mails erasure was not noticed. Whoever did it waited a few weeks. People would notice if recent e-mails disappeared, but not when e-mails are old. What about the April 1 tape?”

Fred said, “They have it. I’ll tell them to go ahead and mount it and call you back.”

David turned to James, thinking out loud. “So whoever deleted Schulmann’s data must have it now. Do you think it was it Thomas Mann aka Julius?”

Before James could respond, Fred called again. “OK, the tape is mounted, I am looking at it and it seems that some of Schulmann’s information is there.”

Frank asked, “Can you send it to us?”

Fred hesitated. “Well, it won’t do you any good. It’s encrypted.”

Frank gently prodded him. “Fred, you know I wouldn’t ask you to do this if it was not literally a matter of life and death ...”

Fred sighed. “OK, I’ll decrypt and send it over. Give me an e-mail address. It’s about twenty gigabytes worth of data.”

David gave him his e-mail. “Fred, one more question. Has anyone at the SEC worked with Schulmann on his investigation of the 2019 crisis?”

“The FBI was asking about this, too. Normally, yes, it would have been an internal team. And that’s how it started, but by summer of 2020 Schulmann had everyone reassigned to other projects.”

“So Schulmann was working on it by himself?”

“Not necessarily. He had his investigative budget that he could spend on external consultants.”

“Is that what he did?”

“I don’t know. That’s not the kind of information that goes through me. Well, the files are on their way to you. I am afraid I must get going, I have a meeting at four.”

After hanging up with Fred, David logged into his e-mail using Maggie’s computer that he brought with him. As promised, there were twenty gigabytes of files and e-mails from Fred. There were two other computers in the house, an older iMac with an old-fashioned keyboard and a fairly new 3D Mac Book. They divided the work: Frank going through e-mails that Jonathan either sent or was one of the recipients

on, David trying to correlate the data with the names that came up in Mark Androssian's research, James looking through the documents trying to find anything that would catch his eye.

It appeared that most of the files were downloads of trading records in various formats. David ran queries on the most commonly occurring strings of alpha characters from Androssian's research. The first mention of Changzoo Tongren in Schulmann's files was in January of 2020. The Novaya Energya did not appear until March. Names of the executing brokers correlated with other clients: Xiang Auto Yan, Zhouhan Electronics, Russia Oil & Gas, Al Falhayat Group, Taracruz Companhia. There were also intelligence files on the companies, with documented ties to high-level government officials. Most of the data was toward the end of the archive. David thought that perhaps that was the time when Jonathan started asking questions that got him killed. But David could not easily analyze much of the information that Fred sent. The data had to be studied, understood, and evaluated by computer algorithms. That would take expertise and time. He had neither.

James and Frank walked in, excited, pointing to documents on the Mac Book. "Schulmann traced a 'loan' transfer of 750,000 ounces of gold through multiple intermediaries to the People's Bank of China!"

David shrugged. "And?"

"Look, there were two, four, six— no, seven. Seven intermediaries! This was intended to be a secret transaction, but Schulmann traced it!"

"This is somewhat circumstantial."

"More than that ... the timing, the amounts. Remember that China's gold reserves suddenly went from an official 2,000 tons to almost 10,000 tons."

"Unfortunately, I don't know how this helps us right now."

"Did you find anything?"

"Not really. We'll need a lot more time to analyze this. There is no smoking gun that we can use today."

James sat down, crestfallen. "What are we going to do?"

David said "I think we should choose some of the more promising data and e-mail it to Maggie's kidnappers to maintain the pretense that we have more. I'll request that they release her if they want to get more information."

Frank shook his head. "Don't. You should ask for money first and foremost. That's what they expect you to do. In their view you are selling the information. Asking for Maggie's release should be secondary."

They selected a few transaction chains for Changzoo Tongren, Zhouhan Electronics, and Russia Oil & Gas, a tracing of a gold transaction to the China reserve bank, and selections from companies' intelligence files. David crafted a response offering a sample of the available information and demanding \$1 million down payment and return of their associate Margarita Sappin unharmed, in exchange for more data.

Tuesday, 4/26/2022, 5:28 p.m. PDT

Fai Hsu stared at Ferguson's response. Troublesome. Names of companies, names of individuals. Could be dangerous to know the names. Both Changzoo Tongren and Zhouhan Electronics were known to be associated with the army. Yes, the army was supposed to have divested all of its commercial holdings. "Supposed to" was the operative word. People on the inside knew that the divestiture was a sham, like changing a store's shingle while keeping the same owners in the back.

His mood changed from imagining promotion to wondering if he'd become one of those people who knew more than they should for their level. Usually such people died in the service of their country. It was important to know, but not to let people think that you know too much. He marked Ferguson's message "urgent" and forwarded it to Beijing. The day was just starting there; it should give them enough time to respond.

In the meantime, he had to prepare to meet Ferguson whether the order to meet would come or not. They had a few places scouted for such occasions. Hsu decided on Balboa Lake Park, which should be fairly secluded during a workday. He was going to go with a team of four. It was time to stop watching Ferguson's house. After four days, the activity was fruitless and he needed people here. Just in case, he prepared a briefcase with the money, although he did not expect he'd have to bring it. Hsu called in his team for the first briefing. Then he replied to Ferguson, requesting a meeting at 10:00 a.m.

Tuesday, 4/26/2022, 6:52 p.m. PDT

David and James were still at Frank's house. Frank ordered delivery from a local restaurant, and they were noodling their food, nobody seeming to have much of an appetite. David kept checking e-mail. Finally a response came, arranging a meeting at 10:00 a.m. at Balboa Lake Park.

Frank reached for the phone:

"We should call the police."

"No," replied David.

"What do you mean? Now we know the time and the place, let police deal with them!"

"No," repeated David. "These people won't walk into a trap. When they see the police, they will stay away and kill Maggie. We've gone to the police once already, now more people are dead. How did they know that their safe house was found? It's possible someone tipped them off."

"But there is no other choice!" shouted James.

"Yes, there is. I will go there with a small drive and threaten them with releasing the information if Maggie and I are not back by 11:00 a.m."

"What information? Do you think they'll just take your word for it? You don't have anything of importance, you said so yourself?"

"Yes, but they don't know this. I will fill the drive was filled with all the data we got from Fred. If they want to look right there and then, they won't have the time to figure out what's important and what's not."

"David, this is way too dangerous!"

"I have just as good a chance of surviving the meeting with blackmail as I would in a shoot-out."

David did not tell them that his patience was exhausted by stress. He had no place to go and he couldn't face the guilt of another person

dying because of him. He had no good choices left. A fool or a coward? If he was going to be a fool, at least he'd be an honorable one. Not that anybody would care.

His disposable cell phone rang. It was Oleg. Upon hearing the plan, Oleg also tried to talk David against going to the meeting alone, but David was firm.

When they got back to Bowen's house, David said, "James, you go in. I'll drive home."

"No, you can't do that! They might be watching it."

"Why? I'm meeting 'them' tomorrow morning anyway."

"What about the police?"

"I doubt it. And weren't you trying to talk me into contacting police in any case? James, thank you so much for your hospitality. I don't know what will happen, but I want to spend this night in my place, look at some things."

James stared ahead silently, then sighed in acceptance. "Would you give me your home number? And don't forget your computer."

"Actually, it's Maggie's computer. I think I'll leave it here. But I want to take her glasses. Perhaps they will be my good luck charm."

James started opening the car's door, hesitated. "David ..."

"Yes?"

"They say that a man is never what he thinks he is. Some are more and some are less. Those that are less tell themselves 'What can one person do?' But you never know. Sometimes it takes one person to change everything. However things go tomorrow, it's been an honor to have met you."

David did not quite know what to say. He mumbled, "The honor's been mine." Then watched the old man slowly go into the house.

It was only a short drive to Culver City. Amazingly, he still had the house keys. He'd remembered to transfer them to each pair of new pants he wore over the past few days just in case. His small rented house, his home for almost two years, was not a "home" home but

more like a refuge where he would escape the noise of co-workers, salespeople, cars ... the racket of everyday life.

David passed by a lemon tree out front and stepped inside, greeted by stale air and a small pile of mail on the floor. Very few people used snail mail these days, but after a week, things accumulated. He followed the dark entrance hall into his living room with its large screen TV, audio system, and a low table where he often ate his dinners while watching a movie. Then he headed into the main bedroom with an unmade king-size bed—way too large for one person.

His heart skipped. The book he'd been reading was on the nightstand to the right of the bed. He always slept on the left side and he would always leave the book there. David turned on the overhead light and backed out of the room. The front door had been locked. He went into the kitchen. There were no signs of a break-in, but the backyard door had been left unlocked. *Somebody's been here.* David thought of getting into the Accord and leaving, then stopped. *Why? They came and left. Did they take anything? Does it matter?* He looked around. *Wish they'd washed the dishes.* He locked the door and cleaned up.

Back in the bedroom, David laid out his clothes for tomorrow, set the alarm clock, and changed into his own PJ's.

He went to the living room, turned on the audio system, set it to shuffle. After pouring himself a drink, he pulled out an old-fashioned photo album from his bookcase. Nobody used such albums anymore, and he had not touched his in years. Almost since his parents had brought it over as a gift for the wedding.

He opened to his family's picture: David, his brother Robert, Mom, and Dad. In that order. Robert had always been their favorite. He was eight years older, and by the time David had started crawling, Robert was already a straight-A student. David was different from his high-achieving brother. There'd been a diagnosis of a mild Asperger's that David had learned about later. His parents were conscientious, but it seemed they didn't quite know what to do about him. Which was

somewhat ironic, with them both being physicians. Perhaps David was too close for comfort, and they needed some dispassionate separation from their clients. But deep inside he thought they had probably been embarrassed by him.

It might have been better if they'd punished him once in a while because it would have at least shown some emotion. Instead, everything had been nice and proper, but cold. Even though David had never quite outgrown his social awkwardness, he did OK in school. But by then his brother was already in Harvard, so David continued to live in Robert's shadow.

When David was a junior in high school, he told his parents he wasn't interested in medicine and planned to pursue engineering instead. And then on top of it, he did not get into MIT and went west to Purdue. The gulf between David and his family opened deeper and wider.

He flipped through the pages of the album and found it. The picture of himself as a twelve-year-old—with Oscar. Being unsure how to relate to their younger son, his parents had engaged in various interventions. "Asperger" was a popular label among child psychologists of the early 1990s, and there was a small cottage industry in progressive Massachusetts specializing in diagnosis and treatment. Five days a week David would spend an hour or more in one of the offices, where yet another kind doctor would try to help him develop social skills and compassion.

Treatments came to an abrupt end in 1996, when David's parents took him to yet another rising star of child psychology. The star said that the Asperger label applied to David was "hogwash," that David was shy but that was just how some kids were wired, and that his parents should save their money and get David a dog instead. So in one fell swoop he was freed from the psychology routine and acquired a rescued dog, a friendly mutt by the name of Oscar.

During Oscar's first week in Ferguson's household, he tore a prized Persian carpet, stole and ate two T-bone steaks from the

kitchen, and iced it by jumping on the dining room table and breaking a crystal vase. David's mother had enough and got the leash ready to take Oscar back. Eight-year-old David grabbed Oscar and would not let the dog go. "No! They'll kill him!" Oscar, after spending the whole week being wild, must have sensed that his life was hanging in the balance. He sat still, let the boy hold him, and even licked David's face.

His mother threw the leash down and walked away. After that, Oscar adopted David. He slept in the boy's room, he followed David around the house. The last time David cried was in 2003, when they had to put Oscar to sleep. He'd wanted to get a dog ever since and name him Oscar, but circumstances had never been right. Besides, Judy did not like dogs.

Judy. David thumbed through the album to the picture of her in a wedding dress, looking like a princess. David next to her, not quite a frog, more a nondescript groom. Actually he'd gotten well into adulthood before he realized he was an OK-looking guy and that many girls would have gone out with him had he only tried. But he'd always been shy and was never that good at reading their signals. He'd had only a couple of girlfriends before Judy. She had picked him; she'd taken charge. He was flattered and kind of went along.

Later, David decided she'd just been following an imaginary map of what she thought her life should be like. Like a "Game of Life" board game he remembered from his childhood. He happened to be standing next to the spot on the board marked "Marriage." His family seemed to have been surprised that David snagged such a good-looking girl. They stayed friendly with his ex-wife, as if to show that they were fair and impartial. When David refused to have anything to do with Judy after the divorce, they thought him wild and uncivilized. They didn't understand that he was acting out of self-preservation. The sequence of the events that culminated in her leaving had shattered his self-confidence so badly the only way he could deal with it was by cutting off that part of his life completely. But he did try to get back

East to see his parents once a year for the holidays, although, he hadn't gone last year because of the cost.

David got out his old personal computer and typed up a short e-mail to his parents, saying everything was fine and he hoped to come visit them soon. It was three in the morning in Massachusetts. They'd see it tomorrow.

Wednesday, 4/27/2022, 4:53 p.m. CST, Beijing, China

General Tsao stood by the window looking at Zhongnanhai imperial garden. The week had not gone well. Changing the Seattle operation on short notice had ended in a disaster. Poor Lei Kao paid for it. It was not all his fault. Everything had been done in a rush, but someone had to pay.

Tsao turned back to the owner of the office sitting at the desk. “Unfortunately, we have two problems now. One, Julius is still out there and he is requesting more money—‘to pay for our bad behavior,’ as he put it. And he has a second associate in Los Angeles that is playing his own game as well, probably without Julius knowing.”

To Tsao’s surprise, the man at the desk said, “Don’t worry about Julius for now. He’s been taken care of.”

“How?”

“Allow me to keep my secrets. It’s not one hundred percent confirmed, but the information is reliable. Just focus on his associate. Does that person have the file?”

“We don’t know for sure. He knows something. He may have the file and is giving us a little bit at a time, or he may have just a small amount of information and is using it to extract some money from us and retrieve his girlfriend.”

“His girlfriend?”

“Hsu’s team captured a girl that was working with him. She is from Ukraine and claims that she works with the Ukrainian intelligence service.”

“No matter. We have to end this. You know what’s at stake for both of us. We can’t allow this information to become public. Do you trust Hsu?”

“He is a loyal man.”

“I am not asking about his loyalty. I am sure Kao was loyal, too. I am asking whether we can trust his judgment and whether he can get things done.”

“I think so. That’s why I sent him.”

“OK. I want to make sure that when this Julius’s associate is taken care of, there is nothing else that will come up. No other associates with the information. Nothing.”

Wednesday, 4/27/2022, 7:08 a.m. PDT

Hsu's emergency phone rang and he tensed, only a few people in Beijing knew this number. It was his boss, General Tsao. The general asked his opinion of Ferguson. Hsu weighed each word carefully.

"General, I think it's likely that Ferguson is a junior associate of Julius. I think he has some of the information that Julius does, but not all." Hsu paused respectfully, but General remained silent, so he continued. "Ferguson probably decided that he has enough to blackmail us and collect the money for himself. I think he is working either alone or with a small group."

"Is it possible that Ferguson is innocent? There seems to be nothing in his background that would suggest clandestine operations experience."

"General, it is possible, but in my humble opinion not likely. It is true that his background is very ordinary, but that could be an indication of a good cover. If I may point out, many of our agents maintain very ordinary appearance until pressed into service. Ferguson did provide the kind of information—and General, I am not the one to properly judge—that does seem to indicate certain connections. It's difficult to imagine someone who is completely unprepared to gain access to such information in a matter of few days. Additionally, he twice evaded trained agents. Once can be luck; twice is unlikely."

"Is it possible that Ferguson works for a foreign intelligence service?"

"General, that's a possibility as well. One argument in favor of this is that his associate Margarita Sappin may have been recruited by the SZRU. But I doubt that an agent of a foreign intelligence service would go to local police. And Julius was likely not affiliated with a service. I am afraid that it is difficult at this point to be one hundred percent sure about Mr. Ferguson."

"What about his associate, that Sappin woman?"

“General, I doubt she knows much, if anything. They likely have known each other for a bit of time, and she is of some importance to him, but he cares about money more.”

“Thank you, Fai. We just received an unconfirmed report that Julius is dead. I also believe that your assessment is correct and that Ferguson does not have a lot more information and is not affiliated with an intelligence service. But we have to be careful. We can’t afford another associate coming forward. Put him at ease, bring him the money, bring him the woman. Find out as much as you can. After that, eliminate them both. Unless you hear something that shows he has a lot more information that will be released.”

“Yes, General.”

Hsu’s palms were sweaty when he hung up. The information was dangerous indeed. But he seemed to have given the right answers. He suddenly could not wait to finish the mission and go back home to his family, promotion or not.

Wednesday, 4/27/2022, 8:49 a.m. PDT

“Cowardice is the most terrible of vices.”
— Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*

David looked back at the house as he was getting into the Accord. He was surprisingly calm, perhaps because he at least had some control over the situation. And he was able to do a short meditation in the morning.

James and Frank made him practice his story the night before, throwing question after question at him. He smiled. He knew the story wouldn't hold up to any prolonged scrutiny, but then he was not going to give them much time. Early in the morning his phone rang, James making another futile attempt to get David to call the police. They agreed that David would come back to Frank's house and James would join them there.

Before leaving, David cleaned up and watered the plants. He had almost forgotten Maggie's green cat-eye glasses and went back into the house to get them. He wondered if she was still alive or if they were just pretending that she was in order to lure him into a trap.

He took San Diego Freeway north, exited on Victory Boulevard, and turned west. He was running a bit early, so he stopped at Starbucks and got himself a cup of coffee. Having a cup in hand and being able to take a sip always reduced his anxiety in stressful situations. David fingered the little flash drive in his pocket. *Flash drive and a cup of coffee*, he thought. *That's like walking into a lion's cage with just your bare hands.*

He turned left on Balboa, then left into the park, and drove around the lake to a distant parking lot as instructed. There were only two other cars parked there and no people that he could see. David stayed in the car for a minute, paralyzed. The engine was still idling. His eyes fixed on the transmission knob. *This is crazy! Should I reverse and leave?*

David exhaled, took a few deep breaths, said out loud “It’s now or never”, turned off the engine. He realized with a bit of surprise that he had not been pulling on his right ear lately. David grabbed his coffee, left the keys in the ignition—one of those little details he’d thought about during the sleepless morning hours—slowly walked over to a bench under a large tree, sat down and gazed at the lake glistening in the morning sun.

There were a couple of boats on the lake, and he could see people on the other side, but nobody in the immediate vicinity. It was quiet except for a bird chirping nearby and trees gently rustling in the wind. Another sound intruded—a car pulled into the parking lot.

David turned. Because of the sun, he could not quite see into the car, but two people came out and headed toward him. At the same time, two more people emerged from the park, and David found himself surrounded. One man sat across from him, three others remained standing. David recognized one of them as the driver from the Navigator. That day seemed so long ago.

“Mr. Ferguson?” asked the man sitting across from him. The man looked to be around fifty, dressed in a dark blue suit, white shirt, power red tie, wide-framed glasses. David replied, “Yes. Who am I speaking with?”

The man offered only, “You can call me Mr. Chao.”

As he’d practiced the night before, David reached into his pocket—he saw the men tense up—pulled out the flash drive, put it on the table and asked, “Mr. Chao, where is the money?”

The man smiled and said, “Mr. Ferguson, you have not shown me anything that would warrant paying you any money.”

David sipped his coffee and followed the script he’d practiced. “I have sent you a sample of my information; if it was worthless you would not be here. There is more here.” He nodded at the flash drive lying on the rough wooden table between them. “And there is yet more that’s not here. I am completely unarmed. I came here by myself. But I want you to know that if Maggie Sappin and I are not in a certain

location in Brentwood by 11:00 a.m., one of the people working with me will send this information to all the major US news outlets. You don't have much time. Even with light traffic, it's at least thirty minutes from here to Brentwood."

David put down the Starbucks coffee cup while trying to keep his hands from shaking. This was it, this was his grand plan. Mr. Chao steepled his fingers and stared at David intently. Then he looked at the man to his right and nodded. The man went back to the car and returned with a briefcase and a laptop. Another man emerged from the same car, dragged out Maggie, and sat her down next to Mr. Chao.

The last time David saw her on Sunday, she was in an exercise outfit, healthy looking, sweaty, her hair in a ponytail. Now Maggie was wearing jeans and a wrinkled white shirt, her face pale and haggard, unwashed hair limp, eyes dull, unfocused. She looked at David and nodded, but did not say anything. David tried to give her an *everything will be all right* smile. The need to reassure her made him calmer. He had someone else to think about.

Mr. Chao opened the briefcase, turned it around and pushed it to David. "As you can see, the money is here." The briefcase was stacked with hundred dollar bills.

David nodded.

The man with the laptop plugged in the flash drive. Mr. Chao continued. "And now that you have what you asked for, I have some questions for you. When did you first meet Julius?"

"It was in January of last year. He approached me claiming I was recommended by one of my Purdue classmates. He said his name was Thomas Mann, and he needed some computer work done."

"What kind of work?"

"Helping him create secure cloud storage."

"Why? One can easily purchase secure cloud storage."

Mr. Chao was watching him carefully, probably for signs of lying or hesitation. David mentally thanked James and Frank for the last night's practice.

“He did not want to rely on commercial services. He wanted additional layers of security.”

“And you helped him with that?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why would he go to you?”

“Well, I am a computer engineer, and I do work with such things. As for why he approached me, I don’t know. He claimed I was recommended. As I already told you.”

“Did you check the recommendation?”

“No, I did not. He was paying well, and I was going through a divorce and needed the money.”

David maintained eye contact with Mr. Chao as he answered, but he also tried to steal a glance at Maggie. She was looking at him, listening, lips slightly parted.

“How did he communicate with you?”

“Mostly by e-mail, sometimes he would call.”

“Do you have a number to call him?”

“No, only an e-mail address.”

The man with a laptop said something in Chinese. Mr. Chao nodded and continued with David. “How do you know Margarita Sappin here?”

“Thomas ... er ... Julius told me if I needed help I could go to an East European restaurant one block off Main Street on the border of Venice and Santa Monica and look up a waitress called Maggie.”

“You have not met her before last Friday?”

“No, I have not.”

“How did you get the information you sent us?”

“Julius instructed me to be at the bar by gate N9 in SeaTac at 11:30 a.m. He gave me a folder with a magazine in it. There was a memory card taped inside the magazine.”

“You are lying. We have your bag from the flight, and there is no magazine or memory card in it.”

"I left the magazine on the plane. Why would I need it? The memory card was in my pocket, not in the bag. Your people never searched me."

Mr. Chao rolled his eyes in a *what a bunch of morons* grimace. Then he asked, "Why did he give you the card?"

"He said people were after him, and he needed to be able to threaten them that someone else would disclose the information."

"Did Julius tell you to contact us?"

"No."

"Then why did you?"

"He paid well, but when your people here tried to kill me, I figured it was getting too dangerous. I want to get enough money to disappear. I don't care about your dealings with him."

"Why did you go to the police?"

"You killed Jim Plasche, and I was the last person to talk to him on the phone. The police would have come after me anyway."

David looked at his watch. "Its 10:26. If we don't leave now, we won't make it to Brentwood by eleven, which means the information will be published. I don't think you want that. By the way, what's 'acegik'?"

Mr. Chao, startled by the question, replied, "Just the first six oddly-numbered letters of the English alphabet."

David stood up, nodded to Mr. Chao who looked surprised, took the briefcase, and told Maggie, "Let's go." He tried to exude confidence, took her hand and they started walking toward the Accord. David struggled to keep his legs from buckling. Maggie looked like she was sleepwalking.

"Mr. Ferguson!"

Both David and Maggie turned to see Mr. Chao staring at them, as if trying to decide. He nodded, and two of the people standing next to him pulled out their guns. Maggie inhaled sharply and her nails cut into David's hand.

There was a noise like tree branches breaking. One of the men clutched his chest and fell. The other had half of his face disappear. Mr. Chao and his two remaining agents turned to the sound of the shooting.

David pulled Maggie and ran to the car. In a panic, he thought: *Where are the keys?* Then he saw them in the ignition, started the car, and tore out of the parking lot.

Wednesday, 4/27/2022, 10:28 a.m. PDT

David was hyperventilating. He tried to control his breathing and slowed down the Accord. No need to be stopped for speeding. Who shot Chao's agents? He looked at Maggie. "How are you?"

She answered in a small voice, "I don't know. I can't believe I'm alive."

They turned right onto Victory Boulevard, heading toward the freeway. Maggie asked, "What did you give them?"

"We found some older Schulmann files. We've been trying to feed them some information to make them think we work with Julius."

"We?"

"James and Frank. Frank is a friend of James's who worked at SEC and knew Schulmann. We are going to his house now."

"What about Megrano?"

"Megrano and Chander are dead. They tried to storm the house in Malibu where they thought you were being held."

Maggie swallowed hard and said in a strained voice, "I was in Malibu for two nights. Yesterday morning they dragged me out of the room I was in, threw me on the floor of a car—one of the men was on top of me—and we drove away. Then they changed cars in a big parking structure and brought me to a different house. How did they die?"

"We don't know the details, but I think the house was booby-trapped, and they were killed in the explosion."

"What about Andrei?"

"I don't know. I haven't gone back. I've heard from Oleg a couple of times, but that's it."

"So who was shooting in the park?"

"I'm trying to figure it out myself."

"What?" Maggie's voice rose a couple of octaves. "You mean you went there alone?"

“Yes. I thought I could bluff them. Obviously, not too well.”

Maggie said, “You are crazy. Completely crazy. How could you go there by yourself?” She shook her head, then added, “Thank you. When they didn’t kill me on Sunday, I figured someone must be doing something to make them keep me alive. Turns out it was you. But to go like this against armed men, that is insane. Do you at least have a gun on you?”

David smiled. “No, I would probably just injure myself with a weapon.”

Maggie laughed and repeated, “You are crazy.” Then she started crying. David was uncomfortable around crying women, so he just looked ahead and focused on driving.

They got off 405 Freeway at Sunset and drove west to Brooktree Avenue. David turned left and made his way to Frank’s house.

Frank practically jumped for joy at seeing them. “Oh my God, you made it! You made it! And you must be Maggie. It’s so great to meet you! Please come in, come in.”

They went to the living room. David and Maggie sat down. Frank brought them some water and asked what happened. David started telling the story when there was a knock on the door.

Frank jumped up. “It must be James. He’ll be so happy to see you!”

He left the room to get the door. There was a muffled scream, noise of a falling body, and Petr walked into the room pointing a gun at David and Maggie.

Wednesday, 4/27/2022, 11:32 a.m. PDT

Petr smiled delightedly. "Well, it's been a while. How are you?" Getting no response, he made himself comfortable in the chair that Frank was sitting in just a few seconds before. A man with a shaved head walked into the room. Petr told him, "*Prover ves dom!*" The man turned around and left. Petr commented to David and Maggie, "I don't think there is anybody else in the house, but it doesn't hurt to check."

"Someone will come soon to get us, and they'll call the police." David tried to sound convincing.

Petr smiled again. "If you are counting on her friend James Bowen, I am afraid he suffered what will be classified as a heart attack."

Maggie screamed, "No!"

Petr continued. "And your detective friends are dead. So you are on your own." He shook his head. "You thought you were so clever, investigating, researching, plotting. Regular Double O Seven. Meanwhile, we've been watching your each and every move. But I do have one question: Who helped you at the lake? Tell me and I'll let the two of you go."

Maggie spat out, "Tell him nothing; he is going to kill us anyway!"

Petr raised an eyebrow. He had small eyes, something that David had not noticed earlier. "Smart girl, but only half right. Unfortunately, Mr. Ferguson here is out of luck. I do have to tie all the loose ends." He looked at David. "But if you tell us, I'll take Ms. Sappin back home, she'll be debriefed, and we may yet make a patriot out of her. Since you put so much effort into rescuing her from Hsu, you must have a soft spot for our little Maggie."

"Rescuing her from who?" asked David.

"Fai Hsu, colonel of the MSS," Petr answered. "What did he say his name was?"

"Mr. Chao."

“Mr. Chao?” Petr laughed. “That’s funny!” He was obviously having a good time.

David thought Petr sounded like a typical sociopath. He vaguely remembered from his freshman psychology class that sociopaths liked to boast about their achievements. “How did you know to be at Balboa Lake?”

“Buying time?” Petr smirked. “I would do the same if I were you. Well, you did us a huge favor, so I don’t mind giving you a few minutes. Then you tell me the name and we’ll move on.”

“I did you a favor?”

“And a big one at that. Unintentionally, of course. You see, we were after Julius for a long time. By the way, his real name was John Trimble.”

“Was?”

“Yes, *was*—thanks to you. John used to be a head of security detail for Mitchell Williams. Former Green Beret, Blackwater—a well-trained man. Everyone thought he died in the blast that killed Williams, although the body was never found. It must have taken him a bit of time to get ready, but a few months back he appeared, shopping the information that Schulmann gathered.”

“And you wanted it?”

“No, but we didn’t want others to get it. We tried to make contact, but he never trusted us. (*I wonder why*, David thought.) He was trying to sell the file to the MSS. To show that he had a sense of humor, he asked for \$79 million.”

“Why 79?” asked Maggie.

“It’s the periodic table number for gold. Trimble arranged a meeting in Seattle. We have a way of feeding information to the MSS, so we influenced them into trying to capture Trimble. But the MSS fumbled the ball, Trimble escaped, and that’s when you”—Petr pointed at David—“came into the picture.”

“Do you know why he chose me?” David asked. He did not really care about the answer, it was an easy question to ask while his mind

was feverishly grasping for options. *Petr's hand on the gun, the gun is resting in his lap, casually pointing at them. Nothing close enough to throw at Petr. Too far away to reach. Keep talking.*

"I guess you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had two MSS agents on his tail. He had to separate them, and he needed a healthy-looking male. Obviously the agents bit. One followed you to LA and tried to grab you. But once again they fumbled, and you got away. Now, by some totally blind luck for us, you had to come across our friend Maggie here." Petr grinned. "Otherwise, we would have had to look for you and who knows how that would have worked out. But Maggie delivered you on a plate. Of course, one has to be prepared when fortune smiles."

Maggie asked, "Was Andrei in on that?"

"No, Andrei was just a convenient cover for us. He thought he was a big cheese, when in reality we've been running his business for years. He was becoming a bit of a problem, hiding money, trying to do things on the side, planning to escape. So I'm afraid he, Tamara, and Oleg became just a few more loose ends to be tied earlier today. Andrei actually wanted to send you away, but I convinced him otherwise. We needed to feed the MSS information that would keep them trusting us. Giving them Mr. Ferguson here would have been a nice little bonus showing how much we knew. You"—he nodded to David—"were supposed to be there on Saturday. But you did not cooperate."

"Why didn't you call it off, then?" asked Maggie.

"It was not that simple. Things had been set into motion. It's not like I could just call Beijing out of the blue to cancel. They didn't know who was feeding them information. All they knew was they paid good money and were getting good intelligence. Besides, it was still possible that David here would come back in time. Now, Alex staying behind was unplanned. I think he just had a crush on you. In any case, it did not work out too badly for us. It was clear to the MSS that the intelligence was good and that the target was indeed staying there, just the timing was wrong. And we lucked out again, because David here

proved to be unexpectedly resourceful. We got particularly excited when he made contact with Trimble. By the way, how did you get his contact?"

"From the man who was wounded at Green Lake," David said. "But wait, how did you know I made contact with Julius ... I mean Trimble?"

"Ah, the man at the UW Hospital. He died from his wounds by the way. As to how we knew? You grabbed Maggie's computer before you left. On Saturday night the two of you were out, and I installed a program that copied all the computer communications to us. Just in case. As I said, one has to be prepared to take advantage of a lucky break. By the way," he told Maggie, "we took your computer from Bowen's house. No loose ends. You can have it back later."

"So how was it helpful to you?"

Petr must have been getting excited, because blotches of red appeared on his otherwise colorless face. "We needed to find Trimble. We had a dossier on him and knew which anonymizing application he was using with his e-mail. What he did not know was that our computer specialists—we have excellent programmers, by the way—partially broke the anonymizer and figured out that it was not entirely random. A flaw in the algorithm. It was kind of like location triangulation: one message did not do us any good, multiple messages spread over a period of time did not do us any good, but three to four messages close together allowed us to narrow IP addresses down to a metropolitan area. And we got lucky twice: first, Trimble responded to you, second, he was staying in Vail, Colorado. He must have flown from Seattle to Denver and then drove a couple of hours to Vail. If it were New York or Chicago, the area would have been too big. But Vail is a small place. By 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday we had a dozen agents there casing all the top restaurants. We knew Trimble's taste. At 7:30 he showed up at Le Tour with a young woman. They enjoyed a good dinner. The big news in Vail this morning is a double murder and

robbery at Ritz-Carlton Residences. We actually wish we could have taken him alive, but he grabbed his gun.”

“Who was the woman?” asked Maggie.

“Just some poor girl that agreed to go on a date with a wrong guy. And now to your original question—we obviously knew about your communication with Hsu since you were using Maggie’s computer. We fed the MSS information that Julius, aka Trimble, was dead. We went to Balboa Lake to make sure they took care of you, and then we were going to follow Hsu and his team and take care of them.”

“Why were you going to take care of Hsu?” questioned David. *I am going to jump him. Perhaps he’ll miss.*

“Because you were telling him things and he possibly knew more than he should have. In a sense, you killed him. But once again, you managed to get away and ruin a perfect plan. So now that you know the story, tell me...who else was at Balboa Lake? Because I still have to drive back to San Fernando Valley to deal with Hsu.”

David said, “I don’t know.”

It was Petr’s turn to be surprised. “You don’t know? You mean to tell me that someone protected you, killed people to help you escape, and you don’t know who it was?”

“That’s right,” David said. *Get ready.*

Petr looked from him to Maggie and back. “I don’t believe you. Under different circumstances, we would beat you until you piss blood and tell us everything we want to know, but we have no time for such luxury. So, I will count to three and then I will shoot Ms. Sappin here. One ...”

As the gun moved slightly in Maggie’s direction, David pressed on the balls of his feet, preparing to push himself off the couch. There was a noise outside the room. Without taking his eyes off David and Maggie, Petr called out, “Hey, what’s going on there?”

In rushed Oleg with a gun trained on Petr. “*Polozhi pistolet na pol!*”

David looked at Maggie, who helpfully translated: “Put the gun down on the floor.”

Petr hesitated, fingers tightening on his gun. Oleg switched to English. "I will shoot you like a dog if you don't put the gun down now!" Petr complied. Oleg barked out another command. "Push it toward me with your foot." Petr did as ordered.

A second man walked in the room saying, "There were only two of them besides Petr." He looked around the room. "I am Alejandro. You must be Maggie and David, right?"

They nodded. Alejandro smiled, his eyes lingering on Maggie.

Petr stammered out, "How ... how ..."

Oleg completed the sentence. "How come I am alive after you left one of your goons to take care of me back at the house, the way you took care of Andrei and Tamara?"

Petr swallowed hard instead of answering.

"When Alejandro and I got back from Balboa Lake, the Bentley was left in the driveway. Andrei would've never left his Bentley in the driveway. It was his baby. He always put it in the garage. So I knew to come in through the back door. I caught your henchman looking the wrong way."

David asked, "So it was you at the lake?"

Oleg nodded. "Yes, it was us. You told me last night you arranged to meet Maggie's kidnappers there. The traitor here"—he pointed at Petr—"did not realize or forgot that I gave you a disposable cell phone, so he didn't know we were talking. I left supposedly for breakfast that morning, but Alejandro and I got there pretty early with two sniper rifles, set up, and waited. Two of them showed up at about 9:30 to comb the immediate vicinity, but we were already there and hidden. They were the same people that killed Alex. We got three of them, the other two got away."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to do this?"

"You would not hear of it; you wanted to be a hero. Besides, it was much better this way. If you knew we were there, you would have looked around, given us away."

"But how did you know to come here?"

“Megrano gave me two GPS trackers that I attached to the Audi and to the Mercedes SUV. He also showed me how to track them. I didn’t know whether the traitor was him”—he pointed at Petr—“or Tamara. It became pretty clear this morning when I came back to the house. Then we followed the signal.”

Petr said, “Look, Oleg, we are on the same side. You are a patriot; you fought in Tajikistan. Come back to Russia with me. We will be heroes. You can contact GRU General Nemzhov. He will confirm how big this was.”

Oleg trained his gun on Petr forehead.

“Wait, wait!” Petr raised his hands pleading. “You don’t understand! General Nemzhov has been directing this operation for twenty years. This is important. He is important.”

“And what about Alex?”

“I am sorry about Alex, but this was a big operation,” a trace of hope on Petr’s face. “Unfortunately, sometimes we have to sacrifice lives for a greater good. Get General Nemzhov what he needs and you’ll be set for life!”

“Set for life, eh?” Oleg’s face distorted. He shot Petr twice, “For Alex. The way you set him.”

“Damn it, Oleg!” moaned Alejandro. “We should have found out more.”

“Sorry,” Oleg inhaled deeply. “I lost it.” He looked at David and Maggie. “We have to go.” David stepped around Petr. Maggie hesitated for a moment, kicked the body, and walked out of the room.

There were two other bodies in the entrance. David kneeled in front of Frank’s and touched his neck for a pulse. There was none. David said, “Good-bye, friend.” His voice choked.

Oleg tugged him. “Please, we do have to get out of here.” There was another body on the side of the gate. Oleg did not want David to drive, so he got into the Accord’s driver seat and Alejandro took the black BMW SUV. David saw the A11 parked at the gate.

Maggie asked if they could drive by Bowen's house. Oleg did not seem happy about it, but complied. There was an ambulance in front of the house. A body covered by a sheet was being rolled out, with the neighboring onlookers sadly shaking their heads. Maggie again broke down crying. "James, James, I am so sorry I brought you into this."

In silence, Oleg drove down the 405 Freeway, switched to 110 south, exited and drove up the winding roads. David saw a "Welcome to Rancho Palos Verdes" sign. They pulled into a circular driveway in front of a large ranch-style house. The black BMW SUV was there already. There were other people in the house, but Alejandro blocked them off, showed David and Maggie to their rooms, and told them to take an hour to relax, take a shower, whatever. Maggie walked gingerly, almost hesitantly, as if unsure she was on solid ground. Overcome with a need to shield her from further harm, David offered his hand for support, and she took it, leaning on him.

PART 3: NEW LIFE

“Hell isn't merely paved with good intentions;
it's walled and roofed with them. Yes, and furnished too.”

— Aldous Huxley

Wednesday, 4/27/2022, 3:51 p.m. PDT

David was lying on the bed with his eyes closed. What happened today did not lend itself to his usual ways of coping. It was something of entirely different order. Out of habit, he took a shower in order to clear his head, to no avail. Someone thoughtfully left a change of clothes for him, but David kept his own.

A scene from his childhood came to him. He was seven and a kind female therapist was asking, “Can you describe for me the emotion you are feeling now?” What was he feeling? Grief, guilt, gratitude ... why did all these different emotions start with the same letter? It was gratitude most of all. Rightfully, he should have died twice today, but at no point did he feel he was going to. He thought he was invincible. Only now the full measure of his luck hit him. *Perhaps I’m being spared for some purpose.* David opened his eyes, brought his hands to his face. He was indeed alive.

He thought of Megrano, and James, and Frank. Just a couple of days ago he was in the same room with them making plans, and now all of them were gone. David’s life had been mostly peaceful. Except for his dog Oscar, he’d never had to deal with death. David clenched his fists until it hurt. Somehow he had to make it up to his fallen friends. But how?

David lay there wondering about Teddy, whether the vicious little dog had survived this day. He heard a knock and got up to open the door. It was Alejandro, who asked David to come to a study with him.

The study was a large room with a dark wood floor partially covered by a thick Persian rug. Dark paneled walls, two large bookcases, a computer desk, and a few comfortable chairs. Four large portraits hung on the walls, three of stern looking men in suits and ties, one of a smiling woman in an early twentieth century dress. There was a faint smell of cigar smoke. *Just like in movies,* David thought. Despite

the dark interior, the room was full of light from a large French window overlooking a terrace and the Pacific Ocean in the distance.

An older man was there already, whom Alejandro introduced as his uncle Miguel, their host. Maggie and Oleg came in. Maggie wore a patterned blouse and a long green skirt, probably given to her by one of the women in the house. Miguel apologized for getting so quickly to business, but he understood that David and Maggie were in a somewhat dangerous situation, and he wanted to start putting together necessary precautions.

Maggie said, "We're still in danger?"

Oleg took his turn. "You stumbled on something big and dangerous. Both the MSS and the GRU now think that you know more than you should. You can't go back to your old lives."

David asked, "What do you mean? What other lives can we go back to?"

"You can change your identity, you can move to another country, you can try to get to the bottom of this if you dare ... but you can't go back. It's not only you two who are in danger, it's anyone associated with you."

"But what about you, Oleg? Aren't you in danger, too?"

Alejandro said, "Oleg will go to Mexico. We have a big family with large holdings. We can use Oleg's skills and loyalty. He will change his identity, of course. And if you want to move to Mexico, we'll be able to protect you better there as well. But the decision is yours. Regardless of what you choose to do, we should start working on creating new identities for you: passports, driver's licenses, bank accounts. Please think about it."

"Why can't we go to the FBI?" asked David.

"You can, but with what? I'm sorry, but neither Oleg nor I are in a position to confirm your story. At worst, you'll become suspects. At best, they'll believe you. But you still won't be able to go back to your lives. They can't protect you if you do."

Miguel got up. "We'll give you some time to think about it." Taking his lead, Alejandro and Oleg filed out of the room, leaving David and Maggie to themselves.

David pulled the green cat-eye glasses from his shirt pocket. "I grabbed them when I left Andrei's house. Forgot to give them to you earlier."

Maggie sadly twirled the glasses in her hand. "If Oleg is right, this might be all I have left from my life."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. Everything is happening too quickly. I don't know what to do. What about you? Do you know?"

David thought for a minute. "Yes, I think I do. I spent the last five days searching for information, and they are right: it's dangerous to know. But it's even more dangerous not to know."

"What do you mean?"

"The times I hated most during these days were when I did not know why things were happening. Like why these people were after me. When I knew, I could deal with it, I could strategize. If I go out there and hide, I think one day they will find me. But if I get the information, I will be in control because I can decide when to release it and how."

"Well, it didn't help Trimble ..."

"True, but Trimble made himself vulnerable because he was focused on using information for financial gain, not to protect himself. Did you notice that Petr was concerned about Trimble selling the information to others, not about releasing it? They knew him and they knew he was in it for the money."

Maggie crossed her arms on her chest, as if she was cold. "I understand. But it's dangerous to look. It's not like you can walk into a library and ask for Schulmann's research."

David said quietly, "Yes. But I have another reason. I want to know. I can't get Megrano and James and Frank out of my head. I had no choice; Trimble threw me into this without asking me. They chose

to get involved despite the danger. I am alive today only because they risked their lives in order to get to the truth. I asked James why he was doing this, he gave two reasons: saving you and desire to find the truth. And I am sure Schulmann knew that his research was dangerous, but he did not stop. I feel I owe it to them to find out.”

“And what will you do when you find it?”

“I don’t know yet. I have to see what’s in there.”

Maggie took a step forward, took David’s hands. “Why did you come to the lake today?”

“What do you mean?”

“You could have disappeared. You could have just walked away.”

“You know, James asked me the same question: why won’t you walk away? And I told him that I can’t. I would have felt like the worst lowlife if I did. I thought they were going to kill you unless we tried to do something. I don’t want to go through life feeling like a coward.”

Maggie continued looking at him intently. “Thank you. But where would you start searching?”

“Frank told us that Schulmann had a sister and a niece. The sister lives in Phoenix. I think that’s the place to start.”

She let go of his hands, picked up and twirled her funny glasses again. “Do you really think we’ll find the file?”

David shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t have many leads, so we may hit the wall quickly.”

Maggie walked to the window and stood there looking out at the ocean. Thinking out loud, she said, “Those two nights in Malibu, I could hear the ocean. The window shutters were closed. I don’t know why, but not being able to see the ocean was difficult. I am sorry. I really, really don’t know what to do. I wish I could just wake up from this nightmare. I don’t know how. I agree, learning more will put us in control. We can try looking for Schulmann’s file, see what happens. Do you mind if we do it together?”

David inhaled involuntarily, his brain seized by momentary panic. He hadn’t thought this through. What would it mean to “do it

together”? He’d have to continue to be responsible for her? But how could he say no? It was simply not possible. David squeezed out, “Yes, sure.”

Once he said it, it actually felt good. It was the right thing to do. Plus, he needed company. For all his newfound bravado, he would have felt lost on his own.

Wednesday, 4/27/2022, 6:42 p.m. PDT

David and Maggie had dinner with Miguel's large family. In addition to Miguel, Alejandro, and Oleg, there were at least a dozen people from three generations. David clearly had the reputation of a fearless hero. Kids were looking at him in awe, and one of the unattached younger women kept trying to get closer to David by serving him an extra portion or pouring a glass of wine. Maggie, who was sitting next to him, was getting visibly irritated, and at one point snarled at the girl.

After dinner, Miguel, Alejandro, Oleg, Maggie, and David retreated to an already familiar study and shut the door. "So, have you decided on anything?" asked Miguel. David and Maggie said they were going to pursue Schulmann's investigation and would start in Phoenix, where his relatives may live.

Miguel shook his head. "This is too dangerous. Don't get these romantic notions. Go to Mexico or Brazil; live your life." Oleg said he understood; they wanted to avenge their friends the way he had Alex. David thought it was not only about revenge, but he left it at that.

Figuring he wouldn't change their minds, Miguel told Alejandro to take them to Javier the next morning, and bid them goodnight.

"Who is Javier?" Maggie asked.

Alejandro explained. "Javier is an expert in creating new identities for people on the run. He works with our family often; he is good. You need a quality setup, not a cheap back alley driver's license."

They went to sit by the outside fireplace in the yard, drinking from a bottle of one hundred percent agave tequila that Alejandro brought. All raised toast to Alex.

Maggie felt Alejandro's hand carefully touching her knee. "How are you? Must have been a horrible experience."

"I am very grateful to you and Oleg and David for rescuing me," she gently removed his hand.

Alejandro smiled. “A beautiful woman like yourself will need protection from the mad dogs that are chasing you.”

Later, back in his room, David again went through the events of the day: being almost killed twice but saved both times by Oleg, and now staying in the house of a man he’d never met before and planning to change his identity. He felt like he was living in a movie, because that was where things like that happened, not in real life. Exhausted, he climbed into bed, but the thoughts racing through his mind wouldn’t let him sleep.

Wednesday, 4/27/2022, 10:27 p.m. PDT

When the house became quiet, the door opened carefully and Maggie sneaked into his room. Wearing flower-patterned PJ's, she sat at the edge of the bed and whispered, "I can't sleep. I'm a ball of nerves. I have to pinch myself to confirm that I'm alive."

"I know. Me, too."

"I am sorry I led you straight to Petr. I had no idea."

"They would have found us anyway. Petr knew everything that the MSS knew. I still don't quite understand how or why."

Maggie got up to go, hesitated. "Last Saturday night I left promising to tell you more about myself. We never had a chance after that. Do you still want to hear it?"

A simple but scary question. Like on a game show: *Do you choose the door number one? Or the door number two? Should he admit to being tired in a "no stories tonight" way? What's behind the other door, where would it lead? Once he starts finding these more intimate details, they may create a bind that will tie them.*

"Yes."

She sat back. "Go ahead then, ask."

Something safe. "Tell me about your family, your childhood."

"OK. I was born in December of 1989 in Kiev. My parents had given up on ever having kids, so my coming along was a bit of a surprise. My father, Eugene, has a PhD in aerospace engineering. He now runs an airplane manufacturing plant. My mother, Maria, taught Russian and Ukrainian literature in Kiev University. She is a great-niece of writer Mikhail Bulgakov. She convinced my dad to name me Margarita, after the heroine of his most famous work. Am I boring you silly?"

Boring is good. "So are you Ukrainian or Russian?"

Maggie shrugged. "I am a mutt. My mother was half-Ukrainian on her father's side, and half-Russian on her mother's side. A number of

the relatives on Grandma's side perished in Stalin's purges of the 1930's. Her father had his own scores to settle with the Party, with his parents dying in the man-made Ukrainian famine of 1932. He survived only because city relatives took him in. My dad is half-Russian and half-Jewish. His mother, Nellya, escaped Kiev in 1941 at the age of sixteen and spent the war in Siberia. When she came back, she found out that her family, the ones that stayed in Kiev, were killed by the Nazis in the Babi Yar ravine on the outskirts of the city."

David gasped. "Oh my God. My family would complain about things like vacations ruined by lost luggage, not being starved or massacred."

It was Maggie's turn to be surprised. "You didn't lose anyone in the war?"

"One of my grandfathers served in the Pacific during the war, but he came back unscathed and the family did not talk about it much. Looks like your family had a hard life there."

Maggie gave a slight bitter laugh. "It was fairly normal by our standards. I think Americans do not realize or appreciate how good you've had it all these years. You don't know the real meaning of fear. When you are scared to say anything, when you avert your eyes at something wrong being done because you are afraid for what will happen to your family. And then you feel so ashamed inside that you avoid looking at people ... that kind of fear."

David wanted to know more. *You are on the other side of the door, might as well keep going.* "What was your childhood like?"

Maggie pushed him to move over and stretched out on the bed next to him. David felt a mixture of excitement and panic.

She continued. "My parents were both working, and I was raised primarily by my grandmothers. They despised all kinds of collectivist politics. Grandma Nellya used to tell me, 'Scoundrels always hide behind big words about common good and send others to work or fight, but they themselves live by different rules. They talk about common sacrifice and how lucky you are to have a small apartment,

while they enjoy their spacious homes and expensive vacations.’ And then Grandma Katya would add, ‘And they’ll call on you to march for this cause or that cause, and they’ll tell you how you are less important than some collective need ... spit on them and walk away! They don’t own you and you are important because you are you, not because you are a cog in some wheel.’ ”

“They sound like fans of Ayn Rand.”

“Kind of. I must admit that such attitudes did not make me particularly popular at school. I was a good student, but I was often alone. The director of the school felt that I was not treating my ‘social responsibilities’ seriously and tried to complain about my ‘anti-social tendencies’ to my parents. My dad by then was a known industrial manager not to be pushed around, and the teachers eventually left me alone.”

David tried to keep his focus on Maggie’s story while acutely feeling the warmth of her body next to his. “Must be hard to be a kid without many friends.”

“I read a lot. With my mom being a professor of literature, the house was filled with books. And of course a special place belonged to Mikhail Bulgakov. My mom unashamedly admitted that being a relative, albeit a distant one, had a lot to do with it. But aside from that, *The Master and Margarita* resonated with her heart, especially the heroine.”

Maggie fell silent, apparently reminiscing, before she continued. “When I was growing up, things were changing in the city, not necessarily for the better. There was this excitement of throwing off the communist regime, but then it gave way under mismanaged economic reforms. Up to the north *siloviki*, the “power guys” of the former KGB, had taken over, installed a president from their ranks. It was like we were being subverted by law and order authoritarians. Things came to a head in 2004 when pro-democracy candidate Yushchenko ran against establishment-and Russia-backed Yanukovich. As allegations of pro-Yanukovich electoral fraud spread, people took

to the streets. I was fifteen and I felt that at last I had a cause I could believe in. I just threw myself into demonstrations and protests. I camped out for days on Maidan Square. New elections had been called, and Yushchenko won easily. I really think that was the happiest time of my life.”

“What happened then?”

”I finished school and tried to follow my father’s science path in college. My heart wasn’t in it. I dropped out after a year and went to work in a bookstore while trying to find what I wanted to do.”

“What about politics? That seemed to excite you.”

“Yes, but it was the excitement of having a common cause. The movement dissolved into political bickering and backstabbing. I remember feeling so numb and disappointed. I had faith in something back in 2004, and then it just turned into an empty spot. I tried my hand at college again, this time in literature. And then I fell in love for the first time.”

“Who was he?”

“An older man, a writer.”

“What happened?”

“I was just one of his affairs, nothing more. It ended. So did my second college attempt. Then my parents sat me down for a talk. Dad said: ‘You are twenty-two. You don’t know what to do with your life. Make a change, go do something. We have a bit of money put aside for you. Go to Europe, go to America, discover your passion. Don’t just sit here and mope. Find what you want to do and where you want to live, and we’ll help you.’ ”

David was lying still, afraid that any motion, any contact with her would provoke his body to react, embarrassing him. “And you did?”

“Yes, I headed to America. I visited New York but didn’t see it as a place for me, so I continued to California. Subleased a place in Westwood and took a summer course in historical economics at UCLA. When I returned to Kiev in the fall of 2012, I told my parents that I knew what I wanted to do and where I wanted to be. Mom cried.

I moved to Los Angeles in 2013 and enrolled in UCLA to study economics. Got my degree in 2017 and stayed on in graduate school.”

“Have you been back to Kiev?”

“Yes, I go to see my parents every other year.” She turned her head to look at him. “So, that’s my life story.”

“Wait, I have more questions. You never told me about your favorite movies or books.”

“Next time.” Maggie smiled, reaching for him. She smelled of chocolate and tequila. “Hold me, please.” She ended up staying most of the night and snuck out early in the morning while David was still asleep.

Thursday, 4/28/2022, 7:21 a.m. PDT

Alejandro woke David up. “We have a busy day. Let’s go.”

David hadn’t gotten enough sleep, but he didn’t complain, feeling anxious and excited.

After a quick breakfast, David, Maggie, and Oleg piled into a Cadillac Eldorado (*How many different cars do they have?*), and Alejandro drove them to meet the mysterious Javier. On the way, Alejandro explained again that Javier was an expert in changing identities. David wondered aloud what that meant. Alejandro just smiled and said, “You’ll see. He is very good at what he does. By the time he’s done with you, you’ll have totally new lives.”

Maggie protested. “But I like my life. I was only a year away from completing my PhD. I thought maybe we’d only need some temporary arrangement until this blows over.”

Alejandro shrugged. “I’m sorry. I think I understand what it’s like. But I also think your old life is gone, whether you want it or not. The news reports today are full of ‘mafia war’ headlines. Three people are dead at Andrei’s house: Andrei, Tamara, and an unidentified man, one of Petr’s people. Three people are dead at Balboa Lake Park. And four dead bodies at Frank’s house.”

Maggie said, “OK,” in a tone that seemed to communicate *I guess I’ll have to go along with this for now but I am not convinced.*

David asked, “What do they say about Frank?”

“There is a puzzlement about his role, but since one of the dead people—Petr—is known as Andrei’s right-hand man, the speculation is that Frank perhaps needed the money and somehow got connected to drug trafficking.”

“Oh my God! And what about Mr. Chao ... I mean, Hsu? Petr had him followed and was planning to eliminate him because Hsu learned too much.”

“Petr obviously never got the chance. Two people got away from us at Balboa Lake, the guy that was questioning you—I presume it was Hsu—was one of them. I guess Petr’s men didn’t attack because they were waiting for Petr. At least there is no report yet. We have to assume that Hsu is still out there, and so are some of Petr’s people, and they may all be looking for you. Plus your car was seen at the lake and at Frank’s house, and our car was at Andrei’s and at Frank’s.”

“Where is my car?”

“I’m sorry, but your Honda has been stripped, taken to a yard, and crushed yesterday. We didn’t want to keep it near Miguel’s house. By now it’s probably fully recycled. Our car had fake license plates and black BMW SUVs are fairly common.”

Maggie quietly said, “And what about James?”

“His death is being reported as natural causes. They may have given him potassium or something like it. I’m sorry.”

They arrived at a large house in South Torrance, parked in the driveway, and walked to the door. Before they had a chance to ring the bell, the door opened and a man said with a smile, “Please come in, come in. Make yourself at home.” He looked to be in his late forties. Short, olive skinned, fine-featured, wearing a white silk shirt and black pants. The man introduced himself to David and Maggie as Javier DeLuna. After pouring everyone a cup of coffee, Javier took them to a large room where they were joined by a Mediterranean-looking woman in her thirties, whom Javier introduced as “Alessandra, my wife and assistant.”

Everyone sat down, and Javier asked David and Maggie to tell him about themselves: age, family, occupation, where they spent their childhood. He apologized for appearing nosy, but explained that to create a good identity he needed to match it to their past.

Afterwards, Javier turned to Alessandra and said, “Let’s work on hairstyle and coloring and a bit of makeup, then take them shopping.” He explained that Alessandra was an experienced stylist and makeup artist who would try to modify their appearance in a way that did not

require extensive maintenance on their part. Both then got up and excused themselves.

David turned to Alejandro. "He is going to create a new appearance and new life story for me just like that?"

Alejandro laughed. "Yes and no. Yes, he will create not only a new appearance and life story, but also all the documents that have to go with it. No, he does not do it 'just like that.' There is a lot of work that has gone into this already. Javier has 'prepackaged' identities with the documents that require photos and filling in of the details, but ninety percent of the work has been done before. It's possible of course to tailor an identity 'on order,' with plastic surgery and all, but that's very expensive and takes a lot of time."

"And this is not expensive?" David asked.

"It's worth it. Javier is one of the best in his field."

"But how can we pay for this?"

"David," Oleg said gently, "you had a million dollars in hundred dollar bills on the back seat of your car. We are taking some of that money to pay Javier; the rest will be deposited into bank accounts that come with the prepackaged identity Javier will provide you. You'll have some cash and traveler's checks on you, but you don't want to carry too much."

David sat there dumbfounded. He'd completely forgotten about Mr. Hsu's briefcase.

Maggie, who'd forgotten about the money as well, smiled at David. "And I thought you were poor. Perhaps your luck is changing."

Javier and Alessandra came back. Javier showed Maggie a small photo of a pretty blonde woman in her twenties with Slavic features and said, "What do you think of this?"

Maggie stared at the picture and then slowly nodded. Alessandra motioned to Maggie to come with her.

After they left, David asked Oleg, "So what are your plans?"

"I am flying to Mexico City later today."

"Already?"

Alejandro cut in. "David, the people we are dealing with are not stupid. I'm sure they've figured out by now that Oleg's body is not among those from yesterday's shootings. They must be looking for him already."

"Shouldn't you be changing your identity and appearance then? Avoiding airports?" David said to Oleg.

"Alex and I have had another set of documents for a number of months now. We figured Andrei was skating on thin ice. I think today I should still be OK. They might be watching LAX, but I'll be flying out of John Wayne airport in Orange County. I doubt they have resources to watch smaller regional airports yet. So, while Alessandra is working on Maggie, let's discuss what your next steps will be."

David said, "The first step is pretty clear: find Schulmann's sister Sarah and his niece Rachel. Frank said Sarah was in Phoenix, so that's a start. After that, I don't know yet. I hope it will lead somewhere. I also would like to better understand Schulmann's connection to Mitchell Williams. I wonder if there is more significance there than we currently realize."

Oleg nodded. "This sounds like a good place to start. If you hit a dead end, come see me in Mexico. There is a good reason to make the initial plans here and now. Javier deals in identities, and because of that he knows how to look for people. He can provide other services as well: helping people disappear, shaking off a tail, hiding a money trail. Make sure you know how to contact him. Do you remember the name of Petr's boss?"

"Yes, General Nemzhov. Do you think Petr said is true?"

"Yes, I do. I wish I didn't let my rage get the best of me, I should have gotten more out of Petr. Just remember that you've been caught in some major operation that's been going on for years. We know that Nemzhov is behind it. It's possible that Schulmann might have exposed it and that's why everyone wants his file."

Javier returned. "I think I found it!"

"Found what?" asked David.

“Why, your new identity of course.”

“And?”

“All in good time, all in good time. Alessandra is still busy with your lady friend.”

Oleg jumped in. “There are some people we have to find for David. There was a man by the name Jonathan Schulmann, spelling starts with S-C-H and ends with a double N. He was killed in 2020 in the same explosion as Mitchell Williams. We need to find people related to him. We’ve been told that he had a sister Sarah that lives in Arizona, probably Phoenix area. She had a daughter named Rachel who is likely to be in college now.”

“This Schulmann guy, he must have done something important?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“You are right, I don’t.” Javier turned to David. “Why don’t I take you to Alessandra, and while she is working on you I’ll see what I can find.” David followed him. They entered a well-lit room that looked like a combination of a small hair salon and a dressing room. Maggie was there, sitting under a large hair dryer that covered the top of her head. Javier gave Alessandra a picture, reminded her to take David’s and Maggie’s fingerprints, and left. The picture was of a dark-haired man in his late twenties or early thirties. David thought that there was some resemblance. Alessandra went to work.

Thursday, 4/28/2022, 10:37 a.m. PDT

Alessandra brought Maggie and David back to the big room. Oleg whistled. Alejandro stared at Maggie with his mouth open. She waved them off in embarrassment. Her hair was now blonde, layered in pretty curls around her face. A bit of expertly applied makeup had taken a couple of years off and given her a subtle air of refinement. David's transformation was less dramatic. Mostly his hair was darker and his features softened.

Javier seemed pleased with what he saw. He sat everyone down and said to David and Maggie, "Let me explain what we do here. We are not some cheap outfit, where they slap your photo onto a blank passport or a fake driver's license. That would work if you're trying to get into a bar or flying to Mexico for an affair. We are kind of like an extreme version of that old show called *Ultimate Makeover*. We create a new identity for you that would withstand some scrutiny, which—being careful—you can live with for a period of time. You probably won't fool the FBI and you may not fool the IRS for long, but with a bit of preparation you should be able to travel without worrying that the next customs agent will arrest you as a holder of a fake passport."

"And how do you do that?" David asked.

"By being prepared. Almost a million people are reported missing in the US every year. Most of these cases get cleared up quickly, but there are tens of thousands that are legitimate disappearances. And around the world such cases are in the millions. Sometimes a person is dead, but the death can't be verified. Sometimes a person vanishes because he or she does not want to be found. After some time passes, police lose interest and, except for relatives and the IRS, nobody looks for them anymore. They are not on any 'wanted' lists. That's where we come in."

"Wouldn't such a person suddenly appearing raise an alarm somewhere?" Oleg wondered.

“We carefully sift through the missing cases that are at least a year old but not more than five years, trying to find the ones that are ‘safe,’ with no close relatives, where police departments are not likely to look any longer. There are not many that meet our criteria, but we always have files of thirty to forty identities that we can fit people into. Different ages, different races. Each file has a life story, a couple of bank accounts, a credit card, and an address that is really a mail box. We make sure that there is bit of activity that takes place on the accounts, social networks, and the card, so if the police, FBI, or IRS are looking, we know before we hand the identity over. As you can appreciate, there is a lot of work that goes into this and not all the files end up being used, so our service is not cheap.”

“But I don’t really look like the man in the photo you gave to Alessandra,” David said.

“Of course not. If you truly needed to take someone’s place, you’re talking many months of preparation, plastic surgery, and hundreds of thousands of dollars. Our service is for people who have to ‘disappear’ quickly, but into a reasonably reliable identity.”

“So who are we?” asked Maggie.

“You”—he pointed at Maggie—“are Alena Blazec, born in Prague in 1993. Came to the US in 2016, last known place is Las Vegas in February of 2021. No known living close relatives, father died in 2014, mother in 2019. And you, David, are now Daniel Brockman, born in New Haven, CT in 1989. Studied physics at Rutgers. Parents died in a car crash in 2016. Moved to Orange County, CA in 2014 to work for a semiconductor company in Irvine. Last known place is a rented condo in San Juan Capistrano. Disappeared in December of 2020 while on vacation in Mexico. Are you planning to travel together?”

“Yes,” Maggie replied.

“In that case, it is best we arrange for you to be married. More natural, causes less suspicion. It’s easy enough for us to do a marriage certificate from Las Vegas. Given that Alena was last seen there, we can build a story around it.” Javier got up. “Now let’s snap your

photos, and then Alessandra will take you shopping. We have to get you attired for your new lives, enough to get you through the next few days. As I said, this is an ultimate makeover. And don't worry, it's included in the price. In the meantime, I will finish preparing your documents."

Oleg went shopping with them because he also needed new clothes. The four of them—Alessandra, Oleg, Maggie, and David—piled into a car and drove to Del Amo Shopping Center. David hated shopping, so he just let Alessandra and Maggie pick things for him as he tried them on. They walked out with three "guaranteed to fit into an overhead compartment" rolling bags, one each for Maggie, David, and Oleg, filled with clothing and whatnots for traveling.

They got back around one thirty, feeling tired and hungry. Javier had some food waiting for them, but no sit-down lunch as time was short. Oleg had a 5:40 p.m. flight to Mexico City; Maggie and David were booked on a 6:00 p.m. flight to Phoenix, also from John Wayne airport. Javier handed them files containing their life stories, driver's licenses, passports, credit cards, bank accounts, linked PayPal accounts funded for \$500, checkbooks, and a big wad of cash. There were also instructions from Alessandra on how to maintain their new appearances. Each got a box of contact lenses, a cell phone, and a laptop.

"The contacts are to confuse Retina ID systems," Javier explained. "There are rumors of such systems being deployed in some airports. The contacts don't change your eye color or your vision, and you can re-use them. We also recommend you use computers for most of your communication. Many people just rely on their phones now, but computers are safer when used properly. Computers and phones are matched to your biometrics, you can add passwords if you like."

Javier went through a short training with Maggie and David, getting them to practice their new names and new lives. He made them promise that they would continue practicing for the next few days, but

destroy the “life story” documents afterwards, and definitely before they decide to go abroad.

Javier brought out another thin file with a few e-paper printouts. “This is secure e-paper matched to your fingerprints, either one of you can activate it.” One page was information about Sarah Kaufman, Jonathan’s sister. She was indeed living in Scottsdale, a suburb of Phoenix, working as a real estate agent in a national firm. Javier suggested contacting her at work. Another page was information about Rachel Kaufman, a sophomore at NYU. Printout pictures of Sarah and Rachel were included. Then there was one page with e-mails and phones to use for different situations, including e-mails that had been set up for them and an emergency voice mailbox for contacting Javier.

Next Alejandro sat down with them and went through some financials. Even after the “ultimate makeover,” they still had over \$900K available. Some of the money was going to be deposited over time in small amounts into their bank accounts. Two other numbered bank accounts were being opened for them, one in Zurich, another in Cayman Islands. To David’s irritation, Alejandro kept addressing Maggie and ignoring him. David decided to bite his tongue.

Finally, Oleg got up and said, “It’s time to go.”

Thursday, 4/28/2022, 6:22 p.m. PDT

On the airplane, David read through the dossier of Daniel Brockman's partly true, partly imagined life. Only child, physician father, homemaker mother. Lived in New Haven all through high school, college in New Jersey, a couple of years working in New York, then came to California. Parents' car spun out of control on an icy road, head-on collision with a snowplow. A bit of inheritance, sold the house in Connecticut. Went on vacation to Acapulco by himself, was seen in the hotel for four nights, then disappeared. David was trying to imagine himself as Daniel, but his mind was elsewhere. Maggie, or rather Mrs. Alena Brockman, was intently reading her file next to him. Or perhaps she was just pretending to read. How does one deal with the shock of being kidnapped and then having your life thrown away and becoming a strange new persona?

David was nervous going through security with his new documents. But the agent checked their driver's licenses and indifferently waved them through.

Parting with Oleg in the airport was hard. Here was a man who came into his life just a few days ago, saved him twice in the course of one day, and now they were going their separate ways. Outward expressions of emotions were not common in David's family; even hugs were hard to come by. And David himself was normally reserved. Judy had accused him of being a "cold fish." So it felt strange when he found himself tightly embracing Oleg and holding on for a few seconds.

Oleg whispered in his ear, "You be careful. Take care of Maggie. They'll be after both of you. Promise to let me know if you find anything. I am not done making them pay yet. Those who gave the orders, I want them to pay."

Afterwards, David had stopped by a restroom to calm himself down and rinse a wetness from the corner of his eyes. From the

mirror, Daniel Brockman stared back at him: darker hair, smoother features except for hard lines around the mouth, nicely tailored outfit. This was more than just a new ID, a piece of plastic with a different name. *David Ferguson is gone, I am no more.* He pushed the thought away. There would be some resolution. If only they could manage to stop for a couple of days and sort things out, they'd come up with something.

He thought that in a mystery book there would be a crumpled piece of paper with a map, or a cipher in a distant language. But here, in the twenty-first century, they were chasing electrons that formed bytes, bytes forming characters, characters turning into large bank accounts. Follow the trail of electrons.

Tired of reading about himself as Daniel, David asked Maggie, "Can you explain to me what the GRU is? I know about the KGB from old movies, but I know nothing about the GRU."

"The GRU is Russia's main foreign intelligence agency. The literal translation is Main Intelligence Directorate."

"So they are a successor of the KGB?"

"Not quite. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the KGB was replaced by the Federal Security Service, or FSB. The foreign intelligence directorate of the old KGB became the SVR, Foreign Intelligence Service. But the GRU is affiliated with the army, it is larger and more powerful than the SVR. They have their turf wars, but in spirit they are all descendants of the KGB."

"So the KGB is not really gone; it just changed names?"

"Right. The name is gone, but the KGB is far from gone. They came back stronger than ever, under other names. They kept a low profile after the breakup of the Soviet Union, but former KGB'ers quietly began turning up in power positions. The economic reforms in the 1990s Russia impoverished large segments of population. As has often been the case in Russian history, people started clamoring for a 'good tzar.' And the '*siloviki*,' the 'power guys' from the KGB and other agencies, were prepared to respond with their law and order

program. In 1999 they succeeded in putting their man in power. The KGB and its successors now run Russia.”

The plane landed in Phoenix’s Sky Harbor after a short flight. They were booked in the Scottsdale Fairmont Princess, about a forty-minute drive from the airport. The rental agency gave them a gas-guzzling older Jeep Victory. While most cars now were electric or hybrid, rental agencies still had fleets made up of mostly gasoline cars, probably because the cars were cheaper and customers were paying for the gas. With rent-a-ride services proliferating, rental agencies had to save where they could.

As David was navigating the Jeep up the 101 Freeway, Maggie said, “Look, I know we have to share a room ...”

David immediately replied, “Don’t worry, I can stay on the couch.”

“No, you don’t ... I mean, you can if you want to, but you don’t have to. I didn’t plan to make love to you last night. I’m not sorry I did. I wanted to. I needed to be held. I don’t normally jump into bed with someone after a few days, but it’s all crazy now. I don’t feel I am me anymore. Maybe this is what being in a war feels like; all the rules change. For three nights I was waiting to die. I was both angry and scared out of my mind, and my only hope was that someone would come for me. I didn’t think it was going to be you, someone I just met and barely knew. I thought the police would come, or Andrei with his bodyguards. But in the end, it was you. By yourself. I don’t know if it was because you cared for me or because you are a good guy or a bit of both, but you did. I did not stay with you out of gratitude; it was more like trust. My whole world has fallen apart, and you are the only anchor to hold on to. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to put you under any more pressure ... I don’t know what I am saying.”

They drove for a minute in silence. Then David replied, “I told you that when the MSS got you, James asked me why I would not go into hiding and forget about you. And I imagined what it would be like, and I felt such disgust for myself. James was just testing to see if he could trust me. What I’m trying to say is that in going after you I was saving

myself. For the past two years I was angry and afraid. I couldn't just let them take you without destroying whatever self-respect I have left. Heck, I don't know what I'm saying either."

The hotel was beautiful. They checked in as Mr. and Mrs. Brockman and were shown to their room. Maggie changed into a brilliant green dress that Alessandra had picked out for her, put on high heels, and they went to have dinner in a downstairs restaurant. David felt the jealous looks of business-dressed men.

The outdoor lounge had live music, with a few couples dancing slowly. After dinner Maggie took David's hand and gently guided him to the floor. As they danced, David closed his eyes. He felt warm from the drink he'd had and from the tender, protective feeling that came over him. Mixed with the warm Arizona night, the moment was exquisite. The song ended, but they stood still, aware of each other's breathing. His hands on her waist, her hands on his shoulders, her face against his chest. David felt eagerness that he hadn't known since the early days with Judy. He pulled Maggie closer. She lifted her head, and now her breasts were pressing against him. Her eyes half-closed, she stood up on her toes and forcefully kissed him on the mouth. Catcalls erupted from the bar, where a few younger guys were applauding and cheering David on. Maggie blushed and pulled David off the dance floor.

Friday, 4/29/2022, 10:55 a.m. CST, Beijing, China

“Our second operation has not gone well either,” General Tsao reported. “Hsu’s team has been ambushed, and he lost three people. Hsu and the remainder of his team are now holed up in the second safe house. Ferguson escaped with the money and the woman. He did leave behind a flash drive, the contents of which Hsu sent to us yesterday.”

To his surprise, the man sitting behind the desk did not seem unhappy. “I know. I just received preliminary results of the data analysis and it seems to be by-and-large useless.”

“Useless?”

“Yes. There are bits and pieces, but too fragmented to be meaningful. It would appear that Ferguson had little real information, but he used it very effectively to fool Hsu into thinking he had more. I thought Hsu was supposed to eliminate both Ferguson and the woman?”

“He tried, but Ferguson had a team in place, and they opened fire first. What about the money?”

“It’s a shame to lose it, but a small price to pay. We know for sure that Julius has been eliminated. I think it’s quite certain by now that Ferguson does not have anything for us to worry about.”

“Should we continue trying to eliminate him?”

“Of course, keep looking. But quietly. No need for any more drama, shoot-outs, kidnappings. He does not represent any immediate danger.”

“And Hsu?”

“He did not learn anything troublesome. But I don’t think we can’t trust his judgment. Bring him back, give him some desk job.”

Friday, 4/29/2022, 9:14 a.m. MSK, Moscow, Russia

“Chance favors the prepared mind.”

Louis Pasteur

“Good morning, Colonel,” said the man sitting in a comfortable chair next to a small round table. “Please sit down.”

“Good morning, General,” replied the visitor. He hesitated for a second, taking a look out the ninth story window, before he sat in the opposite chair.

“Yes, Colonel, the Khodinka Airfield is not the most attractive sight on a dreary day like this. But it’s good for the GRU to stay away from the hustle of the city center. So, what do we hear from Los Angeles?”

“We lost Petr and three of his people. One was killed at the house of Andrei Chernov, the others at the residence of some Frank Gorman. Gorman was retired from the SEC, with possible ties to Schulmann. Petr went to a place called Balboa Lake Park where the MSS operative was going to meet with Ferguson. The plan was to let the MSS take care of Ferguson and then eliminate the MSS team, making sure that no information—if Ferguson had any—gets out. But Ferguson had someone there who killed three of the MSS agents. Ferguson himself escaped with the Sappin woman and the money. Petr decided to split his team, sending two people to follow the remaining MSS agents, while he followed Ferguson. We still have two agents watching the house where the remaining MSS team is hiding out.”

“Anything else of interest?”

“Yes. One of Chernov’s bodyguards—Oleg Khmelco—has disappeared. According to one of our surviving agents, Petr was planning to eliminate Khmelco.”

“Did Khmelco have any special qualifications?”

“He served in SpetsNaz.”

“Then it’s possible that Khmelco was working with Ferguson? That would explain the ambush of the MSS and Petr’s teams.”

“It’s possible. We don’t know.”

“And what are we doing now?”

“We have agents watching Los Angeles airport for Ferguson, Sappin, and Khmelco. Of course it’s a huge airport.”

“I would not bother. There are too many ways to get out of Los Angeles. Besides, we should keep a low profile for a while. Too much activity on the US West Coast lately. With three police officers dead, they’ll start turning over each and every rock. Let the remaining MSS team go. What is it with the MSS? Why do they always pick parks near lakes for their boondoggles? Do they look at the map and say ‘here’s a lake in the center of the city, let’s do a Wild West shoot-out?’”

The Colonel laughed politely. “But what about Ferguson?”

“Don’t worry about him too much. He does not know anything. We have the data that he sent to the MSS, and there is nothing there. He must have obtained some information from the SEC using Gorman’s connections. Thankfully, we did a good job cleaning up the SEC archives back then.”

“How did he know to look for Schulmann’s information if he did not know anything?”

“Good question; that bothered me as well. I asked the MSS to check, and it turns out that the agent that tried to kidnap Ferguson at the airport remembered that the driver asked Ferguson where Schulmann’s file was. So it wasn’t Trimble, but the MSS that gave Ferguson the name.”

“So he was just bluffing the MSS? Why would he risk his life like this?”

“Who knows? Perhaps he liked the girl that they took. Perhaps he is a romantic and could not leave the girl behind knowing she’d get killed. Happy ending—he got the girl and a suitcase full of money. Not bad.”

“Shouldn’t we continue looking for him? He now knows about the existence of Schulmann’s file.”

“Simplify, Sergey, simplify. You have the money, you have the girl, and everyone looking for this information dies quickly—what would you do?”

“Probably go hide out, at least for a while.”

“Exactly. He’ll try to disappear with his girlfriend. Of course we should continue looking for him, for Sappin, for Khmelco. Monitor e-mail, phones, credit cards, social networks. The stuff that we can do electronically without risking agents. Keep an eye on Ferguson’s relatives in the US. But I don’t think there is any urgency. Take your time.”

The general got up and poured himself a cup of coffee. “We Russians are fatalistic people, and cases like this just reinforce my belief in fate. Totally unexpected, improbable connections change everything. Trimble should have died in Seattle. He cheated death, and one of his ploys in doing so was using some nobody that he walked into at the airport. And that nobody in the end became an instrument of Trimble’s undoing. One can’t cheat fate. We got very lucky.”

Sergey left. General Nemzhov remained by the window, enjoying the rest of his coffee and looking out at a largely empty airfield. Really, it was more than luck. No matter how careful you were, things never worked out the way they’d been planned. The question was—how did you respond? Unexpected things happened, you had to be prepared to deal with them. They’ve managed this operation for many years. The last major crisis was back in 2006 when a certain Pavel Rostin almost managed to blow it up, but they handled it. Last year Trimble’s reappearance was unplanned. But what they did back in 2020 paid off immediately: they now had a network of well-placed people tied by a common cause of stopping Trimble. They did it out of fear, not conviction or ideology. Nemzhov trusted fear more.

Within twenty-four hours of them finding Trimble in Vail, all his computers and phones had been taken apart in one of the GRU

laboratories, all the drives and communications were being analyzed down to the last byte. His one remaining associate was taken, debriefed, and eliminated. There was no way to prove it, but as far as Nemzhov could tell this end has been tied once and for all, and there was no immediate risk of Schulmann's file being released. They were back on the plan.

The colonel was one of the subordinates he was considering as a possible successor. Disappointingly, Sergey did not quite fit the bill yet. Loyalty, hard work, good reasoning ... all important. But at this level one had to have a psychological edge, an ability to read people, to predict their actions. "Cognitive empathy" was what psychologists called it. The word "empathy" felt out of place here because it implied the ability to feel someone's pain, and feeling the pain led to acting on it. The paradox here was that you had to feel what they feel in order to predict what they would do, but then you had to ignore the feeling and do what you have to do. Sergey did not have the empathy to get into Ferguson's mind. Regretfully, that was not something one could easily learn. Nemzhov turned on Rachmaninoff's piano concerto and shifted his attention to other pressing business.

Friday, 4/29/2022, 7:22 a.m. MST

Maggie's head was on his right shoulder, making it difficult to move. He touched her hair with his left hand. It had been a while since David woke up next to a woman. Two years, to be exact. His liaisons since the breakup did not include spending the night together. Why did this feel different? Was the fear of being hunted making him more susceptible? Was it the desperation of trying to save her so he could feel he did something worthwhile with his life? Or perhaps just the accumulated loneliness of the past two years?

Then he felt anxious. Was he really ready to take on this responsibility? His relationship with Judy did not work out well at all, and they had dated for quite some time before taking the plunge. He barely knew Maggie ... no, Alena ... wait, and he was not really David anymore. He was Daniel. He didn't know whether he needed strong coffee, strong drink, a couple of Tylenols, or a combination.

Why was he doing this? Were the events just pulling him along?

Maggie woke up and turned to him with a smile. "Good morning." She had freckles on her shoulders; he hadn't seen them before. David's anxiety melted away. They stayed in bed a little longer and then got up, took a shower, and went for a leisurely light breakfast. Sitting outside basking in the Arizona sun, David had a guilty thought that with their new identities and almost a million dollars they could just enjoy themselves for a while ... like a few years. Alessandra sure did an impressive job; the new Maggie's appearance was really becoming. He wondered if she was thinking similar thoughts and whether he should ask her. But he couldn't bring himself to say it. Instead, he asked, "Should we visit the real estate firm?"

Maggie nodded yes.

Before leaving, David turned on a computer and checked the e-mail addresses provided for them. There were no messages. He'd been told to not check his "old" accounts until he set up a proxy or a VPN.

After finding out how Petr's people tracked Trimble, he had concerns about rushing into this. He figured he'd do some research first. Besides, Maggie was ready.

They fetched the Jeep from the valet service and drove to the real estate office, which was only a few miles away. Sarah Kaufman was not in yet. Another agent offered his services, but Maggie politely declined saying that Sarah was recommended to them. She left her cell phone with the receptionist and suggested they go to a mall they'd seen on the way and pick up a few things. As far as David was concerned, they had everything they needed, but he saw no point in arguing.

Maggie got a purse, a dress, a pair of walking shoes, and a few clothing items of a delicate nature. David purchased a book on computer and network security.

Friday, 4/29/2022, 10:08 a.m. MST

Maggie's phone rang. It was Sarah Kaufman. Maggie said they were from California looking for real estate in Arizona. They agreed to meet at a restaurant by the mall. David and Maggie went there, left the name "Brockman" with the hostess, and ordered coffee. A few minutes later, they saw the hostess directing a heavyset woman in her fifties to their table.

She came toward them with a purposeful stride, projecting a go-getter image. Sarah Kaufman had a practiced smile, but her face had a harried, tired look. Following introductions, she asked, "So are you looking to move to a 'red' state?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are from California. The big reason for the current boom in the real estate business is in people from California and New York moving to Arizona and Texas, and vice versa, prior to possible separation. Mind you, business-wise I am not complaining, but it's rather sad."

David decided to drop the pretense. "Ms. Kaufman, we are not really here to buy real estate. We're trying to investigate your brother's death. Frank Gorman mentioned your name."

Sarah turned pale and got up, saying, "I'm sorry, I can't talk to you."

Maggie begged her. "Please, Ms. Kaufman, the same people who killed Frank were trying to kill us, and they may have had something to do with your brother's death. Give us five minutes. If you want to leave after that, we won't stop you."

Sarah Kaufman sat down, eyeing them warily. "OK, five minutes."

David hurried. "We both ended up involved in this by accident. A man from Williams's security escaped the 2020 assassination and was trying to sell Jonathan's information to the Chinese. He set me up at random. Frank was trying to help us. Unfortunately, the Russians were

also after this information. They killed Frank and would have killed us if we did not get help at the last moment. We escaped, but we want to find out what Jonathan found.”

Maggie pleaded. “We are scared, too. But whatever your brother had must have been very important, because they don’t want this to become public.”

Sarah slumped in her chair. “I just want to protect my family. I heard about Frank’s death. They were saying something about drugs, and I know Frank would never —had no need—to be involved in drugs, so I figured they’re back.”

“What do you mean ‘they are back?’” asked David.

“I know Jonathan uncovered something ugly; he said so the last time he visited the West Coast in May of 2020. He stopped here on the way back. He didn’t tell me what it was; he knew it was dangerous. When Jonathan was killed, everyone assumed that the target was Williams, but I wasn’t so sure. Twice, I had different people come to talk to me about Jonathan and to see if I had anything from him, like e-mails with documents. And they always would show some official-looking badges, but I doubt they were all serving the US government. I didn’t have anything to give them in any case.”

“What about his things? Was there anything like a computer or a diary?”

“I never got any of his things. First I’d been told that they had to hold on to them because of the investigation, then I’d been told they were shipped to me, but nothing ever arrived.”

“Do you remember the investigators that came to talk to you?”

“There were two that came just a few days after September 10th, the day Jonathan was killed. They said they were from the FBI. I remember the one that did most of the questioning was called William. I don’t recall the last name. Two others came a couple of weeks later. They flashed badges and said they were from some kind of intelligence organization, but I’m not sure who they were.”

David sat back, dejected.

Sarah asked, "How did you know Frank?"

Maggie said, "He was a friend of my university advisor, UCLA professor James Bowen. James was killed, too."

David continued. "Frank said he met Jonathan at Georgetown; Jonathan was his student. He told me that Jonathan loved you and Rachel. I think Frank was very fond of your brother."

Sarah wiped her eyes with a handkerchief then asked, "Are you planning to see Rachel?"

David replied, "Probably."

"Please don't get her involved," Sarah said. "Jonathan loved her very much. She was the daughter he never had. She does not know anything. I think Jonathan was protecting us by not letting us in on his work. Please, please, let her be." She pulled out her phone and showed a photo of dark-haired girl with a contagious smile. "He would not have endangered her."

"Was it your father's death that moved Jonathan to leave the law firm and go to work for the government?" David asked.

"Is that what Frank told you? I think that was the trigger, not the cause. Jonathan wasn't happy at the law firm. He was continuing out of inertia, not sleeping well, started drinking. When our father passed away, that shook Jonathan out of his routine."

"Can you think of any people he was close with? Perhaps his ex-wife?"

"Definitely not Caroline. She wanted a hotshot lawyer who would parlay his work into a political career, so she could run a high-powered salon in Washington. They did not part well. There were two people he stayed friendly with through the years: Ben Kirsch and John Platt. He met Ben in high school, John in Georgetown. Last I recall, Ben was a schoolteacher in Brooklyn, and John was running an oil company in Texas."

"What about anyone from the CFTC or the SEC?"

"Frank was one, although Frank left the SEC before Jonathan joined there. I don't really know of anyone else. We had to move to

Arizona eight years ago because of my husband's health. After my parents passed away, there wasn't enough to keep us on the East Coast. So I don't really know who Jonathan socialized with after we moved." Sarah got up. "I have to go. I am sorry I couldn't be of more help. I hope you stay safe."

Friday, 4/29/2022, 11:15 a.m. MST

After Sarah left, Maggie asked, “What was that about their father?”

“I am sorry, I didn’t have a chance to brief you in on everything that Frank told us. Why don’t we order something to eat, and I’ll tell you what happened while you were locked up by Mr. Chao.” David recounted the meeting from last Sunday, particularly Frank’s story of his relationship with Jonathan, Androssian’s research, older Schulmann’s files that they had gotten from Fred Womack and that David used to arrange the fateful meeting with Hsu.

Maggie picked at her salad listlessly. “You went through a lot while I was kidnapped.”

David nodded. “This is the first time in a week that I’ve been able to sort through the facts without being pressured by an emergency.”

Maggie agreed. “I can finally think about this without being told what to do, without running, without expecting to be shot or strangled.” She hesitated and then asked, “David, do you think about the future? I had a future, and now it’s all up in the air.”

David looked down. “I’m sorry. No, I haven’t thought much about the future.”

“So, what do you plan to do when we find Schulmann’s files?”

“To be honest, I haven’t figured it out yet. I want to know the truth; I feel like I owe this to Frank and James and Megrano. And before we can decide what to do with the file, we should find it first, which is far from a given. What about you? What do you plan to do?”

“I think I will use it to get my life back. I liked what I did. I was getting close to my doctorate; I wanted to go into teaching. I’ve been pushed into this new identity and told that I have to do it in order to survive now. I get it. And it’s kind of exciting, kind of like playing a glamour role. And you are a really good guy and I could fall for you—don’t get scared, I said could, not will—but this is not me, and this life is not my life. So, I want to use Schulmann’s file to get it back.”

But that wasn't all she was thinking. *David is naïve and idealistic, bent on finding the truth. Probably just a hopeless quest. But then the alternatives don't look great either, and perhaps his luck is changing.*

Maggie somewhat irrationally believed in luck. And she felt indebted to this silly man who went to face a bunch of killers in order to save her. She felt bad about James and others, but they were gone and nothing would bring them back. She did not want the information for some abstract justice but to ensure Maggie Sappin's safety. And maybe there would be some financial incentive as well.

"And how do you think you'll do that?" David asked.

Maggie leaned back, arms folded across her chest. "You are the one who answered this question back at Miguel's house. You said that one reason you wanted to know was because it put you in control, deciding whether to release it and when. Remember?"

"Yes, of course. But it does not answer the question."

"In a sense, it does. If the people that want to kill us know that the information won't get released if we are alive—but will get released if we are dead—we can go back to our lives and they won't touch us."

"And what about the police? They would want to know what happened. Megrano and Chander were investigating—"

"We tell them the truth, up to a point. Oleg helped us get away. We were frightened and left LA for a few days."

"Shouldn't we focus on finding Schulmann's file first?"

She grew impatient. "I am focused on that. Don't you see? We have to put ourselves into Schulmann's shoes. He knew that what he was uncovering was dangerous. He must have made some arrangements to make sure his work wouldn't be lost."

"The files were not released after he died."

"No, but his goal may have been different than just releasing them. Or whatever he put in place did not work. But we have to think like he must have been thinking two years ago. If you had the files and you wanted to make sure they get released if you die, what would you do?"

David nodded. "OK, you're right. If I have the file and I want it released in case anything happens to me, I would hide it on a bunch of servers and set it to be sent to where I want it to be sent at a predetermined time. And I would periodically log in and move this time forward. If I die, the time is not moved forward, and the file gets released. I would also have a command set to have it released immediately, in case I decide to. That's a greatly oversimplified picture, of course."

"But what if your goal was to leave the file to someone else? Or you wanted to prevent them from getting to the file by torturing you? And remember, he was not a computer engineer like yourself."

"I probably would make sure that someone I trust could also get access to the file."

"But it wouldn't be someone obvious, right?"

"No, it wouldn't be. Are you saying that Jonathan was not likely to leave the file to Sarah or Rachel?"

"Would you leave the file to your family? I wouldn't leave it to mine. That's the first place they would look."

"But you can leave it without them knowing, just with some clues?"

She dismissed it. "And then someone brilliant comes along to figure out the clues? That's how they do it in the movies, but it never made much sense to me. If people who have the clue don't know what the clue is, then that 'someone brilliant' can be an enemy just as likely as a friend. And possibly nobody will ever figure out the clue. I would not risk it."

"So it'll have to be somebody he trusts but not obvious, not a relative?"

"I think so. I thought the question you asked Sarah about his friends was a good one."

"Ben Kirsch and John Platt? One a schoolteacher from New York, the other an oil executive from Texas. You know, the mention of Texas reminds me that Jonathan was killed while together with

Mitchell Williams, the governor of Texas. We are chasing Jonathan's file, but the whole world believes that Williams was the target."

"What are you saying?"

David shrugged. "I don't know for sure, but I feel that this angle should be explored first. The answer may be in Texas. If John Platt is running an oil company, we should be able to find him easily."

That was true. She was able to look up John Platt on her phone in the time that it took David to pay the bill. John Platt, CEO of privately held Southwest Oil and Gas, headquartered in Dallas. "We have to call him now," she said.

"Why now?"

"It's Friday. If we don't get hold of him today, we have to either find his home number or wait until Monday." She pressed the number on the screen of her phone.

"Hello? My name is Alena Brockman, I have to speak with Mr. Platt. It's a personal issue. He is in a meeting? Yes, of course. Please tell him that I got his name from Sarah Kaufman, sister of Jonathan Schulmann. It's S-c-h-u-l-m-a-n-n. My name is Brockman; my phone number is 424-555-1234. Thank you."

"Do you think he'll call back?"

"If he doesn't, he's probably not the right person for us to talk to."

They got in the Jeep and started toward the Fairmont. Before they got to the hotel, Maggie's phone rang. "Mr. Platt? Yes, it was Ms. Kaufman that gave us your name. We just met with her. We did get her name from Jonathan's friend Frank Gorman... Yes, he is dead... It's important as in 'life and death' important... 214-555-4321. We will call you from Dallas airport."

She turned to David. "He only agreed to meet with us because of Sarah. He said she would not have mentioned his name unless she thought we were telling the truth."

Friday, 4/29/2022, 5:47 p.m. CDT

David moved his watch forward by two hours. He realized that this watch was just about the only thing he had left from his “old life” of just over a week back. Amusing how just this morning he was thinking of dropping this quest and disappearing with Maggie. Well, she sure set him straight. At least he didn’t share those thoughts with her.

They were coming in for a landing at Dallas – Fort Worth. David had never stayed in a Fairmont before and was pleasantly surprised with their service back in Phoenix. When they got to the hotel a bit past noon local time, he marched to the front desk and said that due to an emergency they had to go to Dallas. They had been immediately checked out and booked into a Fairmont in downtown Dallas, with flights and rental car arranged. By 12:35 they were set and driving to the airport. They barely managed to make it onto the flight. In some small measure, David was pleased that he was the one who handled the situation without leaving an opening for Maggie, who was chomping at the bit to take charge.

Fairmont’s service was good, but the flight was another story. Not only had the last minute tickets cost a fortune, but David also ended up in a middle seat and the person in the aisle seat on his left decided to wage a war over an armrest. He kept trying to occupy most of the limited space and dislodge a small elbow bridgehead that David established. The person in front reclined her seat all the way, crushing David’s knees, while the person behind kept getting something out of the seat pocket and putting it back in, introducing yet another irritant into the experience. David found it hard to concentrate on reading, and with another person seated in their row he and Maggie could not openly discuss their plans.

In the midst of it all Maggie asked, “So what made you go into engineering?”

David thought about it for a minute. “I didn’t feel comfortable enough in social situations to go into sales or another field where I would have to interact with strangers. I think it was an old article that a high school science teacher recommended that made me want to become an engineer.”

“Why is that? What article?”

“I remember it well. It was written by Arthur Raymond from Douglas Aircraft and called, ‘The Well-tempered Aircraft.’ He described why the DC-3 became the first truly successful commercial aircraft by balancing different design elements. It talked about the need to see the problem as a whole, to see the elements in relation to each other in order to do a great design. That’s the beauty of good design, be it in airplanes, in architecture, or in consumer devices: to create a broader context, to think through the user experience and the manufacturing, to make it all come together. Good engineering is an art. And why did you go into historical economics?”

“I tried physics, and it was too precise for me. Then I tried literature, and it was too subjective. I think economics appealed to me because it allows for different interpretations, but is also measurable. And I find it fascinating to study economics in a historical context, to understand how economic developments during a particular time period influenced politics and social movements. In a sense, it’s also about looking at the whole problem.”

For the remainder of the flight both focused on re-reading and memorizing their current stories. David now knew by heart the names of the schools he attended, his family’s favorite vacation places, the projects he worked on in Irvine. Maggie had been less happy to memorize that she ran away from home just after finishing high school in Prague, never went to college, married at nineteen, divorced at twenty-one, worked as a show-girl in Vegas, while engaging in the world’s oldest profession on the side. How did they know it was “the oldest profession” anyway? On the way to the car rental place, she grumbled that Javier must have pegged her for an airhead. David

reasonably, in his estimate, pointed out that it wasn't like Javier had thousands of choices to pick from. Maggie just gave him an *aren't you Mr. Obvious* look and dialed Platt's cell number.

They arranged to meet at Pyramid Restaurant in the hotel at 7:00 p.m. That barely gave them enough time.

On the drive to the hotel, Maggie asked, "Do you think we should be open with him?"

David shrugged. "We don't have much of a choice. He is our best lead right now. And we approached him, not the other way around."

Friday, 4/29/2022, 6:59 p.m. CDT

John Platt must have gotten there early, because he was already waiting when David and Maggie arrived. By the courteous “Are you Mr. Platt’s guests?” from the maître d they knew that Platt was a known and respected commodity there. The man who rose to greet them was tall and thin, with graying hair and a beaky nose. The face of a predator. He was carefully dressed in a business suit, white shirt, and tie. David and Maggie uncomfortably had on the same crumpled clothes they wore that morning in Phoenix. Platt firmly shook their hands with a business-like smile.

After introductions, during which Maggie stumbled on her new name, Platt said, “I asked for a corner table to give us some privacy. I have dinner nearby at eight, so the time is limited. You are welcome to eat. I’ll just have a glass of wine.”

The waiter brought a bottle of wine to show to Platt, who apologized to David and Maggie. “I hope you don’t mind; I took the liberty to order a bottle for us.” By the looks of the bottle, David thought that their \$900K in the bank wouldn’t make much impression on Mr. Platt.

After the waiter poured the wine, affirmed that they wouldn’t have dinner, and left, Platt said in the precise manner of a person used to commanding others, “So, tell me what you know about Jonathan Schulmann’s work.”

Maggie, who clearly did not appreciate being commanded, almost visibly bristled and countered with, “Why don’t we start with you telling us what YOU know about Jonathan Schulmann’s work?”

Platt shot back, “You called me!”

David jumped in. “Mr. Platt, here’s our situation. A week ago I did not know who Jonathan Schulmann was. Mistakenly, we were suspected of having his research. Chinese and Russian intelligence services are after us. We’ve both been kidnapped and almost killed. A

number of people we worked with were not so fortunate. Yesterday we escaped from Los Angeles. The names we gave you are not our real names. We don't know who is a friend and who is an enemy. It would help us greatly if we start by learning more about your relationship with Jonathan."

Platt stared at him intently for a moment. "This sounds too crazy to be made up. Why do you want to know about his work?"

"Some very good people died in the last few days, and this seems to revolve around his research. We'd like to understand why, and perhaps make sure they did not die in vain."

Platt took a deep breath, made his decision.

"Normally I would tell you to go to hell, but Jonathan was my friend and I want to find out who killed him. We met in Georgetown law school. That, of course, is public information. I was always supposed to come back to Dallas to run the oil company that my father started. I tried to get Jonathan to come with me, but he would not. He wanted to make his own way in the world. I would visit him when I went to Washington, and he came to see me in Texas. Our wives did not get along, so we didn't socialize as families. We never lost touch, just drifted apart a bit. We reconnected when he got divorced and went to work for the CFTC. By that time I was CEO, and Southwest Oil and Gas was the largest independent oil and gas company in Texas, so I had to deal with the CFTC. Since we are not publicly traded, I didn't have many business-related dealings with Jonathan when he moved to SEC, but by then the relationship was re-established. I knew he was looking into the dollar crisis of 2019. Since our days in law school he'd been like a bulldog in these things, latching onto a topic and not letting go until he figured out the real story. So I am not surprised if he uncovered something big."

After a sip of wine, Platt continued. "You should understand that being a head of an energy company in Texas means being in politics. I'd known Mitchell Williams since we were in our twenties. I was a major donor to his presidential campaign in 2020. When he was killed

in September, it was a big personal loss for me. It became an even bigger loss when I found out that my friend Jonathan Schulmann was killed in the same explosion.”

“Do you think they were there together?”

“I don’t know if they knew each other. I had not introduced them. I don’t know if they were planning to meet in Philadelphia or if it was a terrible coincidence. I’ve been wondering ever since.”

Platt looked at his watch and said, “OK, your turn.”

David started in Seattle airport, figuring the story wouldn’t make sense if not told from the beginning. He tried to abbreviate where possible, but the story still took a while. Platt remembered meeting Trimble. He commented that he was not sure now whether the target of the attack was Williams, as commonly assumed, or Schulmann.

“Mr. Platt, did Schulmann give you anything about his research into the 2019 crisis?” Maggie asked,

“Please call me John. No, he did not.”

“We think Jonathan must have given the information to a person he trusted. Did he give you any clues?”

“There is nothing I can think of.”

Maggie slumped in disappointment. David asked, “Who else was killed in the explosion?”

“Well, there were a number of people. Why do you ask?”

“Because if Schulmann shared the information with someone, as would be logical to assume, and the information stayed secret, it might be because that person had also been killed. It could have been Mitchell Williams, or it could have been someone else.”

Pratt sat up straight in his chair, now clearly fully engaged. “Yes, it could have been Mitchell. In addition to Mitchell, his campaign manager Jim Zorn was killed. So were his chief of staff Mike Black and his senior advisor Suzy Yamamoto. There were others, too. These are just the names I remember off the top of my head.”

“Was Jonathan familiar with any of them?”

"I don't know. But I am starting to suspect that Jonathan was in Philadelphia to discuss his findings with Mitchell and his team. The assassination may have been targeting all of them."

"But if they are all dead ..."

"There is a chance the information survived. These people did not get to their positions by being disorganized. There must be additional computers, backups. You said that Jonathan's sister was visited by the FBI?"

"Yes, she said one of them was named William, but that's all she remembered."

"It would be interesting to find out what happened to the FBI investigation. The head of the Dallas FBI office is a friend of mine. Perhaps he can help," Platt said. "I am running late for my dinner. I have to think how to proceed. Are you staying here in the hotel?"

"Yes."

"It's comfortable, but you are welcome to stay with me. I have a big house, and the driver is waiting outside."

"Thank you, we are OK here," Maggie said. David wondered if she had an aversion to any form of help that reduced her independence even a tiny bit.

"Then allow me to make dinner arrangements for you." Platt spoke into his phone. "Cathy? Yes, I know I'm running late. Please make a reservation for Mr. and Mrs. Brockman as my guests at The French Room. Also, please research possible connections between Jonathan Schulmann and everyone else that died in the Williams's assassination. You don't need me to spell his name; he was one of the victims. I will need it by tomorrow morning."

Platt got up, saying, "I apologize; I have to go. You will like The French Room. It's the finest restaurant in Dallas, and on a Friday night you won't get in otherwise. You can easily walk to it from here."

Friday, 4/29/2022, 8:35 p.m. CDT

The French Room restaurant was both elegant and opulent, as Platt advertised. The maître d' first looked at them suspiciously, but after realizing that they were Platt's guests, he personally brought a jacket for David with "my apologies, Mr. Brockman, house rules" and took them to a window table. "I hope this table is satisfactory."

Two waiters appeared, ready to cater to their whims. David opened the menu with three digit prices and looked at it broodingly. He liked John Platt, but he was getting tired of accepting things from others. He shot the menu closed and said, "I want to go somewhere else."

Maggie smiled and closed her menu. "With pleasure!" Ignoring the disapproving looks of other patrons and the maître d', they walked out. David almost appropriated the restaurant's jacket, but Maggie reminded him at the door.

They found a noisy Mexican restaurant a block away that advertised margaritas with forty different types of tequila. David joked that with her name being Margarita they had to visit. Maggie giggled.

There was a wait to get a table, but they squeezed through a group of men wearing large, carefully creased Stetson hats, grabbed two seats at the bar and ordered appetizers and margaritas. Maggie tasted her *El Perfecto* margarita and laughed. "I like four-star restaurants as much as the next girl, but tonight I am a hell of a lot happier in this place. It feels so good to let loose a bit, to stop running for an hour."

"Can I ask you a question?" David said, motioning to the bartender for the next round.

"Since you're buying drinks, Mr. Big Spender ..."

"Why did Andrei call you Sabina when we came to his house?"

Maggie fell silent, the smile disappearing from her face.

"I am sorry" David said, thinking *damn, I should keep my mouth shut.*

"No, it's OK. It just reminded me that Andrei is dead ... and James ... and the others. Years back, Andrei and I were lovers. Then I

broke it off. In one of my favorite movies there is a character Sabina that leaves her lover. He knew that and, after he got over the breakup, started calling me Sabina.”

“Which movie is that?”

“It’s an old one, called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.”

David slapped the counter, “I saw that movie! We watched it on one of the online services about five years ago or so. It was about a Czech doctor who was torn between two women.”

“Yes, that’ll work as a short description.” Maggie smiled. “What did you think of it?”

“I liked it, but Judy thought it was too heavy, depressing, and explicit. I remember Sabina being this beautiful woman in underwear and a black bowler hat ...”

Maggie snorted. “Typical male. After watching a great movie all he remembers is a woman in a hat and underwear.”

“I remember more than that,” protested David. “The main character was this guy Thomas ...”

“Not Thomas, Tomas. It’s a Czech name, not American.”

“Well, of course you would know now that you are Alena from Prague.” Both burst out laughing. David continued, “So this Thomas ... no, Tomas ... is a playboy and Sabina is his lover. But one day he meets a young girl called Tereza and ends up marrying her, but he can’t let go of his womanizing. And then the Soviet Army invades, and they all flee to Switzerland. Sabina has this black bowler hat that’s somehow stuck in my memory. OK, that’s all I can recall.”

Maggie picked up the thread. “Sabina has an affair with married Franz, but just as he decides to leave his wife for her, Sabina takes off and goes to California. Tereza goes back to Prague because Tomas continues to see other women; Tomas follows her because he feels he has to take care of Tereza. In the end, Tomas and Tereza move to a farm, where they are happy.”

David was watching her lips as she spoke. He remembered the feel of those lips on his skin, a wonderful ticklish sensation as they traced

the line from his ear to his chest. He was quiet, so Maggie continued, “That’s the plot. Of course it describes the movie, and the book it was based on, about as well as a one-page summary would describe *Anna Karenina*.”

“And why do you like it?”

“Because I can relate to these people. So many things that happen to us are coincidences, caprices of fate that string our lives together. Look at the two of us—you happened to stumble into a café where I was finishing my shift. You could have walked in twenty minutes later, and you and I would have never met. And now we are in a different state using made-up identities and looking for lost files. In school they tell you how deterministic things are, follow this yellow brick road, and you’ll arrive at a particular destination. And then the road crumbles under your feet, and you realize that you better enjoy each and every day because you don’t know what the next one would bring.”

David was digesting what she said. He at least was astute enough to realize that Maggie saw something of herself in the story. “So who are you in the movie?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we usually see ourselves in one of the characters. Andrei thought you to be Sabina.”

“I don’t look at things this way. I guess you can say I am Tomas in the way I can be torn between a desire to take care of someone like Tereza and a desire to be free. And I am Tereza, self-doubting and sometimes full of fear. But in a sense you are right, I relate the most to Sabina. I have learned from childhood to despise all the “kitsch” of being like everyone else, of marching in order, of cheap populism. Like her, I left home and moved to California. But I also think she walked away because she did not think she deserved Franz, and I sometimes feel the same way about people.”

“And who would I be in the movie?”

Maggie cocked her head to one side and gave him an appraising look. “Hmmm ... interesting question. I guess you want to be Tomas.

David the womanizer, the one that wants to sleep with hundreds of women. But coming through is earnest and conscientious Franz.”

“You think?”

“Oh yes. If you could just be Tomas, you would have had as many women as you like, you would have enjoyed them, and they would have enjoyed you back, with no drama and no illusions. If you could. But instead they would sense that it’s not true, that you are not a genuine lighthearted Lothario, and they would lose interest. Am I correct?”

David mumbled that to a large degree this was accurate.

“Yes, see. Some women want a bad boy, some want a nice quiet guy, but you are a nice guy trying to be a Lothario, and they would smell a phony. You are afraid of women, Mr. Engineer”.

“OK, I admit, I am. And you?”

“What about me?”

“You are afraid of men, aren’t you?”

“Nonsense! I’ve had many relationships.”

“And how many lasted more than a year? Be honest.”

Maggie quietly replied, “One.”

“And in how many were you the one breaking up?”

“Most.”

David was about to press the advantage, but the look on Maggie’s face stopped him. He knew he’d hit a nerve. Feeling cruel and ashamed, he called for a check.

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 7:22 a.m. CDT

“You should never ask anyone for anything. Never—and especially from those who are more powerful than yourself.”

— Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*

Maggie woke first, shaken by her usual nightmare of being chased and trying to run away. David was still peacefully asleep. Late last night there was some tension between them. David started settling himself on the couch for the night, but Maggie convinced him to come to bed. He probably was angry at how she’d described him as a Tomas-wanna-be the night before. But she did not like being ignored. It made her feel annoyed and embarrassed. She’d found herself thinking, *I wish he’d slam his computer shut and come after me. He’s right when he says he is better with numbers than with people.*

He was cute, but not really what she would have considered her type. She liked people that had some special talent, that were her superior in some regard, be it intelligence, art, or athleticism. She liked smart people, but she was smarter than most of the guys she came across, and she did not have many artistic types in her circle—which left athletes. Athletes were easy to find on campus, and they were “cool,” which was a big deal in LA. So she ended up going out with the guys that were tall, fast, strong, and younger than she.

Maggie had been on her own for over eight years, living mostly in or around the college and around lots of young unattached people. Relationships were easy to form or break, some of her friends had three or four going on at the same time. She never did, she was a serial monogamist. But then, her relationships did not last longer than a few months, and yes, in most cases she was the one breaking up. Maggie was too independent to submit to someone. Trouble was, she couldn’t respect someone who submitted to her. In her mind, submission meant weakness, and she had no patience for weakness. And most

relationships she saw around were unequal, with one side being stronger and the other weaker.

She'd always thought that love would strike her like a bullet, that she would know instantly that he was "the one." She had a picture in her head of her future family having a summer dinner in the garden of their house, but the faces of her husband and two children were never defined. Sometimes she thought she just wanted to be in love and not care whether it was equal or not, but she didn't really know how to get from here to there. What was separating her from others? Was it her secret, her nightmare? Could she promise somebody—anybody—that she wouldn't run away?

Her social life did not include many campus clubs, she wasn't much of a joiner. In the beginning, when she had just moved to LA, she'd tried a few: a literary club, one of women's clubs. After a while she ran into disagreements with her clubs' fellows: she didn't feel gender-discriminated, she didn't care about affirmative action, she didn't want to march against oppression. The end of Maggie's club participation came when the head of the literary club accused her of being "not sufficiently compassionate about economic equality for all people." When Maggie responded that the constitution does not promise economic equality and that in her homeland economic equality experiments ended rather badly, they suggested she find a different group. In the campus land of compassionate correctness Maggie was an alien, literally and figuratively.

When she first met David, she took pity on him; he was so beaten up and lost. She could never be attracted to someone she pitied. But she also meant what she said about praying for him to come during those three horrible days with "Mr. Chao." She marveled at his courage in going with only a small thumb-drive against a bunch of armed agents, even if it was not particularly smart. She wondered whether any of her "cool" friends could have done that—and concluded that none would have even tried. Being "cool" usually

meant looking out for number one, making your own rules, figuring out how to get ahead. Not having beliefs or people to die for.

It was not only at the lake. When Petr ambushed them and threatened to shoot her, she felt how his body, on the couch next to her, tensed. He was going to jump Petr. They never talked about it, but she knew. The thought of him so brazenly putting his life on the line for her overwhelmed her at times. That made her feel weak and now, when the raw emotion of being kidnapped and waiting to be killed had subsided, it paradoxically made her cranky toward David. The events of the past few days pushed her to the point of hysteria, and she did not like the feeling.

But then she thought of the touch of his hand against her skin, his mouth exploring her stomach, moving lower, her body responding. Her hands on his back, pressing him deeper. She shook her head to push away the sensation. There was some form of protective shell he had, a moat around his castle, a screen that she couldn't penetrate.

She looked at him quietly sleeping. There were lines around his eyes that she had not seen before. Maggie stretched. She'd have to figure this out in due course, but for now her goal was to go back to being Margarita Sappin and she needed his help to get there. And she needed to do it quickly, because the longer she was Alena Brockman, the more difficult it was going to be to come back. She'd have to make an effort to be nicer to David. She gently woke him up.

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 8:18 a.m. CDT

After showering, they went downstairs for a quick breakfast. David was tired; he'd stayed up late last night. When they came back from dinner, both silently went to their computers. David had set them up with multiple proxy services to be used for web surfing and for any e-mail communication.

David checked his e-mail. On the e-mail address provided by Javier there was a brief message from Oleg that he was doing well and giving them his new e-mail and phone contact. On David's personal e-mail there was a message from his boss at Space Systems, telling him he'd been gone for a week now and that he needed to check his work e-mail. David sent a response that he was still tied up with the family emergency, and that he unfortunately did not have access to his work e-mail at the moment. There was no point in explaining that he could not access the work e-mail without his work computer, and said computer had been stolen by the Chinese intelligence service and was possibly being taken apart in some Beijing laboratory. David thought he'd now be RIF'd for sure, but this had moved much lower on his list of priorities.

That was when Maggie exclaimed, "Interesting!"

"What?" David asked.

"Turns out that Suzy Yamamoto, Williams's senior advisor, had worked at the CFTC from 2010 to 2015."

"That means she overlapped with Schulmann there for about two years?"

"Exactly. They probably knew each other."

David looked at Maggie without seeing her, his mind in overdrive. *Keep it simple. Here's a connection. If Yamamoto was Schulmann's "backup," that would explain why the file was not released. Not a certainty, but a possibility, a lead.*

David contacted his Purdue classmate Mohun Biswan. Mohun was a great programmer who had zero discipline. He could not fit into any organization, so he freelanced for various companies, mostly testing their security. David had stayed in touch with him and had gotten Mohun a few paying gigs. Now David was interested in recovering files that may have been deleted long time ago. Mohun sent him an “extra strength” data recovery program. (“It blows any commercial software out of the water,” claimed the hacker. “It will search for even small fragments, anything that can possibly survive erasure.”)

David also discussed with Mohun various approaches to controlling dissemination of files stored on multiple distributed servers. Mohun chuckled with an emoticon, “David, have you gone to the dark side?”

David laughed it off, claiming to be investigating a case of industrial espionage. Mohun even suggested using a virus to infect thousands of computers that would release the information based on their time code, but David thought this was going too far. Instead, he configured a network of remote servers paid for through a PayPal account.

By the time he was done, it was well past midnight. Maggie was still awake. He was apprehensive and guilty over making her feel bad at dinner and started setting up on the couch thinking she didn’t want him anywhere near, but that seemed to make her angry, so he moved to bed. Both were tired and quickly fell asleep.

But this morning she appeared to be in a better mood.

Maggie’s phone rang. “Hello? Yes, John. We can be ready quickly. No need to send a car. Give me your address.”

After hanging up, she turned to David. “He wants us to check out of the hotel and come over to his house. He said he’ll explain everything there.”

They dropped off the keys and fetched the car. Maggie took care to dress in a cream linen blouse, knee length dark skirt, and black shoes with heels. That was the closest in her limited wardrobe to a business

look. She programmed the address in the University Park suburb into her smartphone and projected directions for David into a corner of the windshield. For both of them this was their first time in Texas, so there was some novelty even in the short twenty-minute drive.

Dallas looked like a quintessential large American city, a continuous metropolis anchored by a dense collection of business towers and sports arenas in the center surrounded by miles and miles of suburbs, all interconnected by wide freeways. It was getting hot even though it was still early. On downtown streets there were homeless people wandering around, some still sleeping. But less so than in LA. Perhaps the city was doing better, or the police were stricter, or else the weather played a role. They drove out of the city's downtown core and through an area where most of the houses looked large and spacious with well-manicured lawns.

Next to a freeway, there was a giant billboard of a man confidently looking forward and proclaiming that the best days of Texas lie ahead, with smaller figures of smiling men, women, and children behind him.

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 10:12 a.m. CDT

Not surprisingly, Pratt's house was a mansion. They drove up a wide circular driveway with a fountain and flower garden in the center. Steps led to a Georgian-style house with a tall portico framed by white columns and symmetrical tall windows on both sides. Solid red brick walls were accentuated by white colors of multi-grid windows. There was a large garage on one side and a tennis court on the other.

A pretty young woman met them at the entrance, introducing herself as Cathy, Mr. Platt's secretary. When David asked her if she usually worked on the weekends, she laughed and said, "Not usually, but this is a busy weekend." Cathy had a newspaper in her hand. Recognizing David's surprised look, she offered, "Dallas is one of the few metro areas remaining with a paper version of a major newspaper. John likes to read it the old-fashioned way. Tradition."

Cathy showed them to the study, where John Platt was waiting for them at a small round table, and then excused herself.

Platt went straight to business. "Turns out Ms. Yamamoto and Jonathan possibly knew each other from before."

"Yes, we figured that out," said Maggie.

Platt smiled. "Mrs. Brockman, perhaps after this is over, we should talk about you coming to work for Southwest Oil and Gas. I could use more women that hold their own in our traditionally men's world."

Maggie blushed but said nothing.

Platt continued. "Cathy and I have not been able to find earlier connections between Jonathan and other members of Mitchell's staff, but of course that does not mean there were none. Still, Williams and Yamamoto seem to be our best starting points. The Williams family stayed in Austin. I spoke with Jenny, Mitchell's widow, this morning. I have known her almost as long as I've known Mitchell. She agreed to meet with us today."

"Us?" Maggie said.

“Yes, us.” Platt’s voice had an edge to it. “Both Jonathan and Mitchell were my friends. Also, I think you will benefit from me being there. To these people you are just two strangers off the street. Now, I have met Suzy Yamamoto, but I did not know her well. She is survived by a husband and two children. They now reside in San Antonio. The husband has agreed to meet with us this afternoon. I’m sorry to push things so fast, but it’s easier for them to meet on the weekend. Plus, I need to be in Japan Sunday evening, so I will have to take off from San Antonio tonight. I was hoping to at least be able to facilitate the initial exchange. We’ll have to leave for Austin soon. I understand that you like your independence, but it really would make so much more sense for you to come with me on my Gulfstream. I would appreciate if you’d let me do this.”

“OK,” Maggie grudgingly agreed.

“Thank you. Cathy will make arrangements for your transportation and hotel. One more thing. I spoke with a friend of mine who runs the FBI office here. He checked which agents were looking into Jonathan’s death. One of them was William Tokley. As a favor to my friend, Mr. Tokley will speak with us. Please understand that this is indeed a big favor, and we should not mention this to anyone else.”

“When is he going to talk to us?” David asked.

“We are supposed to call him at 11:45 a.m. Eastern Time, which is just about now.”

Platt looked at the paper in front of him and punched numbers into the speakerphone on the table. After a couple of rings, a gruff voice said, “Hello?”

“Mr. Tokley?”

“Yes.”

“My name is John Platt. Jim Brobak told you about me calling.”

“Yes, he did. You understand that this is highly irregular?”

“I do, and I very much appreciate you talking to us. I am here with two of my associates and what you tell us stays with us, your name won’t be mentioned.”

“OK. You have fifteen minutes. What do you want to know?”

“You investigated the death of Jonathan Schulmann in 2020?”

“Yes, my partner and I did for about three weeks. Why do you ask?”

“Jonathan was a friend of mine, and I’d like to better understand the circumstances around his death.”

“Why? You don’t believe the official version that he was an innocent bystander in the Williams assassination?”

“Do you?”

“I stick to the facts and to my assignments. Doesn’t matter what I believe or not.”

“Can you tell us what you found out?”

“From the very beginning Schulmann was treated as a collateral damage. Just to be proper, they assigned the two of us to look into it, but it was kind of pro forma. Schulmann indeed had a meeting scheduled with the Philadelphia Fed office, so he had a reason to be there.”

“Was he in the room with Williams when the bomb went off?”

“Possibly, but there was no way to tell for sure. Remember, that explosion collapsed a big chunk of the building, killed twenty-two people, and wounded hundreds. Schulmann’s hotel room was a floor above and almost exactly over Williams’s suite. We could not determine whether they were meeting or not.”

“Did you find out anything about the work that Schulmann did?”

“We went to the SEC. It seemed like he was a lone wolf for some time, working largely by himself. We never found his computer; we looked into the files that were on the server, did not know how to analyze them. So we started checking into payments he was making, and tracked most of the invoices down to one consultant.”

“Who was that?”

“His name was Peter Marchuk. He was some kind of computer whiz, designed trading algorithms, specialist in ‘big data.’ But in 2018 he, together with a group of others, was convicted of insider trading.

The rest went to jail, but he somehow got probation. He'd been working with Schulmann. Judging by invoices, it was occasional until early 2020, when it became pretty much a full-time job for Marchuk."

"Did you talk to Marchuk?"

"Would've loved to, but on the morning of September 10th his house in New Jersey blew up. Gas leak. Marchuk died, the house and everything in it destroyed in the fire."

"September 10th? Isn't that the day that Williams was killed?"

"Yes, an amazing coincidence."

"You think there was a connection?"

"As I said, it does not matter what I think. You can believe it was a coincidence. We traveled to Phoenix to see Schulmann's sister, but she didn't know anything."

"And then what happened?"

"After three weeks, we were called in. We had no tangible evidence linking Schulmann to Williams, so Schulmann was judged to be not the target, and we were reassigned to another case."

"Did you or anyone in the FBI continue working on Schulmann's case?"

"Not as far as I know. We'd been told to drop it. The official line was clear—the bomb targeted Williams, everyone else was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And that's all she wrote; there is nothing else to tell. I have to go."

After Tokley hung up, Maggie asked David, "What do you know about 'big data'?"

"Just enough to be dangerous," David answered. "Big data is the process of analyzing large amounts of data to uncover hidden patterns and correlations. The expression became popular about ten years ago. It was an extension of earlier efforts in artificial intelligence, business intelligence, data mining. The idea was that companies would be able to make better business decisions by examining huge volumes of data from all kinds of sources. Kind of like sorting through tons of garbage and finding a few pearls."

Platt commented. “In our company we do analyze large volumes of data we collect in order to decide where to drill for oil or gas, but it remains to some degree hit or miss. You still need specialists to look at the information.”

“Yes, that’s what happened. After the initial marketing hype, companies discovered that they were not getting sufficient return on their investment. It was similar to what happened with artificial intelligence and expert systems: the difficulties were underestimated; pure machine processing resulted in largely a ‘garbage in, garbage out’ outcome where the information derived was not worth the effort. Costs of integrating big data technologies into existing data warehousing structures were high. One still required internal skills and expensive experts. Big data evolved into more specialized applications for particular fields. Some of the technologies, especially databases for processing big data sets, survived and are in use now.”

Maggie shook her head. “So to translate this from computer-ese into English, it seems that to succeed one has to combine a good subject matter expert with a technical expert. Schulmann and Marchuk may have been such a combination.”

Platt called in Cathy. “Would you look up for us a man by the name of Peter Marchuk, died September 10, 2020?” He turned to David and Maggie. “I’d like for you to join me and my family for an early lunch, and then we’ll go see Jenny Williams.”

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 12:15 p.m. CDT

They were in a limo, having just finished a quick but somewhat formal lunch. John introduced them to his wife Liz and their two teenage kids, Joshua and Tracy. The older son was in college. Conversation was somewhat strained. John clearly did not want to involve his family in the subject of Schulmann's files. John told them not to worry about the rental car; it would be returned.

David and Maggie were sitting opposite John and Cathy. After they left the house, Cathy gave them a quick download on Marchuk. It was an expanded version of what Tokley said: PhD from MIT, his dissertation's topic was in searching for patterns in large volumes of data using advanced statistical analysis. Went to work for a hedge fund in Connecticut. The fund was busted for insider trading, Schulmann involved in prosecuting. Marchuk got away with probation. Lived by himself. His house in northern New Jersey exploded the morning of September 10th, 2020 and burned to the ground. The official cause was a gas leak.

"What kind of statistical analysis did he use?" asked David.

Cathy checked her notes and blushed. "I am sorry, I scribbled clustering, Support Vector Machines, Markov chains and Bayesian networks, but did not go beyond that. Would you like for me to pull up his dissertation?"

"It's OK, I can look at it later, thanks."

"Do you actually understand this?" John inquired.

"As I said, I am not an expert, but I remember a bit from my college courses, and I was involved in some data analysis projects in my work. These are statistical techniques for analyzing relationships between entities across large spans of data."

The Love Field airport was only a few minutes away. Neither David, nor Maggie had ever flown on anything resembling a Gulfstream 650. Maggie had no experience with private planes, and

David's was limited to a small two-seater, which he did not find particularly enjoyable. The pilot came out to greet them. John quickly showed them around. David asked whether the plane could take Platt all the way to Japan. "Yes, of course," replied John. "Our pilot is conservative, so we'll refuel in San Francisco, and from there it's eight hours to Tokyo."

As they glided away from the field, John said, "It's a very short flight, so let's plan the day. When we land in Austin, a car will take the three of us—Cathy will stay with the plane—to the Williams's ranch. We have until about three. Then the same car will take us to San Antonio. We are supposed to meet with Chris Maidel, the late Suzy Yamamoto's husband, at four thirty. I am afraid I'll have to leave you soon thereafter. Cathy arranged for a car to pick you up at Maidel's, she also made a reservation for you at San Antonio Marriott Rivercenter. You are, of course, free to change the hotel or arrange your plans however you like. Here are two files on Mitchell Williams for you to review before we get to the ranch. Cathy also made three copies of a file on Suzy Yamamoto; we can review it on the drive to San Antonio. Now, what do you plan to do during the meetings?"

David replied, "I'd like to get access to any computer that may have been used by Williams and Yamamoto and look for traces of Schulmann's research."

"Which traces are you going to look for?"

"There are names of some companies that came up in Schulmann's early research. These are very unique strings, so if they are present, that's a clue that the file either is or was there."

"But if the file's been erased, you won't find anything?"

"Not necessarily. Most people hit the 'delete' key and think they are safe, but the file is still there. Using specialized applications or even formatting the drive would help, but some data remains and can be recovered. The only way to truly erase the data is to perform a few rounds of formatting and disk-wiping using specialized applications. Most people never do that."

“OK, that’s good.”

They came in for a landing. Cathy said good-bye; she was continuing with the plane to San Antonio. A black limo was waiting for John, Maggie, and David. It was about a thirty-minute drive to the ranch. As they were following the road amid gently rolling hills, Maggie and David studied the Williams file. Born in Houston in 1972, graduated from University of Texas in 1994 with degrees in economics and international business, worked as finance analyst from 1994 to 1996, MBA from Wharton Business School in 1998, went to work for a multinational energy company afterwards. Married Jenny Brown in 2000. Jenny Williams, nee Brown, born in Dallas in 1973, graduated from University of Texas in 1997 with an MA in history. Two sons, James and Richard, born in 2001 and 2003 respectively. Mitchell ran for Texas Senate in 2006, won. Ran for the governor in 2018, won. Ran for US presidency in 2020, assassinated.

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 1:47 p.m. CDT

“In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence... The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let this endanger our liberties or democratic processes.”

— Dwight Eisenhower, *Farewell Address*

The limo turned right and followed a long driveway, at the end of which was a large one-story ranch house. A small corral with four horses and a few other structures stood on the left of the house, and in the distance a large pond to the right glistened in the morning sun. Jenny Williams greeted them at the door. She was an elegant woman in her late forties with blonde medium-length hair, friendly brown eyes, and a broad smile.

Jenny hugged John Platt, and firmly shook hands with David and Maggie. “Very pleased to meet you”—in a Texas twang. Everyone got situated with a cup of coffee in a large living room. Jenny commented how empty the place was now, with both kids in college.

John was the first to get down to business. “Jenny, I am sorry, I know this is painful, but we are trying to investigate some of the circumstances around Mitchell’s death.”

Jenny nodded. “I know. Please don’t hold back. Ask anything. I would appreciate some closure. All I know for sure is that my husband and many others had been killed in a large explosion in a hotel in Philadelphia. And none of the subsequent speculations or theories made much sense to me.”

“Jenny, do you know who Jonathan Schulmann was?”

“I’ve heard the name. He may have been here once. He was one of the people killed with Mitchell.”

“Yes. I knew Jonathan for a long time, actually longer than I knew Mitchell. Jonathan was working at SEC, investigating the crisis of 2019.

We believe that he may have come across some important information.”

“What kind of information?”

“Probably related to who organized the crisis and profited from it. We don’t know for sure; we don’t have his data.”

“Why not? Shouldn’t SEC have it?”

“Evidently, they don’t. His research has disappeared.”

“They are the SEC, why can’t they investigate further?”

“We don’t know. We’re trying to understand what Jonathan found, how much of it he shared with Mitchell, and who else knew about it.”

“Do you think this may be related to Mitchell’s death?”

“We don’t know that either. We are looking for information; we are not ready to draw conclusions yet. We do suspect there may have been a connection here, and that your husband and Jonathan Schulmann were not in the same hotel by accident. Jenny, you were the closest person to Mitchell. Whoever made the decision to assassinate a presidential candidate, such a decision was not made lightly. What did Mitchell believe that would have convinced someone to kill him?”

Jenny rubbed her temples. “Sometimes I think it’s just a bad dream. Yes, Mitchell talked to me about his beliefs. He needed someone to talk to, to discuss his private thoughts. I was a history major, and he thought I could give him some perspective. I’d like to think I was able to do that. About seven, eight years ago he started talking to me about Dwight Eisenhower.”

“The Dwight Eisenhower? The president from the fifties?”

“Yes. Mitchell was re-reading Eisenhower’s speech, his warning about the military-industrial complex. Eisenhower was concerned about unwarranted influence and attendant corruption of the country by a coalition of groups with vested interests in particular areas.”

“But Eisenhower’s vision of the military-industrial complex did not come to pass?”

“Not really, although Mitchell did feel that the US spending almost forty percent of the global military budget was too much. Even a great

military can solve only that many problems. But Eisenhower's fear was not misplaced. Mitchell told me that, in his view, something had fundamentally changed at the end of the 20th century, when we began to evolve a financial complex that built unhealthy relationships with the government and regulatory sectors. It was a gradual transformation, not a sudden event. In 1996, banks were allowed to sell insurance. In 1997, they were allowed to buy securities firms. In 1999, the key provisions of the Glass-Steagall Act were repealed. By 2000, the financial sector was 20% of the country's economy, dwarfing our manufacturing. Mitchell said that we forged a 'financialized' crony capitalism where the financial industry used its leverage to capture an inordinate amount of the country's wealth while benefiting only a small portion of the society."

"As a president, was Mitchell planning to do something about it?"

"He knew what he wanted to do. He was working on how to do it, meeting with lawyers, economists, judges, and select legislators. It was not a simple issue, not something that could be done by a speech or one presidential order. Once such a corrupting influence gets established, it becomes self-reinforcing via campaign donations, revolving doors between industry, government, and regulators, and so on. Mitchell thought it would take a combination of legislative, electoral, regulatory, and cultural measures to effect real change."

"Did the 2019 crisis influence him?"

"It most definitely reinforced what he already believed in. Mitchell thought that this was a result of the Faustian bargain, where the financial sector for years enabled the government to live beyond its means while the government allowed the sector to profit out of proportion to its economic contribution."

"Was he open with this view? Because I don't recall him expressing his position this way."

"No, he was not. Mitchell was a pragmatist, not a revolutionary. He wanted to rebuild the system from within. He recognized that there are many voters that became supporters of the system, no matter how

broken, and the change would have to come gradually. Mitchell thought that 2019 was a wake-up call for many, and he wanted to be perceived as an agent of change but not a radical.”

A horse neighed, as if to remind them of the time.

Platt gathered his thoughts. “Jenny, we’d like to check if there was correspondence between Mitchell and Jonathan Schulmann. My young friend here”—he pointed at David—“is a computer expert. We would greatly appreciate it if he could take a look at any computers that Mitchell may have used.”

“Let me see. Mitchell had his laptop with him; whatever is left of it is at the FBI. The boys took their computers with them. There is my laptop, and there is a desktop in the study. I must tell you that the FBI already looked at them a year and a half ago.”

“Do you use any online storage?” asked David.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, do you know if your computers back up somewhere on the Internet?”

“Ah, yes. I use a MacBook and it backs up automatically. We have a computer person who comes occasionally to set things up. Should I call him?”

“Not at this point. I just have to know passwords.”

“Of course, I have them written on a piece of paper above the desk. Let me show you.”

Jenny excused herself and took David to a study where an HP computer with a large screen was perched on the desk. A list of passwords was indeed hanging above. Jenny smiled guiltily. “Our computer guy keeps making me put it away when he shows up, but I just hang it back up after he leaves. We don’t get many visitors now that Mitchell is gone.” She went away for a minute and came back with a translucent MacBook Pro. “And here is mine. Is there anything I can get for you?”

David thanked her and went to work.

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 2:29 p.m. CDT

The desktop had not been touched in a while. The last login was six weeks ago. David guessed it was also the last time the computer guy was here. David looked around the computer. Mitchell's e-mail was still active. At a quick glance, pretty much all of the recent e-mails were junk. There was music, there were photos, a few documents. None seemed like work stuff. David guessed that the incinerated laptop was Mitchell's primary computer. He plugged in the USB drive with Mohun's program and ran a simple query for "Schulmann." There were three hits, two were e-mails, and one was calendar entry for a phone call on June 8th, 2020. David went through the e-mails, one about arranging the call, the other talked about Schulmann coming to visit the ranch in late July. Just in case, he copied them to the USB drive. Then he started Mohun's program and ran queries for Changzoo Tongren, Novaya Energya, etc. Every search came up empty. David repeated the process for the MacBook Pro using the Mac version of the program, without success. David got up. There was nothing else to do here.

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 2:30 p.m. CDT

Jenny returned to the living room. “I think David has what he needs. Can I offer you anything?”

“No, thank you,” Platt replied. “But I would like to hear more about Mitchell. Anything else you can tell us about his plan as a presidential candidate?”

“As I said, purely economic issues were only a part of his thinking. He believed that we must affect a cultural change in the country, which was going to take a lot of time and effort. He’d been working on a new plan of educational and professional incentives.”

“But presidents have been talking about educational plans forever?”

“True, but in a piecemeal manner and usually within constraints imposed by powerful unions. We were by far number one in per-child spending but only seventeenth in global education rankings. Fewer and fewer people could keep up with new technologies, while other occupations were being replaced by automation or cheap foreign labor, leaving low-wage service jobs.”

Jenny stopped and took a sip of her now cold coffee. “I’m sorry. I know I am bitter. I have to pinch myself sometimes. Mitchell and I had been discussing this often. Pillow talk of a politician’s wife. And now the house is empty. He asked me if he should run, and I said yes because I did not want to blame myself later. I wish I’d said no ... I’m sorry, where was I?”

“Education,” Platt said quietly.

“Yes, of course. The subject dear to Mitchell’s heart. He thought that the best, the only way to truly grow a country’s wealth is to increase the productivity of its economy. He wanted our smartest kids to become entrepreneurs, scientists, researchers, engineers, educators—people that build products and companies, grow things, educate and entertain. We don’t need any more litigators and

speculators. Instead, we have more per-capita lawyers than any other country in the world, more than doctors or soldiers or firefighters or police. With all due respect to you John, do we really need that many lawyers?”

Platt responded with a smile. “My Georgetown law degree came in handy in running our company.”

“No doubt, but that’s not what most lawyers do. Don’t misunderstand me, the law is an honorable and necessary profession. But many lawyers are ‘rent seekers’, busy figuring out how to exploit regulations, find loopholes, etc. And it’s not just them. For years, Wall Street has been hiring the best and the brightest for their ‘financial engineering’ schemes - mostly speculation and arbitrage designed to skim money off others, to profit without producing. Mitchell was incensed that we even invented fancy new terms to hide the true meaning of legitimized thievery. What possible benefit to the society were the ‘high frequency trading’ systems, where firms would try to place their computers closer to exchanges and front-run orders of real customers?”

“Who do you think may have wanted to kill Mitchell?”

“That would be a long list. There could have been political motivations, there could have been financial ones. Immediately after the attack, the fingers were pointed at both extreme left and extreme right. The investigation has been inconclusive, and I am not good at speculating.”

David came back to the living room. Everyone looked at him expectantly. He admitted that he did not find anything of significance, except that it was clear that Mitchell and Jonathan had at least one phone call. He commented that Jonathan might have been here at the end of July.

Jenny said, “Yes, you might be correct. We had a meeting here on the ranch. I cannot remember the exact date, but this sounds right.”

David asked, “Who else was here on that day?”

“Let me see ... it was a fairly large meeting. Mike was there, so was George, Jim, Suzy ...”

“George?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. George Youngman was his consultant on international issues, Mike Black his chief of staff, Jim Zorn his campaign manager, and Suzy Yamamoto his senior advisor.”

“And all but George were killed in Philadelphia?”

“Well, there were others, too. We’ve known George for a long time. He was not in Philadelphia because his daughter was giving birth.”

“What about John Trimble?”

“Who?”

“John Trimble, the head of Mitchell’s security detail,” Platt explained.

“Oh yes, surely he was there. I didn’t think of mentioning him, security people were always there.”

“When did he join Mitchell’s staff?”

“I think about a year before. Wasn’t John killed in Philadelphia, too?”

“We are not one hundred percent sure of that,” Maggie said. “Do you know who hired him?”

“Oh my God, I don’t know for sure.”

“Do you remember what he looked like?”

“Of course. But we have pictures of Mitchell with Trimble in the background. Would you like to see them?”

“Yes, please,” David said.

Jenny came back and showed David a picture taken on a lawn in front of a building, probably an office of some kind. Mitchell Williams was in the center with a big smile on his face, shaking the hand of an elderly woman. A man standing behind them had a different hair color and a larger nose, but he was the “Thomas Mann” that had a beer with David in the Seattle airport.

Platt reminded everyone that they'd taken enough of Mrs. Williams's time. Jenny made them promise that they would let her know what they found out.

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 3:24 p.m. CDT

Platt raised the limo's privacy divider.

"So was that the man you saw at the airport?" asked Maggie.

David nodded. "He colored his hair and probably had a plastic surgery, but I am sure that was him."

"Then Petr's story may have been true." After a pause, Maggie spoke again. "And there is another thing. As Jenny said, why didn't SEC pick up Jonathan's investigation after he was killed? They are the SEC after all!"

"I wondered about this as well," John commented.

"There was something that Frank Gorman told us about Jonathan," David said. "According to Frank, Jonathan left the CFTC because he came across something important that his superiors did not want him to investigate. He didn't want to go along, and that's why he left."

"I know he didn't get along with the management at the CFTC. What is your point?" John asked.

"My point is that Jonathan may have come across something that his superiors at the SEC did not want to pursue. That would explain why nobody picked up the work."

"And we now know for sure that there was a connection between Williams and Schulmann," said Platt. "But we are not any closer to figuring out which one was the real target and who was behind the assassination."

They rode quietly for a minute, then John pulled out the files.

"We better learn about Ms. Suzy Yamamoto before we get to San Antonio."

Maggie opened her copy of the file. The face of a pretty young Asian woman was looking at her. Born in 1979 in Cupertino, CA. Straight-A student in school. Graduated from Berkeley in 1999 with degree in finance ("did it in three years," noted Maggie), and from

Harvard Law School in 2005. Met Chris Maidel in Harvard where he was studying in medical school. Worked with a hedge fund in Connecticut for a couple of years, probably waiting for Chris to finish school. They moved to Virginia in 2007 following his graduation. She worked in a law firm for a while, then in 2010 started at the CFTC. They moved to San Antonio in 2015, Suzy joined Williams's staff, her husband got a job at a local pediatric hospital. Two girls, Annette, born 2012, and Josephine, born 2015.

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 4:28 p.m. CDT

It was raining when they got to the house by half past four. Chris Maidel was waiting for them on a covered porch outside. He looked to be in his mid-to-late forties, thin, medium height, prematurely grey, with kind but sad eyes. After the round of introductions, the four of them sat around a rectangular table in a small living room, with John and David on one side, Maggie and Chris Maidel across from them.

John started. "Mr. Maidel, thank you so much for agreeing to meet with us. As I explained on the phone, we are trying to investigate some of the circumstances around your wife's death."

"Please understand that this has been hard on me, but it's been much harder on our ... my girls. Josephine has been waking up every night screaming for Suzy until a month ago." Maidel's voice broke. After composing himself, he continued. "I arranged for the neighbors to take Annette and Josephine to the river walk, together with their kids. They will be back around six. I will help you with anything I can until then, but I must ask that the meeting be over before they get back. Now, please go ahead; what do you want to know?"

"Mr. Maidel, do you remember Jonathan Schulmann?"

"Yes. I know Suzy worked with him at the CFTC, and we saw him a couple of times socially. He was a nice man. I am sorry he was killed."

"Jonathan was investigating the 2019 crisis for SEC. We believe that he may have come upon some information that may be related to what happened. We are trying to find it. David is a computer expert. While we're talking, would it be possible for him to take a look at any computers that your wife used?"

"Certainly. Her laptop was in her room in the hotel, away from where the blast was. It survived the explosion and was returned to us. It's just sitting there, I haven't really touched it since that day. I

presume that the FBI inspected it, but you are welcome to take a look. Please follow me.”

Maidel took David to a small cluttered office with three tables. One was piled high with what looked like medical magazines, one was neatly organized and had a Dell notebook sitting on top of it, and one was in the corner with what looked like an older all-in-one Dell desktop.

Chris pointed to the notebook. “Here’s Suzy’s laptop.”

“Is there a password?”

“Yes, it’s Chris0317. March 17th is my birthday.”

“Do you use any online backup?” David asked.

“Yes, we’ve been using FileBox service for a number of years. It’s tied to my e-mail chris.t.maidel@gmail.com, password Suzy0211.”

“Did your wife ever use this computer?” David pointed to the all-in-one.

“Very infrequently. It’s an old computer that we didn’t get rid of because it was working, and you never knew when your laptop would crash. It does not even have a password. You are welcome to look at it.”

David thanked him, thinking that there was a pattern to their passwords. Maidel went back to John and Maggie.

Like most computers, the laptop held a combination of personal and work stuff: lots of work documents, music, photos, a couple of movies. David ran Mohun’s program for “Schulmann.” Quite a few e-mails came up, dating back to 2018. It was clear that Schulmann and Yamamoto had kept in touch. A number of e-mails had been erased. Yamamoto must have used more than a “delete” button; the erasure was fairly thorough. David was not sure he had enough time to try restoring them. He went through the e-mails that remained, some dealt with arranging meetings or calls, some with business issues. He copied them to the USB drive. Then he ran queries for Changzoo Tongren and Novaya Energya. Searches came up empty. David then logged into

FileBox and ran searches there but came up with nothing except for copies of some archived e-mails he'd seen already.

David moved over to the desktop. It was indeed not used much, most files were dated 2018 or earlier. Just to be thorough, David plugged the USB drive into the all-in-one. The search for Changzoo Tongren produced two partial matches. Not sure if it was an accident or a sign of an attempted erasure, David searched for Novaya Energya. One partial match came back. David analyzed the hits from the program. Whatever file there was, it must have been erased with a commercial program. The erasure was thorough, some fragmented data survived, but not nearly enough for him to reconstruct the file.

"David?" John's voice called. John and Maggie were standing by the door to the study. "I just got a call from Jim Brobak, my friend from the Dallas FBI office. Unfortunately, we have to leave now. I'll explain on the way."

David said, "I need a few minutes." He looked for online backup programs, only FileBox showed up. David clicked on Google and chose Gmail. A page came up asking "ysuzy79" to enter the password.

John stepped in to remind him. "I'm sorry, we can't stay any longer."

David quickly copied what he could. They thanked Chris Maidel, who seemed happy to see them go.

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 5:43 p.m. CDT

Maggie was already in the limo.

Platt made sure that the privacy divider was up. “Did you find anything?” he asked David.

“She may have had the file, not on her work computer but on a little used desktop.”

“May have had? Is the file still there?”

“No, if it was there it was erased too thoroughly for me to recover. What about you and Chris?”

“Not really. We talked about Schulmann and Williams, and whether there was anything he could remember. He mentioned that she worked in finance for two years while he was finishing his medical school. She saw some ugly stuff and a person she did research for either committed suicide or was killed. That affected her deeply and shed did not like Wall Street much.”

“So why did we have to leave?”

“Jim Brobak called. Tokley alerted someone that we were inquiring about Schulmann. Jim received a call asking why I was looking into this and who my two associates were.”

“OK, Tokley did mention that this was highly irregular.”

“Jim was concerned. First, the call came from high up. He did not know exactly how high, but the caller outranked Jim and made it clear that he was acting on someone’s orders. Second, the speed with which they were on it, especially on the weekend. Something didn’t smell right.”

“What did Jim tell them?”

“What I told him. That Schulmann was my old friend and I belatedly wanted to find out more about what happened to him. Jim did not know who my “associates” were. I mentioned that I’d be in Japan for the next few days. He thought it would be good to leave for a while. He also thought that if they are that interested, they might

already be trying to track us. That's why I left in a hurry. I did not want to involve Chris Maidel any more than we already have. I think you should come to Japan with me."

Maggie did not like the idea. "Why? You said that they don't know our names."

"That's right. And this is another reason for me to hurry up and leave, so they can't easily question me about that. But it won't take them long to track you back to the Fairmont and get your names, probably just a day or two. Judging from Jim's voice, you are not safe. He was doing us a huge favor by warning us."

The limo came to a stop. Platt lowered the privacy divider. The driver said, "We are here, at Stinson Municipal Airport."

"Thank you. Give us a few minutes please," Platt said and raised the divider again.

David thought out loud. "John, I appreciate the offer. We probably still have a bit of time, and I figure we are not quite done here yet. There are still possible leads."

Platt retorted, "They will be looking at the same leads."

"And frankly, I don't know what I will do in Japan," David said.

Platt turned to Maggie. "What do you think?"

"Thank you for the offer, but I agree with David."

Platt exhaled. "OK. I'll be in Japan for the next four days, but please contact me with anything. And keep a low profile. Don't go to the Marriott. I'll tell Cathy to cancel the reservation. There is a taxi stand just ahead. Have them take you somewhere. Pay cash when possible. Do you have cash on you?"

David said they had cash and thanked him for all the help.

"Just the opposite," John said. "I should be thanking you. Both Mitchell and Jonathan were my friends, and I did nothing to investigate their deaths. I hope to hear from you soon."

Saturday, 4/30/2022, 6:04 p.m. CDT

“Manuscripts don't burn.”

— Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*

They stepped out of the limo. David and Maggie got their bags, said good-bye to Platt, and started walking to the taxi stand. “Do you think we made a mistake by not flying with John?” David asked.

“Perhaps, but I also wouldn't know what to do in Japan,” Maggie replied. She sighed. “I thought if Schulmann shared the file with anyone, it would have been Suzy Yamamoto. Is this the end of the road?”

“Not necessarily. There were traces of Schulmann's data on their desktop. She was not a computer expert. What would you have done in her shoes?”

“I think I would have used an online backup but different from the one my family uses.”

“And how would you make sure that the service was not discovered?”

“I would use a phony e-mail and get a free service, so there would be no credit card statements.”

“Right. We know that someone, most likely her, had at least once used a “ysuzy79” e-mail account at Gmail. We can narrow down the list of online backup services. And there seems to be a clear pattern to how her family was creating passwords; likely she continued along the same lines. It's been less than two years; the online storage company may not have deleted the file yet. I think we have a chance.”

They came to a taxi stand, waited in line for a couple of minutes and got into a cab. The driver turned around. “Where to?”

David held out a twenty dollar bill and asked, “What's the nearest decent hotel with good Internet service?”

The driver took the money. “Holiday Inn Express. They are popular with business travelers.”

It was no Fairmont, but as the driver promised, the Holiday Inn was comfortable and had high-speed Internet. They checked in, paid cash as Platt suggested, and went for a bite to eat. Both were starving. They had no car, and neither one felt like fine dining. Fortunately, there were many places within walking distance, so they grabbed some food at a casual Mexican restaurant and then hurried back to the hotel. They did not want to be out after dark, the downtown area didn’t feel safe. There were a lot of homeless people on the streets, and about three blocks from the hotel they passed by a long line at a soup kitchen.

David was anxious to get back to his computer. He started with trying to log into FileBox using ysuzy79@gmail.com, but no such user was found. He didn’t think she would have used their regular storage service anyway. It’s likely that Schulmann’s file— if it existed—was fairly large. Which service had more liberal free storage policies? Quick comparison showed it was XBackup. He went to XBackup service, tried ysuzy79@gmail.com with Suzy0211, then Chris0317 passwords. Nothing. Maggie was hovering over his shoulder.

David asked, “Can you get me their kids’ birthdays?”

She checked the file that Platt gave them. “July 22, 2012 and January 9, 2015.” David tried Annette0722, then Josephine0109. Nothing. Maggie figured out what he was doing and said, “Perhaps she used the year as well.” Suzy021179 did not work; neither did Chris031776.

The message popped up: “You have two login attempts left.” David took a deep breath and typed Annette072212.

It worked.

There were two files on the server, a smaller one named “analyzed082719” and a much larger one “data082419.” David clicked on the smaller file. Maggie grabbed his shoulder in excitement. But the file did not open, instead the message asked for a password. “It’s

encrypted,” David said. Same for the second file. Again, he went through the process of trying different name and birth date combinations of Suzy’s family, but nothing was working.

“Can you break the encryption?” asked Maggie.

“Yes, with brute force, but it will take months.”

“Do you think the file was encrypted by Suzy or by Jonathan?”

David thought for a moment. Then he typed “Rachel.”

The “analyzed” file opened.

There were hundreds of pages of text, numbers, and tables. It felt anticlimactic. David’s first thought was *how many people died in the last few days for this?*

The same password opened the larger file, but this one seemed to contain raw data. David went back to the first file. He turned to Maggie. “I’m afraid of what we will find.”

“Me, too. But we’ve gone this far; we have to know.”

Maggie pulled up a chair, sat next to him, and they started going through what must have been Schulmann’s research from August 24, 2019, less than two weeks before his death.

There was no executive summary, just detailed data and notes. It had gone well beyond what David saw in Jonathan’s early work or in Androssian’s blog.

“They were using the K-modes clustering algorithm with adaptive boosting, but Marchuk must have done some clever approach to computing the initial nodes ...,” David was getting lost in thought.

Maggie hit him on the shoulder: “What???”

“It’s a method for analyzing statistical data, but processing very large sets critically depends on choosing the starting points.” David caught himself. “OK, let’s not worry at the moment about how they got the results, let’s just look at the data.”

Jonathan, with Marchuk’s help, had done the painstaking work of tracing transactions through many levels of intermediaries. In most cases, the original large order was broken into a number of small orders sent to multiple parties, which in turn were divided into smaller

orders, and so on—typically going through five, six, or seven layers of intermediaries. By the time it was completed, the initial large order would be disaggregated into thousands of small transactions, each small enough to go largely unnoticed. Schulmann in effect had done a reverse aggregation, assembling the small transactions into the original large order. In some cases a large order was initially assembled from a number of smaller orders from individual investors, and Schulmann was able to track them down to the original bank or trading accounts.

It was difficult to read through all the data. David could only imagine how much work went into assembling it. The clock on a nightstand said 1:52 a.m. by the time he got to the last page. Maggie was trying to keep her eyes open, with little success.

Without detailed accounting, he could still see there were many trillions of dollars of transactions recorded, in currencies, stocks, gold, oil. Perhaps even more important were the names. Jonathan had uncovered not only companies, but in many cases individuals that placed the transactions. While most of the people or institutions were not familiar to David or Maggie, some were household names. They came from China, Russia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Turkey ... and the US. Highly placed individuals from the administration, the Congress, government organizations, banking institutions. David and Maggie were too tired to process the information at that point. They needed to get a few hours of sleep in order to think.

Sunday, 5/1/2022, 7:11 a.m. CDT

Maggie again woke up first. They were sleeping in their clothes, too exhausted at 2:00 a.m. to get properly ready for bed. She was one big step closer to reclaiming her life, but how exactly she had not figured out yet. She hadn't thought they were going to find the file, but they did. Was it luck? Maggie crawled out of bed and went to take a shower. By the time she was done, David got up, too. After he also showered, they went downstairs and grabbed breakfast at the hotel.

The place was not busy and they were able to find a table outside of others' hearing. David looked like hell: sagging skin, tired swollen eyes, dark stubble. He was intently looking past Maggie. She turned to see if there was anything or anyone behind her.

After the first cup of coffee, Maggie broke the silence. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. Just staring into space while thinking. Trying to connect the dots. Schulmann and Marchuk estimated that they analyzed and traced less than a third of all transactions."

"How do you know?"

"It was in the notes toward the end. Together with links to additional raw data."

"I don't remember seeing this." Maggie was puzzled.

"Yes, you conked out at that point." David smiled. "They were processing tens of billions of transactions looking for suspicious sequences. It's incredibly hard because the transactions have been broken into small ones, all under ten thousand dollars, and distributed through a multi-layered network of intermediaries. Clearly organized to avoid detection. It looks like Schulmann and Marchuk used advanced statistical analysis techniques to detect even the slightest outliers, where a particular account appears more than expected. I am not sure they would've been able to completely automate this process, more like a supervised learning algorithm."

Maggie could not quite process David's techno-speak. She shook her head. "No wonder they killed people for this."

"Yes. Kind of explains why nobody picked up his research after Schulmann died. Some of the names there were pretty high up the chain. Two SEC commissioners as far as I could tell. Members of the cabinet. Perhaps they thought they had covered their tracks well, but Schulmann showed otherwise. There must have been quite an effort to suppress any further investigation."

"You know they'll eventually kill us, too."

"I think we are pretty safe at the moment."

"At the moment, yes. But that won't last. Now the FBI is after us. They'll have our new names soon, and then what? I told you in Phoenix I wanted to use the information to get my life back."

"I remember what you said."

"I just don't quite know how to go about negotiating with these people."

And that's when David dropped the bomb. "We have to go to Moscow."

"What? Are you crazy? You are going to walk into a trap!" She raised her voice, attracting attention.

After a minute of quiet, when others' eyes turned away from them, David whispered, "Perhaps I am crazy. But the way I figure, a trap is not a trap if you walk into it on purpose and don't allow them to close the door. I believe that the road to safety lies through Nemzhov. Remember, Petr said that they had a way to influence the MSS. Probably others as well. So we have to convince Nemzhov that it's in their interests to keep us safe and to get others off our backs. And I can't think of a better way to do this than to show up at their door and say: 'We are here, but touch us and the file goes public.' It's a bit of reverse psychology, but in Nemzhov's shoes I would figure that someone who came to Moscow to tell it to his face is likely telling the truth. Speaking of which, I want to know the truth, too. We still don't

know for sure who killed Williams and Schulmann. Going to Moscow might be the only way to find out.”

Maggie stared out the window while drinking her coffee and then slowly, quietly responded. “First you go by yourself to meet five MSS agents, now you want us to show up at GRU’s doorstep. You truly are crazy. But you are also right. There is one logistical problem.”

“What is that?”

“You can’t just pick up and go to Moscow. Without a visa you won’t even get on the plane. And it takes months to get one.”

David deflated. “Well, so much for that idea.”

“But we can get around it.”

“How?”

“We fly to Kiev. You don’t need a visa to go to Ukraine. Then we fly to Moscow.”

“But don’t we have the same problem getting there from Kiev?”

“No. Just put \$100 into your passport, and they’ll let you on the plane. They don’t care. They’ll let you be the Russians’ problem.”

Maggie was already checking flights. “There is a flight leaving from New York’s JFK at 10:45 p.m., stopover in Amsterdam; we land in Kiev at 5:10 p.m. local time.”

“How about getting to New York?”

“There is a flight at 2:40 p.m., gets us there in plenty of time. Do you think you’ll be ready?”

“I can be. Would you want to take more time here?”

“No. It’s dangerous to hang around, and I’m anxious to have a resolution. The longer this goes on, the better the chances that they’ll find us. We may not have been the only ones following this trail.”

David wanted resolution as well. They went back to the room, splurged on business class for their flight reservations, and divided the tasks. Maggie made a reservation at the Hotel Ukraina in Kiev and went out to buy three pre-paid cell phones and an inexpensive laptop. David distributed Schulmann’s data files to a dozen previously set up servers and programmed them to e-mail the summary file with a

password to a prepared list of major newspapers, TV networks, radio hosts—about fifty addresses in all. He deliberated over timing and then chose four weeks. He also prepared a program to stop or change the counter and placed it on three other servers.

When Maggie came back with the phones, David used one to call Javier's voice mailbox and asked him to prepare another set of documents plus travel arrangements for him and Maggie. Ten minutes later a text came back, requesting more details and setting up a contact point.

Preparations out of the way, David dialed housekeeping and asked for a hammer. The woman on the other side sounded surprised, but a hammer was delivered. David physically destroyed the computers and the phones they'd used. They took the other two pre-paid phones and the newly purchased laptop and called a cab for the airport.

PART 4: INTO THE STORM

“Things never return to what they were.”
— Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*

Sunday, 5/1/2022, 3:11 p.m. CDT

The picnic's spot was selected poorly: a BBQ pit located in a corner of a small grassy clearing surrounded by trees. On one side behind the trees there was a rocky beach covered with driftwood. There were a few logs, but otherwise no comfortable place to sit.

A newly arrived visitor looked very lost. He was a gentleman in his thirties, nicely coifed, dressed in the nineteenth century attire of a long dark black coat, white shirt, and black pants. Not recognizing the place or the characters, he walked over to the BBQ pit. The pit was operated by a huge black cat that masterfully flipped burgers and hot dogs. The visitor cleared his throat. "Err... dear Sir, can you tell me where I am?"

"The name is Behemoth, at your service. Whom do I have the honor of speaking to?" replied the cat.

"My name is Alexis de Tocqueville."

"Ahh, the philosopher and historian. You are at a picnic, obviously."

The historian looked wildly around him. The clearing was populated by strange characters. Most were men, although there were a few women, including a lady dressed in black underwear and a black bowler hat. They were gathered in small circles of their acquaintances, talking and looking around. The largest group consisted of five small people with big bare feet, a dwarf, and four men, one of whom had strange pointy ears. The second largest group congregated around the BBQ and consisted of, in addition to the cat, three men and a pale woman.

"You are probably wondering who all these creatures are and what you are doing here?" asked a man standing next to the cat. He was tall, dark-haired, with penetrating black eyes. He wore a black-and-red smoking jacket and black pants. The end of a thin gold chain hanging around his neck disappeared under the jacket. Had the historian been born about a century later, he might have thought he was talking to a middle-aged Hugh Hefner.

"Yes, very much so," de Tocqueville stammered.

"Allow me to introduce myself then. I have different names, but for our meeting let's say my name is Woland."

“Woland?”

“Yes. You many have recognized the name from Goethe’s work. Goethe provided me with a wonderful, poetic description. Less sophisticated people gave me cruder names, such as Devil, Satan, Lucifer, Fallen Angel.”

De Tocqueville took a step back.

Woland smiled. “Please, you don’t have to worry. You see—no hoofs. And by the way, the rumors of me leading people into temptation are blown out of all proportion. Believe me, people fall into temptation just fine without my help. As to this particular event—what you have here are characters of different books. It’s a dream. Everyone here, including yourself, is strictly by the dreamer’s invitation.”

With that, Woland formed a megaphone with his hands and called out in a booming voice, “The food is ready. Please come to the table! Hurry up, hurry up!”

The characters made their way over, each group warily eyeing others.

Woland was smiling broadly. “Welcome, welcome! Please, form a circle. Now, let’s do some introductions. This small group that previously gathered around the BBQ pit is my immediate retinue.” Woland nodded at the black cat. “Many of you have already met Behemoth. He is the one handing out burgers and hot dogs. This thin tall man is my valet, Koroviev, the short scary-looking character is hitman Azažello, and the pale woman is witch and vampire Hella. There are a few more characters from *The Master and Margarita*: Yesbua and Pontius Pilate”—he pointed to two men in robes and sandals engaged in a discussion—“and the man in a greasy skullcap is the Master, with the pretty woman next to him being the famous Margarita.”

Woland pointed to the group on the right. “On this side we have characters from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, Franz.” Sabina was the woman in a black bowler hat. She now had on a jacket that Franz put over her shoulders.

Azažello grinned. “Why is she in her underwear?”

Franz angrily retorted, “Don’t blame her; she is written this way!”

“Exactly.” Woland smiled. “Don’t pay attention to Azažello; he thinks he is a charmer.”

Woland gestured to his left. “Five hobbits: Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, master dwarf Gimli, the elf Legolas, wizard Gandalf, and the two men

Aragorn and Boromir are from Lord of the Rings. Wow, wow, what's wrong?" Woland shouted as the group unsheathed their swords.

Aragorn pointed to Woland's chest. "The Ring! The Ring of Power!"

There was indeed a ring on a golden chain that escaped the confines of his smoking jacket and was now hanging off Woland's neck.

Woland threw back his head and laughed so loud that a flock of crows took off from the nearest tree in panic. After a good laugh, he wiped tears from his eyes and said, "My dear Aragorn, you are not in your book anymore. You may have destroyed the physical ring in Middle Earth, but you can't destroy the concept as long as humankind is around. That's just a part of what you humans are. And yes, I am the keeper of the ring and have been such since Homo sapiens started walking on two legs."

Frodo did not sheath his sword. "And do you have other rings that are bound to it?"

"But of course. I've been giving them out for centuries. As long as people desire power, there is a market for my rings."

"Well, let's put an end to it then!" Frodo cried out, rushing at the much larger man.

"David! David!" Someone shook him.

Sunday, 5/1/2022, 5:02 p.m. CDT

Maggie looked at David as he was quietly snoring. He'd fallen asleep a few minutes after the plane took off. She mused that it had been only nine days since he'd walked into the restaurant, bleeding, ragged, and confused. That man was a far cry from David of this morning, calmly organizing to face killers. Before she had seen him as somewhat smart but definitely not cool. Watching him propose to directly confront a notorious intelligence organization and then take charge, well, it was a different kind of cool, but it was cool nevertheless. They might yet come out of this alive.

David started screaming somewhere over Tennessee. She shook him awake— “David, David!”—forgetting to use his new name. He woke up, looking around wildly.

The flight attendant hurried over. “Mr. Brockman, would you like anything to drink?” The realization of where he was registered in his eyes. Taking advantage of business class privileges, David asked for a glass of wine. Maggie opted for one as well.

Sipping the wine, Maggie asked David, “So who is Frodo?”

“What?”

“You were screaming, ‘No, Frodo, no!’ I had to wake you up.”

“Oh, I see. I was dreaming. It’s a character from the *Lord of the Rings* series.”

“What is that about?”

David gave her a look of disbelief. “You mean you never read the book or saw the movie?”

“No. I remember hearing about the book, but I was not into reading fairy tales, at least not after I was older than five. There was a movie playing about fifteen years ago or so. The boys in the school were pretty excited about it, but I never went.”

“It is a fairy tale, but it’s so much more than that. It’s really about the struggle between good and evil.”

“So is at least half of all literature.”

“True.” David smiled. “But this one is special. It’s such an epic story of courage and friendship, with great and colorful characters. And in the end the fate of the world rests in the hands of Frodo Baggins, a little hobbit ...”

“A hobbit?”

“It’s a mythical creature, a small person, kind of a mix between a man and a rabbit. Frodo has to carry the great ring of power to be destroyed.”

“Why did it have to be destroyed?”

“Because the power it had corrupted everyone who touched it.”

“That actually makes sense.”

“So you see, it’s not strength or magic that destroys evil, but the bravery of someone who is physically weak, but spiritually strong.”

“Yes, sure,” Maggie said, thinking *I can’t believe a grown man is buying into this mythical stuff.*

The captain’s voice came over the speaker: “Ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be landing in New York shortly.”

Monday, 5/2/2022, 10:06 a.m. CEST

“There is no perfection only life”

— Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being*

When the Europe-bound plane took off from JFK, Maggie commented that it would be very early morning in Kiev, and they both should try to get a bit of sleep, so they would not be totally wrecked by jet lag. They managed to sleep fitfully for about five hours. Then the sun’s light started sneaking in through some of the partially closed windows. People began to stir. Flight attendants walked around offering coffee and breakfast.

David was watching the clouds outside. He liked long airplane flights; it was a rare opportunity to avoid the constant interruptions of daily life. It gave him a chance to clear his mind and think. The likely logic of the events in 2020 was becoming clearer in his mind. He could not be sure, and he might never have a proof, but this trip might help to cement his convictions. *Cui Bono?*

Maggie said, “When we are in Kiev, would you mind terribly if we stop to see my parents? I know it’s not fair because we didn’t go to see yours.”

David thought about it and said, “I don’t mind. My parents’ place might be watched, but I don’t think yours will be. I doubt they’ll be expecting us to show up in Kiev. As a matter of fact, would you like to stay in Kiev for a day, spend more time with them?”

“No, I just want to stop by for a short visit.”

“OK. I do have one condition, though.”

“Which is?”

“You have to tell me the ending of the book that you’ve been named after.”

“The ending? When did you read it?” Maggie sounded pleased.

“James gave me the book, but I didn’t have a chance to finish it.”

“Why?”

“Why didn’t I finish?”

“No, why did you start?”

“I was curious who you were named after.”

Maggie smiled. “OK, how far did you get?”

“I just made it into the second part. Woland offered Margarita a bargain: be the Queen of his Midnight Ball and get a chance to reunite with her beloved. She accepted, turned into a witch, flew over Moscow, and took revenge on one of the people that persecuted the Master.”

“Let’s see, what happens after? Woland offers Margarita one wish. He expected she would ask for the Master because that’s what she wanted the most. But instead she asks that Frieda be forgiven.”

“Who is Frieda?”

“A woman she meets at the Great Ball. Frieda was raped by a man she worked for, gave birth, and suffocated the baby with a handkerchief. Every morning she wakes up in Hell, and the handkerchief is there. She tried burning it and drowning it, but every morning it’s there.”

“What happens?”

“Woland forgives Frieda. But he gives Margarita another wish and reunites her with the Master. And Woland restores the manuscript that the Master burned.”

“Is that the end?”

“Not quite. Woland brings them to the place of peace, where they can spend eternity together. And Pontius Pilate is reunited with Yeshua after 2,000 years.” Maggie shook her head. “Just saying all this, I realize what a poor job I am doing in trying to explain the book.”

“Do Yeshua, Pilate, the Master, and Margarita all end up together?”

“No, Pontius Pilate joins Yeshua in the place of light, but the Master and Margarita only get to the place of peace.”

“Why?”

"I think because the Master was guilty of cowardice. He did not conquer his own fear, stopped dreaming, stopped believing in himself and in Margarita, gave up."

"And why didn't Margarita get to go to the place of light?"

"Because she loved the Master, and there is a price for that. She had to share his fate."

"I presume that Margarita was your favorite character?"

"My mother always loved the character for her devotion, her daring, her lack of fear. I love her most for forgiving Frieda. But to be honest, Woland is my favorite character."

"Woland?"

"I know, I know. Sounds horrible when you like the Devil most. But in the book he is a fallen angel: sympathetic, with a cynical but powerful insight into human hearts. Compassionate ..."

"Compassionate?"

"He is almost sad, sitting in judgment but forgiving. He gives people opportunity to sin, but always provides a choice. I sense that he hopes you'll choose the right path. And if you don't, it's usually not death but some comical slap that he administers. I think Bulgakov wanted to remind us that, while we don't choose our circumstances, we are free to choose how we act."

"I thought Yeshua was the most likable."

"Perhaps. I just don't believe in forgiveness and mercy quite as much."

David mulled it over and concluded he was out of his league and should read the book again. He changed the topic. "Do you miss Kiev?"

"Less than before. I grew up there. I miss some of my friends, but I've been gone for nine years now and people forget about you. 'Out of sight, out of mind,' as you Americans say. I miss Khreshchatyk Boulevard and its beautiful chestnut trees. Young people's favorite pastime during summers was to walk the boulevard and try to pick up members of the opposite sex. I miss Dnieper and its parks, where we

would go cross-country skiing in the winter and sunbathing in the summer. And most of all, I miss my parents. But I feel like my home is in California now. At least I thought it was. Now I'm not sure where it is."

Monday, 5/2/2022, 5:16 p.m. EEST

They landed in Borispol's airport, smoothly glided through customs ("Welcome to Ukraine, Mr. and Mrs. Brockman"), and took a cab to the hotel. The ride was only about forty minutes. David looked out the cab's window with curiosity. They checked into the hotel around 6:30 p.m. local time. It was located on a large square, the building reminding David of some of the New York hotels from the mid-twentieth century. After dealing with a crabby clerk downstairs, Maggie made flight reservations to Moscow for the next morning. They made their way to their tenth floor room. Neither felt sleepy, it was morning in San Antonio.

David stood by the window, there was still enough light to see the square in front of the hotel. "This feels like a pretty old hotel."

"Yes, it's been here for at least sixty years. Old Soviet architecture. Used to be called Moskva for Moscow, but after the independence it was renamed into Ukrayina for Ukraine."

"And what is this square?"

"This is Independence Square, or Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Ukrainian. It became known abroad as Maidan Square, although 'maidan' actually translates as 'square,' kind of silly."

"So when you were telling me about demonstrating on Maidan Square at fifteen, this is where it was?"

"Yes." Maggie pointed to the right of the tall column in the middle of the square. "That's where I was. We'd been there for days. We did not want to leave, or else the authorities would close it down ..." Her voice trailed off.

"You miss that time?"

"I miss the feeling I had. There was passion, there was hope. We fought against fraudulent government and we did it peacefully, without bloodshed. Yes, I miss it."

"You grew up close to here?"

“My parents live pretty close, only about a twenty-minute walk. Say, I know you must be hungry—do you mind if we go see them now? They would feed us.”

“We can’t just drop by for dinner!”

“Don’t be silly. They will get offended if we refuse to eat.”

They walked out of the hotel into the square. Maggie pointed to the column in the middle. “This is Independence Column, with a statue of Mother Ukraine on top.” The square was crossed by a broad street lined up with stately chestnut trees. Maggie explained, “This is the famous Khreshchatyk Boulevard. This was all destroyed during the war and rebuilt afterwards.”

They crossed Khreshchatyk, went by a beautiful fountain on the right, and started winding their way up. Maggie pointed to a church at the top of the hill. “Andreevskaya, or St. Andrew’s Church. It was built in the eighteenth century, so it’s relatively new by our standards.”

They made a couple of turns and found themselves in front of an old five-story-tall brick house. “This is it,” Maggie said. David followed her up the stairs to the third floor where she rang the bell of the first flat on the left.

Monday, 5/2/2022, 7:27 p.m. EEST

“The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.”

— Alexis De Tocqueville

They heard sounds of someone coming to the door, and a man’s voice said, “*Kto tam?*”

“*Eto ya,*” Maggie responded.

There was an involuntary gasp, the door swung open, and an elderly gentleman rushed out and hugged Maggie. “Ritochka! Ritochka!” He must have been tall when younger, but now he was stooped, frail, and mostly bald but for a circle of white hair. He was wearing a jacket, a flannel shirt, khakis pants, and slippers.

There was another “Ritochka!” call from inside the flat, and a short woman came rushing out and hugged Maggie from the other side. After a few moments of hugging, crying, and kissing, they noticed David standing behind, let go of their daughter and looked from him to Maggie expectantly.

Maggie introduced them. “David—my parents.”

The man extended his hand to shake David’s and said in an accented but good English, “Eugene Sappin. Nice to meet you.”

The woman clearly did not have the same command of English. “Hello. Maria.” Maggie explained that her dad spoke English, but her mom did not, and that Ritochka was a diminutive for Rita, which was a shortened form of Margarita.

They went inside. The flat was not large—it looked like it had a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom—but comfortable, with Persian rugs, pictures and portraits on the walls, a couch and a reclining chair. Outsized cherry-wood bookcases bulged with rows of books. In the middle of the living room was a large round table. Without asking, Maggie’s mother rushed to the kitchen, and

plates of food started appearing on the table: borsht, cutlets, potatoes, herring, a couple of salads, a bottle of wine. She gesticulated to David to sit down and eat. "Please, please." She kept lightly touching Maggie as if to make sure she was not dreaming, her daughter was really here.

Maggie told David, "Why don't you eat, and I'll tell my parents some of the story in Russian, so my mother can understand."

David nodded. In the ensuing conversation David understood a few words and names, such as Brockman, but for the most part he just concentrated on the food. Whatever she was telling them must have been both scary and flattering to David, because the parents were simultaneously gasping in horror and looking at David with admiration. As David was done eating, Eugene said, "David, thank you so much for saving our daughter's life."

David blushed and replied, "She saved my life, too."

"So are you going to Moscow to confront these people?"

"Yes, we are. Do you think it's a mistake?"

"No, not if what Rita is telling us is correct and you have stored the information securely. It's better to be on the attack. They won't expect it. Do you know what you are dealing with?"

David admitted that his knowledge of the KGB and its successors was generally limited to James Bond movies.

"These people are ruthless but pragmatic. They are like mafia. You have to act and think like them, too."

Maria suddenly broke into a long and emotional tirade in Russian. Stalin's name was mentioned a few times. Eugene sighed and turned to David. "My wife wants me to make sure that you truly understand the history of the organization you are confronting. They are descendants of KGB and NKVD. Over the past century they killed tens of millions of their countrymen. They terrified and suppressed hundreds of millions. Our parents grew up in fear of a knock on the door in the middle of the night. These people are running Russia now. They have big ambitions; they want more."

Maria broke in again, pointing to David and saying something. Eugene got up, went to one of the bookcases, rummaged there, and came back with a thick old-fashioned photo album. He started showing David black-and-white pictures, yellow with age. “Maria’s grandparents. Died in 1930 from the famine that Stalin engineered. They confiscated food supplies from the Ukrainian peasants, did not allow them to move, condemned millions to die from hunger. This is my aunt, killed with her child by the Nazis in Babyi Yar in 1941, turned in by the neighbors jealous of her large flat. My uncle, denounced and arrested as an enemy of the people in 1952, died in Siberia during his first winter there.” He paused. “There is more, but each family here has such an album. A hundred years of power-hungry people running this country, turning neighbor against neighbor.”

Eugene stopped to catch his breath and gathered himself. “I think there is something you Americans don’t understand. Even at your worst times, you gave us a reason for hope. It’s not that you were perfect or always right. But in the end, in things that mattered, you tried to do the right thing. I remember when I was still a young man in 1974, you fired your president. Do you realize how shocking it was to us, those who had only one candidate to ‘vote’ for in any election? The president was like our party chief, and the American people said ‘You are still not above the law!’ We grew up with the knowledge that the law is different for them and for us, that ‘some animals are more equal than others’—and you said ‘Not here, not in America!’ And then Reagan came and said ‘Tear down that wall!’ and the wall came down. You gave us hope that we could be like that, too, the country that was both free and strong. And now that hope is fading because once again you are tearing yourself apart, but this time not for a cause, this time because you have gotten too complacent and greedy and became just another country.”

David protested. “But we are not special. We *are* just another country, a group of people thrown together, carrying similar passports.”

Eugene shook his head. "Of course you say you are not special. And others will tell you that you are not. You choose to be what you want to be. You were blessed with freedom and opportunity, and also given a burden to carry. You can beat your chest 'I am special, I am exceptional' and be an arrogant ass. Or you can quietly whisper to yourself: 'The people that founded this country stood for something and I will act to honor that.' Not special, not imperial, but righteous and strong."

"Please, Dad," Maggie whispered, "don't put it on him. I lived in America for nine years. They don't want the burden."

Eugene was looking at David, as if David was somehow representing America. "God bless you, you did carry the burden for many years. You destroyed communism, you helped to destroy fascism. Perhaps you are tired and you want someone else to carry the load. But there is nobody else. People tell you that you are weak; they write books about it and you believe them. It's easy to see the weaknesses of democracies; it's not as easy to see their strengths. America is not a cult or a religion; democratic people don't need holy causes. Life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, that's all. From Darius and Xerxes to Hitler and Tojo, tyrants underestimated democracies. You might be underestimating yourselves now."

Eugene glanced briefly at his wife and then continued. "There are many that delight in your comeuppance. But also many that grieve. Our lives are almost over. It's not for us, it's for the young people that I hope that you don't give up, that what one of your presidents described as a shining city on the hill will return."

He stopped, overcome with emotion. "What I am trying to say is, please do what you have to do. We are not afraid of them anymore. We don't want to be afraid of them ever again. Thank you for letting us see our daughter one more time." His voice broke. Maria was crying already.

They said a long good-bye at the door, with lots of hugs, kisses, and tears. David got hugs from both Eugene and Maria.

Tuesday, 5/3/2022, 4:16 a.m. EEST

She is lying on a dirty gravel path, face down, her body screams. A heavy boot hits her left kidney, and she exhales a howl of horror and pain. Then another boot slams into her spinal cord, shattering vertebrae, and this pain is like a white blizzard covering her eyes.

Maggie woke up, hyperventilating, even though she realized this was a dream. It was only a mile from here. She could run there in ten minutes. Twelve years, but being so close still terrified her. Thank God her parents did not ask. David did not know. He could not understand why she had to go slowly on the way back, as she had to force her legs to move. He could not understand why in bed she gently pushed him away earlier tonight. She hid behind jet lag, but it was a mixture of an old fear, anxiety, and the guilt ...

Maggie walked to the window, and tried to peer through the darkness. As if she could see into the past. As if she could change it. September 14, 2010. Pavel had asked her out. They went out once during the summer. He was twenty like she, a skinny boy that dreamed of becoming a pilot. She was not attracted to him, but Pavel's eyes lit up so much when he saw her, she did not have the heart to say no. After a cheap dinner, they walked towards the river and started wandering through the park. Pavel led her off the beaten path. She knew he was gathering courage to kiss her.

Two men stepped in front of them. Maggie did not see where they came from. In the dark, she couldn't see them well. They just stood menacingly. Pavel and Maggie stopped and turned to go back. Two more figures emerged from the dark.

Pavel pushed her and screamed, "Run!" And she started running. She'd always been a good runner, and because this was not a real date she was wearing comfortable shoes. She heard screams behind her, but her mind was focused on the heavy breathing of her pursuers. She could hear them getting closer, so close that she could smell the

alcohol on their breaths. Then one of them stumbled and fell with a yelp, but the other kept going. Just as she thought that her heart was going to explode out of her chest, the steps behind her grew fainter. She kept running as hard as she could and then someone was calling to her, and she realized she was surrounded by people, and two policemen were making their way to her.

Once she could talk, she told them what happened. She went back with them to look for Pavel. Other policemen were called. It took an hour to find him, bleeding and unconscious. A policeman asked her why she did not call for help earlier. She was running; she had to put as much oxygen as she could into her lungs so she could outrun the men chasing her. Didn't they understand that you can't run and call for help at the same time?

She came to see Pavel in the hospital. He did not recognize her. More than a hundred blows, the doctor told her. He sustained brain damage and was partially paralyzed. She was sitting by his bed when Pavel's mother came and told her to leave. "He was defending you and you ran away and did not even call for help!" Maggie tried to explain, but the mother just spat, "Get out!"

Pavel's family moved away. She tried writing to him, but there was no response. The attackers were never found. She was telling David how she admired Margarita for forgiving Frieda. Who was she kidding? Who was the one needing forgiveness?

When she'd moved to LA, the nightmares became weekly instead of daily. She thought of Pavel often. Whenever she did, a wave of nausea would come over her, making her hands clammy. Imagining what might have been going through his head as he pushed her away and screamed, "Run!" She hoped he lost consciousness quickly and did not feel the full extent of the blows falling on his broken body. She hoped he was at peace. Because she was not. No matter how far she ran, she could not get away.

Tuesday, 5/3/2022, 1:29 p.m. MSK

The \$100-in-a-passport trick worked without a hitch. The officer waved them through with “Have a wonderful trip.” David had an extra spring in his step; he woke up excited. Feeling himself in charge, he cherished the coming confrontation. But Maggie seemed quiet and hesitant. Her face looked stressed and older than her age, which David by now knew to be thirty-two.

To fill the void, David asked, “Have you been to Moscow before?”

“Yes, twice. Last time eleven years ago.”

“Did you like it?”

“Not particularly.”

David left her alone, sensing she was not in a talkative mood. He wondered what he would have been doing today, had John Trimble not picked him out of the crowd eleven days ago.

The Ukraine Airline flight landed in Sheremetyevo on schedule. They filled out their entry cards on the plane and proceeded to passport control. An unfriendly-looking officer with a long face and a bulbous reddish nose did not bother to show any enthusiasm. He looked at their documents, and said with a rough-sounding accent, “Mr. and Mrs. Brockman? Where are your visas?”

“What visas?” David innocently inquired.

“Visas to enter Russia,” explained the officer, who was clearly thinking he was dealing with two idiots.

“Nobody told us we need a visa,” David said.

“Where did you come from?”

“Kiev.”

“And they let you on the plane like this?”

“Yes.”

“Bunch of Ukrainian morons!” An impatient line was forming behind them. The officer picked up his phone. “*Dva dyrnikih amerikantsa bez vizji.*”

Maggie whispered into David’s ear, “Two dumb Americans without a visa.”

Two soldiers appeared, took the documents from the customs officer, and motioned Maggie and David to follow them. They went to a small room with two tables. One of the tables had three chairs, two on one side, and one on the other. A soldier gestured to David and Maggie to put their rolling carry-ons on one table and then to sit at the other table. The soldiers opened the bags. The one looking through Maggie’s bag started slowly going through her clothes, picking up underwear and looking at it against the light. He was making comments to his colleague that David did not understand but figured to be lewd by how Maggie uncomfortably shifted in her chair.

An officer came in, this one in a uniform with epaulettes. He nodded curtly, took David’s and Maggie’s documents from the soldiers, sat across the table, and studied the documents without looking up. Then he said in reasonably good English. “Your names?”

“Daniel and Alena Brockman,” Maggie answered.

“But you are not originally from America, are you?”

“No, it says in my passport I was born in Prague.”

At this one of the soldiers turned and commented, “*Cheshskaya blyad, podkhvatila amerikantsa i viebivaetsa.*”

Maggie turned crimson, so David figured that whatever was said was not flattering. He’d had enough.

He leaned toward the officer and put as much command in his voice as he could muster, “Look, you better go call GRU General Nemzhov and tell him that David Ferguson and Margarita Sappin are here and we have the Schulmann file.”

This was so sudden and unexpected that the officer leaned back away from David and almost toppled in his chair. The two soldiers

froze over the new development. After recovering his balance, the officer stammered out, “What?”

David repeated slowly, “Call GRU General Nemzhov and tell him that David Ferguson and Margarita Sappin are here and we have the file.”

At this point Maggie added with a vicious smile, “*Ti lutcshe toropis esli ti ne khochesh popast v Sibir ili khuzhe.*” She translated in David’s ear, “I told him to hurry up if he does not want to end up in Siberia or worse.”

The officer was clearly paralyzed, not quite able to comprehend the sudden change and whether it was some sick joke. David said, “Go!”

The command must have broken the officer’s indecision—or else he figured that being embarrassed with a joke is better than ending up in Siberia if this was real. He got up and left the room without a word.

The two soldiers looked fearfully at Maggie, since she spoke Russian and must have understood what they were saying. She snarled at them, “*Polozhi moi veschi obratno!*” The soldier that was searching her things put everything back, carefully closed the bag, and tried to flatten himself invisibly against the wall.

About ten minutes passed in silence. David hoped neither Maggie nor the soldiers could hear how fast his heart was beating. What if this insane gamble was all wrong? He did not know much about Russia, but he’d heard of *gulags*, where people would disappear never to be heard from again, where life was so miserable as to make death a welcome escape. Maggie put her hand on his knee to stop it from trembling.

The door swung open and the officer rushed in with a false smile on his face, the kind people use to cover their fear. “I am so sorry, how could I have possibly known?” He turned to the soldiers and barked a command. With trembling hands they zipped the bags and put them down on the floor. The officer turned back to David and Maggie and repeated, “I am so sorry. I hope these idiots were not hard on you. Please follow me.” When David and Maggie reached for their bags, he

begged them, "Please allow us." And again he barked at the now-ashen soldiers who obediently picked up the bags.

The surreal procession—first the officer, who kept turning back gesturing and babbling, "Please, please, this way, follow me," then empty-handed Maggie and David, and then the two scared soldiers rolling their bags—marched through the airport amid stunned onlookers.

"Where are we going?" David demanded.

"They are sending cars for you. Please, this way," replied the officer. He must have been too scared to elaborate who "they" were. There was a line where some kind of luggage screening have been taking place and someone tried to intercept them, but the officer said, "*Propusti! Srochno!*" while placing a hand on his gun. The screener raised his hands and backed away.

They went through the doors to the outside. The usual airport scene was taking place there, with cars double-parked, people greeting each other, loading and unloading their luggage. The officer said something to the soldiers. They carefully placed Maggie's and David's roll-ons by their feet, and started screaming at drivers of cars in front of them, gesturing for them to get out of there. When one of the drivers tried to argue, the officer removed his gun from its holster. No other word was necessary. People and luggage were piled into cars that took off with tires screeching. Another car tried to get into the empty space, but the officer stepped into the road with a gun still in his hand. For the next few minutes, David and Maggie were in a bubble, surrounded by airport madness but only the officer and the two soldiers near them.

The officer kept saying, "They'll be here soon." David felt embarrassed by all the attention.

Two large S-class Mercedes sedans pulled to the curb. The officer tried to open the door for David and Maggie while saying, "Everything is fine." But he was rudely pushed aside by a man dressed in a gray

business suit wearing a blue tie. Another similarly looking man, but this one in a black suit with a green tie, approached them.

He asked, speaking almost perfect English, “Mr. Ferguson? Ms. Sappin?” David and Maggie nodded. “I apologize for any mistreatment you may have suffered at the hands of these people. Please ...” David tried to get his luggage, but another suit—there seemed to be quite a number of them around at that point—was already loading it into the second Mercedes. David and Maggie slid inside.

The car took off, followed by the second one. The front seat passenger, the one in a gray suit with a blue tie, turned back. “Did you make your hotel reservations?”

David and Maggie shook their heads. “No.”

“Good. We’ll put you in the Ritz-Carlton on Tverskaya. It’s a wonderful hotel, right by the Red Square.” The man got on his mobile phone, giving directions in Russian.

Tuesday, 5/3/2022, 3:18 p.m. MSK

On the way from the airport, David counted three giant billboards of Russia's leader looking confidently forward. They drove in silence through heavy city traffic and pulled up to the entrance of the hotel. A liveried man started opening the car's door, but the gray suit said something and the man disappeared. David and Maggie followed the suit inside, with two other suits rolling their bags. The lobby looked well-appointed and luxurious.

The gray suit led them to check-in, where he told a young woman with a professional smile on her face, "This is Mr. and Mrs. Brockman; they have reservations." The hostess quickly checked. "Of course. You are booked in the Ritz-Carlton Suite. How many keys would you like?"

"Two," David answered.

"Here you go. You are on the fifth floor; the elevators are to your right."

"Don't you want my credit card?"

"Oh no, Mr. Brockman, the room has already been taken care of."

As they were walking toward the elevators, they were intercepted by a plump man who said while gesticulating with his hands, "Mr. and Mrs. Brockman, welcome to Moscow! My name is Anton Bogomirov. I am a concierge here. Do you have any plans for tonight? A restaurant or theater tickets perhaps?"

Maggie said, "I'd like to go to the Bolshoi."

"Of course, wonderful choice. There is a Classical Ballet Festival on now. We'll call your suite with the arrangements."

The gray-suited man tried to escort them further, but Maggie said firmly, "Thank you, we are good," and grabbed her roll-on. David did the same, and they marched into the elevator, leaving the suits behind.

As the door closed, Maggie dissolved in laughter. "Did you see their faces? They were like abandoned lovers!"

David started laughing as well. “Nemzhov’s name is like a magical word in fairy tales. Mention it and locked doors open.”

They got off the elevator and walked to their suite. It was at least twice as large as the house David was renting in Culver City. A spacious room had a grand piano and a dining area. Floor to ceiling windows offered a view of the Kremlin, Red Square, and St. Basil’s Cathedral.

Maggie went to check out the rest of the place and David heard her saying, “Look, there’s an office, a Library, a marble bath, and even a sauna!” She came back, threw herself on the bed and started laughing. “The face of that officer in Sheremetyevo when you said ‘Call GRU General Nemzhov’! I won’t forget it as long as I live! And that soldier that was holding my panties—he dropped them like they were on fire! Oh my God.”

“I was scared,” admitted David.

“So was I,” Maggie said. Then she again dissolved laughing with tears in her eyes, “That march through the airport!”

Just after she calmed down, the phone rang. David picked up.

“Hello, this is Anton Bogomirov. I have your tickets for tonight’s Bolshoi performance. It starts at seven. Please stop by my desk on your way to pick them up. Would you like to arrange for a dinner beforehand?”

David promised to call him back, hung up, and turned to Maggie. “Well, looks like you’ve got your Bolshoi tickets. I didn’t know you were into ballet.”

“I’m not,” Maggie said, “but I want to see the Bolshoi.”

“Do you want to have dinner before?”

“Yes, I am starving. But I don’t really have anything to wear.”

“Well, let’s call the magical Mr. Bogomirov.”

David picked up the phone. “Mr. Bogomirov?”

“Yes, Mr. Brockman.”

“We would like to have dinner before the theater, but we have to do some clothes shopping first. Can you suggest a place?”

“Mr. Brockman, please come downstairs with your lovely wife. We have a wonderful boutique here that I am sure you’ll be quite pleased with.”

Feeling like the fairy tale continued, David and Maggie took the elevator downstairs. Bogomirov was waiting for them by the elevator door. “Please, this way.” He walked them over to a boutique, where Maggie was outfitted with an emerald-green evening gown and matching high-heels, while David was tailored into a tux with a white shirt. David’s offer of a credit card was gently declined.

Bogomirov followed them, anxiously rubbing his hands. “I hope the selection was satisfactory. Here are your Bolshoi tickets. We have reservations for you at Café Pushkin at five. There will be a car waiting for you by the entrance at 4:50.”

David looked at his watch. 4:29. Not a lot of time. They thanked Bogomirov, went upstairs to change, and hurried back down. There was indeed a car waiting by the entrance.

The restaurant was a few blocks away. They were taken to the third floor and treated to a dinner of traditional Russian food in an atmosphere that tried hard to provide an eighteenth century ambiance. The car was still waiting for them after they were done. When they got to the Bolshoi and presented their tickets, the usher had them escorted to a small private box by the stage. Unfortunately, David never had much interest in ballet, so he mostly enjoyed people watching, while Maggie took in the performance. It seemed like David and Maggie themselves were attracting attention, probably thanks to their prime seats.

The same driver was waiting to take them back. In the car, Maggie asked David “Does this feel real to you?”

“No. And you?”

“No, it does not feel real at all. But I’ll enjoy it for a while.”

When they got to the room, Maggie dropped her purse, threw her arms around David’s neck, and locked him in a kiss. The room started

swimming. Maggie broke the magic by whispering, “You know they have listening devices in the room, don’t you?”

David thought for a second, GRU was paying for the room and everything, “Yes.”

That broke the mood, although some of the spirit was saved when Maggie whispered in David’s ear, “Next time.”

Wednesday, 5/4/2022, 8:02 a.m. MSK

David stood by the window watching the sun lazily rising over Moscow, thinking, *yesterday it was Kiev, the day before San Antonio, and Dallas, and Phoenix*. Maggie was quietly breathing, still asleep in bed. What was it between them? They really had no time to figure this out yet.

The phone rang. David picked up. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Mr. Ferguson. My name is Nikolai Nemzhov. I believe you were looking for me."

David searched for words. "Umm, yes, we were."

"Well, I am at your service. Would you be able to join me for lunch today?"

"OK." David's own voice sounded croaky to him.

"Wonderful. I'll see you and the charming Ms. Sappin at noon in O2 lounge in your hotel."

The line went dead.

Maggie was sitting up in bed looking at David. "Nemzhov?"

"Yes. We are meeting him at noon for lunch."

"Where?"

"Here at the hotel."

They had a quick breakfast and went for a walk, to calm their nerves. When they came out of the hotel, Maggie grabbed David's hand. "Oh, my God!"

"What?" he asked, on the verge of panic.

"I totally missed it yesterday. We're on Tverskaya Street."

"And?" David started wondering if the stress had gotten to her.

"You've read this part. This is where the Master and Margarita met. Remember? 'She turned down a lane from Tverskaya and then looked back.' "

"You have it memorized?" David said, glad this was about her favorite book and not the stress of their situation.

“My mother read it to me many times. This is one of her favorite parts. She is an incurable romantic.” With that, Maggie got up on her toes and kissed David on the mouth, then put her hand under his arm. “They walked to the embankment by the Kremlin Wall. Let’s follow in their steps.”

The hotel was literally five minutes from Red Square. They walked by St. Basil’s Cathedral, the Kremlin Wall, Lenin’s Mausoleum, and down to Moskva River, following in the footsteps of Bulgakov’s lovers.

“The next day they met at the very same place,” Maggie mused.

“And where is that place where the book begins?”

“Patriarch’s Ponds?” Maggie checked her phone. “About two miles away. And the apartment where Woland stayed is around there, too. Perhaps later today? I think we should start heading to the hotel now.”

On the way back they even wandered into a huge GUM department store but did not shop. Maggie said, “I think we are being followed. The two men behind us.” David nodded. “Yes, I saw them, too. I don’t think they are trying to hide.”

They tried to walk back slowly, so as not to appear anxious. They stepped into the Ritz-Carlton at five minutes to noon and made their way to the lounge. A line from an old science fiction movie kept playing over and over in David’s head: *I will not fear ... Fear is the mind killer ... I will not fear ...*

Wednesday, 5/4/2022, 12:01 p.m. MSK

“We -- you and I, and our government -- must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering for our own ease and convenience the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage.”

— Dwight Eisenhower, *Farewell Address*

They walked up to the hostess. “Hello, we are here to see—”

Maggie did not have a chance to finish, as the hostess grimaced into a forced smile and said, “This way, please.”

They walked to the very end of the lounge. Three of the last four tables were empty with “Reserved” signs on them. At the corner table a man stood up to greet them with a courteous nod. “Mr. Ferguson, Ms. Sappin ... I am Nikolai Nemzhov.”

Nemzhov was a well-toned man around sixty, clean-shaven, short pepper-and-salt hair. He wore an impeccably tailored suit, white shirt, and a blue tie. Like John Platt, he projected an air of superiority about himself. But while Platt had a direct, in-your-face, I-have-no-time-to-waste aura, Nemzhov’s felt more stealthy and dangerous. Platt’s was an assurance of wealth and a touch of arrogance. Nemzhov’s, an assurance of power over the life and death of others.

“I trust you’ve been treated well,” he stated.

“Your Gestapo thugs behaved exceptionally.” Maggie was not buying the friendly tone.

Nemzhov smiled, showing two rows of small, unnaturally perfect teeth. “Is this not a wonderful view?”

Indeed, it was. They were looking right at Red Square.

“Usually one gets a good view or good food, rarely both. Unfortunately, this place is not an exception. Still, I figured since it is Mr. Ferguson’s first visit to Moscow, the view is probably more

important. I would recommend something simple, like blinis or salad. Would you care for a glass of wine? They do have a good selection here.”

He is trying too hard, went through David’s head, and the thought calmed him down. “No, thank you.”

The waitress came to take their order. Maggie surprised everyone by ordering single-malt straight up. David stuck with coffee, while Nemzhov asked for a glass of Bordeaux. Everyone opted for Caesar salad, which made Nemzhov laugh. “Great minds think alike.”

David decided to dispense with pleasantries. “You realize that if you kill us, Schulmann’s research will be all over the world?”

Nemzhov laughed. “Both of you are safer in Moscow than just about anywhere else in the world. The men who brought you here yesterday, the men who followed you this morning ... if someone tried to kill you, they would throw themselves in front of the bullet. Because they would not be alive for long if they let anything happen to you. No, you are perfectly safe.”

Nemzhov took a sip of the wine and continued. “We completely underestimated you once; we are not going to make the same mistake again. Poor Petr thought you were just an innocent unlucky helpless nerd who’d been randomly set up by Trimble.”

David interrupted, saying, “And in truth I am an innocent unlucky helpless nerd who’d been randomly set up by Trimble.”

“Innocent and set up, yes. Helpless and unlucky, no.” Nemzhov smiled. “Petr made a mistake and it ended up costing him his life. Can’t blame him for this mistake; ninety-nine out of a hundred times he would have been right. But you—and you, Ms. Sappin—have proven yourself resourceful, daring and, most importantly, very lucky. And I have learned to not underestimate the value of luck. I must say, you walking into Sheremetyevo the way you did and telling that idiot ‘call GRU General Nemzhov!’ ” He laughed. “You both are already legendary in the department.”

Their salads came. Nemzhov was eating with relish, while David and Maggie picked at their food.

After a few minutes, Nemzhov resumed in a business-like tone. "OK, let's get down to business. How do I know you are not bluffing?"

David said, "September 17th, 2019. Your account at Moscow Kommerse Bank was credited with just under ten million rubles from a currency transaction placed two months prior through a series of intermediaries."

Nemzhov shrugged. "Even now this is only about \$300,000. That's all you have?"

"Except that this was only one transaction, the smallest. That same week eight other bank accounts linked to you or your close relatives were credited with over 900 million rubles."

Nemzhov rubbed his chin contemplatively. "How did you find the file?"

"Suzy Yamamoto saved a copy on a free online backup service."

"I see," Nemzhov said. His lips curled in a hard smile, but his eyes betrayed a desire to kill someone for allowing this to happen.

David hastened to add, "But of course it's not there anymore, I removed it. Her husband did not know anything."

"Of course." Nemzhov waved a hand. "Don't worry, we won't touch him now. What's the point? We knew about her connection with Schulmann. I can't believe our people did not clean this up. They made sure she didn't have anything on her computer, but they did not find the online backup and they did not tie all the loose ends. That's the devil of this business: no matter how thorough you are, there is always that one connection that you miss. Someone didn't finish the job. I wonder why."

He turned to Maggie. "As Woland tells Margarita in your great uncle's book 'Mercy sometimes unexpectedly creeps through the smallest cracks.' Perhaps that's what it was, some silly mercy. Anyway, congratulations! You've made your point. Now, what do you want?"

Maggie said, "First of all, I want my life back. I want you to call off the hunt. I want you to stop the MSS and others from coming after us. Because the moment something happens to us, Schulmann's file will go public."

Nemzhov laughed. "Like the '60s and the '70s."

David and Maggie looked at him in puzzlement.

Nemzhov explained. "I am old enough to still remember the years of 'mutually assured destruction,' or MAD as it was fondly known. Nuclear standoff between the USA and USSR. Nobody could win. It was mad, but effective. We destroy you, you destroy us. OK, it's a deal. The dogs will be called off."

Too easy, David thought. And what's with all this smiling and laughing? He thinks he has us all figured out.

As if reading his mind, Nemzhov continued. "I am not agreeing to it out of the goodness of my heart. I did not get where I am by thinking with my heart. It's strictly cost-benefit analysis. You might be bluffing about releasing the report. Even if you are not bluffing, we could try to extract the information from you to stop it. But I don't want to run even a ten percent chance of failing, when I have a guarantee of success by making it in your interests to not release the report. You can have your lives, you can have your old lives back if you want, and I'll throw in some money to boot."

"Money?" Maggie's hand with the glass of scotch stopped in mid-air.

"Yes, Ms. Sappin, money." He pulled out two envelopes, one blue, one white, from the inside pocket of his suit and slid them across the table. "We opened two numbered accounts in a Zurich bank, the information is inside the blue envelope. Each account has been funded with \$1 million. As long as the report remains secret, May 5th of every year each account will be funded with an additional \$1 million. We'll even adjust it for inflation. I know \$1 million is not what it used to be, but for a year one can still live comfortably on it. All you have to do is show up to claim the money in person. And if, God forbid, something

happens to one of you—and it won't be by our hand, I can assure you—the other person will collect the money for both. You can live what they call the 'high life' or even go back to the lives you had. You don't have to be particularly creative about explaining things. Tell the truth, just omit the part about finding the file, of course."

"What's inside the white envelope?"

"Two first-class tickets for tonight's Swiss Air flight to Zurich for Mr. and Mrs. Brockman. You, of course, are welcome to stay longer, the tickets are exchangeable."

"So you already decided to do this before you met us?"

"We prepare for multiple scenarios, Ms. Sappin."

Nemzhov's tone was earnest and calm, conveying a *how can you possibly disagree?* reasonableness.

David broke the air of rationality, "I did not tell you what I want."

Maggie grabbed his hand. Nemzhov tensed across the table. "And what do you want, Mr. Ferguson?"

"I want to know the truth. Was it Trimble that betrayed Schulmann?"

Nemzhov relaxed, thought about his answer. "OK. Yes, it was Trimble. We recruited Trimble in 2016 and helped to place him to work for Williams."

"Why?"

"Williams looked like an up-and-coming young politician. A number of US presidents came from Texas."

"And Trimble overheard about Schulmann's work?"

"Politicians don't suspect their security people. In June of 2020 Williams and some of his people had a conference call with Schulmann. Trimble overheard parts of it. That's when we took interest. Then Schulmann came to Texas to meet with Williams in person. He was careful with the information, but by then we'd been following him closely, looking under each and every rock. From the data on SEC servers we could determine that he'd gone pretty far with his research."

“Why didn’t you kill Schulmann then?”

“In retrospect, I wish we had. But we wanted the information for ourselves, so at the time we wanted him to continue, hoping to intervene before it was too late. We knew what we had done and we knew some of the things that others had done, but not nearly to the extent that Schulmann uncovered. He and his computer genius Marchuk were a great team. They managed to follow threads that nobody else could find. You saw his research, how many highly placed people he implicated in the US, in China, in Saudi Arabia, in Turkey ...”

“So you now use this information to blackmail these people?”

Nemzhov laughed, clearly amused by David’s naiveté. “Call it what you want, Mr. Ferguson. We use the information to influence events in our interests. It’s particularly effective when they did something that was not sanctioned by their superiors. Like placing a bet outside of semi-officially set up arrangements. People like that have a really good reason to ensure that the information remains hidden. And so do we: as long as we know things about them that nobody else does, we can occasionally tell them what we need done.”

Nemzhov leaned forward and spoke in a quiet but serious tone. “Do you comprehend the power of having such knowledge? Of being able to tell people in the highest echelons of power that we can destroy them with one anonymous e-mail? And that such an e-mail will go out if they don’t do exactly what we ask them to? I am emphasizing this to you, so you understand how far we will go to protect this power and what fate would await you if you try to cross us.”

“But why did you kill Williams and others?”

“Why do you think that we did it?”

“Because you were trying to get the US to split up, and he stood in your way, didn’t he?”

Nemzhov signaled to waitress to get him another drink, then he leaned back like a chess-master relaxing between moves. “This will take a while. Fortunately, I took all other meetings off my calendar.

See, you are important, Mr. Ferguson. How well do you know history?”

David was caught off guard and mumbled, “Just what I studied in school.”

“This is part of the problem: you Americans, you don’t really know history. You study your own history and think that that’s all there is to know. For example, do you know how many Americans were killed in World War II?”

“A million?”

“About 400,000. And how many Russians?”

David shrugged, admitting his ignorance.

“I guess it’s entirely forgivable for Mr. Ferguson, but you, Ms. Sappin, you know very well what I am talking about.”

Maggie lashed out. “Spare me. I know the numbers. And how many of them were sacrificed by a regime that did not give a damn about people’s lives? And how many were killed by famine and in Gulag? You are a bunch of gangsters that have taken over the country, just like Stalin before you. Crooks and gangsters.”

Nemzhov smiled, but his eyes were not smiling. “Ignoring Ms. Sappin’s outburst, the Soviet Union lost twenty-six million people during the war. For a math specialist like Mr. Ferguson, sixty dead Russians for every one dead American.”

“I didn’t know it was that many,” David said.” But what does this have to do with anything now?”

“Oh, but it has everything to do with everything. While you Americans were sitting pretty behind the oceans, our country has been invaded three times in the last two centuries. It was by the blood of our citizens that the Nazis were defeated, but you were the ones that took credit and benefited. And how nicely you benefited! For years and years have you enjoyed the fruits of a powerful economy that had not been destroyed, and of having the most sought-after currency in the world. Benefits that you did not deserve, but used quite successfully to

‘contain’ us. That’s what you called it, containment, locking us in our cage while you used your money and military power to encircle us.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“I am getting there. You were too young to remember the day that the Soviet Union had fallen, but I remember it well. The pain, the humiliation of going from being one of the two most powerful countries in the world to a basket case. And we were at fault for putting up with a sclerotic bureaucracy and stupid mismanagement for too many years. But it was you, the Americans that pulled the trigger. That was your goal and your victory. And those of us that served the country, we vowed that eventually America would be humbled the way we were.”

“So it was revenge?”

“Revenge? No. It would have been revenge if we did it to you. It’s more like retribution because you did it to yourselves. Which, frankly, makes it even more enjoyable. Fiscal irresponsibility, reckless wars ... Lenin said that all we had to do was to give you a rope and then to watch and be ready. And perhaps to help the events unfold from time to time. And it’s been a long rope, but eventually these ropes always end. It was almost amusing to watch the arrogance of people convincing themselves for years that they could consume much more than they produce and pay for it with monies created out of thin air. You did not even have to print it, just press a few buttons on a keyboard. I bet many Americans knew that this couldn’t last, but they just could not help themselves. Or rather, you let your political and financial elites do that while you were voting for them. I am looking forward to the ‘Less-United States of America’—but we did not do it, you did. Yes, we made a little profit. We were entitled after all those years.”

“And Williams was getting in the way of your plans?”

“He could have. By the time we assembled most of Schulmann’s research, it was almost September. We knew through Trimble that Schulmann was going to meet with the Williams team in Philadelphia.

We also knew that they had a number of conversations before that and had to believe that Williams had at least some of the information. We did not want him to become president using Schulmann's research. We wanted the incumbent to win. We'd been watching the great American Union tear itself apart between the red and the blue states, feeding the flames a bit with an article or a book or with a donation from a properly named group, but mostly just watching and waiting. The 2020 presidential race was essentially tied, and we were not going to interfere; our internal projections were pointing to re-election for the incumbent. Our projections were also showing that the post-crisis frustration in the 'red states' would have produced a powerful secession movement."

"Your projections?" wondered David.

"Yes, market research. We learned well from your presidential elections, you truly turned predictive public polling into a science. See, the Chinese were after the money in this whole game ..."

"And you were not? Please. You've made a bundle."

"Of course, when there is money to be made, why not? But we were not greedy, not on the same scale as the Chinese. Yes, our goal was the breakup of the USA. We thought that the crisis would be the last straw, so to speak. But Williams going public with Schulmann's materials would have changed the equation. Williams would have won in a landslide and very likely kept the country together. Moreover, the shock had a potential to transform the public mood, and to get people to make the hard choices that they were not willing to make before. America still had some powerful cards. We did not have a wide open window of opportunity."

"Did Trimble do the assassination?"

"No. We paid him very nicely for the information, but that was it. Somehow he managed to get Schulmann's computer and disappeared with the money we paid him. We actually thought he was killed in the blast, even though his remains were not found. Did not hear about him until recently, when he tried to sell the file to the Chinese."

“How did you find out?”

“Thanks to the information in the Schulmann’s file, of course. That’s a gift that keeps on giving. There were a number of highly placed people in Beijing that did not want the MSS to get the file, knowing that it would mean a death sentence for them. Not only did we find out about his approach, it was easy to persuade some of the MSS elements to try to kill or capture him. Greed was ultimately Trimble’s downfall. If he had gone to a country whose highly-placed leaders were not involved in the 2019 events, he probably would have gotten away with it and made some money. But he wanted to hit the jackpot, so he went to the Chinese that were the greediest and bet the most heavily in 2019. You see, Mr. Ferguson, greed kills. Yes, this is a warning.”

“What about Mark Androssian, did you kill him too?”

“Who?”

“Mark Androssian. He uncovered some of the connections, died in a single-car crash two years ago.”

“Yes, I remember seeing a report with his name. No, that was not us. Probably the Chinese, or perhaps somebody in your country was getting worried about his findings.”

“Why was it so important to you that the US states separate?”

“To weaken you. Size matters. The combined population of Russia and our satellite states is less than 200 million. The US has almost 340 million people. We anticipate it will break into three states, perhaps more—as former Yugoslavia learned, once you start breaking up, it’s hard to stop—each one smaller and weaker than Russia. We now have to deal with powerful China and resurgent Turkey, we did not want to continue worrying about the US. Russia’s borders don’t have natural barriers like oceans. We always relied on having a land buffer to protect us. After the Soviet Union fell, we ended up with both NATO and Islamic fundamentalists on our doorsteps. We will re-establish our sphere of influence to the west and to the south. Many of our neighbors, such as the Baltic countries, Poland, Ukraine, Georgia,

became much friendlier when they realized that America wouldn't be there to protect them. The opponents change, but the Great Game continues."

"The Great Game?"

Nemzhov explained. "That was the name for a struggle in Central Asia between Great Britain and Imperial Russia. That particular episode is long over, but the game of power goes on. Have either of you read Fukuyama's *The End of History*?"

David shook his head no; Maggie nodded affirmatively.

Nemzhov continued, looking at David. "That was an interesting book. The author was arguing that the West had won, no more wars, no more conflicts, liberal democracies everywhere, we all get along. I am oversimplifying. I did wonder back then whether he was right and the Great Game had ended. But of course he was wrong. I think he was too firmly, perhaps unconsciously, rooted in the context of American exceptionalism. 'America is different' has always been this underlying belief in your country. But you turned out to be not very different at all. Just like others before you, you made it to the zenith of power and reached for the spoils. And just like with the others, it became your undoing. Now we have new names, new actors, but the Great Game is going on. We have to recreate the position we lost when USSR broke up and project our naval power into the great oceans of the world. None of that would have been possible with a strong America. NATO without America poses no threat. Of course, China is much more populous than us, but we are lining up allies, and in a few years they will face some very serious demographic challenges. In the meantime, thanks in part to Mr. Schulmann, we can shape the events to our advantage."

Nemzhov smiled, flashing his perfect small teeth. "You kind of started resembling the old Soviet Union a bit. Spying on your own citizens in the name of protecting them, unleashing government agencies on those that disagreed with government's policies, trying every which shortcut to cure the ailments of your society."

Maggie broke her silence. “General, what do you believe in? Communism?”

He smirked. “Communism? Of course not. The Soviet Union fell because communism did not understand human nature. People act in their self-interest. When there is too little self-interest the economy sputters. Now America is failing because it also stopped understanding human nature. Deep inside, we are all little Robin Hoods. I think your founders understood this. That’s why democracies flame out: people will vote for those who promise them more for less, and politicians will say and do what they have to in order to get elected and re-elected. That’s how it’s been throughout history. You have to find the right balance between giving people some measure of self-interest, but within the context of a strong state that keeps those Robin Hood-ish tendencies in check. That’s what I believe in: my country with a strong state.”

He drank the last of his wine. “Of course we need some cause for people to rally around. A dash of nationalism will do just fine. We don’t need world domination or quasi-religious fervor. People that are willing to sacrifice themselves are only too willing to sacrifice others. Balance hope for the future with enjoyment of the present, bread and circus and pride in your country, a good formula. We can do this without heavy-handed secret police; business and tax authorities can keep people in line quite effectively. Give them their entertainment and they don’t care about free will. All we expect is a certain degree of obedience, a bit of neglect if you will.”

Nemzhov looked at his watch. “It’s been nice meeting the two of you. I am truly impressed by your daring and resourcefulness. But I am afraid it’s time for me to go. Just remember, we will be watching, we can get to you anytime we want. But as long as the information remains buried, you have nothing to worry about. Don’t try what Trimble did. You double-cross us, you’ll wish you were never born. But we have learned our lesson as well; that’s why we’ll continue

paying you so you don't feel the desire to look for buyers of the information. Please don't worry about the check, you are our guests."

Nemzhov left. David and Maggie remained seated. Maggie looked inside the white envelope. "Two tickets to Zurich for 6:10 p.m. tonight," she said in a blank tone.

"Do you want to spend a few days in Moscow?" David asked.

"No, I want to get out of here as quickly as possible."

He felt the same way. Visiting the places from Bulgakov's book just didn't seem important anymore.

Thursday, 5/5/2022, 3:40 p.m. EDT

From her window seat on a Zurich – New York flight, Maggie could see the approaching US coastline. Would she have to call it something else soon? She looked at her watch and realized that she had stopped adjusting it a few cities and time zones back. She thought about the last day.

They'd left Moscow in a hurry. Did not have to check out or call a cab, a car was already waiting downstairs, as if Nemzhov knew exactly what they were going to do before they did. Courtesy of the GRU, the tickets were first class, with decent food and drinks. David looked up hotels near the Zurich bank that had Nemzhov's numbered accounts. When they landed and cleared customs, he asked the taxi driver to take them to Hotel Ambassador. They checked in, walked toward the lake that was only a block away, continued along the footpath that skirted the water, and sat on a bench. It was mostly quiet, with only sounds of traffic from the nearby bridge. The air was chilly, and David put his jacket around her shoulders.

She asked, "Do you think they will leave us alone?"

"For a while."

"What do you mean?"

"I think it's like a chess game for Nemzhov. We are two small, poorly defended pawns, but he does not want to risk attacking. They will keep looking, trying to make sure they can stop the release of Schulmann's report if we die, but they won't touch us in the meantime."

"Then why did you say for a while? As long as they are not sure, we can be safe."

"They might be able to outsmart us. Even if they don't, the value of Schulmann's report will decline over time. The people that they are blackmailing with the report now will eventually be displaced. At some

point the cost-benefit analysis that Nemzhov was talking about will shift in favor of eliminating us.”

“And how long until then?”

“I don’t know. Probably at least a couple of years.”

She fell silent, then said, “We should get our money tomorrow. You are cold, let’s go back.”

They made love for the first time since Phoenix, which was half the world away and ages ago. It was different, gentle, not rushed. They clung to each other for warmth and reassurance, like two people who had nobody else to turn to.

When they woke up, David called from the room to reserve two seats on the one o’clock flight to New York. They had breakfast and headed to the bank. Neither of them had ever visited anything but a typical American banking branch before. This was quite different: like a small private office on the outside, but with security resembling Fort Knox on the inside. The credentials that Nemzhov gave them opened the doors. They had to separate, with Maggie handling one account and David the other. Both of the accounts were indeed funded with \$1 million. As agreed, they entered instructions to transfer the money to numbered Zurich and Cayman accounts that Javier had set up for them. They were done by 10:30 a.m. and headed to the airport.

The Swiss Air plane landed at JFK. The customs officer greeted them with a smile. “Welcome back, Mr. and Mrs. Brockman.”

As they were walking through the airport, Maggie asked, “Do you feel like we are being followed?”

David replied, “Yes.”

They took a cab to the Plaza. David marched to the front desk and said, “Daniel and Alena Brockman, we have a reservation.”

The clerk checked and said, “I am so sorry, I don’t see a reservation under this name.”

“My secretary must have messed up again. Do you have anything available, preferably with the view of Central Park?”

"We do have rooms available, unfortunately nothing with a view for tonight. Would you like us to check you in, and we'll see if we can move you into the view room tomorrow?"

"OK, please check us in for one night, and we'll see what happens tomorrow." David offered his credit card. "By the way, are there any packages for me? I told my secretary to send things here, hopefully he didn't mess it up the way he did the reservations."

"Certainly." The clerk went to the back and returned carrying a small package. "Your secretary got this one right."

David quickly put the package into his jacket. They took the keys and went to the room. He tore open the wrapping. It was a cell phone with a note: "text the last called number." He punched in "arrived." A response came twenty minutes later. David showed the message to Maggie: "Don't repeat anything. Get yourself a new set of clothes for warm weather. Wear them tomorrow morning. Everything you have now you will have to leave behind in the room. Be ready at 7:00 a.m."

She read it and said loudly, "I need to do some shopping."

It was only 6:00 p.m. They went for a walk in Central Park, ate soup and fresh bread at a communal table in a Belgian bakery, and then watched the sunset by the lake.

"So, which of these people are following us?" mused Maggie.

"Hmm, how about that guy on the bench?" David nodded to a portly middle-aged man in an overcoat, spread on a bench about twenty yards away.

"No, I think it's those two." Maggie smiled in the direction of a tall couple in their late twenties, hugging each other next to a tree.

Following a shopping suggestion from one of the locals, they walked a block to Madison Avenue. David stopped to look into a shop window and saw the tall couple inspecting a boutique half a block behind. Maggie smiled when he said, "You win."

Maggie took charge of outfitting both of them. Afterwards, David said he wished they could have caught a Broadway show, but it was far too late. Instead, they walked through the streets of Manhattan, taking

in sights and sounds of the city that never sleeps. Both hadn't been in New York in a few years, and the change was not for the better. While heavy police presence on Madison Avenue and around Central Park kept things safe, there were quite a few people panhandling or sleeping on the sidewalks and in doorways. She asked a policeman how to walk to Broadway, and he explained but suggested that they should stay on main, well-lit streets.

They ended up walking back to the Plaza, having a drink at the bar, and turning in for the night. David was anxiously pacing the room, until Maggie got tired of it and said, "Come to bed. I'll help you to relax."

Friday, 5/6/2022, 5:54 a.m. EDT

Both woke up well before the alarm went off, took showers, got dressed in the outfits that Maggie purchased the night before, and sat down staring at each other and at the phone that was on the bed between them. At 7:00 a.m. a message light lit up: “Make sure you leave EVERYTHING behind. Wear only what you bought yesterday. Leave the door slightly ajar. Be at the entrance at 7:20. There will be three taxi cabs standing to the right of the entrance, one of them will have a driver standing by the driver’s door, smoking. Don’t ask, get into that cab.”

David and Maggie quietly checked their pockets making sure they were empty. They slipped out of the room without closing the door completely, took the elevator down, and walked through the hotel trying to look like two tourists out for sunrise in the park. Maggie had to stop for a second from the butterflies in her stomach.

When they came out, there were actually four cabs standing by the entrance, which momentarily confused David. Then he saw a driver smoking by the driver’s side of the second cab, grabbed Maggie’s hand and, trying to keep from running, walked to that cab, opened the door for Maggie, and then got in himself. Everything then went into fast motion, the first act of the show had ended, and the next one began:

- the driver threw out his cigarette, got in just as David closed the door, and took off, tires screeching;
- the driver of the taxi in front started screaming, “It’s my ride!” and jumped into his cab;
- the driver of the cab behind also shouted something unintelligible;
- sounds of other engines revving filled the quiet morning;
- then a loud crash.

When David looked back, one cab was positioned perpendicular to the road blocking a half of the driveway, while the other cab was

blocking the other half. An SUV crashed into the first cab; the driver jumped out screaming furiously, while whistles were filling the air. Another SUV tried to go on the sidewalk to get around the second cab, scattering a few pedestrians that were there, but there was not enough room. The SUV's driver backed away, turned around, and raced back.

In the meantime, their driver made a sharp left, then right, then left again, pulled into a narrow alley, and stopped behind an old Ford Taurus. The driver said, "Get into that car."

David and Maggie did as they were told and quickly slid into the back seat. The Taurus took off. A young dark-haired woman in the front passenger seat turned back and said, "How are you today?"

Somehow the question must have struck Maggie as funny, because she started laughing uncontrollably. It was contagious, so David and the woman joined in, and even the heavysset driver started chuckling.

Finally, wiping off the tears, Maggie managed to squeeze out, "Just fine, thank you," and then broke down laughing even harder.

Another voice intruded. "Can someone explain to me what's going on?"

The front-seat woman handed a computer tablet to David and Maggie. Javier's face stared at them from the screen. "I am glad you're enjoying yourselves! Do you know what time it is here on the West Coast?"

Maggie tried to compose herself. "I'm sorry. You are our guardian angel! It's just that everything has been miles away from normal for such a long time, so to get a normal 'how are you?' question seemed strange."

Javier softened. "I am sorry. I know you must have been under a lot of stress, and I need another cup of coffee. Oleg says hi by the way. Did you leave everything—and I mean everything—behind?"

"Yes. We are wearing only what we bought yesterday, and our pockets are empty," David said.

“Not quite,” Maggie said apologetically. “I brought these glasses.” She held up her green cat-eye glasses up to the computer screen. “I want to keep them if possible.”

“You should not have done that! Leah, can you take a look?”

Leah pulled a small magnifying glass out of her bag and inspected the glasses. “There is nothing there.”

“OK. Listening and tracking devices are miniature now, and we can’t take chances, for your sake or for ours. The room you stayed in has been emptied already. The front desk will get a call that you had to leave on an urgent business and to keep the charges on the credit card you gave them. There is no need to create any headlines about Mr. and Mrs. Brockman; they will quietly slip away. Obviously you’ve met Leah already.”

“That’s me,” said the woman in the front seat.

“Leah, please hand a wallet to Mr. McCarren and a purse to Ms. Gronko.”

“Who?” Maggie and David asked in unison while taking a wallet and a purse from Leah.

“Unfortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Brockman will have to disappear now for good. Given all the work and expense that went into them, it’s a shame they lasted only nine days. But perhaps they helped to keep you alive, in which case it was worth it. Mr. McCarren and Ms. Gronko are cheap, short-term identities designed to get you from Point A to Point B and never to be seen again. We did not marry you this time, this way you can go through security separately in case they are looking for a couple. In your wallets you’ll find a New Jersey driver’s license, a credit card, insurance cards, and a bit of money. In the trunk of the next car there are two rolling travel bags, a blue one for David, the one with a flower pattern for Maggie.”

“The next car?” David asked.

“Yes, you will change cars when you get to New Jersey. That car will take you to the airport.”

“Why can’t we just take this car to the airport?”

Javier replied with an edge to his voice, “Because you are paying me to keep you alive. And I have to do that, so I can maintain my reputation and charge good money for my services. The people that are following you are professionals and they have resources. Judging by what we saw last night and this morning, very extensive resources. And with the business that you find yourself in, one of the secrets to staying alive is to be careful, avoid attention, calculate each and every step. That’s why Mr. and Mrs. Brockman have properly paid their bill and got their things from the Plaza. That’s why you are in a Ford Taurus, not in a fancy limo. That’s why this car has windows that have been coated to confuse face recognition algorithms. That’s why you’ll be flying coach, not first class. You are in the most dangerous part of your escape: you are out of their sight, but they know the area you are in. I am sure they already have their people heading to local airports, they are tuning into all closed-circuit cameras and face recognition systems they can access, trying to pick up the scent. We want to get you to safety without going through too many airports, but we have to make sure that they lose your trail with the very first leg of your journey. I will take you through the plan and through fallback positions in case things don’t go according to the plan. Don’t interrupt me again as we have only a few minutes. Leah, please hand them their change of clothes. You’ll leave the clothes you are wearing in this car. Don’t be shy, start changing.”

Leah produced new shirts and slacks, her face wearing a look of embarrassment. David and Maggie looked at each other, shrugged, and began unbuttoning.

Javier continued. “The car will pull into a rest area off the New Jersey Turnpike and park next to a green-colored SUV. You will quickly move to the back seat. In the SUV, aside from the driver, there is a makeup artist that will work on you. Your travel bags are filled with typical stuff that vacationers take. Since we had to dress up both of you only last week, hopefully everything should fit. David’s bag has a double-bottom compartment. You reach in and pull the lining from

the bottom of the bag. Nothing fancy, just a small precaution in case you are unlucky enough to be singled out for a search, not that we expect it. Nothing there will show up on X-ray scans, but it's important to you. There are three differently colored envelopes there. The first one to use is a white envelope with two other boarding passes and driver's licenses."

They were in Lincoln Tunnel now, riding in the dark under the river. The reception remained intact.

"I am pretty sure your enemies are already watching New York airports, but probably not the Philadelphia one. You are booked on the flight from Philadelphia to San Francisco, leaving at 10:10 a.m. You should land there at about 1:20 p.m. local time. When you land in San Francisco, go to a restroom stall, change your shirt, put on sunglasses. Take out the white envelope I mentioned. Place the driver's licenses we just gave you into the secret compartment. Please don't throw them away but carefully destroy them later. Go out of the airport. Come back in with the new driver's licenses and boarding passes and pass through security again. Your names will be Mr. Paul Compton and Mrs. Jill Compton, from Cupertino, CA. Please look at the licenses while in security line and memorize them. You will be boarding a flight to Kahului, Maui, leaving at 2:35 p.m. You should have enough time, but don't waste any."

When Javier said 'Maui,' Maggie gave David a quizzical look but said nothing.

They were out of the tunnel and in New Jersey now, driving by rows of nondescript houses.

Javier continued, his tone less stern now. "You will change identities twice, so even if someone figures out that Mr. and Mrs. Brockman and Mr. McCarren and Ms. Gronko are the same people, they won't know that you continued to Maui. And by the way, Mr. Ferguson, I would not have picked Maui in your shoes. But since those were your instructions last Saturday, at least play it safe and don't stay there too long. And there might be logic to doing something illogical;

your adversaries won't expect it. To show you that I am not totally heartless, I upgraded you to economy plus. Now, here is the important part. David, in the double-bottom compartment there is another envelope, a blue one. Unlike the cheap identities that you will use in Philadelphia and in San Francisco, this one is a long-term identity. Hopefully it'll last you more than ten days. David, you will be Jeffrey Moran. Maggie, you are Tatiana Baum. I am not going to go into details; you have the files. When you are in Maui, carefully destroy the used driver's licenses and start using your new identities. There are also passports, credit cards, bank accounts. Despite my exorbitant charges, your accounts seem to be growing. The monies from your Zurich and Cayman accounts have been moved and will be moved a few more times by the time you are in Maui. They will also be divided into a number of accounts. Overall, together you will have just over \$2.6 million. Of course, at the rate you are going it won't last you too long, you better slow down."

Leah said, "Five minutes."

"Now, the plans don't always work out. Remember, don't leave them a trail to follow. They will be looking for anything unusual, such as someone not getting to their flights. If you have to make a change, always assume that the planned identity and the destination will be compromised. If for whatever reason you don't make it to Philadelphia, the driver is instructed to take you to Wilmington, Delaware. Fly from there to Miami; we will contact you. If you don't make it to the San Francisco flight, take BART to Oakland, fly from there to Portland. There is yet another set of driver's licenses and credit cards in the compartment in a green envelope, use those if any change of plans is made or if you want to cover your tracks later. If you are fortunate and everything goes as planned, you'll have that identity to throw off the trail if needed. But never use the documents from today's flights again, you must destroy them."

"One minute."

Javier's voice sounded almost gentle. "These were some serious people after you. We followed you last night and there were always at least four of them. Hopefully, we got them off your tail for now. Try to stay alive."

Maggie said, "Thank you, Javier. We are only alive thanks to you." She touched her fingers to her lips and then to the screen.

Javier grumbled, "OK, don't forget to follow directions. Good-bye."

"He likes you, you know," Leah said after turning off the tablet. The car turned into a rest area.

Tuesday, 5/10/2022, 1:43 p.m. HST

David and Maggie finished their lunch at Whalers Village. Following Javier's directives, they avoided the most expensive places and checked into the aging Sheraton Maui on Kaanapali Beach. Getting a room was not a problem. It was a slow "kids are still at school" season, and the hotel was half empty. Last night a friendly waiter at Black Rock restaurant was wondering what would happen to Hawaii if the mainland split apart. An air of uncertainty hung over the islands.

It was pure kitsch, but David enjoyed Black Rock, a large outcropping of lava jutting out into the ocean. He felt like a little kid jumping into crystal clear water twenty feet down. He and Maggie spent hours snorkeling near the rock and watching a giant tortoise maneuver slowly around colorful fishes. They'd been training to call each other Jeffrey and Tatiana and giggled when they slipped. David missed the old-fashioned sunscreen. He would have enjoyed rubbing it on Maggie. But the new sunscreen pills were convenient, no doubt about that, just take one in the morning and don't worry about being burned.

Maggie had never been to Hawaii before, and she thought she landed in paradise. She would go running in the mornings on the path that wound its way along the beach. Sunset was her favorite time to sit at the Terrace bar watching the sun slide into the water. After sunset, they would drive into Lahaina, park by the huge banyan tree and stroll along the sidewalk looking for an interesting place to eat.

Their journey went as planned, no late planes, no changes required. When they landed late Friday afternoon, they agreed to a short "truce"—no talking about Nemzhov or Schulmann or their future was allowed. As the "truce" was ending, both were anxious. One can ignore reality for only so long.

They were walking along the path back to the Sheraton. Maggie was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and a light cover-up over her

bikini. David had on knee-length swimming trunks, a “Black Rock” T-shirt, and a “Hula Girl” cap. Both had treated themselves to Maui Jim sunglasses and comfortable flip-flops. The carefully laid-out path winded its way between two rows of manicured bushes, the perfectly blue ocean shining in the sun on the left, with Lanai and Molokai rising in the distance.

Maggie broke the ice. “So what are we going to do about this?”

“What this?” David responded reflexively, realizing the stupidity of the reply before it finished leaving his mouth. “Sorry, yes, of course. I guess the vacation is over.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Maggie gently replied. “I just woke up this morning all agitated. You know the feeling, where you have to make a decision and you can’t relax until you do. We can wait.”

“Yes, I know that feeling, and it’s OK. We should start dealing with this. It’s not going to go away.”

“I know you were right when you said that they will never leave us alone. And I don’t think we have more than three or four years.”

David nodded in agreement.

Maggie continued. “I told you the truth. I only wanted to go back to living my life, but that’s not an option anymore.”

“I’m so sorry,” David said. “I wish I hadn’t walked into your restaurant; I wish I hadn’t asked for your phone. You were kind to me, and I have ruined your life.”

Maggie stopped, took David’s hands into hers, and looked up at him. “Please, please don’t think this way. You couldn’t possibly have known. Perhaps it was fate.” She reached on tiptoes and kissed him. “You were truly my knight in shining armor. If not for you, I would have died a few times over.”

David swallowed hard. “But now that your old life is gone, what do you want to do?”

Maggie turned and continued down the path while holding David’s hand. “I think the most logical choice would be to take what we can. Collect Nemzhov’s money for three years, prepare for an expensive

long-term identity change with plastic surgery, like Javier described. Do it and disappear. There might be enough money by then to live inexpensively for many years in some distant locations. Do you agree?"

"Yes. Of course there is a risk that Nemzhov's calculation will change earlier than we anticipate. He set it up so collecting the money requires us to appear in person, and surely they'll be watching."

"The only other choice is to blow up his game and go on the run now, with little resources or preparation."

David agreed.

"So, here's what I am thinking," Maggie said. "These are hard decisions. I don't want to influence you like I did back in Phoenix. Why don't we go our separate ways this afternoon, think about it on our own, and then meet at six and see where each of us came down."

"OK. But I do have one question."

"What is it?"

"You talked about Schulmann's report, about Nemzhov ... but what about us?"

She gently touched his cheek with her hand. "That's also something for you and me to think about. And please remember, I'm a big girl."

David nodded. "OK. Are you going to stay here?"

"Yes, I'll walk around. Why?"

"I'll take the car then."

"See you at six on the Black Rock."

Tuesday, 5/10/2022, 3:22 p.m. HST

“We can never know what to want, because, living only one life,
we can neither compare it with our previous lives
nor perfect it in our lives to come.”
— Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Maggie walked the path around the Black Rock and continued up Kaanapali Beach along the water line. She wanted to trade Schulmann’s file for her old life and for money. When in Phoenix, she’d suspected that David wanted for them to disappear. She’d manipulated him for her own ends. *I got exactly what I wanted*, she thought, *but it turned out to be all wrong*. He’d risked his life partly for her reasons, but in the end going back was not possible. Her old life was gone and she did not have another one figured out.

Maggie found herself next to one of the newish ugly high-rise timeshares littering Kaanapali’s coastline. There was a large tree about twenty yards from the water. She sat in its shade, thought of her time in Kiev. The Orange Revolution had been the high point of her life. The hope, the feeling of freedom. After Kiev, she’d found a new home in easygoing, freewheeling California. People took what they had for granted. They would gossip, they would talk about sports, money, cars, sex, real estate, movies, lives of the rich and famous, drugs. They did not talk about freedom. One of the few exceptions was her old friend James Bowen. She stared out at the water, quietly crying after thinking of him. A passing couple with a little baby looked at her in amazement as if to say “why is this woman crying in paradise?”

James, James ... He didn’t like big words or simple solutions. When a student would start pontificating in class, he would politely steer the conversation away from big words and slogans. She thought James was sad because he understood human nature, the constant struggle between materialistic and spiritual. He acknowledged

humankind for what they are, neither angels nor devils. He worried about his adopted country, feeling that it had abandoned the wisdom of the “dead white men” that risked their lives to give birth to the republic. And now the old teacher had given his life for his principles, assassinated by thugs from Europe. She thought of Jonathan Schulmann and Suzy Yamamoto. They must have known how dangerous the information was. Still, they pushed forward.

And then she thought of Nemzhov. Like James, he understood human nature well. But unlike her old teacher, Nemzhov wanted to use this knowledge to tempt, to control, to subjugate. Her throat constricted; she was suffocating from just thinking of him. She was not going to let the Nemzhovs win this time, not without a fight. She had faith in herself more than anything.

And what about David? No, he was not what she'd come to view as her type. In her mind the man for her would be someone whom she saw as truly a master of his fate, someone of perfection. David had no perfection. If not for Oleg and Alejandro and Javier, they would have been dead. But it was David that held it all together, that against all odds found the report, that went to face Nemzhov and his goons.

She thought how David would start his day with a little ceremony of closing his eyes and meditating for a few minutes. So different from her instinct to jump out of bed and go for a run. When they'd first met, he would maintain physical distance from her. But now he would touch her when he could, just a small reassuring touch, like taking her hand or placing his gently on her shoulder. Just to remind her that he was there, that he had her back.

Anxiety had gripped her yesterday, when she realized that the decision time was near and that she dreaded losing him, losing that “he is here” feeling. Maggie usually closed her eyes during lovemaking, but last night she kept them open. In sadness of not knowing how much longer they'd be together, she wanted to capture him in her memory.

Maggie shook her head. Somehow he'd crawled into her heart. Not the man that she imagined, but here it was. She knew that the

vulnerability, the fears that she saw in him were real. But it did not make her turn away. Instead, she felt tenderness, like she had to protect him. Hold him, calm him down, let his fears drain into her. Perfect or not, he was hers and she needed to anchor herself to him. Not needed, wanted to. He was her country now. But she could not tell him that.

“Does he need me?” she said out loud, scaring away a little colorful finch that hopped close to her. *No, he does not.* He has the files; he knows where they are. He can look out for “number one.” She chased away the thought. He wouldn’t do anything like that. Would she have done it to him? Maybe earlier, definitely not now. But he might be better able to survive on his own. She’d let the chips fall where they may.

She thought of Pavel, the boy that many years ago sacrificed himself to protect her; there was a debt to be paid. An overdue debt. Maggie shook sand off her knees and stood up to walk back. As she was heading into shallow water toward the Black Rock, her thoughts drifted to *The Master and Margarita*. Like the heroes of the book, they had left their lives behind. But there was no peaceful refuge waiting for her, no home with Venetian windows, no writing with quill by candlelight. Perhaps one day she’d be able to have a child, but today was not the day to think about it. Instead, there would be more running, probably more deaths. What must be, must be.

Tuesday, 5/10/2022, 4:48 p.m. HST

David had remembered the little moon-shaped cove from an earlier trip to Maui. Today he needed a quick change of scenery, a place that would help to focus the mind. The cove was almost at the end of Kaanapali Beach, only fifteen minutes from the Sheraton. After parting with Maggie, he drove here, parked in a public lot, and walked through the sand. The beach was small and almost empty, with a few snorkelers at the north end.

Like a good engineer, David was deconstructing the situation into three separate issues: how to stay alive, what to do about the Schulmann report, and what to do about Maggie. All three seemed equally difficult and interconnected. While logically he should have been focusing on staying alive, it was the last question that kept moving to the front of his thoughts.

He was scared of both staying with her and of letting her go. He did not want to give her the power to hurt him. Initially, it was about protecting her, so he wouldn't have to live with the guilt of cowardice. And their lovemaking was a release of stress and the fear they had to live under. But last night, she opened her eyes, and he felt a jolt of a spiritual connection. No, he could not let her go. He needed her in order to protect her. He was not sure she would appreciate him feeling the need to protect her at all. But for him it became a big part of his reason for going on. If he gave up, what would happen to her?

Having Maggie made him stronger. Fate or not fate, he happened to walk into her restaurant, he happened to ask for her phone, she happened to agree to listen to him. So many random happenings. It all could have been different, but it was not. She was given to him as a ward of his, and he chose to accept her.

Figuring this out simplified things. Now his mind could walk down the logical path that Maggie described: take as much money as they could, get ready to run, hide in distant locations. Two years was

probably the maximum that he would risk. He'd have to put in a more robust system of hiding and releasing files. He'd have to find someone who could build a truly deep cover. Or perhaps they'd go to such a remote location in Central America or somewhere, where Nemzhov's eye did not easily reach. It was doable.

His mind wandered back to the question that James had asked him when Maggie was kidnapped: "Why don't you go into hiding and forget about her?" He imagined himself living quietly with Maggie in some remote location, away from prying eyes.

He realized that this wouldn't work. Just like in the conversation with James, the feeling that went through him was that of loathing. He thought of the people that died—Jim, Megrano, James, Frank, Chander, Alex—with swelling anger. And then there was Schulmann himself and the fact that the work he'd died for was now being used for just the opposite of his intentions. There was this chain of courageous people and now it came down to him and Maggie. He could try to do something about it, and if he did not he would live with the knowledge of having done nothing. He knew that he and Maggie wouldn't make it like this; they'd grow to hate each other because of the shame they would feel. They would always have to be on the run, and Nemzhov's spies would keep after them forever.

And what about his country? Eugene's parting words rang in his head. Was he going to be an accomplice to hiding the truth from the rest of his people? He'd never been big on patriotic speeches, but deep inside he was proud of the nation of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Would he serve their memory by keeping silent?

The words of Merry from *Lord of the Rings* came to mind: "The fires of Isengard will spread. And the woods of Tuckborough and Buckland will burn. And all that was once green and good in this world will be gone. There won't be a Shire, Pippin."

David smiled, thinking this was just a fairy tale; there were no hobbits or Shire or any of that stuff. It was dangerous to mix stories and reality. But then, why do we tell stories? Just for entertainment?

Many things happened in real history that dwarfed anything that storytellers could come up with.

He thought of Nemzhov's "Great Game" and of his own earlier image of him and Maggie as two small, poorly defended pawns. Well, Comrade Nemzhov, a pawn can cross the board, turn into a powerful queen, and checkmate you. The thought of wiping the smug "master of the universe" smile off Nemzhov's face pleased him.

His network of remote servers was still set to go off on May 30th. That gave them eighteen days. They'd have to leave here and get back to the mainland, to a big city but not one of those they'd been to. Perhaps Chicago or Las Vegas or Denver. Carefully get in touch with Platt, they owed it to him. Javier, Oleg, Alejandro ... people to contact and get ready. And not forget to figure out a way to contact Frank's children and let them know the real reason their father died. Perhaps one day he'll be able to tell Rachel Kaufman about her uncle, and Annette and Josephine Maidel about their mother.

He wondered about the plants in his Culver City place. By now, the landlord, a pleasant older lady, must have been alerted to David's disappearance. Hopefully, she watered them. What a strange turn his life had taken. David got up. There was one more task to do before seeing Maggie.

Tuesday, 5/10/2022, 5:58 p.m. HST

“In a revolution, as in a novel,
the most difficult part to invent is the end.”
— Alexis De Tocqueville

Maggie was at the edge of Black Rock, sitting and watching the sun sliding into the ocean, twirling green cat-eye glasses in her hand.

David walked up and sat next to her. “Hi.”

She smiled back. “Hi. I feel like these glasses are the only thing that connects me to Maggie Sappin. Do they look funny?”

David laughed. “Yes, they kind of do. But I like them on you.”

They sat quietly for a minute. Then David extended a closed hand to her and slowly opened it. On his palm there was a small Seagate thumb-drive.

She laughed. “Is that what passes for a ring in computer science circles? Or are you going to bluff me the way you did that Mr. Chao?”

David laughed, too, and then said seriously, “This drive has a small executable program that will stop Schulmann’s file from being publicly distributed. All you have to do is plug it into any Windows computer, open the drive, and click on the program. The password is Rachel.”

No, he is not going to look out for “number one,” she thought, ashamed.

“And if I don’t do this?”

“Then on May 30th Schulmann’s report will go to every major TV network, newspaper, news outlet. I added a short statement explaining why Williams and Schulmann had been assassinated.”

“So we have a bit over two weeks to get the hell out of Dodge? Before the proverbial you-know-what hits the fan?”

“Yes.”

“And you are not going to run this program?”

“No, I won’t.”

“Why?”

"I thought about it. I agree that the most logical option would be to get as much of Nemzhov's money as we can and disappear. I would understand completely if that's what you chose to do and help you with that. But that's not my choice. You can say that Merry Brandybuck told me so."

"Who is Mary? One of your ex-girlfriends?"

"No, it's a character from *Lord of the Rings*. I can tell you over dinner."

One of his silly fairy tale characters, she thought with a mixture of relief and irritation.

"Oh, you and your stories." She grew serious. "Do you think this"—she indicated the flash drive—"will change anything? After all, these events did not happen out of the blue, it's been building up for years ..."

David shook his head. "I don't know if it will change things or not. But as James told me, people deserve to know. To know what led to this, to know who profited. What they will do with the knowledge, I can't predict. Nemzhov was afraid of this coming out, so it can't be a bad thing, right?"

She took the plunge. "It will be safer for us to travel separately, right?" Partly a statement, partly a question. David did not answer. "Javier said so," she continued, while thinking, *what the hell are you doing?*

"He did say that it'd be safer to go separately through the airports," David clarified in a neutral voice.

"So perhaps we should travel separately." Her stomach clenched in fear of his answer.

"Perhaps not?" David snarled back, anger coming through. "Stop looking for excuses. If you want to separate, fine, just come out and say it. I won't force you. But don't try to make it sound like it's for my own good."

She was uncharacteristically close to tears. "So, you want to stay together?"

"Yes, damn it, I want to stay together."

“I thought I drive you nuts?”

“Yes, you do. But I want to be with you.”

She looked away to hide the tears welling up in her eyes, tried wiping them with her hand, and finally turned back to David. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I was so scared you’d agree. I just did not want to admit how much I need you.”

David shifted uncomfortably at the sight of her tears, took her hand and kissed it. “I need you, too.”

Maggie lightly tossed the thumb-drive a couple of times in her hand, got up, swung her arm, and sent it flying into the deep water.

“OK, then. Let’s go. I’m starving,” she said. “I’ll buy you dinner. And you can tell me about this Mary character. Then we can start figuring out where to run.”

Tuesday, 5/24/2022, 4:14 p.m. GMT

Moscow, Russia

The large rectangular table was surrounded by twelve leather chairs, but only five were occupied, all on one end. Three in civilian clothes, two wearing military uniforms. A setting sun enveloped the room in a bronze tint.

The man sitting at the end had thin lips and pale angry eyes. He anxiously tapped his fingers against the table. "So nobody knows where Nemzhov is?"

A beefy uniformed man seated immediately to his left shook his head. "No. He disappeared last Friday afternoon. Told his secretary he was not feeling good, to cancel a couple of meetings he had scheduled for Saturday, that he was going to his *dacha* to get some rest. On Sunday night she received another message saying he was still not well and to cancel his Monday meetings."

"Any clues?"

"No. He never made it to his *dacha*, and we have not found anybody who saw him during the last four days."

"And the bank accounts identified in the reports?"

"Mostly emptied on Friday. We lost the trail after a few transfers."

"Has anybody else from the list disappeared?"

"Quite a few tried to run when the news hit. Many of those have been apprehended already. A couple disappeared beforehand, one on Friday, one on Saturday."

"So he suspected something and warned a few people?"

"It certainly looks this way. We detained and are questioning Sergey Arkhipov, a colonel that worked for Nemzhov. Arkhipov said that two people were in Moscow earlier this month, an American man and a Ukrainian woman. Supposedly, they uncovered the information and were blackmailing Nemzhov."

"Supposedly?"

“Nemzhov had a meeting with them and Arkhipov was not a part of it. Nemzhov thought he successfully bought them off, but then the couple disappeared. Nemzhov went ballistic. That’s all Arkhipov knows.”

“Is it possible that these people have more than what was published?”

“We have information that was not disclosed so far, so yes, it’s possible they have data they have not released yet.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Perhaps they hope to sell it or use it for protection. Or they might just enjoy the game. But more likely, they don’t have it yet. Even with our resources, we had not put together the whole picture until last July.”

The pale-eyed man nodded and changed the topic. “Intelligence assessment?”

From the other man on the left side. “So far, multiple arrests, suicides, disappearances. As the news spreads, over the next few days we expect mass demonstrations and riots across the world. Thousands are already gathering in Tiananmen square.”

“What about the US?”

“Large crowds in Washington and other cities. We don’t know whether the current administration will survive; too many were exposed as profiting from the 2019 crisis. We also think that any separation discussions are off the table now. The politicians that have been caught with their hand in a cookie jar have been equally divided between “blue” and “red” states. People will rally around the flag. And the former secessionists now have a new target—us and the Chinese.”

The man at the head of the table tapped his fingers again. “Suggestions?”

The heavyset man on the right jumped in. “Nobody in this room has been mentioned in the report. We can’t disprove the financial actions from 2019, but the assertions of the GRU orchestrating the Williams assassination are just that, assertions. I think we portray

Nemzhov and others listed in the report as rogue elements that illegally profited from the inside information. We deny any government involvement. We say nothing about the assassination. If additional information surfaces, we have the rogue elements to blame.”

“And the US?”

“We must keep a low profile. We are being blamed for the assassination. We can’t afford any additional inkling of our involvement.”

The man asking questions got up and walked over to the window. The flame of St. Basil’s Cathedral was rising to the sky, lit up by the last rays of the sun. After a minute of contemplation, he turned around. “OK, let’s place the blame on Nemzhov and others. We will also announce a campaign against financial speculation and illegal trading. This should help us to get in front of some of the public anger. Draft the statement; I want it issued in the morning. Keep looking for Nemzhov and those that disappeared. And find the couple that visited Nemzhov. I don’t want to take a chance of them disclosing more. Enough surprises.”

He tapped fingers against the glass. “Darn, we expected the Americans to fall apart. I think they would have if not for this information coming out. We knew it was risky. This is not the end ...”

Playa del Carmen, Mexico

David, Maggie, and Oleg were sitting in a bar by the ocean. The small resort town was ignoring the insanity that engulfed the world’s capitals after the real story of the 2019 crisis and the Williams assassination broke. All three were using different names now. David and Maggie flew into Cancun on Saturday; Oleg drove into Cancun the night before once he got their message.

Oleg cleared his throat. “I never went through so many precautions when getting somewhere. So why did you decide to do it?” There was no need to spell out what “it” was.

Maggie shrugged. "I came to realize that my old life was over no matter what. And I did not want Nemzhov to win."

"David, what about you?"

"Same here, didn't want them to win, wanted to make them pay for James, Frank, Megrano, Alex ... Also something that Maggie's dad said to me: 'I don't want to be afraid of them.' I know that I lived in fear for years, fear of losing my job, losing my money, losing my marriage. Living in fear is just not living."

"You could have waited."

"We could have. Actually, the information was not going to be released for another week. When we were in Chicago I saw John Platt's obituary. He was someone who really helped us, without him we would have not found the Schulmann file. Supposedly his plane had engine failure and crashed, but I knew he was murdered. That's when we decided not to wait any longer, to make sure that the information went out before they could get to us. I wanted to see the results."

"Oh, there are results all right. Especially in the US. I saw this morning that the House started impeachment proceedings against all civil officers named in the publication. All politicians involved face swift recalls. You know, you made yourselves some serious enemies. Not that you didn't have some already."

"How's Alejandro?" asked Maggie.

"The family recalled Alejandro from LA, and he is in hiding in southern Mexico now. Javier disappeared for a while. I am in hiding, too. It's dangerous to be associated with you."

"I am sorry about that."

"You did what you had to do. And I can't imagine a better revenge for Alex. But I think you should change identities one more time, so if they get to me or Javier we still can't lead them to you. I'll give you a few names I have from the family. I don't want to know which ones you are going to use. What do you plan to do next?"

Maggie answered, "Schulmann did not finish his work. We published only what he and Marchuk had traced to the conclusion, to

the names of the end account holders. Much of what we found consisted of partial traces and raw data. It was work-in-progress.”

“Marchuk?”

“Sorry, I should have explained. Marchuk was a computer expert that worked with Schulmann. He’s been killed.”

“So you plan to finish their work?”

“We’ll try. David thinks he might be able to replicate some of the algorithms. He’s been reading Marchuk’s dissertation. I’ll play Schulmann, he’ll play Marchuk.”

“You better hide well.”

David sipped his coffee while looking over the boats in a small marina. It was surprising how infrequently he thought of his job at Space Systems. There was a certain irony here: the things he endured and obsessed over a few short weeks ago were unceremoniously left behind and did not matter at all. He felt guilty about his parents and carefully sent them a couple of e-mails, but did not respond to their questions except repeating that he was fine. He did not really know who he was any longer, but he knew he had work to do. Yes, Oleg was right, he and Maggie had better plan to change identities again, place another barrier before their pursuers.

He thought out loud: “This is not the end ...”

Sainte-Luce, Martinique

A man in a straw hat and sunglasses was one of many enjoying his coffee with a baguette on this sunny morning. Nemzhov had always liked the Caribbean, and it seemed like a good place to hide out for a while and prepare for the next step. It was convenient to come here from Paris with an EU passport after visiting Switzerland. It had always been a part of his “if shit hits the fan” plan. The disappearance of Ferguson and Sappin was the first domino falling. Not being able to find them after ten days of intense searching was the second. There was an unconfirmed sighting in the Chicago O’Hare, but the trail went cold and they did not get the names. Then, despite his orders, John

Platt was assassinated. He knew he was losing control and his sense told him to get out. He warned only a half-dozen others, and all of them escaped. As could be expected, the cowards in the Kremlin were now sacrificing him as a “rogue element.” He snorted at “rogue.” As if they did not approve the plan!

He managed to get much of his money out, but that was not the point. It was the rush of power that he craved, the rush that couldn’t be satisfied with money alone. He’d lied to Ferguson and Sappin that this was not about revenge. Of course it was about revenge, first against the arrogant Americans, now also against the spineless Moscow bureaucrats. And Ferguson and Sappin. He’d thought he figured them out, but they played him for a fool—and nobody makes a fool of Nikolai Nemzhov and gets away with it. He knew he was going to be hunted, but he was going to be a hunter as well. He had over a hundred million at his disposal, and he figured that with the ones he helped to escape—who likely longed for revenge as well—they had close to a billion.

Nemzhov closed the newspaper with its screaming headline. He lost the battle, but the war was not over yet.

“Plus de café, s’il vous plait.” He motioned to the waiter and said under his breath, “This is not the end.”

COMMENTARY

The events described here are fictional. There is no hindsight when the setting is in the future. But one can argue that the seeds of such events had been planted by the summer of 2013, when this book was written. Will the seeds grow the way that this tale hypothesized? One hopes not. But hope is just that, hope. What can't last, won't last, and one can kick the proverbial can down the road only so long. To the author's knowledge, all the facts prior to July of 2013 are reproduced faithfully.

Events in Ukraine (added Feb. 22, 2014)

The book refers to the Orange Revolution, protests that took place in Ukraine in late 2004 – early 2005. In February of 2014, we are witnessing another battle taking place in Kiev's Independence Square, with many of the same characters. In the Internet age, it was tempting to re-write parts of the book to include these events, but I have decided to limit myself to this note. It would have felt vaguely Orwellian to keep changing the story after the fact.

On US debt and debt/GDP ratio

US GDP by years: \$14T in 2007, \$14.4T in 2008, \$13.9T in 2009, \$14.5T in 2010, \$15.1T in 2011, \$15.7T in 2012, estimated \$16T in April 2013.

US National Debt by years: \$9T in 2007, \$10T in 2008, \$11.9T in 2009, \$13.5T in 2010, \$14.8T in 2011, \$16.1T in 2012, estimated \$16.8T in April 2013. Source:

http://www.treasurydirect.gov/govt/reports/pd/histdebt/histdebt_histo5.htm

GDP growth from 2007 to 2013: \$2T, or 14%.

Debt growth from 2007 to 2013: \$7.8T, or 87%.

US Debt/GDP in 2007: 64%. In 2013: 105%.

Projected US budget deficit for 2013: \$1.04T (April estimate).

US unfunded liabilities in 2013: \$123T (\$85.8T Medicare, \$21.6T Prescriptions, \$16.3T Social Security). Source:

<http://www.usdebtclock.org>

On “fiscal gap” accounting as described in the INFORM Act in the U.S. House of Representatives bill H.R. 2967: “The fiscal gap is a comprehensive measure of our government's indebtedness. It is defined as the present value of all projected future expenditures, including servicing outstanding official federal debt, less the present value of all projected future tax and other receipts, including income accruing from the government's current ownership of financial assets”

<http://www.theinformact.org/>. The Act is supported by 15 Nobel Laureates in Economics. The 2013 fiscal gap is estimated at \$200 Trillion and future Americans face lifetime “net taxes” of over \$420K, a tax burden of 60 cents for each dollar they earn:

<http://swindled.thecankicksback.org/>.

On US dollar as reserve currency

While we have gotten used to having the US dollar as the world's reserve currency and some people believe that it will continue indefinitely, it was not always so. Over the past six centuries there were five other reserve currencies, each lasting about 100 years. When the US dollar is ultimately dethroned as the world's reserve currency, many will claim that nobody could have seen it coming Except that the signs are on the wall.

From 2000 to 2010, the dollar's share of global currency reserves dropped from 70 to 60%, while the euro's rose accordingly. The IMF (International Monetary Fund) was planning a system of special drawing rights, SDRs, based on a basket of currencies. It looked like there would be a smooth transition to a new currency regime that would also allow the US to gradually devalue its debts.

“Is the Dollar Dying? Why US Currency Is in Danger”

Source: <http://www.cnbc.com/id/100461159>

“Few would dispute China's end goal of having its currency, the yuan, become a genuine world reserve currency. Who wouldn't want cheap access to world capital markets that reserve currency status brings? Not to mention cheaper transaction costs on international trade. Indeed most spectators also understand China's political motives in achieving reserve currency status for the yuan (more voting rights at IMF, World Bank etc.). However, what does seem to be lost on the financial world right now is how quickly they are getting there.”

Source: <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/chinas-secret-ambition-yuan-075459535.html>

“Year of the yuan: China's explosive currency goes global:
“Degenerating credit quality across the board has prompted asset managers to shy away from the dollar, euro, Japanese yen, British pound, and Swiss franc. And some are turning to the yuan, a currency that 10 years ago was completely off limits to foreign investors. An HSBC forecast projected that by 2015, the yuan will become one of the three most used currencies in global trade, in league with the dollar and euro.”

<http://rt.com/business/year-of-the-yuan-china-currency-goes-global-561>

“China is buying crude oil from Iran using its currency the yuan.”

Source: www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17988142

“Australia and China To Enable Direct Currency Convertibility.”

Source: www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/pm-set-to-sign-china-currency-deal-in-boost-to-exporters/story-fn59nm2j-1226609244139

“India, Iran to settle some oil trade in rupees.”

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/20/india-iran-idUSL3E8CK3C120120120>

“France plans currency swap line with China.”

Source: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/13/us-china-france-currency-idUSBRE93C01S20130413>

China Names Yuan Convertibility Plan Among This Year's Goals.

Source: <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2013-05-06/china-names-yuan-convertibility-plan-among-goals-for-this-year>

Chinese Renminbi overtakes Russian Rouble to reach #13 as a World Payments Currency.

Source:
http://www.swift.com/assets/swift_com/documents/products_services/monthly_RMB_tracker_Feb2013.pdf

CENTRAL BANKERS are preparing to welcome the RMB as an emerging major global reserve currency.

Source: <http://asiatoday.com.au/content/rmb-approaching-safe-haven-status>

China and Brazil sign \$30bn currency swap agreement.

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-21949615>

Bank of France Seeking Yuan Liquidity Agreement.

Source: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-05-28/bank-of-france-seeking-yuan-liquidity-agreement-for-euro-area.html>

China's Secret Ambition for the Yuan.

Source: <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/chinas-secret-ambition-yuan-075459535.html>

The Internationalisation of the Renminbi.

Source:
http://www.bundesbank.de/Redaktion/EN/Reden/2013/2013_07_03_nagel.html

Renminbi-yen trade growing strongly a year after launch.

Source:
<http://www.thechinamoneyreport.com/2013/06/12/renminbi-yen-trade-growing-strongly-a-year-after-launch>

Yuan Offshore Trade Race Picks Up With Frankfurt Bid: Currencies.

Source: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-07-02/yuan-offshore-trade-race-picks-up-with-frankfurt-bid-currencies.html>

On the role of gold

The barbaric relic has been used as a store of wealth for over 5,000 years.

The “fiat” money has been around for 1,200 years, having originated in China. The average “life expectancy” of a fiat currency is 27 years. Out of 775 reviewed fiat currencies, 12% percent failed through hyperinflation, 21% were destroyed by war, 12% destroyed by independence, 24% were monetarily reformed, and only 23% are still in circulation (source: DollarDaze.org). The purchasing power of the dollar has decreased by more than 95% since 1913 (source: <http://blogs.wsj.com/wallet/2009/01/28/the-buying-power-of-a-dollar-on-a-downswing>).

“In the absence of the gold standard, there is no way to protect savings from confiscation through inflation. There is no safe store of value. If there were, the government would have to make its holding illegal, as was done in the case of gold.....The financial policy of the welfare state requires that there be no way for the owners of wealth to protect themselves. This is the shabby secret of the welfare statists' tirade against gold. Deficit spending is simply a scheme for the confiscation of wealth. Gold stands in the way of this insidious process. It stands as the protector of property rights. If one grasps this, one has no difficulty in understanding the statists' antagonism toward the gold standard.” Alan Greenspan, “*Gold and Economic Freedom*”, 1966 (source: http://www.constitution.org/mon/greenspan_gold.htm).

For 100 years, from 1834 to 1934, every US dollar was exchangeable into gold, at the rate of about \$20 per ounce. Then again, after the Bretton Woods accord US dollars were convertible into gold at \$35 per ounce until Nixon put an end to it in 1971.

“How much gold China has and how much gold China wants? “Officially” China’s gold reserves stand at 1,054, and this number has not been “updated” since 2008. It’s annual gold mine production is estimated at over 400 tonnes per year. None of this mined gold ever leaves China. Indeed, it is doubtful if any reaches their own domestic market. To service the private demand of its own citizens; China imports vast quantities of gold – now rivaling the near-legendary appetite for gold of India (and Indians).

By 2011, China’s gold imports had already soared to more than 800 tons per year (source: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-02-05/china-gold-imports-from-hong-kong-gain-to-all-time-high-in-12.html>). However, while India produces practically no gold of its own, China is the world’s #1 producer. Clearly, China’s mined-gold is *the government’s gold*. This brings us to some number-crunching. From the beginning of 2002 China has produced approximately 3,600 metric tonnes of gold. However it has only *reported* a total increase in its “official” gold reserves of roughly 650 tonnes.

Even if we assume that some of that remaining 3,000 tonnes of gold-production leaked into its own domestic market (despite the best efforts of China’s government); there is a vast amount of mined gold in China which has not been accounted, and we must strongly suspect that most/all of that gold is securely stored in government vaults. In other words, instead of having only 1,054 tonnes of gold reserves it’s quite possible that China could have as much as four times that amount: 4,000 tonnes.” Source: www.etfdailynews.com/2013/05/03/chinas-real-gold-reserves-at-4000-tonnes

China reportedly planning to back the yuan with gold. Source: http://rbth.asia/business/2013/07/17/china_reportedly_planning_to_back_the_yuan_with_gold_47997.html

The China Radio International sponsored newspaper World News Journal (Shijie Xinwenbao) (04/28): "According to China's National Foreign Exchanges Administration China 's gold reserves have recently

increased. Currently, the majority of its gold reserves have been located in the U.S. and European countries. The U.S. and Europe have always suppressed the rising price of gold. They intend to weaken gold's function as an international reserve currency. They don't want to see other countries turning to gold reserves instead of the U.S. dollar or Euro. Therefore, suppressing the price of gold is very beneficial for the U.S. in maintaining the U.S. dollar's role as the international reserve currency. China's increased gold reserves will thus act as a model and lead other countries towards reserving more gold. Large gold reserves are also beneficial in promoting the internationalization of the RMB."

Source: <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=204405>

Arizona lawmakers pass bill making silver, gold legal tender.

Source: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/01/usa-arizona-gold-idUSL2N0DI00Z20130501>

On the secession attitudes in the US

In 2012 there were almost a million secession petitions signed in all 50 US states, with 125K coming from Texas. Yes, there is no right to secede in the Constitution. But then, there was no such right back in 1861 and it took a bloody war to stop the breakup. As one writer put it, "Breaking away is impossible ... So was dancing on the Berlin Wall." His point is valid: very few anticipated in 1980's that the Soviet Union will break up in a few short years. And one can't predict what another crisis will do to an already divided country.

Some links of interest:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_state_petitions_for_secession
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/16/us/politics/texas-secession-movement-unbowed-by-white-house-rejection.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter&_r=1&

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On tracking people by their cell phones

If a cell phone is turned on, it constantly registers its location with cell phone networks. All cell phone carriers implemented location-based services (LBS) that rely on this capability. Anybody who gains computer access to cell phone networks infrastructure technically can track active phones in real time. It is widely known that the government (FBI, police departments) track cell phones, possibly without a warrant:

<http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2012/08/warrantless-gps-phone-tracking>. There are services, such as

<https://www.locilocl.com/us/cell-phone-tracking> that do it for \$5/mo but they obviously require explicit permission.

How can someone not directly affiliated with law services or with the wireless carrier track your location? There are a number of scenarios: 1) using social media services, 2) installing spyware on the phone, and 3) gaining access to LBS servers by pretending to be a legitimate service or by breaking the network's security. The description in the book assumes the latter case.

Some people assert that a phone can be tracked even when it's turned off, e.g., http://www.huffingtonpost.com/larry-bodine/big-brother-is-definitely_b_1799521.html, <http://news.softpedia.com/news/The-NSA-Can-Track-Cell-Phones-Even-when-Turned-Off-370225.shtml>. Theoretically, this is possible, depending on how a phone is implemented. Only removing the battery and/or placing the phone into an environment where electromagnetic waves can't penetrate would assure that your phone can't be followed.