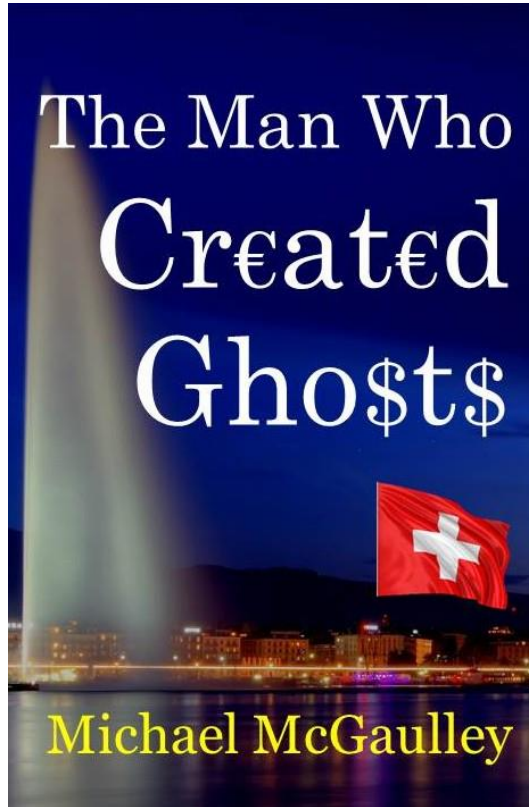


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This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof.

**Apologies for any technical glitches that may have crept in in “translating” these pages from book form to this sampler edition.**

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## NORTHERN VIRGINIA

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## ***Balls and rackets***

“I’VE GOT THE RACKET IF YOU’VE GOT THE BALLS”— Jade’s first words as she popped open the door of the squash court where I’d been pounding away by myself.

It was the voice, even more than the words or the knowing glint in her eyes, that set off a tingle that stretched from my ears down the spine to my . . . well, need I say?

Just as she intended.

And she meant exactly what she said: She definitely *did* have a racket, and I was about to be drawn into it . . . via the balls.

She held out her hand. I took it. She gave a tiny, almost imperceptible squeeze, and held it, holding my gaze as well, direct and unblinking.

She was tall, at least 5'9", with flowing chestnut hair, dark, impenetrable eyes, and wide lips. High cheekbones suggested a touch of Eurasia in her ancestry. At first I guessed her accent as Swedish, maybe Dutch. Much later I’d learn it was mainly Russian.

With no security clearance and hence no job I didn’t have much to do, so I’d gotten in the habit of jogging over to the club to pound off my frustration on one of the squash courts. Usually alone: the place was mostly deserted at that time of day. Most people around here had jobs.

Sherri had gotten me into squash, part of the fitness regimen she’d imposed. In less than a year, I’d dropped 93 pounds, and the fat, nerdy kid in the mirror had melted away.

Now I look in mirrors and see a jock, a hunk.

But the fat little nerd is usually lurking just behind the hunk, out of sight but not out of mind.

Jade was dazzling in her white court suit, lush hair billowing over her shoulders, tight jersey shirt. No wedding ring.

She stepped into the court and closed the door behind. “I’ve been watching you. It’s sad for a big man like you to be playing with himself.”

She let that hang in the air, then said, “Wouldn’t it be more fun to play with a woman?” She had me with that voice, husky and sensuous . . . with a hint of someplace foreign and exotic.

“I NEED A BREAK,” she puffed after a while. “I’m not in the shape you are. Do you come here often?”

She laughed, throaty, sensuous. “There I go again. ‘Do you come here often?’ I sound like a guy on the make in a singles’ bar. No matter. I might as well ask, What’s a nice guy like you doing in a place like this at this time of day?”

“I’m self-employed.” My first fib: I was unemployed, not self-employed.

“Self-employed? In what field?”

“Computers.” I didn’t want to get into that story. People didn’t take my specialty very seriously. And I didn’t want to get into the whole story of why I couldn’t get a security clearance, let alone the whole thing with Sherri and Florida.

“I think I’ve stumbled on a very interesting man,” she said. “You’re just the kind of guy I’ve been looking for.”

*The kind of guy I’ve been looking for.* Sherri had said the same, back when she shifted roles from personal trainer to lover.

We played another ten minutes or so, then collided, as if by chance, and her arms fell around me, her racket clattering across the floor.

Time stopped. Her scent—light and expensive, mixed with her aroma—filled my nostrils. Her tongue flicked across my lips. Her crotch ground against mine, and we shuffled over to a corner of the court, out of sight of the door.

AFTERWARDS, she shrugged her shorts back up. “My God! You *are something!* You really *are* the kind of guy I’ve been looking for!”

She held out her hand for me to pull her up. “I didn’t expect that to happen. Not here,” she said. “We’re both so sweaty. We need a shower. Is your place close by?”

*Too good to be true!* the fat little kid whispered in my ear.

We walked out together, hand in hand, and she led the way to her car. A gold Mercedes two-seater sports car, license plate JADE-38-D.

She paused. “I don’t even know your name.”

“People call me Rick.”

She looked into my eyes, deep in, and her tongue flicked over her lip as fast as a frog’s tongue grabs a fly. “Rick?” Her eyes flicked down my body before adding, “In my opinion, Dick—rather, *Big Dick*—suits you better. May I call you that?” she asked as her hand subtly passed across my front, lingering down there just long for a subtle squeeze.

“That’ll be fine, I managed, a little short of breath.

“And your last name?”

I took a breath. “Woodcock.” It always embarrassed me, though my father reveled in it.

“*Woodcock?* Are you serious?” she giggled. “Woodcock? Woodcock! Oh my God, you *are* perfectly named! Big Dick Lumberdick—I love it! That is so apt!”

She'd been an actress, as I'd discover later—among several other professions. And she had written today's script, and delivered the lines perfectly.

“So, Mr. Lumberdick, let's go to your place and take a nice long shower. Oh, by the way, I'm Jade, Jade Greene, as you can guess from my license plate.”

“What's the 38-D stand for?” I asked, then wished I hadn't. She looked up at me. “You're not naive. You figure it out.”



## ***Now and then***

THAT WAS THEN—two weeks, three days ago.

Now I get back to my place, exhausted. It's after eight, and dark, and starting to rain, and I haven't had anything to eat since a power bar hours ago. I'm tired, I'm cut and scratched on the face and arms, my clothes are bloody, and all I want is a shower and something to eat.

Five calls on my answering machine. I'm tempted to let them go till morning, but there was always the chance that one of them might be a job offer. I'm about a month away from flat broke.

The first is Jade, calling at 6:12: "Call me when you get back. It's urgent, really urgent."

Jade, at 6:49: "Where *are* you? Call me."

Jade, at 7:07: "You *must* be back by now. There's been some *very* bad news. We need to talk."

Jade at 7:24: "Are you hiding from me? What's going on? Why haven't you called? We need to talk, now."

Jade, at 7:48, her voice even huskier. I wondered if she was crying. "Why aren't you picking up? We've got a problem, a really big one."

*We've* got a problem? Not *we*—*I'm* the one with the problem, and the problem is Jade. I don't want to talk to her, I don't want to get any further involved than I already am. I want to break it off.

I'm not comfortable with it now, not after I found out that she was married. Actually, I didn't *find* out: she *told* me, yesterday, after two weeks.

Jade at 7:59: "Dammit, will you please pick up? I know you're there. It's urgent, we've got to get our stories straight so we're consistent when we talk to the police."

Police?

I step into the bathroom and pull off my biking gear. There's blood all over the jersey. If I wash it now maybe it'll come out.

The phone rings again. I check caller ID. Jade. I hear her voice from the answering machine. "Look, I know you're there, will you just have the courtesy to pick up? Our necks are on the line. Pick up. *Pick up!*"

I pick up. As I do, I check myself over in the mirror. Scratched and bruised, worse than I'd realized.

"We need to talk, right now. Come on over, you know the way."

"I need a shower and something to eat. Can't we talk about this tomorrow?"

"There's trouble, a *huge* problem. Come right now, I'll give you something to eat."

"Where? Your place? But your—your husband . . ."

"He won't be here. He's dead."

I stumble back against the shower door. "What do you mean, dead?"

"What do you think dead means? As I said, we've got a problem and we need to talk. Before the police arrive asking questions."

JADE'S HOUSE is in a development modestly called Grande Potomack Estates, arrayed amongst the last remains of a forest that had once spread back from the Potomac River, a half-mile away.

Jade had given me the code for the front gate yesterday when she'd driven me around the development, when it finally came out that she was married.

I drive slowly through the quiet streets, not wanting to draw attention.

Windsor Castle Way is the main drag, and the Greene place is on Olde Hastings Road.

Ironically, just yesterday, after she finally admitted it, I'd gone to the Safeway and bumped into her coming out with Mr. Greene. He was maybe 50, going gray, paunchy, hunched-over, obviously no athlete. A very ordinary-looking guy, Mr. Anonymous. The only thing distinctive about him was a pronounced limp, one leg shorter than the other.

And now he was dead. With that paunch, he'd been a coronary waiting to happen. But why would the cops want to talk to me?

I'm not comfortable coming here now; there are security cameras discreetly situated in the trees, with one facing directly down Olde Hastings from the Greene mansion.

No matter that the whole community was gated, the Greens also had their own gate—the code was easy enough: jade38D. As I punch it in, I notice still another pair of security cameras, one catching my face, the other my car license plate.

The house is in the Federalist mansion style, and only a bit smaller than George Washington's at Mount Vernon.

Jade's gold Mercedes coupe is parked out front, top up. No other cars. No police cars.

She'd told me that Mr. Greene—Edgar— was an accountant and financial planner. None of it was true, I'd soon learn, not even their names.

Though he *was* a financial planner . . . of a certain sort, catering to a very unusual clientele.

“Don't ring, the door will be open, just let yourself in.” I step into a grand entry like Tara in *Gone with the Wind*, only more

grandiose, with a winding staircase leading to the upper level, and above that a glass dome.

I catch a whiff of smoke. Jade doesn't smoke. Who else is here? What am I walking into?

She appears at the top of the staircase and comes down slowly. She's wearing a sheer silk robe, a see-through with nothing beneath it. And holding a cigarette that seems as long as a pencil.

"I . . . I didn't think you smoked."

"I don't. *Usually* don't. I quit years ago. But this, this is so upsetting, it just—" She throws her arms around me and squeezes tight. I feel her body shaking with sobs.

I push away, gently. This isn't feeling right, not at all. She leads the way into a living room, a huge room, almost barren of furniture. That seems strange, as she'd said they'd lived in this house "for years."

Two more lies, I'll learn later: they don't own the house, only rent it. And they've been here not quite two years.

She walks over to a table and pours vodka into a glass, nearly to the top, then tips in a little tonic and a slice of lime and hands it to me. The lime had already been sliced into wedges. She tops off her own glass.

"To our future," she says, touching glasses.

*Future?* "Look," I say, "I can't be drinking, I haven't had anything to eat, just some power-bars along the way. It'd knock me out on an empty stomach."

"Drink a little, then I'll get you something to eat. I can't drink alone. But I need something to calm me down."

I take a sip. The raw vodka burns all the way down. I drop in a couple more ice cubes.

She sits on a white leather sofa and pats the cushion beside. I take a chair instead.

“You’re very distant, just when I need you most. I need your support; this is a very . . . very wrenching time.”

“You said your . . . He’s dead?”

“I . . . I *think* he’s dead. I mean, I’m *sure* he is.”

“I . . . I don’t know what to say. I’m . . . sorry to hear it.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m not. He was a bastard. But a very rich bastard. And you and I need to work together.”

“How did it happen? Where?”

“I don’t know. They haven’t found the body yet.”

I sit there, staring at her, trying to figure out what to say, what to do. Already the vodka is hitting. “Then how do you know . . . know he’s dead?”

“I *know*, Dick, I just know.”

”Why? How do you know?”

“They found his car, the Mercedes, the big black sedan. It was parked for hours along the C&O Canal, beyond Harper’s Ferry.”

The big Mercedes, one step shy of being a limo.

I’d been biking along the canal, past Harper’s Ferry. “Maybe he just parked it and got delayed in a meeting,” I say, wanting it to work out that way. I wanted out, to get away from all of this. But the body beneath that sheer robe was pulling me.

“Never mind that, we can talk about all that later. Now we need to work together, there’s no time to lose.”

“Work together? On what?”

“He was married before me, in case you didn’t know. She was a bitch, that I know, and she hated me. You can be sure she’ll have her lawyers in here in the morning to do an inventory and try to grab it all from us.”

*From us?* “Wasn’t he divorced from her? Didn’t he have a will?”

“Of course, I made sure of all that. But she’ll contest it, and that’s why I need you to move some things out so nobody finds

them. Then we can go away. We'll be great together. You're just the guy I've spent my life looking for."

Her boobs bounce under the silk as she talks. I force my eyes away. Not a time for distractions.

"I'm still not clear," I say. "How did he die? Is there anything—"

"I *told* you, I don't *know* how, I just *know*. I was shocked when the Maryland police called to tell me about his car. But then I knew he was dead, I felt it."

"But why call me? It'll look very strange when the police—"

"I won't give the go-ahead yet, won't tell the police to act on it, until morning. We need to work out a plan, to get our stories together, so they're consistent. And why did I call you? Because I needed you. *You, only you.*"

My brain is fuzzy, and I realize I've been automatically sipping the drink. It's already half-gone. I want to set it down, get it out of my hand, somewhere out of reach. There's no table by this chair. I stand and walk over to the drinks table and set it down. I turn. She's behind me. The silk robe has fallen open, and she pushes her body against me, and I respond.

"This isn't a good idea," I mumble, her lips on mine. She pulls me over to the leather couch and begins fumbling with my belt.

"This is . . . crazy," I say, standing. She doesn't let go, and tugs on my pants.

## *Favor*

“I NEED A FAVOR,” she says afterward, coming back from cleaning herself. She’s wearing that sheer robe again.

Some of the scratches I got earlier have opened up. I dab them with damp paper towels in the kitchen, making a note to come back and check the sofa for blood.

She leads me down to the basement, touches a hidden catch, and stands back when one wall of the wine cellar swings out, revealing a safe.

She’d written the combination, and I open it and take out the leather briefcase she described.

I don’t know why I’m doing this, it’s insane, I should be out of here, far away, not getting drawn in deeper and deeper. But the vodka on an empty stomach makes the voice of reason sound like a very faint whisper in the distance.

BACK UPSTAIRS, she refills our glasses. I say I don’t want any more, but does she have some nuts, some cheese, anything?

“I’ll make you a sandwich in just a minute,” she says. “But first we need to talk.”

“Talk about what?” I say, hearing my words slur.

“The fact is, you and I were having an affair, a very torrid affair. That’s going to come out, like it or not, so we need to get out stories straight, where we were today. I was here all day, and there were phone calls and workmen stopping by, so I’m okay. But it’s you—”

A phone chirps in another room, a cell phone, from the sound of it, but’s not the ring-tone I’m used to with her. She jumps up, grabs cigarettes and a lighter from her purse, and half-runs into

another room. If she's as drunk as I am, I wonder how she can be so coordinated.

I hear a clunk. Her purse has fallen onto the floor, and I hear something skitter across the hardwood floor. I stuff the things back in the bag, then get down on my hands and knees to see what fell under the sofa.

At first I think it's a tube of lipstick, then realize it's a memory stick. That is strange. She's told me more than once that she's hopeless with computers.

I have a couple of memory sticks like this—PNY. Could she have taken it when she was over at my place? Simpler explanation: it fell out of my pants, not her purse.

I hear her coming back. I slip the memory stick into my pocket, then stand and squeeze a slice of lime into my glass and fill it with tonic water.

"Listen, Big Dick, something has happened. That was my friend. She's coming over. You need to go right now, so she doesn't see us together."

"Our stories," I mumble, my lips numb. I can barely get the words out. "You said we needed to get our stories—"

"There's no time for that, not right now. I'll call you later. You need to go."

I'm at the door. She calls me back. She snaps open the leather brief-case I retrieved from the safe and pulls out a thick, sealed manila envelope. "Take this, hide it somewhere, keep it very safe. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Why? What's in it?"

"Don't open it, whatever you do. Not until we have the chance to talk some more. But take it and go, quickly. We'll have . . . Once we get past this . . . this episode . . . we can spend our lives together. And we'll be very, very rich."



FOR THE FIRST TIME, I notice a bruise on her inner arm, just insides the elbow. I point to it. “You haven’t been shooting up, have you?” I ask, half as a drunken joke.

“Of course not,” she snaps. “I was at the doctor’s today. They drew some blood samples.”

I’M AT THE DOOR when I think to ask: “It was the Maryland police who found his car? Any idea what he was doing in Maryland?”

“Edgar has some strange clients, clients he meets at odd places, clients who don’t want to be seen. I don’t ask questions about his business. I told the trooper it was okay, he’d been planning to meet someone there. So there’s no search under-way. Not yet. But I know it’s going to hit soon, and you and I need to be speaking the same language when the police came asking questions.”

“It’s not unusual for someone to drive to Maryland, park the car for a few hours. Why would the police—”

“Listen, my friend’s coming, we mustn’t be seen together, not now, not tonight.”

“It doesn’t make sense to me,” I say, maybe the one time I was making sense. “Why would the Maryland police even notice a parked car?”

“Because it was along the canal, at a parking area where one of the access roads lead to the canal. It had been there for hours, they said, and found it unusual for someone to leave such an expensive Mercedes in a vulnerable place like that.”

My mouth is suddenly bone dry. “What canal?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“The C&O. Way out, past Harper’s Ferry.”

It's as if a brick slams into my chest.

Finally I say, "I was biking that area today. That's where you and I had planned to go. I probably biked past his car."

The plan had been for Jade and I to spend the day biking. It's a nice ride on a gravel path along the canal, the path where the mules and mule-drivers walked in the old days, the canal boats coming and going from West Virginia to the port at Washington. Back before the railroads took over the business. That canal path, and the W&OD bikeway in Virginia, in the roadbed of what had been a railroad, drew thousands of bikers and hikers on weekends.

I'd figured that would be the perfect place to break it off. It would be easier to talk out there, in the open air. Away from a bed.

But she'd called this morning, saying her knee hurt, but that I should go anyway and scout it out for another time when we could go together.

I went anyway. I didn't have anything else to do. No prospects of a job coming up any time soon.

Her phone rings again. She closes the door and leaves me standing on the top step.

## ***Crown Victoria***

I WAKE, MOUTH DRY, HEAD POUNDING.

No, it's not my head that's pounding, it's somebody downstairs pounding on the front door. I pull myself out of bed, my head splitting, stomach queasy—*worse* than queasy. I'm going to be sick. Very sick, very soon.

That's not like me, I never drink. I saw enough of drinking in the years with my father.

But I drank last night. Jade poured it down me.

I'll never touch vodka again.

More pounding. I peek through the blind. The morning glare hurts. A plain gray Crown Victoria is parked across my driveway, blocking it. Four antennas, basic hubcaps. A cop car.

Two guys in lumpy sport coats, a huge black guy with the build of a football lineman, and a short guy with slicked-back hair and the kind of big-check plaid sport coat they wore in the—what? 1950's? 1960's? Whenever, long before my time.

They spot me and hold up wallets so I see the shields. As if I didn't know they were cops.

I slide the window open. "What's up?" I manage. My voice breaks, and my mouth is so dry the side of my cheek sticks to a tooth.

"Mr. Richard Woodcock? We need to talk to you. Open please."

"What's this about?" I don't remember driving back from Jade's last night, I don't remember whether I managed to get the car it into the garage. Did I hit something on the way?

"We need to talk to you. Please open the door."

I splash some water on my face and drink from the tap, and then I'm suddenly barfing, and it reeks of alcohol. I didn't eat anything last night, not a thing.

No wonder I'm sick. And in trouble.

More pounding on the door. The phone rings. "This is Detective Summers of Baron Cameron County Sheriff Department. You know we're at your door. Come down and open up. We need to talk."

"I will, I will, I'm just getting dressed." I can't find the clothes I wore last night, so throw on a shirt and pants from the closet.

I take the time for a quick tooth-brushing. It doesn't help much in clearing my head, but my mouth doesn't taste quite as foul.

I make it downstairs, head throbbing, and open the door. The smaller guy is standing on the front step, crowding the door when I open. He holds up his badge again. "I'm Detective Summers. With me is Detective Gardner."

Summers is maybe 5'6", and the banty-rooster way he carries himself signals a perpetual chip on his shoulder.

Gardner appears around the corner of the house. Snooping? Or covering the back door? What the hell did I do?

"Summer and Gardner. Sounds like a lawn-care company," I manage. They don't seem to get the joke, so I ask, "What can I do for you?"

"We need to talk," Summers says. "I see your neighbors are all very interested in why we're here. Wouldn't you rather do this inside?"

Let a cop in the door and he'll take it as license to snoop—I knew that from before, from when Sherri went missing, and before that from my father.

But he has a point. Whatever this is, I don't want to share it with the neighborhood.

“Have a seat,” I say when they’re in. “I need a coffee, how about you?”

“Not for us. This won’t take long.” Then he adds, “If you cooperate with us.”

“Right, but I need some coffee.” I put some water in the microwave, and pop a couple of aspirin while I’m in the kitchen.

“So what can I do for you?” I ask again when I come back to the living room. Gardner rises and hands me my *Washington Post* that he brought in from outside, still rolled up in the plastic bag.

He walks around behind me. I know cops, he’s snooping.

“What you can do for us,” Summers says, “is to tell us about your day yesterday.” He pulls a smartphone from his jacket pocket and puts it on the coffee table pointing at me and tells me it’s department policy to record preliminary conversations, and that I have the right to say no.

The way he says it conveys that it wouldn’t be a good idea to exercise that right just now.

“I had the day off, so I went for a bike ride.”

“You went for a bike ride,” he echoes, making it sound like some kind of sexual kink. Where?”

“Out— ” I begin, then cut off when I remember what Jade said as I was leaving last night: “Whatever you do, if the police come, don’t tell them you were here with me, and don’t tell them you biked right past where Edgar’s Mercedes was parked. Tell them anything, but don’t tell them that.”

“Out where?” Summers prodded. “You’re not being very cooperative, are you?”

“Am I being charged with something?”

“*Should* you be charged with something?”

“I don’t know what this is about. Maybe I need a lawyer.”

“That’s your choice, call a lawyer if you want. But all I’m asking you is about your day yesterday.”

I think about it, the silence heavy. “I was biking out along the trail.”

“What trail?” Gardner rumbles from close behind me, his voice booming in my ear.

“The bike trail. The old railroad trail.” My mind draws a blank. Then it comes to me. “The C&O Trail.”

“The C&O Trail? That the one along the old canal? That’s where you were biking? You sure about that?”

I nod. I sense I’ve made a mistake, but can’t figure what.

“And so where did you bike on that trail?”

“Where’s this going?”

“The question is where were you going yesterday?”

“As I said, I just took the day off and rode.”

“You keep dancing around the question: where did you ride?”

The microwave beeps. I jump up, glad for the break. My head hurts, my mind is foggy, but worst of all, I’m baffled. If I’d had an accident driving home last night, then why the questions about biking?

“I rode out to Leesburg, and then beyond.”

“You rode to Leesburg on the C&O trail?”

I nod, then realize my error. “No, I was on the W&OD trail to Leesburg. My mistake. I said the old railroad trail, got the names mixed up.” They don’t seem convinced.

“So you were *not* on the C&O trail, the canal trail, contrary to what you just told us?”

“No, not— I mean, I was on that trail later. But that was later.”

“So, contrary to what you said earlier, you were on both the W&OD and the C&O trails?”

I nodded.

“Please speak up.”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“How far did you go along the C&O, the canal trail?”

This was getting too close. “I’m not sure. I didn’t notice the mile-marker.”

“Beyond Harper’s Ferry?”

“At least that far.”

“Beyond Dockery’s Lock?”

“Yeah, I went beyond that before turning back.”

“About what time was it you were at Dockery’s Lock?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure. Maybe two o’clock.”

“That’s two in the afternoon?”

“Right.”

“And who was with you on this bike ride?”

“I was alone. Mostly. Though I did pass other people in both directions.”

Gardner is still shuffling around the room behind me. I’ve been this way before, I know that’s part of the game, to rattle me.

“I see, I see,” Summers says, now almost friendly. But I’ve been through this before, and I know that what they taught in school is all wrong: the policeman is *not* my friend.

“We’re almost done,” he says, “It’s good that you’ve decided to help us out. Now what time did you get back home? Around nine, was it?”

I notice a thick manila envelope on the table by the front door. It puzzles me for the moment. Then I remember: it’s the envelope Jade had given me as I left last night, the thick envelope she told me to keep in a safe place for her.

“Nine in the evening?” I echo. “No, more like seven. Not long after dark. I try not to ride after dark.”

He pulls a notebook out of his pocket. “Strange. One of your neighbors says you were seen coming back around ten last night. In your car. Very slowly.”

I feel the noose tightening. “I left here on my bike, and came back on my bike. Total round trip on the bike.”

Gardner suddenly leans in from behind me, so his face is inches from mine and I smell coffee and onions and stale smoke on his breath. “So you came back from your bike ride, then went out again in your car—that what you’re telling us now?”

“I’m not telling you anything now that I haven’t been telling you all along. I never said I didn’t go out in the car, we just hadn’t gotten to that part yet. Your question was what time I got back from biking.”

“So where’d you go last night, in your car?”

I think fast. “Groceries. I went to the Safeway, I was pretty much out of food.”

“Which Safeway was that?”

“The one near here. The one I usually go to. At the shopping center.”

“Sorry, Richard, we’re not from around here, we don’t know which shopping center you usually go to. It have a name?”

“I can’t think of it, I’m new here.”

“New?” Gardner is still leaning over me from behind. I feel him and smell his breath, but I can’t see his face. “How long you been here?”

I’m relieved, a bit. They didn’t ask to see a receipt from the Safeway; I don’t have one. I wish I could take that back. Once you tell one lie, that lie begets another, and then another on and on until you’ve lost your way..

“About . . . about four months.”

“And where’d you move here from?”



I sense he already knows the answer; that's bad news because it means they've already been checking on me. "Florida."

"Where in Florida?"

"Central Florida. Near Orlando."

"And why was it you moved here?"

"I had a job lined up here."

"And what job is that?"

"It fell through."

"So what kind of work is it you do?"

"I'm trying to get a job. In my line, my career path, it takes a while."

"And that career path is?" Summers cuts in. Gardner stands back, but the stink lingers.

"I'm a game designer. I work with a team in designing computer games, simulations."

"Game designer?" Summers says, making it sound like a dirty word. "You design *games* for a living? Like that game, what is it? Cop-killer? Or Grand-Theft Auto—that's another real socially worthwhile pastime. That's what you do, huh? When you do bother to work?"

"The job wasn't really about games. It was about simulations. Simulations for training. I was going to be helping to develop training simulations for the Army, but that didn't happen."

"Didn't happen? How come?"

"I needed a clearance, a security clearance. That got held up."

"Too bad. No clearance, no job. How come it got held up?" From the way he asks it's obvious that he already knows the answer.

"Look, what does this have to do with where I went biking yesterday? Why are you here?"

"You've been real cooperative to this point, Richard. Now you clam up. Why's that?"

“Because I don’t see why it’s relevant. I don’t know why you’re here, what you’re after.”

“I think you do know, Richard,” Summers said, then stares at me.

I’m realizing I’ve made a big mistake. After what happened before, I should have known better than say anything to police. First thing, get a lawyer.

“Okay, Richard, so don’t tell us. That’s up to you. But you know we’ll find out anyway, and that’ll make us look really close at you, close like we wouldn’t have, otherwise. You almost had me convinced you were clean. Now we’re going to go back and take a real good look.”

Another long pause — a trick I’d learned from my father the cop. My father the shit.

I don’t jump into the silence, I don’t blurt out a confession, so he says, “Richard, you think about it right now: I know you’re holding something back, something you want to tell us. Best thing, help us and we’ll help you. Tell us, don’t make us find it out, ‘cause then you look like you been hiding out.”

I shake my head. It’s still pounding from the hangover. I just want them out of there.

## Columbo

THEY'RE AT THE DOOR, Gardner going out first. Then he stops. "Oh, there's something else."

I was expecting this, the Columbo Question. I just hope it's not what I think it is.

"Just a couple little details we forgot to ask you, Dick? Okay we call you Dick? Anyway, what's your middle name?"

"William."

"Dick Woodcock. Willie Woodcock. Some name," Summers says almost under his breath. They were trying to rattle me. I'd heard all the jokes before.

"So, you married?"

"I was," I reply without thinking. Then add: "*Am* married." As I say the words I want to bite my tongue.

"*Was* married, *am* married--which is it?"

"Am . . . so far as I know. She disappeared. Until a court declares her dead, I'm married, technically speaking."

"That must be tough, not knowing," Summers says.

"Until a judge declares her dead," Gardner mutters. "Or until they find the body."

I'M BRACED FOR THE FOLLOW-UP to that. Instead, Summers asks, "Jade Greene—you ever meet her?"

Jade last night: "Promise me this: That you won't—definitely will not—admit we know each other, that we were having a . . . a relationship. I don't need to spell out what kind of doors that would open."

I shake my head. Summer holds up his smartphone. The flashing red light tells me he never turned it off. "You need to

Speak up, Richard. “The question was, did you ever meet Jade Greene?”

“The name’s not familiar,” I manage.

“You sure of that, Richard?”

“Maybe we crossed paths, but I don’t recognize the name.”

He nodded his head, staring up at the sky for a long while. “Funny thing, the folks at the tennis club, squash club, whatever, some of the staff, they told us you and her were quite an item there, seen leaving together.”

He held up a picture; Jade’s ID photo from the club. “You telling us you never seen her?”

I feel I have no breath to tell another lie. But I manage, “I didn’t know that was her name.” He stares at me. I blunder on. “I just knew her as Jade.”

“You left the club together with her—that right?”

“I suppose sometimes we left together.” I definitely should have a lawyer now, but to break it at this point? I might as well sign a confession. Confession to what? I wonder.

“You ever see her car?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Gold Mercedes convertible, hard to miss. Staff tells us you they saw you and Jade drive away together in it.”

“They’re wrong.”

“You ever go to her house, Jade Greene’s house?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“You didn’t slip over there last night around the time you came back from your bike ride, did you?”

“I told you no.” Getting in deeper and deeper.

Gardner leans close; this time his breath is even more rancid. I’m six foot; he’s at least 6’4” and a solid 240.

“We know what you told us. What we’re asking for now is the truth, you understand what I’m saying? You went over there last night—admit it.”

“I don’t even know where it is.”

“What would you say if we told you that your car was spotted over there at the Greens’ house last night?”

“I’d say you were making that up.”

“Her husband, Mr. Edgar Greene,” Summers said. “You ever meet Mr. Greene?”

“No.”

“You didn’t happen to meet up with him yesterday while you were on your bike ride?”

“No. But that’s it. No more questions, I’m done answering. It’s obvious you’re not here to listen, you’re out to get me.”

“What’s obvious is that you’re in deep trouble, Richard, and you know it. Like I said, work with us now, and we can help you. What happened when you were with Mr. Greene yesterday?”

“I said I’m done talking. Now leave.”

Then I say, “Wait a minute. I don’t even know why you came to see me today. What’s this all about?” Even as I say it, I realize how phony it sounds.

“You know damned well why,” Summers says.

“I GOT A QUESTION,” Gardner said. “You told us you got to Dockery’s Lock about what time was it?”

I try to remember what I’d said. “I don’t know, Two, three o’clock, somewhere around there.” I notice he’s holding the phone, and the red button is still blinking.

“So which is it? Two? Or three?”

My mouth is dry again. I know what he’s after. “Can’t say for sure.”

As they get back into the car I realize what's been implied: nothing said about my going on and coming back past the lock, so looks as if I stayed there for an indefinite time.

At Dockery's Lock, where they found the Mercedes sedan of Mr. Greene.

## ***Speed-dial***

I WATCH THE CROWN VIC drive away, then drop into a chair, knowing I'm in deep trouble.

Again.

After what happened with Sherri I should have known—the way cops first drop by to catch you off-guard. I should have kept my mouth shut and demanded a lawyer.

SOME GOOD NEWS: they hadn't spotted that manila envelope Jade had given me.

For the first time I take a look at it—a sober look. The flap is sealed. Feels like a thick bundle of papers inside. There's no name, no address on the outside.

I stick it in a kitchen drawer, out of sight if they come scooping again.

And they *will* be back, of that I'm sure.

My head is still throbbing from the hangover. I down a couple more aspirin with a glass of water and another cup of coffee.

I put three eggs on to boil while I go up to shower and brush my teeth again.

I'm feeling a little better after I eat. I scan the morning *Washington Post* for anything on Greene; nothing.

Then I remember what Jade had said as I left last night: "If the police come to see you, call me on our special line. Let it ring three times, then hang up. I'll know."

"Our special line" was a pre-paid cell-phone she'd given me when we got together the second day.

I hit the speed-dial, wishing I'd never gotten into this, never met her.

One ring, two rings. A woman picks up and says hello, just hello, not Jade's voice purring, "Hi there, Big Dick."

I hang up fast, panicked. But too late: my number has already registered as an incoming on Jade's phone. The number is anonymous, but if they search the house and find it, then they'll know. And then they'll subpoena the phone company and track our calls.

"Let it ring three times, then hang up, and I'll know," Jade had said. Then who answered on the second ring?

I flick on an all-news radio station:

"Maryland State Police are scouring the area around Dockery's Lock on the C&O Canal for clues to the whereabouts of missing Virginia financial advisor Edgar Greene, whose abandoned Mercedes was found nearby yesterday. According to unconfirmed sources, blood-stains were found in the passenger compartment and trunk of that Mercedes.

"Meanwhile, on the Virginia side of the Potomac, Baron Cameron County police have cordoned off the private road leading to the Greene residence, and a forensics team is in the house.

Unconfirmed reports indicate that Greene's wife, Jade, made an emergency call to 911 last night. When police arrived at the Greene residence they found signs of a struggle, including—again, this is as yet unconfirmed—significant amounts of blood in one of the downstairs rooms. This also is unconfirmed, but it seems that Mrs. Jade Greene is missing."

Jade missing. Blood in the downstairs room.



My hands are shaking. I set the cup onto a table without spilling anything. I can barely breathe. I feel I'm drowning. Drowning in panic. It's just as it was when the police came asking about Sherri.

Sherri. I take some deep breaths, to calm myself, the way she'd taught me in her class.

Significant amounts of blood in the Greene house.

Whose blood? Why? I try to remember just how it had gone, but it's so fuzzy in my mind. The huge glass of vodka Jade had stuck in my hand, then refilled. Refilled how many times?

Just what did happen last night?

Things got very foggy toward the end. The image of her walking around in the see-through robe. Then the robe on the ground, and she on the leather couch with me

An image comes to mind: the phone ringing in another room and Jade grabbing a pack of cigarettes out of her purse and running, naked, into another room, to take the call. Her purse fell onto the floor, and things spilled out, and something slid across the hardwood floor under the sofa. I'd pulled my clothes on and staggered over to the purse. I stuffed her things back in, then looked to see what had been under the sofa across the floor. Probably lipstick, I'd figured.

It wasn't lipstick, it was a flash-memory stick. PNY. Like some I use.

Then what?

Did I keep it? Did I put it in the purse, or did I stuff it in my pocket, figuring it was one of mine? I can't remember.

After that, I'd gone into the kitchen and sponged off the blood from the scratches that had opened up on my arms.

Then I'd tossed the paper towels in the trash—for the cops to find with my blood. And maybe more of my blood on the leather sofa.

I go upstairs, head pounding again, and dig through the pile of clothes I'd shucked off when I got back last night.

There's a PNY memory-stick in my pants pocket.

Mine? Or Jade's?

I plug it into my laptop and pull up the directory. Gibberish. I click on what look like files. More gibberish. Everything on the stick is locked, security-coded. So it's not mine.

But there are files on it, I can tell that much. One seems to be an Excel spreadsheet locked behind a password, but the other I have no idea. Looks like something technical, maybe engineering data.

I was a hacker, once upon a time. That's how I got in trouble the first time, hacking into OPC's: Other People's Computers.

I try some obvious passwords: JADE, EDAJ, JADE 36B, and some variations, but nothing works.

I take the memory-stick out and make a little mark on it with a Sharpie pen to distinguish it from my own. Then I put it with my others, at the back of a desk drawer.

I FLICK THROUGH THE TV MENU looking for the all-news station. Replays of a couple of stand-up reports earlier. The first is out at the canal. The other is here in Virginia with the Greene house in the background, way back behind the yellow police tapes.

Again the unconfirmed reports of significant amounts of blood in the house, but nothing about a body found, either in the house or out along the canal.

Then this: "Though police initially responded to a 911 call made by Mrs. Greene, they have so far been unable to locate her. Mrs. Jade Greene was not in the house when they arrived last evening."



## *Tampered*

I NEED A LAWYER, BAD. FAST.

The only Virginia lawyer I know is a guy I've met on Sunday group bike rides. Joe Bleaux.

Joe Bleaux, pronounced Joe Blow—that's his real name, he told me, the first time we met, bicycling, trying to make a joke of it.

I look him up. A small ad in an old book of Yellow Pages that came with the house. He turns out to be a sole practitioner. From the ad, it appears he specializes in real estate closings and divorce work. I'm not surprised; he didn't strike me as particularly swift, and it doesn't take a lot of brainpower to handle routine house closings.

But at least he'll be able to recommend a good criminal lawyer.

I dial the number, expecting to talk to a receptionist, but he picks up. He remembers who I am: green Bianchi bike, drive a silver Explorer. "You're into computer stuff, game design, is it? Still waiting for security clearance?"

I tell him I've gotten caught up in something, not my fault, and I may need a good criminal lawyer, just in case. Who would he recommend?

"That's not much to go on, my friend," he says. "Why don't you come see me at the office, no charge. I'll get you set up, whatever you need."

"I don't want to waste your time. I just need a referral to somebody who does criminal work, somebody you have confidence in."

“Understood. But I need to know more before I can point you where to go. There are specialties and sub-specialties in criminal work. Come on over, I can fit you in now. No charge.”

“I’m at home, it’ll take a while to get there.”

“Understood. I’m in the office all morning. See you then.”

I RUN BACK UPSTAIRS and throw on a dress shirt, debate about a suit and tie, then decide just being neat is enough for now. I have no idea when the cops will be back, but I’m sure they will. For me, there’s no time to waste.

I set my empty cup in the sink, and notice that the answering machine is blinking for one new call. Strange. I’ve been here and didn’t hear it. Maybe when I was in the shower.

I hit Play. Jade’s voice: “Ricky, listen to me, please. Yes, we had a thing together, but it was wrong, and it’s over with. You must accept that. You *must*. You have to let me go. It’s not just—The fact is, you *scare* me, the way you’ve been talking these last couple of days. About killing Edgar so we can be together. That’s crazy talk. It’s scary. I didn’t—I had no idea—”

She broke off. It sounded as though she was sobbing.

I’m holding onto the kitchen counter, my world reeling. What in hell is going on? This wasn’t on the machine last night.

The message continues: “I had no idea you could be so . . . so crazy! You’re crazy about me, so you say. But I’m realizing now you’re plain crazy! I don’t know what you did out there on the canal today, but Edgar is missing and you’ve got me terrified! Do not—DO NOT—come here. If you do, I’ll call 911. I am not going away with you, not now, not ever!”

She was screaming toward the end.

I check the time: that came in about eight last night, just about when I was driving over to her house—at her request.

I let it play on, expecting to hear the string of messages she'd left last night telling me to call, to come over.

But those messages are gone. This is all that's on the machine.

THE GARAGE is accessed through the kitchen, and I stumble out to my car, moving like a robot, barely able to force my feet forward. I want to curl up someplace and let this go away.

I hit the garage door opener and sunlight floods in. The Explorer is parked crooked, I must have had trouble lining it up, but at least it isn't smashed up from the drive home last—

I see the blood smeared on the outside of the passenger door.

I stand, stunned. Time stops.

I bend forward and sniff. It has the coppery smell of blood, though now dried hard.

I lose it. I run over and hit the button to close the garage door and grab a pail and a sponge and wash away the blood.

Now the passenger door is clean, but the rest of the car still is muddy from the drive in the rain on Sunday. Now only the passenger door is clean. Suspiciously clean.

I start to wash more, then realize I'm only making it worse.

Now I've tampered with evidence—blood evidence.

What do I do with this bloody water? I pick up the pail, intending to flush it down the toilet, but the handle pulls out of the plastic pail, and the dirty water cascades across the garage floor: water, dirty sponge, blood.

I hit the garage door button and back out fast. Get away! Get away while you still can!

## ***Good criminal guy***

I SETTLE DOWN a little once I'm driving. It's a couple of miles to the lawyer's office.

I check the mirror to see if the cops are following, but there's too much traffic to tell. There's always too much traffic around Northern Virginia.

Later, I'll realize that I had been followed—not by the police but by people who would bring very bad luck to Mr. Bleaux, Esq.

I pull into the Exxon station on Route 7. I don't really need gas, but they give a free car wash with a fill-up, and I need that wash to cover up the fact that I'd washed away the blood on the passenger door.

It gets worse: when I get out to pump the gas, I see a smudge of blood on my hand from the steering wheel. My palm was sweaty and melted the dried blood.

I'm losing it again. My hand is shaking as I try to fit my credit card into the pump.

While the gas is flowing, I make a production out of washing the car windows: that gives me a reason to walk all around the car, checking in every direction. No cop cars that I can see.

I bring a couple of wet paper towels into the car with me, and scrub the wheel while the Explorer is going through the wash. Now that I look, there's blood on the wheel, blood on the passenger seat, blood on the door handle. I try to get it all while I'm still hidden in the wash.

I toss the towels out the window while the washer is between cycles, hoping they'll be ground to pulp.

ONCE UPON A TIME, Route 7—Leesburg Pike—was a country road going from Washington and the Virginia suburbs to the country town of Leesburg.

Cameron Crossing, back then, was just a village at a crossroad. That was the way things stood from the 1700s until the Washington suburbs started exploding a couple of hundred years later.

Until then, Baron Cameron County, Virginia's smallest county, was notorious as a speed-trap along Route 7, a stretch between early-booming Fairfax County and Loudoun County, where the development fever hit later. Speeders were plentiful, takings were good, and the county paid most of its bills by the fines generated.

Baron Cameron County, and the sleepy village of Cameron Crossing, the county seat, stayed 50 years behind the times . . . just the way the old-timers liked it.

They resisted when the developers first came calling. They wanted to remain, as the *Washington Post* put it, "the last enclave of an old way of life". Somehow, the *Post*, with its usual subliminal gift for nuance, made it sound as though the old-timers were sitting on the verandas of estates, still watching slaves do the work.

It wasn't that way at all, so I'm told. They were farmers, mechanics, and some who made their living commuting to build the new developments in Reston, Ashburn, Great Falls, and, later, around Leesburg.

Then the old-timers began to realize that if they accepted the reality that change was coming—like it or not—they could sell out to the big developers and move somewhere else and live happily ever after on the profits, while their hardscrabble farms were bulldozed into developments with happy names like Greenfarm



Acres, Olde Shropshire Village and not to forget Jade's very upscale Grande Potomack Estates.

I FIND THE IMPRESSIVE BRASS PLAQUE denoting The Law Offices of Joseph Bleaux and Associates in a shabby '70's vintage strip mall. The office is upstairs over a Pizza/Gyro place.

The office door is unlocked. I let myself in and see the layer of dust on the secretary's desk. Clearly enough, there hasn't been a secretary here for a long time. Nor any army of young associates.

He's on the phone when I enter, but waves me into his inner office and quickly wraps up the call. (Later I wonder if there really was anybody on the other end, or was it just a way for him to not look too desperately un-busy.)

"Sorry about that, Cynthia . . . she's away on leave, maternity leave," he says. "She's my . . . uh, paralegal."

He pours coffees into foam cups, saying, "Not the greatest office, but I tell you it's convenient to the courthouse." He gestures through the dirty window, and I see the brick steeple of the 1887 brick courthouse, looking more like a church than a public building. "Two minute walk over there when I need to file some papers or sit in on a hearing."

I wonder why he's telling me this. Defensiveness, I suppose. But the words are wasted: I'm just here to get a referral.

He's somewhere late 30's, early 40's, wearing a Walmart tie and a white shirt that looks—as they put it—"tired". But I knew his bike-gear was the newest and best, all crisp and fresh and the bike waxed and gleaming. Whoever heard of waxing a bike?

It had been his eyes that first struck me when we met: too small, too close together, and dwarfed even more by the pair of oversize metal sport-framed glasses that he wore biking. And, it

turns out, at work, as well. Overall impression, perhaps wrong, but I tagged him as NVS: Not Very Swift.

Before long I'll be regretting that unkind thought. Regretting that I ever called him.

He settles behind his littered desk, and gestures me to one of the mismatched chairs.

"Got a hearing coming up shortly, so we'd best get down to it. First, let me say I called over to the Sheriff's Office and put on record that I'm representing you, so—"

"You called? But—"

"Not to worry, it's just a precaution. I know you're here because you want my recommendation for a good criminal guy. But at least now you're lawyered up, which means they've got to have me, or some other lawyer, present before they try to ask you any questions. See my point?"

I nod, all the questions I'd already answered to the two cops this morning echoing in my mind.

"Am I right in figuring that your problems have to do with the infamous Mr. and Mrs. Greene?"

I nod again, wondering how he could have known. Wondering, too, why he called them "infamous." Does he know something that I should have known a couple of weeks ago—before Jade inquired if I had the balls to go with her racket?

"How did you know that—about the Greenes?"

"Obvious. The sheriff folks told me when I called."

Maybe I'm the one who's not so swift.

"It's best to tell me from the beginning," he prods.

"I don't want to take up your time. What I'm looking for is the name of a good criminal lawyer around here."

"Time is of the essence, I'm sure you realize that. We don't know how far along the police are in their investigations. They could be outside the door waiting to arrest you when you walk out

of here. So, smartest thing is for you to tell your side of the story now. It won't be so easy to talk if you're locked up. The walls have ears, and all that. Tell it from the beginning."

I tell him how it started with Jade.

"Did you know she was married?"

"Not for several days. She never said a word."

"Did you ask?"

"She wasn't wearing a ring. She acted single. She didn't talk about having to get home and make dinner." A stupid thing to say, I realize as I say it. I'm saying a lot of stupid things today.

"Ever heard about Women's Lib? Nowadays not every dear little wifie rushes home to make dinner for the old man. A lot of them have other agendas, as my own dear ex could tell you. So tell me about yesterday."

"We'd planned to go biking for the day, then she called in the morning and said she wasn't up to it, and why don't I go alone and we'd do it together another time."

"So she knew where you were going? Did you confirm that you really were going biking?"

"That was how we left it. She'd said that maybe she'd drive out and meet me out along the trail if she felt better."

I'd forgotten she's said that. I'm finding his questions troubling. They're stirring up possibilities that hadn't occurred to me.

"So she knew where you'd likely be, out along the canal? Did you two talk on a cell-phone through the day, anything like that?"

"Yeah, we did, every hour or so. We each had matching cell-phones that we used only to talk to each other. Phones with pre-paid cards, so there was no record of the calls."

"So you did confirm your whereabouts with her during the day yesterday? Did you talk while you were out on the Canal trail?"

“Where’re you going with this?” I think I know, and I don’t like it.

“Wherever it leads. So she more or less knew your whereabouts through the day yesterday, including timing?”

I nod, feeling reality—reality as I *thought* I’d known it—slipping away.

## *Affairs in order*

“WHEN WERE YOU LAST IN CONTACT WITH MRS. GREENE?”

“Last night. She called when I got back and demanded I come—” I break off when I remember my answering machine and that newest message. And her earlier messages, now missing.

He frowns. “There’s something I’m missing, obviously.”

Maybe he’s more astute than I’ve been giving credit. “Something just clicked, how it fits in here. Last night there were six calls on my answering machine from Jade, leading up to telling me to come on over as soon as I get back. That’s why—”

“Whoa. Let me get this straight. You said the calls were on your answering machine? An answering machine at your home? Not on your cell-phone?”

“Right.”

“But didn’t you more or less tell me that the two of you used private cell-phones, so as not to leave a record?”

That stopped me. “Good question. That hadn’t occurred to me. She had never used that landline before last night. It had always been via the cells, and we’d talked on that all through the day yesterday. She said she was worried about me, wanted to make sure I hadn’t fallen off the bike.”

He nods. I add, “But there’s worse. This morning, after the cops left, I was still pretty hung-over. I replayed those messages she left. They were gone.”

“Gone? You erased them?”

“I’d had a lot to drink by the time I left Jade’s place, but I don’t think I erased them. I’m *sure* I hadn’t. They were gone, and today there was a totally new message on the machine, one I hadn’t heard before. It came in, supposedly last night from her,

and it was a warning that she didn't want to see me anymore, that she was very afraid of me, that she suspected I'd had something to do with . . . with what happened to the husband."

He looks at me, silent. Then says, "That would not look good, if the police get hold of that message."

"I probably should have erased it when I left to come over here."

"Erase it? Good Lord, I can't advise you to erase it. That's tampering with evidence. That's definitely a big No-no."

Meaning: I can't advise you to do that. Wink-wink, nod-nod. I'm an officer of the court, I can't advise such a thing. But it would have been a smart move.

"In any case," he adds, "police technicians can probably pull it up even if erased."

This doesn't seem like a good time to tell him I've already washed blood off my car.

"Backing up, did I hear you say the police came by to see you this morning?"

"I was getting to that. They woke me up. They were pounding at my door, first thing."

"You let them in? You opened the door and let them in?"

"I wasn't sure, at the start, why they were there. See, I'd had a lot to drink last night at Jade's. A lot, by my standards. I don't drink very often, and she poured a big vodka and then another. I was thinking maybe on the way home I'd left the scene of an accident."

"Had you?"

"Had I what? Did I have an accident driving home? No," I say, then wonder if that was how that blood got on my car. Did I hit a pedestrian? But then what about the blood in the interior?

"It turned out the two detectives were there to ask me about Jade."

“You—I hope you didn’t talk to them. I hope you broke it off right there, once you realized why they were there?”

He might be dumb as a rock, but he has the ability to put me on the defensive. That might come in handy if this went to trial.

“The conversation, interrogation, got started and it didn’t seem smart, prudent to break off to say that now I wanted a lawyer. I felt that would seem really suspicious. The fact is, I didn’t know until afterwards, when I checked news radio, that anything had happened to Jade.”

He says nothing, just shakes his head slowly.

The silence hangs in the air. Then he asks, “How much money are you carrying?”

I pull out my wallet. \$113.

“Lucky thirteen. Credit cards—how much can you draw?”

“I’m okay there: couple, three thousand. Why do you ask? Are you thinking bail if I’m arrested?”

He pulls a file folder out of his desk drawer, hand-writes something on one of the sheets, and passes it across the table to me. “Sign it now, that’s the smart thing to do.”

It was a retainer agreement, making him my attorney in the matter, with an up-front retainer of \$2,500.

“But I told you—”

“What you told me is that you’re really deep in hot water, and that you need a lawyer—not just fast, but like yesterday. I do criminal practice, a lot of it. My advice, you’re best to sign this now. That way, I’m officially your counsel, which means that whatever you’ve said to me is protected under attorney-client privilege.”

“But I need somebody who’s a full-timer in criminal law.”

“If we need that, we can bring him in as co-counsel. Right now is when you need me, and I mean *right now*, to keep you from blundering in any deeper.”

“So what are you going to do—assuming I sign?”

“I’ll do my professional best. I can’t promise any specific outcomes, you know that.”

“I mean, what’s your next step? What’s likely to happen now?”

“Depends. In part, it’s a matter of jurisdiction. You don’t know off-hand whether the Greene’s residence was within the confines of Baron Cameron County, do you?”

I’d have thought that a real-estate lawyer would know to the inch where every upscale development ran. “I think it probably is in Cameron County, because she—Jade—has been complaining about the county property tax going up. I’m not clear what you’re saying about jurisdiction.”

“It’s about who owns the case. If—let’s just speak hypothetically—if Jade, Mrs. Greene, had indeed been killed here in Baron Cameron County, then the case belongs to the cops from this county. But what if she’d been killed here, then buried across the county line? Then there’s a conflict, and the two departments have to work it out.”

*If she’d been killed here.* I can’t get words out for almost a full minute. “Are you assuming—do you have any reason to believe—that she’s dead?”

“Not at all. That was just a hypothetical. Where there is a real conflict brewing is the fact that Mr. Greene was a resident of this county in the state of Virginia, yet whatever happened to him took place across a state line, in Maryland. That could work to your advantage.”

“Advantage? How?”

“Gives you time, gives us time, while the departments have their little pissing contests on jurisdiction.”

“But isn’t that just a matter of a few hours? How is that really going to help me?”



“For one thing, it gives you some more time to get your affairs in order. Gives me time to work behind the scenes, find out how much they really know, how good a case they have.”

“Get my affairs in order, you say? What do you mean?”

“You may be arrested. In which case, you’d want to have somebody lined up to feed your dog, that sort of thing.”

“I don’t have a dog. But sound like you’re assuming I’m guilty? You never asked me.”

“Absolutely right, I never ask. I don’t want to know. And I don’t want to be lied to. Fact is, it’s my job to defend you, and it helps if I don’t start out from the git-go knowing you’re guilty.”

“So you’re figuring I’ll be arrested? What about bail?”

“What collateral have you got? A bail-bondsman will want to know that first thing.”

“I . . . I . . . Not much. I’ve been out of work. I’m running low.”

“When we first met, a couple of months ago, you said you were a designer for training simulations. There’s a lot of that work around here — military, government.”

“I’m having . . . there’s been a delay on my security clearance. I can’t start until I have the security okay.”

“Any idea why your clearance is taking so long?”

“Because there’s some trouble—trouble pending in Florida. They don’t want to give me a clearance until that gets settled.”

I see him draw back a little in the chair. “What kind of trouble?”

“My wife disappeared . . . and the police down there, they’re convinced—they want to get me for it, but they don’t have the evidence. The State’s Attorney, the prosecutor, brought charges, but the judge threw them out, saying all the evidence was circumstantial.”

“I’m not clear what they were charging you with.”

“My wife disappeared—her name was—is—Sherri. They couldn’t pin down exactly when she disappeared; there was no sign of a struggle, nothing like that.”

“What you seem to be telling me is that your wife disappeared and the local cops are looking at you for killing her?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Sounds a lot like now.”

I nodded. “It does, yeah.”

“Then”—he shakes his head. “Then how is it you’re up here in Virginia, not down in Florida? Strange they’d let you come up here with charges pending.”

“The judge . . . there was a hearing. He looked at the evidence they had against me, which wasn’t much. The lead detective and the prosecutor on the case were both women—they had it in for me, assumed that given I was the husband then *of course* I killed her. Lucky for me, the judge didn’t agree.”

“And the judge released you?”

“There was a hearing, the judge determined there wasn’t enough to hold me, and I had a job about to start up here, so he let me go. He did take my passport, just to be sure.”

“From what I’m hearing from you, seems like the prosecutors could bring the charges again, any time.”

“That’s what I understand.”

“The judge down there in Florida—does he know you’re here in Virginia? Does he know you don’t have a job? Were you telling the truth about that?”

I can hear the part of the question he left unsaid: Does the judge know you’re up here in Virginia screwing around with a married woman . . . a woman who’s now gone missing, along with her husband?

“He doesn’t know that job fell through . . . not my doing, but I couldn’t get a security clearance with that case hanging over my

head. Actually, at the time, I was told it was just a matter of days before the clearance would be coming through. Then it was put on hold.”

He takes a deep breath and stares at me. “You are one hell of a piece of work.”

## ***One thing for sure***

BLEAUX COMES DOWN to the parking lot with me, and I give him the title to my Explorer. He's to hold it in his office on the chance that a bail-bond company will take that as collateral.

But that's dubious. I bought it used with the little cash I had left after the mess in Florida. It's seven years old and had a hard life before me.

Beyond that, the cops would likely seize it as potential evidence.

After listening to Bleaux, it seems just a matter of time—probably hours at most—before the police come back to haul me in for a formal interrogation at the station.

Will I walk out after that? I've been through this before. I'm not optimistic.

When Sherri went missing, the Florida cops played mind-games for most of a week, then finally picked me up on Friday morning before a three-day holiday.

First came a long day of questioning, then they booked me at six that evening. No accident: by that time of day, most of the people I knew were away till Tuesday. Even so, would they have put up bail? Not likely. So I spent six very long days and nights in the deeper reaches of hell with the crazies and psychos and drunks and killers and screamers.

I aged 20 years that week: I couldn't risk sleeping; if you dozed off, one of the crazies would jump you. There wasn't enough room in the jail to hold new arrivals, so we were held in what used to be a dining hall. One sink, no shower for 43 guys. I spent most of the week sitting on the floor, back-to-back with another guy who seemed a little less wacko than the others. Since

then, whenever I've heard of someone "covering their back," I know what that means.

I got out in six days; he didn't. Sometimes I wonder what happened to him, did he make it out alive?

The good news was I lost another 10 pounds that week, because they dumped gobs of hot sauce over everything . . . really, *really* hot sauce, to cover up the fact that most of the food had spoiled. I was told that by one of the other guys in there, and I think he was right.

I SIT IN THE CAR thinking it out from here. I don't want to—*can't*—do jail again.

Back then, in Florida, at least I had some money. I finally managed to come up with bail—once I got a good lawyer, and the judge reduced the bond.

But this time I've gotten myself locked in with a loser of a lawyer, and he's all but cleaned me out. He said a bail-bond company is going to want 10% down. But if bail is set at, say, \$50,000, I'd have to come up with \$5,000.

More likely, the bail would be ten times that.

No bail money? Then do not pass Go. Go directly to jail, and stay there until the trial— which won't be for months, maybe a year from now. Justice moves slowly.

And then what? First problem: I don't get the sense Mr. Bleaux really knows much about criminal law.

Second problem: his retainer just about cleaned me out. He took my last hundred, left me \$13, and had me sign an IOU for the remainder. And that's all it is, a retainer. Front-end money. It'll get used up fast. And not likely he'll give me a free ride when that's gone.

Which means I'll end up with assigned counsel, an overworked, underpaid, inexperienced public defender who won't have the time or resources to go all out for me. He'll want to work a deal, a plea bargain. "Plead guilty, you'll get off with only 20 years and no risk of the death penalty. Better take it, it's the best deal you're going to get. The alternative is to go to trial, but judges don't like to have their time wasted, and there's no telling what sentence you'll get."

I jump out of the car and walk around to get some air in my lungs.

Think positive. At this point, all the police have is the fact of a couple of missing people, and some blood. No bodies, no real evidence of what happened.

No real evidence . . . apart from the fact that I happened to be at both scenes—along the canal, and in Jade's living room.

One thing for sure: I am *not* going back into a lockup. *No matter what.*

## *Insurance*

THAT'S WHEN I NOTICE two guys watching me from a white Focus a few cars over.

Police? Most likely . . . I figured then, not realizing yet that the police were the least of my problems.

I turn the key and pull out of the parking space. The guys in the white Focus fire up and follow me.

I turn east and drive down Cameron Road into the old part of town. The Focus follows, not making much effort to blend in.

I pass what was the Blake Hardware Store, back in the old days, before the developers came to town. Now the old sign is still in place, but it's an upscale burger place at noon, a singles hangout in the evening.

Shields' Drug Store—again, the old sign is still hanging out front— now sells upscale health food. The old soda fountain is still where it was, a kind of living museum where they serve cappuccino and fruit smoothies, not hot fudge sundaes and tuna sandwiches.

The old feed store by the railroad track now deals in upscale bikes and jogging gear.

The old five and dime has been converted to a health club, open 24/7 to accommodate the folks who sometimes work around the clock. I stayed away: health clubs remind me of Sherri and that pot of bad stuff still simmering on the back burner.

I make a U-turn in the empty lot where the old movie theater had been, now the locale of the Saturday Farmers' Market, and head back up Cameron Avenue, faster now.

The Focus does the same.

I'D BEEN A FAT KID, ate too much junk food, exercised too little, spent most of my time in front of the computer playing games and tinkering with computer code.

Then I turned 24 and resolved I'd had enough of being a blob.

I think what really turned me around was seeing those Subway ads with Jared, the guy who lost a bunch of pounds living on subs. I figured, if he can do it, so can I.

It worked for a couple of months, until I hit a plateau.

I didn't know that plateaus were normal when you're losing weight, so I went looking for something new.

Which is how I found Sherri.

Or was it the other way round? Did she find me? "You're just the guy I'd been looking for"—she said that almost at the start, even up to the end.

Jade said the same thing, the very same words, that first day. What is it about me?

Sherri was good-looking, not movie-star beautiful, but girl-next-door beautiful.

Clarification: Hot girl-next-door. With a good figure.

She worked part-time at a couple of health clubs leading group sessions, the other part as a personal trainer.

She took me under her wing from the start, and gave me a price break on personal training—workouts five, sometimes six, times a week, always pushing me to extend myself.

Things moved fast. I got the sense she'd been involved with a guy not long before we met, but apparently that ended. Or she preferred me, the buff stud she was creating. I didn't know and didn't care. By then I was hooked. But it wasn't just the sex, it was the sense that she had seen through the fat to the person I really was inside. "Inside every fat guy is a future buff athlete fighting to get out"—my motto at the time.

She moved in with me a couple of months later.



I was on top of my world, riding the wave. I'd finally gotten through school and snagged a computer science degree. Which meant I was making a fortune (by my standards), working—hard to believe, working and getting paid!—at my dream job, as a game designer.

I owned a condo on a golf-course and drove a BMW. All those good things, and best of all I was a hunk, and had a hot girlfriend who was crazy about me.

Life was great.

Then I started wondering where she went every other weekend. “To visit my mother in a nursing home,” she'd said when I asked as she was packing to leave one Saturday morning. But where her mother was living, what her name was—that was none of my business, she'd said. Actually, not *said*, more like *screamed*.

By the time she got back Sunday night, I'd decided she was right, it was none of my business. Maybe I was better off not having a visible mother-in-law.

“I'm so sorry,” she said the minute she got back, leading me into the bedroom for a very personal workout.

Afterwards, she showed me a picture of herself with her Mom, and said her Mom was troubled because we were “living in sin”, and she wanted us to get married.

That sounded good to me.

We flew out to Vegas—her life's dream for a honeymoon, she said—and got married by a justice-of-the-peace. Her mother wasn't able to come. Actually, no one came. Which was fine with me.

A couple of weeks later, after another weekend visit to her mother, she came back saying we should get matching life insurance policies, for \$2 million each. “We're young now, we're in good health, the premiums will never be cheaper. We can lock

in for life, and when we have kids, there'll be a safety net. That's something my Mom never had. My Dad got killed in an auto accident when I was five, and times were tough."

It was Sherri who pushed for the life insurance, not me.

The cops didn't believe that, of course, but that's cops for you— cynical bastards. My father was a cop. And he was a first-class bastard, the worst of the worst.

They tried to paint it that I was the one who pushed to get married, and then pushed to get the insurance. And then, according to them, got impatient for my \$2 million payoff.

## ***Neighborhood watch***

I GET BACK on Route 7 and head west. The Focus stays with me, a few cars back. Either the driver doesn't know much about tailing suspects, or doesn't give a damn if I see him.

Or maybe he's just trying to panic me into screwing up.

I've seen photos of this stretch of Route 7 in the old days—back in the 1970s or so. It was mostly farmland then, some corn, some horse farms with broad rolling meadows, a country gas station here and there.

Now it's wall-to-wall malls for miles on end, with housing developments behind the malls.

I take that back: it's not all malls along Route 7 — there are corporate campuses, and even a couple of university branch campuses. In the last couple of decades a lot of brain-power—and hence a lot of buying-power has taken up residence here.

The legend goes that when the British invaded Washington and burned the White House. Dolly Madison and her entourage escaped down this same Route 7, then a dirt-track. Now it's a two- and three-lane divided highway, except where it gets wider.

The white Focus stays a few cars back. To test them, I do a quick lane change from right to left, then cut across 7 to a mall on the other side.

In any case, I'm hungry, so pull into a Subway shop. No surprise, the white Focus appears and parks a couple of lanes over.

I lived—rather, dieted—on Subways for the months before Sherri, but I'm still not tired of them.

I go inside to eat where it's cool. The Focus is outside, and I take my time eating. Let the bastards bake in the sun, let them starve.

I feel better after eating, the last remnants of the hangover gone now. My spirits are up, my mind is clear.

First thing is to go back home and erase that bizarre message from Jade. How it got there, I can't figure, but it's part of a setup — that much is clear. But who or why? Did Jade make the call voluntarily, or was a gun pointed at her head?

THIS TIME I HEAD EAST, to pick up the turnoff to Newtowne.

The white Focus follows. I get a glimpse of the men: both are scruffy, thin moustaches, black unkempt hair.

I switch to a different all-news station: nothing new. Divers and helicopters are searching the Potomac out around where Greene's car was found. A police forensics team is still working at the Greene residence.

Newtowne, the planned community where I'm renting, was one of those modeled on Reston, the first planned community here in Northern Virginia. Reston started in the early 1960's, and is still growing—though a lot of that growth involves digging up what had been assumed was parkland and building office campuses for the influx of tech firms.

Like Reston, Newtowne was begun with a town center in place, built around a man-made lake, with shops on one end of the lake, and upscale waterfront homes on the rest. From this town center, a network of roads and walking paths branch off to link each of the clusters.

Each cluster of homes is intentionally different, both in design and how it's targeted to a specific socio-economic market. I'm sub-letting in one of the less up-scale clusters.

Before the trouble with Sherri, I'd signed up to take the place furnished on a six-month rental: the owner was a tech-type who

lived here between his various overseas assignments. It's okay, the furniture has been around a while, but it's clean enough, and the neighborhood is quiet.

"Woop! Woop!" Police car close on my tail, lights flashing. I feel a surge of adrenalin. My foot hits the gas, hard. *I am not going back into a jail cell!*

Then I catch myself. It's crazy to make a run for it now.

I ease off the gas, hit the turn signal, and pull over to the side of the road.

The cop car shoots past. I stay where I am a minute or so. My hands are shaking, I'm puffing as though I'd just run a sprint.

I check the mirror. That white Focus is gone.

I PULL INTO MY CLUSTER and slam on the brakes. It's not over yet. Two police cars are parked by my house, emergency lights flashing. I throw the shift into reverse, panicked, wanting to get the hell out of there, make a run for it.

Again I catch myself. I take a deep breath, put the car back into drive, and pull up in front of my house. Before I'm out of the car, one of the uniformed cops comes up to the door. "Sir, is this your residence?"

"Yeah," I manage. "What's up?" Keep it cool, even though I hear my voice cracking. My mouth is dry.

"One of the neighbors reported some suspicious characters, possibly scouting out to break-in."

"Here? At my place?"

"That's not clear. They were in the parkland behind the house."

I walk around with him to the back. Mine is third in the row of attached houses, all pretty much the same in design. Sliding

glass doors open onto a concrete patio which looks across some greenery to one of the hiking and biking trails.

That makes it convenient when you want to go out and talk a walk in the parkland, but it also makes it easy for burglars, dressed like joggers, to veer off the path and jimmy open the doors. That used to happen a few times each year, I'm told, but now most houses have better doors. Beyond that, there's an informal Neighborhood Watch: an army of Mrs. Curtain-Pullers peeking out to mind other people's business.

It worked this time: one of the watchers spotted two suspicious guys: "Hispanic-ish-looking," I heard later was how she described them. Keep talking like that, and she can expect visitors from the PC Police.

In any case, there was no sign of a break-in, apart from some scratches on the paint of the sliding door, which could have happened an hour or five years ago.

THE COPS LEAVE. I'm able to breathe again.

This crisis passed. But what's next?

Were the burglars targeting me?

Why me?

## ***Why me?***

### WHY ME?

Why were the guys in that white Focus interested in me? They weren't cops: they took off when a real cop car appeared.

And why would local thugs suddenly target my house? I've got computers, sure, but I've had them here since I moved in. So why today? Coincidence?

For that matter, why did Jade Greene make the moves on me? *You're just the kind of guy I've been looking for.*

I listen again to her newest message. No surprise, it's still the same: Stay away from me, you scare me, I'll call the police.

I listen to it again, and again, looking for a clue, hoping it wasn't real, that maybe somebody was holding a gun to Jade's head, forcing her to betray me.

But it says what it says, so I erase it, knowing even as I do that it's probably pointless—police technicians can pull up erased messages.

But one bit of good news: if they can pull up this message, there's a good chance they can pull up those six messages from last night, her other messages telling me to get over there fast, she wants to see me desperately.

I go up to the second bedroom and log on-line to do what I should have done a couple of weeks ago, back when Jade appeared.

First I scan the local news web-sites for updates. Basically nothing. Police in Maryland were still searching the area around Dockery's Lock for whatever, and divers were in the Potomac. Nothing changed.

Nothing new at the Greene residence either, just some photos and video clips from earlier today. No real news . . . other than that the BaronCameron County cops were focusing on “a person of interest.”

Nice to know that *somebody* finds me of interest.

I take a deep breath and settle down to do some digging to learn what I can about Mr. Greene and his business.

After twenty minutes, I’ve turned up just about zilch. He kept a very low profile. I find just one passing mention of him in Washington-area business journals: “Edgar Greene is a boutique financial advisor with a silent clientele.”

“Boutique”—implying a limited clientele of the wealthy elite. Or just the wealthy?

He apparently didn’t advertise, he didn’t even have a listing in the Yellow Pages, online or in the paper version. He never wrote any articles, never was interviewed.

So who were his clients? How did they find him? I can’t find a thing.

My doorbell rings and my heart starts rocketing again. Police? Here to seize my computers? Or to just pull me in and be done with it?

I quickly erase my search history and log off.

But it’s not more police; this time it’s one of my neighbors, a small lady, 60-something. I talked to her once at the mail box. I think she’s retired from the government.

“Was everything all right?” she asks.

I’m puzzled, and it shows.

“Did they manage to get in?”

“Who?”

“The men, the Hispanic-ish looking men who were prowling around, I think trying to get into your back door. I was the



person who called the police. The uniformed officers came very quickly and I saw the men run away. But did they take anything?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’m glad. I do try to keep an eye on thing, sort of a one-person neighborhood watch. I’m retired, have time to help out that way.”

I get the sense she’d be amenable to coming in for a cup of tea and a long chat. But not today.

We trade phone numbers, just in case.

I walk around the house, checking the doors front and back to see if there are any signs of an attempted break-in. Nothing, no scratches, no footprints in the dirt out back.

“Hispanic-ish.” That could fit the guys in the white Focus—dark hair, thin moustaches. Or maybe I’m inventing stuff.

I’M STIFF from all the biking yesterday. I tell myself a short ride would loosen up those muscles. More important, help clear my mind. Could be my last bike ride for 20 years to life.

My biking garb, what I wore yesterday, the rainbow suit that makes me look like a contender on the Tour de France, is in the laundry bin. I should have soaked it in cold water overnight to get the blood out. Jade called last night before I got a chance to do that.

Maybe it’s not too late.

I run cold water in the sink and pull out the suit. I hold it in my hand, staring at it, disbelieving at how bloody it is. There was blood, but not this much. So much blood that the cloth feels like starched fabric.

I panic, dropping the bloody shirt into the water. I scrub, but only some of the blood comes out. I get laundry detergent and use hot water this time. A little better.

I catch myself and draw in some deep breaths.

Think.

What the hell is going on?

There wasn't this much blood last night, I'm sure of that. So how did it get there?

How did Jade's messages from last night get erased? I wasn't imagining things, somebody got in and messed with the machine. And probably splashed some extra blood on my clothes.

What else did they mess with? What else did they do to set me up?

I go into the bedroom and dig out the clothes I wore to Jade's last night, a knit shirt and a pair of khakis. I hadn't noticed earlier: dried blood stains over both shirt and pants.

## ***Beaten***

HEAVY KNOCKING downstairs at the front door.

I glance through the glass by the door before opening. The same gray Crown Victoria.

Summers, the banty-rooster detective, stood on the doorstep, his hair still as slicked back as this morning. Gardner, the big guy, turns the corner coming from the back. “Mr. Woodcock, how nice of you to answer your door. How’s your day going?”

“Fine. What can I do for you?” Unsaid: If you’re here to bring me in, get it over with.

“Hear you had some intruders around here a little while ago. Everything okay?”

“Everything’s okay. Seems they didn’t get in.”

“Why you, my friend, why you?” booms Gardner.

“It’s my lucky day.”

“You’re being a smart-ass. I don’t like smart-asses.” Summers said. He let the silence hang, glaring at me. He was a half-foot shorter than I.

When he realized the glare coming from way down there wasn’t intimidating me, he said, “Aren’t you going to invite us in, ask us to look for evidence of a break-in you might have missed?”

“You’re playing games with me, detective. You’re hounding me. Why don’t you put that energy in finding Mr. Greene . . . and Jade?”

“Do I understand you are not permitting us to come in? It goes on the record that you have refused us permission to come in and conduct an interview regarding an alleged break-in of your home.”

“I never claimed there was a break-in. In any case, I’ve been to a lawyer, and—”

“We know you’ve been to see Mr. Bleaux. And let me tell you, we’re very pleased about that. You couldn’t have made a better choice . . . from our point of view that is. It’ll make a conviction one hell of a lot easier.”

He turns away, saying, “Have a good day, Mr. Woodcock.”

“Yeah, have a good one, while you can,” Gardner echoes. “Enjoy it, ‘cause next time you see us we’ll be leading you out of here in handcuffs. You got that?”

It’s supposed to strike fear in my heart. It does.

“The suspects you interview, they start out scared, and a good cop builds on that, ratchets it up until they fall apart and give you what you want.” Words of wisdom from my father. He was good at fear, but not a very good cop, as it turned out. He got what was coming to him.

But I’m not shaking, not jumpy. I just want to roll up on the floor and die.

An image of my father comes to me. He threw me on the floor, showing off some of his police tricks. He’s still in his uniform. I’m maybe nine years old, bawling my eyes out from the pain, even more from the hurt that my father did that to me, and he’s saying, “Get up, you little sissy. Real men don’t cry.”

“Real men don’t beat up their little kids,” I say, provoking him more, and he pounds me until it’s as if it’s not really me there getting hit, it’s some other little kid. I’m just off to the side, watching.

In the end, the bastard got what he deserved. Not for the right reason, but the right punishment.

I’M FEELING BEATEN. I’ve got to break out of this mindset.

I dig out one of my other biking uniforms, pull it on quickly, and go out through the garage. For a moment, I’m surprised to

find it empty. Then I remember: I left the Explorer on the street when I got here so the cops wouldn't have reason to come in and see the wet floor. The floor is dry now, and I don't see any blood.

I wheel my bike out onto the driveway and drive the Explorer inside. That gives me a cover to look up and down the street. No sign of police.

Something comes to mind: I'm not really flat broke, I still have a small pile of cash hidden in the kitchen. I go back for it: \$53. Plus \$8 left of the \$13 Bleaux spared me. \$61, my great-escape stash.

I mount up, and ride around the cul-de-sac that comprises my cluster. I see a white Focus parked over by the basketball hoop, where it could see comings and goings. Very likely the same white Focus that followed me from the lawyer's office.

I figure I'm invisible in biking garb, wearing a helmet and wrap-around sunglasses. I pedal slowly past them, looking to see what I can pick up.

First surprise: I see the bar-code on the car's back window. Car rental companies stick the codes there to help their staff sort out the cars. I'm told it helps thieves, too: the bar-code is a good way to target rentals with luggage in the trunk.

Next surprise: as I pass, I hear the two men talking, and it's not English. It's not Spanish, I know that much. Later, I'll find they were speaking Russian.

They stay in place, don't follow.

One white Focus with guys who might be Hispanic; a second Focus with guys who are definitely not Hispanic. Coincidence?

Then something clicks. This Focus isn't really white, it's light silvery-gray. A different car, a different team?

I RIDE A COUPLE OF BLOCKS, then swing back to pick up the trails through the wooded areas. The biking and hiking trails are a key selling feature in Newtowne. They wind past every cluster, so you only need to go a few steps from your door to be on what feels like a peaceful country trail. That's another of the ideas the developers of Newtowne cloned from neighboring Reston.

Reston was begun back in the 1960's, out in what was then the middle of nowhere—not quite as far out as Dulles Airport, which at the time seemed so far from Washington that, so the story goes, some of the local wits claimed it would be quicker to drive to California than find your way to Dulles.

No longer. Everything expanded, and the novelty that was Reston became the norm. Everything is planned, and (almost) everything here in Newtowne works according to plan.

It is a comfortable way of life here. I've only been here a few months, and am already thinking there's no place I'd rather live.

Until today.

The way things are looking, I'm not going to have any choice on where I live for a good many years.

Unless I find a way out.

## ***Blood flowing***

I RIDE A HALF-HOUR, pushing myself, getting the blood flowing. A plan begins to form.

I pull in at the Broad Meadow Shopping Center. There's no meadow here, maybe never was—but the name is evocative, and that's what the planning folks were up to. There's a Giant Food supermarket, a bank, Starbucks, CVS pharmacy, gas station, Chipotle, pizza shop, a real restaurant I've never tried, a six-story office building, and a Marriott Hotel.

The pieces of a plan begin falling into place.

I lock the bike and buy some Power Bars (just in case), along with a new pair of sunglasses. The bike is still there when I get out—not always a given, despite the lock.

I bike home with the stuff in the pockets of my biking jersey.

This time, coming back, I go by the trail that runs from the shopping center along the shore of one of the man-made lakes that dot Newtowne, and check for any watchers.

None. None that I can see.

ONCE INSIDE the house, I check the answering machine. Nothing.

I call my lawyer for an update. “No movement,” he says. Whatever that means. But I can't ask because he's (supposedly) in a conference.

Defective Summers: We're very pleased about the lawyer you picked. You couldn't have made a better choice . . . from our point of view that is. It'll make our life so much easier.

I FLICK ON THE ALL-NEWS STATION while I shower.

“All-News Radio has learned that the FBI has entered the case of missing financial planner Edgar Greene, and wife Jade, also missing. No word yet on why that federal agency is interested in missing persons cases that include links to both Maryland and Virginia.

“In a related development, a source has informed All-News Radio that Maryland State Police divers, working the area around Dockery’s Lock, where Edgar Greene’s Mercedes sedan was discovered yesterday, have not as yet found any sign of bodies, but—and this is not as yet confirmed—we are told that the divers did find a bicycle rack on which was engraved a license plate matching that of the car of an individual who is, according to unofficial sources, the primary person of interest. That person of interest has not been identified to the media, but is believed to be a Virginia resident who was involved in some way with Jade Greene.”

I don’t towel off, I run, wet and naked down to the garage. The bike rack Jade gave me ten days ago is gone. “I want you to have this,” she’d said, “so we can go on long trips together, way out to the trails where no one goes. Then we can pull off and spread our blanket and . . .”

I’M UPSTAIRS, finally toweling off, when the phone rings.

Bleaux: “Bad news. The balloon has gone up, word has it they’ll be seeing a judge shortly.”

“They? The cops? The prosecutors?”

“Who else? Yeah. Someone tipped me off that it was happening. Not clear yet what they want. Could be a search



warrant for your house or car or both. Or an arrest warrant. It could be tricky: they might invite—great word, invite—you to come in to the station and make a statement about some evidence they’ve turned up. If so, they’ll grill you, and then formally arrest you while you’re there”

I can’t breathe, I can’t get enough air to answer him. I’ve been through that drill before, in Florida, and spent most of the following week in hell.

“You still there?”

“I’m here,” I manage. “Bail—do you think there’s a chance?”

“We talked about that. Depends on how much bail the judge sets. If it goes that far. You might just walk out, free as a clam.”

Free as a clam? Happy as a clam, but free as a clam—that’s one I’ve never heard before. Has he been drinking already?

“Some advice. When they come, be wearing slip-ons.”

“What?”

“Wear shoes you can slip on, shoes that don’t need laces. They’ll take away your shoe-laces first thing, and most shoes get really sloppy without laces. Very demoralizing, I hear. Best to wear slip-ons from the start.”

“You’ll be there, won’t you?”

“I’m just leaving the office now, should be free about seven or so. Leave word on my machine, and keep your mouth shut till I get there.”

Out of the office just about long enough for a round of golf. Or a nice bike-ride.

Wear slip-ons: his best legal advice. For which advice I advanced him all the cash I had left.

PANIC!

Panic is strange. Last time, in Florida, I fell to pieces. This time, panic makes time slow down and my mind takes on a weird super-clarity.

I grab my backpack, the carry-on I use when I fly, and stuff in a couple of changes of underwear, socks, a clean shirt, a toothbrush. In the space that's left I slide in my laptop and power cord.

I dress quickly in my usual travel uniform. Semi-dressy pants, a tan blazer. I need to look respectable when I head out.

But head out where? That part I haven't yet figured out. How far can I get on \$61—no, now it's down to \$47 and change.

If I had my passport. That would open up possibilities, but the court in Florida is holding it.

I'm at the sliding door downstairs, the one that opens onto the hiking trail, when I remember the little flash memory that fell out of Jade's purse last night. That's all the way upstairs in my office. I run up and stick it in my pocket, expecting police at the door any moment

If they're half-way smart, they'll send somebody around to cover the back, so I peek out carefully before opening.

It's raining now, a healthy drizzle. That's a good thing for me: now I can hide under an umbrella. Another quick run upstairs, just one level this time, and I find the big golf umbrella that the owners left here.

I'M AWAY FROM the house, walking the trail toward the shopping center. My plan is to slip onto one of the Metro buses headed back to Washington after dropping off the commuters.

Once I'm in DC, I'll find an ATM and draw out what cash I have in the account—the money I had set aside for next month's rent. I hadn't mentioned that to Mr. Bleaux because he'd have

glommed onto it, as well. But it doesn't seem as though I'm going to be in that house next month.

I'm in sight of the shopping center, a Motorbus just pulling in, when—*Oh Shit!*—I remember the manila envelope Jade gave me to hold for her, the one from the safe.

Can I afford the time to go back for it? Ten minutes each way, there and back. Are the cops already swarming through the house?

I have no idea what's in the envelope, just that it's thick. Maybe, just maybe, it holds my ticket out of jail.

I head back, moving fast. I pause before emerging from the wooded area behind the house. No police yet. So it seems.

I'd rigged the Charley Bar to fall into place to block the sliding glass door on the back as the door shut as I left. Now I can't use that door to get in, have to go around to the front door. Still no visible police. No sirens wailing in the distance.

I let myself in and punch in the code to silence the burglar alarm. That would be excitement I don't need.

The envelope is still in the kitchen drawer. I slice it open with a butter knife. Four smaller envelopes. I slit one open and bills fall out, American tens, twenties, fifties and hundreds. I do a quick count: \$7800!

What the hell is going on?

I'm torn: take the money and run and get the hell out of here before the police come.

Or . . . or what? How do I explain why Jade gave me this envelope? To admit that means admitting I'd seen her last night.

The second envelope holds a stack of British pounds; the third a pile of Euros; the fourth a thick wad of Swiss Francs. I don't take the time to count everything, but I ballpark the total at somewhere around \$18,000.

Then I find a smaller, hard envelope. I know what it is even before opening: not just one passport, it turns out, but two: one Canadian, the other Irish. The face in the ID photos is mine, slightly doctored, the wonders of Photoshop. But the names are not mine. Ronald Williams, a good bland Canadian name. Peter McGuiggan, sure-and-begorrah as Irish as they come.

Credit cards are stuck in each passport; two cards in each fake name.

I'm shaking. My mouth is dry. I have the feeling that the world is about to fall in on me.

I guzzle a quick glass of water, aware that the clock is ticking: the police will be coming for me, maybe in an hour, maybe in a minute.

This changes things, totally changes things. But I don't know whether it's very good or very bad news.

At least now I have options: two passports and a bundle of cash. Now I can get out of the country, really put some distance between here and me.

But I can't go through airport security carrying wads of cash. Last I heard, \$10,000 was the legal limit without declaring it.

The solution comes to me. I slit open the bottom of the padded back liner of my backpack and slide out the foam pads. I fit the bundles of cash in their place, then use black tape along the bottom to seal the openings shut. On a quick glance it looks normal, to my eye, at least. Unless the tape gives way.

I stuff the rest of the cash into the pockets of my blazer, my pants pockets, even my shoes, and finally get it all in. But there's no room now for the foam pads. I tie the pads across the top of the backpack. They blend in if you don't look too closely. I'll toss them somewhere along the way.

But that still leaves me holding two fake passports.

I reopen the taped seam of the bag. There's room for a passport in the pocket. But which one to use, which to keep in reserve?

Most important is just getting out of this country. Chances are, by the time I get to the airport the police will already have sent out an alarm.

I check the photos. I know when both pictures were taken: the first was when Jade and I walked the Mall in D.C., though now the photo is zoomed in on my face. The second was at the tennis club. It's me against a white concrete wall, which makes it look more like a normal passport photo. On this photo my beard has been eliminated, and my hair color lightened. I look almost Swedish.

My cellphone rings, my own phone, not the one I used with Jade. Police? It rings three times, then stops.

"We need a signal," Jade said, after she'd finally told me she was married. "How about this? One of us calls the other, lets it ring just three times, hangs up, counts to ten, then rings again, twice. That's when the other person answers. Got it?"

I count to ten, a hundred thoughts racing through my mind? Is it Jade? Is it her husband, setting me up? A coincidence? Police? My half-baked lawyer calling to say the police are on the way?

It rings again: once, twice. I pick up. "Yes?"

Silence. Then I hear a click and the dial tone.

NOW THAT I'M CARRYING THE CASH, there isn't room in the bags for my laptop. Too bad.

I run through a quick mental checklist before leaving the house. No more coming-back. Front door locked, umbrella, Jade's

little flash memory device. Plus two passports, and \$18K in miscellaneous cash hidden away.

I hoist the backpack onto my shoulder and head to the back door.

The doorbell rings. I freeze. Have I put it off too long? Are the cops here? How to explain the cash? And the fake passports.

But the police didn't use the doorbell: they pounded on the door.

I peek through a window. A white van in front, a blond woman on my doorstep, holding an umbrella. I recognize her. Alexa-something, reporter for one of the TV stations.

I catch the figure of a man just disappearing around the corner of the house, headed to the back. If I try to slip out the back door again he'll be there, probably holding a TV camera. "Live at Six! Person of interest caught on camera slipping out his back door!"

Alexa turns and our eyes lock.

I slip off the backpack and go to the door.

A wide smile. "Hi! I'm Alexa—"

"I recognize you," I smile back. "But you've got the wrong house. It's around the corner at 11522."

Still holding the smile, she says, "How do you know who I'm looking for?"

"Hey, I watch the news. The guy they want on the case of Mr. and Mrs. Greene. I'm telling you, he lives over at 11522."

The smile freezes. Her face goes blank. She touches her ear. I realize she's wired, getting instructions from her producer in the van. I look at the van and see the sliding door is open and a camera is pointed at us, red light blinking.

"How do I know you're not lying?"

I'm pissed now. "Show me yours, and I'll show you mine," I say.

“I beg your pardon?” she responds, the facade cracked. She’s confused. Things aren’t following the script.

“I told you I’m not the guy you’re after. Show me your driver’s license, and I’ll show you mine.”

“Shit!” she says, silently, then again touches the ear, getting instructions from the van. “11522? Are you sure of that?”

“I said 15223.” Confuse them a little more.

“Okay, thanks. But you better not be lying to me, you know. If you are, we’ll really get you, make you look really bad.”

You already got me, I realize: You’ve got a video of what I’m wearing.

I race back upstairs and shuck off the tan blazer and pull on a dressier blue one. Not much different, but better than nothing. I grab a hat left by the owner, a floppy canvas sun-hat.

THE TV VAN IS GONE, off on a wild-goose chase. I grab the backpack, briefcase and umbrella and race back to the basement.. I look around before sliding the door open. No TV guy with camera. No visible police.

Again I slip out, letting the charley bar fall back into place.

The drizzle is heavier now. Even more excuse for holding the umbrella up high enough to block my face. I have the backpack over my shoulder. I hope I look like just any other poor schmuck coming home from work in the rain. Except I’m headed the wrong way, toward the bus-stop, not coming from it.

But where am I going? Overseas, that much I know. Now that I have passports and cash. But where?

The shopping center looms up again through the mist.

I circle the Marriott. No police. No cabs waiting for fares, but I could call one from inside. Problem is, that leaves a trail.

Salvation arrives in the form of a bellman hurrying out to hop in one of the vans.

I catch up as he fires the engine. “Headed for Dulles?”

He looks me over. I’m carrying a soaking umbrella. His name-tag tells me he’s Dave. “Are you a registered guest, sir?”

I reach through the window and slip him a \$10 bill.

“Yes sir, what airline? Like to put your bag in the back?”

“Thanks, I need to go through things. Uh, US Air—” I cut myself off but it’s already out.

We’re under way now. “Sir, US Airways doesn’t fly out of Dulles, merged a long time ago with American.”

“Right, who does? Who goes to, uh, San Francisco?”

He looks me over in the rear-view mirror. Now he’ll remember me.

I use the time in the van to rearrange things.

I’ve decided I’m going to use the Canadian passport—that has the photo of me with my beard and dark hair. I slide the Irish passport into the lining of the bag, replacing the black tape.

My new name is Ronald Williams—smart, whoever made up the phony identity: the initials match my own, just in case I had a monogrammed suitcase. Which I don’t.

I’m sliding Ron’s new credit cards into my wallet when I recognize a problem: I’m still carrying my own ID stuff, driver’s license, credit cards. Not good if the TSA people ask me to empty my wallet “Security theater” it’s been termed it. Symbolic gestures to make us feel more safe. But every once in a while productive.

And now I qualify as one of the bad guys.

Will I ever need my own ID again? Or is the old Me gone forever?

I slide my cards into one of the backpack’s small side pockets. This isn’t the time to open the black tape again.



I'm not sure how much of this Dave sees in his mirror, but every time I look up his eyes dart away.

Ronald Williams. Ronald Williams. Ronald Williams, I tell myself. Thou shalt not slip-up.

Dave drops me off on the upper level, and I enter the great hall that is Dulles Airport, designed by Eero Saarinen. I'm struck by the upward sweep of the roof-line. I suppose that sweep is to symbolize flight, or the lift of an airplane wing, or something.

I'm putting off the big decision: Where to go, where to go?

I check the main departures board, and my eye settles on a British Airways flight leaving in an hour. I go to one of the kiosks and book a seat, no problem. Then—holding my breath—punch in Ronald Williams' Visa number. Time passes, and I wonder if it's a stolen card.

It goes through, my purchase is approved.

I realize that the Visa card is unsigned. I pull out Ron's passport and check his signature, then try to duplicate it on the Visa. Close enough, I hope.

I go to another of the British Air kiosks and print a boarding pass. The plane isn't full, and I'm given the seat I requested, a nice, anonymous window seat where I won't be very visible.

I NEED TO DUMP some incriminating stuff before risking security. I find a men's room and stuff the foam padding from the backpack into the trash, wash my hands, then find another toilet and chuck the crumpled paper envelopes that held the cash. Paper holds fingerprints, and I don't know whose prints were on them.

A couple of deep breaths and I get into the line for security. It's not a busy night, and the lines are relatively short. I'm next in

line when I remember I still have my own ID and credit cards tucked into a side pocket of the backpack.

Too late. I'm next. The agent looks over my passport, looks at the photo, then at my face, and back at the photo. She flips through the pages, looks back at me with an expression that says she doesn't much like me . . . or maybe doesn't like anybody today. I suppose it goes with the job.

"Sir, this is a brand-new passport, has no stamps to show you've gone overseas. Why not?"

I rub my nose: something to gain thinking time. "You're right, it is new."

"How did you get into this country?"

"From Canada? It's not . . . I drove in, they didn't stamp anything."

She looks at me, I hold her gaze. She hands the passport to me. "Have a good trip, sir."

NEXT HURDLE: I drop my wallet and pocket change into the basket. No shoes-off check tonight.

A sign on the wall reminds travelers that cash totaling \$10,000 or more, in any currency, must be declared.

The scanner beeps and a burly security guy blocks me for a personal scan. He turns up Jade's little flash-drive, which I'd buttoned into an inside pocket of my jacket and forgotten. I drop it into another basket, and go through again.

This time I pass. I collect my wallet and change from the basket and pull my briefcase and backpack off the scanner belt.

I'm walking away when security calls me back. I turn. Is this it?

He points to the basket: I'd forgotten Jade's flash-drive. I had no idea then that people would literally kill to get their hands on that little gadget.

I join another line, this one to load onto a "people mover," the funny bus that takes us out to the plane. A couple of uniformed police come toward me.

I pretend to ignore them. They walk on. I breathe again.

ONCE ON THE PLANE, I settle into my window seat and wait. It isn't crowded; I have the whole row to myself. Last thing I need is a granny-type eager to chat about her brood. Or to ask questions about myself.

Time passes, the doors should be closing when the captain comes on to announce a slight delay. We're out in the middle of the field, away from the main terminal. I look to see any police cars headed this way. Nothing.

Finally the doors close with a thump and I feel the cabin pressurizing. Maybe I just might make it.

Maybe.

The long slow take-off run, and just when it seems we're running out of space the big plane lifts off and it feels like we're floating on a pillow.

I'm behind the wing so I have a view as we pass by the cluster of high-rises at the Reston Town Center, and the labyrinth of streets that's Newtowne. We circle around the Beltway and I see the White House and the Capitol and wonder if I'll ever be back.

## LONDON

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## *Jade*

DINNER is chicken or fish, hard to tell which. Whatever, better than jail food.

After a while, coming up to Newfoundland, they dim the lights, and I settle back, trying to come up with the next step. We'll be landing in London in a few hours. What then?

I CAN'T SLEEP. I dig out my iPad and begin writing up all that's happened. Maybe a record will come in handy. Maybe there'll be an overlooked detail that saves me. Any case, something to do, not just sit there scared.

I LOOK UP and see a figure coming down the aisle.

It's Jade, smiling. "I'm so glad you took this flight. I knew you would. We had such good times together."

She bends over and kisses me. On the cheek.

Men in suits swarm around and grab me and shove me, face-first onto the seat. I feel the handcuffs click around my wrists.

I look up. Jade is standing, laughing, looking down at me. "You are so very stupid, Dick. You should have known from the start never to trust me."

Someone shakes me. I open my eyes. A female flight attendant, the chubby blond who brought my dinner. "You were having a nightmare, sir. Are you all right?"

I nod. My mouth is dry and I have trouble speaking. She brings me a bottle of spring water.

I WAKE AGAIN in time to see the sun rising, reflecting off the silvery clouds below. Running almost parallel with us, maybe 10 miles away is a big Delta 747, floating along like a cloud. Is it racing us to get first landing slot?

The TV on the seat back shows our route: we're at 36,000 feet, passing over southwest Ireland. A break in the cloud layer opens, and I see the green fields, seven miles down.

Breakfast: a little cup of orange juice (apparently the smallest cup allowed by law), a cold roll, yogurt, coffee . . . and a grudging second cup when I asked.

Before long, we're weaving slow, circles south of London. The co-pilot announces that we're waiting landing clearance, as good tail winds sped us here a little ahead of schedule. Did that Delta 747 jump the line?

Or are they stalling to give the local police time to get into place to arrest me?

Finally the course straightens out, and we swoop over the strange blocky buildings and tile roofs of south London. I see the spires of Big Ben, Parliament, and wide rolling green fields in the long slow glide, and then we're down.

Another "brief delay" while we wait for a gate—so they tell us. Waiting for a gate, or waiting for a SWAT team to move into place?

At last we're towed into a gate, and the walkway slides up to the plane. The doors open. A couple of hundred people leap to their feet, all determined to be first out.

That's a good sign, I figure: nobody came to arrest me.

Or are they waiting to nab me on the walkway?

I let most of the eager ones go ahead and then blend in with a bunch of the left-overs, keeping an eye out ahead for whatever might be waiting there: uniformed police, or blocky guys in lumpy suits.

I stop off for a quick wash, then rejoin the crowd queuing up to go through immigration. I'd already filled out the immigration card on the plane. I stick it into my new passport, rehearsing again and again: I'm Ronald Williams. Ronald Williams.

The holding area is the size of a basketball court, and mirrored windows ring it on the second level. There are police up there, I know, along with customs, drug inspectors, probably MI-5 spy types, as well.

Smile, Ronald Williams, you're on a whole slew of candid cameras.

The line twists and turns through a labyrinth of ropes. Finally I'm first in line and step up to the desk. A guy in a dark blazer and turban asks my name. I get it right. Then he asks how long I'll be in England. I do well to that point. Then he asks, "Purpose of your visit?" I catch myself in time to say, "Short vacation."

Only one more hurdle: customs. I take the Nothing to Declare line, and hope they don't pull me out to check out the lumpy padding in my backpack.

I make it, and step out into the main terminal, passing the chauffeurs in black suits holding up signs with passengers' names, and the families of every nationality of the world lined up waiting to greet the relatives. The world passes through Heathrow.

## ***Shoe fetishist***

FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS: get away from Heathrow and blend into the city. I follow the signs to the Underground station beneath the terminal. A train has just left; the platform is empty.

Minutes pass. More passengers file onto the platform.

The electronic sign showing the next arriving train suddenly goes dark.

Still more passengers arrive. The sign stays dark.

A British voice makes an announcement: I can't understand much of it, partly the accent, partly the way it echoes off the concrete walls. Something about taking a hound slow.

An old phrase comes to mind, "The houndslows of hell". I have no idea what it means.

I find a map on the station wall: there really is a place named Hounslow—not a slow hound.

"Did you hear that!" a guy says, coming up to stand beside me. American accent, one small carry-on and a briefcase. Blue business suit, no necktie. Maybe 5'8" and balding, but exudes energy and fitness. "Second time this year it's caught me. You're American. I can always tell by the shoes."

"I couldn't understand the announcement, too much echo," I respond.

"Seems there was a minor fire on the incoming train, so there'll be a delay. The official advice is to go upstairs and catch a bus to Hounslow, that's part-way in, past where the train is stopped. My advice to you is just stay put. So you are American? You might be Canadian, they wear good shoes, but I didn't catch any of that in your voice."

"American, yeah," remembering as I say it that I'm traveling with a Canadian passport. "What's that about shoes?"



“Little hobby of mine when I’m over here, here or on the continent. Especially sport shoes, athletic shoes. The locals wear little flimsy shoes, no real support, no arch, not much padding—like our old basketball shoes from the ‘50’s. Americans these days wear good solid, comfortable shoes. Same with men’s business shoes: the British, and even more on the continent, have taken to wearing black shoes with very long narrow toes. Like women’s high heels. Must be uncomfortable as hell. Wife says wearing dressy uncomfortable shoes like that gave her bunions. Europe in ten years will be full of men with bunions and toes all crunched together into points.”

I glance at this shoes—black running shoes. He practices what he preaches. An odd guy, but he’s doing the talking, not asking questions. I like that.

“You’re a techie of some sort, am I right?” he asks. “Maybe IT, some kind of software genius?”

“How—”

“How did I know that? You’re traveling light, here just for a few days. You’re not wearing a suit, which is standard business garb for business types, though IT types and techies don’t play by those rules. And, most telling of all, you’re carrying your precious little computer. ‘Course you could be a creative type, as well: advertising, something like that.”

He sticks out his hand. “I’m Fred. Most people call me Freddie.”

“Dick,” I start to say, then switch to “Ron, short for Ronald.”

“Great to meet you. How long you here for?”

An announcement on the PA system. I still can’t understand much of what’s said, but now the electronic sign comes to life: Next train in 2 minutes.

“Just a few days,” I respond. “Taking a break, spur-of-the-moment. Any suggestions on a good place to stay?”

“I were you, traveling on my own, no meetings to go to, I’d get off at one of the stations between Earl’s Court and South Kensington. Nice area, lot of hotels, though the closer to the center the more upscale, which translates as costly.”

We feel the swoosh of air pushed down the tunnel as the train nears. “May I offer you a point of wisdom, good buddy?”

“I’m always open to wisdom.” Even from very strange people.

“If you go to one of the big chain hotels, not a problem. But if you go to a mom-and-pop place, make sure it’s one where they give you a key-card, know what I mean?”

“Like a credit card, yeah. But why? What real difference?”

“Wow, for a techie you’re really out of touch with tech. Haven’t you heard? There’s new technology. The bad guys can shoot a photograph of a key, do some tech hocus-pocus, then print out a duplicate key on one of those new 3-D printers? Somebody could have stayed in that room a month, a year ago, and then use his new home-made metal key to help himself to your riches.”

My riches? Jade’s \$18,000? How could he know about that?

“I appreciate the tip. Have a good trip.”

The train pulls in and we’re separated by the crush of people. Just as well. An interesting guy, a smart guy. A strange guy. Another in the string of people you meet once, and then never again.

But he was observant. The kind of guy who might remember me if he saw my photo in the papers.

## ***No good deed***

FREDDIE—the strange guy on the platform—said the best choice of hotels ran along the stretch from Earl’s Court to South Kensington. I get off at the mid-point, Gloucester Road, and take the elevator up to the street.

A business street, lined with four and five story buildings and some familiar faces: Burger King, Starbucks, KFC.

I’m flush with Jade’s cash; I’m tired and need a coffee lift. Beyond that, I have no idea what I’m doing or where I’m going.

I order a *cappuccino vente* along with a cinnamon bun at Starbucks; calories don’t count when the police are after you.

Somebody has left a *USA Today* at an empty table. I settle at that table and flip through it, wondering if I’ve made the news yet. Good news: Not yet, at least.

Feeling a little better after a caffeine and sugar overdose, I head outside. A light drizzle is falling. But it’s London, what do you expect?

The first day of the rest of my life on the run. Where to go? What to do? Where to hide?

I pause at the corner, letting the traffic shoot past, aware that they drive on the wrong side here, and I’m probably more likely to be nailed by a passing taxi than the police.

I spot a high-rise down the Brompton Road with the familiar green logo: Holiday Inn. A good place to start. I’m bushed, I need a shower and a change of clothes.

The lobby seems as big as an airline terminal, marble, or some facsimile thereof, big windows, and a check-in line a hundred or so bodies long. Maybe just as well; in numbers there is anonymity.

Five minutes, then ten. I'm closer to check-in, but still waiting. I wished I'd hit the toilet before I got in line.

A man walks by, holding an open tablet. He glances at me, then looks again and stops to talk. "Do you speak English?" he asks. American accent. He's 50, maybe 60, balding, pudgy.

I check his shoes: good old sturdy comfortable American New Balance. White. "I do."

"You know anything about computers?"

"Some. Why?" I wonder if this is some kind of a set-up.

"I can't get online. There's wi-fi in the room, and they gave me the access code when I checked in, but it just doesn't work for me. I phoned down, they put me on indefinite hold. Any ideas?"

He folds the tablet open in front of me while we stand. I try the code. It doesn't access. I see one of his favorites is [WashingtonPost.com](http://WashingtonPost.com). Out of force of habit I hit it, instantly wishing I hadn't.

It comes up. "It works! Good job! Don't know what you did, but it did the trick."

I hit exit, snapped the laptop shut, and handed it back to him. For all I knew, my picture could be on the *Post's* front page.

"Really appreciate that," he says. "Whereabouts you from? The States, I assume?"

I shuffle forward, not wanting to lose my place in line, very much wanting to lose this character before he starts asking questions.

"Virginia," I say. Then remember my passport is Canadian.

"How 'bout that. That's where I'm from, not DC, the suburbs, Northern Virginia. You work for the government?"

"Mmm," I grunt. He takes the hint and moves over to plop in one of the overstuffed leather chairs in the lobby.

I get the passport and credit card ready, then rehearse my new name: Ronald Williams, Ronald Williams. A moment of

panic: they'll want a home address when I check in. I flip through the passport: there it is, in Toronto.

I glance over at the guy I helped. He's staring back at me, his tablet open. He shifts from me to laptop to me again. I'd told him I was American; now I'm holding a Canadian passport. He jumps up, still staring at me, and shuffles over to try to break in at the front of the check-in line. The clerk waves him away. He goes off in search for somebody else to tell.

I grab my backpack and head for the exit. The line is as long as when I arrived, still stretching back nearly to the door. I use the bodies as cover.

"Hey! Hey you! Wait!" I hear behind. I know who it is. No good deed goes unpunished.

Outside, I jump into the first taxi. "Railway station, fast!" I say. The bald American runs outside, then stops, looking around.

The taxi is moving. "Right, train station, mate. Question is, *which* train station? Waterloo, Victoria, Paddington? Where it is you're headed?"

The American is frozen in place, his shoulder slumping, still holding his tablet. He's lost his prey, he's lost his claim to fame and fortune.

"I meant —I meant to say Hounslow." As I speak, I realize Hounslow slipped out; I'd meant Heathrow. The airport, not the random stop on the London tube.

"Hounslow?" the cabbie says, looking back over his shoulder at me. "Are you sure of that? Not my concern, I'll take you wherever you want, just want to be sure."

There's no cab pulling out of Holiday Inn, seems he missed us.

My driver does a U-turn, and I'm amazed at the short turning radius of a London cab.

He slides into traffic on the Cromwell Road, and I'm headed fast to somewhere I don't want to be. We cross the Earl's Court Road, and I see the tube station down the way. Freddie, the guy on the platform at Heathrow earlier said the best place to stay is along the stretch from Earl's Court to South Kensington. I see a string of small hotels, just signs over the door, Mom and Pop places, not part of hotel chains.

"Driver, sorry, I changed my mind. You're right, I don't really want to go out there. Just let me out here."

A dirty look in the mirror, and I'm out on the street. I linger behind a van for a bit. No sign I'd been followed.

I wander off onto one of the side streets and walk a while, getting a sense of the place. I figure I'm maybe three or four blocks from the tube station.

I try one of the small hotels overlooking an enclosed grassy square. The front door is locked; I ring; moments later it's opened by a small dark man in maroon silk pajamas. "Yes, yes, good man, we have a room for you, oh yes, very good room."

He shows it to me. On the ground floor, with a window looking out to that grassy square. A sink and toilet, and a shower just across the hall. I'm overcome by a wave of exhaustion.

But something about the owner makes me uncomfortable. Is it about silk pajamas in the middle of the day? Or that he just strikes me as generally creepy?

We go back to small front desk by the door. There is no lobby, just a space between the doors and a wide staircase. Most likely, this was once a home of the wealthy.

"Your passport, I need your passport," he says. "And how will you be paying?"

I hesitate. It's worth a try. If I'm going to hide out this would be the perfect kind of place. "I'll be paying in cash," I try. "But I

lost my passport coming in on the subway. I'll need to get a new one."

"Subway? Ah, the tube, yes, yes, of course. It happens. But the thieves, they did not get your cash?" I see his mind working behind the dark eyes: something in the way his eyebrows coming together in the moment before he spoke.

"I kept my cash separately."

"Yes, yes, of course. The room can be arranged. Though I will need an extra deposit because of no passport, you understand? One hundred, yes?"

I realize he's an old hand at this. People like me with no legitimate papers. Hot-sheet cheating couples who don't want to leave a trace.

I pay and he hands me the key: still a real metal key here, no plastic card here.

I hesitate, just for a moment recalling what Freddie's warning at Heathrow: : metal room keys can be 3-D printed from photos.

But I'm not going to leave anything valuable in the room. And this hotel asks no questions. And I'm beat and really want to sack out.

I'm hungry, but haven't got the energy to go out again. I shower quickly, eat one of the power bars I bought back in Newtowne, and slip into the bed.

It's lumpy. Then I'm out.

## ***Hackers for hire***

I SNAP AWAKE when a key turns in the lock. A woman, early 20's, long auburn hair. She's as shocked to see me as I her.

"So sorry," she says. "I — I did not know. I Mariska, I housekeeper."

"What time is it?" I haven't reset my wristwatch to London time.

"Nearly five."

I CHANGE into the only set of fresh clothes I'd managed to stuff into my backpack. I pull out a handful of British pounds and head out, backpack over my shoulder. No chance I'd risk leaving it in that hotel.

Mariska tells me there's a Marks and Spencer on Kensington High Street, up and over a few blocks.

And a McDonald's along the way. Not on my diet these days, but I'm beyond ravenous.

"Mickey Dee, good food," Mariska says. "I eat there. Sometimes." Is she flashing take-me-to dinner eyes?

As I'm leaving, a man comes down the broad staircase and passes out the door with me. Just a coincidence, I tell myself. He couldn't have timed it this way. He's mid-40s, tall and fairly lean, but something about him says, No athlete.

"You're new here?" he asks. "Don't mean to pry, but haven't seen you."

"First time, right," I respond.

"So you haven't had any of his breakfasts? Then let me give you a tip. I'd stay away from the sausage. The bacon as well. Anything meat."



“I don’t eat much meat, not anymore.” That was one of Sherri’s sermons: avoid fatty foods like sausage and bacon and hot dogs and a whole lot of other stuff I used to go for.

We’re both headed the same direction: toward Earl’s Court Road. “My business takes me to London once a month for a couple of days, and I stay here because of the location . . . and because it’s reasonable. But I’m beginning to think twice.”

“Really?” I say, hoping he’s not planning on walking up to the High Street.

“Did you meet the proprietor? The bloke in silk pajamas, his uniform, day and night.”

“He checked me in.”

“You’ll wake up in the night, smell cooking. He does his cooking in the bloody middle of the night! Why then? True, he’s . . . he’s from another culture, Indian I believe. But in the middle of the night? And those odors? Not right, something about the cooking odors that just . . . just aren’t normal, if you know what I mean?”

“Not really. I haven’t been here a night yet.” I have no idea what his point is.

“I’ve been coming five months now, and each time there’s a new girl, Polish or Russian girl. Works the front desk if he’s not around. Does all the housekeeping. Every single month there’s a new girl, different face. Ask what happened to the old girl, and the new one hasn’t a clue, doesn’t speak English. That is why I wouldn’t eat the sausage, if you understand my meaning. And keep your own door securely locked.”

I’VE LOST MY APPETITE.

I find Marks and Spencer: a big department store. No rush: it’s open till eight. I’ll come back later.

First things first: I find an internet café and I pay cash for a latte and an hour's computer time. I use one of their computers. I don't know if the Cameron County cops are smart enough to trace me via my online ID on my iPad, but better to be safe. s

I pull up the *Washington Post* online to see what's been happening. I didn't make the front page, but I did make page 1 of the Virginia local section: *Murder Suspect Eludes Police Arrest*, along with my photo pulled from the video they shot at my front door last night when I was sending Alexa and her crew to the wrong address.

I change my focus and look at myself reflected in the computer monitor: same shaggy hair, same thick beard, even same blazer. No wonder the guy at the Holiday Inn recognized me at first glance.

But the *Post's* account ends with my slipping away from the house ahead of the police. There's no mention of my going out to Dulles, nor any indication they had checked passenger lists.

Sloppy work? Or police playing it close to the bullet-proof vest? But so far as the police know, my one and only passport is being held by a judge in Florida. They don't know that Jade has given me two others.

Thank you, Jade.

But you didn't do it for *me*, you did it for *you*. So what's your game this time?

The *Post* article had nothing new on what had happened to her, or to the husband. The Maryland State Police were still dragging the Potomac beyond Harper's Ferry, now working several hundred yards downstream from where his car had been found.

I almost miss the sidebar article: *Missing Money Manager Had Mystery Clients*. According to unnamed sources, both state and federal authorities have been exploring Greene's business

files, without much success. It didn't say how they got access to Greene's files, probably a court order, but the files apparently had not revealed much.

The article left unclear whether that was because the authorities had not yet been able to get into the computer security protecting the data, or because Greene had scrubbed the drives—maybe even took them out and tossed them somewhere.

SO THE FEDS are involved, sniffing around Mr. Greene's business. Why?

Maybe the answer is on that thumb-drive, the one that fell out of Jade's purse. There's a chance that whatever is on that little drive could be my Get Out of Jail Card.

I'd invested a few minutes at home taking a look at what it held, but found the contents locked. I didn't have time then to try to hacking the code.

But now I still have 45 minutes of the hour's computer time I've paid for, so might as well give it a try. Beyond the hacking I'd done in my teens, I'd taken a college course in anti-hacking, a requirement for my degree.

But I'm jittery, can't focus.

Beyond that, I have the sense I'm being watched. I glance around; nobody seems to be looking my way. For whatever that's worth.

I give it a half hour, getting nowhere. then punch "Hackers for Hire" into Google, hoping to find a pro who might be able to do it for me. I come up with a couple of names, both with .ru suffixes. Russia.

It's no secret that a large part of big-scale computer crime comes out of Russia: the word in the industry is that both the

Russian government and Russian criminal gangs ran teams of computer hackers and originators.

I don't contact them, not just yet. I have problems enough. without inviting in more.

## *Twins*

TEN MINUTES left on my hour. I start to punch into my own email account, get one digit shy of finishing my password, then stop. What the hell am I doing?

*Of course* my account is being monitored. As soon as I log on, a link will go off to the police to tell them where I am and what I'm reading. Actually, they've probably already read all my old emails. Every computer in the world has its own unique digital fingerprint, telling the internet just where it is. In a gazillionth of a second, the police computers back in Virginia would know that I'm calling in from this computer just off High Street Kensington. The alert would go out, and the London police would be on their way.

HOTMAIL! Jade and I had set up Hotmail accounts so we could write back and forth in privacy.

With five minutes left on the clock, I log in to the old site, not really expecting anything.

I'm wrong:

*Now U kno I was VERY seriously when I said I got the racket if you got the balls.*

*Now racket, now payoff bigger than ever, than I ever dreamed. Still got the balls? Want a win bigger than U ever dreamed in your wildest wetdream?*

*If yes, move fast!!! Ex is moving very fast but we can beet him to it.*

*Where R U?  
Reespond 2 this ASAP and idenfy youself by my very  
personal name for U  
Cant wait to be together again  
U No Who*

No idea what Jade was up to, what games were now in play. One thing was clear, her strengths did not include written English.

But I wrote back:

*Big Dick is visiting Big Ben. What's up with you? And  
where R U?*

THE SECURITY GUARD at the door of Marks and Spencer eyes my backpack but lets me in after a perfunctory glance inside. He didn't spot any wads of cash.

I pick up what I need— a couple of shirts, underwear, a windbreaker to replace the blazer. Other odds and ends, along with scissors, razor, shaving cream, and hair color.

There's a food-market downstairs, and I pick up another half-dozen power-bars, just in case.

I don't go back to that same internet café, but saunter past on the other side of the street. I don't see any police cars lurking

I drop into a pub and have a half-pint of bitter and a traditional British delicacy: Shepherd's Pie fresh out of the freezer and into the microwave. Again, worlds better than jail food.

I TAKE A CIRCUITOUS ROUTE back to the area around the Earl's Court tube station. A couple of pubs, small food markets,

most operated by Indians or Pakistanis. No one seems to be following me.

I find what I was hoping for: another internet café. This one not really a café, just a hole in the wall offering online access.

I buy another hour of computer time, and begin with WashingtonPost.com.

No new developments, but there is a new sidebar article, detailing all the places I've been spotted: a bar on N Street in the District, another bar in Georgetown, on the Acela train to New York. And at a Holiday Inn in London. "None of these sightings have been confirmed, and police are not saying which, if any, are credible."

At a Holiday Inn in London. Getting close.

I click onto my new Hotmail account, figuring it's too soon to hear back from Jade. Again I'm wrong:

*U R so close!*

*Come to Amserdam ASAP! First thing in morning*

*As soon as U land buy a new mobile fone, pay cash, get time. Then send me phone number at this account.*

*Will check this every hour.*

*We have to work FAST! Payoff is HUGE if we R on same team!*

*Twins miss you VERY much. Come Fast. then u can come sloooooow with me! Cant wait!*

Just before I log off, I do one smart thing. I set up a cloud account, and download the contents of that flash drive. That won't make it any easier to read, but at least I won't risk losing it.

So I figured.

But it didn't happen that way.

ONCE BACK IN THE ROOM, I take final look at myself in the mirror—the last sight of the old me. Then I clip the beard, shave, and take another look. I find my eyes strangely large.

My skin feels very sensitive, and soft as a baby'

Next I clip and color my hair.

I collect all the hair in a bag which I'll toss tomorrow.

I turn in. Tomorrow begins the rest of my life.



## AMSTERDAM

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## *Making static*

PUNGENT FOOD AROMAS as I leave the hotel at six in the morning, and I think about the proprietor cooking strange dishes in the middle of the night, and young Polish chambermaids who seem to change every month, and a that other guest who never eats the sausage here.

The proprietor doesn't hear me leave. That's fine, even though it means I don't ask for my £100 special deposit back. He'd probably have come up with a reason to keep it.

Beyond that, it's better that he doesn't see the new me, the one with neatly trimmed short hair and no beard.

THE TUBE to Heathrow seems a safer bet than a cab. A cabbie might remember me. To the other passengers on the tube I'll be just another anonymous face across the aisle. So I hope.

There isn't much outbound traffic this early: I have a seat to myself, and flip through the handful of newspapers I'd bought outside the Earl's Court Station: *Telegraph*, *Times*, *Guardian*, *Sun*, *USA Today*. If I was in the news, I wanted to be the first to know.

I even made page 1 of the London *Sun*: "Have you seen him?" blared the headline over that picture taken by the TV crew back in Virginia. And something new: a frame from the security camera at the Holiday Inn yesterday when I'd been standing in line. They'd tried to blow it up, but it was fuzzy and just showed somebody with a big head of hair and a oversized beard.

I don't resemble that person, not at all. So I hope.

My face feels strange, sensuous, soft as a baby's bottom. I'd had the beard for five years.

I'D ARRANGED the air ticket last night, along with a printed boarding pass, to minimize the number of people who might remember me later.

I'd even remembered to book it on my other new identity, using the Irish passport and the credit card to match.

First comes security clearance, in a room with windows along the second story. The better to see you with.

All goes perfectly until I get to the security line. Belts off, wallets out, bags on tray, then pass through the scanner. The problem comes after that: I make it through, but see they've pulled my backpack off the roller. It sits by the X-ray machine.

And then nothing happens. I have my belt back in place, all my other stuff together. Still no backpack. I glance up at the board: my Amsterdam flight is in Final Call status.

Finally a woman runs a wand over the backpack. She frowns and calls her supervisor over. He's tall, Indian or Pakistani, round head totally shaved head, owlish 1930's style round glasses, fashionable then, coming back into style. He rewands the bag, then puts it on a tray and sends it back through the X-ray.

I wonder what \$16,000 in assorted bills looks like on X-ray.

I want to run, to get away while I still can. But I can't, not with most of my money in the backpack.

The woman and the supervisor study the screen, then turn and look my way. Our eyes meet.

The supervisor picks up a phone and dials a single digit, his eyes still locked on me. Then he blinks, and reaches for the cell phone clipped to his belt. He takes that call, still holding the land-line for a moment before putting it back on the cradle. He's still watching me, even as he tells the woman to bring me the backpack.

I grab it and hustle to the gate. I was lucky. Or had he been told to back off and let me go? But who would do that?

I make it to the gate in time; I'm third-to-last to board. I check out the other two coming behind me—are they following me?. A man in a business suit settles in business class, and a woman, 30-ish with unruly curly dark hair, who'd been in the security line ahead of me, takes an aisle seat a few rows ahead.

RAIN IN AMSTERDAM, but immigration and customs are a breeze, and 20 minutes after I board the train I'm arriving at Central Station in bright sunshine.

I pause in the big shopping mall beneath the station to buy a cellphone—a “mo-bile” they call them here—and find an internet café to email the new phone number to Jade. Or whoever is claiming to be her.

I'm paranoid . . . with good reason. *Prudently* paranoid.

I see a row of lockers by the entrance, hesitate, then fit my backpack into one of them. Safer here than on my back in the city with pickpockets and bag snatchers.

I slip out a side entrance. Now the sunshine has given way to drizzle. I step back into the terminal and buy an umbrella at one of the small shops in the mall beneath the station. My first thought is a mini-folding one, then think again and buy a big one, the size of a golf umbrella. It'll protect against rain, cover my face, and—worst case—serve as a weapon.

At the same kiosk, I buy a Greek fisherman's cap.

Umbrella raised, I join the crowd and walk anonymously across the bridge to the Damrak. My new mobile phone rings. “Where are you?” Jade's voice, unmistakable, and again it tingles those nerves down below.

She is not your friend.

But you need her. Maybe she is your only way out.

Just don't let her drag you in any deeper.

"At Central Station," I lie. "Where are you?"

"Then it's perfect. Just come out of the station. You'll find VVV, I'll be there, waiting at the café in front, overlooking the canal. If you don't recognize me, just phone and I'll wave."

"Vay vay vay? I don't understand. Why wouldn't I recognize you?"

"It's the tourist office in front of the station, in a small white building that looks like a cottage."

I glance back and see the white cottage, dwarfed by the immense brick station.

I'm not ready to talk to Jade. I'm not at all sure it's safe to get near her: she could be baiting a trap—sell me out to save herself.

The bridge is busy with bikes and trolleys and pedestrians and I'm one in the river of bodies. The rain has passed now, and the sun comes out again.

Once across, I spot a rank of coin-op telescopes. Despite a big hat and long coat I recognize Jade standing by the staircase. There's something about her—her movements, her bearing.

To draw out what might be waiting there, I phone her. It is Jade in the long coat, and she reaches into a pocket and pulls out a phone.

"Where are you? I'll wave," she says, her voice lush and warm and inviting.

"No need, I'm about to get on a train back to the airport. Something has come up," I lie, winging it as I go. She freezes in place.

"Back to the airport? Why? I need you here, now!"

"I think I was being followed. I'm trying to throw them off. Then I'll come back here in a while."

"But— but—"

“I’m losing you,” I say, rubbing the mouthpiece with my finger to make static, then click off.

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**End of the sample of**  
***The Man Who Created Ghosts***

Thank you for reading this sampler. I hope you will want to read the complete book, which is available via various sellers, including Amazon. It is available in both ebook and print editions.

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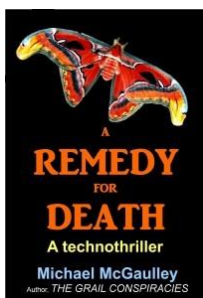
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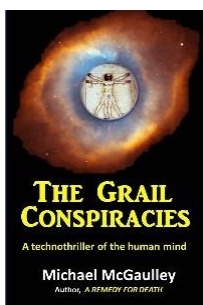
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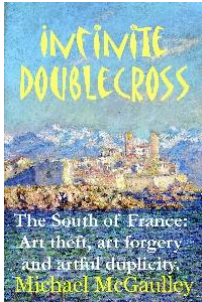


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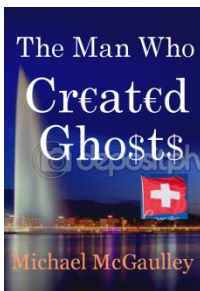
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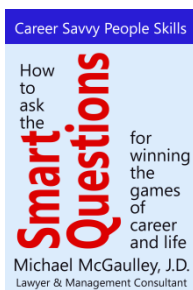


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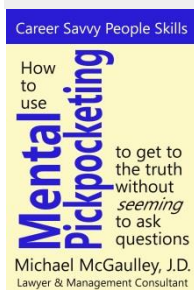
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