Thirty Days in America

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The Rain

was not going to be the first thing anyone remembered about the evening, but for the moment it had everyone’s attention. Countless drops pelted the rooftops, the pavement, and anyone foolish or desperate enough to step out into the deluge. The storm sewers had already backed up, and the runoff, with nowhere else to go, was flirting with the tops of the curbs and threatening to overrun the sidewalks. The lights of New York City, normally reflecting spectacularly off the river behind the warehouse, created little more than a hazy aura through the downpour, not that anyone was willing to lift their eyes to admire the glow.

Edith and Shirley huddled in the shelter of the parking garage entrance, dreading the first step out into the torrent. Their gaze was focused on the warehouse across the street, its neon sign out-of-focus but providing a beacon that would signal the end of the impending dash. An Escalade passed across their view, sending a bow wave over the curb that started a flow down the parking garage ramp, and affirmed their suspicion that the storm was not about to subside. The two women leaned forward in tandem, signaling their resignation to the inevitable, and began to slosh towards the warehouse. At first their heels clicked on the sidewalk, but as they stretched their gait in a futile attempt to clear the gutter the sound succumbed to the rush of water around their ankles as they stepped out onto the street.

“This really bites,” said Shirley as they clasped each others’ arms for stability against the wind.

“It fucking sucks is what it does,” Edith argued, not because she had applied less hairspray than Shirley, and without its repellent effect had already felt the first trickle run off her scalp and under the collar of her overcoat, but because she tended to curse slightly more than her younger companion.

As they crossed the double-yellow line the red neon sign above the door came into focus, spelling out “3 2 1” for anyone careless enough to waste a glance in its direction. Shirley had often wondered if Madame Z had a purpose when she procured that decoration. On a typical slow night the ratio achieved by Edith, Shirley and their co-workers to the number of patrons was easily three to one. However, Shirley doubted that the old miser would have ever been willing to exchange cash for a custom-made embellishment, and she certainly lacked a sufficient grasp of the subtleties of her non-native tongue to appreciate the irony of such a display. Shirley had long ago concluded that the sign had been a second-hand purchase that gave the establishment its moniker out of convenience and thrift, with no other deep purpose. However, on this night, Edith and Shirley were in no mood to re-read a neon sign they had scrutinized hundreds of times before, and they had no desire to avert their focus from the drenched pavement below their feet. Instead, the sign’s scattered reflection in the churning puddles provided a sufficient target for them to minimize their distance traveled as they continued on the all-too-familiar trek from the parking garage ramp to the warehouse door.

As they reached the door, Edith pounded vigorously to ensure that they would be heard above the din, hoping to somewhat reduce their exposure to the elements. This set in motion the ritual that they endured every evening as they entered the establishment, but one for which they had no patience on a night such as this. As the metal slide opened at eye level, and a predictable pair of bloodshot eyes stared nonchalantly out onto the scene on the sidewalk, they were met with the most unwelcome of greetings.

“Youse late.”

“Open the door goddamnit, we’re fucking soaking out here,” Shirley shouted, since it was well-known that she cursed only slightly less than Edith.

As the heavy metal door creaked open on its rusty hinges they were greeted by a hulking mass of humanity, and the owner of the bloodshot eyes, known to all as simply “Carmine.” This Lebanese-Italian giant sported an extra large wife-beater that stretched precariously across his massive torso and betrayed the fact that his shaving ritual should have extended well below his neck. As many members of his profession, he was cursed with the perfect conflation of physique, intellect, accent, and attitude that limited his employment opportunities to bouncing at a strip club. Nevertheless, he had an affinity for “his” ladies, and he watched over them like a mother hen, although Shirley suspected that he was simply providing another set of eyes for Madame Zucker so that none of “her” ladies would conceal any of their hard-earned profits.

“Youse better get changed, the shift’s already started,” Carmine said, motioning in the direction of the dark, musty corridor that snaked past utility closets, electrical boxes that were installed with little regard to wiring codes, and a small window that was (thankfully) latched against the elements. Its path terminated at the changing room behind the bar, where ancient metal lockers that had once held the uniforms and lunches of union workers had been put to use by Madame Z so that her dancers could enjoy a moderately secure place to store their clothes and personal effects as they worked the floor, tables, and poles.

As Edith had already unbuttoned her overcoat and shaken off several layers of moisture at Carmine’s feet, she flashed him, revealing that in addition to her heels, all that had separated her from the elements during the trek from the parking garage were the coat, two pasties, and a g-string. “I’m fucking ready to rumble,” she cooed as she sidled past Carmine and made her way to the changing room.

“It’s gonna’ be a busy night,” Carmine said in a tone that could almost be described as conciliatory. “Ain’t nobody wanna’ be out anywheres else in this shit.”

Shirley gave Carmine a wink and a quick pat on his massive shoulder, and chased Edith down the corridor, rifling through her purse to extract her uniform. In addition to her exorbitant percentage of the girls’ take, Madame Zucker had an elaborate system of fines for the smallest infractions that included violations of the shift-clock. The list extended to on-premise drug use, excessive consumption of patron-purchased drinks (they were supposed to be recycled with a well-practiced sleight of hand) and, of course, failing to submit in the proper amount all gratuities received over the course of an evening. As Edith reached the changing room, she glanced out from behind the bar to survey the supposed crowd, and signaled to Shirley that haste wasn’t necessary at this point.

“Who we got so far?” Shirley asked, relieved that there would be no fine for tardiness this evening.

“Couple a’ boardwalk greasers in the corner, two business tourists at the bar, and the Diplomat at his regular table.”

“Damn, I wanna’ know who that sonofabitch is,” Shirley muttered to herself. However, she fully understood that getting to know a patron, which usually involved an off-premise rendezvous at a sleazy motel and an exchange of funds, was not even on Madame Z’s list of fineable offenses as it would result in immediate termination of employment. While some of the girls took that risk, Shirley had no desire to look for another gig in the current economy. Madame Z tended to make up rules as she went along vis-à-vis her ladies, but she was a stickler when it came to the law, which kept her in fairly good standing with the local authorities in spite of the nature of her establishment.

The “Diplomat” was the nickname the girls had given to a recent regular. He had been coming to the club for about three weeks and used a foreign passport for identification, as the girls had gotten Carmine to reveal after much goading. Nevertheless, the fact that it was Syrian and had no US entry stamps was lost on the bouncer. Somehow, however, he seemed to have at his disposal a significant number of substantial bills. He was always nicely dressed, impeccably mannered, and generous with all of the help, but particularly with the ladies. He carried an air of bemusement, as if he were observing the strip club as some bizarre alien ritual, and his participation in both drinking and tipping dancers had begun rather gingerly, and then only after careful observation of the other patrons. However, he had since become quite a fixture at one of the front tables. On several occasions some of the girls had tried to follow him to the parking garage after his departure to ascertain the smallest clue about his existence; however, this always produced the same result: “He just disappeared.” His mysterious air led the girls to conclude that he was a foreign diplomat from across the tunnel, who maintained a wife and family in Manhattan, and who had found an obscure establishment well off the beaten path where he could indulge in the trappings of the great American culture without fear of discovery.

Shirley hung her trench coat in her locker and began changing even as some of the girls from the first shift made their way around the bar and back to the dressing room. Edith was already in full uniform, and was attempting to repair her rain-damaged coif in front of an ancient mirror, when the ritual was interrupted by a surgically-enhanced blonde bouncing through the opening.

“Edith, dahling, I haven’t seen you in ages! You look simply divine,” the girl gushed. “How is it that you can keep dancing after all these years? And more importantly, why do you keep doing it?”

“Look you little bitch,” came the predictable reply, “after I had my third kid, my god dammed stomach muscles separated, and so I had to get a plastic surgeon to tuck them back in. I’m telling you, that was god dammed expensive, and the only way I could fucking pay for it was to dance, so you just keep your pie hole shut, and mind your own god dammed business.”

Undaunted, the blonde pursued, “So why’d you need the operation in the first place if you’re married with three kids?”

“Well, you sure as hell can’t dance with a flabby gut,” Edith’s explained, “Ain’t no way anyone gonna’ hire you.”

“Makes perfect fucking sense to me,” Shirley muttered only to herself, not wanting to question her friend’s impeccable logic, and also ensuring she would still have a ride back home at the end of the evening. For all her faults, Edith was generous, although her sensitivity often forced Shirley to hold her tongue, causing many a clever gem she would have loved to unleash to die on its tip. Shirley noticed the blank stares of a few of the girls as if they had just been handed a paragraph that began “A train leaves Boston at 4:00 p.m. heading towards Pittsburgh.”

“It’s a god dammed good thing we ain’t preppin’ for brain surgery back here,” Shirley said a little louder, knowing full well that her sentiments would be lost on her co-workers.

Shirley finished dressing, stuffed her clothes in her purse, which she tossed up onto the space above Edith’s locker, and headed out to the floor to join Edith and the rest of the shift. While it would be lunacy to leave valuables “backstage” as the girls called it, the purse was a convenient way to carry outfits and a piece of ID, since bringing cash into Madame Z’s establishment guaranteed an opportunity to split it with the proprietress during the exit inspection after closing. Furthermore, Shirley maintained no credit cards since, beginning with her employment at the 3-2-1 Club, she managed to complete all of her financial transactions with cash.

As Shirley emerged from behind the bar, she made two lackadaisical turns around the nearest pole and gave a wink to the diplomat, who, in spite of being engaged with another dancer, lifted his eyes for a second as she made her entrance. It only took a quick glance around the room to size up the clientele. For a Friday evening, the crowd was quite sparse, and since three-to-one had already been achieved by the other dancers who arrived on time (or in uniform) Shirley took her place near the end of the bar so she could snare any newcomers who might brave the elements for the thrill of exchanging currency for a lap dance. For once she hoped Carmine knew what he was talking about, and that a crowd would materialize.

Mike, who had just finished topping off the four glasses in front of the business tourists and the employees they were chatting up, wandered down to Shirley’s end of the bar and expressed the sentiments of everyone present.

“So, Shirl, do you think it’s gonna pick up here at all, or does this weather usually keep them away?”

“You know how guys are, Mike, there’s no way a little rain can keep them from groping some T&A.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said as he wiped the counter in front of Shirley with a greasy towel.

Mike seemed decent enough. He had only been working the bar for a week, but was hired when Miguel’s jacket had been found with enough sunshine in the pocket to draw the attention of the local authorities, and a search of his car had turned up enough merchandise to alert the Feds. It seemed Mike had known Madame Z in another capacity, for although Shirley couldn’t remember seeing him before, he had an immediate rapport with the old battleaxe. He also proved adept at keeping the juice flowing from behind the bar, and he took great delight in helping the girls empty their drinks into his decanter, only to have him refill them at excessive cost to the patrons. He was in his mid-thirties, was easy on the eyes, and Shirley decided that it would be prudent to keep the conversation going, if for no other reason than to keep herself in the good graces of Madame Z’s new “boy.” She knew Carmine favored her over most of the other girls, and having Mike drop a positive remark might give her some insurance against the consequences of getting caught departing the establishment with perhaps a little more than her share of the tips, not that Carmine or Madame Z would ever dare risk a search that might reveal the loot. But her thoughts of continuing the clever repartee were interrupted by the arrival of the first large group of the evening—a dripping pack of college boys had just passed Carmine’s scrutiny and was heading for her end of the bar.

The college crowd was fairly predictable. They carried themselves as God’s gifts, particularly around the dancers whom they considered beneath them. Shirley found it ironic that a few of the girls spent their days sitting next to these boys in class, and made enough in the evenings off of their classmates to fund their education. The boys would always engage in sophomoric banter, hoping to impress some poor, uneducated dancer with their esoteric body of knowledge. However, Shirley had learned that when she pinned one down face-to-face, he would revert to post-high school adolescence, wide-eyed and stammering, and more than willing to part with his small clutch of bills in an attempt to retain some of his dignity as a “man-about-town.” Shirley went to work on this crowd, placing herself in the center of the ring as Mike began filling the de-rigueur glasses with watered-down spirits, and she noted the predictable clip-clop of high heels crossing the floor as her co-workers scurried over to take part in the frenzy. The evening was turning out to be promising after all, as some of these boys seemed to have a few bills left over from the monthly deposits made for them by guilt-ridden divorcees in the Hamptons.

Edith began to work her normal pole on the bar to the delight of a small group of young men who didn’t realize their source of entertainment was older than some of their mothers. Shirley did a few lap dances, grabbed a few wrists that were a little too intent on placing bills into more than just her g-string, and kept Mike more than busy with her well-rehearsed sequence of moves that always resulted in one or more empty glasses. As if to reinforce the charade, Carmine made an occasional round, announcing that those glasses better have more than just ice in them, as Madame Z would be mortified to discover that some of her customers were going thirsty (not that he expressed this sentiment in those exact words, but the message was still ably delivered).

This routine was interrupted, though, when the jackpot hit as a group of about twenty men in sports coats showed up at the door, having just been deposited there by a fleet of limousines from across the river. As quickly as Shirley could look for an escape strategy from her current situation, the dancers who had been circling the college boys like sharks made bee-lines for the new arrivals, and when Shirley finally extricated herself, the employees resting backstage had already flooded out from behind the bar as the magic words spread through the club like wildfire: “bachelor party.”

Bachelor parties, while a lot of work, were the highlight of any evening at the club, and the attendees were even more predictable than the college crowd. There were always a few ring leaders, including the organizer, who were comfortable with the club scene, but who rarely shelled out too many bills themselves. Then there were the also-rans, who were uncomfortable with clubs, but who so wanted to be part of the gang that they over-compensated with their boisterous declarations of love for the dancers and willingness to part with significant sums of money. Further down the line were the snooty sophisticates, who were outwardly appalled at the behavior of their contemporaries, but who could be pinned down like college boys and convinced by a doe-eyed young girl to contribute large quantities of cash to alleviate some of the guilt they felt in their brief brush with society’s underbelly. Finally there was the bachelor himself, and the lucky girl who was recruited for his personal entertainment (usually by the best man) was guaranteed a huge payday. There were downsides, of course. Most of the participants arrived inebriated, they tended to fill their glasses from hip flasks, and there were no designated drivers to retain order when the festivities got out of hand. Carmine did some of his best work during bachelor parties, but occasionally had to resort to physical force to restore order, a situation that would even bring Madame Zucker out of her back office and away from her safe full of tips.

This group, however, was fairly tame, and as the girls jockeyed for position the crowd continued to grow with a number of new arrivals, including a few regulars, which indicated that the rain outside was diminishing. With a well-recognized gesture out her office window, Madame Z indicated to Carmine that it was time to re-distribute the wealth. He got the attention of the dancers one at a time with the discretion of a runaway locomotive, and soon had them positioned on the poles and amongst the various tables that dotted the club floor, although an inequitable number lingered with the bachelor and his posse.

Edith was able to retain her position on the bar, as her collegiate admirers had been joined by a trio of Salvadoran stone workers intent on parting with their week’s paychecks. Shirley, through Carmine’s good graces, had latched on to a forty-something cousin of the bachelor who clearly did not want to be in the club, more clearly did not want to be seen in the club, and very clearly was about to part with the contents of his money clip in exchange for his first-ever personal lap dance. As Shirley danced him over to one of the few remaining empty tables, she was anticipating a substantial payday, when the club lights and music, and in fact all the power, suddenly ceased working. This led to an inevitable pause, during which conversations stopped and the eerie silence was penetrated by expressions of incredulity from several of the patrons. While the ensuing next few seconds seemed like an hour, the surreal scene ended with a bright flash and the sound of a firearm discharging, causing patrons and dancers alike to hit the floor while emitting a collective scream. Carmine’s voice could be heard from the direction of the exit, shouting “Nobody move! Stay down,” but beyond that the only other sound produced by the assemblage was the whimpering of dancers and patrons alike, barely audible above the dull ringing that filled every ear in the establishment.

Power was restored not two minutes later, and when it was all the chairs were empty, save for that of the Diplomat, across which lay his splayed body, a nine millimeter entry wound centered on his forehead, and with the back of his head wide open, dripping blood and grey matter over the top of the chair and onto the concrete floor.

The Office

door burst open, and the two contractors, one carrying a folder, rushed towards the desk. “You’re never gonna’ believe what we found, Boss!” Dick blurted out as he came forward.

“Jesus Christ, don’t you guys ever knock?” said Frank, turning his monitor to the side. “For all you know I could have been boffing a secretary in here.”

Ignoring the admonition through all the excitement, Dennis continued. “Boss, we just hit the jackpot. Nasser Baqr is in the United States.”

Frank sat in stunned silence. The name was well known to him as one of the leading al-Qaida lieutenants in Iraq. He had cut his teeth with the Mujahidin in Afghanistan in the eighties, and had lain low during the AQ buildup in the nineties, but after March of 2003 he was rumored to have run the operative pipeline from Damascus to Baghdad. More recently he was believed to be in Tikrit where he directed the activities of a network of insurgent cells. In the past few years, however, he had dropped off the map, and for him to be in the States had tremendous implications for the Department.

“How do you guys know this?” Frank finally managed to ask.

Dick opened the folder and turned the photograph towards Frank. It was a blurry photo of an Escalade running a red light as a pedestrian crossed an intersection.

“We’ve been getting feeds from every red-light camera in the country as they clear through the collection center in Ohio,” Dennis explained. “We’ve been buying time on the supercomputer center in Michigan to image every face against our bank of people of interest. It’s been a great program to help us track people, but we’ve never gotten a result like this before.”

“Is that Baqr in the SUV?” asked Frank.

“No,” said Dick. “That’s him crossing the street.”

“Jesus,” said Frank, trying to focus on the blurry silhouette. “How can you possibly tell?”

“The software is pretty good,” replied Dennis. “This program ain’t cheap.”

“Where and when was this taken?” Frank continued.

“Two days ago, right across the river,” Dick explained.

“Who else knows?”

“Just us,” came the reply in unison.

“All right, guys,” Frank said, leaning back in his chair, “we’re gonna’ have to do this one on our own. I want you to stake out wherever this was taken and see if you can figure out where he’s staying. I want to find out what this son of a bitch knows, and who the hell he’s telling it to. I also want to know how the hell this could happen without us knowing.”

“Do you think he’s planning something?” asked Dennis.

“Close the door,” said Frank.

Dick took two steps and did as Frank asked. It was a reminder to Frank that while he was no longer confined to a cubicle he was not yet enjoying the luxury of an executive suite.

Frank continued. “What I’m telling you isn’t even classified, because I’ve got no idea if it’s even happening, but right now some of us suspect that the CIA and the FBI have a program to put us out of business. We think the CIA is using old KGB tactics from the seventies to nab high-level operators by putting pressure on their families, and then they’re bringing them over here to suck them dry for intell before sending them back to their big, happy families with a large stipend. The FBI has the charter to execute on any actionable intell, and DHS gets left out of the loop. I’ll bet dollars to donuts that Baqr is here under that program, and that he’s spilling his guts to the FBI as we speak.”

“But how do they get them in?” asked Dick.

“Military transport to Andrews. It’s coming in from Theater pretty much daily anyway,” Frank said. “Otherwise we’d pick them up as they passed through any security checkpoint, and then they move them in vans to FBI safe-houses where we don’t have any eyes. Wherever this picture came from, I guarantee there’s an FBI shelter nearby, not that we’d ever find it. If you say it’s across the river, then you can bet your ass something’s going down here in the City real soon, and that the FBI field office is working it hard.”

“What do you want us to do, Boss?” asked Dennis. He had already planted his palms face-down on Frank’s desk, but with this inquiry he leaned forward as if he expected the response to be whispered.

“Well, we could blow the whistle on this by publicly sharing this image with the G-men,” Frank said without changing his tone, “but I know our brass would never go for that. Instead, I’m gonna’ give you guys a week to stake him out, and if you can nab him we’ll double his payday for singing to us. Then we’ll cut the Feds out of the loop as we emerge the big heroes. You guys think you can handle that?”

“We’re on it, Boss,” said Dennis, straightening up to unbutton his sports coat as he turned towards the door.

“Piece of cake,” added Dick, picking the folder up off the desk.

“All right, then get to it,” said Frank. “And by the way, who authorized the red-light program?”

“Uh, you did Boss,” answered Dick.

“No kidding. Well, nice job, guys.”

As Dick and Dennis stepped out and closed the door, Frank pondered his big break. He had started his government career with the Department of Defense directly out of graduate school, and had worked his way up through the ranks as a systems analyst. Inevitably lethargy set in within the mighty Pentagon bureaucracy, and with it came the predictable slow-down in advancements. But when 9/11 created other opportunities, he left Defense as a GS-12 when the Department of Homeland Security was formed and had landed a GS-14 job. However, after what he considered to be a token promotion to GS-15, he could see that his career was going nowhere. Several of his former subordinates were already filling the ranks of the Senior Executive Service, and Frank was tired of stagnating in the NYC office while his peers were all rotating through DC for further promotions and more action. Admittedly, his production had waned considerably in the past few years, and the thought of retirement had often crossed his mind, but he was still hoping for one last chance.

He pondered his various options, trying to determine which course of action would be the most likely to get his career back on track. He knew that if he sprung the image on his chain-of-command, the best that could happen is he would be hushed, and the worst would be the beginning of an inter-agency gang war. As the whistle-blower, that would not bode well for him. He thought about skipping his immediate chain-of-command and sending the image directly to some of his connections at the Washington headquarters, but he realized that the best that could happen would be that his former peers would take all the glory, and that his current bosses would be more than upset for being taken out of the loop. This also would not enhance his chances for promotion. Instead, though, if he could turn the picture into useful intelligence, and then work with the local authorities to shut down a cell (or, dare he consider it, an operation) that would put him on a springboard to the fast track.

There were some inherent risks with this option. The FBI may likely have already milked Baqr for everything he knew, or worse he could find himself running an investigation and colliding with the Feds. Worse yet, he could find that Baqr knew nothing, and he would be left holding a missing informant while his bosses would have to explain to the FBI why he was suddenly in DHS custody. However, Baqr could also provide his organization detailed information on the program that had brought him over, and that would be something of great value to his entire chain. It was worth the try, and with Dick, Dennis, and their boundless energy and resourcefulness, he might be able to pull it off.

However, he first needed Dick and Dennis to do what they did best, and they didn’t need him getting in the way. He pivoted his monitor back towards his chair and picked up where he had left off.

The Club Scene

was chaos. Dancers were scrambling to get backstage, and the patrons were frozen in place, wanting nothing more than to leave but unable to move. Madame Zucker had emerged from her office, shaken but working her way towards Carmine and the only egress route away from the carnage. When the shot was fired Edith had ducked down behind the bar, and she and Mike were now emerging, but his calming voice was having no effect on the string of expletives she was unleashing. The two business tourists at the bar were staring at each other in disbelief, and were the first customers to begin the surge towards the exit.

The only person who seemed in complete control of his faculties was Carmine, who had latched the heavy metal door, and was standing in front of the exit with his hands up, in an attempt to get everyone’s attention.

“Listen,” he bellowed, “the cops are on the way, and they told me to hold everyone here until they can get IDs and statements. Everybody just sit back down until they get here. It’s only gonna’ be a few minutes.”

The surging mass might have bowled him over, but it seemed that no patron was willing to spearhead that effort, so amidst significant grumbling, the crowd began to melt back into the seats, giving a wide berth to the table that for three weeks had hosted the living, breathing Diplomat. The ladies, on the other hand, were nowhere to be seen, although Edith’s shrill epithets could still be heard coming from backstage, along with the voices of a few other dancers who were attempting, with no excess of tact or sensitivity, to end her ceaseless din. Shirley had taken a seat on a backstage metal bench, leaving a good distance between herself and her ride, as she knew that at times like these the less attention given to Edith, the better. Mike, who had long-since abandoned his attempts to calm Edith, stood back at the bar, surveying the scene with a grim face.

Not two minutes later the door reverberated with a loud knock, and after the requisite peek through the slot, Carmine unlatched it and allowed in a forty-something man whose shoulder holster and badge were less-than-subtly visible when he shook the rain off his trench coat. Madame Zucker accosted him and unleashed in broken English a barrage of expressions of innocence and declarations of the upstanding nature of her establishment. Included in this were her sentiments that a fine officer such as himself should be able to quickly and discreetly resolve this unfortunate incident so that her service to the community could continue uninterrupted. He said a few calming words to Madame Zucker and as she hurried off backstage he spoke in a low voice with Carmine while the patrons craned to hear what was being said. When all the ladies had assembled behind the bar, including Edith, whose ranting had been reduced to sporadic blubbering, the officer held his hands up and addressed the crowd.

“My name is Sergeant Robert Fusco from the Hoboken Police Department,” he began. “There has been an incident here that will obviously require a police investigation, and as all of you are potential material witnesses, we are going to have to ask you to remain in place until we can get identification and statements that might help us get to the bottom of this. I know that many of you do not wish for your loved ones to know that you spent your evening in this particular establishment, but if you all cooperate, we can get you on your way as quickly as possible.”

As he spoke, he worked his way over to the Diplomat’s table, and as he surveyed the body, the patrons sitting nearby heard him mutter, “Shit. That’s some nice shooting. What a fucking mess.” Sergeant Fusco reached into the Diplomat’s breast pocket and extracted a passport that was obviously foreign in origin, and casually leafed through it. Satisfied, he began to search the Diplomat’s pants pockets, when his investigation was interrupted by another knock on the door. Carmine let in two uniformed patrolmen who, thinking they were the first authorities on the scene, announced that everyone needed to calm down and stay put. Sergeant Fusco pocketed the passport and walked back to confer with the new arrivals.

After a brief discussion, one of the patrolmen stepped near the door to make a radio call, while the other, with the help of Carmine, moved an empty table with three chairs nearer to the exit, and sat down with his notepad ready to write. Sergeant Fusco, comfortable with the way the scene was playing out, again turned to address the crowd.

“OK, everybody listen up. We are going to let you go one at a time. My two patrolmen here are going to record your names and contact information, and each one of you is going to be required at some point to come to our station to issue a statement. If any of you think you have information that might aid in our investigation, please let the patrolmen know. As you are all part of a crime scene now, please be careful what you touch, and I don’t think I have to remind you to not take any souvenirs from the establishment as you depart this evening. We’re going to get a crime scene investigator over here shortly, and obviously a coroner, although I think we can pretty well determine the cause of death. Now to demonstrate that chivalry is not dead, even in an establishment such as this one, we’re going to let the ladies leave first.” But with a nod to Madame Zucker, he added “You being the exception, of course. I’m sure you will want to stay and help in any way you can.”

“Of course,” she muttered.

“All right then,” he continued as he turned his attention to the throng huddled behind the bar. “You ladies can secure your personal effects, and then I need you to form a line here at the table so we can take a brief statement from each one of you. We’re going to need some form of identification from all of you before we can let you go.”

As the dancers turned backstage to grab their belongings, the two business tourists nodded to each other from their position at the bar and approached Sergeant Fusco with their open hands facing him. A hushed conversation ensued, during which each tourist pulled out a wallet and extracted some form of identification that was sufficient to impress the Sergeant, and in fact, some might have noted it was the first time during the course of events that he showed any indication that there might be cracks in his unflappable façade. On the Sergeant’s instructions, Carmine unlatched the door and allowed the two to depart, but as he secured the door behind them, the Sergeant leaned over one of the patrolmen and dictated for him to write down a quick note.

This exchange was not lost on the remaining patrons, and a senior member of the bachelor party shouted from the back of the room, “Hey! If they can go, why can’t we?”

This was met with a course of “yeahs” from a large number of the other patrons, apparently emboldened by not only the actions of the tourists but of the inebriated reveler as well, but Sergeant Fusco held up a silencing hand, and explained.

“Listen,” he said, “sometimes political necessity trumps chivalry, so unless someone in here is the head of a foreign government, you all just need to stay put and do as you’re told.”

This seemed to satisfy the gathering, but the point was moot, for as soon as he had spoken the dancers began to file out from behind the bar and queue up at the patrolmen’s table. Not surprisingly, through her intense desire to no longer be a part of the evening’s festivities, and also through her compatriots’ desire to no longer have to endure her outbursts, Edith found herself at the front of the line, the first to be interviewed. The presence of the patrolmen had a sobering effect on Edith never before observed by her co-workers, for when she gave her name and was asked for identification, she pulled a drivers license out of her coat pocket and politely said, “Here it is, Officer.”

Sergeant Fusco, taking a clear interest in this inquiry, asked if she had anything else in her pockets, and she produced a set of car keys, replying, “Just these, Sir.”

This prompted the Sergeant to motion to one of the patrolmen, who moved to check the remaining pockets of her overcoat, but when a quick unbuttoning revealed that it was doubtful she had hidden anything of interest on her person, he motioned her towards Carmine and the door. As Carmine was unlatching the door, Sergeant Fusco made one last attempt to delay her departure.

“So, did you notice anything tonight, Miss?” he asked.

“Just a gun going off in my ear, Sir, it was dark,” was the meek reply.

“Are you sure you have all of your personal effects with you?” he continued.

“Yes, Sir,” she retorted. “I only bring my keys and ID into the club. I would never want to leave any valuables backstage while I’m dancing.”

Apparently satisfied, the Sergeant motioned for her to continue on her way, and as she passed Carmine, she turned over her shoulder to address her companion, who was about half-way back in the line.

“Shirl, I’ll wait for you in the car, Hon,” she said in a tone that left the other dancers wondering who that woman was and what she had done with Edith.

As the third dancer was being let out of the club, two crime scene investigators squeezed in, looking nothing like what any of the patrons expected based on their vast knowledge of the occupation through the miracle of modern television. Sergeant Fusco ushered them over to the Diplomat’s body, where they opened their bags of equipment and took charge of the scene. One started snapping photos, while the other began shooing customers away from the pattern of splattered blood behind the Diplomat’s chair. He extracted a flashlight from his pocket, and gingerly stepped among the tables and chairs with the air of someone in search of a critical piece of evidence. Upon seeing a drop of blood that a treaded sole had recently imprinted on the floor, he moved to the back wall, and finding his quarry, picked up the slug with a pair of tweezers and placed it in an evidence bag. Shining his light on the wall, he announced to his partner, “It’s definitely hollow-point, but we knew that already from the exit wound. It appears to be a nine mil, but it lost so much energy going through the skull that it barely made a dent in the back wall. We should be able to figure out where it came from, though—must have been near the bar.”

The partner with the camera walked a wide path to the back wall, and started recording where the flashlight was shining. He took a quick picture of the blood spot on the floor, and began to announce to the patrons that anyone leaving the bar had better watch where they’re walking, when he was interrupted by a commotion at the front door. Shirley, taking a cue from Edith, had thrown her coat on over her uniform and had left her clothes in her purse. To show she was not intimidated by a couple of punk cops, she had not pulled her ID out before getting to the table, and when the patrolmen requested it, she dumped the contents of her purse on the table, which included, much to everyone’s surprise, a small Beretta.

One patrolman made a lunge for the weapon, while the other drew his own firearm, but neither reaction was necessary, as Sergeant Fusco had Shirley on the ground and in handcuffs so quickly it was as if he expected the pistol to fall from her purse. Shirley’s reaction, of course, was predictable.

“What in the hell are you doing, you fucking asshole?” she shouted. “I don’t know how that got in there, and I’ve sure never seen it before.”

“I’d keep my mouth shut if I were you,” the Sergeant’s replied. “You’re in a whole lot of trouble, Miss.”

“Do you think that I’d be stupid enough to dump my purse out if I thought it had a gun in it, and do you really think that if I’d just shot somebody that I’d put the gun back in my purse?” she continued to snarl.

“Look Miss,” the Sergeant shot back, tightening his grip on her arms in a way that was clearly meant to get her attention. “I told you to keep it shut, and if you know what’s good for you, you’d better.”

While Shirley was never one to back down in a battle of wits, she had a healthy respect for the authority of brute force, and wisely chose to acquiesce. After all, she reasoned to herself, in what was so obviously a feeble attempt at a set-up, any investigator worth his salt would have her cleared in a matter of minutes. Both crime scene investigators were already at the table, and were expertly scrutinizing the weapon.

“It’s been fired real recently,” said the one with the camera.

“And the mag’s full of hollow-points,” added the one with the flashlight. “We should be able to show that the round came from this weapon, once we get it back to the lab.”

“All right men,” concluded Sergeant Fusco. “This case looks like it’s gonna’ be easy. You guys get that weapon and round to the lab ASAP, and let me know how it works out.” Then, to the patrolmen, he added, “You guys finish taking names, and get me the list back at the precinct as soon as you finish. I’m going to take the perp down to the station so we can try to figure out why the hell this all happened. Good work, men.”

“Thanks, Sergeant,” they replied in unison.

“C’mon Miss, let’s go,” he added to Shirley, grabbing her by her upper arm, scooping her ID off the table from the top of the pile of clothes, and shoving her in the direction of the door.

As Carmine held the door for her and the Sergeant, he gave her an imploring look that was pure pity with no hint of accusation. “It’s OK, you big lug,” she assured him. “You tell those patrolmen what really happened, and I’ll be out in an hour.”

“Keep moving, Miss,” the Sergeant hissed, tightening his grip on her arm. “We’re going down to the station to get to the bottom of this. In the meantime, keep it shut.”

Shirley complied for the rest of the trip.

The Phone

rang. Normally the old man wouldn’t be in his office so early on a Saturday morning, but he was expecting this call. This was going to be the first complete piece to an intricate puzzle he was assembling, and he was expecting to hear some good news. He looked across the phalanx of cell phones behind his desk, each one labeled with a code that only he could decipher, and sitting idle until one of his contacts had news that was so important that it warranted a personal report. They were one-time use, and it was a policy that seemed to work, as he had discussed some very private matters on the predecessors of these phones, and none of the conversations had ever come back to haunt him. As long as there were good people willing to do his work for him, and for generous compensation, it was a safe and convenient way to run his empire without getting his hands dirty. In his youth, he had had gotten his hands more than dirty, but now it was time for others to take the risks so that they too might someday earn the luxury of directing operations from an ivory tower. He checked the label on the phone that was lighting up, and it was as he expected. He picked it up.

“Yeah, whaddaya’ got for me?”

“We did it, Mr. M,” said the voice on the end of the line.

“Yeah, I know. I saw it on the news this morning. Didja’ have any complications?” the old man asked.

“No, Sir. Everything went as planned,” replied the voice in a tone almost too mechanical to be convincing.

“It looks like there was a pretty big crowd there last night,” the old man continued, hoping it would result in the voice admitting to whatever it was it was hiding. He had not come this far in the business without the uncanny ability to see through smoke screens, and he had known from the first report that something had not gone as planned.

“Well,” the voice said smoothly, “There were two agents from DHS at the bar, but they got out real quick-like after the shooting.”

“What in the fuck was Homeland Security doing at the club?” the old man snapped, not quite sure if this was the issue that was being obscured.

“I’m not sure, Boss, but they were really eager to leave. I think they had no desire to get caught up in any of this. Do you want me to follow up on it?”

“Naw,” the old man said, “I’ll check my sources, but if they were trying to be discreet, I don’t think you’ll hear from them again—just try to leave them out of the investigation.”

“That will be easy,” assured the voice. “Oh, another thing, I think the bouncer got a call off, so we had a few patrolmen there as well.”

“How did the uniforms work out?” the old man persisted, still not convinced that this was the complete story.

“Like a charm,” came the quick response. “I just had them take notes and we brought in forensics, but it all wrapped up when we made the collar.”

“Good. So did you guys get assigned the case?”

“Of course,” the voice assured.

“OK, nice work. Now how about this Edith chick, is she gonna’ go down easy?”

“Well,” the voice hesitated, “we ended up nabbing another broad—still one of the dancers, though.”

Paydirt. Something had been wrong since the conversation started, and it had taken this long for it to come out.

“I thought you said there were no fucking complications!” the old man snapped, standing up out of his chair.

“Well, she’s still a dancer,” the voice reasoned, unconvincingly.

“Do you think she’ll play out the same way this Edith would have?”

“To be honest,” the voice admitted, “she is a little sharper than Edith. I don’t think we can string her along until we can blow this gig.”

“How much sharper?” the old man demanded. He was pacing the office, not sure if his frustration was more with the incompetence, the deception, or the bad luck.

There was a brief silence on the other end. “Well, actually,” the voice finally confessed, “with a good public defender she’ll be out in an hour. She was in the wrong place in the bar, and I doubt we’ll even be able to get the DA to charge her.”

“OK, you guys are gonna’ have to come up with something quick. It looks like the news fucks have no idea who this guy was, but I’m thinking a little slip might make this real easy to wrap up.” The old man was now sitting on the credenza, his mind racing furiously.

“What do you mean, Boss?” the voice asked.

“Do I have to fuckin’ spell it out for you—you’re the cops, you figure it out!”

“Sure, Mr. M.,” came the quick reply, although the voice still seemed a little unsure of itself. “I think I know what you’re getting at.”

“All right, keep me posted. And listen, don’t use this cell phone again. Get rid of it, I’ll have someone bring you a new one with a different number programmed into it. You know the drill by now.”

“Don’t worry, Boss, we’ll take care of this,” the voice said, finally regaining its confidence.

“Yeah, you’d better.”

Guido Marnacchia closed the cell phone, but instead of replacing it on the credenza behind his desk, he dropped it into the basket at his feet. On Monday his secretary would personally take care of its disposal and replacement, and no record of this morning’s conversation would ever come to light. He looked out the window behind his desk. Steam was rising off of the building tops below as the morning sun was just starting to strike the puddles that had been left by the previous evening’s downpour. He had outlasted the storm at the Lincoln Center, watching opera with his oldest granddaughter, which was a pleasure that was far too rare in his waning years. His two cops were on their own for their task, and he didn’t need to spend the evening fretting about their competence, so he had gone out of the way to arrange this distraction. As it was, the evening passed quickly, in fact the wait in the office for the morning’s phone call seemed to last longer than the previous night’s operation. He had not been fully confident in the ability of his henchmen to pull off their part of the task, and the phone call confirmed his suspicions. Nevertheless, they had done what was required, and his plan was now set in motion. The next phase was going to be far more complex, but it would be executed with a greater level of precision. He just needed the next phone call to put it in play.

The Police Station

wasn’t particularly busy for a Friday evening, most likely due to the heavy rain earlier. The city’s criminal element had no more desire to get drenched than did its just citizens, so Sergeant Fusco took Shirley straight back to booking without any unnecessary delays. During the search Shirley tried to rationalize that she made a living by having strangers paw her body in unnatural ways, but when the two female cops had finished their excessively thorough investigation, she couldn’t help but feel violated. As they handed her back her coat—it seemed absurd at this point to re-apply her pasties, and the prospect of stepping back into her g-string offered little comfort—she heard an almost-familiar voice from around the corner shout, “Make sure you get a full set of prints.”

The officers printed Shirley and directed her to a sink where she was instructed to wash her hands. One of the officers stepped out, and after what seemed like an eternity, returned with an orange jump suit and a pair of booties. “The Sergeant tells us you’re gonna’ be here a while, so you might as well put these on,” she explained.

As Shirley stepped into the jump suit, it dawned on her for perhaps the first time that this wasn’t a farce, and that she was really being arrested. A wave of panic swept over her that gave way to anger at the absurdity of the “investigation.” She grew eager for a chance to explain her side of the story, and as the officers led her to the holding cell she reviewed the evening’s events in her mind. By the time she got to the cell, she had affirmed to herself that at least a handful of witnesses was going to exonerate her.

The holding cell was already populated with about a dozen specimens from the upper crust of New Jersey society. Most of the detainees appeared to be prostitutes, although a few of them could have been involved in domestic violence, but only if they had been the instigators. There were two other orange jumpsuits in the cell, and based on the scanty attire of some of the ladies who did not rate the privilege of taxpayer-purchased couture, Shirley wondered what level of undress they had achieved during their arrests. As it didn’t appear to be a particularly chatty crowd, Shirley passed on introductions and took the only remaining seat, which was on a metal bench next to a sobbing young teenager who was bemoaning the hazards of purchasing a dime bag for one’s eighteenth birthday.

Shirley was just starting to get comfortable on the bench, and was now confident that the body of evidence she was prepared to recount would be sufficient to convince any investigating officer of her innocence, when one of the women returned with the keys and Sergeant Fusco.

“Let’s go, Miss,” he said, “It’s time for us to chat.”

Shirley followed him to the interrogation room, where she was directed to sit on a cold metal chair at a cold metal table, while the Sergeant stood across the table from her and lit up a cigarette. “Care for a smoke?”

“My body’s integral to my profession,” she said, scoffing at his physique, “I have to take care of it.”

“Sure you do, Doll,” he replied, taking another puff.

“So who’s behind the mirror?” she asked, indicating in the direction of the observation room with a nod of her head.

“My partner,” he said, “and we’re feeling pretty good right now because we just bagged a murderer.”

“So is that the guy you’re sharing a brain with? Why don’t you bring him out here too so I can explain this all to a full set of neurons and synapses?”

“Listen, Miss,” he snapped, slamming his hands down on the table and leaning his face towards hers, “I’ve just about had enough of your smart mouth. Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in?”

“Quite frankly I don’t, and any officer worth his salt could figure that out blindfolded. Once you get some of the witnesses down here to make statements, it’s going to be obvious even to you that this is a poorly-executed setup,” Shirley said, beginning to show signs of frustration with what she considered to be an incompetent investigation.

“Well, in that case, since forensics has just confirmed that your pistol was the murder weapon, perhaps you can start by explaining why you had it at the club, and why you shot that man tonight.”

“I don’t own a pistol, you can check, and if I did, I certainly wouldn’t dump it out of my purse in front of a police officer just after a murder had been committed.”

“We already ran a check on the weapon’s serial number, and it isn’t registered to anyone, so I guess whoever owns it probably bought it illegally, and paid cash. Oh, that could have been you, Miss.” Fusco was now pacing behind the table across from Shirley, and was clearly starting to lose patience with the interrogation.

“Look, Sergeant,” said Shirley, taking a deep breath. “There’s at least a half-dozen people from the club who can provide consistent statements that will make it real clear that there’s no way I could have fired the weapon, and that someone’s trying to set me up.”

“And who might that be?” he asked sarcastically, but apparently eager to find out what she might know.

“Well, first of all, there’s the guy I was dancing for. He was the cousin of the bachelor, and I was with him at the table by the door when the power went out. When the lights came back on, I was still next to him, and if you bring him in, he’ll tell you the same thing. Next, there’s Carmine, who was standing near the door the whole time, and he knows where I was before and after the power went out. Next there’s Edith—you heard her yourself. She was up at the bar, and she said it sounded like the gun went off right…” Shirley’s voice trailed off.

The events of the evening came into focus, and Shirley’s mind started racing. She kicked herself for not noticing before, but Edith was the only dancer that Fusco had questioned in depth as they cleared the club. Since Edith was the first to be interviewed, at the time Fusco’s behavior didn’t strike Shirley as out of the ordinary. In light of everything else, though, the picture became clear, and it wasn’t pretty. “Son of a bitch,” she muttered, slapping a hand down on the table.

“What’s the matter, Miss?”

“You’re in on this, you mother fucker. Only it wasn’t supposed to be me, it was supposed to be Edith. Whoever shot that guy stood right next to Edith when he did it, and then threw the gun in the purse on top of her locker, only it was my purse on top of her locker. That’s why you were giving her the third degree when she was leaving the club—you thought she had forgotten her purse, and then when the gun was in my purse, you had to wing it. You probably meant to set Edith up all along, you fuck. Hell, you were probably the shooter. That’s why you got to the club so quickly, and that’s why those other cops came in like they were the first ones there.”

“Well, aren’t you the little genius?” Fusco said with an air of unconcern.

“That’s it. I want a fucking lawyer, and I want one now, you bastard,” Shirley snarled, rising out of her seat.

“I’ve told you more than once tonight to watch your mouth, Miss. You wouldn’t want to get popped in it, would you?” Fusco was starting to show signs of frustration, but as he had some success earlier in the evening with physical force, he decided to revert to this tactic.

Shirley was unfazed, but her mind was still reeling, as she began to wonder how deep the conspiracy went. Realizing she had nothing to lose, she decided to lay all the cards out for Fusco, hoping that he might inadvertently identify a confederate, or more importantly, someone who wasn’t in on the setup whom she could possibly use later to her advantage. “That’s why your lady cops had me wash my hands after they printed me—so your forensic geeks couldn’t show that I hadn’t fired a gun. Are they in on this too, or are you just playing them for suckers? And that’s why you took your crime scene investigators off the case when you found the gun in my purse—because you were using those saps to build your case against Edith. That’s it, get me a fucking lawyer.”

“Sorry, Miss. It’s Friday night,” came his smug reply. “The public defender’s office is closed for the weekend. But you’re welcome to stick around here until they open up on Monday.”

“I know what happened now, and I don’t care that I just laid my case out for you. There’s no way you’re gonna’ be able to cook up enough evidence to support your bullshit case over one weekend, so I sure as fuck will stick around, because come Monday, I’m getting a lawyer in here, he’s gonna’ get a real investigation going, and your sorry ass is gonna’ fry.”

“Miss, I think it’s time for you to get back to the cell,” Fusco said, not at all pleased at how the discussion had gone.

The Office Door

didn’t burst open this time, but from the anxious-sounding knock, Frank knew that Dick and Dennis had something important to report. He turned off his monitor.

“Come on in, guys.”

“We found him,” began Dennis. “He comes out of a parking garage in the evening at about the same time and crosses the street to a strip joint in an old warehouse on the river.”

“It’s called the ‘3-2-1 Club,’” added Dick.

“I think I know it,” said Frank, “what else you got?”

“Nothing,” said Dennis. “We haven’t seen him come in or out of the parking garage at any other time, and when he went in there last night, he just disappeared. He may have gone through to the back exit, though. We watched every car that left there last night, and he wasn’t in any one of them, unless he’s gotten a couple ‘a strippers or club patrons to drive around with him hiding in the trunk.”

“There’s gotta’ be a safe house nearby,” Frank concluded. “It must be where the Feds are keeping him, and somehow you can get to it through the garage. They must think it’s really secure to let him wander around in the evening, or maybe they know that the club being there will keep him tethered.”

“What should we do, Boss?” asked Dick.

“When he leaves the club, I want you to nab him. Don’t get him on the way in, in case someone expects him to be there, ‘cos we don’t want to alert anyone that he’s missing. Get him into a vehicle, and take him to a safe place for the night. You need to treat him real nice, and in the morning, call me at home and we can all meet here. No one else will be in tomorrow, and we can cut a deal with him to tell us everything he’s given to the G-men. I’ll work on getting some cash freed up this afternoon, and we’ll double whatever the Feds are paying him. In the meantime, I’ll work up—no—you guys work up a story that makes sense on how we got him. Use that red light thing. This could be really big for us, and the Department.”

“Uh, you want us to get him tonight?” asked Dennis, pushing up the sleeves on his jacket.

“Look, I know it’s Friday and it’s going to be raining cats and dogs, but if we can get him before the weekend, they might not notice he’s missing until Monday morning. In that case, we can have him on a plane back to Syria before anyone guesses what we’re doing. Why? Are you hitting the Lincoln Center tonight?”

“Well, I was going to,” Dennis said sheepishly.

“Look. This is more than just national security and the safety of our citizens. It’s our careers, and your contract. This could be huge.”

“We got it,” said Dick.

“No problem,” Dennis added on the way out of the office.

“Go ahead and leave the door open,” Frank instructed.

As they left, Frank turned the monitor back on, closed out of his current application, and hit the switchbox to bring up the classified system. As he logged in to the secure net for the first time in weeks, it almost felt good to be getting back into the game.

The Saturday Morning News

opened with an update of a previous night’s story that took a lot of people by surprise, particularly a number of employees of the Department of Homeland Security. Frank had gotten a late-night call from Dick and was expecting to see something about it on the news, but not with the level of detail that someone had apparently released to the media. Others in the Department received the report with no prior warning, and began activating alert rosters in order to find out who knew what. Frank would get the call soon, and as planned, would be spending Saturday in the office, but for a different reason than originally anticipated. Dick and Dennis, as contractors, would not be notified, and wisely chose to avoid the office during the day’s activities.

The Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI’s New York City field office was also expecting to hear something about the incident, but what was reported stunned her. She dropped her coffee on the floor, headed straight to the phone, and roused her Deputy for a full-office alert. He had also seen the report, but did not grasp its subtleties as she had. She had been informed via a late-night phone call that a person of great interest in her charge had recently expired, but she also knew that his identity was safe with only a small handful of Special Agents. The revelation on the airwaves implied that either the victim had somehow talked, or that she had a leak in her office.

The talking head proceeded. “We have an update on the story we brought you last night about the shooting at the 3-2-1 Club in Hoboken. The Hoboken police have identified the victim as Nasser Baqr, a former al-Qaida member who is now rumored to be a US informant and was in the country cooperating with federal authorities. The Hoboken police say they have the shooter in custody, and although they have not released her identity for security reasons, they suspect that she has been working with an al-Qaida cell in New Jersey, and that their investigation continues. The FBI and the Department of Homeland Security had no comment as to whether the victim was, in fact, Baqr, and if so, what he might have been doing in a Hoboken strip club. In other news…”

Not far away on Manhattan’s upper-east side, a third generation Greek-American matriarch had just completed her morning ritual of sweeping the sidewalk in front of her establishment. She had taken a seat at the end of her coffee bar while the barista had presented her with her usual concoction, and she casually glanced at the television as the report began. A few key words alerted her to the fact that this was perhaps no ordinary news story, and she cringed with sadness realizing that the effects of a global hatred were again manifesting themselves on her doorstep. She sipped her coffee slowly and recalled the tales of her grandmother who had experienced similar conflict in a far-away land nearly a century earlier. It troubled her that the human condition had failed to progress beyond this point, but after not more than a moment’s consideration she brought her focus back to the present and the day’s activities. After all, she had a store to run.

Farther up the Hudson River, a widow heard the report on the kitchen television in her tiny apartment. She was already alert to the possibility of nefarious activities being executed on American soil, as she had to pass through well-manned military checkpoints daily on her way to work. However, she had grown callous after years of enduring this ritual, and like most of her countrymen she no longer carried the alert edge that the 9/11 attacks had honed in her a few years earlier. There was something in the report, though, that jarred an emotion that had long since faded from the forefront of her mind. She knew what she had to do, and she began to formulate a plan that would possibly prevent another act from happening right under her nose. Flipping open the local phone directory, she jotted down a number that she left on the kitchen counter, and made a mental note to make the call as soon as possible. In the mean time, though, if she didn’t move quickly she would miss the shuttle and would arrive unacceptably late for work.

Just a few doors away in an identical apartment, a young man glanced up from his laptop as the television suggested something that piqued his interest. He was unsure if he was involved, directly or indirectly, with the report, but he had confidence that his superiors would let him know shortly what the implications were for his plans. His slightly-increased level of anxiety would only be assuaged during the next contact with his mentor, an event that he knew would happen now even sooner than expected. However, as he had nothing else to occupy him, he would spend a significant amount of his time over the next few days trying to decipher what he had just heard. Fortunately, events that pass through the airwaves are recorded in more detail electronically, and at least the research challenge would alleviate some of his boredom.

Farther back down the Hudson River, and not far from the epicenter of the event, a clerk pulling a substitute shift in a nearly-empty mini-mart saw the same report and should have shared this same trepidation. However, he failed to grasp the report’s implications, and instead he absorbed the facts as if they were unrelated to his current undertaking. He gave a slight chuckle in the knowledge that the organization to which he had recently committed was operating with impunity only a short distance from his own ground zero. When his contact assured him that the events and their implications would have no bearing on their own plans, he was surprised at the idea that there might have been any connection at all.

Not far from the mini-mart, a young Korean-American sat in a bedroom polishing his shoes as the mention of a dreaded terrorist organization crossed the airways. He needed neither further resolve nor increased alertness to ensure his participation in the events that were soon to unfold. That afternoon he would continue his own surveillance operations, and when his suspicions were confirmed to his satisfaction he would execute a plan that he had already formulated. He glanced at the stack of textbooks on his desk, checked his reflection in his shoes, and finished dressing for work.

In Brooklyn two roommates sat on a couch as their unattended cigarettes dropped ash onto the dingy carpet from the edge of the coffee table to their front. As the report entered their apartment one of them recognized some of its words, but the possibility of them impacting his current situation never penetrated his psyche. However, the more astute of the roommates was given great pause, and it would take several days of research, reflection, speculation, and finally reasoning that would allow him to maintain his current path. Noting that his roommate’s reaction had not betrayed any trepidation, he knew he would only have to contact two other confederates once he sorted out all of the implications. He did his best to not indicate his new-found anxiety to his slower roommate, and that was more than adequate.

Only Guido Marnacchia smiled knowingly at the report. He was proud of his boys for coming up with this solution, but he gave himself most of the credit for the hint he had dropped just a few hours earlier.

Naturally, from her position in the holding cell, Shirley wasn’t privy to this report, although it had been concocted, leaked, and presented entirely for reasons that involved her.

The Desk Phone

rang. It was the last thing Guido expected to happen, particularly with a federal government identification on caller-ID. He knew there was no way the Feds could have linked him to Friday night’s shooting, at least not this quickly, and if they had, they sure as hell wouldn’t be calling about it. He may have been expecting a call from the downtown office, but only on the cell phone he had identified for that purpose. He thought for a second, and then reached for the receiver.

“Uh, hello. This is Mr. Marnacchia.”

“Mr. M., it’s me, Tony,” said the voice at the other end of the line, in a manner that reflected perhaps a lesser sense of urgency than what the recipient was expecting.

“Why the hell aren’t you using your cell?” snapped the old man.

“Look,” Tony explained, “we can’t take cell phones into the office, since they might pick up some classified background noise and transmit it to undesirables, and I’m not gonna’ get a chance to get out of the building today, but I figured I had to call you.”

“So where are you calling me from—I don’t recognize the extension?”

“I’m in my boss’ office right now. She just started a meeting in the conference room, and I’m too junior to get invited, so I’m using her phone. It’s the only one in the building that I’m sure isn’t traceable. Since things have been happening, we all suspect that our phones are monitored.”

“If you get nailed, you could put our entire relationship in jeopardy,” Guido cautioned.

“Aw, don’t worry,” came the far too casual reply. “Ms. Cruise won’t mind—I may be the junior guy here, but she kinda’ likes me.”

“So what do ya’ got for me?” the old man demanded.

“I just wanted to let you know that what you had done worked.” Tony was finally getting down to business, and the value of this information far outweighed the cavalier attitude of the young informant. “It’s complete chaos down here today, and we’re going to be scrambling on this thing all week. Our man wasn’t singing about all that much yet, but what he’s told us so far means that his demise has put us in a frenzy. We’re even bringing outside help to give our team an edge, and that’s why you’re getting this window. This is going to be our only focus for the next month—I guarantee that.”

“So you’re saying you think I can go forward safely?” the old man asked, still exercising the caution that had brought him this far in the business unscathed.

“Absolutely,” Tony said. “You’re not even on the radar anymore.”

“All right, and don’t ever call me again at this number.”

As Guido hung up the phone, he had a nearly uncontrollable urge to wipe down the receiver. Using the land line, particularly talking to one of his contacts, and especially when the other end of the line was the FBI office, made him real uncomfortable—so much so that the good news was almost lost on him. He got up from his desk to wash his hands, took a few deep breaths, and then sat back down. Here it was, Monday morning, and the second piece of the puzzle had already fallen into place. He was going to have a brief window of opportunity, and he knew he’d better not waste it. He swiveled slowly around in his chair, surveyed the bank of cell phones, and picked out the one that he knew would complete his plan. He selected the only contact number from the list, hit “send,” and waited for the pick-up at the other end.

“Let’s bring it in.”

The old man turned off the phone and stood up to gaze out the window behind the desk. It was a view he had earned by taking on the most challenging assignments as he had risen through the ranks of his organization, and he never tired of it. The Manhattan skyline was protruding through the blanket of haze that the August heat had deposited after the weekend’s rains. At least this invoked an image that helped clear his mind of the brief wave of panic—no, it was frustration—brought on by the brazen call from his young informant. He imagined himself sitting on a porch in the Adirondacks with the humid air obscuring all but the tops of the mountains for as far as the eye could see. He went as far as to include his grandchildren in the daydream and with a great stretch of his imagination, their parents as well. It would be the richly-deserved culmination of a career where far too much time had been spent looking up from the bottom.

He turned back around and dropped the phone into the basket that had already been emptied once that morning.

The Holding Cell

was certainly not the most comfortable place Shirley had ever spent an evening, but comfort was the least of her worries. To her surprise no one else had joined the crowd throughout the night, and Shirley wondered if it there was another holding cell, or if it had just been a slow Friday. While most of the women slept, Shirley remained seated on the metal bench, dozing occasionally, but mostly trying to make some sense of her situation. Did she really have to wait until Monday to see a public defender? Why was Sergeant Fusco trying to frame Edith? Was Edith just someone who could conveniently take a fall? Who was the shooter? If Sergeant Fusco knew so much about the club, why had she never seen him in there before?

The idea of the conspiracy kept coming back to her, and she couldn’t help but wonder how deep it went. Who was Fusco working with? Had his partner been in the bar? Who else at the station was in on it? Were the patrolmen from the bar part of the setup? How about the crime scene investigators? What about the female cops at the station?

And finally, the underlying source of all of her problems continued to gnaw at the back of her mind. Why would someone want to kill the Diplomat? Why would Fusco want to kill the Diplomat? What if she had decided to change clothes before she had lined up to leave the club? No. No dwelling on past mistakes. She had to figure out what was going to happen here and now, and the more she could piece together, the better chance she had of getting out of that cell. Her head was spinning.

At about ten in the morning, a new female police officer came to the cell and indicated to the birthday girl that it was time to go. She looked surprised and started to ask if she was being released, but the only response she received was a curt, “Shut up and come with me.”

Not ten minutes later the same women came back and motioned to three prostitutes who had spent the night together on the same bench. “Let’s go,” she directed as the three of them quickly exited the cell.

This continued for about two hours, at which point Shirley and one other woman were the only two remaining in the cell. Unfortunately, the other woman had vomited several times during the night, and was now lying in her own mess in the corner, snoring audibly. When the cell was full this had not been much of a distraction, but the spectacle in the corner, along with the stench, was beginning to absorb Shirley’s attention, and she was starting to feel light-headed and nauseous. “Focus,” Shirley told herself. “You’ve got to keep a clear head and look for an opportunity.”

Opportunity came when the officer returned, and after shouting at the drunk from the cell door, entered the cell to shake the women from her stupor. As she was yelling, with little response from the drunk, Shirley decided to make her move.

“Excuse me, officer,” she asked from her corner of the bench.

Shirley got no response, so she decided to try again.

“Uh, Ma’am?” this time standing up, hoping to get the officer’s attention.

Again, nothing.

While the officer continued to shake the drunk, Shirley decided to try something bolder, so she walked over to the officer and tapped her on the shoulder.”

“Pardon me, officer.”

The officer whirled around and grabbed Shirley by the wrist.

“Don’t you dare fucking touch me, bitch.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. Can I ask what’s going on? Am I going to leave too?”

“You wanna know what’s going on, I’ll fucking tell you,” the woman snapped. “My husband was a New York City police officer.”

Not knowing the proper response, Shirley tried “That’s nice.”

“He was fucking killed on 9/11, you bitch.”

“Oh, I’m really sorry,” Shirley offered, not having to feign sincerity.

“The hell you are, bitch. Now get the fuck back to that bench before I throttle you.”

Shirley possessed an uncanny knack for detecting when people were joking, and she recognized that this wasn’t one of those times. As she moved back to her bench, she watched as the cop dragged the drunken woman out of the cell, securing the door behind her. When she had cleared the swinging doors leading to the station’ desks, Shirley decided it was time for a new tactic.

“Help!” she screamed. “I need to talk to someone who’s not in on this charade!”

After a few more attempts proved to be futile, Shirley was beginning to think the whole station was in on the setup, when the doors swung open, and in walked Sergeant Fusco, sporting a shadow and an attitude, but also the air of someone who knew he was about to win big.

“Miss, how many times do I have to tell you to pipe down? If you don’t it can only result in bad things happening to your person.”

“Look you son of a bitch, why don’t you bring me somebody I can talk to? Bring in your Lieutenant. Bring your god damned captain. Hell, bring the fucking Police Chief, and I’ll knock your cocky son of a bitch attitude back into next week. I dare you to give me my phone call, ‘cos I’ll have your ass hanging in a second. You corrupt mother fuckers are making me sick.”

“I see that already happened in the corner. That wasn’t you, was it?” His confidence was disturbing.

“Look, what the hell’s going on?” Shirley tried, changing her tactic. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because you shot the wrong guy last night, Miss, and we’re gonna’ see that justice is done.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.” Shirley thought that if she antagonized him, he might slip up. He had already demonstrated a fiery temper and a lack of keenness of intellect, but as long as she was locked up, he held all the cards.

“It’s my story, and I’m sticking to it,” came the calm, unfortunate reply. “Now if you need anything, I’ll be on the other side of those doors for the rest of the day. Just holler.”

“Fuck you, asshole.”

“That can be arranged too.”

He walked out.

Shirley’s outlook deteriorated to despair. It still wasn’t clear to her why the female cop had been so hostile; at least Fusco had a bit of an air to him, as if he knew he was simply playing out a farce, but she was different. Shirley sensed her venom, and there was nothing farcical about it. The only question was “why?” Shirley’s answer was going to come shortly.

Not fifteen minutes later, the female cop came through the doors, escorting a prisoner. She unlocked the cell door and held it open as the prisoner entered. But something was slightly awry—she was treating the new prisoner almost as an honored guest, and not as the dregs of society. Shirley decided not to say anything until the cop left, but before she had a chance to speak, the new arrival pre-empted her.

“You fucking bitch.”

“Excuse me?” was Shirley’s reply, being too shocked for a clever retort. “Why would you say that?”

“I think you fucking know,” the woman snapped.

“I have no idea,” Shirley claimed, honestly. “What are you in here for?”

“I volunteered.”

“Why?” Shirley asked, truly perplexed.

“Because my husband was a New York City cop, and you bastards fucking killed him on 9/11,” the woman explained.

“I killed someone on 9/11? What in the hell are you talking about?” Shirley was beginning to show her frustration with this new arrival.

“Just like that hit you did last night,” the woman snapped back.

“Last night I was dancing in a club, the power went out, and some guy got shot. I think the Sergeant outside did it.”

“Since when in the hell did AQ start stripping in clubs, although I guess it would be the perfect cover?” the woman snarled, completely ignoring the reference to Fusco’s possible guilt.

“Who in the hell is AQ?”

“Don’t play stupid with me, bitch.”  
 “I’m serious. I’ve got no idea what the hell you’re talking about,” Shirley was able to honestly admit.

“That’s bullshit. You know damn well who you shot last night, and I know damn well who you’re working for,” came the woman’s confident conclusion.

“OK, humor me, and spell it out, as if I’ve got no idea what in the fuck you’re talking about.” Shirley said, hoping that it would elicit a response that would help her make some sense of the matter.

“The guy you shot was an informant, and you were part of the al-Qaida hit to silence him, so your terrorist asshole friends could keep attacking America”

“Where in the hell did you hear that bullshit?” Shirley said in utter disbelief.

“Don’t play stupid, bitch” the woman retorted. “It was all over the news this morning.”

Shirley was floored. “That son of a bitch,” she muttered. Fusco wasn’t as stupid as he looked. He had concocted an elaborate plan to kill the Diplomat and frame Edith, a slight miscalculation landed a different patsy in his lap, and he was winging it from there. It certainly explained the female officer’s attitude, and now he was assembling a death squad so the investigation could be put to rest quickly. With the only suspect being dead and a bar full of witnesses who saw Shirley with the gun, his case would be closed.

There were still some loose ends, though. Was the Diplomat really an informant? If so, why would Fusco want him dead? If not, why would the media report that he was? If he really was, then was Fusco an ‘AQ’ assassin? He seemed to have a rapport with the families of some 9/11 victims, and that would certainly be counter to him being AQ.

Just then, Shirley saw her loophole. Whether or not the Diplomat was an informant, it had made the news, and her alleged association with AQ apparently had as well. She would be of great interest to more than just the Hoboken Police Department, and somebody who wasn’t in on it would have to take her into custody. Whether the FBI, CIA, or Homeland Defense was the next to walk through that door, she knew that Fusco was going to fail.

Predictably, the female officer came back, this time with two “prisoners.” As she politely escorted them into the cell they looked at Shirley’s companion and motioned in Shirley’s direction.

“That her?” one of them asked.

“Damn right,” the first woman replied.

“Look,” said Shirley. “I’m being set up here. You’re going to kill me so a crooked cop can get away with murder.”

“Shut up, bitch,” came the reply. “We know what you are.”

“Come on, ladies. I was born here in Jersey. I grew up here. I’m not what you think the news said about me—that was a setup. I’m American.

“Yeah? So was Richard Reid, the son of a bitch. Now you shut the fuck up.” The women were certainly well-versed in the language of the country’s terrorism landscape, although Shirley wisely chose to not correct her new companions concerning the nationality of the notorious shoe bomber.

Shirley sized up her three companions, and decided she could probably hold them off, since, in addition to spending her evenings dancing, she spent her mornings in the gym. The problem was they were probably carrying concealed blades, and the fact that they hadn’t attacked her yet meant more were on the way. At some point the cell was going to contain a critical mass of armed, angry 9/11 widows and Fusco was going to win. Shirley dreaded the thought of the door swinging open again, as she knew it was just a matter of time until it was over.

But the door did open again. Only this time, it was Sergeant Fusco and the female cop, a police lieutenant, and a man Shirley had never seen before. As the woman unlocked the door, Sergeant Fusco motioned to her.

“All right Miss, this gentleman would like to have a word with you.” There was an air of resignation in his voice.

Shirley suppressed a grin, put on her most sing-song voice, and said “Why thank you Sergeant. You’ve been very kind.”

She followed the man out the door.

The Night Watchman

was spending a quiet evening, as he had done every evening for the past month, overlooking a small marina from his comfortable perch in the dock house. As he had come to expect, nothing stirred near the water, but the owners had collectively hired him earlier in the summer as the vacationing crowd had engaged in a little vandalism, and his minimum wage was a small price to pay for a bit of security and peace of mind. He had been an obvious choice for the job with his background in law enforcement, his modest means, and the fact that he had become well respected as his years advanced and the color barriers that had stifled him as a child had gradually eroded.

As he did every evening, he had a small chuckle about his current lot. He had grown up not thirty miles west of the North Carolina shore, but had only seen the Atlantic once in his first eighteen years, and that was when the Church had rented a school bus and had held a picnic near a small inlet on the outer banks. Now the rich folk, whose only cares were the occasional hurricane and minor vandalism from marauding tourists, were actually paying him to look out over the ocean and enjoy the warm summer breeze on his face.

In fact, it was more than a minor miracle that he had even made it this far. The small dirt farm from which his family had scratched a living seemed to be his destiny from the day he was born. Every time his mother had pushed out another child, the family’s needs further outstripped the additional productivity, and the things that other children may have taken for granted were quick to fall off his list of expectations. His grandmother hated to bring the children to church every Sunday in bare feet, but shoes were among the many luxuries that the farm, or the Good Lord, simply could not provide.

Making the trek to the schoolhouse was at best a seasonal event, but an aunt living not a mile down the road actually had her high school equivalency diploma hanging on the wall of their shack, representing the greatest academic achievement in the history of the extended family. Some of the family considered the diploma to be a mark of shame, as the aunt’s tendency towards ailments as a child had kept her out of the fields, but there was no doubting that her academic talents had no match from one end of the township to the other. As Norm seemed to share her understanding of letters, numbers, and the abstract, but none of her physical maladies, she had taken her young nephew under her wing and filled many of the holes that the farm had dug in his education.

When the bus to Wilmington started coming to their tiny corner of the county, the family made further sacrifices (against grandmother’s better judgment—“ain’t nobody in her family never needed no education”) and Norm was to wait alone before sunrise every morning, in a pair of shoes that had appeared by the good graces of the pastor, for the rickety yellow vehicle that, his mother insisted, represented opportunity.

Norm was far behind most of his classmates as he began his sophomore year, but there were a sufficient number of white folk who had neglected their education for various reasons to comprise a remedial program, and Norm soon found himself thriving academically. It seemed ironic that the folk in these classes were the quickest to unleash a sharp tongue on someone who was a little bit different than most of the other kids, but the occasional visit to Whiteville as a small child had taught him that such remarks were best ignored.

The bus didn’t leave the school until football practice had ended, and while Norm had successfully carried many a football at church picnics, that was one barrier that was not going to fall. However, a sympathetic teacher had guided Norm towards the 4-H club so he didn’t have to spend his afternoons in the stadium waiting for the bus, and it was there that Mr. Whittaker opened up a whole new set of doors for Norm and the other students.

Growing up on the farm, crop production was reduced to plantin’, pickin’, ho’in’, and plowin’. Things Norm had never considered, such as fertilizer and pesticides, were second nature to the other kids, but every once in a while, a little common sense and farm know-how helped him stand out from his peers. By the end of high school, from which Norm was to be the first in his family to get his diploma, Mr. Whittaker had steered him towards the local community college where a young man could continue his education at very little expense. With two older sisters now in a textile factory and a brother in the Navy, the family had more money than they had ever imagined, and it was decided that the luxury of education was a blessing that the family couldn’t pass up, in spite of his grandmother’s, “Boy, you get yo’ ass back to this farm and get to work befo’ yo’ mamma dies herself out in dat field.”

Two years later, Associate’s Degree in hand, Norm had found himself out by the coast wearing the uniform of the local police department. Twenty-five years into his career saw an unprecedented promotion to Sergeant, but a drunk domestic shooter sent him to an early pension with seventy-five percent disability, and somewhat of a hero’s reputation among the local community. He knew his grandmother would have been proud, yet still would have had nothing good to say about leaving the farm. Norm could think of worse things than getting paid for sitting at the dock.

Only this night was going to be a little different. As the last of the deep blue glow had faded from the western sky, the sound of a muffled speedboat motor drifted across the calm water. Anticipating a break in his routine, Norm reached for the “NVGs” that one of the boat owners had left at the marina to assist the night watchman with his duties. These night vision goggles were a commercial version of the military technology that had made America so successful on the battlefield, and would have been real handy from time to time during Norm’s stint with the force. Norm particularly appreciated the “IR” mode, which allowed him to see hot things in different colors, and had almost caused him to drop them in amazement when he had spotted the glowing red stream as a fisherman urinated off the side of a boat two weeks earlier.

Even with the NVGs, Norm could barely make out the shapes of two zodiacs speeding towards the inlet, so he flipped the IR switch and was amazed that the entire Atlantic Ocean seemed to light up. These boats were moving under the cover of darkness, but were shining IR headlights as bright as the sun, and were coming from what appeared to be a large cargo ship, also lit up like an IR Christmas tree. Looking past the point towards the inland waterway, Norm saw the bright flashing of an IR signal guiding the zodiacs towards a small docking ramp on the inner bank. A twinge of excitement brought him back to his days of law enforcement, but it quickly subsided as he stood up and had to reach for his cane. Pulling a cell phone out of his pocket, he dialed a number he hadn’t called in several years, but that was permanently etched on his brain.

“What can I do for you, Sergeant Edmunds?” was the pickup on the other end. “This is Officer Wright.”

Norm had still not gotten used to the “caller ID” feature on these new phones, and was always startled to be recognized before he could identify himself. “Well Sammy,” he began, “I think you need to call the Captain, ‘cos something fishy’s going on down at the Park Landing.

“What do you think it is, Sergeant?” The young policeman offered the greatest respect for his former superior, even in retirement. Norm’s grandmother would have been moved to tears.

“We’ve got some fast boats shuttling something from a ship offshore, and they’re doing the whole thing under infra red. I’m betting it’s a drug haul. A few patrol cars can probably seal the landing, but I’m thinking they’re gonna’ need the Coast Guard to get to that ship.”

“I’ll get right on it, Sergeant,” came the assuring reply. “Thanks for letting us know.”

Norm picked up the goggles again, and saw four more speedboats coming his way. He was about to have the best seat in the house for the most impressive spectacle seen along that shore since the Civil War.

The Table

and chair in the interrogation room were still metal and were still cold, but Shirley had never been so relieved to be offered a seat. The new man was casually dressed, with a decent pair of slacks and a polo shirt that revealed an acceptable physique, and in spite of a boyish face, Shirley concluded that he was almost ruggedly handsome. As her occupation had driven her to classify all men as pawing lechers, she convinced herself that this sudden weakness was the result of her eleventh-hour reprieve by a guardian angel, and that this statuesque demigod—No!—this sleazy scumbag standing before her was only of mild interest to her libido due to the fortunate timing of his arrival. She actually began looking forward to an unpleasant interrogation so she could triumphantly announce to her sub conscience that she was so over him.

Shirley also noticed that the light in the viewing room behind the mirror had been left on, and that the room appeared to be empty, a good sign that whoever this guy was, he wasn’t in bed with Fusco and his ilk. He surveyed her for what seemed to be an eternity, and still standing, he finally broke the silence, relieving the tension that was building in Shirley. This was particularly fortuitous since if Shirley had sat in silence a second longer, she was going to erupt, but it was still wholly unclear to her if her outburst was going to involve tears, uncontrollable laughter, screaming, or a hug of gratitude.

“So, Shirley,” he began. “Uh, do you mind if I call you Shirley?”

“Whatever floats your boat.”

“Um. OK. So Shirley,” he continued. “I’m Special Agent William T. Goodwell from the New York City Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” As he spoke he produced a wallet with a badge and identification, as if the two acts could never be performed independently. “I think you might know why I’m here.”

“Well, I can only guess, ‘cos I’ve got no fucking idea why I’m here.”

“I have a theory,” he explained, showing that he was going to be as patient as necessary to successfully get through this interview.

“Woop de fucking doo. I’ve got dozens of theories. Some of them are actually pretty good,” Shirley shot back, indicating that she was quite beyond the point of showing patience.

“Well I might like to hear some of them sometime,” he said politely.

“Buy a drink and a lap dance, and I’ll tell you anything you want to hear.”

“I’m afraid that will have to wait. Do you know why you were arrested?” he continued calmly.

“Yeah,” she said immediately. “It was a setup and a case of mistaken identity.”

“That’s my theory,” he agreed, quite to Shirley’s surprise. “Ever since the news report this morning suggested that you might be an AQ operative, I’ve been with some of my contacts at Homeland Security, and after talking to Carmine and Madame Zucker, I’ve concluded that you probably had nothing to do with this shooting. Carmine was very clear on where you were at the time of the shooting, and also on the shooter’s location. He showed me the blood and where the slug was picked up, and he’s convinced that somebody just dropped the weapon in your purse to frame you.”

“Well, isn’t that special,” she snapped. “I’ve been telling the assholes in this building the same thing all day, and either they’re too god damned stupid to figure it out, or they’re all in on it with that prick Fusco, who I think pulled the trigger.”

“You mean the Sergeant at the station?” he asked, a little startled.

“The very same. He’s all but admitted it to me, and I think the news report was going to be his attempt at having me offed—something that might have happened had you shown up any later.”

“Well I’m glad to have been of service, but if you’re right, that’s going to help us immensely, since up ‘till a second ago, we’ve had no idea who might have done this, and more importantly, why.”

“So you don’t think I’m ‘AQ’ as I’ve heard it called?” she pressed.

“Homeland Security is sure that you’re not,” the Agent said confidently. “Even though you spend your evenings dancing in an establishment that puts you on their radar, you’re spending your mornings at a health club, turning the TV on your elliptic machine to news channels, and you’re spending your afternoons in the library, checking out an odd assortment of magazines, and showing one of the most bizarre internet surfing patterns we’ve ever seen. You’re certainly not who you pretend to be at the club, and not even who you’re pretending to be now, but we’re quite certain you’re not AQ.”

Shirley sat in stunned silence, pondering how her simple, insignificant life could be so well-documented by federal authorities. She finally blurted out her reaction, with equal parts shock, anger, disbelief, and disgust, “How in the fu…?” She stopped herself. The Agent knew more about her than she did, and it was time to quit playing the dumb stripper. She started over. “How can you possibly know all that about me? Is there a big fat old ‘Shirley’ file in the basement of the White House that gets updated every time I fart?” The indignation of her strip search paled in comparison to what she was feeling now—it’s if she had been gang-raped with the entire federal government watching and cheering for the rapists. Her earlier desire to find a reason to be repulsed by the special agent had come back with a vengeance.

But Agent Goodwell just laughed. “No, but anything anyone does gets recorded. Every time you use your library card, your gym membership card, your driver’s license, a supermarket discount card, your ATM card, a credit card, or any other electronic form of identification, even your cell phone, that activity goes into data files. Nobody even looks at them—they can’t—it’s too much data. But if we have a person of interest, such as you based on the news report this morning, we can slice the data fairly quickly and put together a profile in a hurry.”

“Small comfort,” Shirley said coolly, still seething.

“Actually, the only thing that popped on you was the fact that you don’t use your checking account, you make no ATM transactions, and you have no credit cards. That’s the type of thing the IRS might be interested in…”

Shirley shuddered.

“…but they don’t get to see the data. It’s really for security purposes only, although in extreme cases the Bureau gets to take a peek when we have a major crime.”

“I guess I’ll just have to watch myself,” said Shirley, slightly relieved and able to regain some of her composure, but clinging to the remaining vestiges of her revulsion.

“So I knew before I got here that if you were AQ, then I was the Pope.”

“So what are you going to do with me?” Shirley pressed, hoping that the answer was going to take her as far from the station as possible.

“Right now, it won’t help our investigation much if we let the people here know that you’re clean, and as I think you know, it’s not going to help if they know we think you’re not the shooter. Since it seems you know more about Baqr’s death than we do I’m going to take you into federal custody for this investigation, as if you were the shooter.”

“Wait a fucking…”

He held up his hands to interrupt her. “It’s all right. You’re really going into protective custody. Your name hasn’t gotten out yet, but you’re not particularly popular right now, and we’re going to make sure no one can get to you.”

“Who’s this Backer guy?” Shirley asked, still trying to get her head around the day’s events.

“Nasser Baqr. He was an al-Qaida informant in the country at our invitation. He was all over the news this morning for getting shot last night at your club, and the suggestion was that an AQ hit woman—that would be you—had done it. How the press found out who he was—well, actually, how their sources found out who he was—is a complete mystery to us right now. Until this morning his presence here was so classified that not even Homeland Security knew he was here. Something really ugly is going on, and I think you might be able to help us. In the meantime, I’m going to take you into federal custody to get you out of here, since something really stinks at this station.”

“Oh, so you’ve seen the holding cell?” Shirley said, having regained some of her composure and at least part of her wit.

“Cute. I’m going to need to cuff you, and I want your attitude back on when walk out of here. Based on what you told me, if you’re right, everybody in this station is a person of interest to us right now, not that they weren’t already, and we don’t want to tip their hand before we can get back here. Are you ready to go?”

Shirley stood up and turned around with her hands behind her back. She had no idea what a chivalrous act putting on a pair of handcuffs could be, particularly since her first experience with the ritual was at the hands of Fusco, and she started to revert to her initial impression of the special agent. As he gently grabbed her upper arm to lead her from the room, she almost swooned, but rationalized that it was the result of a lack of sleep. She was really hoping to fire a parting salvo at Fusco, but the Agent walked her straight to the Lieutenant’s office, and affirmed the tension between the two law enforcement agencies with an icy exchange.

“I’m taking her into federal custody. If she’s who you said she is, we’re gonna’ need some answers from her. You should already have heard from our office.”

“Our Captain spoke with your boss earlier—we knew this was coming.”

“Thanks for your help,” the Agent said.

“Always happy to cooperate,” came the Lieutenant’s parting shot, which was overflowing with a lack of sincerity.

The Agent led Shirley out the front of the precinct and into a black Expedition with tinted glass all the way around and government plates. She noted that it was parked in a red zone half-way across the sidewalk. As he held the front door for her, Shirley concluded that he had rushed over to the station on her account, probably after talking with Carmine, and it dawned on her how close she had been to not making it through the evening. When he got in the driver’s seat and removed the cuffs, she bit her lip to suppress a sob. “Look, Agent Goodyshoes” she said, hoping the quip would help her regain some of her composure. “I really have to thank you for getting me out of there. I was really starting to get worried before you came.” It was one of those rare moments when she was sincere.

“No problem. Go ahead and buckle up,” he said as they drove off.

They drove a circuitous route around Hoboken, and finally pulled into a parking garage near a mall. The agent guided the SUV to a secluded spot away from any other vehicles, parked, popped the back hatch, and got out and walked around the vehicle. He returned to the back, slammed the hatch, got back in, and drove off.

“What was all that about?” Shirley asked, a little perplexed.

“The plates,” he answered. “I’m taking you to a safe house, and it happens to be here in Hoboken. The Hoboken police have three hundred and sixty degree cameras on their vehicles, and all they do is scan for license plates. They record every plate they pass, and they use their GPS to keep a running tracking of every vehicle on the roads. It can come in real handy some times, but it’s become a crutch that we can use to our advantage.

“Why is that?” she asked, not quite following his tactic.

“If you’re right about the Sergeant, he’s gonna’ want to know where you are, and with the plate ID technology, he won’t think he’s going to have to follow us. It’s wonderfully ironic that because they think they’ll be able to track our plates, the fact that we’re rolling through the streets in a huge black SUV with tinted windows but different plates makes us practically invisible to them. Sometimes the technological crutches we use get in the way of good old-fashioned police work. It’s like having GPS, but not knowing how to read a map. They have no idea that we’re even staying in the city, but I don’t want to take the chance of getting picked up anywhere near the safe house. We never take these vehicles there, but I want you to get settled and off the radar quickly. I’m betting you’re pretty tired.”

Shirley didn’t say anything, but a minute later she discreetly reached up with the butt of her palm and wiped a tear from her cheek.

“And by the way, it’s Tommy,” he said.

“What’s Tommy?” Shirley asked.

“My name. There’s no reason to call me ‘Special Agent Goody-Shoes’ unless you’re going to insist on formality, in which case I’m going to have to put the cuffs back on.”

“OK, Tommy,” she said hesitantly.

They were driving through a part of Hoboken that Shirley didn’t recognize, but suddenly she found herself on familiar streets. As they turned a corner near the shore, Shirley saw the far-too-recognizable glow of a neon “3 2 1” above a warehouse door, and as Tommy guided the vehicle into the parking garage, Shirley couldn’t restrain her incredulity any longer.

“You’ve got to be fucking shitting me,” she blurted out.

“Are you surprised?” he chuckled.

“I thought you were taking me to a safe house,” she protested.

“Right. We’re here,” he explained.

“The safe house is by the parking garage?”

“The safe house is in the parking garage.”

The Coast Guard

pilot was used to the late-night phone calls. They had always bothered his wife, but for the Lieutenant they were a small reminder that he might just be taking part in something a little bigger than himself. In fact, his wife had used the alerts as an excuse to leave him a year earlier, although her subsequent move back to Plano with her soul mate de jour betrayed the true reason for her departure. It wasn’t the first time that a woman’s behavior had shattered Shaw’s illusion of the sanctity of marriage.

The excitement and danger of flying Coast Guard C-130s along the Carolina coast belied the sheltered upbringing he had enjoyed in an affluent Seattle neighborhood, with a pristine view of Bainbridge Island greeting him daily from his bedroom window. His father was a successful developer, having ridden the Pacific Northwest building boom of the 80s to a life of relative comfort, so Shaw was expected to be destined for a life of white-collar luxury. However, he had a mechanical streak and a desire to tinker that couldn’t be ignored, and that was going to mold his destiny far more than the lure of any level of income ever could.

It had started at the go-cart track when he was still in grade school, where he discovered that not only could he navigate the vehicles with some of the best competitors, but he could also make subtle but critical adjustments to the machines that would optimize their performance as well as anything the more experienced racers could achieve. Long before he had his license, he had installed, along with his younger brother Myron, a significant amount of timing equipment on his father’s BMW. They celebrated his sixteenth birthday by placing third in a local road rally, and while this had not been his first taste of excitement behind the wheel, he was hooked. Shaw’s ability to mechanically coax the maximum performance from an engine allowed him to frequently trade up, and as his prowess with a wrench continued to develop, so did his talents behind the wheel.

The enticement of the adrenalin rush that came with speed had garnered him a hefty number of tickets, and an even greater number of warnings, which resulted from a well-rehearsed, convincing apology, but he always knew that a speedometer that went terminal at 140 miles-per-hour was not going to be a limiting factor for his future. A neighbor, and the father of a high school friend, was an airline pilot, and would frequently regale Shaw with tales of the open skies, so when Shaw’s mother struck out on her own, he found himself spending more and more time discussing the intricacies of mach-plus speeds with his mentor. These discussions had such an impact on him that by the time he completed high school he was convinced his future lay in following his neighbor’s footsteps.

Being a Navy pilot in Viet Nam, however, was no longer an option, and the opportunity to fly over the Iraqi desert or the mountains of Afghanistan had little appeal, so after completing the undergraduate program at the University of Washington and considering all of the possibilities for earning a set of wings, he decided that the Coast Guard offered the most benign path.

The training regimen at Pensacola was no more challenging than one of Coach T’s high school basketball practices, the academics were trivial, and the flight training was the fulfillment of a life-long dream. Shaw completed the program at the top of his class in academics and pilot training, but not surprisingly finished dead last in his military ranking, and so his hopes of a posting to Seattle, San Diego, or even Hawaii were dashed. Against his wishes, the Government decided he would be permitted the opportunity to defend the shores of his great country from an airfield in Elizabeth City, North Carolina.

The duty, however, proved to be quite rewarding, as a number of non-routine operations punctuated the relative boredom of slow passes over the Carolina beaches. He had recently been preparing for a routine anti-drug run down the Central American coastline, when he and his crew were ordered to Flight Operations for an additional briefing. While this was unusual, it wasn’t unprecedented, but they ended up sitting in the briefing room for an hour while receiving no further information on the mission. However, when they returned to the aircraft, they discovered three additional crew members, and they found the plane’s cargo hold filled with an insert that fit snugly inside the C-130. They were instructed to fly their standard route, but were to extend the trip to ensure a complete pass along the coast of Venezuela. They were not to go back to the cargo hold without a proper warning, even if to just use the “honey bucket” in the back of the craft, and the times when this was required they experienced a delay when the additional crew pulled curtains over what was clearly an impressive array of electronic equipment. The pass along the Venezuelan coast was uneventful from Shaw’s perspective, but as soon as they had cleared the western border, one of the operators in the back entered the cockpit and instructed Shaw to “racetrack” back along the same course immediately. He did so, and on the return pass tried to pay particular attention to whatever it was he had missed the first time, but in spite of the advanced optics provided courtesy of the American taxpayers he detected nothing unusual. Shaw spent the next few weeks scanning the news for any indication of what his mission might have entailed, but nothing was forthcoming. He concluded that he had taken part in a highly classified operation that had been essential to national security, but that the Great American Public would never know of his efforts. Still, this particular flight gave him a great deal of satisfaction.

Several of Shaw’s anti-drug routes had resulted in observing high-speed boat chases in the Caribbean, and on occasion he would receive small-arms fire from some of the fast-movers below. As he didn’t particularly subscribe to the “big sky, little bullet” theory, he was always cautious to take his bird to an elevation that ensured a safe distance from the attackers, but in such cases he usually lingered a little longer than necessary to watch the final actions of the Cutters he was guiding in as they closed in on their quarry. He considered it a treat to see the red tracers cut their lines across the bows of the target boats as they conducted their final futile maneuvers.

On such a calm night though, this call was a bit of a surprise, but any number of events could require the services of Shaw and his bird. With its four lumbering propellers, the C-130 provided what the choppers and boats referred to as “hang time;” Shaw could keep his eyes on anything in the water for as long as necessary until a more flexible craft could arrive at the scene and execute the mission. Bursting into the command center not ten minutes after the phone had rung, Shaw was surprised to see the briefing map showing the coast just north of Charleston. The Lieutenant Commander standing by the map looked grim, but didn’t appear to be overly excited as he began briefing the pilot on the evening’s task.

“Shaw, we’ve got a foreign cargo ship that’s sneaked up from Central America by way of Cuba. It’s sitting about fifteen miles off the Carolina coast, and there’s a shuttle operation going on down there. We’re guessing a drug haul, but in today’s environment, when anybody goes through this much trouble to breach our borders, we can never be too careful. We’re in contact with local authorities—in fact, they alerted us to this operation—and Wilmington’s scrambling a cutter. We want eyes in the air just in case something slips through the cracks. You need to be wheels up in five minutes.”

“I got it Rick, thanks,” was the Lieutenant’s casual response, as he received the briefing folder from the Commander’s outstretched hand. Rick was a good friend, a fellow member of the base basketball team and, before the divorce, half of the couple in whose company Shaw was most likely to spend a Saturday evening.

As Shaw crossed the tarmac he saw his crew of two already waiting. While the officers on alert were permitted the comfort of their own quarters, the enlisted members were kept on a shorter tether, and within five minutes, as promised, the wheels were clearing the end of the runway. As the last lights of the coast disappeared under the fuselage, Shaw took the plane black as there was no need to alert the runners of his presence, and he could probably fly the route blindfolded. By the good graces of the FAA and the modern miracle of radar, he could cruise in the relative comfort of knowing there would be no other aircraft for miles. Nearing the target area not ten minutes later, he left the flight controls on instrument, and doing what he did best, donned his NVGs to search for the tell-tale sign of ships lights on the sea below.

Only there were none. Since these goggles could pick up the glow of a cigarette on a fishing boat from 3,000 feet, he marveled at what care the culprits below must be taking, and decided that this was no run-of-the-mill operation. Switching to IR mode, though, he was almost blinded as the ocean was lit up for miles with the glow of infra red coming from a sizeable cargo ship. He called this fact back to the base, and not a minute later the cutter departing Wilmington announced it was joining the hunt. A number of smaller craft were indeed shuttling someone’s precious cargo towards the shore, but their speed was somewhat slower than the cigarette boats Shaw had tailed down in the Carib, and he guessed someone had invested in a fleet of Kevlar Zodiacs for the purpose of a major smuggling operation. Not ten miles away from his position Shaw was able to detect another large IR signal from the inner shore. Someone had spared no expense to keep this operation hidden from prying eyes, and he wondered how it was that the local authorities had uncovered it. It was a sleepy part of the coastline, and it was doubtful that Interpol had alerted a local sheriff to the presence of a cargo ship delivering contraband from parts unknown. He decided that it must have been a lucky break, but whether drugs or a more nefarious cargo, he was happy to play a small role in disrupting the operation.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sharp cackle of an almost-familiar voice piercing his headset.

“Whiskey three eight alpha niner, this is lima two seven delta four,” came the voice.

While this was the proper protocol for entering someone else’s radio net in the Coast Guard, the formality of the call took Shaw somewhat by surprise, as his communications with the ships he supported were generally of a more casual nature. Assuming the call was coming from the Wilmington Cutter that was just entering Shaw’s field of vision, he responded as formally as he ever had to ensure the proper communications link was established.

“Delt four, ya got A 9 up here, over,” Shaw replied.

“Roger, eight alpha niner, we’re just clearing the channel and need you to vector us to the target location, over,” responded the voice from the Cutter.

*Holy Schlamoly*, thought Shaw, *someone’s spent way too much time memorizing communications regulations. It’s a wonder he’s made it this far in the Guard*. However, Shaw chose to respond in the manner to which he had grown accustomed, knowing that it would have the most positive effect on mission accomplishment.

“We’re looking about forty clicks to your northeast,” he offered, “I’ve got visual with both of you.”

“Roger, eight alpha niner,” came the response. “We understand you have shuttle operations in progress, over?”

The robotic voice conveyed an excess of military bearing that Shaw had not encountered since his officer entry training and flight school at Pensacola years earlier. He continued to respond, however, as he would to any other ship.

“That’s a roger. We’ve got about six zodiacs making a haul to a landing up an inlet. They’re lit up like IR Christmas trees—you can’t miss ‘em.”

“Alpha niner, I copy six small craft, over.”

Shaw shuddered as he identified the voice. His tactical officer from his Officer Candidate Course must have just been promoted and had taken command of the US Coast Guard Cutter Diligence out of Wilmington. Not only was the Commander responsible for Shaw’s low military rating and far-from-choice first assignment, but on one occasion had almost been responsible for an early termination of Shaw’s Coast Guard (and hence flying) career. He continued, however, to respond as if he was unfamiliar with the voice at the other end of the transmission.

“Ya got a good copy, over.”

“Roger, alpha niner. I’m scrambling three small craft. You need to remain on station to vector them in, over.”

Shaw wondered if the Commander had recognized him yet. As a tactical officer, he would have seen hundreds of ensign candidates pass through training, but as much personal attention as Shaw had received at the hands of the zealot, he feared he had made an indelible impression on his tormentor.

“We’ll be up here as long as you need us,” Shaw replied, “I’ll keep an eye out for them.”

“Niner, this is base, over.” Shaw recognized Rick’s voice on the net, and was relieved to have a more familiar and friendlier voice to talk to.

“What ya got, Base?” Shaw asked.

“We’re monitoring this operation—keep us posted,” was Rick’s instruction.

“You got it,” Shaw replied.

The surface operations would be monitored by Wilmington Base, but Shaw’s contribution was going to be of interest to his headquarters until the mission was completed.

Three patrol craft had come into Shaw’s view, about ten miles behind the Cutter. Although they would respond to their mother ship, Shaw thought he might give them a jump-start on their mission to secure the zodiacs.

“PCs, this is niner in the sky, do you copy?” he offered on the same frequency.

“Roger, niner, this is foxtrot one, over,” came the immediate reply.

Wanting to give a clear picture to everyone on the net, Shaw offered an update.

“You’ve got shuttle ops going on right now, two are headed to the inlet and one’s outbound. The fourth one’s doing the transload at the cargo ship. Must mean there’s two at the landing.”

“This is foxtrot one, roger, over,” came the response from the patrol craft.

“Foxtrot one, foxtrot two, foxtrot three, this is seven delta four, over,” came the voice from the Cutter.

“This is foxtrot one, over.”

“This is foxtrot two, over.”

“This is foxtrot three, over.”

Shaw shook his head in amazement. He had worked with these patrol craft on numerous occasions, and he had never heard them exercise such formal communications protocols. The new Commander must have them terrified with his well-developed military leadership skills.

“This is delta four,” the Cutter continued, “I need foxtrot one to follow in my wake to the cargo ship—alpha niner can vector you if required. Foxtrot two, foxtrot three, you need to continue up the coast to the inlet to intercept the shuttles and prevent escape, over.”

The three PCs offered their robotic responses in order.

“This is foxtrot one, WILLCO, over.”

“This is foxtrot two, WILLCO, over.”

“This is foxtrot three, WILLCO, over.”

Shaw surveyed the situation, and for a fleeting second was quite impressed. The zodiacs were slow, but once contact was made they could scatter down the inland waterway and make capture nearly impossible. The Commander’s allocation of his assets was optimal from Shaw’s vantage point, but more importantly was going to ensure that if any zodiacs escaped, they would have to be empty. Whatever the contraband, it was going to be fully recovered.

“Delt four, this is A 9, you got visual yet?” Shaw asked of the Cutter.

“This is delta four, affirmative, I’m going dark over,” and as soon as the response was completed, the lights of the cutter disappeared from Shaw’s view, although his optics still provided a clear outline of the ship against the water.

“Got it,” Shaw continued, “I’m dropping to five hundred and going over land to give the PCs and the ground-pounders a hand. I don’t wanna spook your target.” Shaw had been making a wide circle at ten thousand feet, doing his best to keep all the operations in view, but not wanting to risk tipping off the smugglers to his presence. As the patrol craft closed in, his presence was going to be unlikely to give up the element of surprise, and he could make a greater contribution with the improved visuals, as long as he stayed clear of small arms range.

“Roger, this is delta four out,” was the Cutter’s next response.

Shaw knew that the Cutter was going to have its hands full for a while, and that the Commander needed no distractions as he assembled his boarding party and seized the cargo ship. The “out” at the end of his last transmission was a polite way of saying “don’t bother me,” and Shaw respected that. He would have one patrol craft with him, and Shaw would keep an eye on the other two from his vantage point. In case things turned south, Shaw would also provide the quickest relay to the cavalry—in this case the Navy ships at Norfolk. However, this was not going to be necessary as Shaw watched the cutter pull alongside the cargo ship and detected no tell-tale signs of shots being fired.

“You get the one on the left, I’ve got the one on the right,” was the next transmission to break the radio silence.

Shaw was happy to hear the patrol craft revert to using the radio waves as he always felt they were intended—to permit seamless communications during an operation—and he watched as the two patrol craft overtook their prey, in this case zodiacs laden with cargo on their return trip to shore. The other empty zodiacs went dark and disappeared down the inland canal, but the ground operations otherwise seemed to be going like clockwork. The patrol craft escorted their quarry up to the landing, and several troopers assisted in their capture. Finally, to answer Shaw’s most pressing question, the Commander came back on the net and gave an update to all the participants.

“All stations this net, this is lima two seven delta four, the cargo ship is secure, and it looks like we just netted the most heroin I’ve ever seen in one place. Are we all secure?”

“This is foxtrot two,” came a quick response, “two empty zodiacs got away, but we have the two with the cargo, and the ground operation is pretty well wrapped up, over.”

“Roger, my vessel’s going to escort the cargo ship to Norfolk. Coordinate with the local authorities and get the contraband back to base,” the Commander instructed.

“This is foxtrot one, WILLCO, over.”

“This is foxtrot two, WILLCO, over.”

“This is foxtrot three, WILLCO, over.”

Once again, this well-conditioned response brought a chuckle out of Shaw, but he was beginning to appreciate the efficiency with which this unit operated. However, what he heard next really floored him.

“Alpha niner, this is delta four, over.”

“Go ahead four,” Shaw responded.

“Is that you, Perkins?” the Commander asked.

Shaw’s suspicions had been confirmed. The negative impression he had left on his first tactical officer had not been erased by the years.

“That’s a roger, Commander,” Shaw replied.

“Helluva job tonight, Perkins, glad to have you on our team.”

“It’s my pleasure, Sir,” Shaw offered as he made his final turn before heading back to base. As he turned north for the final time, he swung wide over the Atlantic to pass near the Cutter and its new charge, and as he did, he dipped his right wing to show his appreciation to the surface crew for a job well done. As he headed back to the comforts awaiting him in “E-City” he felt a great relief that this elaborate operation had not been an attack on the homeland, but instead was simply a well-financed attempt to bring drugs to America’s shores.

With his stint in the Coast Guard nearing its end, Shaw had a career in the airlines to look forward to, and what would eventually be a marriage that would erase all of his previous bad experiences with that institution. Still, in his future years he would regale Myron’s children with tales of the night of flying when he made his most significant contribution to the Nation’s war on drugs.

What he would never realize, however, was that he had also made an equally significant contribution to the War on Terror.

The Safe House

occupied a significant portion of the bottom level of the parking garage. In fact, Shirley would later question why she never noticed that the underground level, with its own ramp leading directly to the street, had so few spaces compared to the two above-ground levels. But Tommy pulled in on the street level and parked near the back of the structure, and as Shirley noted, as hidden from the view of the street as possible. After performing a three-sixty scan, Tommy, apparently satisfied, said, “Let’s go.”

Shirley got out of the vehicle, and followed Tommy to the stairwell near the center of the structure. There was nothing remarkable about the stairwell landing, just an old metal door on which a small sign announced “maintenance,” and a red panel with a glass window that was securing a fire hose. Tommy stopped in front of the maintenance door, motioned towards the panel, and instructed “Open it.”

Shirley complied by twisting the latch, and Tommy continued his instructions, “Hit the toggle switch up above the hose on the left side.”

Shirley felt for the switch, and upon pushing it, heard the latch on the maintenance door click. Tommy pulled the door open, and motioned for Shirley to step inside. “Ladies first,” he said, but Shirley, remembering that same thing had been said not a day earlier with a less-than-fortuitous outcome, didn’t acknowledge the magnanimous gesture with anything more than a glare.

Shirley stepped into the maintenance closet, and Tommy followed and pulled the door closed behind them. It was wholly unremarkable, and Shirley felt a twinge of disappointment, expecting perhaps something more elaborate for her tax dollars. On the far wall was a utility basin, above which hung a smudged mirror, against the right wall were two rusty metal lockers, a mop in a bucket leaned against the corner, a shelf supported various janitorial supplies, and the left wall sported a half-sized vented door about two feet off the floor that obviously provided access to some utility system. “I call sink,” Shirley announced, hoping at least that Tommy would produce a mattress of some sort out of thin air, since the lockers didn’t appear sufficient to contain any amenities.

Tommy just chuckled, and continued with his instructions. “Go ahead and place your right hand on the bottom right face of the mirror, and stare directly into the center of the mirror from about six inches away. Oh, and try not to blink.” As Shirley complied, Tommy pulled what looked like a remote control from his pocket, punched in a code, and said, “OK, relax for a second.” Tommy punched in another code, and then said, “All right, try it again.”

Shirley again placed her hand on the mirror and stared into its center. As she did, the small door to her left swung open, revealing a flight of stairs that went down one level. Shirley was impressed, but recognizing this, and not wanting to appear too gracious, she reacted in what was more the typical style she had developed from too many evenings of gyrating semi-nude in exchange for cash. “Well, aren’t you quite the James Fucking Bond all of a sudden.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Tommy said, and then, continuing with his well-rehearsed instructions, “go ahead and step through and head down the stairs.”

At the bottom of the stairs, Shirley found it more than ironic that she was standing in front of a door, and on a matt that spelled out “Welcome.” She tried the door handle, but as expected, it didn’t turn. “So, do I press my tits or ass against this door to get it to open?” she asked.

“Since you’ve got all these great theories, I’m gonna’ let you figure out where the key is,” he offered.

“Oh my God, the Feds have a sense of humor,” Shirley blurted out, and stepping off the mat, she rolled back one side of it, picked up the key, and unlocked the door.

As Shirley began to step into the room, Tommy—impressed with how quickly she put together the last piece of the puzzle, but equally as determined not to show it—issued the last of his instructions, “Don’t forget to put the key back.”

“Of course. How silly of me.”

As Shirley stepped into the room, she might have described the safe house as a luxury hotel suite, had she ever patronized such an establishment. The sitting room contained a love seat and a coffee table with a stack of magazines, a small round table with two chairs and a laptop, a kitchenette, and, to Shirley’s surprise, an elliptic machine with a TV screen, and a yoga mat leaning against the corner. The door to the bedroom was open, and Shirley could see a dresser that supported a flat-screen TV. The whole setup could easily have housed Shirley’s apartment, although the faint smell of cigarettes was noticeable in spite of the vigorous activity of an air freshener that was spewing a sickeningly sweet pine scent from a wall socket. Shirley plopped herself on the love seat, and finally reacted to the whole, surreal scenario. “OK, so I wasn’t expecting this.”

Tommy pulled a chair up to the coffee table, and sat down. “You may have to stay here for a while, so we want you to feel at home.”

“Where in the hell did you get this place?” she asked.

“We had it built in the seventies, at that time it was usually used for Mafia informants during trials.”

It didn’t make sense to Shirley. She had grown up in Jersey, in the shadow of the New York City skyline, and she knew that there were certain industries that were dominated by the ‘Cosa Nostra.’ “How did you build it without the Mafia knowing? Don’t they own all the construction around here?”

“Ah, very clever,” Tommy said. “This was built as a private garage. We still use the door to haul stuff in and out. The modifications were done with outside sourcing, and the security features were put in by a special company.”

“So I should feel pretty safe here,” Shirley suggested.

“Yeah, but I’m going to have to ask you not to leave. We’ve tried to give you all the amenities you might require, so you can pretty much make it through your daily routine without too much interruption—except the dancing, of course.”

“Yeah. What about my job?”

While Shirley didn’t particularly care for her current occupation, it certainly paid the few bills that she did have, and it afforded her the luxury of maintaining the lifestyle and routine that suited her so well.

“As far as Madame Zucker knows, you’ve been arrested for being an AQ hit woman,” Tommy began to explain, “although she and Carmine know better, and they’ve made it clear that they’re prepared to testify to that effect. When this is all over, we’ll clear everything up with her and you should get your life back. We’ve also taken care of your rent and your gym membership for the next month—we’ll make it for longer if we have to.”

“You better not have to,” she admonished. She imagined that with a good public defender, her ordeal in the Hoboken lockup should not have lasted more than a day, and there was no way she was willing to trade that for an extended stay in this parking garage, regardless of how luxurious it was compared to her normal accommodations.

“Listen,” Tommy explained. “That binder on the counter has the instructions for everything in the house—the microwave, the TV, the dishwasher, etc. Based on how you spend your afternoons, I figure you’re pretty familiar with laptops, and I think you’ll be able to work the elliptic on your own. Someone will come over tomorrow, but in the meantime, you just need to know how to work the phone.”

He got up from his seat and walked over to the phone on the counter.

“I think I know how to work a phone,” Shirley offered in disgust, but she followed him to the counter nevertheless.

“Not this one,” he assured. “It only reaches certain preprogrammed numbers. You can see how the buttons are marked: my office, my home, other agents in our office whom you should be meeting soon, that one is our duty officer, and it’s manned 24/7, and the last one is my cell. If you suspect anything’s wrong, call immediately. Just say you’re Shirley, and whoever answers will know what to do.”

Shirley reflected on all of the high-profile informants who had helped shut down many of the major crime syndicates in her lifetime, and could only imagine the ones who didn’t make it into the press. “So I guess me staying here puts me in pretty good company,” she conjectured as she walked from the phone to the binder and casually flipped through it.

“We’ve had our share,” Tommy admitted.

“So where are you gonna’ be?” she asked, partially out of wanting to know which button to push first should circumstances require it, but perhaps with a remote hint of interest as well. Although he wasn’t wearing a ring, she could imagine him returning to a wife and kids after having spent the better part of a weekend dealing with her predicament.

“I need to be getting back to work,” he answered quickly. “You were a person of interest for this case all morning, until we figured out that you’d been set up, and that we needed to get you into protective custody. Now we’re back to square one, but you can bet we’re gonna’ chase down the leads you’ve given us about that Sergeant—what did you say his name was?”

“Fusco,” she said with contempt.

“That’s right,” he said, getting up and sliding the chair back to the table. “You stay safe now, and holler if anything goes wrong.”

“So how safe is this place?” she asked.

“Not as safe as you think.”

“Why not?” she continued, not having received the confident reply she had anticipated.

Tommy turned over his shoulder and answered as he made his way out the door. “Because the last person to stay here was Nasser Baqr.”

The Commander

of the US Coast Guard Cutter Diligence in Wilmington, North Carolina had received his alert notification just a few minutes before the pilot in Elizabeth City had gotten the call. The Operations Officer from the Command Center would meet him on his own bridge, and would most likely remain with him during the mission. The headquarters pukes always wanted to be in on the action, but in this case the call indicated that the operation was going to be local, and that they needed to get under way as soon as possible. The eyes from E-City would already be airborne before Pat was able to join the chase, and he didn’t want to waste any time getting out to the open seas.

Commander Pat Sanders had grown up just outside of Denver, in a fairly comfortable neighborhood in the foothills of the Front Range. His dad had bounced around the aerospace industry, but finally settled where he could provide his son a little stability outside the C470 bypass, in an area which offered infinitely less stress (and traffic) than his previous positions had inside the DC Beltway. The area afforded great opportunities to hike and mountain bike half the year, and to snowboard less than an hour away the other half. With three younger sisters, Pat didn’t mind getting out of the house and up to the mountains as often as possible.

Of course there was another lure for living in the Denver area, and that was that Colorado Springs was a short drive away. Since Pat knew it was his destiny to fly fighters for the Air Force, he made the trip to the Air Force Academy on a regular basis. Pat’s father had been giving him model airplanes since before he was old enough to build them, and by the time he was in high school his room was filled with replicas of the entire arsenal that had served the Air Force (and the Army Air Corps) since before World War II.

While Pat’s grades were adequate, his test scores turned out to be a bit of a disappointment, and although his mother enrolled him in some crash courses, she knew that it wouldn’t be enough to guarantee an appointment to the Academy. A congressman who was appreciative of the aerospace contributions made in his district was willing to include Pat on his list of regular Academy appointees, but during the interview process a number of board members suggested applying elsewhere as well. It was sound advice, as Pat found himself rejected by Colorado Springs, wait-listed at Annapolis, but accepted at New London, so when he graduated from high school, he headed directly to the Coast Guard Academy.

Pat performed adequately at the Academy, but upon graduation had not placed high enough to garner a coveted flight school position, and so found himself with the majority of his classmates destined for sea duty as a surface officer. The academy had trained him well, however, and a career of drug enforcement, maritime law enforcement, immigration enforcement, and search-and-rescue operations in the Caribbean region was sufficient to ensure a promotion to Commander and a Cutter of his own. He had only recently taken command of the Diligence when he got the call that there were major smuggling operations underway off the Carolina coast.

As anticipated, there was a Watch Officer waiting with a briefing folder when he arrived at the bridge, and he instructed his Lieutenant to get them under way as he received the briefing. A large cargo ship enroute to New Jersey had made a brief stop offshore, and there were small craft that had been performing shuttle operations under IR illumination since just after nightfall. Pat inquired as to the availability of patrol craft, and was informed that three had already been alerted. He asked about air cover, and was told that E-City already had a C-130 on location that would be waiting for his radio call.

As the cutter passed beyond the outer banks and made its way to the open sea, Pat had his signal officer provide him with the full call sign of the C-130 as required by communications regulations.

“Whiskey three eight alpha niner, this is lima two seven delta four,” he began, knowing that it was likely that the pilot above him might not respond using the full protocols.

The aircraft responded as expected, when Pat heard, “Delt four, ya got A 9 up here, over,” coming from his speaker.

Since Pat knew he certainly out-ranked whoever was piloting the bird, he felt comfortable with a continued use of proper radio procedures, as he said, “Roger, eight alpha niner, we’re just clearing the channel and need you to vector us to the target location, over.”

“We’re looking about forty clicks to your northeast,” came the quick response, “I’ve got visual with both of you.”

At least the information was what he required, and he decided to acknowledge that fact. “Roger, eight alpha niner,” he replied, and then for further clarification, “We understand you have shuttle operations in progress, over?”

“That’s a roger,” was the next transmission. “We’ve got about six zodiacs making a haul to a landing up an inlet. They’re lit up like IR Christmas trees—you can’t miss ‘em.”

These flyboys were completely out of control. There was no more heinous violation of radio protocols than to say “That’s a roger.” However, Pat knew he had a mission to accomplish, so he simply replied, “Alpha niner, I copy six small craft, over.”

Pat had served a stint as a tactical officer at Pensacola, where the flight school trained all of these yahoos. It was the closest he had come to a flight assignment, but his role there was to monitor the military discipline of the candidates, and to let the pilot trainers worry about their airborne acumen. He would admit that he held more than slight contempt for the entire community, bordering on resentment. He wondered briefly if the voice at the end of the signal could be one of his former charges. He suspected it when the next transmission told him, “Ya got a good copy, over.”

Pat let the pilot know, “Roger, alpha niner. I’m scrambling three small craft. You need to remain on station to vector them in, over.”

“We’ll be up here as long as you need us,” came the quick response, “I’ll keep an eye out for them.”

The sound of the voice rattled Pat’s memory, and he made a positive identification of the pilot. In his two years as a tactical officer, he only had one ensign candidate whom he would have preferred to remove from the service, and that was a smart-ass civilian who was clearly in his beloved Guard as a stepping stone to the commercials. While lots of pilots were on this career path, there was one in particular made it abundantly clear that he had no room on his agenda for military discipline, and Pat was almost able to use that to terminate his service. His name escaped Pat momentarily, but he knew it would come to him. However, Pat’s thoughts were interrupted by a new voice on the net.

“Niner, this is Base, over.” It must have been the pilot’s base at E-City, and it was clear to Pat that the lack of proper communications procedures had the base as their source.

“What ya got, Base?” Pat heard next.

“We’re monitoring this operation—keep us posted,” came the base’s instruction. Pat felt that this might be a way for the pilot’s base to suggest he clean up his act, but the response let Pat know that this was not to be the case.

“You got it,” the pilot said

*Whatever happened to ‘WILLCO, over,’* Pat thought, but he had more important things to worry about at the moment.

The surface operations would be monitored by Wilmington Base, but Pat understood that the pilot’s contribution was going to be of interest to his own headquarters until the mission was completed.

Pat wondered if the patrol craft had passed the outer banks yet, and if he should begin to bring them in on the operations. Surely they had monitored everything so far, but before he could determine their status, he heard the next transmission from the pilot, “PCs, this is niner in the sky, do you copy?”

“Roger, niner, this is foxtrot one, over,” came the immediate reply. Obviously the craft had come into the pilot’s view, and he was engaging them as quickly as possible.

The pilot continued, “You’ve got shuttle ops going on right now, two are headed to the inlet and one’s outbound. The fourth one’s doing the transload at the cargo ship. Must mean there’s two at the landing.”

“This is foxtrot one, roger, over,” came the response from the patrol craft.

Pat did a quick assessment, and he realized that he now had enough information to get the surface operation under way, so he summoned his three surbordinate craft. “Foxtrot one, foxtrot two, foxtrot three, this is seven delta four, over,” he began.

“This is foxtrot one, over.”

“This is foxtrot two, over.”

“This is foxtrot three, over.”

Pat found it refreshing to hear correct radio procedures. “This is delta four,” he continued, “I need foxtrot one to follow in my wake to the cargo ship—alpha niner can vector you if required. Foxtrot two, foxtrot three, you need to continue up the coast to the inlet to intercept the shuttles and prevent escape, over.”

The three PCs responded in order.

“This is foxtrot one, WILLCO, over.”

“This is foxtrot two, WILLCO, over.”

“This is foxtrot three, WILLCO, over.”

Pat felt certain that if the information the pilot had given him was correct, that this would ensure the shuttle operations were shut down without any contraband getting away, whether it was drugs or something of an even more nefarious nature.

“Delt four, this is A 9, you got visual yet?” Pat heard next, as the lights from the ship had just come into view, and he had intended to inform the pilot of this fact momentarily.

“This is delta four, affirmative, I’m going dark over,” he offered, and immediately signaled to a Lieutenant to black out the ship.

“Got it,” came the response, “I’m dropping to five hundred and going over land to give the PCs and the ground-pounders a hand. I don’t wanna spook your target.”

*This was a pretty savvy tactical move*, Pat thought.

“Rodger, this is delta four out,” he told the pilot, letting him know that he was about to have his hands full and couldn’t be bothered with further radio traffic.

Pat was able to guide his cutter up alongside the cargo ship without incident, and as his boarding party executed their mission, the ship’s crew offered no resistance. Clearly they were not expecting to get caught, nor were they willing to hazard an international incident.

“You get the one on the left, I’ve got the one on the right,” was the next transmission to break the radio silence.

Pat knew that his patrol craft were in hot pursuit of two shuttle craft, and he appreciated that they were so deeply engaged in their operations that they may not even have time to use call signs.

Presently, the Lieutenant from the boarding party appeared on the bridge, and gave Pat a full report of what they had captured. Pat decided to share the information with the pilot, his PCs, and both bases all at once by sending, “All stations this net, this is lima two seven delta four, the cargo ship is secure, and it looks like we just netted the most heroin I’ve ever seen in one place. Are we all secure?”

“This is foxtrot two,” came a quick response, “two empty zodiacs got away, but we have the two with the cargo, and the ground operation is pretty well wrapped up, over.”

“Roger,” Pat acknowledged, and then he instructed, “My vessel’s going to escort the cargo ship to Norfolk, coordinate with the local authorities, and get the contraband back to base.”

“This is foxtrot one, WILLCO, over.”

“This is foxtrot two, WILLCO, over.”

“This is foxtrot three, WILLCO, over.”

With the operation in hand, the pilot’s name finally popped into Pat’s head.

“Alpha niner, this is delta four, over,” he said to get the pilot’s attention.

“Go ahead four,” came the expected response.

“Is that you, Perkins?” he asked.

“That’s a roger, Commander,” came the quick reply.

“Helluva job tonight, Perkins, glad to have you on our team.”

“It’s my pleasure, Sir,” the pilot offered. Pat was sincere in his praise. This haul was going to look real good on his record, and in fact it would almost ensure a future promotion to Captain. The assistance of Perkins and his C-130 had been instrumental in what they had accomplished, and in spite of his lax attitude, the pilot had demonstrated remarkable tactical prowess. Maybe it was a good thing that Pat had been unable to run him out of the Guard as an ensign candidate.

“This is delta four, out,” Pat said to himself without cueing the mike.

The Morning

found Shirley lying atop the covers, still in her orange jumpsuit. She had been so exhausted that as soon as Agent Goodwell closed the door on his way out, she had nearly collapsed, and barely had the wherewithal to unplug the air freshener on her way to the bedroom. With a full night’s sleep under her belt it was now time to take stock of her situation, which included the immediate requirements of removing the jumpsuit and making use of the facilities.

Returning to the bedroom, Shirley first inspected the bureau drawers, and discovered that virtually the complete contents of her apartment had been transferred to the safe house. Once again the revulsion stemming from the privacy violation at the hands of the federal government was overcome only slightly by the appreciation of the presence of familiar creature comforts, and she slipped into a favorite pair of sweats. A perusing of the refrigerator and kitchenette cabinets yielded similar results, although she noted that the stockage levels had increased significantly from their customary sparseness, and she chuckled over the fact that she was being indulged with a personal valet at the expense of the taxpayers. This only gave her pause for a moment, since Tommy’s remark the previous evening about the possibility of an extended stay had not given her a warm feeling about making a quick return to her normal life. Grabbing a yogurt, pouring a glass of orange juice, and sitting at the kitchen table, Shirley moved the mouse on the laptop and saw she was logged in and ready to surf. She Googled Nasser Backer, but got no hits.

Moving to the love seat, she flipped through the stack of magazines, and marveled at the thoroughness of the government’s database. Included were the latest copies of *Nature*, *American Scientist*, *Scientific American*, *Scientist*, and *Foreign Affairs*. *US News and World Report* and *The Economist* were conspicuously absent, but Shirley realized that the only magazines present were the ones she had checked out as back copies for reading at home, and that fact that she read her two favorite magazines fresh off the shelf before indulging in any of the library’s other offerings was what was now keeping them from her. She considered a call to her personal valet, but rejected the idea in favor of casually mentioning it to her next visitor, just to see how detail-oriented the Feds were.

Taking a deep breath, Shirley made a conscious decision to stay true to her routine for the duration of her incarceration, and committed herself to beginning her day as she always did—with a hearty workout. Returning to the bedroom, she was confident she would find her gym shoes in the wardrobe and a sports bra in the dresser, and she was not disappointed. She went to inspect the elliptic machine, and noted that not only was it like the ones from her gym, but it was one of the machines from her gym. A towel was draped over one of the handles, and an empty plastic cup was in the bottle holder. Shirley would have preferred not to see the cup, since she had slight congestion due to mild allergies and the cup served as an expectoration receptacle so she wouldn’t have to swallow phlegm during her routine. She shook her head in disappointment with Jessica, her personal trainer, and wondered what other deep personal secrets had been divulged during what must have been an arduous interrogation. She made a mental note to never share personal secrets with Jessica, or any other living human being, again.

As she unrolled the yoga mat from the corner, she marveled at the effort Goodwell had undertaken to make her comfortable, but then, recalling how narrowly she had escaped her demise, she bristled at the amount of time that must have been wasted un-Backering and Shirleyfying the room when he should have been rushing over to save her. She concluded that the Agent had just earned himself an earful upon their next encounter. After fifteen minutes of stretching—so crucial to her profession—Shirley began her workout. She was normally able to complete thirty-five pushups before dropping to her knees to reach the count of fifty, but the previous day’s events had taken their toll, and twenty-five was all she could manage. She had less trouble completing her standard hundred crunches—again, tight abs attracted larger bills—but twice she felt the orange juice rise in her throat. Since she hadn’t made the walk to the gym she was starting too soon after eating, and realized she would have to make some minor adjustments to her daily regimen.

After a sip of water, she returned to the elliptic machine, turned on the TV (it was already set to the news channel) pushed the power button, and selected a pre-set routine. She had missed the news the previous day, and was eager to get caught up. After a few stories highlighting global economic peril and further bank collapses, the local news provided the clarity she had been seeking since her nightmare had begun Friday evening. The talking head spewed forth…

“In local news we have an update on the story we first broke here yesterday about the alleged assassination of an al-Qaida informant. We are pleased to be joined by the two officers from the Hoboken Police Department who made the arrest, and we now go live to Wayne Dodson in Hoboken for more detail on the story.”

The talking torso picked up where the talking head had left off. “Good morning, this is Wayne Dodson reporting live from Hoboken and joining me are Sergeant Robert Fusco and Officer Mike Patricelli of the Hoboken Police Department. Officers, I understand you were the ones to capture the alleged al-Qaida hit woman shortly after the informant was shot.”

When the camera panned to the two officers Shirley nearly fell off the elliptic machine. Fusco’s partner was Mike the bartender. His was the same voice she had heard at the station instructing the female officers to print her, and it explained his hiding behind the mirror in the interrogation room. Mike was looking a little sheepish, perhaps knowing that this exposure could doom them, but Fusco was in his element.

“Yes Wayne,” Fusco began, “amazingly the shooter tried to depart the club with the murder weapon in her purse, and we immediately took her into custody.”

Dodson continued his line of in-depth, investigative reporting, “And I understand that you have not released her identity, and that she is no longer in your custody.”

“That’s correct,” Fusco continued, “for her own protection, and so that we don’t compromise the ongoing investigation, we have not released her identity. In fact we turned her over to the FBI yesterday afternoon. Because of the terrorism implications of this case, they have taken over the investigation.”

It was a well-rehearsed response, and had Shirley not known better, she might have been convinced of his sincerity. The talking torso continued.

“Well officers, the FBI has had no comment on this case so far, but if this could possibly lead to the breakup of a terrorist cell right here in New Jersey you will certainly have the thanks of a grateful nation.”

“Well, we’re just doing our jobs,” Fusco announced triumphantly, without a hint of modesty.

“And monkeys are flying out my ass,” Shirley observed from her elliptic machine.

“Uh, thank you,” added Mike, unconvincingly.

As Dodson concluded and the program switched back to the studio, Shirley clicked off the TV and went into auto-pilot on the elliptic. She did some of her best thinking while exercising, and if she ever needed to do her best thinking, this was the time.

“So,” Shirley announced to herself, “Mike and Fusco did this together. They’re probably working for someone big—someone with access to classified FBI information—and this hit was a few weeks in the making. Miguel’s arrest had to be part of the setup, and Mike got the job moonlighting by applying a little pressure to Madame Z—after all, her bartender had been dealing happiness. Mike had gathered enough dope on the dancers to determine that Edith would make the best patsy, but whatever their plan was, they had hit a few snags.”

Several questions remained. Goodwell had admitted to her, but not to the press, that Backer’s alleged identity was correct. It didn’t make sense, though, that these two crooked cops were AQ. There had to be another reason for the hit, and it had to be so big that these fools were willing to risk the loss of critical intelligence that might save American lives. Fusco seemed to have an in with the 9/11 crowd, so it was doubtful he was with AQ. Tommy had suggested that Homeland Security didn’t even know Backer was in the country, but she couldn’t conceive of a reason for DHS to be involved with the hit. She continued her workout, and by the time the machine signaled that an hour had passed, she had a fairly coherent picture of what might be going on. After an abbreviated cool-down stretch, she toweled off her face and hands and went over to the phone.

Since it was Sunday morning, she first tried the cell, with no luck. She next hit the button for home, and got an answering machine. She noted, with a slight blush, that his answering machine was undeniably that of a bachelor. Finally, out of frustration, she went for the long shot, and called his office. The pick-up was immediate.

“Special Agent Goodwell speaking.”

“Tommy, it’s Shirley. You’re working on Sunday?”

“It’s been a long night,” came the reply. “How are you doing?”

“Have you seen the news?” she asked. “They just interviewed Fusco, and his partner was our bartender.”

Dead silence. And finally, “I wonder why he never mentioned that to us.”

“Anyway, I think I’ve figured out what happened,” Shirley said.

“I’ll be right over. One of us was going to check on you this morning anyway, so it might as well be me. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Cute,” Shirley chided, having recently heard that response to a similarly sarcastic quip, and having decided it was slightly more refined than some of the ones she had been borrowing from Edith.

After she hung up, she considered a quick shower, as even on Sunday morning the trip would take him a good twenty minutes. However, the lure of a laptop that didn’t require a library card—although it was certainly being monitored—distracted her, and she sat down at the kitchen table. Unfortunately, Fusco and Patricelli had much less of a web presence than she had anticipated, and she soon found herself lost behind a sequence of random clicks.

The Investment Banker

sat in his car behind the gas station on the deserted coastal highway. The evening was quiet and the station was empty as the vacationing crowd in the waning days of summer was holed up in bungalows after a full day of sun, surf, and golf. He had been chosen for this assignment by his boss, and while he wasn’t the obvious choice, his presence here would offer the old man a little security and peace of mind.

As he had done quite a bit recently, he rued his current lot. He had grown up near the Atlantic coast, but much farther north in Boston, and had never been near the North Carolina shore until this present operation. He was associating with a group of thugs and operatives that he never would have included on his list of social contacts, and the constant rehearsals near the small inlet had been no picnic.

It was his greatest disappointment that he had fallen this far. The sprawling mansion in which he had been born seemed to be his destiny, and he spent his youth taking for granted those things that others would consider a luxury. In fact, it became his expectation that if his parents might be inclined to deny him something, he always had a grandmother who would be more than happy to provide it.

He had attended the finest preparatory school, and like the rest of his family, was expected to spend a significant number of years pursuing an education. Since a sister of his father’s had dropped out of college to marry an artist in Stockbridge, most of the family considered her lack of diploma to be a mark of shame. While Eddie shared some of his aunt’s cavalier attitude, the family thought it best to immerse him in a program that would offer no distractions, so when time for high school came around, Eddie found himself loading his father’s corporate jet and heading to Chicago for boarding school.

Due to his superb Boston education, Eddie found that he was well ahead of his classmates in Chicago, but the extra time that this afforded him was not spent wisely, as he experienced minor discipline issues as soon as he arrived. However, he soon found a welcome distraction on the lacrosse field, and was able to transform from scholar to scholar-athlete to athlete by the end of his first year.

Eddie was unable to return to Boston for college, as his father’s alma mater seemed to value academic performance over athletic prowess, but he was able to secure acceptance to the University of Pennsylvania where he continued to distinguish himself on the lacrosse field. This was fortuitous, as he planned to follow his father, brother, and two sisters into the banking business, and the reputation he established for himself on the Philadelphia fields—in addition to an adequate academic performance that was motivated primarily by parental threats—meant that he would be able to pursue his business degree at Wharton immediately following graduation.

Three years later, MBA in hand, Eddie found himself on the trading floor of one of the most ruthless Wall Street firms. It was ironic that while his family connections and his top-notch degree made him attractive as a prospective employee, it was the aggression he had shown as a collegiate lacrosse player that finally secured the position. The firm valued in-your-face traders who were willing to beat down negotiators who either had the need to borrow large sums of capital or who had large quantities of money to lend. While the firm derived its profits from the narrowest of margins, the magnitudes of these transactions were such that Eddie secured seven-figure bonuses in each of his first three years on the floor.

However, Eddie soon found himself devoting the majority of his time to a single account from his portfolio that resulted in the movements of untold amounts of cash that, had he not chosen to ignore their origins, could have easily been discovered to have as their source one of the City’s most notorious crime families. A few short years later, Eddie moved up to portfolio manager with a single client under his charge, an arrangement that turned out to be very profitable for Eddie, his firm, and the Family.

When the crash brought an end to the firm’s operations, and their new parent company was unwilling to maintain that particular portfolio, Eddie finally approached the head of the Family and offered his continued services in any way possible. He was aware of the amount of capital that moved through the City under the guiding hand of the family’s patriarch, and he was more than willing to continue a relationship that would permit him to offer his attention to the flow of money.

The relationship certainly started in that vein, but the aggression Eddie had shown on the lacrosse field continued to permeate his performance, and the patriarch began to move him into business areas that, while no shadier than the monetary transactions he had guided, were perhaps a little more overt in their questionable nature. In fact, Eddie soon found himself as the go-to man for some of the Family’s most challenging operations, and a shipment of heroin that had been coordinated with the Chinese Mafia qualified as such an operation.

And so now here he was, on the Carolina coast with a number of the Family’s low-level operatives, rehearsing extensively the operation that was going to provide him, his boss, and several other family members the opportunity to leave the business and spend the remainder of their days in relative comfort. The haul would also prove profitable for the team he had assembled, so he had no questions about their loyalty or ability to execute the mission. He even overlooked the contempt he received at the hands of these thugs, whom he considered beneath him, and who were fully aware of this fact.

As Eddie sat low in his car, not wanting to draw any unnecessary attention to the operation that was to take place a few short miles away, he pondered how he had come so far down from his lofty upbringing. However, he rationalized that it was going to be worth it once this operation was completed. His thoughts were interrupted by the first transmissions to reach his ears over the walkie-talkie that he held in his hands. He didn’t want to be present at the landing, and he was going to drive well behind the convoy once the vehicles were loaded, but as he had been given responsibility for this operation, he needed to keep the thugs on a relatively tight leash. Additionally, he had a trusted foreman on the ground who would be a much better candidate for taking the fall should anything go awry.

As security was essential the mission was to be conducted under infra red illumination and with minimal communications, but the report from his henchman that the boats were inbound was a welcome sign. The walkie-talkies went silent after that, but several hours later Eddie was startled to action as the highway in front him suddenly lit up with a convoy of Sherriff’s vehicles that were going somewhere in a hurry, and Eddie decided to break the radio silence himself by communicating this fact to his operators.

“You’ve got black and whites incoming,” was the first message he sent to alert them to the problem.

“No shit,” came the immediate reply. “They’re already here.”

There were no subsequent transmissions. The vehicles Eddie had seen were coming from the neighboring county, as the locals had already secured the landing, disarmed the muscle, and taken his entire crew into custody. The cops were mostly local boys—hunters—who had no problems conducting a tactical assault on a number of city thugs. Since the thugs were so occupied with their winches, lifts, trucks, and IR light sources they were unable to detect movement in the woods until the heat from the spotlights that illuminated the landing blinded them through their infra red goggles.

Eddie noticed a slow-moving aircraft making circles above the landing site, and he remained in defilade for the remainder of the night. But when the glow of the dawn made the markings visible, he realized that the United States Coast Guard had also gotten in on the action. The Sheriff’s vehicles indicated that this was not a federal bust, and when he returned to his hotel later in the morning the local news made it clear that a bunch of local cops had been the ones to thwart this well-planned, well-rehearsed operation.

When he had gathered as much information as he could, he bit the bullet and made the phone call that would be more unpleasant than any other event in his career.

The Knock

on the door was an unnecessary formality, as it opened immediately thereafter. However, Shirley still appreciated the gesture as it seemed to be the first time since Friday night that the Federal Government had recognized she might welcome at least an iota of respect for her privacy. Tommy hadn’t been kidding about the rough night, for in spite of the dark shadow on his face, the bags under his bloodshot eyes, the tousled hair, and the disheveled clothing, he looked terrible. For a second Shirley felt a pang of gratitude for the willingness of some government employees to put the job first, but she remembered her primary order of business, and dropped the sympathetic thoughts quickly.

“I’ve got a bone to pick with you, Mister Special Agent Man,” she blurted out from the love seat before he had even closed the door.

“Well, good morning to you, too,” he replied wearily, “what do you have for us?”

He was clearly in no mood for sarcastic banter, or maybe he had no time for it, but Shirley chose to continue. “Not that I don’t appreciate your efforts to make this my cozy home-away-from-home here, but as you were duplicating every detail of my existence yesterday I was fearing for my life in the presence of an ever-growing death squad. Now, in my estimation, my life might have taken a small priority over stocking the fridge with my favorite flavor of yogurt.”

This brought a chuckle out of Tommy. “Actually, once we had spoken with Carmine, I went straight to the station, figuring you might be in danger at the hands of a setup. I had the rest of my Section—you’ll meet them—cover the places that DHS had given us. Two went to your apartment, one went to the library, and one hit the gym. One of the reasons I drove around in circles after leaving the station was to give them enough time to finish, Miss Smarty Pants, so I guess not all of your theories are flawless.”

The response deflated Shirley’s ire like a popped balloon, and she almost dropped her guard enough to let some sincerity leak out. “Well, you guys do think of everything, don’t you?”

“We’ve done this a few times before,” he admitted. “So, what do you have for us? I’m hoping your theories are going to improve from this point.”

“Yes, of course,” Shirley said, realizing that she had just wasted the time of someone who was trying to save American lives with a critical investigation, and sincerely desiring that her theory about Mike and Fusco was at least going to contribute.

She recounted all of the events as she recalled them, beginning with the Diplomat’s first appearance in the club, Miguel’s arrest, Mike’s sudden appearance as a replacement, and everything else up to and including the news report earlier that morning. She placed Mike as the shooter, with Fusco most likely as the co-conspirator who had hit the power, using the window for egress. Tommy wasn’t exactly new to investigations, but he was impressed with the level of detail and integration of events Shirley was able to provide. When she finished he was convinced that her version of the events was accurate, but he rationalized that his agents would have come up with the same conclusions had they known of Patricelli’s identity.

“OK,” he said, “so what’s your theory?

“Well, first of all, you’ve got a leak in your office.”

“Tell me something we don’t know already,” he said. “We were the only ones who knew of Baqr’s existence, except for the CIA, and they don’t operate here. Ms. Cruise and I have been behind closed doors most of the night trying to figure out how a couple of Hoboken cops were able to find out something that we hadn’t even shared with Homeland Security.”

“Who’s Ms. Cruise?”

“She’s my boss,” Tommy explained, “The Assistant Director in Charge of our field office.”

“Well I’m convinced that Fusco isn’t AQ,” Shirley said, pleased with the fact that she had been so quick to integrate the new lingo into her speech. “However,” she continued, “he’s gotta’ be part of something big.”

“We’re pretty certain he’s not AQ either,” Tommy’s agreed, “we’ve been digging through his data with DHS all night. He runs with a pretty sketchy crowd, but it includes a lot of 9/11 families, and we don’t think he could be that deep. He’s been with the force for over twenty-five years, and AQ didn’t even exist for most of his career.”

“Have you checked Mike?” Shirley asked.

“You mean Patricelli?” asked Tommy. “He wasn’t on our radar, but if he was moonlighting where Baqr was hanging out, he just moved way up on our list. The question is, why would he want to hit Baqr?”

“Well, that’s my theory,” said Shirley, “Backer wasn’t the target.”

“Then who was?”

“You guys were.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tommy asked after a pause, trying to let the idea sink in.

“Listen,” Shirley said, leaning forward in the love seat, “somebody wanted to disrupt your organization. You were holding Backer, and nobody outside your office knew about it. I’ll bet he’s told you things that have you real worried, and you’ve probably been super busy following up on his leads. Now there may be a chance he’s hitting too close to home for somebody, in which case you’ve got an AQ plant, which isn’t too likely. So I figured there’s something else going on and offing Backer is providing a much-needed distraction. The problem is I’ve got no idea who it could be, whether it’s the mob, foreign intelligence, or even Homeland Security. After getting to know Fusco so well, though, I’d have to bet on the mob.”

“Interesting theory,” said Tommy, pulling a chair up to the coffee table and making himself comfortable, “but why?”

“Isn’t that what you guys do?” asked Shirley, “figure crap like that out?”

“Yeah, I guess we do,” came Tommy’s resigned response. And then, changing the subject, he switched to polite conversation, “So how’s the surfing?” He indicated in the direction of the laptop.

“Not bad,” she said, although if I knew that I wasn’t safe surfing at the library, I’d have gone to an internet café or the Apple store.”

“Actually,” said Tommy, “home computers are the most secure. If someone wants access to your history they need a subpoena to squeeze it out of your ISP, and they’re usually really reluctant to cooperate unless we come in with a hammer. However, in the library, once you stick your card in the reader, Homeland Security has got you. Same with the stores or a café; there’s usually cameras around, so it’s not as safe as you think, although no one will ever take the time to match you to your image, unless you’re really interesting.”

“Well, I wish I had known all this. Maybe I should hook up at home,” Shirley concluded, and then, to let Tommy know the slight hadn’t gone unnoticed, she added, “So I guess I’m not that interesting.”

“Actually, your surfing was so bizarre that DHS was unable to put you into any category, so I guess that puts you into our category of interesting,’” Tommy said. “What are you doing on there?” he continued.

“Well, I thought I’d start by digging into my friends at the station, but I admit I got a little distracted when nothing popped up.”

“Well, it can be distracting,” Tommy said, nodding in the direction of the laptop that was humming on the table.

“Well, to be perfectly honest,” Shirley said, “if I were Al Gore, I wouldn’t be bragging about inventing the internet, but apologizing.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it’s the biggest waste of fricking time since the invention of television. All that men use it for is to surf porn, women waste hours using it to window shop, kids Facebook and chat with total strangers they wouldn’t give the time of day to on the street, and ninety percent of everything else is unedited tripe that idiots post to feed their bloated egos, and bigger idiots read as if it’s gospel.”

“Well, you sure spend a lot of time on it,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but I’m using it to expand my mind, so when everyone else has had their brain turned to mush by all this garbage, I’ll take over the world.”

“If you’re plotting anarchy, I’ll have to add you to our special list,” Tommy said, shaking a finger in her direction.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Shirley reassured him, “I’ll give you a nice position in my Department of Nosy Feds.”

“Thanks,” Tommy said, “but I’ve got other matters to deal with right now.”

“Like what?” Shirley asked, raising her eyebrows in feigned surprise.

“I need to get over to the Hoboken station,” Tommy explained, missing the sarcasm of her quip. “If your theories are correct, and right now that’s the way I’m leaning, I think the patrolmen from the club are going to be more help here than they ever imagined.” He headed towards the door. “So, is there anything else you need?”

“Yeah,” Shirley said, crossing her arms in mock defiance, “you guys missed a few details. Where’s my *US News* and *Economist*?”

“Oops, how silly of us,” Tommy said, “I’ll have them sent right over.”

He turned over his shoulder and sent her a wink as he stepped out the door.

The Cell Phone

rang. It was the one Guido had been expecting, but the call was coming much later in the day than he had hoped. There had been no news, one way or the other, since the operation began the previous evening, and he was more than a little anxious at this point. He picked up the phone.

“Yeah, what ya got for me?”

The voice on the other end hesitated. “Boss, we lost the shipment,” it finally said.

“What in the hell do you mean we lost the shipment?” the old man shot back.

“Look, Boss,” was the reply, “all hell broke loose last night. The local cops got the trucks at the landing, and the Coast Guard picked up the ship. Only two of the Zodiacs got away, but they didn’t have any merchandise—they were on their way back out when we got hit.”

“Were there any Feds there?” Guido asked, looking for any possible sign of a betrayal. The informant who had helped him set up this operation was perhaps a little too casual for the old man’s comfort, and the thought that he was being played for a sucker by a double-agent had crossed his mind at least once.

“I don’t think so, Boss,” was the guess. “The landing got jumped by local cops and I got the hell out of there. I only heard about the Coast Guard when one of our boys checked in later, although I think they had a bird in the air over the landing.”

“Was there any shooting?” the old man pursued, trying to gauge the loyalty of the crew his lieutenant had assembled for this critical task.

“None that I saw. Our muscle got ambushed, and they took them down so fast they couldn’t react.”

Guido mulled over how this could have happened. This was supposed to be a fool-proof operation. “How could we not see them coming? Didn’t we get NVGs for everyone?” he asked.

“Yeah, Boss,” was the explanation, but we were doing the whole thing under IR lights, and I think it blinded our guys to anything outside of the perimeter. They never saw them until it was too late.”

“Jesus Christ,” Guido blurted out, standing up from his chair. “Didn’t we rehearse this goddamned operation?”

“About a hundred times, Boss. We just didn’t expect them to hit us.”

“How many of our guys got taken down?” he asked, sitting down on his desk and staring numbly out the window.

“About two dozen,” came the expected reply, “but that doesn’t count the crew on the ship. I don’t know what the Coast Guard picked up, but they have that damn boat locked down tighter than a drum.”

“Fuck,” said Guido, now starting to show some real worry. “Our Chinese contacts aren’t gonna’ be too happy about this. Did we recover any merchandise?”

“No Boss, they got it all.”

“How in the hell could this happen?” Guido asked in frustration.

“Boss, I’ve got no idea. There were no Feds anywhere around, so I don’t think we had a leak. The local cops did the whole landing operation by themselves. Someone must have seen something and tipped them off, but I can’t figure out how the Coast Guard got there so quick without the Feds being in on it.”

“What are your guys gonna’ say?” There was a tremendous implication in this question, and the voice at the other end of the phone knew it.

“Don’t worry, Boss,” came the quick response. “Nobody’s gonna’ be able to tie this back to you.”

“Yeah, except the fuckin’ Chinese,” the old man said with resignation. “They’re gonna’ be pissed, but that’s my problem.”

“What do you need me to do, Boss?” came the eager response.

“Just lay low. Come see me in about a month. I’ll have something figured out by then.”

“Got it, Boss.”

As the line went dead when the caller hung up, the old man surveyed the city from his vantage point. The morning fog that the Hudson River so frequently spread over the city had not yet burnt off, and he imagined the streets to be river valleys, visible in the distance from a perch high atop a mountain. The image, however, only stuck fleetingly as he realized that his plans for spending his remaining years with such views may have just been jeopardized.

Guido closed the cell phone and dropped it into the basket. For all of his years with his hands in various businesses, there was one he could always count on for a steady income stream, and this time he was going to make it his magnum opus on a path to a well-deserved retirement from the industry. He had left Sicily as a teenager shortly after the Big War and had landed a job running numbers in the Big Apple. With a special knack for collecting payments he moved up quickly in the hierarchy of the organization, so when his patron had decided to expand the family holdings to include the opium trade, Guido was a logical choice to head that branch of the operations. The 60s had been a good time for the business, before government propaganda had soured the populace on the joys of partaking, but by the mid-70s he had built enough of a solid financial cushion that he was able to guide the family towards more legitimate enterprises, such as construction, sanitation, and, with the help of a few well-placed union officials, transportation.

Guido inherited the mantle of operations from his patron in an almost-bloodless transfer, although a cousin who might have had designs on the seat at the head of the table met with an unfortunate construction accident just after his patron’s death. During the 80s the business continued to prosper behind the walls of his well-established, legitimate operations; however, the import, manufacture, and sale of opium products always remained an integral part of his dynasty. Pressure from the Feds in the 90s had almost changed all that, as he several times considered shuttering that operation, but he survived a number of close calls, and that income stream was simply too lucrative to abandon. All that pressure went away, though, after 9/11.

The attack on America was probably the greatest thing to ever happen to the heroin trade. Whether it was a renewed feeling of national despair not felt since the early 70s, the country’s engagement in an unpopular military operation that drained the economy and sapped the nation’s morale, or the fact that the government propaganda machine took its eye off the drug ball for a moment in the face of a greater danger, the demand for his product had skyrocketed in recent years. There was a whole new generation of users who had never been told to “just say no” and who were engaging in a thrill their parents’ generation had skipped. The beauty, though, was that the attention that the Feds were paying to the industry was taking a back seat to the terrorist concern, and Guido’s operation appeared to be off the government’s map. The grandson of an associate, however, was reporting from inside the New York City Field Office that the domestic side of the war on terror was going almost too well. It appeared that the additional officers with which the Feds had filled their ranks post-9/11 were soon going to have very little to do with their time, and many would soon return to more traditional roles. This report had come just after Guido had entered into a significant business contract with his Chinese counterparts, and he needed a way to ensure that his operation would not be disrupted.

The shipment on the Chinese freighter represented the most substantial operation of his career, and it was going to be his ticket to buying his way gracefully out of the business. He owned an entire mountain in the Adirondacks, and he looked forward to nothing more than spending his twilight years in the well-earned comfort and security his spread provided, so he could engage in some of the finer joys he had never imagined existed as a young numbers-runner in the 1950s fresh off the boat from Sicily. Only he heard that the Feds were somehow tracking his operation, and with the wheels already in motion he needed a distraction so he could complete his plan. While his informant had not gotten into the Organized Crime Division, he did land an assignment with the coveted Counter-Terrorism Division, and that had given him the inside information he needed to create a diversion. With the Feds distracted, and the shipment getting dropped on a sleepy slice of the Carolina coast, his final delivery would arrive safely.

But somehow the local cops were able to trip up weeks of planning and rehearsals, not to mention a substantial investment in the latest technology to ensure secrecy. He imagined Barney Fife pulling a bullet out of his pocket and shouting “Halt! I have you surrounded! Now drop those automatic weapons, turn off those IR searchlights, and hand over that half a billion dollars worth of black tar.” Half a billion dollars. The street value of the shipment, once processed, was going to be astronomical. This was going to set him and his extended family up for the rest of their lives. This was going to let him sleep with both eyes closed for the first time since the War started in 1939. This was going to be the culmination of a career that saw far too much pain and suffering and was going to end with a well-deserved retirement, not to mention making him a hero with a large number of business associates.

The business associates. There was his primary concern. The Feds couldn’t link him to this operation, but he had investors in the City who weren’t going to be happy about getting zero return on their contribution, and the Chinese were going to be most displeased. While the ship and the rest of its cargo were going to be their problem, he had been the one with the plan for bringing the merchandise in, he had given the OK, and somehow, he had lost the shipment. This was not going to be easy to explain, and he couldn’t think of any possible way to bounce this back on his Asian partners.

Retirement was going to have to wait.

The Polite Knock

on the safe house door indicated to Shirley that it wasn’t just Tommy visiting.

“Come on in,” she shouted from her comfortable position on the love seat. She enjoyed copping an attitude with Tommy, but decided that she needed to exercise a little caution with any other federal agents before turning on her inscrutable charm.

She was a little surprised to see Tommy step through the door, but when he was immediately followed by an impressively-turned-out lady about her age, the reason for the soft knock became apparent.

“Shirley, I want you to meet Special Agent Joy Eastman,” Tommy began, and the Agent approached Shirley and stuck out her hand.

There was something about this Agent that Shirley immediately liked, so instead of returning the handshake she simply blurted out, “That’s it?”

Joy looked a little taken aback, and Tommy was mortified, but he managed to stammer, “What’s it?”

“Well,” Shirley explained, “I thought you Feds couldn’t introduce yourselves without also identifying your field office, flashing your badge, and presenting copious amounts of official documentation.”

With a wry smile, Joy immediately retracted her hand, pulled a leather holder with a badge and identification card out of her pocket, flashed it at Shirley, and said “Ma’am, I’m Special Agent Joy Eastman from the New York City Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

“Much better,” Shirley concluded, and then, with a wry smile of her own, extended her hand and said “Hi, I’m Shirley.”

“So I understand,” replied Joy, shifting her badge to the other hand and taking the hand that Shirley offered her.

“Well, now that introductions are done,” Tommy said, “we just wanted to come over and see how you’re doing today.” There was a slight hint of discomfort and formality in his voice, and Shirley wondered if this sheepishness was due to the sarcastic banter that had begun on his last visit, or if it was his familiarity with Joy that was causing him to put up a shield.

“Well, that’s very kind of you, Agent Goodwell,” Shirley replied. “Please pull up a seat and make yourself comfortable.”

Tommy did just that, but Joy made a beeline for the refrigerator and opened it up.

“So, Shirley,” she asked, indicating towards the magazines on the coffee table, “what’s keeping you entertained today?”

“Back copy of *Scientific American*,” Shirley said. “Chaotic interference in signal processing. It’s a miracle we can keep track of anything these days.”

Joy glared at Tommy. “Stripper, my ass,” she said.

“Hey, it pays the bills,” Shirley protested.

Joy had closed the fridge and after opening and closing the cabinets, walked straight to the bedroom and did the same with the bureau drawers.

Shirley turned to Tommy with an air of disgust and asked, “Who are you going to bring in next, a proctologist?”

“Sorry,” Joy shouted from the bedroom, and then returning, explained, “I just wanted to see how I did.”

“So you’re responsible for the transfer of my entire existence to this hole?” Shirley asked.

“Agent Goodwell thought it better that we do it with a woman’s touch,” Joy explained.

“Well, thanks, Joy,” Shirley said without a hint of sarcasm. “I do appreciate your efforts to make me feel at home here.”

Joy noticed Shirley stealing a glance in the direction of the elliptic machine, and immediately cut off Shirley’s next protest. “Jessica suggested the cup,” she said. “After we told her you were going into protective custody, she said that if we put it there, you would know that she was thinking about you.”

Shirley was really touched. “Wow,” she finally said, but not wanting to get too emotional, she added “I just figured that Tommy here had one of his thugs torture her until she spilled her guts.”

Joy chuckled, and Shirley wasn’t certain if this was due to the clever repartee or the familiarity she had just shown towards Joy’s boss.

“Well, I think that you’ll be pleased with where the investigation’s going,” Tommy said in what was clearly an attempt to reestablish a modicum of formality in the presence of his subordinate.

“Look,” Shirley said, “there’s no need for an investigation. I know exactly what happened.”

Tommy, who looked uncomfortable sitting up straight in his chair, leaned forward a little. “What’s that?” he asked.

“OK,” Shirley began, leaning forward herself. “I’ve already laid this out for you. Fusco and Mike did the hit. Mike had to be the shooter because he was right next to Edith at the bar. Furthermore, he had picked Edith out as a patsy since she’s always on that same pole, and plus she’s not exactly firing on all cylinders. Since there’s no way Fusco had gotten by Carmine, he had to have come in the window, which would have been a squeeze, but it’s doable. He hit the power, Mike probably had a laser sight that he snapped off later—that or some kind of night vision optics—and as soon as he got the shot off, he stashed the gun in the purse on Edith’s locker and came back out to the bar. In the meantime, Fusco flicks the power back on and scrams back out the window, ready to be the first to arrive at the scene.”

Joy, who had been leaning back against a chair at the kitchen table, sat up a little. “Then what?” she asked.

Shirley continued. “Since Carmine got a call off, a couple of uniforms showed up not long after Fusco entered, so he had to wing it from there. I really don’t think they were in on it, since they were taking pretty good notes. I do think that Fusco wanted the CSI folks there, however, since they were going to find the dirt on Edith. He knew that if he had the ladies leave first, that he would nail Edith with a building full of witnesses, and he could wrap up before the investigators found any inconsistencies.”

“Like what,” Joy asked.

“Oh, a few simple things,” Shirley said. “Like no powder on her hands, like she would have a tough time hiding a nine mil under her pasties, like I doubt she’s ever shot a gun in her life, like she’s got three kids and probably isn’t moonlighting as a hit-woman, and like Fusco’s a piece of shit who needs to fry. So go wrap this up and get me outta’ here”

“Wow,” said Tommy, “You’ve really thought about this, haven’t you.”

“Well you know,” Shirley said, “that’s what I do nowadays. I get to sit in my cell all day long thinking about what happened Friday night, since that’s what got me here in the first place.”

This elicited an audible chuckle from Joy, who explained, “You have to excuse my boss, Shirley. In addition to being a master of the obvious, he’s not the most sensitive guy in the world.”

“Tommy?” Shirley asked with mock surprise, “Oh, no. He’s actually really smooth once you get to know him.”

Joy outright laughed at this, but Tommy interrupted her.

“OK you two, enough, I get enough crap at the office. I don’t need to come here to get it as well.”

“Sorry, Boss,” Joy said quickly, still laughing, but Shirley wasn’t done.

“Aw,” she said, “do those mean agents pick on you?”

“All right,” he said, “you’ve done a pretty good job of putting this all together.”

Joy gave Tommy a slightly quizzical look from the table, and he nodded subtly.

“You know,” Joy began, “your story matches almost perfectly with what Carmine said. He never picked Patricelli to be the shooter, and he certainly didn’t have Fusco cutting the power, but the events really line up. I think he’d agree with you on pretty much everything, though.”

“So who’s behind it?” Shirley asked.

“That’s what we’re working on,” Tommy replied.

“Can you squeeze those bastards to see what pops out?” Shirley pressed.

“We’re sure gonna’ try,” Joy assured.

“Look,” Tommy said, “Do you need anything? We need to be getting back to our rounds. We were in the neighborhood, though, and I thought it would be a nice chance for you to meet Joy.”

“I’m good, but thanks.”

Shirley stood up as Tommy and Joy headed to the door, and as they were about to walk out, she couldn’t resist a final parting shot.

“Oh, Agent Goodwell,” she said in a singsong voice, “Don’t mind the chair, I’ll put it back myself.”

Shirley could hear Joy laughing the entire way up the stairs.

The Field Office

of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Manhattan was in chaos. The biggest drug shipment to ever reach the shores of the United States had just been detected by a retired cop sitting on a marina, and the entire Federal Bureau of Investigation, which had been tracking the shipment for several weeks, failed to note its arrival. A seavan of raw opium was being transloaded via shuttle to a number of waiting trucks on the Carolina coast, and a bunch of local cops made the collar. The most significant drug bust these cops had ever made involved catching high school students with a few joints in their backpacks out behind the bowling alley, and now they were all over the news as national heroes.

The Deputy Assistant Director in Charge of the New York City Field Office was assembling all of the possible culprits. The Special Agent in Charge of organized crime was on the top of his list, as were his three section leaders who had been heading the investigation. The Division Chief for counter terrorism was high on the list, but as he was deployed to an overseas meeting, his senior section leader would have to do. A few more assorted technical experts needed to be rounded up, but no contractors. This meeting was going to be internal, off the record, and heads were going to roll.

In the next room Cynthia Cruise sat at her desk behind closed doors with her head in her hands. She was going to be on in about ten minutes, but she needed to regain her composure. She had just completed the most antagonistic discussion of her life with the Director, and she had no desire to convey the indignity she felt at the hands of her superior to any of her subordinates. When they were finally let in they were going to be met with the coolness of an ice cube, and would have no idea that their boss’ Teflon coating had finally failed to deflect a projectile after its thirty-five-plus years of service.

She had seen a meteoric rise to her current position, and she had no intention of this being her terminal assignment with the Bureau. She may have ruffled a few feathers on her way up, and even worse, stood on the shoulders of a fair number of competent subordinates, but she had the fullest confidence in her own abilities, and looked at her position as the Department’s “golden girl” almost as a birth right. In fact, the only setback she had ever experienced was years earlier when she had lobbied hard for the coveted counter terrorism division in the same office, and instead had received the consolation prize of organized crime. After 9/11, however, she had emerged with no stink on her coat and she catapulted past the apparent victor who would later add his own career to the list of victims of that attack.

Ms. Cruise, as she insisted on being addressed by all of her subordinates, remembered well her earlier days with the Bureau when women were treated like outsiders, and while the tables had now turned somewhat, she derived a slightly perverse pleasure of running her field office with perhaps a greater amount of formality and adherence to protocols than was necessary to nurture a successful organization. During the number of assignments she had enjoyed in the Washington, D.C. headquarters she had made some adjustments to her demeanor and, some might say, aloofness. With this being her second field office, though, she could sculpt her fiefdom to her liking, knowing that she alone held the Director’s ear. Only this morning what she had received was an earful, and she had every intention of passing it on to her subordinates as she saw their failure almost as a personal affront on her career aspirations.

She had grown up on a small family farm outside of Cincinnati, and except for her academic performance and participation on the cross country team, had not distinguished herself during high school, perhaps more due to her family’s low expectations for a daughter than to any of her own shortcomings. Her parents were at best distant, and the occasional sarcastic quip concerning her lack of talent to rise above their current lot had a stifling effect on the young girl’s ability to reach her fullest potential. However, her father had a modest retirement from his years with the local plant, and combining this with a partial academic scholarship was enough to permit attendance at Ohio State University. It was in this environment that she finally blossomed.

With no obstacles to her ambitions she breezed through the Criminal Law program while tackling two languages and maintaining a respectable position on the cross country team. She was considering a leap to graduate school when an admiring professor suggested that with her intellect and physical stamina, she might try for a position with the Bureau. It was a decision she never regretted, and when she was able to pick up a Master’s years later at the Government’s expense she decided it was the best career decision of her life. In fact, since many of her classmates from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces were now holding key roles in the Department of Defense, Homeland Security, the CIA, and various other government agencies, she had watched her personal stock skyrocket in a new environment of inter-agency cooperation.

While joining the Bureau as a woman in the Seventies was not easy, a lucky break in high profile kidnapping case brought her to the attention of the upper echelons of the Bureau hierarchy, and from there her career had taken off. She suspected that many former peers would relish her falling from her pedestal, but she had read so many of her press releases that she had come to believe them. In spite of the embarrassment that her office was causing the Bureau, not necessarily through a blown operation but more through a missed opportunity, she was confident that this minor setback would pass. If nothing else, the pressure she would exert on her subordinates in a few short minutes would compel them to perform, if not out of loyalty, then in the interest of their own insignificant careers.

Tommy didn’t realize it, but his invitation to the meeting was not only due to his boss’ current absence, but was by the explicit direction of Ms. Cruise. If she had learned anything on her way to the top it was to put her trust in proven talent, and in this case, she was going to need his insights to get through this ordeal. As her special agents and chiefs filed in, they stood nervously around the small table until she offered a curt, “have a seat.”

Her Deputy directed the Chief of the Organized Crime Division to the chair to her right, and everyone in the room knew that particular seat was going to become very hot.

“Can you describe, for the benefit of all those present,” she began without looking up, but clearly addressing the seat to her right, “the precise journey undertaken by a certain cargo ship that is now in the possession of the United States Coast Guard, and tell us which agencies, both domestic and international, have contributed to our understanding of what its possible purpose might be.”

The Chief in the hot seat began, “Well, as you know, Ma’am, this ship departed Shanghai several weeks ago. As its ultimate destination was Newark-Elizabeth the ship had a security inspection as agreed to by all of the post-9/11 international protocols, and it came up clean. However, the South Korean Navy reported that it made a detour to the north once it entered the South China Sea, and it appeared to pick up a single container from a cargo barge out of Pyongyang. The Koreans told Japan and Europe, and once the ship crossed the Suez, Interpol started tracking it. It made five stops in the Med, but when it passed Gibraltar still carrying the container, Interpol alerted us. That’s where we first picked it up.”

He gave a brief pause, knowing that everyone present knew this story as well as he did, but as his boss was going to use this to prove a point, she simply said, “Go on.”

The Chief continued, “Since the only things Kim Il Sung is exporting right now are counterfeit 100s and opium, organized crime picked this up instead of CT, as we could probably get a lot more mileage out of this operation than they could. Much to our surprise, the ship went straight to Porto La Guiria where it was re-flagged, and we watched it come as far as Havana Harbor, where it’s been sitting for several days. The next thing we know, the Coast Guard is picking it up off the Carolina Coast.”

“Thank you,” began Ms. Cruise. “The intelligence assets that went into the tracking of this container, the favors that were called in under the spirit of international cooperation, the blow we might have made to someone’s processing ability if we had been able to track the merchandise to its ultimate destination—all these things have tremendous implications for our office and organization. Instead, a bunch of hick cops got their pictures in the paper, and we’ve got nothing after all we put into this. Now how the hell could this happen?”

The Chief, never one to shy away from an accusation, shot back immediately, “Well, Ma’am, when we all started focusing on Baqr, I’ve got to admit we took our eyes off some very important balls.” This was a direct affront, as Ms. Cruise had personally directed organized crime to divert assets to counter terrorism in the wake of the Baqr shooting.

A light bulb immediately went on for Tommy, but Ms. Cruise’s deputy was too quick to defend his boss for the Agent to interject.

“Now wait a fricken’ second,” he barked. “There is no way you’re gonna’ throw this back in our faces. We told you to go into the assist mode, not to drop every ball you had in the air and let them fall to the ground.”

The assemblage immediately disintegrated to a food fight, with very little productive contribution, and a significant amount of turf defense, accusations, and general unpleasantries that had become the norm under the guiding hands of the current boss. While this type of careerist mud-slinging rarely happened in her presence, the tension in the room was such that this venting had been long-overdue, and Ms. Cruise let the melee continue for a good fifteen minutes. Many of the accusations had been directed towards Tommy’s Division, but as he was one of the junior participants, he chose not to respond on behalf of his boss. These were issues that could be resolved at a time when cooler heads prevailed. Finally, Ms. Cruise interjected, but not in the manner everyone was expecting.

“Tommy,” she began, “You’ve been awfully quiet through all this. What are you thinking?”

“Well, Ma’am,” Tommy started slowly, “I’m not really worried about how we might have gotten to this point. I’m more concerned about what we might be able to learn from it so we can all move forward. Something the Chief said here really has me going, though, and if you would all indulge me a minute, I think I might have a pretty clear picture of the events of this past week.”

“Please,” encouraged Ms. Cruise.

“At this point,” he continued, “I’m thinking that Baqr’s death was not an AQ hit, but was instead something like a convenient opportunity to throw our office into chaos. Now somehow those Hoboken clowns knew who Baqr was, but it was so unlikely that they had AQ ties that I figured they were putting up a smoke screen for something else. I had no clue what else might be going on that would be so big that we needed to be out of the way, but right now I’m thinking that a half-billion in horse could probably be a good reason for someone to want to redirect our attention. The problem is, since we don’t know where the heroin was going to be taken, we can’t close the loop on this damn thing, unless we can put the squeeze on our big-mouths across the river.”

A few low whistles punctuated the completion of this diatribe, and everybody in the room paused while the theory sunk in. Finally Ms. Cruise broke the silence, “I think we all know what we need to do right now. Get back to work, all of you, and Tommy, you stay here a second.”

She motioned to her Deputy to close the door from the inside, and when the three of them remained, she spoke directly to Tommy in a low voice. “Weren’t all of your people poly’d after that idiot blabbed on TV?”

“Actually, the whole Division has already gone through it twice each, and we all passed,” he assured her.

“Then how did they know who Baqr was?” she continued.

“Well, Ma’am,” Tommy started slowly, as he was still thinking, “I think we’ve been asking the wrong questions.”

“What do you mean?”

“During the polygraph, we’ve been focused on seeing who might have an AQ or some other terrorist connection. As I expected, nobody came up hot. However, I’ll bet that if we do it again and look for a mob tie, particularly in relation to this operation, that we’ll probably pop out the leak.”

“I agree,” she said, and then, turning to her Deputy, she added, “Get it done.”

“WILLCO, Ma’am,” came the well-conditioned response.

As Tommy walked out, he made a mental note to thank Shirley for planting the seeds of a theory that seemed a little far-fetched at the time, but in light of recent events had every indication of being near the mark.

The Magazines

waving from behind the just-cracked door caught Shirley’s eye, and were her first indication that she had a visitor. Her immediate response was to blurt out, “Don’t you people believe in fucking knocking?” but she immediately checked herself, removed her ear buds, and instead conjectured, “I’m guessing that you knocked and I didn’t hear it over the music,” and not wanting to sound too gracious as the captivity was starting to take its toll, added, “and for your sake I’d better be right.”

Tommy chuckled as he poked his head around the door, and said, “You know, I can hear that thing from out here, and it can’t be good for your ears.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“So what are you rocking out to this morning?” he continued.

“It’s a Scarlatti sonata, not that you’ve ever heard of Scarlatti, and I doubt that that you even have any idea what a sonata is.” Shirley continued with the attitude. She had never minded days alone when she had the freedom to come and go as she pleased, but now that departure wasn’t an option, the routine which she had executed in perfect comfort for several years was grating on her. It wasn’t that she missed her chats with Edith on the way to the club, her gentle sparring with Carmine as she came and went, and especially not the attention she received nightly at the hands of groping letches. It was more the casual, insignificant interactions of her daily grind that she missed. She was beginning to realize that these little things were important to preserving her sanity as only a slightly participative member of the human race. It was Jessica encouraging her as she walked past between sets in the gym, the stolen jealous glances of the admiring gym patrons behind her as she performed her magic on the elliptic, the casual remarks of the clerks at Whole Foods during her weekly checkouts, the pleasant—but meaningless—conversations she struck up with the librarian every afternoon, and even the random greetings of strangers on the sidewalks as she drudged through her routine. It was beginning to occur to Shirley that for a lone she-wolf, she certainly thrived on insignificant human interaction, and that deep down she was beginning to suspect that she was a bit more of an extrovert than she would have ever cared to consider.

“Actually,” Tommy indicated, “We have all been fascinated at the iTunes account activity we’ve been monitoring, particularly with Uncle Sam footing the bill, but your taste in music has become one of our favorite diversions during these troubled times.”

Again, Shirley felt the twinge of resentment stemming from another governmental intrusion. However, she acknowledged that the bills for her purchases were most likely going directly to the monitor of some penny-pusher in Tommy’s office, and she was filling up her iPod at their expense. Still, wanting to keep the banter contentious, she said, “I’m guessing that I’m going to run out of memory long before Uncle Sam runs out of money.”

“Just don’t download any porn,” Tommy said. “We’ve had issues with that in the past.”

“You shouldn’t speak ill of the recently departed,” Shirley said.

“Hey, I never said it was Baqr,” Tommy blurted out in defense, and changing the subject he indicated to the magazine in her hands and asked, “So what fascinating scientific tidbit are we perusing today?”

Shirley placed the latest copy of *Science* on the coffee table and explained, “A neat bit of paleontology. It seems the guys who originally named the ‘*Oviraptor’* did so because they found a male who had perished amongst a nest of eggs, and they assumed he was stealing them. Turns out he was guarding them, not unlike today’s Rheas or Cassowaries. The whole thing is based on clutch size relative to body mass, and the argument is pretty compelling. These poor dinosaurs have been falsely accused for decades, and I can sympathize completely.”

“Well, talk about a bad *rap*,” Tommy replied, and Shirley’s groan at the pathetic—but quickly delivered—pun seemed to diffuse a small bit of her attitude, and even allowed Tommy a quick chuckle. “Anyway,” he continued, “I’m here on a mission that’s vital to our nation’s security, and I’ll not have any more of your senseless chatter.” He handed her the two magazines he had waved upon entering, the *Economist* and *US News* she had requested.

“We’ll, it’s about damn time,” Shirley scolded with mock indignation. She knew he must be working like crazy with the recent demise of a critical intelligence source, and she appreciated the time his people were taking from their hectic schedules to check up on her. “So, any new developments in the business of securing our borders?” she continued.

“We think you were right about Baqr’s death,” he replied. “Have you seen anything on the drug haul off the Carolina coast,” he asked as he pulled a chair over from the kitchen table.

“I caught it on the evening news,” she said. “I’m a little surprised you guys weren’t in on it,” she added.

“Well, we were supposed to be. Only our office plunged into chaos with Baqr’s hit, and our organized crime section took their eyes off that ball. We really missed an opportunity to track the goods to a lab, but now that we think we know the shooters—thanks to you and Carmine—and we’re getting a fix on the leak in our office, it shouldn’t be long before we put the squeeze on the kingpin. We just have to be real careful not to tip our hand before we can complete the picture.”

“Told you so,” Shirley gloated, “But don’t worry. I’ve got the utmost confidence in my federal government’s ability to get their man.”

“Thanks,” said Tommy, echoing her sarcasm. “What’s really got us though is that we brought Baqr over because he got wind of an impending operation, and we thought he might be able to make contact with the cell leader before it went down. Well, not only was he unable to make contact, but now he’s dead, we’re grasping at straws, I’ve got a bad feeling that Americans are going to be dying soon, and there’s nothing we’re going to be able to do to stop it. All for a damn shipment of horse.”

“Such language,” Shirley admonished, “but I’m sure you guys will solve this case.”

“Why is that?” Tommy asked, hoping for a bit of insight that might get the investigation moving. After all, it was Shirley’s hint that resulted in the only explanation his office had been able to produce for Baqr’s execution.

“Weren’t you paying attention a second ago?” Shirley teased, “I told you I’ve got the utmost confidence in my federal government.”

“Well there ya go,” said Tommy, a little disappointed that he wasn’t going to get any immediate insights. “Case solved.”

“Good,” Shirley concluded, “now go arrest everyone involved so I can get out of here.”

“Speaking of which, do you have everything you need?” Tommy asked, as if it was a required part of his required visit.

“Dunno,” came the quick response, “it depends how long you’re gonna’ keep me locked up in here.”

“Look,” Tommy said, “if this isn’t working, I know a few guys down in Hoboken Central who would be happy to throw you in their lockup.”

“My, aren’t we testy,” Shirley shot back, “I was just kidding.”

“So was I,” Tommy chuckled, “and believe me, there’s no one who wants you out of here more than I do.”

“I can think of one,” Shirley disagreed.

“OK, you got me there,” Tommy said, “but seriously, if there’s something you need, just let us know.”

Shirley had been avoiding a topic for the duration of the visit, and she decided to test the waters. “Thanks,” she began, and then continuing, she suggested, “So, Joy seems like a real sharp cookie.”

“Oh, she’s certainly one of our best,” Tommy offered.

The noncommittal response failed to assuage Shirley’s curiosity one way or the other, so she added, “Well I really like her.”

“She’s a really good agent,” Tommy said, and Shirley decided that this line of interrogation wasn’t going to succeed, particularly since Tommy had already hinted that he was on his way out the door.

“Not that I’m enjoying my incarceration at the hands of the Feds, but I really do appreciate what you’re all trying to do for me,” she said. It was one of those rare times that Shirley was sincere.

“Look,” Tommy said, “I know this is tough, but it’s gonna’ work out, and at least you’re safe here, and that’s the most important thing.”

“No,” Shirley disagreed again, “the most important thing is you nailing those bastards, which you’re not gonna’ do sitting around here, so you go get back to work so we can all sleep safe and sound.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Tommy said, smiling as he got up to put the chair back and make his way out the door.

The Polygraph

examiner entered the FBI field office like she always did—wheeling a suitcase that contained an odd assortment of various contraptions that comprised her livelihood. It was her third trip up from Washington since Saturday, but the routine work she had scheduled at Andrews Air Force Base was going to have to be put on hold yet another day. Requests from an Assistant Director usually meant the job was of the highest priority, as the contract managers at the Defense Intelligence Agency understood. In this case, when the investigations were centering on an AQ informant for whom DIA had shared a hand in transporting out of theater and into the country, they were more than happy to let their routine investigations slip another day. The examiner had been instructed to go directly to the Deputy’s office to receive a briefing, not that this was unusual, but it would be the third time this week she had received such a briefing, and she suspected that some new information had come to light. As she passed the office of the Assistant Director in Charge, she briefly poked her head in the door and offered a pleasant, “Good morning, Cynthia.”

Ms. Cruise, not surprised at the interruption as she was expecting this visitor, lifted her head from her papers and replied, “Thanks for coming up again, Nina.”

“No problem,” came the quick reply, and in fact, it wasn’t. Since the Bureau was covering her expenses, plus a significant fee that was written into her contract for short-notice deployments, Nina was more than happy to make the trip.

“Hey, stop by when you finish up today,” Ms. Cruise said in a voice that was louder than necessary. The volume was for the benefit of anyone who might be outside the office, and the suggestion was her way of letting the contractor know that while Nina would be receiving her instructions from the Deputy, anything unusual she might uncover in the day’s work was to be presented to Ms. Cruise exclusively.

The lack of formality the contractor exhibited might have seemed unusual to anyone familiar with the level of decorum that was otherwise demanded in the field office, but most of the agents knew Nina not only as the contractor who ran their polygraph tests, but as a former agent herself, and in fact, as a peer of Ms. Cruise’s from their earliest days with the Bureau. As Ms. Cruise was one of the first women to rise to the position of Assistant Director, Nina was one of the first women to reach full retirement, as they were both among the earliest crops of women to complete the training and enter the Bureau as Special Agents. Cynthia might have preferred having contractors in her office who were not quite so familiar with the details of her early career, but she held Nina’s talents in the highest regard, although she suspected the sentiments were not reciprocated.

The path that led Nina to her current position paralleled that of Ms. Cruise, but it started from even more humble beginnings. She didn’t quite claim the same level of drive as her longer-serving peer, and while she may have exceeded her in competence, it was Cynthia and not Nina who was selected early to be the Bureau’s example of how quick it was to break down the gender barriers that it had embraced for so many decades.

Nina had been born to an unwed teen mother in Huntsville, Alabama, a few years before that town found itself on the map due to the nation’s burgeoning space industry. Her fundamentalist grandparents, displeased with the shame their daughter had brought to their house, were quick to expel her from under their roof. Nina’s mother had already dropped out of high school and found shelter in a trailer park, where her employment as a waitress was barely sufficient to cover rent and other minimal expenses. While the welfare checks helped as soon as she turned eighteen, Nina’s birth put her employment opportunities in serious jeopardy, until an older couple in the same compound offered to watch Nina while her mother struggled at the restaurant. Nina’s mother found herself cleaning, cooking, and running errands for two trailers, but it was a small price to pay for the day care that allowed her to continue to make ends meet.

Even before the dedication of the space center, Nina knew she was from a more humble lot than most other kids in town, but when the industry made Huntsville the most educated city in the South, the class difference became even more pronounced, and Nina found herself marked as “trailer park trash.” As her mother continued to work evenings, once Nina started school she was on her own, and she found herself striking back at her more privileged classmates the only way she knew how, and that was by striking back. Her reputation as a tough fighter spread throughout the community, and she became a near-permanent fixture in the principal’s office by the time she had entered the second grade. Nina’s mother, still struggling to pay the bills, was perhaps the only one who was not aware that she was raising a budding pugilist.

Word of her misdeeds had even reached the LaBarge couple, who had so kindly cared for her as an infant and who were still benefitting from the manual labor her grateful mother was willing to perform on their behalf. Mrs. LaBarge decided to extend after-school invitations to the young ruffian, to first keep her off the schoolyard where she had developed her reputation, and to perhaps impress on her the merits of being a proper southern lady, regardless of her social status. It was this influence that provided Nina her only semblance of dignity during her formative years, but it was enough to keep her on a reasonable path until an even stronger force was able to capture her attention and bring her back in line with the rest of society.

Nina’s mother never divulged to anyone the true identity of the father, and she would brush off all queries with the same response, “Look, he knocked up a seventeen-year-old high school girl. He wasn’t exactly a rocket scientist.” But in fact, that’s exactly what he was, as their single encounter occurred when he was visiting the soon-to-be space center on a trip from Houston. While he had no idea he had left a child in his wake, the girl’s aptitude for academics belied her humble origins. The growth of the space center had a profound effect on the town, as families that valued education began to pour in from all over the country, and Nina soon discovered that academic performance had a much greater effect on improving her status than fighting. As her conversations with the LaBarges started drifting towards the realm of scholarly achievements, the older couple felt a great amount of pride in what they perceived was a very bright future for this young lady, and they just hoped that the Good Lord would recognize that they had played a very small part in it.

Throughout high school Nina was able to join her mother at the restaurant, and as the town’s wealth had increased, so had the income for a pair of part-time waitresses. They were soon able to keep their heads above water without the stigma of welfare checks or food stamps, and in spite of the evening shifts, which forced her to organize and focus her efforts, Nina continued to excel academically. With the help of a high school counselor who was now comfortable with placing the children of scientists into some of the nation’s finest institutions, she graduated high school with an acceptance to UCLA and an Air Force ROTC scholarship to pay the way. Her mother, who had not completed high school and who had never even left the state, could no more grasp what her daughter was about to do than if she had announced she was boarding a rocket ship for Mars. However, a few meetings with the school counselor assured her that Nina was on her way to something special, and that this should be a great source of pride for their family. The LaBarges, now quite along in years, were delighted for the young ruffian.

UCLA was far from challenging, and in fact got much less mention in Nina’s letters home than did the bus trip across the country. Since the ROTC program required only slightly more discipline than waiting tables under the watchful eye of her mother, she again found herself performing academically at a level her mother could only imagine. College graduation brought her mother west of the Mississippi for the first time in her life, but it also brought Nina some uncertainty. As the conflict in Viet Nam was winding down, the Air Force was commissioning fewer regular officers, and the opportunities for women in that service were proving to be fewer and farther between. Nina accepted a reserve commission as an intelligence analyst, which only required her services one weekend a month and two weeks each summer. While this revised her plans for post-graduate employment, she heard through a friend that the FBI was about to start accepting women as Special Agents, and she jumped at the opportunity.

She soon found herself in Quantico with a number of other pioneers who, over thirty-five years later, were to comprise a cadre of Grand Old Dames within the Bureau’s ranks, with Cynthia Cruise leading the charge. Nina, on the other hand, was continually bumping against a glass ceiling, as she watched a number of former subordinates rocket past her on their way up the ranks. Of the numerous ways she might have reacted to the constant slights, the Southern Lady prevailed over the schoolyard ruffian, and while she never achieved her fullest potential, she nevertheless completed a successful career as a Special Agent in Charge.

One thing the Bureau did for her, though, was to set her up for post-retirement success, and for that she was grateful. It was not uncommon for Special Agents to receive a plethora of administrative additional duties within their stations, and this requirement had brought Nina a full training course in the intricate methods of the polygraph test. At first the Bureau only used the tests for interrogating suspects, but when the likes of Robert Hanssen and Ana Montes drove the need to screen all employees and agents, this additional duty became a full-time job. Working the polygraphs might have contributed to the cold shoulder she received at the hands of many of her bosses, since it carried the stigma of an internal affairs assignment at a police department, but it ensured continued employment upon retirement as the Bureau was now contracting out these services. Nina’s experience made her an ideal candidate for this lucrative profession. As she was running her operation as an independent contractor out of her home in Vienna, Virginia, she had very low overhead, and in fact only had to juggle the requirements of the Bureau, DIA, NSA, and occasionally the CIA in order to keep the checks rolling in. It was possible that with her federal retirement paychecks and the money she brought in with her machines that she was actually drawing a bigger salary than Cynthia, a subtle fact that was not lost on Ms. Cruise.

As Nina walked in to the Deputy’s office, closed the door and took a seat, he began the conversation with something she expected to hear.

“We’ve been barking up the wrong tree.”

“Well, I kinda’ assumed that, given that this is the third time this week you’ve flown me up here,” she said.

“We’ve been chasing someone with AQ ties throughout this whole ordeal, but we think we should have been looking for mob ties,” he continued. “Are you familiar with the opium haul in North Carolina this week?”

“No. I must have missed that one on the evening news.”

“Well, we were tracking that ship, and we took our eye off the ball just before it came in. We think the Baqr hit might have been to throw us off, and that it was mob related as opposed to what we’ve been looking for.”

“So,” Nina said, “you want me to test everyone again, but this time hit them with an out-of-left-field question about mob ties to see if anyone spikes?”

“Exactly,” replied the Deputy. “Right now I’ve got the Section Chiefs briefing their Agents that some new information has come across from the CIA, and that we need to re-focus to see who might be an AQ mole. When you hit them with a mob question they won’t be expecting it, and we’ll be able to see who puckers up.”

“Give me five minutes to get set up, and I can just tweak the questions we’ve been using all week. Start sending them in when they’re ready,” she instructed, knowing that today the Federal Government was going to get its money’s worth.

Nina spent the rest of the day hooking up and querying every agent in the Counter Terrorism Division, as she had done twice earlier in the week. There was no indication that any of these agents had shared information about Baqr with anyone outside of CT, so she knew she could focus on a direct leak from one of these agents. When she finished she walked past the Deputy’s office and announced, “Everyone’s clean. I’ll write up the report and secure fax it to you by tomorrow morning. Thanks again for the invite.” However, on her way past Ms. Cruise’s office, she asked innocently, “You wanted to see me, Cynthia?”

After being invited in, she left her suitcase at the door and left the door opened, but the two spoke in hushed tones. “I think we’ve got one,” Nina began.

“Who is it?” pressed Cynthia, her voice held low.

“Your new guy, Fontana,” Nina suggested.

“Tony?” asked Cynthia in surprise.

“Right,” Nina replied. “That guy is as cool as a cucumber, but when I asked if he had let anybody in the mob know about Baqr, he puckered up for a second. He calmed down mid-denial and stayed flat for the rest of the session, but it’s for that very reason that I think he’s your mole. Of course, he’s definitely not AQ, but I’ll bet he’s got some family ties to the mob, and he’s probably just doing someone a favor as more CT assets go back to OC.”

“Well thanks so much for coming by, Nina,” Ms. Cruise said for the benefit of those outside the office, “We’ll get together the next time I’m at headquarters, I’m sure.”

As Nina left, feeling no less pride than she did after making her first drug bust, Ms. Cruise’s Deputy was already on his way into her office. “We got something?” he asked.

“I think you and I need to have a little chat with our SAIC for CT, and while we’re at it, bring in Goodwell,” she explained.

“My God, it can’t be Goodwell, this was his idea,” the Deputy blurted out.

Ms. Cruise looked at him in amazement. “Wow. You are one crack agent,” she said, using a moniker had been employed during her early years with the Bureau to refer to her and her female peers. “I think our guy’s in Tommy’s section, and we need to start drilling down quickly.”

“Got it, Ma’am,” he replied, and he left her holding her head in her hands in mock disgust.

The Grocery Bag

poking around the door following the knock was a welcome sight, and since she had yet to place an order with her captors, Shirley had a pretty good idea of whose hand was attached to the bag.

“I heard you’re running low on yogurt and OJ,” Joy said as she appeared from behind the door.

“And I thought you were just being snoopy the last time you were here,” Shirley said.

“Oh hell no,” Joy shot back. “I knew that none of our other agents would even think about keeping you stocked up, so I figured I’d do it myself.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Shirley asked, getting up off the love seat to help Joy fill the fridge with the contents of the bag.

“Well, duh, they’re all guys.”

Shirley chuckled at this, pulled two glasses from the cabinet, filled them with OJ, and set them on the kitchen table.

“Thanks,” Joy said to the offer as they both sat at the table, “So what is it today? Astrophysics? Quantum mechanics? Microbiology?” as she nodded in the direction of the magazine Shirley had left on the coffee table.

“Psychology,” Shirley said, as if the choices presented made perfect sense. “It’s a fascinating bit of research done in Romania after they tried to compete by making human capital their national commodity. It left tens of thousands of orphans in homes where the care ratio was one to twenty, and it’s created an unprecedented opportunity to study the effects of the lack of human interaction on cognitive and social development in infants.”

“So what’s the punch line?” Joy asked, guessing that Shirley was going to turn this around on her organization.

“Well, since they realized their mistake, they’ve been pulling these kids out and putting them in foster care, and there are definite points where the psychological damage is irreversible. The number of cases of bipolarity where kids remained for over two years is staggering.”

“Damn,” Joy said. “I hope we aren’t doing that to you by keeping you locked up in the basement.”

“Not if you keep sending people over like clockwork” She was a little disappointed that Joy had deflected her attack, but she was also impressed at how Joy had anticipated her setup. It was a bit of a test—that had not actually been the article she was reading—but Joy aced it. Shirley made a mental note to step it up a little around this one.

“You know,” Joy said, “when Tommy and I drove back on Monday he all but admitted that he had pretty much shared most of the information about the investigation with you.”

“Well, actually, I think I figured most of it out myself.”

“I’m not talking about Fusco,” Joy continued, “I’m talking about what was going on with Baqr.”

“Well since it was apparently all over the news, I’m guessing he didn’t divulge any deep state secrets.” Shirley appreciated how candid Tommy had been with her, and she didn’t want to lose her only source of reliable information by betraying his trust.

“Oh, it’s OK,” Joy assured her. “We’ll never admit that Baqr was on our side because it might put the rest of that program at risk, but I also heard that you dropped him a very useful hint.”

“So I guess he believes that you’re not the mole,” Shirley said.

“He’s sure I’m not,” Joy said, fueling Shirley’s suspicion that there might be a relationship in the background that went beyond senior-subordinate.

Not wanting to let the possibility of a Joy-Tommy connection give her pause, Shirley asked, “So, how is it going with Backer?”

“Well, it depends,” Joy answered. “How much do you know?”

“Well, I know you wouldn’t have brought a guy like that over here unless there was something real imminent going down, and if he had any intel, I’m guessing you would have left him overseas. I figured you needed him over here to help bust your case open, but that he wasn’t being much help.”

“Did Tommy tell you that?” Joy asked. She was a little surprised at the amount of detail Shirley had gleaned.

“No,” Shirley answered quickly. “He just told me who Backer was. I had missed the news report since I was a distinguished guest of the Hoboken Police at the time. But I figured that if he had been here over a month and you didn’t have anything yet, that you were still grasping at straws.”

“How do you know when we brought him over?” Joy asked, almost startled at hearing this amount of detail from a civilian.

“Oh, that’s easy,” Shirley chuckled. “He’s been coming to the club for at least three weeks. That gave Fusco enough time to frame Miguel, install Mike in his place, and plan the whole setup. Based on Miguel’s arrest, and the amount of time it would have taken for them to plan that operation, you can find a fairly small window for when your office leaked. Not sure if that’s going to help your investigation, but I don’t think it can hurt.”

“Damn,” Joy said. “Does Tommy know this?”

“Naw, he hasn’t bothered to ask.”

Joy pulled a notebook from her pocket and quickly jotted something down. “Sorry,” she apologized, “this is important.”

“Believe me,” Shirley said, “if it gets me out of here any sooner it sure as hell is.”

“So where do think that leaves us with Baqr?” Joy asked. Tommy had told Joy some of the details of how Shirley’s last theory had helped him, and she was hoping she could glean a hint or two for herself.

“Well I’m guessing he hasn’t put you in contact with the cell,” Shirley said.

“How do you know that?” Joy asked as she looked at Shirley with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Otherwise, you wouldn’t have asked”

“Touché,” Joy agreed, returning her notebook to its pocket.

“In that case, you’re pretty well screwed,” Shirley said.

“Why is that?”

Shirley leaned forward in her chair. “Backer knew something was going on, and if there was an existing cell here, he might have known that too. It looks like there wasn’t, which is good news for America, but bad news for you. If they’re sending over an ad hoc organization to rain death and destruction on freedom, it’s gonna’ be pretty damn hard to find.”

“You got that right,” Joy agreed.

“Of course, knowing it’s ad hoc might help,” Shirley added.

“How’s that?”

“Well, it means they probably arrived recently. They’re going to need money, supplies, vehicles, apartments, all the usual stuff. I’m sure you’re looking for this stuff already, but at least it gives you a smaller window.”

Joy didn’t take out her notebook. “Believe me, we’re trying.”

“Well, if you can catch just one of them, you can bring the War on Terror to an early end,” Shirley said.

“How will that help?” Joy asked.

Shirley leaned back in her chair. “You just bring him down to the safe house and keep him here as your guest. When he realizes that there’s no such thing as privacy any more, he’ll tell his buddies to give up and go home. He’ll see that all this Great American Freedom is just a myth, and that the bad guys have already won.”

“Hey, privacy’s not the same as freedom,” Joy said, “and if I’m not mistaken it’s that ‘Shirley’ file that helped us get you out of Fusco’s grasp so quickly.”

“Touché.”

“Well, look,” Joy said, “I’ve got to get back to the grind, but don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything, or if you just want to chat.”

“Or if I run out of yogurt?” Shirley asked.

“Absolutely,” Joy chuckled. “And, by the way, thanks for the OJ?” she added on her way to the door.

“No,” Shirley corrected her, “thank *you* for the OJ.”

“No problem,” Joy said. She shot Shirley a smile over her shoulder as she walked out.

The President

of the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce sat quietly in his apartment, smoking a cigarette. Only he was no longer in Baghdad, as he had relinquished that mantel months earlier. However, he still made as much use as possible of his former title, for he was now struggling in his new surroundings. Frustrated at the directions taken by his children since the move, he wondered if he had done the right thing for himself and his family. A truck backfired as it accelerated on the street below, and as he checked himself midway through a well-conditioned dive under the table, he had his answer. He had lost his status, his connections, and for what it was worth, his paltry salary. However, while he was struggling to scratch out a living amongst the Americans who had provided his lofty title in the first place, he had gained the security and peace of mind he had hoped for upon his departure from his war-torn city. He was no longer a pawn in a political mud-sling, and the physical safety of his family was not his primary concern. However, their spiritual well-being was the greatest source of his angst, and he mulled over whether the decision to move to America might have been better foregone for another option where his family’s faith might have been better accommodated.

The apartment in Paramus had the same three bedrooms they had left behind, and it was more than adequate with a room for himself and his wife, one for the three boys, and one for the four girls. Meals were no less sparse, as the change in the family income had almost matched the increase in market prices that had caused significant sticker-shock upon their arrival. However, the fear of entering the outdoor market in their old neighborhood was a sensation that was gratefully left behind. Two of his four oldest were contributing to the family coffers, while the other two were still examining employment possibilities. The youngest three were able to enjoy the luxuries of the New Jersey public school system, and much to the family’s delight they discovered that they qualified for the state-sponsored breakfasts and lunches provided by the middle school and high school cafeterias. His job as an office manager at a local distribution company—one he would have scoffed at in his previous life—was almost sufficient to cover the rent, and if he could only find employment for the other two children, his family should be able to live in relative comfort.

His second son had secured a meager salary as a convenience store clerk, and while the hours had him sleeping most of the day, the paycheck was sufficiently steady to cover a good deal of the family’s expenses. His eldest daughter had landed a position in retail, and while she arrived and departed in a scarf, he feared she was removing it for the benefit of her employer and the customers. She had a decent command of the English language, and her demeanor and free spirit were serving her well as she was also producing a steady income. His second daughter, and fourth child, however, was not as fortunate as her sister, for her education had been disrupted severely by the invasion, and she lacked a sufficient grasp of the English language to secure employment. Earlier in the day he had accompanied her to an interview for a clerical position, not as her father or the President of the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce, but as her translator. What was most disturbing about the interview was not his daughter’s lack of command of the language, but her thorough understanding of the new culture. Her insistence on removing her head scarf before entering the establishment had resulted in a brief argument near the door that he hoped had gone unnoticed by her potential employer. Finally, when she explained he knew nothing about their new culture, his acquiescence was the hardest blow he had taken since arriving in the Land of Opportunity. The interviewer was polite, but unimpressed, and he did not anticipate a return visit.

His oldest son, however, was an entirely different matter. It was more this child’s behavior that prompted the move from Baghdad than any other factor, including the security of the rest of his family. The child had completed his primary education five years earlier, but in spite of his well-connected father, had been unable to secure a job in his home city. Regardless of the number of favors called in, no prospective employer was willing to take him on. Out of frustration the father cornered an old friend, who had explained that his son was running with a crowd that might make an offer of employment too great a risk. The adage of the parents being the last to know hit him hard, and this sealed the decision to leave the country. Mohd, the most devout of his sons, had now been fired from two jobs, criticized his siblings for their participation in the vile American culture, and refused to take part in the English-only discussions they held every evening to accelerate their integration.

Mohd, on the other hand, was unconcerned with his current lot, and had no intention whatsoever of finding a third position where he could be bullied by infidels with only a fraction of his intellect. He had been well respected amongst his peers in Baghdad, and had spent most of his time since secondary school around the Mosque, where he and several other like-minded individuals had passed numerous hours debating the most intricate details of the interpretation of the Qur’an. During these discussions they had frequently been joined by a Saudi intellectual named Faris al-Dosari. He was a man who spoke with the wisdom of an Imam, but whose worldly knowledge transcended that of any person Mohd had ever encountered. Tales of his travels dominated many conversations, and he could support his vision for a world under a united Caliphate with such melodically quoted passages from Mohammed’s writings that it was as if he were speaking with the voice of Allah himself. Mohd and his compatriots were smitten with the images Faris projected, and before a year had passed a number of them had pledged fealty to his cause.

Throughout the subsequent year their ranks dwindled. Faris assured his remaining acolytes that the departed had all secured important positions in an organization that was going to bring their vision to fruition, and that further opportunities remained. When Mohd first heard from his father that he was possibly going to move—either to America or Indonesia—his rage was unspeakable, but intense personal discussions with Faris led him to support the former option. Faris passed on to him explicit instructions for establishing a Facebook page at any American public library, and provided him a list of friends to whom he could pass essential contact information. Mohd left for America with the blessing of Faris and a promise of a subsequent rendezvous.

The rendezvous was six months in coming, but it finally arrived. Mohd’s younger brother had received a promotion to night manager and was able to secure for Mohd a substitute position on the morning shift. The additional income was not to be turned down, as threats from his father to set him on his own were becoming more frequent, and the anticipated arrival of Faris was fading as a bad memory. But it was during such a shift, with no other customers in the mini-mart, that he watched in disbelief as a familiar figure walked up to his counter. After the traditional exchange of pleasantries, Faris explained in rapid Arabic that the treatment recent murder of their beloved leader was driving his organization to a call for action, and that Mohd had an opportunity to play a key role in the activities. Mohd accepted without hesitation, and was instructed to maintain his current employment until further contact was initiated.

That evening, Mohd joined his family in their English dialogue for the first time since their arrival.

The Casual Knock

indicated to Shirley that today’s visitor was most likely Tommy, and when he poked his head around the door, she wasn’t disappointed. Occupying her usual perch on the love seat, Shirley decided to fire an immediate salvo, letting Tommy know that her disdain for her current lot far outweighed the gratitude she felt for the daily visits.

“Well, it looks like it’s a slow day back at the head shed if they’re sending me the Big Boss,” she said.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Tommy said, “but I’m just one of the minions.”

“And I thought you were running the whole show,” Shirley teased.

Tommy chuckled. “I can’t even keep an informant alive, much less break open an investigation,” he confessed with a hint of self-deprecation as he pulled a chair over from the kitchen table.

Shirley couldn’t tell from this if he was getting heat from above or if this chastising was self-imposed, so she tried, “Feeling a little pressure back at the office?”

“It’s not the office,” he said, “It’s the case.”

“Well, any luck?” Shirley asked hopefully. She was not unimpressed with the dedication Tommy was showing. If he was more concerned with his own performance than what his boss thought, then he might have a chance at cracking this thing.

“Not yet,” Tommy admitted, “but after Joy saw you yesterday she’s been running our geeks 24/7.”

Shirley couldn’t see the connection with what she had told Joy about Fusco, so she decided to keep pressing. “What’s that got to do with the case?” she asked.

“Well, she has them looking in the New York area for car purchases, apartment rentals, plane tickets, pretty much anything that might be associated with forming a cell, and she’s got them going back one month at a time. Just so far, there’s been nothing.”

“Oh, that case,” Shirley said, a little disappointed. “Joy and I talked about Fusco, and I saw her take a few notes. I assumed that that’s what you had her working on.”

“Oh, we’re getting to that,” Tommy said, “but right now we’re stretched a little thin with the cell, and we need to focus on that one first. Not that you’re not important,” he added, “but right now you’re safe, and there may be some Americans who aren’t.”

“Makes sense to me,” Shirley wasn’t quite sure if she had just been chastised for being selfish about the allocation of limited resources, or if she had simply been treated to well-conditioned, press-ready federal jargon.

“So I’m guessing that you dropped Joy the hint about using the HLD databases to look for signs of recent cell formation,” Tommy said.

“Not really,” Shirley said. “We talked about it, but she probably figured most of it out on her own. I got the impression that she was already working on it.” Shirley was delighted that her conversation with Joy was proving to be useful after all, but she in no way wanted to betray her new friend by taking any credit for what she had suggested.

“Thanks for looking out for my agent,” Tommy grinned.

“So, she’s your agent?” Shirley asked. She decided it would be futile to make any further attempts to deflect credit towards Joy, and Tommy had just given her an opening that she couldn’t resist.

“Well,” Tommy hesitated, “She’s on my team, if that’s what you mean.”

“You two aren’t an item?” Shirley asked with feigned trepidation. She was finally going to pin down the question that had been gnawing at her since they first visited together.

Tommy let out an audible laugh, which was the least likely response Shirley had anticipated. “Oh, believe me,” he began, once he had regained his composure. “She’s not interested in me.”

“Why not?” Shirley pressed, not quite picking up Tommy’s meaning.

“Trust me,” he assured, and left it at that.

Shirley still didn’t grasp the underlying message, so she suggested, “Well I think she’s fantastic.”

“Oh, we all do,” Tommy agreed. “She’s absolutely first-rate.”

Shirley rarely missed hints, but there were certain places her natural radar didn’t reach, so she decided to get back to the more pressing issue. “So is anyone working the Fusco angle, or am I just going to rot here while you have your fun?”

“Oh, we’re working it all right,” Tommy reassured her. “Our OC folks are folding that into their investigation of the shipment, among other things.”

“Like your leak problem?”

“Not much gets by you,” Tommy said, but knowing he was already on the verge of breaching Bureau security protocols he decided to deflect this conversation before it became classified. “So what is it today?” he asked, indicating to the copy of *Foreign Affairs* that Shirley had placed on the coffee table when he entered, and having confidence that she would take this bait.

“Guess I was hitting a little too close to home,” Shirley said, not wanting to let him think that the timing of his change-of-subject had gone unnoticed. But then she continued, “Just watching all these governments getting out-maneuvered by the masses and their electrons.”

“Ah, yes, the Twitter Revolutions,” Tommy said. “But can’t the governments search through all the ‘Shirley files’ and stop the flash mobs before they start?”

“Not that it makes me feel any better, but no computers are that fast. Regardless of how you slice the data, or what keywords you’re looking for, the people win with sheer volume. It’s just like the problem Joy’s having right now. Every person who bought a vehicle, rented an apartment, or flew into New York in the last six months has unwittingly aided the terrorists. I’m betting there’s just too many of them, and it’s impossible to get through all the data.”

“Well, you’re right about that,” Tommy said.

“Hey, you guys keep looking,” Shirley said. “You’re going to get a break.”

“I sure hope so,” Tommy admitted, “but if we’re going to do it, I probably should get back to the office.”

“You lied to me earlier,” Shirley teased, “I knew that you were the lynchpin holding this investigation together.”

“OK, you figured me out,” Tommy admitted. “I’m really not going back to the office,” he confessed as he pulled his chair back to the kitchen table.

“So where you headed?”

“To cancel my Twitter account.”

The Student

sat in his bedroom apartment surfing MSN news, a cigarette perched on the edge of the laptop. He pondered the journey that had taken him full circle, halfway around the world and practically back to where he had started. For the first time in his life there was a light at the end of the tunnel, and while he felt he was a little young to end his run, he had resigned himself to going out with the most glory one could possibly achieve.

His parents had grown up under one of the most schizophrenic political systems in the world, a dysfunctional conglomeration of clans on the Horn of Africa that spent the Cold War bouncing between the two Superpowers like a ping pong ball. However, when the Red Berets instigated their reign of terror in 1986, his parents, who had for so long swayed with the churning political system like reeds in a sandstorm, decided they had had enough, and like many of their countrymen, fled Somalia for America. While Marcus Ahmed had been conceived in Somalia, being born in Milwaukee had guaranteed his US citizenship as his parents were just beginning the arduous naturalization process as political refugees. In fact, of all the refugees who had arrived over a period of a few short months, he was the first to legitimately carry the title of US citizen, although he was unaware of it at the time. He had even been given an American name in honor of the occasion, although it was not going to guarantee his full integration into Western society as his parents had hoped.

Marcus never accepted the American culture, in spite of the fact that his education was being delivered by the good graces of the Wisconsin taxpayers. Part of the problem was that discussions at home never reinforced anything the schools were teaching, as most of their conversations involved the ever-changing political system in a country he had never seen. A further obstacle was that the story of his homeland was constantly transforming. Neither of his parents had a firm grasp on the fluid political system before their departure, and their understanding was even more tenuous now with their only data being filtered through the Western media. The more he learned about American government as he progressed through school, the more abstract the bizarre situation on the Horn of Africa became in his mind. He finally concluded that Somalia had been a former paradise that was shattered by Western Imperialism.

And then there was the Mosque. Marcus was fascinated by the weekly rantings of the Clergy. The Somali population was not sufficient to support its own place of worship, so had integrated with a predominantly Egyptian establishment. The messages of the Qur’an were at the same time beautiful and confusing, but there was an underlying theme that dominated every sermon, and that was the evils of the Jewish infidels. From the time he was sufficiently mature to integrate ideas, Marcus knew he would be unable to identify a Jew if one punched him in the nose, but he was convinced that they were all intent on destroying him, his family, and their way of life. He was in high school when the 9/11 attacks occurred, and he listened in awe of how the attack was organized by the American Jews to cause hatred against the Muslim population, and of how all of the Jews in the twin towers had stayed away that day. The arguments presented in the Mosque were irrefutable, yet when he proposed them at school as a defense against the ire he received from his classmates, it only resulted in further ostracizing. The Jews had won this round.

Marcus had never been popular, and the subtle hints of prejudice delivered by his classmates magnified this condition, but his treatment after 9/11 drove him to further isolation. He began seeking refuge, as did a number of his peers, in the Mosque. It was there that after a slow day at school he was first introduced to Abu al-Aidid, a Somali statesman who had recently arrived in Milwaukee from Mogadishu, and who spoke of the political climate in the homeland with remarkable insight. The discussions his parents held over the dinner table now revealed in them a complete misunderstanding of a world Marcus had never seen. It became clear to him that the true problems being faced by his people required modern and innovative solutions, and that the education he was receiving at the hands of the American taxpayers was positioning him to take a lead role in their implementation. Marcus began to imagine himself as a personal advisor to a Sultan, sharing with him deep insights concerning the proper three branches of government, the intricacies of supply and demand in a vibrant economic system, and the optimization of factory production using formulas and examples straight from his high school calculus text. Prior to graduating from high school, Marcus was thrilled when Aidid offered him the opportunity to travel to Somalia to help make a difference.

There were many stipulations, however. First, his parents must not know about the trip. Second, he would have to get an American passport, but as he had already turned eighteen, that would not be much of an obstacle. Third, he would need to provide a significant amount of cash to help defray travel expenses, and finally he would need to be willing to endure incredible hardship, risk personal danger, and witness untold suffering in exchange for the help he might offer his kinsmen. As Marcus had rejected American culture as being anti-Muslim, he saw no future for himself in his parents’ clueless existence, and since his true countrymen needed his help, he was more than eager to tackle the journey. Taking what he could from his parents, and not leaving as much as a note, he began his adventure.

He had never been in an airplane, and now he found himself being shuttled with five other boys first to Newark, Frankfort, Mombasa, and finally K50 Airport in Lower Shabelle. They were received by a young man in fatigues who had clearly greeted many such arrivals, and were herded into the back of a waiting truck for the two-hour ride to Mogadishu. It was no small comfort to see that their escort included two well-armed guards, and that the vehicle showed the signs of more than one firefight. The driver demonstrated little regard for the roadblocks and checkpoints they negotiated, and by the time they arrived at the palace of a warlord (not, as Marcus had anticipated, a Sultan) the general consensus in the back of the pickup was that they had perhaps been misled by their recruiter.

Marcus, like his traveling companions, was told he would be serving this warlord as a “technical.” These were armed enforcers who redistributed the foodstuffs that were being improperly distributed by various international relief organizations working outside of the legitimate Somali government. The clans under this warlord were preparing to assume their rightful place at the head of the Somali government, and only required a small amount of time to reestablish order, and perhaps eliminate a few rivals. At that juncture, the education received at the hands of the Americans would prove invaluable in setting the new government on the proper foundation. A brief survey of his surroundings left Marcus more than slightly skeptical.

Marcus was issued an AK-47 and three clips of ammunition. He had taken in enough American cinema to believe he could fire the weapon if required, but had to observe his comrades to figure out how to load the magazines and pull back the charging handle. He eventually discovered the safety switch, resulting in an accidental discharge to the delight of his fellow “techs,” and he chose to never again engage that feature unless absolutely necessary. While he was constantly reminded that he was redistributing resources to their rightful owners, the imploring eyes of many a woman as he relieved them of their bags of rice told him otherwise. He was having a difficult time understanding why one group should be more privileged than another, and it reminded him of his Jew-defending classmates in high school who had ostracized him for being a Muslim.

But the worst part about the experience was the khat. It was more plentiful than rice, and Marcus found it was a convenient way to relieve the stress of fatigue and hunger while patrolling, but it also provided a numbing sensation that made him wholly uncomfortable. With a Muslim upbringing that forbade the consumption of alcohol, Marcus and his friends had still been able to round out their American high school experience by smoking a little pot. As his father continued to indulge in Turkish cigarettes, the smell of marijuana on Marcus’ clothing was easily disguised in their cramped quarters, and he almost enjoyed the sensation he felt when one of his friends was able to score a few joints. But khat was different. It became a necessity after the renewed Ethiopian attacks, when the country’s level of violence increased and the number of organizations distributing foodstuffs dwindled. For the first time in his life Marcus was truly hungry, but the chewing produced a sensation that deeply troubled him. The disorientation he experienced while on patrol, he rationalized, could not be to his advantage if caught in a firefight with a rival clan, but as hard as he tried, he could not wean himself of the product.

Marcus once again sought solace in the one place that had provided him comfort during his most trying ordeals, and that was the Mosque. While his employer only paid lip service to their common Muslim roots, Marcus decided to attend services regularly, and to once again linger to discuss the merits of what had been presented. It was to his great surprise that the underlying theme didn’t involve the treachery of the Jewish race, and in fact, that received scant mention in this new venue. Marcus pressed in ensuing discussions that this omission needed to be rectified, but the lackadaisical response he received from his newfound compatriots indicated they had little understanding of the world order. Nevertheless, at every opportunity Marcus pursued his theories about the evil infidels, and the reputation that this built for him finally got him a personal invitation to visit with his Warlord.

In his years of service, Marcus had never seen his ultimate boss, and when he entered the office behind the command post he was wholly unimpressed. Lord Aidid shared a name with, and bore a striking resemblance to, the man whose overtures had recruited Marcus into this service in the first place, but the palace he had confiscated as his headquarters was in such a state of disrepair that it was difficult to ever imagine this man running any organization, much less a country. However, there was another man in the office—a foreigner—and Aidid clearly held him in the greatest respect. He was introduced to Marcus as Faris al-Dosari, a Saudi visitor who addressed Marcus in perfect English.

“I understand that you may be willing to take up arms against the infidels,” the man began.

“It is the way of Allah,” Marcus’ replied.

“Then we have much to talk about,” Faris said, and with a nod to Aidid he led Marcus from the room.

Dosari understood the futility of serving as a technical in this war-torn hell-hole, and offered Marcus immediate passage to Syria. There he would be well cared for and would receive the most thorough training available for him to serve as a soldier in Dosari’s organization. Marcus had long realized that there was no hope for his “homeland,” and had rued the youthful idealism that had placed him on this path, but this was the first opportunity he had seen for escape and he embraced it with gusto. He soon found himself on a plane bound for Damascus, and after a truck ride to the high desert, was relieved to settle in to a barracks that not only contained bunks and ample food, but no khat.

At the camp Marcus received training that would have been essential had he found himself in a firefight against Ethiopian regulars in Mogadishu. Fortunately, the technicals from the rival clans had as little training as Marcus, and during his numerous firefights the danger from a well-aimed bullet had been far less than that from a ricochet or a stray. However, here he developed skills that would serve him well in any combat situation. He was instructed in the proper handling of his AK-47, he was put through a strenuous physical regimen that proved to be the ideal activity to help his body recover from the years of chewing khat, and he was inculcated into the dogma of the evils of not only the Jews but of all Western civilizations. While he and his small circle of Muslim friends had been outcasts in high school, here he was received as a brother Muslim by the entire community. He not only believed the anti-Jewish and anti-Western propaganda that was at the root of every spiritual discussion, he lived it.

Marcus noticed that as the seasons passed, his newfound comrades rotated through this training, while he alone remained from his original cohort. He was even finding himself as a useful participant in the training of new arrivals. This increase in responsibility gave Marcus a renewed sense of purpose, and he soon discovered he had a knack for identifying those trainees whose commitment to their cause might have been in question, and that he had developed sufficient communication skills to sway them back onto the righteous path. His current lot could have suited him indefinitely, but once more he found himself being visited by Dosari and a further call to action.

“Marcus,” began Dosari, still reaching out to him in un-accented English.

“I prefer my new name,” came the quick response in acceptable Arabic, audible in spite of the cigarette dangling from his mouth.

“Where we’re going, you will best serve our cause as Marcus,” Faris explained. “It is time for you and me to travel to a land where we can take up arms and strike a death blow to the infidels.”

“We will be going to Israel?” Marcus asked, reverting to English.

“No. America,” was the solemn reply.

Dosari produced Marcus’ old American passport, and Marcus was soon touching down once again at Newark Airport, only this time, it was to enter the United States. Dosari had explained very little during the flight, as he was certain the airline seats were bugged, but after recovering a small car from long-term parking, he used the hour drive up the Hudson River to clarify the nature of the impending operation and to let Marcus know what lay in store in terms of his participation and his fate.

“So, is it safe to talk now?” Marcus asked.

“Absolutely,” Faris started. “It is time to punish the infidels for the murder of our leader.”

“Then I am pleased to be a part of this operation,” Marcus said.

“We are going to bring the imperialists to their knees,” Faris continued.

“But 9/11 didn’t crush them,” Marcus protested. “Is this operation going to be so much greater?”

“9/11 was against a strong enemy,” Faris explained. “We now have an enemy who is much weaker. I have been in Baghdad and have seen how afraid they are of supporting their puppets. They lack resolve and have grown wary. We are going to hit them in places that will give them great pause, and the oppressors on our lands are going to see the source of their strength disappear.”

“So we are going to strike them in many places?” Marcus pressed. He wanted an idea of the scope of the operation so he could gage the significance of his role.

“We are going to rain down upon them with the fires of Hell in many different ways,” Faris stated, pounding his fist on the steering wheel for emphasis. “You,” he added, pointing a reassuring finger in Marcus’ direction, “are going to play a very important role in this operation.” He felt that this response would satisfy Marcus, letting him know he was part of something big, but also that Marcus’ participation was going to be critical. He would provide no further information regarding the rest of the operation as he could not afford to compromise the security that his organization had been so careful to achieve.

“What is my target?” Marcus persisted.

“I will take you there soon,” Faris said. “You are going to strike at a synagogue—I think you will be pleased once you see it. But first, we will need you to get settled into your community.”

“So where are we going?” Marcus asked.

“There is a little village up the river called Highland Falls,” Faris continued. “It is outside the Military Academy, but it is quiet and inexpensive. You will have a small apartment there, and you will be living as a graduate student in engineering. I have gotten you a car that will provide good cover for your operation, and I have provided you a New York driver’s license from your passport picture. They are already at the apartment. You will need to keep a very low profile until we can complete the arrangements for our strike. I have arranged television and internet for you, but it is very important that you have no contact with any people, especially your old acquaintances from Milwaukee. You cannot let anyone know you are in the country.”

“How long will I be staying here,” Marcus wanted to know.

“It should not be long,” came the noncommittal reply. “I need to complete the arrangements for all of our attacks, and I will need to secure your materials. You will have enough cash for the things you need, and I will visit you frequently. I need to take you to your target, and you will need to rehearse the drive and the operation until you are comfortable with what will be required of you. I am going to come up in the evenings, when I can blend in with the traffic from New York City. There will be no phone in your apartment, and you will not have a cell phone—too many from our organization have been betrayed by sending their voices over the airwaves. You will be keeping a very low profile, and that is hard to do for too long.” While Faris had a specific target date for the operation, it was unclear that the logistical arrangements would be completed in time, but more importantly, he had no desire to risk the security of the operation by divulging the date before the last possible moment.

Faris drove through the village and pulled into a small apartment complex near the West Point gate. He parked next to a 1987 Ford Country Squire station wagon, and indicated in its direction. “That is going to be your vehicle.”

Marcus was a little disappointed, and it showed in his face, but Faris explained, “That car will make you invisible in your target area. Make sure you keep the tank full, and it will serve you well. Now let’s go up to your apartment.”

The apartment was small, but comfortable, and was more than adequate for Marcus’ needs. In fact, it was to be the most spacious abode he would ever occupy. Faris provided a brief orientation, and continued with his instructions.

“There is a landlady, a Mrs. Jerrod, who might contact you. I have paid your rent so that should not be an issue, but she could be a little nosy. Tell her as little as possible, but be polite. She is in the apartment at the end of this row,” he explained, nodding towards the back of the parking lot.

This elicited a noncommittal grunt from Marcus, so Faris continued, emphasizing perhaps the most important of his previous instructions. “I have my own key, so when I visit, I can let myself in. I will return later this week so we can begin to work on our operation. You must become invisible—make contact with no one. This is very important.”

Marcus rebuked the suggestion that he might not remain incognito in his best Arabic. He assured Faris that he was thrilled to be playing an integral role in the greatest setback the infidels would experience since 9/11. Faris smiled, patted him on the shoulder, and left the apartment. “I’ll see you soon,” he assured as he closed the door.

Marcus sat down at the table where a laptop was awaiting its first prompting in weeks. He took a brief survey of his surroundings, but while he was sitting in relative comfort and breathing American air, he felt no satisfaction with this environment. Instead, he was in the country of his birth, preparing to do battle in a war that had taken him half-way around the world. He lit a cigarette, took a slow draw, and balanced it on the corner of the laptop.

He had come full circle.

The Anxious Knock

took Shirley a little by surprise, and while she received two visitors, the first to enter was an agent she had never seen before. Tommy followed immediately and seemed a little put out that his companion had taken such initiative upon entering the safe house. The new agent—Shirley surmised correctly that he was one of Tommy’s charges—was a few years her junior, but the tailoring on his sports coat and the way he had his hair combed back gave her a slight feeling of unease in that maybe he was just a little too slick. Tommy began with the introductions.

“Shirley, this is Special Agent Tony Fontana,” he said, “he’s heading up the investigation into Baqr’s information on the cell.”

Shirley suspected that this was not the time for sarcasm, so she conjured up a noncommittal, “Nice to meet you, Tony.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Tony said. “The Boss and Joy are giving you credit for a lot of the good ideas we’re chasing down right now.”

Shirley was uncertain if this was a compliment or an accusation, so she decided to play it humble. “Well, I probably jabber more than I should,” she said, “but if anything I’ve suggested is useful then I guess it’s worth it.”

Tommy went over to the kitchen table and pulled his standard seat up to the coffee table, but Shirley, who had been standing when the pair had entered, took a seat on the arm of the love seat, facing towards the kitchen.

“So,” Tommy began, indicating in the direction of the empty coffee table, “no fascinating reading yet today?”

“Sorry,” Shirley said, “I’ve been stretching—just finished my workout—I wasn’t expecting my daily visitor so soon.”

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Tommy said, “but Tony was anxious to meet you, and we probably both needed to get out of the office.”

Shirley looked over at Tony, who seemed a little taken aback by the admission. “Well, Joy gave us all a real good report on you,” he said.

“Please thank her for me,” Shirley replied with a little more formality than was her norm, and deciding to diffuse what she was sensing was a little tension in the air, she followed with an invitation, “Why don’t you pull up a chair?”

“Thanks,” he replied perhaps a little too curtly, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

“So Shirley,” Tommy continued, “any more insights today?”

“You mean on the cell?” she asked, suspecting somehow that the investigation into Fusco and the hit on Baqr was a topic to avoid.

“Of course,” Tommy said. “Tony has really jumped into this thing, but with all the expertise we’ve assembled, we’re still running into brick walls.”

Tony was trying to maintain a nonchalant façade, but Shirley noticed that he sat forward slightly when this subject was broached.

“Well, if there is a cell here,” Shirley began, “I’d just as soon you kept me here until you bust them up, or until, Heaven forbid, they do their thing. I wouldn’t want to try to get into their sick heads, but my best guess is that parking garages aren’t high on their list of targets.”

Tommy turned to Tony and ordered, “That’s it. Go ahead and trash that list of garages we’ve been putting together.”

This got a slight chuckle out of Tony, but Shirley suggested, “Well Backer must have told you something. There’s got to be something to go on.”

Tommy started to say something, but Tony was quicker. “I’m afraid we had pretty much exhausted his leads when he got shot. The best we got out of him is that something’s going down, but after three weeks he was still unable to make any contact for us.”

Tony had been relatively tight-lipped up to this point, and Shirley wondered if this admission was for Tommy’s sake or hers.

“Well, whoever it is and whatever they’re doing, they’re bound to slip up,” Shirley said.

“How can you be so sure?” Tony asked.

“This is post-9/11. Back then we were caught off guard, although with 20/20 hindsight we had enough information to stop that attack. Now, everybody’s on edge, and someone’s bound to see something and report it. We’ll never get caught asleep at the switch again.”

“Wow,” Tommy said. “I thought I was making this drive so I could be bombarded with cynicism.”

Shirley was winding up to unleash a zinger, but Tony cut in again. “Interesting point,” he said, “but unfortunately the phenomenon you just described has made the country more dangerous.”

“How is that so?”

“Well first of all,” Tony explained, “everybody and their dog wants to be the person to stop the next attack, so anytime a gas station attendant or a taxi driver sneezes, we get about a hundred calls. There’s no way we can follow up on all of them, so the important ones slip through the cracks with the rest of them. We’re at the point now that if something doesn’t come from a credible source, we pretty much have to ignore it. Sadly, the Great American Public has become overzealous in this witch hunt, but they’re simply not trained to identify the real signs that they should be looking for.”

Shirley couldn’t resist knocking this slightly arrogant agent off his soap box, so she decided to press a little. “What kind of signs?” she asked. “Like Middle-Eastern men attending flight school in the US and not wanting to learn how to land?”

“Well, there’s that 20/20 hindsight.”

“Of course,” Shirley agreed, “but didn’t an FBI agent report it and get ignored? If that’s not a credible source, I’m not sure how we can expect any better from our public.”

“I wasn’t even in high school when that happened,” Tony objected, “and that’s why I joined the Bureau in the first place.”

Shirley decided to back off a little. “Tommy assures me that’s a good thing,” she said.

It was Tommy’s turn to cut in. “Tony’s the junior agent in our office, but we’ve given him the lead on a huge part of this investigation.”

“So I understand,” Shirley said. And then, changing the subject, she continued, “So, you’re a local, Tony?”

“Our accents betray us,” he admitted. “So you’re Joisey born and bred?”

“Afraid so,” Shirley said. “Are you Brooklyn?”

“Upper-East side, but close enough.”

“Wow,” Shirley said. “So you probably knew a number of 9/11 families; you know, cops and fire fighters.”

“We had our share,” Tony admitted, “but I understand you got to meet a few of them in the Hoboken lockup.”

“That’s the problem with the press,” Shirley said, “it’s remarkable what people will believe these days.” She was a little surprised to hear Tony’s familiarity with her predicament, but she decided it was a good sign that her story was well-known amongst Tommy’s agents. At least it offered a glimmer of promise that the investigation into Fusco was progressing.

“It’s even worse when you have to protect sources and control what gets out,” Tommy said.

“How’s that?” Tony and Shirley asked simultaneously.

They all three chuckled a little at this. “Well,” he said, “a lot of times when we do something good, nobody hears about it until it winds up in a Federal courtroom two years later. There’s so much we have to do under the public’s radar that we frequently get no credit for all our hard efforts.”

“But screw something up,” Tony continued, “and the whole world knows about it instantly.”

“I knew you guys were just in it for the glory.”

“You figured us out,” Tommy admitted.

Shirley was relieved that the earlier tension had been diffused, so she relaxed a little. “You see, otherwise you would make the effort to train the Great American Public to properly identify warning signs, but if you did, then they might get all the glory.”

“Yeah, but how do we do that?” Tony asked.

“Those old commercials. You know, this is Hamed, and this is Hamed with explosives. You could show a guy with wires and everything hanging out of his backpack.”

“I think it would make more sense,” Tommy said, “to send posters of Nancy Reagan to Riyadh that say ‘Just Say No to blowing people up.’”

“Well, I’m glad we’ve just solved all the world’s problems.” Tony rolled his eyes as he said this.

“Sorry,” Shirley said. “I know you’ve got a lot going on, but I appreciate you both coming over to break up the monotony.”

Tommy got out of his chair and pulled it back towards the kitchen table. “Tony’s right,” he agreed, “we probably need to get going.”

Tony stood up from his chair, walked over to the love seat, and extending his hand he said, “Shirley, it was nice to finally meet you.”

“Likewise,” Shirley replied, taking his hand.

“Let us know if you need anything,” Tommy offered.

“Is that on a checklist somewhere, that you have to ask that every time you stop by?” Shirley asked.

Tommy’ shoulders drooped a little at this accusation, but Tony laughed. “Actually, it is,” he said.

“Hey, I’ll see you tomorrow,” Tommy said.

“Go get ‘em,” Shirley said after them as they walked out the door.

The Roommate

of Faris al-Dosari had neither the worldliness, advanced intellect, nor the phenomenal powers of persuasion of his oldest and dearest friend. However, he made up for these deficiencies with his incredible fervor in his hatred of the Jews and the Western culture that were crushing any possibility of the establishment of the much-desired global Caliphate. They had grown up together in Jeddah, had both become early adherents to the extreme doctrines of the Wahhabi sect of Islam, and were both willing to kill to further their beliefs. However, Faisel possessed an even deeper commitment than his friend, although he was not aware of the difference, for he was also willing to die for their cause. Faris, on the other hand, was well aware of this difference, and as he was putting together an operation that was going to receive funding from the highest levels of his organization, he knew he would be able to count on his oldest friend to play an integral role.

Dosari had been traveling the world for over three decades, using his silver tongue to recruit for his organization. His escapades were funded from within his own government, although others in that government cursed his organization and denied that any support could be coming from their coffers. He had started by searching the slums for the most downtrodden of his people and sending them directly to fight with the Mujahidin in Afghanistan, but after the infidels had the audacity to station troops on the Holy Land, his aim took on a more global nature. The Mosques and Madrassas that were springing up all over the world provided fertile grounds for recruiting under the sway of the right Imam, and the funding for these from his own royal family ensured their continued success. These were strategically placed in the most depressed locales amidst the greatest unrest, and provided a never-ending source of fresh talent willing to die for an important cause. Once the Imams identified potential candidates, Dosari simply had to work his charm on them and they would soon find themselves at austere but well-funded training camps that incidentally shared a patron with the Mosques.

Dosari had never taken part in an operation, and in fact, he had never even fired a weapon. But when his organization determined that there was a pressing need to conduct a mission to maintain relevance, he was chagrined to be enlisted as the cell leader. The operation was to be conducted in the utmost secrecy, under the guise of sending the infidels a message for the murder of their leader, and aside from a few suggestions, the manner was to be entirely of his choice. He was to have one contact for logistics, and a separate one for finances. No other communication with the organization was allowed. He would assemble his own team from his long list of former recruits, and was to ensure that he, and only he, knew their identities. His multiple passports and identities would serve him well, as he could blend in to any western city, and the organization was confident he was not on any DHS list.

It was suggested that for historic reasons, the existence of a viable financial and logistical support network, and the fact that it harbored a significant Jewish population, that New York City would be the center of his operation. He conceived a number of simultaneous attacks (at least three) that could disrupt the security of the Jewish-American populace, and would throw Western society further into turmoil. He even had a few candidates in mind for his cell members. They would be expendable, but he needed an exit strategy for himself, as he had no intention of terminating his career with this operation. He was almost indignant at having received the assignment, but his Leadership assured him that the situation required immediate action, and it would be impossible to assemble another cell from scratch. He had asked about the efficacy of using an existing cell, but the noncommittal answer suggested that the Americans had finally found a way to get inside the Organization’s operating cycle, and that perhaps no sleeper cells were available. He was about to become a reluctant operator.

The most obvious candidate for his team was an American whom he had recruited in Somalia, and whom he would have no problem returning to the States. He had a few potential candidates in Baghdad, one of whom had recently fallen into America’s lap due to a legitimate family relocation, but he needed one more participant to execute his plan. After a number of reconnaissance trips under the guise of a German businessman, he decided that the most promising candidate for rounding out his trio of confederates would be his old friend Faisel. He chuckled when he imagined his friend’s response at the revelation of where his travels had been taking him for the past three decades, and laughed knowing how his final recruit would willingly volunteer to wreak havoc on Jewish infidels on American soil.

His most recent trips to Jeddah had only come when a period of cooling off was required due to international pressure, but this one would be welcomed as it would permit a reunion with his oldest friend. As was expected, Faisel displayed an eagerness to travel to New York City that was characteristic of his religious fervor, but that also hinted that while the Royal Family’s handouts from the oil trade had eliminated poverty, they had not worked so well on boredom. It was time, Faris determined, for idle hands to participate in Allah’s work.

The two of them would establish a residence in Brooklyn where they would share a small apartment and the use of two vehicles, including a cargo van. Faris had already contacted his financial backer who had provided an ATM card from an account that had been created using funds from a New Jersey Mosque. He had an apartment and a vehicle secured further north that would work as a staging base for his second confederate, and he had located the third member of his cell at his place of work in Paramus. He needed to confirm the availability of his extensive supply request, collect the third member of his trio from a camp in Syria, and the operation would be ready for execution.

As Faisel sat alone in the apartment, enjoying the luxuries provided by the substantial amount of cash Faris had left for him, he concluded that New York City was in some ways no different than Jeddah. He had most of his creature comforts taken care of, tobacco was cheap, and he was able to pass the days idly in front of a television or computer screen. Furthermore, his existence was light on companionship, and he was bored out of his mind. The major difference, he told himself, was that Jeddah was a place for the devout, while New York City was populated with infidels and Jews who needed to be destroyed. He contemplated what might be his possible demise at the conclusion of his yet-to-be-determined operation, and he relished the opportunity.

The Familiar Knock

was a sure sign that Tommy was visiting alone, and Shirley was pleased to discover that her intuition had been correct. However, as soon as the door had closed, she launched a quick salvo.

“Thanks for the warning.”

“What warning was I supposed to give? I knocked, didn’t I?”

“I’m talking about yesterday,” Shirley said. “The next time you need me to conduct an investigation for you, at least let me know in advance what I’ll be doing. You caught me completely off guard.”

“What investigation?” Tommy asked.

“Well,” Shirley said, “Tony’s your mole.”

Tommy was stunned. “How can you possibly say that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’ve never seen anyone so nervous. Talking with him was like dancing with a porcupine—I was afraid he was going to erupt. I guess since I’m getting credit in your office for figuring stuff out, you decided to bring him here yourself to test the waters. I was petrified that I was going to blow it, and I almost did a couple of times. I even had to turn on the charm once or twice to keep him going. Now you and he probably think I’m some kind of a sap, and that’s completely unacceptable. I’ve got a reputation to protect, you know.”

“Shirley,” Tommy said, “I had absolutely no intention of getting you wrapped up in our leak investigation, and that’s certainly not what I did. In fact, Tony was the one who suggested he visit with me yesterday.”

“Ah,” Shirley said, “so he was the one testing the waters.”

“What do you mean?” Tommy asked, finally pulling a chair over and sitting down.

“Well, if he wanted to come over, then it was to see what I knew about his activities. That’s why he was so defensive from the get-go.”

“Well I’ll admit the conversation was a little awkward,” Tommy agreed, “but I still don’t see why you think he’s the mole.”

“It’s pretty clear he is nervous about the whole Fusco thing, and the fact that he’s also Italian and from the right neighborhood supports it as well, but it’s really how he’s going after this cell that convinced me.”

“How is that?”

“I’m guessing he feels a little guilty about what happened to Backer. He was pretty careful to explain to us—to explain to you, actually—that the Backer well had dried up, and that his demise wasn’t going to hurt this investigation. However, he’s still against the terrorists, and wants to stop them any way he can. He was very clear on that. I think he figures that if he busts open this case that the Backer issue will be moot and you’ll stop looking for the leak.”

Tommy sat silently for a moment. “We’re still looking into it,” he finally said.

Shirley understood that Tommy had to protect his agent, and his investigation, and that this conversation was over. “Well, I hope you catch whoever it is.”

“So,” Tommy asked, “you got any plans for the weekend?”

“Oh, is it the weekend already? My, time flies when you’re locked in a cell!” She regretted her sharp response, as Tommy had obviously reached into the realm of the absurd to see if he could get a reaction from her, and she had walked right into his trap.

Tommy was chuckling at her response. “Well you know,” he said, “Uncle Sam’s paying for your computer hookup so you can keep track of things like that. Now if you’re wasting this precious resource on frivolous surfing, then there’s not much more we can do for you.”

Shirley, however, was not going to fall for this a second time. “Well, I was just a little surprised to see you here on your day off,” she said, hoping to catch him off guard as well.

Tommy shook his head. “I haven’t had one of those for over a month,” he admitted. “I’ve almost forgotten what they were like.”

“So I guess you’ve been running 24/7 since you brought Backer over,” Shirley conjectured with a tone of sympathy.

“Absolutely,” Tommy confirmed. “Until we can figure this thing out, my team doesn’t get to come up for air.”

“Wow,” she said. “Don’t let the press hear that or your reputation as government employees will be ruined.”

“Hey, it beats the Army.”

“Yeah, but don’t you have a life?” Shirley continued, not sure if she was offering sympathy or perhaps simply prying.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Not lately.”

Shirley was disappointed to get such an inconclusive response. She suspected he had shared more about his job with her than with anyone else outside the Bureau, but she still had her doubts. “So is it worth it? Are we winning?” she asked.

“Not yet,” he admitted, “but we haven’t lost yet either.”

“So what are you doing here?” she asked. “Shouldn’t you be back at the fort leading your team to victory?”

Tommy chuckled at this, and shook his head. “My people don’t need any help from me. They’re running a whole lot harder than I am, and they don’t need me getting in their way.”

Shirley didn’t believe this for a second. “So my only contribution to this whole ‘War on Terror’ thing is going to be getting you out of the way of the good people who are really fighting it?”

“Well, actually,” Tommy said, “you’ve given me a great excuse to get out of the office and clear my head. I always seem to think more clearly when I get back to the office, in spite of the esoteric garbage you’re always spewing when I come over.”

“Hey, I like spewing esoteric garbage,” she protested.

“Well, somehow it works.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Shirley asked, leaning back in her seat and crossing her arms.

“Well, it seems every agent who comes over here gets back to the office with additional clarity—even Tony yesterday. I realize you gave Joy and me some hints, but Tony made a lot of progress yesterday afternoon after the three of us chatted, in spite of what you considered to be an interrogation.”

“Well, Joy and I did banter a few ideas around,” she said, “and I’m glad some of them worked out for her. But in Tony’s case, it wasn’t that I gave him any ideas.”

“Then what was it?”

“Once I had figured out that he was the mole, I had to convince him that I didn’t think he was the mole. I knew I’d get some help from you with your clever wit, but it worked pretty well. When he left here I think he felt he could stop looking over his shoulder, and that’s probably what let him focus.” She had rolled her eyes almost imperceptibly when she said “clever,” but this subtle gesture did not go unnoticed by Tommy.

“Damn,” Tommy said, and Shirley covered her ears in mock disgust. “Maybe you should be leading the team and I should be locked up in this basement.”

“Sorry, can’t do it,” she said. “I need this time to get caught up on my reading. And besides, I figure I’m safe down here, and apparently I have no less privacy than I did back at the apartment, so you’re going to have to win this one on your own.”

“Oh well,” Tommy sighed.

Shirley decided not to press any further. She had gotten her point across, or several of them, and her investigation of him could continue later.

“So,” he started, given the brief pause in the conversation, but Shirley cut him off.

“Don’t tell me. I’ve probably got to be getting back to the office now, but before I go is there anything you need?”

“Ouch,” Tommy said. “Am I that predictable?”

“Sorry,” Shirley began, but Tommy cut her off.

“Don’t tell me,” he said. “I really do appreciate all you’re trying to do for me.”

“Ha. Not even close,” she said. “But I really do appreciate all you’re doing for all of us.”

“Well I sure can’t do it around here, so I’d better get going.”

“So are we thinking clearly now?” she asked. “Got our game face back on and ready to do great deeds for all of mankind?”

“Oh absolutely,” he assured her.

“Well, that’s quite a relief,” Shirley said. “I’m sure going to sleep well tonight.”

“Well let me know if there’s anything you need,” he said instinctively as he pulled the chair back to the kitchen table.

As soon as he had said this, he realized that he had better make a joke out of it, but when he caught Shirley’s glare, he realized it was far too late for a recovery.

“Oh, and Tommy,” she said.

“Yes Ma’am?”

“Have a nice weekend.”

He shook his head and smiled as he closed the door.

The Master-Mind

in charge of the terrorist cell that was preparing to wreak havoc on American soil watched the news report in disbelief, although he was careful to not betray this instant of panic to the companion sitting next to him on the couch. He had met Nasser Baqr several times, but had no idea he could have even been in the United States, and particularly not in the role of an informant. Baqr worked the other end of the recruitment pipeline, for as soon as Faris delivered the recruits to the training camps he was done with them, whereas Baqr’s role in this business was to pick them up on the back side of training to link them up with their cells, for the most part in Iraq. It made no sense for Baqr to have turned in favor of their mortal enemy—he was too deeply entrenched in the organization.

But what was Baqr doing in the United States? If he was part of a cell he could have been executed by the FBI, but then why wouldn’t they capture him and squeeze him for information before sending him to Gitmo? If he was an informant, then would his handlers have risked exposing him to a public place? And if he had really been executed by the organization, then would the authorities dare admit his true role when they could have turned it into a propaganda coup and instead released the details of his colorful past? And if there was really another active cell this close by, then why weren’t they assigned the task that had fallen into the lap of the less-qualified Dosari?

As Dosari pondered and was unable to make sense of the report, he came to one inescapable conclusion: somebody was lying. It was most likely that Baqr was in the country for the same reason he was, as the international effort to quash the organization was becoming more and more successful. Apparently the leadership was being forced to go to the executive level in order to find trusted operators for critical operations, particularly with the urgency of the current situation. He concluded that Baqr had been sent here for similar reasons as himself, and that he had been discovered and inadvertently executed when a snatch-and-grab operation had gone awry. Instead of covering it up, as it had happened in such a public setting, the FBI had obviously concocted a story that was intended to scare any other cells away from their plans, and had let the local police release the information for them in order to keep their fingerprints off of the operation. In fact, the local police must have been fed the story by the FBI, had bought it hook, line, and sinker, and were unwittingly playing the role of federal stooges on this much larger field.

Just to make sure, Dosari spent a lot of time over the next few days perusing the al Jazeera websites for any indication of a message from one of the organization’s chief lieutenants, or even someone higher up in the chain. These were often used not only as propaganda and recruiting instruments, but as a convenient way to convey important coded messages to any number of disparate, autonomous, unconnected operators for whom direct contact could spell disaster. As no such message was forthcoming, and Dosari had no prior knowledge of Baqr’s presence, much less his operation, he concluded that he was still supposed to execute as previously planned, and that he could still do so with impunity.

He chuckled at the fact that a blind ruse by the US government had caused him a significant amount of pause, but that they would never know how close they had come to disrupting an operation until it was too late. “Nice try,” he thought as he lit a cigarette and brought his focus back to the task at hand.

The Formal Knock

caught Shirley off guard, and for some reason she would never quite be able to explain, she chose to stand up from the comfort of the love seat as her new visitor entered the safe house. She was a very attractive woman, tall and slender, with an air of formality about her, but quite a bit older than Tommy, who was following closely in her wake. Tommy started with the introductions.

“Ma’am, I’d like you to meet Shirley,” he began, but before he could begin the reciprocal offer, she had already wrested the initiative from him and approached Shirley with an outstretched hand.

“I’m Cynthia Cruise,” she announced.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Ms. Cruise,” Shirley replied, taking her hand. “I’ve heard quite a bit about you from three of your agents now.”

Cynthia smiled a little at this. “Well, your presence here certainly isn’t something we were planning for, but I think our team made the right decision to quickly get you out of the Hoboken lockup, and the location here was ideal in terms of vicinity and security.”

“I think they did a great job, Ma’am,” Shirley said, but she realized that saying “you” did a great job would have better reflected the expected response. Here was a woman who was used to being the top dog, but Shirley suspected that outside of the office or the press room she didn’t always receive the deference she would have preferred. To secure a recovery, Shirley asked, “Can I offer you a seat or something to drink? You have all been very accommodating in making me as comfortable as possible in my stay here.”

“No thank you, that won’t be necessary,” Cynthia replied. “I just asked Tommy to meet me here after church this morning for a quick stop by. We wanted to see how you were doing and if you needed anything, but we’re going to have to get over to the office here shortly. It’s been a very busy weekend.”

“That’s what Agent Goodwell has told me,” Shirley said, “but I certainly appreciate the time that your agents have taken to look after me here.”

“Well, you’ve become somewhat of a celebrity in our office,” Cynthia said, and as Shirley offered a polite blush and a smile at this, she continued, “It seems our agents are fascinated by your reading and surfing habits, and that it’s providing quite a diversion for them. I think Tommy’s people are actually jockeying for who gets to come over here, so naturally I needed to come see for myself.”

“Well I hope I’m not providing too much of a distraction when you’re so busy with so many things,” Shirley apologized.

If Cynthia was surprised to hear how much Shirley knew about current Bureau operations, she didn’t let it on, but instead suggested, “Actually, during an intense investigation it’s good to get away from it and clear your head occasionally. That’s usually when you get your biggest breaks.” She said this with the air of someone who had “been there and done that.”

Before Shirley could offer a response, Tommy cut in, perhaps to mitigate the revelation that Shirley might be tuned-in to their current operations. “Ma’am,” he began, as if this was the only way he could begin a conversation with her, “Shirley’s recollection of events the evening Baqr was killed has proven instrumental in our investigation into his death. She really put the pieces together for us.”

“So I’ve heard,” Cynthia said.

“Well, actually, Ma’am,” Shirley clarified, “I spoke quite a bit with Agent Eastman about that evening, and I think she had some pretty good insights of her own. I just really hope you can nail those guys.”

“Oh, we absolutely will, and Joy’s the right agent for it,” Cynthia assured her. “Unfortunately, right now, we have some bigger fish to fry.”

“So were the news reports true that Backer was here at the Bureau’s invitation?” Shirley asked.

“We’ve never commented on that,” Cynthia said, a little curtly. “Why, what did you know about him?

“Oh, he had just been coming into the club for about three weeks,” Shirley explained. “None of us had any idea who he was, but we all thought he might be a diplomat from across the river.”

“I guess he might have been a diplomat of sorts,” Cynthia confirmed.

“Well, Ma’am, if he really was former AQ like the reports suggested, then if anything’s going on, whoever put out the word on him being an informant might be playing the bad guys for suckers,” Shirley suggested.

“Why would that be?” Cynthia asked, a little puzzled.

“Well,” Shirley explained, “if I were planning an operation right now and I thought an informant was working with the FBI, I’d put a lot of effort making sure someone wasn’t on to me. It could be enough to force me to change plans.”

“Well why would you think that there might be an operation in the works now?” Cynthia asked.

This was a weak attempt to check if her agents were violating security protocols, but Shirley saw right through this. “Ya’ know, Ma’am, we all just get a little nervous when 9/11 comes up every year, and maybe we’re too antsy, but we just don’t want to get burned again.” She made it abundantly clear that she was speaking for the Great American Public, and that she herself was an insignificant cog in this giant wheel.

“We’re here to make sure that doesn’t happen,” Cynthia assured her from her position of high authority.

“Well, Ma’am,” Shirley continued to play into her hands, “like I told Agent Goodwell yesterday, I doubt that the public has any idea what kind of hours your people work to keep us safe. I had no idea myself until I was getting visits on the weekend from agents who were on the way to the office.”

“We have some dedicated people,” Cynthia agreed, nodding in Tommy’s direction. “You’d be surprised at how many things have not happened because of our agents’ dedication.”

Shirley felt like she was at the receiving end of a Bureau press conference. “I can only imagine,” she said, but if Tommy detected any hint of irony in her tone, he was confident it was lost on his boss.

“Speaking of which,” he cut in, “Ma’am we probably ought to be heading in ourselves. We might want to see what the computer searches turned up last night before the geeks run too far with them.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Cynthia concurred. “There’s a lot of work to be done today, and we’ve missed most of it already.”

“Well, I can’t thank you enough for stopping by, Ms. Cruise,” Shirley offered, extending her hand.

“Well you let us know if you need anything,” Cynthia assured her as she shook her hand. “Our people are doing their best to wrap this up so we can get you out of here, but it’s good to know that you’re staying safe as this investigation continues.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Shirley said, and then as the two headed out the door, she added, “Thank you, Agent Goodwell.”

Tommy held the door for his boss, and as she began her way up the steps, he turned to Shirley, knowing full well that she had already planned a snide reaction to this visit.

Not to disappoint, she pointed an accusatory finger in his direction and mouthed the words “You owe me one.”

Tommy sent Shirley a wink and a smile, and the door closed behind him.

Shirley stood by the door and listened while the door at the top of the stairs squeaked shut. She could hear the exterior door to the maintenance closet close almost immediately afterward, and she turned her thoughts to the conversation that had just taken place. There was no compelling reason for Ms. Cynthia to visit, as Shirley was a non-participant in a drama that was playing its way across a global stage. Ms. Cynthia wasn’t simply checking a block though, as she had offered some insights into the priorities and inner workings of her organization that were meant to convey a particular message of assuredness, but her remarks had somehow had the opposite effect.

Shirley walked slowly back to the love seat, and as she sat down she pondered what the Assistant Director had admitted. Joy was “the right agent” to look into Shirley’s predicament, which was an assurance of the fact that Shirley could trust the Feds to take care of her problem. However, there were also “bigger fish to fry,” which meant that Shirley would have to be patient while more pressing issues were being addressed by the competent authorities.

Neither of these sat well with Shirley. While Ms. Cynthia had exuded confidence almost to the point of arrogance, she had failed if her objective had been to instill any sense of trust. Furthermore, showing patience in the face of the unknown was not one of Shirley’s stronger traits, and this confirmed doubt was enough to end her idle waiting. Instead, it was time for Shirley to take matters into her own hands if her incarceration was going to end any time soon. The only question was, “Where to start?”

Shirley shot a quick glance over towards the kitchen table, where the Bureau’s laptop was awaiting her next click. She instinctively made a move in its direction, but checked herself as she realized that any electronic activity undertaken in the dungeon was not only the property of the Feds, but was apparently high on their list of interests, as Ms. Cynthia had also confirmed. She tucked this idea into the back of the plan that was already forming in her mind, as it was something that she could later use to her advantage. More importantly, though, she also gave herself a directive to exercise some discipline regarding her mouse clicks, since the last thing she wanted to do was arouse suspicion amongst her captors. It was clear that if she was going to make any progress with her own investigation that the starting point had to be beyond the parking garage.

As Tommy and his boss had business to attend to, she was certain that they had long since departed the premises. However, if she were to attempt a foray into the great beyond, she realized that it would best be done incognito, so she gave herself even more of a cushion against discovery by first going into the bedroom and attiring herself appropriately for her adventure. The sweat pants she had been sporting since her workout were sufficient, and she matched them with a comfortable pair of sneakers. However, her top needed to be not only an integral part of a disguise, but consistent enough with the outside conditions as to not attract any unwanted attention.

The problem Shirley faced, of course, was she had no idea what the conditions were outside her cell. Tommy and Ms. Cynthia weren’t necessarily dressed for late August, but they would only have had a short walk from their vehicles to the stairwell, and couldn’t be trusted as reliable weather indicators. Shirley went back to the laptop and clicked on the “home” icon. Fortunately, whoever had last adjusted the computer’s settings had left the local weather display as part of the home page, and Shirley was able to make a quick check without rousing any suspicions. Since her surfing habits for the past week had not indicated any interest in the local weather, starting now could indicate a change in behavior that her hosts might find illuminating, and she praised herself for already exercising a newfound caution. She was a little surprised to find the conditions outside to be slightly cool and breezy, but she was also pleased in that they would lend themselves to more appropriate sleuthing attire. She returned to the bedroom and pulled a hooded sweatshirt out of the bottom drawer. Going into the bathroom and pinning her hair tightly into a pony tail, she pulled the hood over her head and checked herself in the mirror. Suitably convinced that she would not be recognized, she took a deep breath of resolve and turned toward the exit for the first time since her incarceration began.

Shirley began her adventure by testing the door, and propping it open with her foot she checked under the mat for the key. Not satisfied with just confirming its presence, she picked it up and tired it in the lock, ensuring that she would be able to return. She knew that this was a routine that Backer had executed on numerous occasions, but she was still wary of the possibility of being locked out of her own cell, and she rued the embarrassment that would consequently ensue. She replaced the key under the mat, which rolled neatly back into place, and began her ascent of the stairwell. Upon opening the door to the maintenance closet she wrinkled her nose slightly at the musty smell, but still chose to linger to rehearse her return. She hesitated as she pulled the door shut, but once satisfied with the click of the latch, she went to the mirror to see if she could undo the damage. She placed her right hand against the bottom corner of the mirror, and stared intently into its center, almost not recognizing the face that stared back at her. As anticipated she heard another click, and turned with relief to see that the door had swung open. With one obstacle to go, she opened the outer door and stepped out into the garage.

Looking around to gather her bearings, or perhaps to confirm that her surroundings were devoid of any hostile characters, she shut the door behind her and tried the handle. As expected it wouldn’t budge, so she stepped to the fire hose, opened the glass cover, and felt for the toggle she had first discovered over a week earlier. A final click from the direction of the closet assured her that the system was functioning as advertised, but she tried the door’s handle just to be safe. When it worked, she shut it and turned to execute her plan.

Except that she didn’t have a plan. All she knew was that if she wanted to resolve her predicament she needed to get out of the safe house. Having completed the first step, she realized she had no inkling of where the second step needed to be. She chuckled as she assured herself that confirming her freedom was more than an adequate first step, and that she now had the luxury of knowing that second, third, and all subsequent steps could be taken unimpeded.

She walked towards the garage exit when another oversight stopped her dead in her tracks. She had failed to check the exact time as she left the room, and she didn’t want her foray to coincide with the arrival of a shift of her co-workers. However, she recalled that Ms. Cynthia had mentioned church, and that the local ordinances prohibited Madam Z from conducting business on the day of worship. While she had been keeping track of the days based on snippets of conversation with Tommy, she made a mental note to maintain a keen situational awareness starting immediately. There would be no room for mistakes if she was going to conduct the investigation that Ms. Cynthia had just placed in her hands.

She continued to the garage exit, but once on the sidewalk turned towards the down-ramp that she and Edith had descended so many times before. Of all the times Edith had parked on the lower level Shirley had never noticed anything unusual about the configuration of the garage. That would all change now, though, for as soon as she took in the view from the bottom of the ramp she cursed herself for never having figured out that smack dab in the middle of the parking spaces was a structure that could only be an FBI safe house. She walked around the structure, associating its walls with the insides with which she had now become so familiar. The locked panel, resembling that of a mini-storage unit, betrayed the seam in the interior wall that had allowed the redecoration that accompanied her replacement of Backer as the unit’s sole tenant. She wondered what special accommodations her tax dollars had provided for her recently-deceased predecessor, but turned her thoughts back to the more pressing investigation that had brought her outside in the first place.

Having circled the house twice from the outside, she made her way back up the ramp and into the sunlight that bathed the street, the river, and New York City in the distance. Her sweatshirt provided a sufficient barrier to the wind that was coming off the water, and she dug her hands into the front pocket as she started down the sidewalk. With no particular destination in mind she planned to wander aimlessly, if not solving her problem, then at least enjoying a modicum of autonomy. However, she had barely cleared the end of the garage when inspiration struck in the form of an unlikely ally. The characteristic “3 2 1” that had always greeted her in bright red neon as she walked these steps, regardless of the time of day, was more noticeable than ever in that it was not glowing. The unlit sign punctuated the obvious starting point for her investigation, and she realized that her timing was slightly less than ideal.

Stopping in her tracks, and again chuckling to herself, she shook her head and walked back towards the stairwell and fire hose that represented her security, if also her incarceration. As her plan continued to formulate she reflected on how her lifestyle of the past several years had caused her mental reflexes to atrophy, and she further resolved to focus intently on all of her activities over the coming days. At least she knew, however, where her investigation was going to begin, and that she had sufficient time to wipe the cobwebs from her synapses before Madame Z opened her doors to the first step in the impending investigation.

Shirley walked across the near-empty garage with a purpose in her gait, not due to her trusting the federal government’s security system to function sufficiently to allow her to voluntarily relinquish her freedom, but more due to the fact that she was beginning to formulate a vision of where the next steps would take her. Were it not for the resolve furrowed into her brow, a casual observer might have detected the hint of a satisfied smile on the corner of her lips.

The security system worked as intended, and Shirley once again descended into her dungeon to solidify her plan.

The Borough of Paramus

with its country clubs and well-maintained thoroughfares was more than just a bedroom community serving well-heeled big-city commuters and their growing families. While it played that role quite well it also provided a small bastion of conservatism amongst the North Eastern liberal political scene. Finally, it was one of the most lily-white cities with reasonable access to Manhattan in the state, and that was how its residents would have preferred to be regarded by the outside world. However, for over a hundred miles in every direction it held a reputation that overshadowed every other characterization of the city, much to the chagrin of its inhabitants. Quite simply, Paramus, New Jersey was a shopping Mecca.

Since local ordinances prohibited stores or white-collar businesses from operating on Sundays, every Saturday morning Route 17 became a parking lot. It only helped slightly that Woodbury Commons, less than an hour north in New York, had become one of that state’s top three tourist destinations, and that the furniture selection in Rye, New York enticed many Long Islanders to make the shorter drive. However, the tax break offered by the state of New Jersey meant that people from hundreds of miles around were still willing to spend the extra time to take advantage of the clothing and furniture deals available in Paramus. It had become such a well-known bargain center that New York officials patrolled the parking lots of the borough’s numerous shopping establishments and leaving on the windshields of any vehicle with New York plates a small card reminding the shoppers that purchases made in New Jersey and returned to New York required that the residents were legally obligated to declare and pay the tax differential to their home state upon return. While this program cost the state of New York significantly more than it generated in tax revenues, it nevertheless provided untold amusement to the New York residents who chose to shop across the border.

Of Paramus’ numerous attractions, all involving retail opportunities, one stood out as a behemoth among giants, and that was the establishment known throughout the Northeast as simply the “Paramus Mall.” Its formal name was superfluous, for if a woman in Schenectady told her neighbor, “Tomorrow we’re going to the Paramus Mall,” it was well understood where she would spend the day. Even among the borough’s numerous other shopping destinations, including a number of malls that were impressive in their own rights, the declaration “Paramus Mall” carried no ambiguity.

So, on an early Tuesday afternoon when a young man and his middle-aged companion entered the establishment together, it attracted no attention when the young one received the explanation, “This is the Paramus Mall.” It may have attracted a little more attention had any of their fellow visitors heard the subsequent utterance, which would have sounded something like, “Don’t ask me any questions when we’re here. Just look around and tell me what you see later. Oh, and let’s keep talking English so no one will bother us.”

Faris had picked up Mohd at the end of his shift and had driven him the few short blocks to the Mall, and they were now beginning an orientation that would be the first of numerous reconnaissance missions Mohd would execute prior to his final visit. With his renewed faith in this ultimate cause after his recent reunion with Faris, he was able to scrutinize the scene of future carnage with a newfound purpose, and he chafed at this ultimate symbol of Western decadence. The excesses and shrines to capitalism that surrounded him filled him with disgust, as did the endless parade of immodestly-clad females who were in no way attired per the sacred edicts of the Qur’an. Far more offensive were the clusters of Jews, strolling nonchalantly as if the crimes of their people were more than half a world away. His disgust turned to anger, which morphed into a resolve that could not be broken. It was here that he was going to do Allah’s work and a paradise would await him that was far greater than any he could have achieved by remaining in Iraq. He finally understood how he was to achieve the American Dream.

The duo completed a circuit of the facility, exited for the parking lot, and returned to Faris’ vehicle. The brief walk across the parking lot was sweltering in comparison to the air-conditioned mall, and the small car had become an oven in the summer heat. However, as both men had grown up accustomed to such conditions, they thought nothing of it, and left the windows up to ensure privacy. Once inside, the debriefing occurred in rapid Arabic, as Mohd could scarcely contain his eagerness or excitement. “That place swarms with Jews,” would be a rough translation of what Mohd blurted out as soon as the doors were closed.

Faris’ response was more contained, but he felt a swell of pride, as the recent stroll had accomplished its purpose, “So do you see why I think this is an ideal location?”

“Allah be praised that my ignorant family chose to settle so near this place of sin,” came the quick confirmation.

“Allah be praised,” came the reflexive response, and then, “If the Americans do not feel safe in their malls, they will not feel safe anywhere. In addition, I am glad that you noticed the large number of infidels wandering throughout the establishment.”

“They sicken me,” came the desired response. For Mohd’s part, he wanted to impress upon his benefactor the resolve he felt for the task at hand, and for Faris, it was a confirmation that this part of his mission was going to be a success.

“They will be your objective when the time comes,” Faris assured both of them.

As they drove back to the small apartment that was to house Mohd for at least the next few weeks, Faris continued to issue instructions to his companion.

“You will need to make a number of trips to your target—you will need to know how long the walk takes, and where it is you might begin your attacks. However, do not be too conspicuous as you perform these rehearsals—you do not wish to draw any attention to yourself. It is good that you have employment nearby, as it offers you a plausible excuse for frequenting the mall. Pay particular attention to the security guards. They are naturally suspicious of Arabs, for that is their training.”

“When will you deliver my materials?” Mohd asked.

“It should be soon,” Faris continued, “I am still making the final arrangements, but it will be our last contact before the attack.”

“Have we set a time for the attack yet?” Mohd persisted, accepting the cigarette that Faris was offering him.

“It will depend on the materials and the other operations,” Faris explained, again being purposely noncommittal for reasons of operational security.

“What will the other operations be?” Mohd asked, hoping for some indication of the larger picture for which he would be a significant part.

“The infidels will burn in the fires of hell for all eternity, Allah willing,” came the careful response, which seemed to satisfy Mohd’s curiosity. Faris had no question about Mohd’s commitment to this operation, and in no way feared a change of heart from his fervent operator. However, he also saw in his companion a recklessness that grew out of his disdain for his surroundings, and he knew that compromise could easily come in the form of capture by local authorities for some other transgression.

“You need to continue your employment, as that is how I will contact you,” was Faris’ next instruction, but the true reason was that it might help Mohd stay out of trouble.

“I look forward to your return,” Mohd replied.

“And be careful as you walk the grounds,” Faris continued. “You need to be familiar with the target, but you do not want them to be familiar with you.”

“That will be easy,” Mohd assured him, but Faris only hoped that Mohd’s disdain for his victims was not going to lead to a sloppy mistake. Mohd’s commitment and enthusiasm, however, had Faris convinced that he had picked the right operator for this part of the mission, and that it was Allah’s will that had delivered his compatriot serendipitously to this ideal location.

After delivering Mohd to his family’s apartment complex, Faris drove off, confident that he had accomplished both of the tasks that he had intended to execute with the visit.

The Morning Routine

to which Shirley had become so accustomed was interrupted by an unfamiliar knock on the door. She hit the pause button on the elliptic machine and grabbed the towel off the handle as she stepped down onto the floor and shouted a quick “Come on in,” in the direction of the door.

Tony was the first to enter, followed immediately by a thirty-something gentleman whose physique and appearance suggested to Shirley that if this man was an agent, then she was the Pope.

“Shirley, this is Dirk McFadden,” Tony said, “He’s one of our computer experts, and in fact, he’s the one who’s responsible for your hookup over here.”

Shirley wiped her hand on the towel before extending it in Dirk’s direction. “It’s nice to meet you, Dirk,” she said.

“Likewise,” Dirk replied, “but I have to say I feel like I already know you.”

“Ah,” Shirley concluded, “so you’re the one tracking every one of my mouse clicks.”

“Well, I’ll admit that I did learn a lot about you when we sliced the DHS data on you after your arrest, and it’s been interesting to see that your surfing habits haven’t changed much since you’ve come over here,” he explained.

“Well, you guys want to have a seat?” Shirley said, taking her usual place on the love seat, but putting the towel down first in an almost mock respect for the government’s inventory of cheap furniture.

“Thanks,” Dirk said, going over to the kitchen table and pulling a chair over to the coffee table where Shirley was sitting. But Tony went straight to the refrigerator, pulled out a bottle of water, opened it, and walked over to the love seat to hand it to Shirley.

“Well thank you, Agent Fontana,” she said as he returned to the kitchen table and sat in the remaining chair.

“So Joisey,” Tony began, “what did you think of the big boss when she made her visit yesterday?”

Shirley looked at Dirk and then back to Tony, to try to discern if speaking frankly about the big boss was going to be acceptable or a severe breach of protocol. She decided that frankness would be appreciated, but chose to offer instead a more subtle assessment. “She’s very political, very smooth,” she suggested, “but I guess that’s how you have to be if you want to be the big boss, isn’t it?”

This response elicited a chuckle out of both Tony and Dirk, and Shirley concluded that this was the assessment they had expected.

“Well I hope you didn’t give her any hints on how to solve this case,” Tony said, “or she’ll start going into her special agent mode and getting in the way.”

“Well, I think as far as she knows, I don’t even know there’s an investigation going on,” Shirley assured him.

“But if I showed her your surfing patterns,” Dirk said, “I’ll bet even she could figure it out.”

“Let’s keep those our little secret, then,” Shirley suggested. She was a bit surprised at the clear contempt these two low-level employees had for the woman in charge. While Tommy had hinted that she might not be the most popular leader, he had certainly not shown any disdain for his chain of command. Dirk, on the other hand, as a non-agent technical geek could be expected to hold in less-than-the-highest regard those who dictated his cyber investigation activities, but there was no such convenient explanation for Tony’s attitude. It was clear that he wasn’t in the Bureau to play political games, but Shirley read his cavalier attitude as further evidence of the activities that led him in a direction counter to what was expected of him by the Agency.

“So I see you’ve got a keen interest in a couple of Hoboken cops,” Dirk continued.

Shirley cringed at this suggestion. She had no doubt that Dirk knew nothing of Tony’s possible involvement in recent events, as it was unlikely that Tommy or his superiors would have shared the details of an internal investigation with a geek, but he was treading into dangerous waters with Tony there. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well,” he said, “I’ve been trying to dig into our Hoboken cops, same as you, and I haven’t found much either.”

“So you mean Fusco and Patricelli?” she asked. She wasn’t sure if Tony would have any direct connection with these two, but she hoped not. Either way, though, if Dirk pressed they would both find out.

“The very same,” he confirmed.

“Well, Mike was our bartender,” she said, “and I was a little surprised to find out he was a cop. I’ve been trying to find out more about his background and what he might have been doing at the club, but I haven’t found much.” This remark was meant for Tony, but Dirk was in his element.

“Oh, believe me,” he continued, “if you had found anything I’d know about it.”

“Well, anything I can do to help your investigation would be fine with me,” she said.

“Sorry,” Dirk said, “but you haven’t shown me anything we didn’t already have.”

“I figured as much,” she said, “but what about the Fusco file. I mean you were able to get a Shirley file from Homeland Security, so they ought to have something on a couple of public figures like that.”

“That’s the problem,” Dirk said, “a lot of departments keep their internal records off line, so we’d really be looking for a needle in a haystack if we tried to get any dirt on them through the public record.”

“Makes sense to me,” she said. This had some real implications for the investigation she was about to start, but more importantly, Tony wasn’t contributing to this discussion, which indicated he had not been brought in on this side of the investigation. It was likely that he wasn’t aware of her story from inside the club, and she hoped to keep it that way.

“So what ever happened to good, old-fashioned police work?” Tony asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dirk asked, knowing exactly what it was supposed to mean.

“Now Dirk,” Shirley said, “don’t get offended. I get the impression that Tony would rather interview a suspect than learn everything about him from the electronic record.”

“Something like that,” Tony agreed.

“May I remind you,” Dirk said, “where everything you have so far is coming from.”

“Well obviously,” Tony said, “but that’s only because we don’t have a suspect. Once you have someone in hand, that’s when you really get to go to work.”

“I think he’s talking about thumbscrews,” Shirley said to Dirk.

Dirk laughed at this, but Tony rolled his eyes. “So you’re in on this investigation too?” he asked.

“Actually, as you both know,” Shirley explained, “I’m probably getting more information down here than Ms. Cynthia’s getting up in her tower.” She was almost certain Tony was referring to the cell investigation, but she wanted to confirm it.

“Well between the two of you,” Tony said, “you’ve probably done a lot more to help this investigation.”

Shirley relaxed a little with the confirmation she was hoping for. “Well I’m the one who wants to get out of here,” she said, leaning back in the seat.

“Speaking of which,” Tony said, “Dirk and I should probably get back. The boss wanted us to make it over today, but we still have a lot going on back at the ranch.”

Dirk checked his watch. “You’re probably right,” he agreed, with a slight hint of dejection in his voice. “We built some queries earlier this morning, and they should be done running by the time we make it back.”

“So, doing some good old-fashioned police work?” Shirley asked. The remark was a dig at Tony, but Dirk missed the point.

“Oh believe me, we are,” he assured her.

“Then you should solve this case in no time,” she said, “after all I’m sure all the data’s in there.”

“Oh, it is,” Tony said “and unfortunately, that’s the problem.”

“Too much data?” Shirley asked.

“You ain’t kidding,” Dirk said.

“So why don’t you just keep the dirt on the bad guys?” Shirley asked, knowing full well the effect this question would have on Tony.

Tony laughed at this. “Because you never know,” he explained as he stood up out of his chair.

*Oh yes I do*, Shirley thought, but instead she just nodded and smiled.

Dirk stood up and pulled his chair back over to the kitchen table. “Plus, that would make my job too easy,” he added.

“Well, we certainly wouldn’t want that,” Tony said.

Shirley recognized a certain rapport between these two that could only come from working together towards a common goal. However, she could also tell that there might be a slight amount of competitive tension between the two of them, since each took an amount of personal pride in their differing approaches to solving the Nation’s problems.

“Well, thanks for stopping by guys,” Shirley said, “and I’ll certainly let you know if I need anything.”

Tony, who knew better, just shook his head at this last remark, but Dirk laughed aloud. “We almost forgot,” he blurted out.

“Well, let’s go,” Tony said to him, and then, “See you later,” to Shirley.

“Yeah, Shirley,” Dirk added, “Nice to meet you.”

“See you guys later,” Shirley said, as she stood up and began to walk over to the waiting elliptic machine where the lights indicating the program she had been working on were still blinking.

As the door closed and Shirley heard the footsteps ascending the stairway, she heard Dirk distinctly say “Holy fucking shit, Dude.”

Tony’s silencing of Dirk was not quite audible, but Shirley was confident it had happened nonetheless.

She was really hoping that Dirk’s remark had been part of a commentary on her intellectual prowess, particularly since she felt that they had connected somewhat on perhaps an esoteric level, but she had spent long enough in her current profession to know better. As she took the few short steps over to the machine, she wiped the sweat from her forehead and abdomen, adjusted her sports bra, stepped up on the footrests, and picked up her routine where she had left off, only this time her thoughts were to be focused on a singular purpose.

It was quite a relief to have the daily visit over so soon, as that afforded ample opportunity to execute her plan without fear of detection, but as her plan involved activities that would be best undertaken in the evening, she realized she had more time than she needed to think.

And think she did. She couldn’t imagine that Tommy would send Tony over with Dirk without Dirk knowing about the second investigation. Since Dirk was running data on Fusco, as he had confirmed, then there was a chance that a Fontana connection would emerge somewhere. Until then, though, Dirk was most likely not privy to the investigation that involved Tony. Since Shirley had figured this one out on her own, she knew that Tony presented a bit of a danger to her. With Dirk having no reason to exercise caution around Tony, he could have gotten her in a lot of trouble based on what he knew so far. She felt she had just dodged a bullet, but she wasn’t sure why. Shirley couldn’t imagine how the visit was initiated, but she was sure of one thing: Tommy had nothing to do with it.

Shirley spent the remainder of her time on the elliptic stewing about how she would handle Dirk. However, when the machine beeped the end of her routine and she grabbed a towel and moved over to the mat to stretch, she was already chastising herself for wasting any effort on such trivial matters when she, as Ms. Cynthia might have suggested, had bigger fish to fry. She had fairly well planned her next moves the prior evening, but she needed to consider any information Tony and Dirk could have provided that could further guide her actions. Unfortunately she had wasted the opportunity by skirting any issues that might alert Tony to her suspicions.

However, Dirk had slipped when he suggested that Ms. Cynthia might glean something about the investigation based on Shirley’s surfing patterns. Since Dirk had confirmed that he was tracking her mouse clicks, but he had also revealed that he was analyzing her activities with regards to the investigation, she knew that she had just gained an unwitting accomplice that she could sparingly put to use when the opportunity presented itself.

But that would have to come later. She needed to pursue her investigation one step at a time, and the first step had nothing to do with Dirk, Tony, or any other potential accomplice. Instead, she needed to start by returning to the scene of the crime where a friendly set of actors could help provide some direction to her pursuits. Unfortunately, the 3-2-1 Club was best visited during the evening hours and this was going to force her into a very long day of waiting.

As slowly as Shirley could have imagined the day passing, it passed even more slowly. No amount of casual reading, random surfing, or attention to personal hygiene could make the minutes turn into anything but hours, and she found herself pacing the room, rehearsing conversations from the upcoming evening as she saw them transpiring. By six o’clock she was already fully attired with her hair pinned back and under a hood, but she had resolved to not venture out until seven-thirty, and she was going to stick to her plan. At that point the evening shift would have arrived and there would be no inadvertent encounters in the garage that might betray her current situation. However, when the clock clicked over to her pre-selected time it was all she could do to keep herself from bolting out the door.

She exited her confines with the same caution she had practiced the day prior, confirming the presence of the key before ascending the stairs, but upon clearing the final threshold into the garage she focused her attention strictly ahead. The garage, as expected, held a small number of vehicles, but was devoid of people for the moment, and she took advantage of this fact by making a beeline for the exit. Pausing in the shadow of the garage entrance, she established a vector to the door under the now-illuminated “3-2-1” sign, and checking for cross traffic, took the shortest route to her destination.

Once outside the old metal door she hesitated, but only for a second, and with the final bit of resolve needed to commit herself to the plan, she knocked without a bit of trepidation.

As expected, the slot opened, revealing the same pair of eyes that she had seen so many times before, but this time they seemed to be squinting with inquiry.

“Yeah?” came the gruff voice from behind the door.

Shirley pulled her hood back slightly to make her face perhaps more recognizable, and implored, “Carmine, it’s Shirley. Open up, please.”

The slot slammed shut and the door creaked on its hinges, and at the moment there seemed to be sufficient space Shirley attempted to squeeze in through the crack. However, her entrance was interrupted by a feeling of flying as she found herself being tossed through the air like a rag doll. She thought better than to let out a scream, but before she could otherwise react she found herself landing gently in the narrow corridor that led backstage, with Carmine’s giant hand gently covering her mouth as he indicated that her silence was essential at this moment.

“Miss Shirley,” he implored, “What the hell you’se doin’ here?”

Shirley noted that while his massive arms had deposited her quickly into the shadows, his touch had been so gentle that she barely noticed his grip. The fact that he had just addressed her as “Miss Shirley” was also not lost on her, and she realized that whatever direction her investigation might take, she had just identified a staunch ally.

“Carmine,” she whispered, catching her breath. “I came over to see you. I think I need your help.”

Carmine straightened up to block any view of the corridor with his torso as he whispered back to her over his shoulder. “Where youse been? I thought dose crooked cops had youse.”

“I’m safe,” she assured him. “The FBI got me out of there and they’re keeping me safe,” but she hesitated and added, “for now.”

“Well you should *stay* safe then, Miss Shirley,” he confirmed. “Youse could be in a lotta shi-, uh, a lotta crap right now.”

Shirley was charmed as this was the first occasion she had ever know Carmine to suppress an epithet. She patted the shoulder that currently occupied the majority of her view of the world. “I’m fine,” she reassured him.

“So whatsup?” he continued.

Carmine,” she began, leaning closer to his ear, and standing on her toes to accomplish this,” I need to know what’s going on here with my investigation.

“Hey,” he suggested, “we done told the Feds everything we knows. They know it wasn’t youse. Fact, you remember Mike at the bar? Well he’s a cop, and we all in here think it’s him what did it.”

“That’s the investigation I’m talking about,” Shirley confirmed. “The guys who set me up, what’s going on with that? Mike and his partner.”

“Fusco,” Carmine confirmed, under his breath.

Shirley was impressed with Carmine’s ability to link events and remember facts. It was a side of him she had never seen, nor imagined, and when she recalled Joy’s claim that Carmine’s account had been instrumental in her investigation she was overcome with gratitude.

“So are his people still coming around?” she continued.

Carmine seemed to immediately grasp the implications of this question. “Naw,” he assured her. “Just the Feds. Ain’t none of the Hoboken uniforms asking nothing,” but almost as an afterthought he added, “cept one.”

“Who’s that?” Shirley blurted out eagerly.

“Dere’s dis lady officer,” he continued. “She’s here after work, um, twice now. She ain’t in uniform, but she flashes her badge.”

“Who has she talked with?” she pressed.

“Me,” he admitted, “Mad’m Z, couple da girls, Edith I thinks.”

“Mousey brown hair, really bitchy?”

“She been nice,” he objected, “but dat’s her.”

“When does she come?”

“Bout six, I thinks. I knows it’s after work.”

“You think she’s after me?” This question was going to clinch Shirley’s next step.

“I dunno,” Carmine admitted. “She ain’t sayin’ much. Just askin’ a lotta questions.”

Shirley recalled her night in lockup, and concluded that if there was a conspiracy afoot, that the female officer watching the cell wasn’t a part of it. While Mike was hiding and Fusco was acting, this woman was sincere in her desire to eliminate Shirley, but for reasons that were certainly resolved at this point. The officer had almost committed a major blunder at the prompting of her superiors, and was using her off time to see if she could put it right. Otherwise, Shirley concluded, she would be visiting the club in uniform and pursuing her “AQ operative.”

“Carmine, you are a sweetheart,” she said as she reached her hand around his back and gave him a hug from the shadows.

While he remained stoic in his pose, Shirley detected a slight shudder at her touch.

“What you’se gonna’ do, Miss Shirley?” he whispered, his voice cracking slightly.

She released her hug. “I’m gonna’ talk to a few people, and I’m gonna’ bring those bastards down.”

“Don’t youse get youself in trouble,” he cautioned. “Youse let the Feds do dere work.”

“Oh, I will,” she assured him. “Listen,” she continued, “I’m gonna’ roll outta’ here.”

He turned over his shoulder for the first time since the conversation had begun and looked her directly in the eyes. “Youse comin back?” he asked.

“You betcha,” she confirmed.

“Alright,” he said, “then follow me to the door.”

He shielded her with his massive body as she scooted towards the exit. He slipped the latch for her and cracked the door so she could squeeze out. Fortunately the sidewalk was empty.

“Carmine,” she offered as she turned back over her shoulder, “thanks.”

He grinned at her as she made her way back to the garage, and to safety.

The Town of Monroe

contained within its borders one of the most statistically improbable entities in the entire country. It was a locale where less than three percent of the population spoke English at home, where over two thirds of the population lived below the poverty level, and where all holders of public offices were required to receive the blessing of the local religious leader. Furthermore, the sway this community held over its state and national political leaders was grossly disproportionate to its population, and in particular, its income level. However, when the founder of the Village of Kiryas Joel had passed away a few decades earlier and was the first to be buried in the Village cemetery, over 100,000 members of the Satmar Hasidic dynasty descended on the tiny village to mourn the passing of their Rebbe. While the village had attained notoriety in the twilight of the Clinton administration by being associated with Presidential pardons and well-timed donations to a certain Senatorial campaign, it was otherwise unheard of outside of Orange County, New York except amongst the Nation’s Hasidic Jewish population.

At the time of its founding, the selection of Kiryas Joel as a Hasidic enclave in the heart of New York State was a well-conceived idea. It had sufficient proximity to Manhattan to allow its residents to engage in business with their larger population centers, particularly the Satmars in Brooklyn, but with the Town of Monroe being one of the Hudson Valley’s Sleepy Hollows, there was little danger of this small slice of the Hungarian Homeland causing any disruption to the rest of the local populace, not unlike the presence of the Amish in Central Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, the characteristics that made the small tract of land so attractive at the time of the Village’s founding became a source of consternation not envisioned by the Rebbe when he moved the center of his Sect’s operations out of Brooklyn. The continual growth of New York City over the ensuing decades converted many a Sleepy Hollow into vibrant bedroom communities where businessmen sacrificed several hours of each day commuting so that their loved ones could enjoy the American Dream—sans fathers—without having to pay the prices exacted by the communities that provided shorter commutes. As Kiryas Joel found itself much nearer to the City than a large number of villages that now supported Manhattan commuters, it began to attract the attention that its location was selected to avoid. However, its sway over the state’s politicians ensured it was secure in its existence.

While the Village and its inhabitants had remained largely off the Nation’s radar, its role as a strategic center to many Hasidic Jews, and as a symbol to an even larger number of Jews, were well understood by Faris. As he and Marcus made the journey from one improbable New York Village to another, Faris ensured that this symbolic importance was the central topic of their discussion. Marcus was fascinated to learn that there had been a Hasidic community within his country’s borders for his entire lifetime, and that nobody had done anything about it. Faris was anticipating a number of questions about how an attack on such a small village might produce any economic impact or have any effect on their organization’s priorities, but no such queries were forthcoming. Had he received such a question, he was prepared to respond that, combined with some number of other attacks, this attack would help bring the infidels to their knees, and that it would avenge the murder of their leader. However, Marcus was so thoroughly conditioned by a lifetime of anti-Semitic propaganda that he found wreaking havoc on this community to be the most natural act he would ever commit, even if it was to be his last.

As they entered the village they parked on the street across from the Synagogue lot. Marcus began to gain an even greater appreciation for Faris’ understanding of most worldly issues, as he noticed that while the beat-up old station wagon that stood out when parked in front of his apartment blended into this community so well that it was unlikely that anyone would even notice that its occupants included a Somali and an Arab.

Faris began his instructions by pointing in the direction of the Synagogue’s main entrance. “It is there that you can enter the building,” he explained, “and once inside, you will want to destroy as many of them as possible.”

“When will I receive my weapon?” Marcus asked, hoping to get some indication of the timing of the operation.

“As soon as I have completed all other arrangements,” Faris assured him. You will need an overcoat to hide the weapon as you cross the parking lot, but otherwise I am confident you will require no training on the firearm.”

Marcus smiled, recognizing that the years of training in Syria had not gone unnoticed by the organization. “Where do you recommend that I park?” he continued, “surely not here across the street.”

Faris nodded in the direction of the parking lot. “You will want to be as close to the entrance as possible, to give them the least warning,” he explained. “However, as you rehearse the drive over here, you need to keep yourself and your vehicle away from the building. You do not want to attract any attention. You should probably park here, across the street.”

“I see a lot of people entering the building,” Marcus suggested, “even today.”

Faris assured him that there would be no shortage of victims once the time for the operation came. He pulled two cigarettes out of his pocket, and not wanting to linger any longer than was absolutely necessary, he put the car into gear and departed the Village. He now had two confederates who would do his bidding with enthusiasm, and he merely required a few logistical details to be completed in order to bring this operation to fruition. As he returned Marcus to his apartment, he again presented a set of instructions that included maintaining a low profile, rehearsing the drive and other aspects of the operation that could be practiced without drawing any unwanted attention, and attempting no contact that was not initiated by Faris himself.

Faris found Marcus’ excitement almost pathetic, but more to the point, necessary for the completion of this operation, and as he exited the station wagon and walked to his own vehicle through the evening haze he chalked up another successful visit.

The Routine

Shirley had continued to maintain for the sake of her sanity was once again set into turmoil by the unexpected arrival of a duo of mid-morning visitors. When the knock resounded, she immediately rolled her eyes and hit the pause button on the elliptic, and she knew that it wasn’t going to be Tommy coming through the door. As she grabbed her towel and shouted “Come on in,” she was pleasantly surprised to see Joy’s face poking around the door, but her suspicions were confirmed when she saw Dirk immediately following close behind.

“Well look what the cat dragged in,” Shirley suggested, but while this elicited a chuckle from Joy, the bouncing puppy-dog behind her seemed to miss the point.

“I figured you’d still be working out, but Dirk started a bunch of queries for me a little earlier this morning, and he thought we might be able to scoot over here before they finished running.”

Dirk managed a sheepish grin, and finally a “Good morning, Shirley.”

“Morning, Dirk,” Shirley acknowledged as she walked over to the refrigerator, pulled out a water bottle, and offered, “You guys want anything?”

“No thanks,” Joy said as Dirk shook his head.

“Well, have a seat,” Shirley offered as she walked over to the love seat, spread out her towel, and sat down on it to start drinking the water.

Dirk pulled a chair over from the kitchen table, but Joy made herself comfortable on the opposite arm of the love seat.

“So,” Shirley began, directing her comment in Joy’s direction, “anything new with any investigations?”

“Shirl, I’ve gotta’ tell you,” Joy said with a sigh, “We’re really struggling right now.”

“Too much data?” Shirley asked, with a slight nod in Dirk’s direction.

“We’re just grasping at straws right now,” Joy explained. “We’ve got so little to go on, and we almost don’t know where to start. We’ve even tried some of the things you suggested, but we’re just not getting anywhere.”

“Well these guys are going to make a mistake,” Shirley offered hopefully, “and when they do, you’ll be there for them.”

“I sure hope so,” Joy agreed as Dirk gave a quick nod.

“So I guess TSA hasn’t turned up any Arabs trying to enter the local airports with bombs strapped around their waists?” Shirley conjectured, trying to lighten the mood.

Joy turned to Dirk. “See, I told you we should be checking for that,” she said with mock emphasis.

“I’ll get right on it,” Dirk said.

“So how about you, Shirl, any new ideas?” Joy tried with a hint of optimism.

“Not really,” Shirley confessed. “I spent most of the day yesterday catching up on my reading,” and then with a slight glare in Dirk’s direction, “I’m afraid to move my mouse for fear that whatever I do will end up in the next day’s headlines.”

“Hey, it’s my job,” Dirk protested.

“To snoop on people?” Shirley continued.

“Actually, yes,” he admitted. “You can imagine what kinds of visitors we’ve had down here,” he continued, “and we sometimes need to know what they know.”

“So you’ve hacked the router down here?” she pressed.

Dirk laughed. “Oh, much more than that,” he confessed. “I put the router in, so I certainly don’t need to hack it, but I’m way beyond that—I see all,” he bragged, almost gleefully.

“Apparently,” she remarked, somewhat miffed.

“Oh, Dirk’s the best,” Joy said. “He can do anything he wants to any computer anywhere. You should see what he does to us in the office.”

“I can only imagine,” Shirley said.

“Well, it’s good that he’s on our side,” Joy offered, trying to diffuse the slight amount of venom she was detecting on Shirley’s part, and wondering what had really happened during yesterday’s visit. Dirk had given Joy a rousing report of the previous day’s repartee, and in fact Tony had confirmed this, but Joy was getting the impression that the perceived love-fest was not necessarily mutual.

“I wasn’t always, you know,” Dirk offered hopefully, apparently oblivious to the psychological nuances being delicately balanced by the two women.

“Let me guess, you were a hacker,” Shirley conjectured, taking Joy’s cue and lightening up slightly. While his departing remark the previous day was not necessarily meant for her ears it still weighed on her psyche, but Joy seemed to be vouching for her comrade, so she decided to not turn the charm off completely.

Dirk was delighted to get an opening into the conversation. “How did you know?” he asked.

“It wasn’t hard,” Shirley said, with only a slight hint of contempt.

“Well, I’m one of the few people the Bureau would hire in spite of my record,” Dirk said with a hint of pride. “In fact,” he added, “it may have been because of my record.”

“Well if you could convert all of your compatriots in the Philippines, India, and Eastern Europe, then the world would be a much less frustrating place,” Shirley said.

“Actually, it’s China,” Dirk corrected. “They’ve institutionalized the art, and even have fully manned military units practicing it 24/7.”

“Those bastards,” Joy interjected.

“Don’t worry, Shirley,” Dirk assured her. “You’re safe here. You’ve got the same firewalls we have back at the office. No one can get past them.”

“Except, of course, for you,” Shirley accused.

“Of course,” Dirk admitted. “I’m the one who built them.”

“Small comfort,” Shirley said with enough venom to pause the conversation.

Joy broke the silence. “So Shirl, what’s new in the world of scientific discovery and global affairs?” she asked. “With all the reading time we’ve given you have you at least solved the rest of the world’s problems?”

Shirley chuckled a little at this. “Pretty much,” she admitted.

“So what’s in that American Scientist?” Dirk asked, pointing to the magazine on top of the stack which, he noted, had not been there when he departed the previous day.

“All kinds of stuff,” Shirley began. “Earlier I was reading a neat piece on the biology of dormant zooplankton eggs.”

“This ought to be good,” Joy said, rolling her eyes. “The two geeks are about to do a mind meld. Tony warned me that this could happen.”

Dirk pretended to ignore this remark, but to both of the women it was obvious he was unable to contain his delight. “So what do they do?” he asked.

“Well we don’t know why the eggs can remain dormant for decades, and yet still retain their viability,” she explained, “but it’s given us an incredible opportunity to study instant evolution.”

“How’s that?” Joy asked.

Shirley turned to Joy. “Because of the huge volumes and short lifespans of these creatures, they appear to evolve very quickly. As environmental conditions change, for example the amount of pollution in their habitats, different survival traits emerge every generation, and in a few short years, entirely different species seem to evolve. When we get the dormant eggs to hatch—they’re calling it resurrection ecology—we’re finding that the previous decade’s organisms are no longer viable in the changed conditions.

“Well that’s no different than the terrorists,” Joy remarked.

“How do you figure?” Dirk asked, a little perplexed.

“That’s a good point,” Shirley agreed. “Today we would catch the pre-9/11 terrorists easily. They signed up for flight lessons, used their cell phones, probably surfed al-Jazeera with impunity. If you took a 2001 AQ cell and plopped it in the middle of Manhattan today, it would stick out like a sore thumb. The environment has changed for them, and they’ve had to adapt.”

“Yeah, Shirl,” Joy agreed, “but it’s not working the other way.”

“Well, I’m afraid we’re the environment and they’re the parasites,” Shirley said. “They’re the ones multiplying like zooplankton, and while I’m sure you guys have caught your share of them, the ones who slip through the nets can pass that behavior on to the next generation. That’s why this war’s going to be so hard to win.”

“Wow, I’m not sure what I’d rather be,” Dirk offered, “the parasite or the pollution.”

“Dirk, you don’t have a choice,” Shirley said. “You are the pollution in their environment. If they try to do anything over the net, you’re there to snuff them out. It’s part of our role as the good guys. I’d take it as a compliment.”

“Geez,” Dirk said with mock dejection, “Shirley called me pollution. What a compliment.”

“Actually,” Shirley said, “it’s the terrorist pigs who consider you to be pollution, and I would treat that as the highest compliment.”

“Ya’ know, Dirk,” Joy said, “I think I see a new nickname forming.”

“How’s that credit rating, Joy?” Dirk threatened.

“Good point,” Joy agreed. “I guess ‘Dirk the Dirt’ will remain our little secret,” and then turning to Shirley she added in a hushed voice, “Never piss off a geek.”

Shirley chuckled at this. “So anyway, Dirk,” she explained, gesturing back in the direction of the magazines, “I thought I was reading about pond scum, but I guess I was really reading about, well, pond scum.”

Joy laughed at this. “Sorry Dirk,” she offered, “I’ve been trying to convince Ms. Cruise for years that you geeks aren’t pond scum, but I guess I’ve just been wrong all along. I’ll tell her when she gets back.”

“So where did Ms. Cynthia get off to?” Shirley asked.

“Oh, she’s in DC right now,” Joy explained. “It seems we’ve got a few things going on that have the attention of the bigwigs.”

“Anything I’m involved with?” Shirley asked.

“More than she knows,” Joy continued. “I heard you did a pretty nice tap dance on Sunday with Tommy here.”

“Oh, she was easy,” Shirley said, but Joy wondered if Shirley had been using the same conversational subtleties during her visits as well.

“Not quite like Tony, then,” Joy said, letting Shirley know that Tommy had been sharing with Joy the details of that investigation.

“Aw, he’s just a softie,” Shirley added for Dirk’s benefit.

Joy looked at Shirley and shook her head. “Not much gets by you, does it?”

“That’s what I like about you,” Shirley said, pointing in her direction. “We can keep it real.”

Joy smiled and gave her a wink.

“So what am I?” Dirk interjected, “Chopped liver?”

“Dirk, we’ve just been through this,” Shirley assured him, “Of course not.”

“So what am I?” he pressed.

Joy smiled, knowing the answer even before Shirley delivered it. “You’re pond scum, aren’t you?” she teased.

Joy was now laughing aloud.

“You two are real clever,” Dirk said, and then turning to Shirley he threatened, “I dare you to surf tonight.”

“Dirk,” Shirley said with a seriousness that he couldn’t quite decipher, “I’m going to spend all evening on ‘get-a-life-dot-com’ hoping that you’re following my every mouse click.”

Joy had to cover her face.

“All right,” Dirk conceded, looking at his watch. “I’m guessing that those queries are done, and we can get back and check the results.”

“All right,” Joy agreed, still laughing.

“Well thanks for stopping by, guys,” Shirley offered as they stood up to leave, and then holding up a hand she added, “and I’ll let you know if I need anything.”

“I’m sure you will,” Dirk scoffed.

“You go stop those bastards,” Shirley said as they made their way out the door.

“Thanks Shirl,” Joy said, “and you keep it real.”

Once again the early visit, while inconvenient, freed Shirley up for the rest of the day. Back on the elliptic she reviewed the conversation in her head. She had been much more open with Dirk than she had planned, but she hadn’t expected to see him quite so soon after the previous day’s visit, and she needed information from him, so she had been forced to improvise. It had worked, though, as Dirk had all but admitted that he had installed a Trojan on the laptop. Not only could he track all of her internet traffic, but he was actually tracking every keystroke. This was a critical bit of information that added a slight twist to her plan, but it was one that she could also put to good use when the time came.

His cavalier attitude about his snooping firmly sealed her opinion of him though, as she decided she was repulsed by him. She had enjoyed digging at him a little bit with Joy, as it gave her an amount of satisfaction at a prurient level, but she also realized she would need to rein that in slightly, at least for the time being. She had already decided that she was going to need his services shortly, and she didn’t need to alienate him completely. At least not yet.

The day seemed to pass more quickly than the previous day had, but the mission that faced her this evening, while scheduled for an earlier hour, promised to be more arduous, as it was going to require her to venture into enemy territory. She had a fairly good idea of where the Hoboken Police Station was, but she wanted to confirm its location before she set out on her mission.

She was, at her best estimate, less than two miles from her target, so a half-hour would be sufficient to get her there on time, but she couldn’t make any wrong turns or she might miss her opportunity. She once again considered checking on the laptop that the government was providing, but she realized that mapping out the city of Hoboken on her screen for Dirk’s prying eyes would betray her intentions, so she allocated a full hour to navigate. She would just have to trust that this was a municipality that provided sufficient directional signs for anyone requiring the assistance of local law enforcement.

At four o’clock, suitably attired, she set out. The cool breeze from Sunday afternoon had left the area, and her hooded sweatshirt was far from appropriate for the temperatures. She was less concerned with her comfort, however, than she was with the possibility of sticking out noticeably from any other pedestrians, but as she wandered past the waterfront parks she gained confidence that hers was not the most noticeable outfit gracing the banks of the Hudson that afternoon.

As anticipated the route to the Police Department was clearly marked, and Shirley found herself walking across the street from her destination a full half-hour before she had intended to arrive. The bank across the street didn’t appear to be an appropriate place to wait in a hooded sweatshirt, but a planter near the sidewalk offered not only shade and shadows, but also an ideal vantage point for watching the small set of steps and the wheelchair ramp leading to the front door, as well as a direct view of the small parking lot that was marked for department employees.

The wait, however, was quite a bit more than Shirley had expected, and not because it took any more time than she had planned. Instead, her angst was heightened by the myriad questions that ran through her head as she sat in close proximity to the location of her almost untimely demise. What if Fusco or Mike came out of the building and spotted her? What if she was picked up by a hidden camera, either from the bank or the station itself? What if the female officer didn’t get off at five? What if she came out of the building with a group of officers? What if she came out with Fusco or Mike? What if she was part of the conspiracy? What if she took Shirley’s approach to be hostile and shot her, or worse, turned her back over to Fusco?

With no contingency plan in place for any of these possibilities, Shirley took it as a positive omen when, at a quarter-to-five, her target walked alone out of the station and turned toward the parking lot. The officer was smaller than she remembered, and in civilian clothes had a greater air of vulnerability than when they had first met in the holding cell. Shirley rose slowly and crossed the street so that she would enter the lot about five steps behind the officer. The street and lot were otherwise deserted, another good sign, but she felt her arms shaking as she anticipated the inevitable encounter. The officer pressed her key fob as she approached a silver compact, and to Shirley’s relief she walked around the car to the driver’s side, still not noticing her tail. As the officer got in and closed her door, Shirley took a last breath of resolve and in one fluid motion opened the passenger door and slid in across from the officer.

“What the fu--,” was the least hostile reaction that Shirley had anticipated, and the officer did not disappoint, while thankfully making no motion towards any concealed firearm.

Shirley was able to diffuse the potential pressure-cooker by holding up both palms and offering, “Officer, I just want to talk.”

It took the officer a moment to register what was happening and to place Shirley amongst the thousands of faces that pass through the station, but that moment seemed like an eternity to Shirley. She once again felt the sinking feeling of having no control over her present situation, but it was exacerbated by the fact that this was a predicament of her own creation. As her thoughts raced she considered making a quick exit and leaving the officer to ponder the surreal event, but she watched as the look of surprise gave way to one of slight recognition, and finally to resolve.

“Close the door,” the officer instructed.

Shirley breathed for the first time in what must have been minutes, but in fact had only been less than a half-second. Carmine had once again not disappointed.

As the officer pulled the car out of the spot, Shirley realized that this next step was not going according to plan. “Where are we going?” she asked with a little trepidation.

“Well, we sure as hell can’t talk here,” came the quick response, followed by the admonition, “and buckle up” as they pulled out onto the street.

*Of course*, thought Shirley, *I should have realized that the parking lot wouldn’t work*. She adjusted her plan.

The shoreline had no shortage of parks sprinkled between the various marinas, and after driving a few blocks the officer pulled into a parking lot that promised a little privacy for two women sitting in a car. Shirley decided to let the officer take the next step as she was probably shaking as much as Shirley had been, and perhaps still was, although she would never admit it to herself.

“So what do you want?” the officer started, apparently regaining some of her composure.

Shirley pulled her hood back so her hair was no longer covered, and perhaps to appear less threatening to her companion. “I take it you remember me,” she suggested.

“Of course I do. You’d be dead otherwise,” she suggested, patting an object under her windbreaker that could only be one thing.

“Then thanks for stopping,” Shirley said in her most conciliatory tone, but she followed up with a slight jab that could only be construed as an accusation. “I guess you know I’m not ‘AQ’ now.”

The officer averted her eyes momentarily with a sheepish sigh, but quickly locked her eyes back to Shirley’s to get more quickly to the point of the visit. “What do you want?” she repeated.

“I need your help, officer,” she offered in a soft tone.

“I can see that.” Again, the curt responses were letting Shirley know that the conversation was not going as rehearsed.

“I need to know what’s going on with my investigation.”

“The murder or the setup?”

Clearly the officer knew both sides of the story at this point, but Shirley was not yet convinced that she was on the right side. However, having very few options at this point, she decided to err against the side of caution. “So you know about the setup?” she pressed.

“It’s in the Feds’ hands now,” she offered.

“Were you in on it?”

“Hell no!” came the quick response. “Look, I had no fucking idea that I was being dragged into this mess when I set you up. Now my ass is on the line every day the Feds don’t wrap this thing up.”

The ice had been broken and Shirley sensed another potential ally, but the officer continued. “Look, I’m sorry that I…”

But Shirley cut her off by holding up a hand. “Look,” she explained, “that bastard was playing both of us for suckers, but I think we can both get out of this if we play it right.”

“How’s that?’ Again, the curt responses.

“You know where I am now?”

“Well the Feds have got you holed up somewhere, but obviously not too tightly or you wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Exactly,” suggested Shirley, and I see them every day. If you know anything that might help, I can…”

This time the officer cut Shirley off. “Don’t you think I’ve talked with them?” she began. “I’ve gone over the entire situation about a half-dozen times with every agent from that god-damned field office. And what am I seeing for results? Shit, I’ll tell you. Those bastards are sitting on their asses and my life is on the line.”

“Is that why you went to the club?” Shirley asked.

“Who knows about that?” she snapped, looking over her shoulders as if she were being followed.

“Relax,” Shirley assured her, “no one.”

“Do the Feds?”

“No, and I haven’t told them. I heard form Carmine.”

“I knew that bastard would talk.”

“Only to me. He’s on my side.”

“Small relief.”

“Look,” Shirley said, “I just wanted to see what was going on with this investigation. They’ve got me locked down pretty tight, and until they resolve this thing, I’m kinda’ stuck.”

“Well, if you’re seeing the Feds every day, then maybe you can ask them yourself. I need this resolved more quickly than you do. If they don’t figure it out quickly then I’m kinda’ screwed.”

Shirley knew the officer was telling the truth. “Well I’ve already broken it down for them, but I don’t know why they haven’t made any arrests yet.”

“Oh, that’s easy.”

Shirley was shocked. This visit was going to bear fruit after all. “Why?”

“They want to know who’s pulling the strings. They ain’t gonna’ find it, but that’s what they’re waiting for.”

“Shit,” muttered Shirley. “Of course.” She cursed herself for not realizing the cause of the delay. Ms Cynthia’s backfiring assurances had not led her to this obvious conclusion. “Well, are they making any progress on that?”

“You would know better than I would,” the officer almost snarled, “they’re not seeing me every day, and they’re not keeping me in the loop or out of sight. Right now my ass is hanging out there and I don’t know when it’s gonna’ get chopped off.”

Shirley realized she needed to diffuse the officer’s anger towards her captors if she was going to make any progress here, but she also realized she had the ideal way to get her attention.

“Look,” she began, “if I told you what they’re working on right now, at least you may understand why our little case isn’t at the top of their list right now. Do you remember Backer? The guy who was shot?”

“So what?” Back to the curt responses.

“He really was an AQ informant.”

“The Feds have never admitted that, but they haven’t really denied it either. So what in the hell was he doing here?”

“I think something’s about to happen.”

“Who the hell told you that?”

“Does the name ‘Cynthia Cruise’ ring a bell?”

“The head of the Manhattan field office?”

“That’s the one,” Shirley confirmed. She sat back for a second to let this tidbit sink in. It was the first time she had to take up a relaxed posture since she got in the car.

“Shit,” came the expected response. “I hope they nail those fuckers.”

“We all do,” Shirley assured her.

“Look,” the officer continued, having re-focused based on this new information. “Every time I talk with the Feds I’m getting more suspicious eyes at the station. Right now we’re all on pins and needles not knowing who’s who. I’ve been trying to put some stuff together on my own—that’s why I went to the club—but if I contact them and get caught I could end up in there.” She nodded towards the river in front of them, and Shirley understood her predicament.

“Anything I can help with?” Shirley offered.

“If I got something to you, could you get it to the Feds?” she asked.

“That would be easy,” Shirley said, “but you might have a tough time getting it to me,” she added, bringing back into focus her current situation.

“You trust Carmine?” the officer asked.

“Completely,” Shirley assured her. After all, the positive turn the conversation had taken, which was even better than hoped, was due to Carmine’s information.

“I’ll get it to him.”

Shirley was impressed with the officer’s solution, and at how quickly she had gone from cursing Carmine to seeing him as an indispensable confederate. She nodded. “Sounds good,” she suggested.

The officer regarded Shirley for a moment and finally held a hand in her direction.

“I’m Micki Love,” she offered.

Without taking the hand, Shirley chuckled.

“What’s that about?” Micki asked, her hand still extended.

“That would be a great name for the club,” Shirley said.

“Like I’ve never heard that before.”

Shirley clasped the extended hand with her own and looked Micki in the eye. “Let’s do this.”

The Diamond District

in downtown Manhattan was a hub of activity. Over ninety percent of the diamonds entering the United States were traded through the district, and on a typical day the total receipts for all of the transactions approached half a billion dollars. It had come to prominence with the rise of the Nazis, when the Jews who had been trading stones in Antwerp and Amsterdam for years had to relocate to safer turf, and Europe’s loss was Manhattan’s gain. In addition to its numerous exchanges, it hosted countless retail outlets and even its own Synagogue. It was also, Faris’ organization was convinced, a significant source of funding for the Israeli aggression in the Middle East, and would be an ideal location from which to punctuate the message that was about to be sent to the Jews and their American puppets. This last characteristic was the primary topic of conversation in hushed Arabic between Faris and Faisel as they exited the subway on Fifth Avenue and began their reconnaissance stroll across Forty-Seventh Street.

The model for this portion of the operation was going to be the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, where the largest non-nuclear explosion in the history of mankind had ended an occupation and turned the course of a civil war. This explosion was going to have a similar impact on a conflict in the same region, but from a much greater distance, with an even greater loss of life, and with a crushing financial impact that would be felt globally. It was possible to trace the world’s current economic woes back to the 9/11 attacks, and in particular to America’s ensuing reaction. Faris’ organization had convinced itself of this connection, and was additionally convinced that the impending attack would push Western society even further down that slope. While this operation was going to be of a slightly more limited scope, it was a strike against a much weaker foe, and the effect would be even more devastating. Faisel could only imagine what rewards would await him in Paradise after striking the blow that was the first step in setting the conditions for a global Islamic Caliphate.

Faris had not divulged to his companion any details of the other activities, but he did assure him that there would be two other simultaneous blows and that the synergy would have a crippling effect on the Jewish populace across the land. In particular, though, Faisel’s role would have the greatest impact on the atrocities being committed against their Muslim brothers in Israel. They paused briefly at a number of storefronts so as to not attract attention by the extended pause Faris had planned at his pre-selected location. Arriving at a particularly congested spot, Faris announced that this was going to be the target location, and Faisel felt a swell of pride realizing that his thus-far mundane and meaningless life was going to terminate on that spot in glory and immortality.

As they proceeded down the block to the nearest subway entrance, Faris began to give Faisel a set of instructions in rapid Arabic, confident that he would not be risking the security of the operation.

“You will need to rehearse the drive to the target daily,” he began. “You must know how long it will take, and what route will get you here with the least amount of danger.”

“But the van will be empty,” Faisel pointed out. “The drive will certainly be different when it is full of, well, merchandise.”

Faris appreciated his companion’s insight, and the caution that he had just demonstrated in terms of operational security. “That is precisely why you must rehearse the drive until you are completely comfortable. You will be nervous, and the van will be cumbersome when it is loaded with merchandise. We cannot allow traffic and wrong turns to get in the way of this operation.”

“Will the operation be soon?” Faisel persisted.

Faris had shared more about the details of the operation with his roommate than with the other compatriots, but was still playing his cards close. “There are a number of logistical matters that I must attend to before we can execute our plan. I will need your assistance when the time comes, but I do not yet know when our supplier will be ready.”

“The boredom here is starting to wear on my nerves,” Faisel said.

“Then you must rehearse and concentrate on our mission,” Faris explained. “I am going to be gone a lot because of the arrangements I must make,” he continued, “so I must trust you to be ready to execute the moment we are supplied.”

“Of course,” Faisel said.

Faris wondered silently if his determination to make himself scarce was out of sorrow for the impending loss of his old friend, out of contempt for the eagerness with which his companion was willing to sacrifice himself, or out of his own desire to distance himself from the operation during the planning phase, so that it would be no great challenge to distance himself from the operation during its execution.

“We must maintain a very low profile,” Faris said. While many of our brothers live in this city, the infidels still regard us with suspicion, and we cannot afford risking our operation when we are so close.”

Faisel agreed, and they continued their subway ride in silence.

As the duo returned to their apartment in Brooklyn, Faris began to light a cigarette, but Faisel suggested that it was time to pray together. Faris joined him, and concluded that he was, in fact, going to miss his old friend.

The Early Evening

knock let Shirley know that she was back on schedule, as her morning routing finally hadn’t been interrupted by someone waiting for a set of queries to finish running. As expected it was Tommy, and he actually looked a little more refreshed than usual, although the bags under his eyes had not completely disappeared.

“Well, to what do I owe this honor?” Shirley chided as he poked his head around the door.

“Hey, I’ve been unavailable,” he said. “Some of us have a lot to do lately.”

“Must be nice.”

“So, I trust my good people made it over in my absence?” he asked, pulling up his usual chair.

“Well, it was real nice of Tony and Joy to visit the past two days,” she replied, “but did they have to bring Dirk?”

“Dirk?” Tommy asked, “McFadden?”

“The very same,” Shirley answered.

“What was he doing over here?” He seemed a little perplexed. “I told each of them to come visit you with another agent, not a computer geek.”

“Well,” Shirley explained, “they both showed up early each morning with the geek in tow. As a matter of fact, I had to interrupt my workout both times because they came so early.”

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Tommy said. “That wasn’t my intent.”

“It’s no big deal,” Shirley said, “he’s not a bad guy, although he’s a little weasely.”

“I’m still going find out how this happened,” he said.

“Tommy,” she assured, “don’t worry about it.”

“OK, if you say so.”

“So, where have you been?” she asked. He had twice hinted already that he had been gone, and was probably a little disappointed that he hadn’t had the opportunity to regale her with the tales of his travels yet, so she decided to give him the chance. She already knew how Dirk had pulled off his coup, but she decided that this theory could wait until later in the evening.

“I had to go down to headquarters,” he said nonchalantly, in a failed attempt to impress Shirley with the level of importance he held in the organization.

“Ah, so Ms. Cynthia needed someone to carry her bags?” she shot back like a dagger.

“Something like that,” he admitted. Shirley already knew that his boss had made the trip, so she wasn’t going to be impressed at all with his level of involvement.

“So did you meet with the Director?” she offered, realizing that she had been perhaps a little harsh, and deciding to give him another shot at the limelight.

“We did,” he said, perking up a little, “and he’s very concerned.”

“So is he going to solve this thing for us?” she continued.

“He’s certainly going to give us unfettered access to all of his resources,” he bragged.

“Oh my God,” Shirley blurted out. “He didn’t show you the ‘Shirley’ file, did he?”

“No,” Tommy admitted, “he keeps that in a briefcase that’s handcuffed to his wrist.”

“Shouldn’t have told me that,” she admonished. “Now I know where to go to retrieve it, and don’t you think I won’t.”

“I’ll let him know you’re on your way,” Tommy said.

“So is it going to help?” Shirley asked hopefully.

“I doubt it,” he admitted. “We’ve had the lead on this since we brought Baqr over, and I don’t think that Headquarters is going to have any more than we do.”

“But I thought Ms. Cynthia said you hadn’t admitted to bringing Backer over,” she reminded him. “What gives?”

Tommy chuckled a little. “I must say that you handled Ms. Cruise with incredible grace. And, thanks for not letting on how much you know about the investigation.”

“You mean ‘investigations,’” Shirley corrected.

“OK,” he admitted. “And you’re right, I owe you one.”

“Good,” she said. “How about getting me out of here, then.”

“We’re working on it.” The frustration shown in this response let Shirley know that the trip to DC hadn’t produced as much as Tommy might have hoped.

“Well, hurry up then,” she scolded.

“You know,” he said, leaning forward in his chair, “now that I know that you use conversations to investigate people, I’m going to have to be more careful.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked.

“Well, I didn’t realize you were investigating Tony until after you told me, but when I realized it and thought about the conversation, it was a pretty slick piece of work you pulled on him.”

“Well I thought you wanted me to,” she said.

“But now that I’m aware of it, I watched you with Ms. Cruise, and it was masterful,” he admitted.

“Wait a second,” she objected, “I was just making polite conversation.”

“Don’t give me that,” he said. “You were stroking her ego, putting in a good word for me and Joy, trying to find out what she knew about the investigations, trying to not jeopardize your other sources, and basically charming her socks off. I’m telling you it was smooth.”

“You’re giving me way too much credit,” she protested.

“There’s only one problem with it,” he explained.

“And what might that be, Mister Special Agent Know-it-all?”

“Now that I’ve seen you in action, I’m always going to wonder what your hidden agenda is when we’re talking. I never noticed it before you admitted it with Tony, but now that I’ve seen it with the boss, I have to worry about how you’re manipulating me.”

“That’s not fair,” Shirley offered in her defense. “I’m not investigating you.”

“Yes, but my radar’s going to be pinging from now on.”

“Tommy,” Shirley began, “I’m going to tell you the same thing I told Joy, and I mean it.”

“What’s that?” he asked, a little puzzled.

“I told her that I like talking with her because when I do, we can keep it real. Same goes for you, so you can retract your antennas and turn off that radar.”

“Really?” Tommy asked.

“Really.”

“How about the night I picked you up at the station?” he continued.

“Doesn’t count,” she said, “things were out of control.”

“They certainly were,” he agreed.

“I’m sure I didn’t make much of a first impression,” she said. “When you picked me up I was completely on the defensive. Things were coming at me too fast and I was in the reaction mode. But since you’ve been kind enough to give me more than enough time to regroup, I can go on the attack whenever I need to now. Of course, when you first brought Tony over it caught me a little off guard, but if you say that the visit was his idea and not yours, then I guess you’re forgiven.”

“Well that’s quite a relief,” Tommy mocked, leaning back in his chair.

“You know what I mean.”

“OK,” Tommy agreed. “Keep it real. I like that.”

“Me too.”

“So,” Tommy began with the expected change of subject, “since it’s already evening and you’re not surfing, I’m guessing all that reading material is keeping you fully occupied.”

“I’m certainly getting caught up, if that’s what you mean.”

“So what’s the latest?” he asked, knowing that it would give her a chance to get into her element. He enjoyed hearing her wax eloquent about some esoteric scientific concept. It wasn’t what she said, or even how she said it, but it transformed her, and he could see it in her eyes. They would light up, she would drop any pretense of a façade, and all of her defenses would come down. There was no cynicism, no smoke screen, not even the jaded quips of someone who had spent too many years dancing for strangers. He knew that she would, as she said, keep it real.

“Good stuff,” she said, and he was not disappointed in the enthusiasm that he could see bubble to the surface. “A neat piece on divergence and convergence.”

“What are we talking here?” he asked. “Tectonic plates? Galaxies? Magnetic fields? Come on, throw me a bone.”

“Fish,” she answered triumphantly.

“Well, that explains it,” he said, pretending to get up to leave. “Let me go back to the office and announce that fish diverge and converge.”

“Hey, do you want to hear or don’t you?”

“Sorry,” he apologized with no hint of sincerity. “I didn’t realize there was more.”

“OK, smart ass,” she said, “tuna fish and lamnid sharks.”

“And these lamnid sharks would be?” he prompted.

“You know, makos and whites, for example.”

“Of course,” he said. “So what about them?”

“Well, what I was going to say before I was so rudely interrupted,” she continued, “is that tuna fish and lamnid sharks have strikingly similar characteristics. In fact, they have more in common with each other than they do with most of their closest relatives.”

“How so?”

“The way they swim, for example,” Shirley explained. “They are both apex predators, and they both share a muscle and fin configuration that is otherwise unique among fishes. They are perfectly evolved swimming machines.”

“So where does this divergence and convergence fit in?” Tommy asked.

“Well, in order to find their common ancestor, you have to go back about 400 million years, but about 60 million years ago the precursors to these common features emerged in both species. So in seeking to fill their evolutionary niche, these two divergent branches of the fish family have come together in some sense, in that they have evolved similarly.”

“So let me get this straight,” Tommy finally said. “We’ve got these things that went on their separate paths, but after a long time they’ve come together. Could we say the same thing about civilizations, or cultures?”

“What do you think?” Shirley asked.

“Why not?” he offered. “Maybe the world’s cultures went their separate ways eons ago, but soon we could all find ourselves holding hands and singing ‘Kumbaya.’ What do you think?”

“I think you’re forgetting something,” Shirley hinted to Tommy’s disappointment.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“If you put a shark and a tuna in the same pond, what would happen?”

“I’m guessing a little sushi action for the great white,” Tommy conjectured.

“Absolutely,” Shirley agreed, “and we’re no different. We diverged a few hundred thousand years ago, and many great cultures have come and gone, but over the course of our history, these divergent civilizations have come together many times. And what’s happened every time we’ve converged?”

“Somebody’s gotten eaten,” Tommy suggested.

“Exactly,” Shirley agreed. “Look at Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, America’s southern border. It’s always the same. When civilizations that have diverged are brought back together, they clash. It’s never a pretty sight.”

“Only now,” Tommy posited, “we’ve flattened the world so much that these clashes no longer need a geographic convergence. We can span oceans and continents with our conflicts, and we’ve all evolved into highly efficient killing machines.”

“You got it,” Shirley said. “When the Jews diverged from the ancient religions, when the Christians diverged from the Jews, and when the Muslims diverged from the Christians and the Jews, we never imagined that we would all come back together through the airwaves to spawn a new kind of hatred. It doesn’t bode well for us as a species.”

“Wow,” Tommy exclaimed. “I thought that this investigation was making me cynical. I guess there’s no chance of stopping this convergence, is there?”

“Sorry,” Shirley offered, but the cat’s out of the bag already. We’re either going to have to evolve together now, or someone’s going to end up as sushi.”

“And I guess you’re betting on sushi?” Tommy guessed.

“You’re getting to know me pretty well, aren’t you?”

“So now I’m depressed,” Tommy said.

“Don’t be,” Shirley assured him. “Remember what Ms. Cynthia said. You need to clear your head occasionally so you can get back to the investigation with an open mind. This is bound to lead you to a break-through.”

“I doubt it,” Tommy said with resignation. “I leave for less than three days, and I can’t even get your visitors arranged properly.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Shirley consoled him. “Dirk wasn’t a bad guy. He and I even did a little mind meld over some good science. I could probably have gotten to like him if he hadn’t creeped me out quite so much.”

“Well, he still shouldn’t have come over,” Tommy said. “I wanted some more of my agents to have the chance to get out of the office.”

“Well, it’s not your fault, and I’ve got a theory on how he did it.”

“And what’s that?” Tommy asked.

“Well, I figured that Joy and Tony sent out an e-mail asking for someone to join them on the trip across the river, and Dirk, with his access to all things electronic, intercepted the messages and volunteered to fill the void when no one else showed.”

“Sorry,” Tommy said. “A little far-fetched, and not nearly mundane enough for the truth.”

“So do you know what happened?” Shirley asked.

“Unfortunately,” Tommy explained, “it’s my fault. I was on the plane to DC Sunday evening, and I realized that I hadn’t asked Tony or Joy to come by on Monday and Tuesday. I needed to ask Dirk a question about some queries he was running, and since you have to pay for the Wi-Fi on the plane, I figured I’d take care of it all in one message. He’s the only one I sent the message to, and instead of telling Tony and Joy to grab another agent, he must have told them I wanted him to go with them. I have slightly different reasons for my suspicions of him than you do, but I can’t disagree with your assessment of our young geek.”

“How disappointing,” Shirley said. “And I thought your office was crawling with nefarious characters.”

Tommy was only a few years older than she, but unlike Joy and Tony, he apparently was not entirely comfortable with Dirk’s presence in the Bureau. She couldn’t decide if it was Dirk’s personal behavior, his record, or his line of work in general that Tommy found objectionable, but she decided not to push this any further. Besides, he was starting to look a little tired, as if the DC vacation was not as relaxing as it should have been.

“We still have our share,” he assured her. “But look, I probably should get back to the office. I’ve been out a few days, and I need to get caught up with something other than Blackberry.”

“You mean you just got back this evening?” she asked, more than a little impressed.

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “We took the shuttle in to LaGuardia, and I just thought I’d swing by here before I headed back in to the office.”

“Well, isn’t that thoughtful?” Shirley mocked to hide how flattered she was.

“Oh no,” he retracted. “It’s just that I hadn’t arranged anybody to come over for your mandatory visit today, and so I figured I’d check that block while I was out on the road anyway.”

Shirley didn’t believe this for a nanosecond, but she decided to continue to play along. “So, Special Agent Checklist,” she began, sitting back and folding her arms, “in that case haven’t you forgotten something?”

“Of course, how silly of me. So, is there anything you need? Anything we can get for you?”

“No thank you,” she offered in her sweetest voice, “but it’s very kind of you to ask.”

“Good,” he teased, “because I wouldn’t have brought it anyway.”

“Joy was right,” Shirley concluded.

“About what?” he asked as he got up and pulled his chair back over to the kitchen table.

“Men,” she said. “You make lousy hosts.”

“I’ll work on it,” he said as he made his way out the door.

Based on the absence of any early-morning visits, Shirley had concluded that Tommy would be returning, and that she could expect an evening visit. However, that fit neatly into her schedule, as she wasn’t planning to visit the club until much later, being intimately familiar with Carmine’s routine. Still, while she was glad to see Tommy back, she was just as glad to have him continue on his way so she could get back to her business.

Whatever information Micki was about to provide, she couldn’t get her hands on it soon enough. Obviously Micki had something that the Feds hadn’t seen, only this time Shirley was going to see it before them, and she would get to decide how and when they saw it. However, Shirley knew that if she went over to the club now, that there was a chance that Micki wouldn’t have dropped it off yet, and she really didn’t want to wait another day. On the other hand, if whatever it was had already landed in Carmine’s able hands, she really didn’t want to wait another hour. Shirley also knew, though, that she needed to minimize her exposure to the immediate neighborhood, particularly when the patrons from the club and the other local businesses were passing like ships in the night, so she chose to delay possible instant gratification for a sure thing. Two hours later she was appropriately attired and on her way out the door.

With the trip across the street accomplished in relative obscurity, she stood in front of the great metal door and waited for Carmine’s eyes to appear through the slot. She was disappointed, though, when he reacted with genuine surprise upon making a positive identification of his guest.

“Miss Shirley,” he hissed through the slot, “Whacha’ doin’ heres?”

Shirley immediately realized that Micki had not help up her end of the deal, at least not yet, so she decided to take the opportunity to let Carmine in on the plan, as he was going to play an integral role. “Carmine, let me in,” she implored.

After apparently a quick check over his shoulder, Carmine cracked the door, and deftly ushered Shirley over to the shadows of the corridor as he took up his position against the wall, again restricting her view of the establishment to his massive shoulder.

“What’s going on?” he began.

“Carmine,” she asked, “has that lady cop from Hoboken come by today?”

“I ain’t seen her.”

“Carmine,” she continued, “she’s gonna’ bring you something. I need you to hold it for me. Can you help me with this?”

“Of course, Miss Shirley,” he assured her. “Anything youse need.”

“Please don’t show it to anyone else,” she implored. “It’s important.”

“Youse got it.”

She patted his shoulder. “Thanks, Carmine.”

The club hadn’t seemed too busy when he had snuck her in, and the pregnant pause that her touch had injected into the conversation required an ice-breaker, so she decided to take a slight risk to indulge in something that would be purely frivolous, but gratifying.

“Carmine,” she finally said, “how’s Edith doing?”

“Youse wanna’ ask her?” he said, “she’s not busy right now.”

Shirley raised up on her tiptoes to sneak a peek of the floor over Carmine’s cover, and she saw that, in fact, the ratio of employees to patrons far exceeded three to one. Shirley wondered if it was just a slow night, or if the activities of the previous weeks had taken their toll on the business.

“Why not!” she concluded.

“Youse sneak backstage,” he suggested, and she watched as he made his way towards the bar.

Shirley navigated the dank corridor, pausing once she had a clear view of the backstage area. It didn’t take long for Carmine to uphold his end of the arrangement, for as soon as she positioned herself in the shadows, she saw Edith step into the light and look around with trepidation.

“Someone here?” Edith began, staring into the empty room.

“Edith,” Shirley hissed from the shadows, “over here.”

Shirley watched as Edith focused her eyes in her direction. To help matters, Shirley pulled the hood off her forehead and stuck her face into the light. Carmine had clearly not revealed to Edith who her guest was, as Edith squealed with surprise and almost tripped as she dashed across the concrete in her heels. She was sobbing by the time she had crossed the room, and after an extended hug, finally broke her silence.

“Shirl, what the fuck happened to you?” she began.

“You don’t fucking want to know,” Shirley assured her. It felt strange to revert so quickly to the language she had shared with Edith for so many years, even after only a two-week hiatus.

Edith stepped back to size her up. “You OK?” she finally asked.

“I’m fine,” Shirley assured her. “The Feds are taking care of me.”

“I heard they had you locked up.”

“It’s protective custody.”

That’s what they said,” Edith confirmed, “but you can never trust those fucking bastards.”

Shirley was taken aback slightly by this affront on her new-found friends. “They’re treating me pretty good,” she admitted. Then she added, “They’re good people.”

“Hey, I’ve talked with a bunch of them,” Edith agreed. “I tried to tell them everything I could, but I was still so worried about you.”

Shirley realized that this visit was going to be much better for Edith than it was for her. Her friend had been genuinely concerned, and she was delighted to have an opportunity to assuage her fears. “They’ve gotta’ keep me protected until they can wrap this thing up, but they’re working hard on it.”

“So how’d you escape?” Edith pressed.

Shirley was almost startled at the insight that this question showed, but she realized that given the circumstances it was an obvious query.

“Oh, I can come and go as I please,” she lied, “it’s just that I have to be really careful.”

“So why did you come by here now?” Edith continued.

Shirley lied again. “I wanted to see you—let you know how I’m doing—see how you’re doing.”

Edith was apparently satisfied with this response, although Shirley was more than prepared to offer an excuse about “waiting for things to cool down” before returning to the scene of the crime.

“So how are you doing? How are the boys?” Shirley asked, knowing it would quickly divert Edith to her favorite subject.

“The boys are fuckin’ awesome,” she began, bursting with pride. “They’ve been asking about you.”

Shirley realized that there was a danger in this visit that hadn’t occurred to her until this remark. “Edith,” she began in earnest, “you can’t let them know you saw me. You can’t let anyone know you saw me,” she continued. “The Feds can’t know I’ve been here.”

“What about Carmine?” Edith objected.

“It’s OK,” she assured her, “he’s on our side.” It was the second time in two days she had made this claim, but in the face of great uncertainty from every direction it was the one fact of which she was unquestionably confident.

Edith was more moved, however, by the implication that she was automatically on Shirley’s side. If Shirley had said, “He’s on my side,” Edith would not have been quite as resolved to follow the instructions she had just received, but Shirley knew that a minor choice of words could make all the difference.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Edith assured her. “I’m just glad to see you.”

“Me too,” Shirley agreed. “Look, I’d better slip out,” she continued, “I don’t want anyone else to see me here.”

Edith looked disappointed, but her response showed understanding as well. “You gonna’ be OK?” she asked.

“They’re keeping me safe,” Shirley assured.

Edith gave Shirley another extended hug. Neither woman was in the least bit concerned that Edith was in uniform, as the brief encounter had lifted a significant load off of both of their minds.

As Edith’s heels clicked across the dressing room towards the bar, Shirley crept back down the corridor to the security of Carmine’s cover. She felt bad that her friend had been worried, and she took great satisfaction in knowing that Edith would sleep better tonight. However, she admitted to herself that the visit had a purely selfish component as well, as it had provided her an opportunity to have a completely unguarded, albeit brief, conversation with someone who clearly had no agenda with regards to Shirley’s predicament. For all of her quirks, Edith was one of the few people who Shirley could count as a friend.

The Money

trail was going to be the only tangible lead Baqr could produce before his untimely expiration. He had tried through numerous conduits to establish contact with potential cell members in the states, but operations were so decentralized at this point that this task was impossible. His attempts had been legitimate, as his treatment at the hands of both the CIA and the FBI had been quite reasonable, and his hopes for the prosperity of his family in Damascus had provided an additional incentive towards his productivity. He knew of a cell that was being formed for immediate operations, but beyond that he had almost no other information, save for his familiarity with the financing and logistical support processes that normally accompanied operations in western countries. Since his information was consistent with the details gleaned from cells that the FBI had recently interrupted, they were not taking his suggestions lightly.

But it was the money trail that was going to provide Tommy and his Section their first glimpse at what might be a terrorist cell on American soil. Mosques had been springing up in Northern New Jersey for decades, but one in particular had a reputation for catering to the less-than-desirable elements of the Muslim population. Its radical cleric and his fiery rhetoric had turned the Mosque into somewhat of a magnet for hypocrites who were enjoying the trappings of Western Society, but who in reality wanted nothing more than to destroy it. Several insurgent activities that had been stopped by local or federal authorities had been traced back to the Mosque. More important, however, as Baqr had explained in verifiable detail, this particular mosque was providing a conduit through which foreign funds could be funneled to finance any number of nefarious activities aimed at making America a less secure place.

Special Agent Tony Fontana had been assigned the task of evaluating the Mosque’s finances, and he had attacked the challenge with gusto. Bank records were easy to obtain with the proper warrants, and he had spent many long hours over the past three weeks with his computer experts, examining the Mosque’s accounts for any activity that might hint at possible funding sources for a terrorist cell. The first discovery he made, however, was that the Saudi banking system was not nearly as transparent as the local one, and while there was a significant amount of activity involving what appeared to be a Middle Eastern entity, the precise source of incoming funds and the origins of a number of deposits were impossible to discern. Tony had addressed this roadblock with some of his superiors, and they had concluded that there was a two-way cash flow between the Mosque and the Saudi National Treasury. It had always been suspected that certain members of the Saudi Royal Family were more than sympathetic to a number of terrorist organizations and were using their overflowing oil accounts to finance their global activities. After 9/11, when the US government suggested this possibility to its Saudi allies, there had been a cursory investigation at some level of the Saudi government, but nothing ever came of it. While it was not unusual for US mosques to send funds back to the Holy Land, and it was even more common for mosques world-wide to be the beneficiaries of Saudi generosity, Tony had most likely uncovered a connection such as the one used to support 9/11. Unfortunately he was unable to peer beyond the brick wall that covered the conduit to the Saudi National Treasury. As there were elements of the Saudi Government that did not condone such activities, this discovery was going to be handed over to diplomatic channels where it would be discussed at the highest levels and with the utmost delicacy, but as usual, with little or no results.

However, the Mosque’s account activity showed a steady stream of deposits that appeared to be feeding a collection of satellite accounts. This was not unusual, as the mosque’s employees would certainly receive either their paychecks or stipends from the huge central coffers, and direct access to these coffers by the mosque’s rank and file was not something the higher echelons desired. If a cell was being funded, though, it was likely that one of these accounts would be the funding source for the cell.

Tony’s first inclination was to look for a recently established account that might belie the beginning of a new operation, but there were no such candidates. He next considered that an existing account might have recently shown an increased level of deposit activity, but of the fifty-seven personal accounts that accepted regular deposits from the Mosque, none fit this description either. Realizing this wasn’t going to be easy, Tony dreaded the next step, but he took it with a fair amount of confidence that he was going to uncover some activity that was going to warrant further investigation. After obtaining the proper warrants to dig into each of the fifty-seven accounts, he began to search for two things. The first, which was going to prove fruitless, was recent or regular deposit activity to some other account, but the second, which was a change in the cash withdrawal activity of any of the accounts, was going to provide his first break. One account in particular, belonging to a mid-level administrative official at the Mosque, historically had a low level of cash withdrawal activity restricted to the Northern New Jersey area. However, the past few months showed a spike of withdrawals from cash machines in Brooklyn, but never from the same ATM twice. Tony was breathlessas he rushed this information into Tommy’s office since it provided their first break.

Baqr had provided a fair amount of conjecture concerning this new cell and its possible activities, but none of it was actionable without a tangible piece of confirmation. He had suspected the target was going to be in the area of New York City (again), the operation was being hastily executed by an ad hoc cell, and the stated goal was to send a message to America after the murder of their leader, although the true reason was to reestablish al-Qaida as an important and relevant organization. The logistical element was unknown, but the mosque through which the financial support would come was identified with near certainty, and that was sufficient information from which to begin an investigation. The cell leader would have picked up an ATM card and a PIN from a predetermined location in the Mosque, and the provider and the recipient had probably never met. The mosque official could provide no insight as to the nature of the impending operation, or its perpetrators, but he was going to find himself the subject of intense scrutiny for quite some time.

Baqr’s most telling piece of information, however, concerned the ad hoc nature of the cell. The organization’s leadership felt an urge to conduct an operation on American soil, but apparently had no sleeper cells available to take on the task. The resources devoted to the joint CIA-FBI program were proving to be a fruitful investment for America’s security.

The Mid-Afternoon Knock

was Shirley’s first indication that today’s visitor wasn’t going to be Tommy, but she wasn’t disappointed when she saw Joy and Tony emerge from behind the door. She took great pleasure in Joy’s company, and even with Tony’s mob connections he seemed to be a pretty dedicated agent. Tommy had certainly vouched for him, and this was going to be her chance to see what Joy thought about him as well.

Shirley was sitting on the love seat when she heard the knock, and when the two agents entered she already had a quip ready for them. “So, I see we’re doing a study in combinatorics. I guess that means I’ll be out of here in thirty-one days,” she observed.

As the door closed, Tony and Joy simply stared at her with confused looks on their faces. Finally Joy admitted, “Girl, we have no idea what you just said.”

Shirley smiled. “It’s simple,” she explained. “I’ve had a total of five visitors, you two, Tommy, Dirk, and Ms. Cynthia. If you send over every possible combination of the five of you, then you’ll exhaust all the possibilities after thirty-one visits. Of course, Tommy’s way over his quota of solo visits, but I’m figuring he’s covering for Ms. Cynthia, who we probably won’t get over here again. Oh, and if you can, try not to let Dirk come over here unescorted, he creeps me out a little.”

“Damn,” Tony exclaimed. “Someone’s got way too much time on her hands.”

“Not really,” Shirley shot back, “they’re keeping me pretty busy lately.”

Joy had a good chuckle at this, and explained, “Tony’s one heck of an investigator. Not a whole lot gets by him.”

Shirley found Joy’s spunk contagious. “Well, make yourselves at home, guys,” she said. “There’s Gatorade and OJ in the fridge,” but she then added to Joy, “but I’m guessing you already knew that.”

Joy had already taken the bag of groceries from Tony’s arms and set it on the counter. As she began to unpack it, and Shirley came up from the love seat to help her, Tony said, “Do you want me to just wait out in the car?”

Joy turned around and patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t be so sensitive,” she scolded. “This is the only break we’re getting today, and we’re supposed to be enjoying it.”

“Hey, and Dirk wasn’t our fault,” he added for Shirley’s benefit.

“I know,” Shirley assured him. “Tommy already let me know what he did.”

“Yeah, but it still didn’t keep the boss from chewing on us,” he continued. “How were we supposed to know he wanted us to bring other agents by?”

“We were supposed to ping him on his Blackberry when he was in with the Director,” Joy explained. “And you’re just way too sensitive this week.”

“Sounds like the stress levels are peaking over at the Bureau,” Shirley said. “Do you guys need a vacation?”

“You’re not kidding,” Tony confirmed.

With the supplies shelved Shirley returned to the love seat. “Well have a seat, guys,” she offered.

Joy pulled a chair from the kitchen over to the coffee table, but Tony took a seat at the kitchen table. “Thanks,” they said simultaneously.

“So how’s the investigation going?” Shirley asked.

“Believe it or not, we’ve had some breaks the last couple of days,” Tony said with a hint of satisfaction.

“Anything you can talk about?” Shirley asked.

“Not yet,” Joy explained. “Tony’s been coming at this from a different angle, and I think he’s starting to hit paydirt.”

“Wow,” Shirley exclaimed. She knew how little the Agency had to go on, and if they had started to crack the case with its limitless possibilities, this must have reflected some incredible luck or some pretty impressive detective work.

“We’re not there yet,” Tony said, “but we could have some leads.”

“So what are you doing over here?” Shirley asked.

“Taking a break,” Joy explained.

“Yeah,” Tommy agreed. “We’ve briefed the bosses this morning, and now that they’re jumping all over our stuff, we figured we’d get out of their way for a while.”

“Am I detecting a slight amount of contempt for the office bigwigs?” Shirley observed.

“If you’re talking about Tommy,” Joy answered, “absolutely not.”

“But as you get farther up the chain,” Tony continued, “then we might have a few folks who tend to do more harm than good to an operation.”

“That’s comforting.”

“The boss has actually been pretty good in giving us room to maneuver,” Tony said, “but the rest of them just need to allocate us resources and get out of our way.”

Joy leaned towards Shirley and explained in a mock whisper, “He’s not comfortable calling him ‘Tommy’ yet. You know how those new guys are.”

“Well if the new guy is going to be the one to figure this thing out, then maybe he needs a promotion,” Shirley suggested.

This out-of-the-blue compliment stunned Tony. While he maintained his cool façade, he had certainly not expected Shirley to even be capable of such flattery, and even if she was, he was startled at its delivery. However, Joy deflected what could have been an awkward pause by continuing with the mock whisper.

“Not so loud, Shirl,” she admonished. “You don’t want the new guy to get a big head quite yet.”

“No danger of that,” Tony assured them both.

“So what was it, Tony?” Shirley asked. “A planeload of Saudi tourists with one-way tickets to JFK? A couple of local Mullahs advertising for explosives on Craigslist? A Jordanian rug importer making a midnight pickup down at the docks? How did the bad guys blow it?”

“All of the above,” Tony teased.

“I told you she was good,” Joy affirmed. “Not much gets by this one.”

“Got it,” Shirley conceded. “So you’re not going to share. That’s OK. I’ve got MSNBC and 900 channels in the bedroom that I can use to follow this investigation, and as soon as something pops, I’ll be on to you.”

“If we do it right,” Tony argued, “you’ll never hear about it.”

Shirley leaned towards Joy and said in her own mock whisper, “We both know that’s BS. He’s only in it for the glory.”

Tony made a quick glance at his watch and hinted to Joy, “Do you think it’s safe to go back yet?”

“Holy smokes,” Shirley blurted out. “What went on over there this morning?”

“Well,” Joy explained, “our young agent here briefed the big boss on a partial lead, and now she wants to jump in the fray with us. Tommy sent us on a “mission” so he could calm everyone down and get the right people back in their places. If Ms. Cruise thought we were over here right now she’d have his head.”

“Damn,” Shirley said. “That’s some serious psychology.”

“We call it leadership,” Tony corrected her.

“I guess you could call it that,” Shirley agreed. “Whatever it takes to get the job done, though.”

“If we can keep from getting micromanaged through this thing,” Joy added, “we might end up busting the whole thing wide open.”

“Like I said, I’ll be watching for that,” Shirley reminded them.

“Well, let’s roll, Joy,” Tony suggested.

“Need anything else, Shirl?” Joy asked.

Shirley turned to Tony. “Got that checked off?” she teased.

Tony rolled his eyes and shook his head with mock disgust.

“I’m rooting for you guys,” Shirley encouraged. “Go get them.”

“Thanks,” Joy said. “We’ll see you later.”

“Take care, Shirley,” Tony added on their way out the door.

Shirley noted that Joy had been a little cautious around Tony, but that she was still coming across as his biggest fan. It was obvious that the investigation had taken more than a good turn, but that they still had a long way to go. As it seemed that Tony was the one making all the progress, Shirley wondered if Joy’s presence with him involved perhaps another investigation—one that might result in her freedom as well, but that didn’t bode at all well for Tony. If Tony was truly on the trail of this alleged cell, she hoped that this wasn’t the case.

The early visit, though, meant that Shirley had another long wait before the evening’s foray outside of the dungeon. She tried to occupy herself by wondering what particular breaks the cell investigation had gotten, but her thoughts kept returning to the packet that Micki would most certainly be dropping off later in the day. What was it that Micki might have that the Hoboken Police wouldn’t have already turned over to the Feds? More to the point, however, was that the Feds always seemed to get whatever they wanted, and anything that the Hoboken Police, or Micki, might have access to should already be in their possession.

After at least an hour of fretting, Shirley decided she needed to create a minor diversion for her captors. Since Dirk would already know that the daily visit had been completed, she realized that if he had any suspicions concerning her forays, he would be most alert for them upon Joy’s and Tony’s return. In order to assuage any suspicions he might harbor, she sat down at the laptop to engage in an hour of random surfing. She made a game out of it, knowing that every site visited would receive Dirk’s scrutiny at some point in the next twenty-four hours.

She initially considered searching on “Geek,” “Nerd,” and “Dork,” but decided that would be far too obvious an affront, and she still needed his help. She briefly flirted with the idea of shopping on-line for lingerie, but she feared that would bring him back too quickly, and she wasn’t particularly looking forward to his next visit. She finally settled on “Removing a Trojan Horse from a Computer,” knowing that this would get his attention. She had no intention of cleaning his snoop-ware from the machine—after all, it wasn’t her machine—and she was going to need him to snoop successfully as a later part of her plan. However, she knew that this would, among other things, assure him of her presence in her appointed place of duty, at least for the next hour or so.

However, as one thing on the internet inevitably led to another, she found herself still randomly following links three hours later, until she realized that if Micki was going to provide anything to Carmine this evening it already would have happened and she was now just wasting time. Still, she was satisfied knowing that if Dirk was going to track her activities, as he was certain to do, then he would be treated to one of the most bizarre stream-of-consciousness surfing sessions ever created.

*Mission accomplished*, she thought to herself, as she changed her outfit to one more appropriate for sleuthing.

The trip across the street exposed her to more random people than she had expected, but none of them seemed to take any interest in her. She shook her head at the idea that her fellow countrymen were so absorbed in the mundane details of their drab lives that they couldn’t spare a glance for someone else walking down the street, in spite of the myriad similarities they shared. They were all part of the same rat race, competing furiously for that next morsel, lounging under the watchful cover of the federal authorities, and being only vaguely aware that an entire collection of fanatics was trying to bring their existence to an abrupt, untimely end. It was the first time she had ever felt such a kinship with her fellow travelers. Perhaps it was because she had recently been exposed to a side of society that she had never previously imagined, or maybe it was due to her recent brush with her own mortality, but most likely it was because these people, ignoring her as they passed her on the sidewalk, were behaving exactly as she would have just a few weeks earlier.

She reveled in her anonymity as she approached the metal door, and she almost struck a brief peace with her country and her current lot. She knocked forcefully enough to bring Carmine’s inquisitive eyes to the small slot that should result in her receiving whatever it was Micki had promised.

However, she snapped back to reality as Carmine, after a brief pause for recognition, offered “Nothing yet, Miss Shirley,” through the slot.

Shirley quickly held up her hand to retain his attention, and she whispered, “I’ll check back tomorrow,” letting him know there was no need to crack the huge door on her account.

A brief wave of panic swept over her as she turned down the street and walked at a crisp gait, putting as much distance between her and the parking garage as possible. *Shit*, she thought. *What if this was a setup? What if Micki was in cahoots with Fusco, and was just trying to lure her out of safety?* Micki seemed sincere at their last meeting, but maybe she was just a quick thinker. Shirley walked to the corner and turned away from the river, down the familiar route that she and Edith had traveled so many times, stealing glances in every direction and trying to confirm that she had been set up. She yearned for the safety of her dungeon, but she had no desire to lead her potential assailants in that direction. Pausing at a storefront she feigned a stretch, checking the rooftops in every direction. No tell-tale heads poked up against the skyline to betray any observers, but she wasn’t yet convinced they weren’t out there. Suddenly every oblivious face on the sidewalk became an enemy stalker, and she continued her escape with the determination of a hunted animal.

She was aware that the parking garage backed up to a retail center and she marveled at the fact that in her years of using the garage with Edith they had never stopped by the shops. She knew, however, that this was her best bet for returning to safety, but not until she had taken any possible tails on a circuitous tour of the surrounding neighborhoods, hopefully losing them in the process.

She made a number of turns that brought her down unfamiliar streets, but she maintained a mental vector towards her intended destination, and continual checks revealed no enemy forces. Having traversed several blocks, including a few back-tracks intended to surprise any followers, she decided that all surveillance efforts had been thwarted, and she concluded that it was time to end her exposure to the streets of Hoboken and any nefarious elements they might harbor. She had little trouble finding the entrance to the shops that would lead her to the rear of the garage, and she almost ran up the steps to the street level that concealed her secret passage.

The garage was mercifully devoid of any potential threats, and in fact it was empty as she made her way to the center stairwell and the hidden toggle switch that would end her vulnerability. Once inside the maintenance closet she stopped to catch her breath, and cursed herself for being so trusting of someone who, not a few weeks earlier, had attempted to have her killed.

However, as she descended into the safety of her dungeon, she rationalized that this was still the best lead she could pursue, it was now an essential part of her plan, and she had very little choice but to continue to check with Carmine if she wanted to resolve her current predicament.

Only the next evening she would need to change her tactic and incorporate caution as an indispensable component of her activities.

The Image

of the face at the ATM was partially obscured, as was expected, but the process of combining it with the collection of images Tony had already gathered was starting to show some real promise. He was producing a composite that might soon reveal the identity of the most recent AQ operative to enter the United States. The operative had been using a variety of ATMs, all located in a small neighborhood in Brooklyn, but had not used the same machine twice. He knew enough to hold an object in front of his face as he performed the transaction, but partial images, as well as images obtained from surrounding security systems around the same times, had produced a fairly complete composite of the individual. Unfortunately, checking the partial image against every available database was producing no results, except for a possible match with a German passport obtained from Interpol of an executive in the hotel business. While the Germans confirmed that the passport was a fake, the match provided no further insight as to the identity of the owner. In frustration, Tony approached his Section Chief for advice.

“Boss, here’s our man, but we’re getting no matches from any sources right now,” Tony said as he placed a copy of the composite image on Tommy’s desk.

“But these are all being taken around the same neighborhood?” Tommy asked.

“Sure they are,” Tony confirmed, “but there’s about thirty thousand people living in that immediate area—lots of high rises—and I don’t think we’re going to have much luck pinning him down. I’m afraid we’re running out of time.”

“What about the local talent?” Tommy persisted.

“Do you really want to alert the locals to something that might be going down?” Tony asked. “That could start a panic and it might scare this guy off. Plus, you know how we can’t trust the cops up there.”

“I think that if we gave them a close-hold copy of the image, and explained that there might be an AQ operative in their neighborhood, that they would do everything they could to find him. We don’t have to worry about crooked cops in this case—a lot of those guys will still remember 9/11—but you’re right about starting a panic. I can see a cop telling his wife that they’re hunting AQ in Brooklyn, and the next thing we know we’ll have mass hysteria on our hands.”

“You know, Boss, I think I can handle that,” said Tony. “If this guy’s going around using ATMs, he’s walking the streets. I can take the image up to Brooklyn and just let them know that we’ve got someone running around who might be dangerous, but that we just want eyes on him. If I suggest a Middle Eastern link we should get full cooperation. I’m sure this is the guy Baqr was looking for, and we’ve really got to find him. If we spook him, then we just have to hope that whatever he’s doing hasn’t been set in motion yet, but if we can hook a tail on him, we can blow this cell wide open.”

“All right,” Tommy agreed. “Take someone with you and go do it.”

As Tony walked back to his cubicle, Tommy hoped that Ms. Cruise had been wrong about him being the leak. His energy and resourcefulness were going to be a huge factor in this manhunt, and Tommy would hate to lose his talents before they caught this guy. He did feel fairly certain that Tony’s efforts here would be unwavering, although he wouldn’t have the same level of confidence if this had been an organized crime investigation. Anyway, having Tony chase this phantom cell was going to keep him occupied while Tommy and his counterparts in the organized crime division could complete their investigation. With two crooked Hoboken cops on one side and Tony on the other it shouldn’t be too hard to squeeze until someone popped out from the middle.

The Afternoon

had produced no visitors, so Shirley knew who was going to come in following the early-evening knock. She was, however, a little surprised to see Tommy carrying what appeared to be a small grocery bag, but she chose to disguise her delight with a typical snide remark.

“So,” she began, “we couldn’t spring any of our minions free today for the required visit? I’m guessing we might have been a little busy with some important, top secret investigation.”

Tommy didn’t fall for this, but he did announce with pride, “I’ll have you know we’ve made an incredible amount of progress on the Baqr cell in the past two days, so I’ll have none of your cynical remarks tonight, Miss Smarty-Pants.”

“A little feisty tonight, aren’t we?” Shirley shot back.

“Yes we are,” Tommy declared, pulling a chair over to the coffee table and setting the bag down as he took a seat.

“Well, Tony and Joy hinted yesterday that something was going on, but that they needed to stay clear of the boss for a few hours.”

“Yeah, I pretended to send them on a mission,” Tommy admitted, “but I just had to separate them from Ms. Cruise

“Did it work?” Shirley continued.

“The investigation’s back on track.”

“Investigation, or investigations?” Shirley asked.

“Not much gets by you, does it?”

“Depends,” she offered. “What’s in the bag, lamnid shark?”

“How’d you guess?” Tommy said, a little disappointed that his surprise had been discovered. He pulled a few packets of sushi out of the bag, opened them on the coffee table, and handed Shirley a pair of chopsticks.

“I love this stuff,” Shirley said. “It’s one of my few vices—good brain food, though.”

“Like you need that,” Tommy said. “I figured you were probably getting tired of your same routine, and when we started talking about sushi the other night I thought you might like to try something different.”

“What’s wrong with my routine?” she asked. “I happen to like the same boring thing day in and day out, although I liked it better when I had a choice about it.”

“Well,” he began to stammer out a response.

“Tommy, I’m kidding,” she laughed. “Thanks for the sushi.”

“No problem.”

“So is this how you like spending Friday nights?” she asked, swallowing another piece. “Hanging out with your prisoners?”

“Not usually,” he answered a little sheepishly, “but in this case I’ll make an exception.”

“Man, and I thought Dirk needed a life.”

“Hey,” he objected. “This is a nice, and much-needed, break from the office. It’s been pretty crazy there this week.”

“Well, it looks like you’ve found something,” she reminded him. “That can’t be all bad.”

“Right,” he agreed, “but we’re not sure what the targets are going to be yet, or how they’re planning to attack them, but we’re hoping that surveillance and tracking turn something up. We pretty much know why this is going down now, but that’s not going to help us lay out a target list.

“So why is it going down now?”

“AQ’s been taking a beating recently—this is going to be their way to reestablish relevance. At least that’s what the CIA’s hearing.”

“But that can’t be their excuse to call cells to action,” Shirley objected.

“Absolutely,” Tommy agreed. “We’re figuring that the untimely demise of their leader has something to do with it, but based on the location we’re betting on Jewish targets.”

“Well, just bring me a supercomputer, and I can run all the possible combinations of Jewish targets and attack types in the vicinity of New York City over the next few months for you. It shouldn’t take more than a few years to compile.”

“That’s the problem,” he said. “But I think they’ll lead us to them before they hit.”

“Wow,” Shirley remarked. “You really have been busy.”

“Tony can be like a pit bull,” Tommy admitted. “Once he sinks his teeth into something he won’t let it go.”

“Is that why you’re keeping him on this investigation, or doesn’t Joy have enough dirt on him yet?” she asked.

“All right,” Tommy said with resignation. “How could you possibly know that?”

“She was just a little too bubbly, even for her,” Shirley said, “and I figured she probably came up with something about the same time he got his first break. You probably had to convince Ms. Cynthia to keep him on the case while Joy continued to gather evidence, and you figured that having her babysit him was the safest way to do that. Otherwise there’d be no way you would have sent them both over here yesterday with all the progress he’s been making.”

“I take it back,” Tommy said. “Nothing gets by you.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure,” Shirley admitted, “but now I am. I have to say, though, that he’s got a lot of motivation to solve this case, and it would be a mistake to take him off it now. He really seems to be cooking on it.”

“Shirley, I’ve got to tell you this,” Tommy explained, “but based on your suggestion we ran a polygraph on all of our people looking for an OC link with Baqr’s death. Tony came up hot.”

“All the more reason to keep him on the Baqr case,” Shirley said. “There’s no way he wants to be the guy who let the next 9/11 happen.”

“You’ll be happy to know that when I suggested that to Ms. Cruise, she agreed.”

“So is Joy the one squeezing him from one side and Fusco from the other?” Shirley asked hopefully.

“Our OC people are heading that, but Joy’s my agent who’s working that from our side,” Tommy admitted. “They still haven’t found the link.”

“Well with Tony on one side and Fusco on the other,” Shirley offered, “I’m guessing that you’re not looking for a Chinese mob connection.”

“Yeah,” Tommy confessed, “but we’re not finding any record of contact in all the data.”

“There won’t be,” Shirley said. “Not if you’re dealing with someone who has survived long enough in this business to own FBI agents and Hoboken cops. There’s too many ways to stay off the radar now: Facebook accounts, tweets, disposable cell phones, and of course the age-old method of meeting in person. If you know that the Feds are relying on electrons for evidence, it makes it real easy to work around it. Aren’t your AQ buddies doing the same thing now?”

“We’re afraid they are,” Tommy said. “And even if they were using regular comms, there’s just too much to check.”

“How about the guys you picked up with the shipment?” Shirley suggested. “There’s got to be some connection somewhere.”

“Our OC people have been down to the local lock-up in North Carolina,” Tommy admitted, “but they’re all pretty low-level. A bunch of minor New York muscle, but nobody we can connect to anyone in particular.”

“Well keep looking,” Shirley ordered.

Tommy found it interesting that with the news of progress on the AQ cell, Shirley had turned her focus back to her own predicament. She seemed to know that Fusco and Patricelli weren’t going to be taken in until the link to their kingpin was established, and that probably wasn’t going to happen until after Tony finished his work with the cell. Of course, the evidence Joy had shared with him was all pretty much circumstantial, even though it had come from a few of the hints Shirley had dropped a week earlier.

“Don’t worry,” Tommy assured her. “We’re getting close.”

“So, are you heading back to the office tonight?” Shirley asked.

“I don’t think so,” Tommy admitted. “We’ve been going non-stop all week, and it’s going to be a busy weekend.”

“Then you shouldn’t have come over,” Shirley admonished. “If you’re getting close on this investigation, I want you fully rested up with your head in the game.”

“Well what if I told you that coming over here helps clear my head and makes me more effective?” he challenged.

“Ah, so you’re just using me,” she accused. “I knew it. And I thought you were being a good host when you brought me sushi.”

Tommy just shook his head. “I can’t win with you, can I?”

“Let’s check the scorecard,” Shirley suggested. “OK, on one side we saved my life, got me an internet hookup, got my magazines, and brought me sushi. On the other hand, we’ve snooped into the Shirley file, kept me prisoner in a basement, and sent Dirk over here twice. It looks to me like it’s about even right now.”

“Wow,” Tommy said, with mock excitement. “I had no idea I was doing so well. I didn’t think I was even still in the game.”

“Don’t push it, buster,” she threatened. “I can throw out this scorecard any time and start a new one.”

He chuckled at this. “So I guess you’re kicking me out,” he said.

“No,” she said, “but with all you’ve got going on right now, I don’t want to hold up your investigation.”

“So what are you doing tomorrow?” he asked.

“Going to the shore. Why do you ask?”

“That’s too bad,” he said. “I just thought I might stop by.”

“Well, if you must,” she said. “You might want to call first, though, ‘cos I’m pretty much booked for most of the day.”

Tommy capped up the remaining sushi and took it over to the fridge. “Well, if you’re not going to have time tomorrow, I could just spend the evening in the office,” he suggested.

“Hey, if you’re going to solve this case and get me out of here, then you have my blessings.”

“Of course,” he said, “there’s always the chance that if I don’t stop by, then I can’t do anything to get another bad mark on my scorecard.”

“Let me tell you something, Mister,” she threatened. “The quickest way to get a bad mark on your scorecard is to not stop by.”

He smiled as he pulled the chair back over to the table and started towards the door. “See you tomorrow,” he said with a quick wink as he walked out.

The visit had come a little later in the evening than Shirley had hoped, and it threw a slight twist into her previous plan. She had intended to catch Edith on her way in to work, and to use her as a cover on her way to the club, but a quick check of the time let her know that even with Edith’s perpetual tardiness, that opportunity had passed. She made some quick mental adjustments to her plan and went to the bedroom to dress appropriately.

This evening’s mission required a change of outfit, although a different pair of sweats would be sufficient to throw her assailants off track if she was being watched, but it also required a change of route. If someone had watched her exit the garage the previous evening they would be expecting the same tonight. Of course, it was unlikely that anyone suspected Shirley was staying in the garage, but they might guess that she was entering the garage hidden in the vehicle of a cohort, and the club across the street provided plenty of candidates. Therefore, a slight change in approach would be sufficient to confuse any enemy forces.

Having once again navigated the federal government’s safeguards, Shirley made a quick exit out the back of the garage and lost herself in a small crowd as she made her way past the shops and onto the sidewalk. A trip around the block would be enough to conceal the true origin of her excursion, but as she made the walk she questioned why she was doing it. There was no doubt that Micki had yet to fulfill her end of the bargain, and she was exposing herself to forces which, for various reasons, intended to do her harm. However, given the remote possibility that Micki had delivered, Shirley did not want to further delay her investigation due to an unfounded case of paranoia. She steeled herself with the resolve necessary to continue her trek, and rationalized that even with an unfortunate turn of events she still might find temporary refuge on the other side of Carmine’s door.

She approached the door and knocked quickly, to limit her exposure at the most vulnerable point of her quest. Carmine’s gaze appeared through the slot, but this evening there was no hesitation in his eyes.

“Wait a second,” he said, and the slot slammed shut.

*Great*, thought Shirley. He’s dealing with something inside, and I’m a sitting duck out here on the sidewalk. She considered making another escape, but her eagerness to resolve her case convinced her otherwise.

After waiting for an eternity that fit snugly into five seconds, Shirley heard the door unlatch and she tried to squeeze through the crack that Carmine had created. However, he was blocking her entrance, and he made it clear he had no intention of letting her into the club.

“Here youse go,” he said as he thrust an over-stuffed envelope into her surprised, but grateful, palms.

Shirley barely had the chance to stammer out an expression of gratitude when the door creaked shut, leaving her standing on the sidewalk with her loot, laughing audibly at the consternation her paranoia had caused her over the past two days. She knew that on a Friday evening Carmine would have his hands full and she found his curtness entirely forgivable, particularly in light of the mission he had just accomplished. She made her way back to the safety of the garage via the most direct route, still chuckling at the unnecessary precautions she had employed on the way over.

However, once secured away from all external elements, she got down to business as she ripped open the unmarked envelope and dumped its contents on the coffee table to her front. It contained two files, one moderately full and one with its capacity far exceeded with papers, and she noted that a small yellow sticky note implored her to deliver these to the federal authorities as soon as possible.

*That may have to wait*, she thought, as she first picked up the thicker of the two files and began to read about Sergeant Robert Fucso of the Hoboken Police Department and his miserable life. Halfway through the file it dawned on Shirley why the FBI hadn’t received any of this information yet. While most of the initial documents were standard personnel files and forms, the raw underbelly of Fusco’s department was revealing itself through photocopies of handwritten notes, internal department reports, and even some news clippings that hinted at potential links between Fusco and a less-than-desirable slice of New York society.

There were even old yearbook photos with some of the names circled in red, and had Shirley been better informed on such matters, she might have recognized Fusco’s possible connections with some of New York’s more prominent criminal families. Someone in the Hoboken Police Department had done some thorough digging into Fusco’s past, but since his employment had continued it was clear he had escaped this scrutiny unscathed. The reason for Micki’s delay in delivering these files was apparent, as each of the documents would have been obtained illicitly, copied in some clandestine manner, and snuck out of the department under possible suspicion.

Shirley spent well over two hours poring through Fusco’s life before turning her attention to Patricelli. Mike had a less colorful history than his older cohort, but he had still somehow managed to garner the attention of some of his superiors, in addition to some internal affairs investigators. Again, no explicit ties to organized crime were established, but the files demonstrated significant potential. She found some slight amusement in the fact the Mike had worked as a bartender prior to attending the Academy, but she didn’t dwell on this for long as she realized she had a lot of work ahead of her.

She grabbed a pen and notepad from the kitchen and began to record her observations, although it became apparent that with no other resources her investigation was not going to lend itself to any breakthroughs. After all, some interested party in the Hoboken Police Department had traveled this road before, and Mike and Fusco were still on the payroll. Once again she leaned instinctively towards the laptop on the kitchen table, but she checked herself. In fact, she already knew what was required for her to pursue this investigation if she wanted to shed any more light on the files in front of her.

Shirley hoped that Tommy’s Saturday visit would come early so she could take her next steps immediately. She sorted the papers spread out in front of her to something that approximated their original order and returned them to their respective files. Any more time spent on them without additional resources would be counter-productive, so she stuffed the files back in the envelope and buried it in a dresser drawer before going to bed.

The Mall Cop

walked his insignificant beat past the storefronts, knowing at least that for the first time in his life things were only going to get better. The silver tag that displayed the name “Courtney Lee” to anyone who wasted a glance at the right breast pocket of his uniform served as a reminder of the first of his mother’s many failures in her attempt to raise him in a culture that was foreign to her own. The collar that covered his tie partially obscured a number of distinctive tattoos that identified him in his former neighborhood as a member of an organization he had joined to rebel against his mother’s failings. The highly spit-shined shoes that adorned his feet were two of many reminders that he had once been forced onto a path that was intended to turn his life around, a process that seemed to be working. And the thirty-eight revolver on his hip, his third weapon-of-choice that life had assigned him, at least gave him a feeling of security in reminding him that while transient, his current position might hold at least some importance in the grand scheme of things.

But Courtney Lee’s story began, not in the Paramus Mall where he now patrolled, nor on the streets of Sherman Oaks where he once helped terrorize an entire community, but in a working-class neighborhood in Seoul, Korea. His first opportunity to visit this neighborhood came in the nineteenth year of his life, but the crowded cluster of buildings was responsible for everything that had happened to him in his first eighteen years. His mother had been born in that neighborhood, the second of three girls, and when her younger sister was born her father finally gave up on his dream of producing a son. As a laborer, Courtney’s grandfather had little hope of his daughters achieving anything beyond what his wife had accomplished by marrying him, but through a set of fortuitous circumstances each daughter would be granted opportunities he and his wife could never have imagined.

Courtney’s oldest aunt had the fortune of landing a job at the US military base at Youngsan, and in doing so made the acquaintance of a Master Sergeant who provided her with not only a marriage proposal, but an opportunity to move to the states. Courtney’s mother, on the other hand, married a working-class countryman, as was expected. However, the fluctuations in the Asian tourist industry kept his employment opportunities tenuous at best, and when he was finally let go with hundreds of others, Courtney’s mother succumbed to the pressures of her older sister and the couple accepted her husband’s sponsorship to the United States. For Koreans this opportunity usually involved a stint in the retail business, but the work ethic that Courtney’s mother brought with her permeated her establishments and led to a great deal of success. Furthermore, her husband possessed an acumen for identifying locations where the Hispanic high school population would sustain a market for ninety-nine cent grooming accessories and trinkets, which were imported from her native land in such quantities that allowed a twenty-fold markup. Soon the family was able to make a significant down payment on a fairly nice spread in Sherman Oaks, far from the Huntington Park streets where they conducted their business.

It was in Sherman Oaks where Courtney and his younger brother Michael were born, as his mother learned in the two years separating their births to better research her selection of Anglo names that would help her offspring more smoothly assimilate into their new culture. For a while, the young family lived the American dream, and even saved up enough to send a considerable sum back to both sets of Courtney’s grandparents, but their prosperity was not to last indefinitely. As the economy began to collapse, more merchandise left their stores via the five-finger discount, requiring shifts of security guards that made a hefty dent in the family’s profits. Furthermore, Courtney’s father, who had proven so adept at locating and setting up the establishments, found it beneath him to take a hands-on role as a proprietor, and while Courtney’s mother juggled assistant-managers at three locations, he devoted more of his time and funds to alcohol, women, and gambling.

Courtney, taking his cue from his only adult male role model, began his association with the more undesirable elements of the community, and at fifteen was initiated into an Asian street gang. Their activities spanned the spectrum from drugs to robbery to extortion, and finally to armed conflict. However, a year into this enterprise, a retaliatory action by a collection of rivals brought an abrupt end to Michael’s life, and Courtney found himself as the recipient of more parental attention in one month than he had received in the previous sixteen years. His father sobered up long enough to administer a beating that exceeded any he had experienced during his gang initiation, and now fearing for his life on two fronts, his mother looked for a way to protect her remaining son from the fate that awaited him on his current path.

Courtney’s younger aunt, through the graces of money sent from the States by two older sisters, had an opportunity that had never been available to any of her relatives, and that was to continue her education beyond high school. She was accepted into Ewah University in Seoul, where she had performed admirably, and had married a young man who had attended Seoul University, the nation’s most prestigious institute of higher learning. Since her husband’s family came from a slightly higher class, they were both able to attend Columbia University for graduate school, after which they remained in the States, rented a small apartment in New Jersey, and made the daily commute to Manhattan where they were both employed. Courtney’s mother decided that her younger sister would provide the most stable setting for her son to complete his education, and to sever his current ties. After many reminders of why the educational opportunity had only been available to the youngest of the three siblings, the couple acquiesced and agreed to host Courtney while he finished high school.

So Courtney was whisked away to an upper-middle class high school in New Jersey under the watchful eyes of his aunt and uncle. Unfortunately, he had very few credits to show for his meager attendance at Grant High School, and as he transferred it was clear he was not going to complete his senior year on time. Courtney’s uncle, however, proved to be the stern disciplinarian that his father had never been, and Courtney soon found himself with a tutor every afternoon preparing for this GED examination. Courtney never did receive his high school diploma, but he did sufficiently well on the equivalency exam to receive his certificate and enlist in the Army.

Courtney’s uncle and aunt promised they would support him through a community college education, and, if he succeeded, through a bachelor’s degree, but they placed a set of very stringent conditions on the offer. First, he would have to enlist in the Army for a minimal tour, and second, he would have to find steady employment upon his discharge. Having no other choice Courtney visited his local recruiter and signed up for a two-year contract, the shortest the Army allowed.

Courtney had no trouble with basic training at Ft. Benning as it was less rigorous than tae kwon do classes and much less stressful than his gang initiation, and he soon found himself stationed in Korea patrolling the Demilitarized Zone not far from the birthplace of his ancestors. He traded the Mac-10 he had carried in Sherman Oaks for a government-issue M-4, but otherwise the experiences were surprisingly similar. There was a hierarchy to be respected, there was an amount of discipline required, but while keeping one’s mouth shut could help avoid attention, there was also a modest level of reward to be had by a trooper who was willing to demonstrate some initiative. Courtney was discharged honorably at the completion of his tour, and he returned to his aunt and uncle to fulfill the bargain they had struck two years earlier. Only this time, Courtney was moving forward with more discipline, self-confidence, and fortitude than he had ever known.

With a full schedule of evening classes at the Community College, Courtney met the employment requirement of their arrangement by continuing to serve under arms, only this time it was as a security professional at a local mall. His military service had helped him secure this position over hundreds of other applicants, and the Army promotion board he had passed when he became a Corporal had more than prepared him for the final interview that guaranteed him the job. With his days of gang banging a thing of the remote past, Courtney was looking towards the future with anticipation, and working the day shift meant the requirements of his job were far from taxing.

However, Courtney did take his position seriously and when early one afternoon he witnessed two Middle Eastern male customers entering the establishment and walking a full circuit without ever going into any store, he became suspicious that they were not there for the shopping. He had seen all of the training films that had been produced for Mall Security Professionals after 9/11, and he knew what to look for (including the racial profiling that was prohibited from almost every non-private law-enforcement activity in the country) but it was his military experience that alerted him to the possible unusual nature of the visit. He had often watched as his Company Commander and Platoon Leader walked a piece of terrain in preparation for a training exercise, and for some reason he got the sense that these two Arabs were performing a reconnaissance mission.

When the younger of the two Arabs returned five times over the next two weeks, always walking the same circuit and appearing to take mental notes, Courtney decided to approach the head of security concerning the anomaly, and at the end of a shift, he knocked on his boss’ office door.

“What’s up, Courntey?” his boss inquired. Charles McNair had been a noncommissioned officer in the 82D Airborne Division before Courtney was born, but had retired as a Master Sergeant just after the Wall came down, so had missed most of the excitement their Army had experienced recently in the Central Command sandbox. It was Courtney’s military experience that had impressed him so much when he was hiring to fill the vacancy that had given Courtney this opportunity.

“Sir,” Courtney began, “I think we might have something going on that we may want to look into.”

“Lay it on me, Trooper,” McNair said.

“Sir,” Courtney continued, “about two weeks ago I saw two suspicious-looking Arabs swing through here, and I swear they were casing the joint. One was about fifty, but the other one was my age, and he’s come back by himself almost every other day since then.”

“What’s he doing?” McNair asked.

“He just walks down to the end of the mall and back, looking around,” Courtney explained. “It almost looks like he’s looking for somebody, but I noticed he spends a lot of time staring at groups of Jewish women, and I don’t think he’s trying to get a date from that crowd.”

“Well, pull up a seat—let’s take a look at him,” McNair offered, swinging his monitor around so both he and Courtney had a good view of it. “Now, what time did he come through today?”

“He came in at 11:17,” Courtney explained,” it’s always around the same time, and I’m pretty sure it’s been Monday, Wednesday, and Friday these past two weeks.”

McNair pulled up the images from the Mall’s numerous security cameras, and made a positive identification of Mohd on each day Courtney had claimed he had visited. The most important image, however, was the one from the previous Monday, which clearly showed Mohd and Faris entering the mall together.

“What do you have going this afternoon?” McNair asked.

“I don’t have classes until this evening,” Courtney said, “so I guess nothing.”

“Good,” said McNair, “stick around while I make a call.”

McNair dialed a number without looking it up, and engaged in casual banter with the voice at the other end. However, after a few minutes of this, he got down to business explaining what he had just heard from one of his security guards. Courtney felt a twinge of pride as McNair vouched for his credibility, and soon he finished the conversation with “OK, see you in a few.”

When McNair hung up, he pulled out his wallet, handed Courtney ten dollars, and told him “Go down to the food court and grab us three cokes. There’s a man coming by who is going to want to talk to us.”

When Courtney returned, there was a uniformed policeman sitting in the chair that Courtney had just vacated, and he and McNair were carefully scrutinizing the images on the monitor. McNair made the introductions.

“Courtney, this is Captain John Adams from the Paramus Police Department, and one of my closest friends. We go way back together, Fort Bragg actually, and we both think that you’re onto something here.”

The Captain stood up and shook Courtney’s hand, and began to explain. “Courtney, you can’t imagine how many reports of suspicious people we get every day. We spend most of our time just trying to reassure the people who are making the reports, but Charles here vouches for you, and if you and he think that something’s up, then I’m going to take it seriously. Now I certainly don’t recognize either of these gentlemen, and it’s way beyond our ability to here in Paramus to check these images, but I’m going to drop a copy of this image off with the FBI’s New Jersey Field Office. They’ve got software that can tell us if either of these characters is of interest. You need to keep your eyes open, and if you see anything else involving either of these two, you need to let Charles know immediately.”

“Yes, Sir,” Courtney responded.

Adams then turned to McNair and finished his thought, “Ya know, Charles, there’s no doubt in my mind that these guys are casing this joint. You know better than I do that big malls are popular targets, and we need you and your people to stay alert on this one. I hate to say it, but I’m afraid you’re really on to something here.”

This would not be Courtney’s final interview with the authorities concerning the two men, and each subsequent interview would be with people in higher and higher positions within the law enforcement community. McNair assured him that without the personal relationship he had with Captain Adams, this probably would have gone nowhere, but that it was a great thing for the mall, and America, that they were being taken seriously.

The Bag

of groceries poking around the door without warning let Shirley know that not only was a much-needed resupply run being conducted, but that the delivery was being performed by a welcome guest. She got up from the love seat and started pulling things from the bag Tommy had set on the counter, as the two of them began filling the cupboards with a resupply of Shirley’s essentials.

“So how did you know what to get?” Shirley asked. “It looks like you did a pretty thorough job here.”

“You know,” Tommy protested, “I’m not completely incompetent.”

Shirley walked over to the phone and picked it up. “How do I get through to Joy on this thing?” she asked.

“All right,” Tommy admitted, “Joy gave me a list.”

“She didn’t get this stuff for you to bring over?” she pressed.

“I bought it myself, thank you very much.”

“Wow,” Shirley remarked. “He can shop, too.”

“In addition to what?” he asked.

“You know,” Shirley explained, “the usual. Snoop, spy, all those Secret Agent things.”

“I see we’re reading off the bad side of the score card, and it’s Special Agent,” Tommy objected.

“A little sensitive tonight, aren’t we?” Shirley asked. “Is the War on Terror getting us down?”

“Actually, the War on Terror saw even more progress today,” he announced. “I’ve got a really good feeling we’re going to win this one.”

“So how does that bode for Fusco?” she asked. It was clear that this was the report she really wanted.

“Fusco and Patricelli are on hold,” Tommy said. “We just don’t have the manpower right now to cover all these bases.”

“That’s OK,” Shirley offered. “Let’s get the heavy lifting done first. Although I have to say that we’re going about this stupid war on terror the wrong way. If we’re fighting this battle on American soil, we’re way too late. I’ve spent most of the day thinking about this one.”

This, of course, was a significant stretch of the truth. Shirley knew that she had spent the majority of her morning musing about her own investigation of Fusco and Patricelli, but as she had spent a small portion of her time on the elliptic concocting a quick theory on the fight against terrorism, she felt justified with her claim. Furthermore, this deception was an essential part of her plan.

“So what do we do if the enemy takes the battle to our soil against our wishes?” Tommy asked.

“I haven’t thought through that part of it yet, since if we were to approach this correctly, that would never happen,” Shirley said as she walked over to the love seat and made herself comfortable.

Tommy pulled up his usual chair and settled in for what promised to be an interesting conversation. “All right,” he said, “If this is going to be another one of your theories, I’m all ears.”

“Did you know,” Shirley began, “that there’s a village in the jungles of Thailand where every family has at least one car?”

“There are a few villages in the US where every family has at least two cars, at least that’s what I’m hearing from my sources,” Tommy answered, having no idea where this line of reasoning was going to take him.

“Sure,” continued Shirley, “but fifteen years ago, that village didn’t own a single car. The only way the people could get to their neighboring villages was by bike.”

“So what happened?” asked Tommy, taking the bait.

Shirley leaned forward, and Tommy knew that this was a sure sign she was about to jump up on her soap box. Her eyes followed with their rare sparkle, but since she was delving into his area of expertise we welcomed the impending rant.

“A Swiss company built a factory in the jungle, they took advantage of the cheap labor, and soon the Thai villagers were rolling in more Euros than they had ever imagined. As the village grew, more labor was available, the factory expanded, and the invisible hand of the global market pushed everybody involved beyond the brink of prosperity.”

“How quaint,” Tommy said, “but what’s that got to do with AQ attacks on American soil?”

“Well, the nefarious elements in the Saudi government are doing the exact same thing, only in reverse,” Shirley explained. “They’re finding the most depressed areas of the Muslim world, where the despairing population is the most likely to produce fanatics from the downtrodden, and they’re building Mosques and Madrasses to serve as recruitment centers for these terrorist organizations. If young men can’t find a job, can’t support a family, and can’t even find a wife, they’re going to be ripe for the propaganda of a fiery Imam, they’re going to buy what’s being spewed forth from these ‘schools,’ and they’re going to provide these scumbags a never-ending supply of martyrs.”

“Well, obviously,” Tommy agreed. “We’ve been following that activity for years.”

“Right,” said Shirley, “but we’re not doing anything about it. The whole system is based on the economies of these hell-holes staying in the dumps, because once people taste a little prosperity, they’re not quite so eager to make the leap to Paradise.”

“So what are we supposed to do about that?” asked Tommy, leaning back in his chair.

“If our government is really interested in winning this war,” Shirley continued, “we would offer huge tax incentives for some of our companies that are already outsourcing most of their operations to specifically target these depressed areas. That way, we could beat the Saudis at their own game. Our industries could enjoy the cheap labor, these depressed areas would become like the village in the Thai jungle, and these fertile grounds for growing martyrs would dry up.”

“So how do we decide where we want our industries to build factories?” Tommy asked, having no trouble following this line of reasoning.

“It’s simple,” Shirley replied, “We use the Burger King model.”

“OK, I’ll bite,” Tommy said with resignation. “What’s the Burger King model?”

“All right,” Shirley began, “What company has the second best market research program in the entire fast food industry?”

“Uh, Burger King?”

“No, you idiot,” she said, “It’s McDonalds. They study demographics, traffic patterns, building permits, changes in local industries, oil spots in parking lots as an indicator of the health of the local economy, and dozens of other factors to determine where the ideal location would be to place a restaurant. Every McDonalds built represents hundreds of hours of market research.”

“So let me guess,” Tommy said, “Somehow Burger King has the best market research program in the entire fast food industry.”

“Of course.”

“And how is that?” asked Tommy.

“They build right next to McDonalds.”

Tommy paused, gathered his thoughts, and began, “So, we just look for wherever the Saudis are funding a new mosque, and we slap a factory down right next to it?”

“Exactly.”

“And don’t tell me,” Tommy continued, “We install a CIA operative as a floor manager, so that we can keep our ear to the ground concerning the local buzz.”

Shirley was not unimpressed. “I hadn’t thought of that, but I don’t see why it wouldn’t work,” she said, leaning back in the love seat.

“And,” Tommy continued, “we build a little Aid Station that’s stocked with medicines with US flags on them, and we man it with a bearded Special Forces medic in civvies who gives shots to the local kids, delivers babies, wipes noses, and hears from all the village women what’s going on in their tiny community.”

“Oh my God,” Shirley blurted out, sitting up straight, “It’s a federal agent who’s actually capable of forming an original thought. Alert the media at once.”

Tommy chuckled at the poorly disguised complement, but then pointed out, “The problem is, it would never work.”

“Why is that?” Shirley asked.

“Because an entire industry has grown up in the United States to prevent further attacks like the one we experienced on 9/11,” Tommy explained, “and if we were to implement the Shirley Plan for International Peace and Prosperity as you just described, a whole lot of people would be out of a job, and that wouldn’t sit too well with our political leadership.”

“Congratulations,” said Shirley. “I thought I had the biggest attitude in this room, but you are now the reigning king of cynics anonymous.”

“Just doing my job, Ma’am,” Tommy said, best Southern Sheriff. “Hey, I’ve gotta’ roll here,” he added, checking his watch, “but I should be able to make it over tomorrow.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going back to work,” Shirley said, a little surprised.

“Absolutely,” he answered. “We’ve got a lot going on right now.”

“You’re crazy,” Shirley scolded. “You don’t need to take time off just to bring me goodies; I’d rather have you solving the world’s real problems.”

“Hey, that’s how I solve my problems now,” he teased, “I just bring them to you.”

“Well, I was going to think about the other problem for tomorrow, but it looks like you guys beat me to it.”

“What problem’s that?” he asked.

“What to do when the War on Terror makes it over to our shores,” she explained.

“You need to keep thinking about that one,” he suggested.

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Because if we win this round, it’s only because we got lucky,” he said.

“Well,” suggested Shirley, “I’d really appreciate it if you guys would get lucky with some of your other crises so I can get the hell out of here.”

“Believe me,” Tommy said with a somber tone, “we’re working on that too.”

As Shirley watched him walk out the door she almost believed him, in spite of the fact that her predicament was taking a back seat to larger matters. The click of the door at the top of the stairs assured her that it was safe to spring into action, and she shifted her focus to her dresser for a quick change and the envelope that had been burning a hole in her sock drawer since very late the previous night.

Shirley’s mission today was going to take her to more familiar territory. Although it was not more than several blocks from the police station, the Hoboken Public Library was going to be a destination for which she needed no navigational help, in spite of the fact that this would be the first time she approached it from the direction of the club. Over the past several years she had spent her afternoons in the library, between her morning workouts and her evening dancing, and she was fully aware of the resources it could provide. In fact, she was confident that she would be able find everything she needed to complete her investigation within the confines of its walls.

She had noted during Tommy’s visit that he had been wearing a light windbreaker, and not one that advertised “FBI” on the back, so she concluded that a hooded sweatshirt would again be an appropriate way to venture out on a Saturday afternoon, as well as providing sufficient cover for a large envelope. However, she traded her usual sweat pants for a casual pair of jeans, as vanity dictated that she needed to look presentable. Shirley wouldn’t think twice about her appearance if she knew it would only receive the scrutiny of the less-gentle sex, but this afternoon she was going to encounter a woman who knew her outside of work, and she needed to maintain some level of respectability. She considered a pair of flats, as that would complete her usual outfit, but she opted instead for a comfortable pair of sneakers as the trek was not going to be short.

There were a few items she required that weren’t available from the quarry Joy had brought over from her apartment. The small purse she normally carried that held a moderate amount of cash, and more importantly her library card, had not made the trip. She considered this a good sign, however, as it meant that Joy had not searched too deeply into her personal items when making the transfer, and that the larger quantity of cash secured in the apartment also most likely went unnoticed. She didn’t even consider a pass by the apartment to collect any of these items, as the risk of discovery was too great. Instead, though, she knew that by going to the library she would find an ally whose loyalty would exceed even Carmine’s by orders of magnitude, and she had already rehearsed the conversation that would assure her of getting more assistance than she could ever need.

How Char had ended up at the Hoboken library was a mystery to Shirley. She had grown up in Hawaii, she held a doctorate from somewhere in Southern California, and as far as Shirley knew she had never been married. Yet somehow, there she always was, sitting at the reference desk any time Shirley happened to wander into the building. She was occupied more often than not, but she was always quick to drop any activity in order to engage Shirley in conversation. In fact, Char was one of the few people with whom Shirley could chat without having to disguise her intellect behind a façade of slang, brashness, or attitude. With Jessica at the gym, Shirley came across as a jock. With Edith, of course, she was just another dancer. But with Char she could be herself. In fact, she was looking forward to the encounter, since she hadn’t really engaged in unguarded conversation since her incarceration had begun, except, of course, with Tommy. She paused briefly as this idea flittered across her psyche, but she rapidly dismissed it with a chuckle as she had to attend to more important matters.

The walk to the library was uneventful, although Shirley did take advantage of the opportunity to scout some establishments that could factor into her plan later, but her focus stayed on the events that were to transpire once she entered the building. Still, as she walked up a few short steps and reached for the ancient door she felt a trepidation that was only exceeded a few days earlier by her initial encounter with Micki. Fortunately, on the weekends the information desk was staffed from a rotating roster of volunteers and she passed by the kindly older woman sitting there with almost no recognition.

However, once she had negotiated the rear stairs and entered the reference area with its bank of computers, she was greeted with instant recognition from across the room as Char looked up from whatever was occupying her and almost squealed with delight as Shirley pulled back her hood and shot a hesitant smile in her direction.

“What the fu?” Char mouthed as Shirley scooted between the tables to the reference desk, giggling like a schoolgirl at Char’s unabashed reaction to her entrance.

For the first time ever the two ladies greeted with a hug, and although the few job-seekers at the terminals dictated hushed tones, neither could conceal the excitement in their voices as Shirley pulled a chair up to the desk.

“Is everything OK now?” Char began with more than a whisper.

“Not yet,” Shirley admitted to Char’s obvious disappointment. “That’s why I’m here.”

“I’ve discussed you with quite a few federal agents,” Char confessed. “I know you didn’t do what they thought you did, but what did you do?”

“Wrong place, wrong time,” Shirley said, shaking her head.

“I figured you were the one those two cops talked about on the news,” Char continued, “but then it’s like you just fell off the face of the earth. No word about it on the news. I just thought it was strange, though, that the Feds would take a bunch of magazines for you. I figured they might have you in custody, but they really wouldn’t admit much to me, even after all I told them.”

Shirley knew that this admission was really a question, and in order to maintain the trust necessary to complete her mission, she decided to not disappoint.

“They still do,” Shirley confirmed.

“You’re in custody?” Char almost blurted out. “How did you manage to get out?”

“It’s protective custody,” Shirley continued in hushed tones. “I’m in a safe house, but I can leave if I want.” But then she added, “They have no idea that I’ve left, though.”

“Holy smackaroos,” Char said. “And so you just decided to stop by.”

“Actually, I’ve got some work to do.”

“The plot thickens,” Char said, raising her eyebrows. “Lay it on me, sister.”

Shirley offered a truncated version of the activities of the past few weeks, focusing mainly on the predicament that she was in with regards to some crooked Hoboken cops, but only making an obtuse reference to the terrorism angle in order to rationalize her own involvement in the investigation. She did, however, mention the envelope that was still hidden underneath her sweatshirt.

Char listened intently to Shirley’s account, and was surprisingly nonplussed at the mention of an impending attack, but when Shirley concluded, Char clearly had some thoughts of her own. “So how can I help,” she said, quite to Shirley’s relief.

“Char, I need to get on a computer to do some research,” she began, “I need to do some work where my every keystroke isn’t being monitored.”

“Well you can certainly do that here,” came the immediate offer.

“Yeah,” Shirley agreed, “but I don’t have my card. I’d like to get a card that, uh, doesn’t reveal my identity, if you know what I mean.”

Char reached into a drawer under the desk and pulled out a blank card with a magnetic strip on it. “This will let you log in to any machine in here,” she announced, “and no one will know who you are.”

Shirley hesitated for a second. This was almost going too smoothly.

“What else?” Char pressed.

Shirley began to pull the envelope from underneath her sweatshirt. “I may need to make a few copies,” she suggested tentatively. And then as an afterthought she added, “I’ll probably make some notes on these, and if I do hand them over to the Feds I don’t want them to know what I did with them.”

Char indicated over her shoulder with her eyes in the direction of a copy machine. “Done,” she announced. “Anything else?”

Shirley almost sheepishly shook her head, knowing that she had a lot of work to do, but not wanting her friend to think that she was just coming over to use her resources, in spite of the fact that she was doing precisely that. “I should probably start in on this,” she said.

“You do that,” Char said, a little to Shirley’s surprise. “I’ve gotta’ go pick something up.” She grabbed a set of keys out of her top drawer and stepped out from behind the desk.

Shirley smiled a “thanks” as she staked a claim at the nearest table, inserted the card into the reader and wondered where to begin her research. She had seen a lot of circled names in the files, but she needed to chase some of them down if she was going to find the link between Fusco, Mike, and as he offered the only other possible lead, Tony. She flipped through the pages, starting with Fusco, and entered probable suspects into the search engine, cursing herself for not organizing her work better before setting out on the day’s mission. However, she had only followed two apparent dead ends when Char returned carrying a cloth shopping bag. She set the bag down at her desk and walked back over to where Shirley was conducting her investigation.

“What kind of an idiot do you take me for?” Char said as Shirley looked up.

“I, I don’t,” Shirley stammered, wondering briefly if the trust she had assumed since concocting this mission had been misplaced.

“Good,” Char confirmed. “Now I’m going to need to see that stack of papers,” she continued, pointing towards the two files that Shirley had risked so much to obtain.

Shirley’s face fell. “Char, I can’t,” she began, but she was cut off immediately.

Char grabbed a chair and pulled it in close. “Shirley,” she began in a hushed tone, “What is it that I do?”

“Um, you’re a librarian?” Shirley guessed, hoping this was the desired response.

Char chuckled. “No, you nincompoop,” she said, “I have a flippin’ doctorate in research and document forensics. This is what I do. I’ve got immediate access to every library in the county, plus quick links to everything across the river. I can be deep into the Library of Congress before you can get logged into Union City. If you think you’re going to come in here trying to solve some great mystery without my help you’re out of your freakin’ mind.”

Shirley just shook her head and laughed. She expected help, but she never anticipated this, although it should have been obvious.

Char took this response to mean acquiescence. “OK, then,” she continued, “I’m gonna’ need to make copies of that whole stack,” she clarified. “Oh, and by the way, I brought you a laptop from storage. If your safe house has you cabled into a router, then you’ll have to go somewhere else for Wi-Fi, but it will be more secure than working from the safe house. I doubt the feds provide Wi-Fi since they don’t want anyone stumbling across it, and if their system’s as tight as you say it is, you probably don’t want any of your work to go through that router.”

Shirley handed the Patricelli folder to Char and said, “I’ll swap you when you’re done.”

Char nodded an assent, took the folder, and grabbed the keys from her desk. “I’m going to use the high-speed down in the office,” she explained. “This should only take a few minutes.”

As Char walked off, Shirley focused more intently on the task at hand. Char’s offer was welcome, but she also took it as challenge to pit her sleuthing skills against an expert. She was going to crack this case open before anyone else.

However, two hours later as the library had emptied out and it was approaching closing time, Shirley had found nothing but dead ends. A quick glance at Char, though, led her to believe that someone might be making progress on this case, as the activity at the reference desk was seemingly non-stop.

“So,” Shirley began, no longer having to hold her voice down as the room had been otherwise vacant for quite some time, “Are you finding anything.”

“Hush, I’m working,” Char joked, not looking up.

Shirley started packing her things up, putting the original papers back into their folders and logging off the computer. She carried the folders to Char’s desk and set the pass card next to the stack Char was using as the basis for her surfing. “Can I really take this laptop?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” Char confirmed, finally looking up from her work. “I guess it’s that time, isn’t it?”

“Afraid so.”

Char took the envelope from Shirley’s hands, slipped it into the shopping bag with the laptop, and handed the bag to Shirley. “Anything else I can do?” she asked.

Shirley thought for a second. Char had been so helpful that she didn’t want to abuse her kindness, but the laptop and the need for a Wi-Fi connection presented one small hurdle. “Could you make me a loan?” she finally asked. If I’m going to work at a café tomorrow I’m going to want to at least buy an iced tea, and I have no cash with me. I really hate to ask this, but I don’t think the feds would be happy to front me some money.”

Char laughed. “I should have thought of that,” she said. She grabbed the keys, unlocked a drawer in the desk, and reached for her purse. “Is twenty enough?” she asked.

“Plenty,” Shirley affirmed, “Thanks. As soon as I’m out of this the first thing I’ll do is repay you.”

Char nodded in the direction of her computer. “Hopefully I can help make that happen.”

“When should I check back?” Shirley asked, hoping her friend was making more progress than she was.

“Set up a hotmail account,” Char instructed, handing a business card across the desk. E-mail me here, and I’ll let you know if I have anything worth sneaking out for.”

“Holy smokes,” Shirley blurted out, “I almost forgot.”

“What?”

“I didn’t give you a piece of the puzzle.”

“What’s that?”

“Tony Fontana,” Shirley said. “He’s an FBI agent, and he has a connection to Fusco and Patricelli, or at least to their connection.”

Char made a quick note on the top of her stack of papers. “Sounds like a minor detail,” she quipped. “What can you tell me about him?”

Shirley covered everything she had gleaned about Tony during their three previous meetings, not failing to mention the fact that Joy was investigating him while he investigated the possible terrorist cell.

“Well thanks for mentioning that,” Char joked after Shirley had wrapped up. “This might make a difference.”

“I can’t believe how incredible you’re being,” Shirley said. “I knew I’d get some help if I came here, but I never expected this.”

Char just laughed. “This is what I do,” she said. “I give myself challenges to keep on top of the game, but it’s rare for me to get something like this that really matters. I’m having a blast.”

The two women exchanged hugs for the second time ever, and as Shirley turned to go she confirmed, “I’ll e-mail tomorrow.”

“Be safe,” Char said as Shirley made her exit.

The intended pun was not lost on its recipient.

The Investigation

into the cell that had cost Baqr his life was going nowhere. The face at the ATM might as well have been a ghost, and Tony, Tommy, and the rest of the Counter Terrorism Section were beginning to fear that they were going to glean the details of this operation only after some amount of devastation had been unleashed on the American public. They debated squeezing the Mosque employee who had provided the ATM card, but if Baqr had been unable to initiate contact with the cell, it was unlikely that this minion would provide any more insight. Additionally, his small but critical role in this grand scheme meant that the FBI now had a portal into the organization’s activities, as long as their unwitting informant remained oblivious. They decided he would be of little additional value to the investigation, in spite of the fact that he had provided their only break, and that he needed to be retained as a key source of future intelligence.

The search for the logistical support element was even more daunting. As Baqr had described it, there would be someone who would receive a coded material order at a secret drop, along with contact information, and this person would contact the cell leader with instructions on how and when the request was to be filled. It was likely that the material would come in via a shipping container to a friendly import/export business, but for small requirements there were options involving cross-border or over-the-shore clandestine drops, or even a local procurement in the case of trivial needs. There was going to be very little chance of finding this needle in the haystack of East Coast commerce, and a search of known Mosque visitors with close ties to the import business produced no leads. The frustration of being so close and knowing that an operation was under way, but having no way to prevent it, was taking a toll on the entire field office. Even Ms. Cruise, who normally left investigative matters to the experts and who primarily concerned herself with Bureau politics, was rolling up her sleeves and getting in the way.

Tommy was trying to keep upbeat about the investigation, but he was worried that since his best agent was the subject of another investigation, that this was taking more of his time than it should have. This was a very close-hold inquiry, but Tony had brought two agents (not to mention Shirley) into the investigation, since, after a surprise question on the last polygraph, he was conducting his own counter-investigation to determine if anyone suspected him. Tommy was working with Ms. Cruise’s Deputy, in addition to the head of OC, but so far, aside from the polygraph, they had found nothing to implicate Tony. He almost hoped that he wouldn’t find anything, at least not until the investigation into Baqr’s information was wrapped up, as he considered Tony to be the agent most likely to break open that case.

Tony, on the other hand, was growing despondent. Not only was he making little progress since the first few days of the investigation, but he suspected he was getting a cold shoulder from some key members of his chain-of-command, as he worried that he may not have performed as well on the last polygraph as he would have liked. There was going to be no way he was going to be pegged as an accessory to murder, but he might have put his career, and even worse, Mr. M. and his gravy train, in serious jeopardy. He was mulling over his personal options, as he felt he had exhausted any leads the investigation had allowed, when the phone at his desk interrupted his thoughts.

“Federal Bureau of Investigation, Special Agent Fontana speaking.” The greeting had become such a reflexive response in his short time with the Bureau that he couldn’t imagine picking up a receiver and saying anything else.

“Tony, it’s Liz, over here in Jersey,” said a familiar voice on the other end. Liz St. Anne had been a classmate at Quantico, and an attractive one at that, with a sharp mind and a sharper tongue. While the latter had perhaps prevented her from getting her choice assignment upon graduation, she was nevertheless doing pretty well for herself as one of the Bureau’s junior agents. Tony had considered asking her out towards the end of their training, but with his sights set on Manhattan, and knowing that he would be competing for that choice assignment with the other super-stars in his class, he decided that he needed to concentrate on his performance with minimal distractions. When he was successful in securing his assignment he was delighted to learn that she would be a short drive away, but the demands of his duties—to two separate, conflicting bosses—prevented him from pursuing the relationship.

“Hey, Liz,” he blurted out, a little surprised, “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Look,” she said, “I know this sounds like nothing, but we’ve got a rent-a-cop over here at the Paramus Mall who thinks he’s got a few Arabs casing the joint. He’s former military and a college student, and I’m pretty sure he’s being straight up on this, but I just wanted to run it by you CT guys in case there may be something going on here. The mall does get its share of Jewish shoppers, so his hunch might make sense.”

“Well,” said Tony, trying to act casual, “what do you have on it?”

“They’ve given us a couple of images, and it may be nothing, but I’m wondering if you’d like to take a look.”

“Sure,” said Tony. “Do you have my secure fax?”

“Of course,” Liz replied. “I’m sending it now.” Tony’s question had been superfluous, as every field office had every other office’s secure fax programmed into their machines, but it had been a polite way of saying he was, indeed, interested in what seemed to be a long shot. He chose to not mention that he was in the middle of an investigation that was bumping up against a brick wall. The number of “hunches” the FBI receives on a daily basis would cripple any organization were they to act on each one, but right now Tony felt that if a credible source was going to share something with him that matched his current interests, he wouldn’t hesitate to check it out. However, before the fax was half-way through, he almost dropped the phone.

“Liz, are you still there?” he asked hurriedly.

“Still here,” came the casual reply.

“Listen,” Tony said, “I need you to get that cop and his supervisor, and any local authorities who might be up on this as well, and have them assemble ASAP at your office. We’re gonna’ chopper over there right now—be expecting us.”

“Is there something I should know about?” Liz asked.

“I don’t want to tell you over the phone, but we’ll fill you in on everything once we get there,” he explained.

He hung up and rushed into Tommy’s office, where Ms. Cruise was sitting on the desk, apparently engaged in idle chatter. “Boss, you’ve gotta see this,” he blurted out, slamming the image of Faris and Mohd down in front of him. “Paramus mall, within the past week. New Jersey’s assembling the security folks who IDd them and I told them we’d chopper over ASAP to talk with them.”

“How in the hell did they know that we’re looking for this guy?” Tommy asked.

“The mall security cop thought they looked suspicious, alerted the Paramus locals, and they must have thought they had something, so they called down to Jersey,” Tony explained. “A classmate of mine just faxed this over thinking it might be worth a look.”

“Let’s load the chopper,” interrupted Ms. Cruise, “I’m coming on this one.”

Tommy reached for the windbreaker behind his desk, as Ms. Cruise rushed to her office to grab hers. Not only did they have a location for the next operation, but they also had the operator, and a possible way to get to the cell leader. Baqr’s information was starting to pay off, and Tony dismissed any doubts he had about the last polygraph.

The Next Visit

was one that Shirley was keenly anticipating, and not just because the previous visit had left her with a dangling question from her captor. She had spent little time pondering Tommy’s remarks, and while she looked forward to sharing ideas with him, with her own matters to attend to she was also hoping to get the visit out of the way quickly. As the morning hours clicked past, though, she made good use of her time preparing the next move. The knock finally came early Sunday afternoon, and she was somewhat relieved to know her plans wouldn’t take her too late into the evening. However, as she emerged from the bedroom to greet her guest, Tommy looked so tired that she concluded it would not be the time to engage him in esoteric banter.

“Wow,” she said as he closed the door. “You look beat.”

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “It’s a good kind of beat.”

“So we’ve been productive today?” she asked, but as soon as she said it, she noticed his shadow, and the fact that he still had on the same clothes as Saturday. “Or, should I say, last night?”

“Oh, you could say that,” he said as he pulled up his chair.

“Fusco or the cell?” she asked hopefully.

“What do you think?” he asked with more than a hint of resignation.

“Hey, first things first, right?” She knew that he had enough pressure from the case, and the last thing he needed was some spoiled guest giving him a hard time.

“Don’t you get soft on me now.”

“Well, I figured you could use a break,” she said.

“Not a chance,” he said, “I come over here to make sure I get my daily dose of cynicism. If you start getting all upbeat I’m not going to stop by any more.”

“Oh, that would just be awful,” she mocked.

“Much better,” he said. And then leaning forward in his chair, he asked her “So, how do we go about this?”

Shirley knew exactly what he was talking about, but she wasn’t sure he really needed to get into a heavy discussion at this point, so she offered a noncommittal, “How do we go about what?”

“Remember our chat yesterday?” he asked. “I’ve been waiting all day to hear a fresh perspective on how we can win this war once it comes to our doorstep.”

“Of course I remember our chat yesterday,” she said, “but you don’t look like you’re ready to solve all the world’s problems right now.”

“I thought you were going to solve them for me,” he said.

“It looks to me like you’re doing a pretty good job of solving the one you’re working on,” she said, “even if the details are a huge national secret and you can’t tell me about them.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, “but this is a great way to take my mind off of work.”

“Ah, that makes sense,” she teased. “We spend all day fighting the War on Terror at our doorstep, and we spend the afternoon talking about fighting the War on Terror on our doorstep to make sure we get our mind off of work. I need to introduce you to my friend Edith some time.”

“Who’s Edith?” Tommy asked, pretending not to know.

“She dances with me at the club,” Shirley explained, forgetting for a second that Tommy had most certainly interviewed Edith at least once during the past few weeks.

“And let me guess,” Tommy conjectured, “she spends most of the day dancing to keep her mind off work?”

“No, but it wouldn’t surprise me,” Shirley said, “She’s an absolute master of impeccable logic.”

“Two of you in the same club,” Tommy remarked. “Who’d have thunk it?”

“You know what this seat needs?” Shirley asked, gesturing to the love seat she was currently occupying.

“What’s that?” Tommy asked.

“Some small pillows.”

“I’m sure we can arrange that,” he said, “but what for?”

“So I can throw them at you when you get out of line,” Shirley said.

Tommy grabbed his collar as if he were talking into a hidden microphone. “Cancel that order for small pillows,” he said in an official-sounding voice.

“Darn,” Shirley said, “so close.” She could tell that Tommy still wanted to banter about his ideas on the War on Terror, so she decided to give him a chance. Plus, he wasn’t looking quite so tired any more.

“So how’d you do it?” she asked.

“How’d I do what?” he asked, not quite sure what she was getting at.

“How did we win this round in the Long War, assuming that we’re about to win it?” she continued.

“Like I said,” he explained, “we got lucky.”

“Please tell me Dirk didn’t stumble onto something,” Shirley said.

“Would you believe ordinary citizens?” Tommy said with a small chuckle.

“Don’t mess with me,” Shirley threatened.

“I’m serious,” Tommy said. “Just like you told Tony.”

“You know damn well that I was moving that conversation around to keep the investigation going,” she said. She scrutinized him for a moment. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

“I never would have guessed,” she said. “I figured that our Federal Government had worked so hard to dull our senses that none of us could ever provide any useful insights.”

“Why is that?” Tommy asked.

“Well, the only face they put on this thing is a feeble attempt to fight the last battle. All the American public knows is that our government is working hard to prevent a repeat of the last failed attempt.”

“Like what?” Tommy pressed.

“Well,” Shirley explained, “we have some idiot trying to light his shoes on fire on a plane, so now everybody has to take their shoes off at the airport. We have a couple of jerks trying to mix fluids on a plane, so now they won’t let us fly with shampoo and toothpaste anymore. As far as the public is concerned, we’re attacking in full reverse with 20/20 hindsight.”

“Do you really think we’re that stupid?” Tommy asked.

“Of course not,” Shirley gave the answer he wasn’t expecting, “but most Americans probably do, and they wonder why they don’t see you guys looking for the next innovation in clever means of destruction.”

“But what do you think?” he asked.

“I know you’re trying to stay one step ahead of these pigs, but I just don’t think that it’s a good idea to take the Great American Public out of the loop.”

“Why do you think we occasionally search a Midwestern grandmother at the airport?” he pressed.

“My best guess would be to piss them off.”

“Exactly,” he confirmed. “That way they’re still thinking about terrorism, and they might just be a little more alert to the anomaly they wouldn’t otherwise notice.” And then he added, “Plus, we don’t want to be accused of racial profiling.”

“Well in this case,” Shirley suggested, “a little racial profiling is probably OK, and besides, it’s obvious that it’s done.”

“How is that?” Tommy asked.

“I’ll bet that if you watched at any airport, you would see that over ninety percent of the people being searched aren’t from the Middle East. However,” she added, “that’s only because such a small percentage of the travelers are Arab-looking. If you look at the total numbers, you can say there’s no profiling, but if you look at the proportions actually searched, it’s probably less than five percent of the non-Arabs, and over a quarter of the people with dark facial hair.”

“How true,” Tommy admitted, “but isn’t a little profiling warranted in this case?”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t,” she said. “This is one case where I have to fully agree with it. Once those bastards established a track record, they pretty much ruined it for everyone else.”

“But what about the huge numbers of upstanding, law-abiding, Muslim Americans?” Tommy asked.

“I like to think they hate this as much as we do.”

“What if I told you that the majority of the attacks we’ve stopped over the past several years came from reports from Muslims who thought they saw something that wasn’t quite right?” he continued.

“Just like Tony said,” Shirley concluded, “you’re probably getting so many reports that you can only check the ones that you know are credible, and if that’s not a credible source, then I’m not sure what is.”

“You got that right,” he agreed.

“So it’s kind of the opposite of the war on drugs,” Shirley continued.

“How is that?” he asked.

“Well,” she started, “with the war on drugs, we have to win that one on our own soil. As long as we create the demand people all over the world are going to want to accommodate us so they can scratch out a meager living. There’s no way we’re going to win that by fighting it overseas. But with the War on Terror, as you just demonstrated, once it’s here, unless we get lucky, we’ve lost. I guess if you’re getting your best tips from Muslims, they’re probably getting sicker of being searched at airports than we are, and if that’s what it takes to win it, then so be it.”

“So you don’t have any definitive theories on how we can do better?” Tommy asked, a little disappointed.

“Look,” Shirley said, “you’ve got a whole lot of people trying to solve this problem, and the fact that we haven’t had a successful attack in a while tells all of us that they’re doing something right. It’s just tough, though, and I don’t think we’re ever going to find an easy solution once it gets here.”

“So we just need to keep it away from our shores,” Tommy concluded, “using the Shirley Plan for International Peace and Prosperity.”

“Well, there is another way, if you didn’t like that one,” Shirley suggested.

“What would that be?”

“Well, it’s a little nefarious,” she added.

“Oh good,” Tommy said, “I like nefarious.”

“OK, so where are Muslims being most abused anywhere in the world right now?” she started with her characteristic lean forward.

“Probably in Sub-Sahara Africa,” Tommy guessed.

“Not even close,” she corrected him. “That’s where the Muslims are killing the most people. They’ve taken ancient tribal rivalries and turned them into faux-religious conflicts, and they’re killing millions in the name of Allah.”

“So where is it then?” he asked.

“Western China,” she announced. “The Uighurs have been abused there for years, and under the Communist regime they have been positively crushed.”

“So what does that do for us?” Tommy asked.

“Well,” Shirley explained, “if AQ turned their attention to the troubles their Muslim brothers are having in China and they pulled some of their stunts over there, we could simply sit on the sidelines and watch the War on Terror come to its natural end a whole lot quicker. The Chinese don’t play by the rules, and if somebody brought them into this fight it would be over in a hurry. We talk about playing cowboys and Muslims, but I think it would be quicker if China went all ‘kung fu’ on them.”

“So how do we do that?” Tommy asked skeptically.

“There’s the nefarious part,” Shirley concluded. “A few well-placed Imams with the right message and we could win this thing. That’s how they got stirred up against us, and we could just use that to our advantage. I’m sure that even these self-righteous nut cases have their price.”

“You are evil,” Tommy said.

“Hey, I’m not saying to do it,” Shirley objected, “I’m just saying we could.”

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to stick with trusting good old ordinary citizens, Muslims included, to help us win this thing when it comes to our shores,” Tommy said.

“Well maybe if we were a little more forthcoming with our citizens, instead of making them take their shoes off every time they get on a plane, we might get a little more help,” she suggested.

“Don’t let Tony fool you,” Tommy explained. “He has a pretty skewed view of this because he’s the guy who takes all the calls. We actually do get a lot of help from America, and believe it or not, from overseas sources as well.”

“So Interpol shares their intelligence with us,” Shirley remarked, “what a surprise.”

“Actually,” Tommy suggested, “Interpol gives us a huge amount of useful stuff, and they have a lot of problems of their own with the growing violence in Europe, but it’s amazing what our CIA sources get from the Middle East. There are people there who, perhaps out of fear of retaliation, are willing to turn on their brothers quickly once they get wind of impending violence. What’s amazing is that most of them don’t like it any more than we do, and they see a whole lot more of it.”

“So do I start waving a flag and singing ‘God Bless America’ now?” Shirley asked. This was her signal that soapbox time needed to end.

“No,” Tommy said, picking up her message clearly. “But I have to say that I’m glad we chatted about this after all.”

“Why is that?” she asked. “I don’t think I provided any useful insights for you.”

“Au contraire,” he said. “You’ve confirmed that we’re going about this right.”

“And it confirmed my suspicions as well,” she added.

“How’s that,” he asked.

“You just come over here to use me,” she said. “I feel so cheap.”

Tommy grabbed his collar again and spoke into it with his official-sounding voice. “The order for the small pillows is now on,” he said, “I repeat, go ahead and place the order for the pillows.”

Shirley laughed at this. It was the relief that they both needed, and Tommy had a good laugh too, as Shirley’s biting tongue was a source of entertainment, and her occasional smile was always welcomed, but it was rare that he was treated to a genuine laugh. Her reaction seemed to take the weight of the past few weeks off his shoulders.

“So,” he finally said, “do you need anything?”

“Yeah,” Shirley demanded, “I want that pillow now.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

“You know,” she said, “you don’t look quite as tired as you did when you first came over. Maybe Ms. Cynthia was right—it’s good to get out of the office occasionally.”

“Well,” he said, “I know you don’t like being kept prisoner here, but I have to tell you that I really don’t mind coming by.”

“Sorry, Tommy,” she corrected him, “but I’m afraid that you really need to get a life.”

“You’re not kidding,” he agreed. “Maybe I can start looking for one when this is all over.”

“Well, I can tell you that if it’s not over soon, that you’re going to have no life before it ends.”

“We’re working on it, Ma’am,” he offered as he got up from his chair and pulled it back to the kitchen table.

“Well work harder,” she admonished, “but Tommy,” she added.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Get some rest this afternoon,” she said in her softest voice. “They’re going to need you this week.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he responded again. And then he added, “Hey, it’s going to be a busy week for us. I’m not sure when I’m going to have a chance to get over.”

“Well I’m not going anywhere,” she lied, “but you do what you need to do to win this thing.”

“We’ll do our best,” he assured her, and he made his way out the door.

It was already mid afternoon when Shirley finally stepped out into the sunlight, but that didn’t mean the day had been wasted. Her research efforts at the library had not borne any fruit, but as soon as she started looking she realized she had failed to organize her search. She made up for that today, though, as she had spent most of the morning making notes to herself and devising a research methodology that was certain to break new ground. Tommy’s visit, while a nice diversion, had forced her to work in the bedroom so that any evidence of her activities could be shoved under the bed, and she was able to accomplish that as soon as she heard the tell-tale knock announcing his arrival.

But now, armed with a shoulder bag of notes, Char’s laptop, and a twenty dollar bill, Shirley was ready to get to work. On her trip back from the library she had scouted a small coffee shop that had advertised “Free Wi-Fi (For Our Customers)” and she had already decided that would be the perfect setting for her sleuthing. She ordered an iced green tea and a plain croissant from the college student behind the counter, and having her choice of any seat in the establishment, to include a few outside in the sun, she walked over to the most secluded table in the joint and settled in with her back to the corner to start digging.

Shirley had declined politely when the barista had asked her if she wanted her receipt, and he had impaled it on a metal spike on top of several others upon hearing her response. However, as she fired up Char’s laptop and searched for a wireless connection, she realized she needed a password to enter the net through the establishment’s router. She approached the counter to ask the young man how she might access Wi-Fi from her table, but he was already holding out her receipt out to her with a smile.

“The passcode is on the bottom of your receipt, Ma’am,” he offered, as if it were not the first time he had enjoyed playing this little game with a customer.

Shirley rolled her eyes. “Thanks,” she said, taking the receipt and returning to her table to begin work. First things first, she set up a hotmail account and shot a quick note to Char to let her know that had been done. The response was almost immediate, and encouraging, but it also suggested not sharing too much over the unsecured net. Shirley set up a second account for future use, not wanting to give the federal government any connection to Char as her plan unfolded. With the logistics behind her she turned her efforts towards the investigation.

In spite of having mapped out a coherent strategy for searching every possible lead, she was disappointed to find few connections among the names Micki’s files had suggested. A few hours into her search she almost considered giving up and turning the files over to Dirk so that the Homeland Defense database could be brought to bear on the problem, but she refused to be defeated that easily. Several recent news articles from the Carolinas about the drug bust Tommy had mentioned did provide a match with some of the names in question, but aside from that there was very little evidence of nefarious activity linking the names Fusco, Patricelli, and Fontana. After a few more hours, though, Shirley suspected there was a connection with Tony on one side, Fusco and Patricelli on another, and someone in the middle with enough clout to own FBI agents, impel Hoboken cops to commit murder, and to make deals with Chinese organized crime.

The most disappointing aspect of her efforts, though, was that in spite of the hours spent whiling away time in the local library in an attempt to keep her mind sharp, Shirley realized that as a competent researcher, she was out of date. While it is one thing to pull magazines off of shelves to keep up with the latest developments in science, international affairs, and occasionally gossip, it was an entirely different matter to pursue a targeted focus of inquiry in order to discover connections that lay at the root of an issue. Shirley now understood why Char admitted to challenging herself in order to stay on top of her game, as researching was certainly a perishable skill.

However, Shirley had made the link with the Chinese ship, but she had done so with the advantage of Tommy’s admission that made the connection an obvious one. She thought she might drop a hint in Char’s direction in case that was something that her friend had missed, so she copied the link to one of the local articles and sent it over to Char’s account. Shirley was encouraged, but a little humbled when the immediate response of “Duh!” only further reinforced the fact that she was being outclassed by her able compatriot.

Other than establishing these circumstantial relationships between a number of low-level operatives, however, Shirley was unable to bring into the puzzle the piece that connected them all. No arrest records, grand jury indictments, volunteer fire brigade rosters, recreational sports league records, parent-teachers’ association lists, news articles, or any other sources pointed to any one person or organization that tied them all together. If there was a kingpin behind these activities, he was far too well-hidden. Shirley sighed in frustration, and barely noticed the footsteps approaching her across the otherwise-empty café.

“Can I get you anything else, ma’am?” came the polite, but slightly annoyed voice of the barista who was preparing to close the establishment.

Shirley looked up from the screen and noticed, for the first time, that it had gotten dark outside, and that the room was devoid of customers.

“No, thanks,” she stammered apologetically. “I’m just getting ready to leave.”

“No worries,” he assured her, realizing he had perhaps been a little harsh, “we’re closing up in five.”

Shirley allocated the remaining time to fire off a quick note to Char, announcing her progress (or lack thereof) and her intent to make contact as soon as possible the next day. She gathered her things, earmarked some more of her change for the tip jar on the counter, and made her way back out on to the street. She made a quick mental note that there was a patron sitting outside making use of the Wi-Fi connection, and that he didn’t appear to be a paying customer.

The walk back to the garage was relaxing, as well as a good opportunity for Shirley to clear her head. She just hoped that Char had been able to find whatever it was that had eluded her.

The Village

of Highland Falls was a bit of an anomaly in the Hudson Valley. While it was closer to Manhattan then were many of the bedroom communities that serviced New York City, the frantic development and skyrocketing home prices of the nineties and beyond seemed to have passed it by. It also provided the Cadets at West Point with a “ville,” but it had neither the charm of Annapolis nor the vibrant economy of Colorado Springs. In short, it was a sleepy little depressed enclave that seemed immune to the trappings of progress, in spite of its proximity to one of the Nation’s most storied institutions.

Dana Jerrod had lived there all of her adult life, but certainly not as the result of the grandiose plans she had concocted while a student at O’Neill High School. Her father was a Navy lawyer, assigned as an instructor in the Department of Law at the Academy, and she was enjoying a high school experience where, for the first time in her life, her entire family was together for more than six months at a time. Her father had been deployed quite a bit during Viet Nam, and no Navy assignment had kept him at home as much as this one had. She had also adapted to the environment of her first Army base, with its four thousand cadets marching everywhere in perfect formation, and she was beginning to form a plan for remaining in the area after her father got reassigned. She was, of course, expected to attend a prestigious university, and many of the colleges in the Northeast looked very attractive to her. However, there was one option that allowed her the best of all worlds, and she decided to pursue it.

Ladycliff College sat high above the banks of the Hudson River, and adjacent to the gate leading into the Academy. It was a small, private institution, run by clergy, which offered young women a fine liberal arts education. However, very few denied that its proximity to the testosterone-laden halls of West Point had permitted many of its graduates to obtain the coveted M.R.S. degree that was usually granted at the Cadet chapel a day or two following the Academy graduation. Dana, under the guise of staying close to her family during her first year at college, made this her goal, and gained acceptance to Ladycliff her senior year of high school. She was well-aware that the life of an Army wife could take her to Fort Bragg, North Carolina or Fort Hood, Texas, neither of which compared to the Navy bases she had enjoyed in San Diego and Norfolk. However, she had also heard of wonderful assignments in Germany, Italy, Belgium, and a number of other exotic destinations that would make the drudgery of a state-side assignment worth it. All she had to do was to hook onto a cadet, and with her father’s assignment providing an open door onto the Academy grounds, the prospects were certainly promising.

However, that was all to change her freshman year in college when the Academy was rocked by scandal. It was common, and in fact required, that Academy faculty host cadets in their quarters, but in her father’s case, it was reported during the final year of his assignment that several of these visits had resulted in illicit liaisons between the professor and some of his students. Dana’s mother packed up her shame and returned to her family in Michigan, and as soon as the government secured a conviction, Dana found herself stranded on the banks of the Hudson with no funding available to finish her education. Dana dropped out after her first year of college, but during the ordeal she had found solace in the companionship of a high school classmate who had remained in Highland Falls, and within a year they were married at Sacred Heart church downtown.

Dana’s husband had been a Highland Falls native whose parents worked in maintenance jobs at the Academy, but he was able to secure a position with the Directorate of Logistics after high school. He remained there for twenty-five years until a lifetime of smoking turned on him. Their only son had followed in the (pre-dishonor) footsteps of Dana’s father and had attended Annapolis. Meanwhile, Dana held a variety of positions on the Academy grounds over the years, but had also acquired a small collection of apartments outside of the Academy gate, using the money that had been saved for their son’s college and the small insurance settlement that her husband’s passing provided. For years these produced very little income, but a decision by Congress to partially civilianize the West Point faculty brought in a number of new tenants who did not qualify for on-post housing, but who were able to pay premium rates for a short commute, and soon Dana found herself sitting on a gold mine. In fact, with her son deployed and her husband gone, Dana occupied one of the apartments herself, not only for the location, but more to treat herself to a complete set of built-in companions in the form of her tenants.

The turnover at the apartments was constant, so Dana thought nothing of it when a polite Arab gentleman approached her concerning one of her vacancies and offered her cash to secure a room for a visiting graduate student. Dana inquired as to where the young man might be studying, but while she received no specific response, she entered into a twelve month contract with the gentleman. A few weeks later a young African man arrived with his benefactor, and although she heard them converse in some non-native language, the new arrival spoke English without the hint of any accent. On numerous occasions Dana attempted to engage him in conversation, but he always seemed to have a well-rehearsed excuse at the ready.

Her tenant, a young man named Marcus, might have attracted much less of her attention, but his station wagon, which was older than her son, rarely moved from its parking space. The only time she noted its absence was when the young man’s companion would show up and the two of them would disappear for hours. She found it unlikely that the student was able to keep up with his courses as he almost never left the apartment, but during a chance meeting in the local supermarket, she was able to corner him and inquire about his studies. His response convinced her that he may have been many things, but a graduate student was not one of them.

Dana was well aware that the Academy was high on the list of potential targets for those who might want to cause harm to America. At least two years before 9/11 the increase in security had been so severe that Dana considered quitting her employment on post just to avoid the security check every time she passed through the gates. However, these daily reminders had the positive effect of heightening her own vigilance, and while she had grown callous to false alerts over the past several years, a recent news story had piqued her interest sufficiently to turn her radar back on. With her antennae operating at full capacity, she found Marcus’ situation so suspicious that she decided to bring it to the attention of the local authorities.

Officer O’Rielly of the Highland Falls Police had been an acquaintance of Dana’s for years. Dana had worked with his mother when he was a small lad, and she watched with pride as he completed his associate’s degree at a local community college and returned to the Village as the junior member of the police force. (He had even forgiven her a speeding transgression on more than one occasion when he realized that the victim of his radar was not a cadet.) Not wanting to arouse suspicion by having the authorities visit the apartment, she called the Highland Falls Police Department and left a message for him to return her call. When he did and she explained her situation over the phone, he suggested that she come to the station for a chat.

Dana made the short drive down to the station, but Officer O’Rielly was already waiting for her at the door, and he immediately escorted her to the Chief’s office where she was introduced and offered a seat. Dana had seen Chief of Police Mullen at church and when he was performing civic functions, but in all her years in the community she had never made his personal acquaintance.

“Mrs. Jerrod,” he began, “I understand that you have a suspicious renter, and Officer O’Rielly thought that we might need to talk.”

“Yes, Sir,” Dana answered, and she proceeded to explain the situation of Marcus’ benefactor, the unusual way in which the apartment had been secured, and the fact the Marcus was wholly unconvincing as a graduate student.

“Mrs. Jerrod,” the Chief asked when she had finished her explanation, “would you mind waiting here while I contact the West Point CID? It sounds to me like you certainly have a person of interest in your apartment, and this close to the Academy they’re the most likely people to handle something like this.”

“Not at all,” Dana said.

The Chief hollered out to a clerk to get CID on the line, and while Dana only heard one half of the conversation, it was clear that they were going to be taken seriously. After hanging up, he announced, “Someone should be here in about ten minutes. Can we get you a cup of coffee?”

Dana politely declined, but spent the next fifteen minutes in conversation with Chief Mullen, wondering why it was they had never met.

Soon a young man entered the office, introduced himself as Special Investigator Terrence Fagin of the West Point Criminal Investigation Division, and even produced a badge attesting to that fact for Dana’s benefit. Chief Mullen offered him a seat, and asked Dana to repeat what she had just told him.

“Ma’am, I think you’re really on to something,” he said when she finished, “and while there’s not much we can do about it yet, we’re going to need to keep an eye on this ‘Marcus.’ We’ll certainly put him on the watch list at the gates, but we’ve been in contact with the FBI for the same reason that you’re seeing heightened security when you come onto post, so I’m going to inform our contacts that we may have something of interest for them. Now, would you be available to talk to an FBI agent if one requested an interview?”

“Absolutely,” Dana said.

The Special Investigator thanked everybody for their vigilance, and took his leave. The next day Officer O’Reilly called her and asked if she could come back down to the station. There she was introduced to a young man who showed her a badge and asked if she would be able to look at some images for him. She was happy to oblige, and was shocked to see Marcus’ Arab benefactor as the subject of the photos. When she explained where she had first met the man, and what activities she could discern had been taking place with his “student,” the young Special Agent appeared almost delighted. He explained to her that her apartment building was about to become the subject of intense scrutiny, that her discretion in this matter was going to be of the utmost importance, and that anything unusual she might notice warranted an immediate call to the local authorities.

Dana was no stranger to making contributions to National Security. As a Navy brat she had endured her father’s deployments and the constant interruptions brought on by reassignments. As an Academy employee she had taken a small part in the well being and professional development of thousands of future officers, and her own son’s service had been a great source of pride for her. But this time she felt that she was making a difference, and although she couldn’t share the details with any of her acquaintances, she viewed it as the single greatest contribution of her life. She wished her husband had still been here to share in her pride, but she was confident he was watching the entire scene with delight and admiration.

The Hesitant Knock

gave Shirley a pretty good indication of who today’s visitor was going to be. As she had been sitting on the love seat reading while her ipod charged in the computer, she had detected the nervous shuffling of feet outside the door before the knock came. Not only was she confident of who was going to appear around the door, but she suspected he would be alone. She briefly considered dashing into the shower, but decided quickly that of all the possible places to get caught by this next visitor, that was probably the worst.

“Come on in, Dirk,” she offered, although she felt she would regret it later.

Dirk poked his head around the door, and seeing that there were no other visitors (as he knew there wouldn’t be) he came in to the room.

“Hey, Shirley,” he said. “How we doing today?”

“Hey Dirk,” Shirley offered from the love seat. “What brings you here?”  
 “Well,” Dirk said, “all of the door kickers are out on surveillance, and I heard that they weren’t going to be able to shake anybody loose, so I thought I might stop by to break up the monotony.”

“Well, that’s very thoughtful,” Shirley said, “but does this mean that the computer geeks have finished their part?”

“Pretty much,” Dirk said as he pulled a chair from the kitchen table and sat down on it across the coffee table from Shirley. “We’ve done all we can and now it’s up to them to carry this across the finish line. Hey, you mind if I have a seat?”

“Make yourself at home.”

“So, reading anything interesting today?” Dirk began, indicating to the pile of magazines on the floor and the *Economist* sitting in front of Shirley on the coffee table.

“Not really,” Shirley said, as she picked up the magazine and dropped it on top of the pile. She had already gotten all the information she wanted out of Dirk about the investigation, and she thought a cold shoulder might end this intrusion as efficiently as possible.

“Well, I noticed your surfing has slowed down quite a bit since I last visited,” he said, “but you’re still keeping up the same pattern. Same old sites.”

“You know, Dirk,” Shirley began, deciding to take a more direct approach, “when Tommy first let me know that my life had been saved because of the Federal Government’s ability to snoop into all my activities, I wasn’t convinced that I didn’t prefer the alternative.”

“Why is that?” he asked.

“Because I like my privacy,” Shirley said. Certainly he was going to pick up on this hint.

“Me too,” he replied. “Although I’ve got to say that for someone who likes her privacy, you spend a lot of time making your opinions known to the world, ‘Joisey Goil.’”

Shirley was stunned. Several years ago she had followed a number of news outlets and she had enjoyed posting her opinions on articles under a variety of pseudonyms. She had quit when the intellectual discourse gave way to trolling, but in her heyday she had chatted on most of the worlds’ problems. This banter, however, had taken place from a terminal at the public library, and ‘Joisey Goil’ was one of her earliest monikers—one she hadn’t used in several years.

“How could you possibly…?” she began, but knowing the answer she cut herself off mid-sentence.

“Oh, it’s easy,” Dirk said. “I think I’ve found pretty much all of your old screen names, and in some cases the avatars that go with them, and I’ve really enjoyed spending the past few days reading your opinions. I’ve gotta’ say that we certainly agree on a healthy number of issues.”

“So how do you feel about privacy?” she asked, since her previous hint on the subject had fallen on oblivious ears.

“Same as you,” he said. “It’s just amazing how much of it we lost after 9/11, and it’s remarkable how much more transparent the world has become now that everything’s digital. I believe you used the name ‘Leave-me-Lone’ when you wrote that one.”

“Dirk, did it occur to you that someone using the name ‘Leave-me-Lone’ would probably not want those opinions to ever return.” She decided that if he didn’t take this hint, she would have to use a brick the next time.

“Oh, no kidding,” he said. “But like I’ve been telling the agents for years, you’re only as secure as your firewall allows.”

Shirley got up from the love seat and walked into the kitchen area. She began to wash the yogurt spoon from the morning that had been drying in the sink. “Dirk,” she began, without looking over her shoulder, “just because someone has access to someone else’s data, it doesn’t mean they need to look at it.”

“Oh, I’m not a snoop, if that’s what you mean.” This response startled Shirley, not because of how he had replied, but because the response had been delivered from what had been not a moment earlier the empty chair at the kitchen table.

“Dirk,” she said, turning around and drying her hands on a dishtowel, “tell me about Backer’s surfing habits.”

“A lot of porn, actually.”

“OK, bad example, I suppose,” she said, “but did he ever post anything from this computer? Or better yet, from any computer?”

“Not so sure about any computer,” Dirk answered, “but nothing from here.”

“So you haven’t snooped into the computer usage of every guest the FBI has entertained in this lovely apartment?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why me, Dirk?” she asked.

“I thought you would be cool just going through your DHS data, and when I finally got to meet you, it was like ‘Wow.’ I mean we read the same science, we surf the same sites, and I thought we had a lot in common.”

“But if you knew that much about me, then couldn’t you figure out that I didn’t want to be snooped on for any reason?”

“But you’re a stripper,” he blurted out. “I figured that with what you do at the club, you wouldn’t mind if I got to know you a little better.”

Shirley bristled at this. “First of all,” she explained, “I’m a dancer. I don’t particularly enjoy it, but it pays the bills, and it gives me my days off to spend as I like. Second, like most of the girls at my club, I have no interest whatsoever in the clientele. Their only function is to part with their money. And third, you’re starting to make me feel real uncomfortable.”

Dirk had just been handed the perfect opportunity to become humble and apologize, but somehow he missed his cue. “But Tommy and Tony and even Joy just seem to waltz in and out of here, and you don’t care. But when Dirk comes by, suddenly we have a federal case,” he protested.

“Dirk,” Shirley began, regaining most of her composure, “they come over here to check up on me, to make sure I’ve got everything I need, and to help me get through these long days of isolation. For that I am grateful, but none of them are snooping into my past and waving it in front of me like a flag, other than what their investigations might require. They understand that even though I am a guest of the Bureau, that there are certain boundaries that must be respected.”

“But this is what I do,” he said. “Your tax dollars have been paying me to put my hacking skills to use, and I can tell you it’s done a lot of good.”

“I’m sure it has,” she said, “but my tax dollars also pay for my share of the sewage treatment plant down on the river, and while I’m happy it’s there, I’m not too interested in the details of its inner workings.”

“I get it,” Dirk said, “I’ve gone from pond scum to sewage.”

“OK, I’m sorry,” she said, “that was a bad example.”

“It sure was.”

“All right,” she continued, “but let’s say you went to Comic Con. Just because it’s ‘what you do’ doesn’t mean other people are going to want to hear all about it.”

“Wow,” he said, “don’t tell me you go too?”

“No Dirk,” she assured him, “I don’t go to Comic Con. It was just an example.”

“So how did you know I go?”

Shirley rolled her eyes. “It was just a lucky guess.”

“So you’ve been snooping on me? Why would you get mad when I do the same with you?”

“No, Dirk, I haven’t been snooping. I don’t have the access to data like you do, I’m not a hacker, and I wouldn’t know where to begin, even if I wanted to, which I don’t.”

“Well,” he said, “I just thought that since we had so much in common you might enjoy talking about some of your ideas with someone who agrees with you. I mean you don’t mind discussing your science articles.”

“Sure,” she said, “but those aren’t my private thoughts.”

“Come on,” he said, “once it’s on the web it’s no longer private.”

“As I’m discovering, but I’m not real happy about it. If I ever had a hint that my postings from years ago would come back to haunt me, I would never have written them.”

“Welcome to the digital age.”

“Look Dirk,” she said, “I understand that you’ve got a job to do, but I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t share the details with me. At least not the parts that involve my life.”

“OK, I get it, but I suppose you don’t mind discussing these investigations.”

“Of course not,” she said.

“But they involve you too.”

“Absolutely,” she agreed, “and that’s why I enjoy discussing them. Anything I can find out that will help get me out of here, I want to know.”

“So if I find out anything else about Fusco I can let you know?”

“Wait a second,” she said, “when you said your part of the investigation was done, you were talking about the AQ cell. You’re still supposed to be working on another investigation that just happens to be closely related to that one, and that some of us in this room have a great deal of interest in.”

“Of course,” he said.

“Then what are you doing over here?” she asked.

Dirk checked his watch. “I started some queries before I left. They should wrap up pretty soon.”

“Well then shouldn’t you be getting back to check on them?” She had been looking for an opportunity to invite him to leave since he had shown up, and this was the first chance she had where she could do it with a soft touch.

“I suppose so,” he agreed.

“Well, you get back to your queries, and you find something that will get me out of here.”

It was the first encouraging remark she had directed at him since the conversation began, and it had a clear impact on his attitude. “You got it,” he said as he hesitated, and then got up to leave.

“Thanks, Dirk,” she said as he made his way out.

“Hey, I’ll see ya’ later,” he assured her as he stepped through the door.

When the door closed, Shirley thought for a second, and decided to make a quick call. She picked up the secure line on the counter and punched the button for the duty officer. When it rang, she heard a voice that she didn’t recognize.

“Federal Bureau of Investigation, New York City Field Office, this is Special Agent McDonald speaking.”

“Uh, hello,” she said, “this is Shirley over at the safe house.”

“Hey, Shirley, heard about you,” came the voice. “Is everything OK.”

“Look,” she said, “I know you’re real busy right now, and I hate to bug you, but is there any way you can have Special Agent Eastman give me a call on this line when she gets a chance.”

“Joy?” came the response. “Absolutely. She’s out in the field right now, but she should rotate back in this evening. I’ll make sure she gets the message.”

“Thanks so much,” Shirley offered.

“No problem,” said the voice. “It’s nice to chat with you, and we’re all looking forward to meeting you.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Shirley said. “Bye.”

“Take care now,” he said.

Shirley hung up the phone. Any other time she would have taken this to be a pleasant conversation, but in light of the visit that had just transpired, she found the unknown voice at the other end of the phone line to be perhaps a little too familiar. It might have been reasonable for the agents to know a little bit about her—after all she was their guest—and Tommy had even warned her that if she identified herself as “Shirley” that the person on the end of the line would require no further explanation. Still, she felt that there were too many people who knew a little too much about her right now, and it made her more than slightly uncomfortable. She had to be a little careful with Dirk, as she was going to require his services as an integral part of her plan, but she rationalized that her admonition of him had been entirely warranted and appropriate.

Her call to the field office, though, was far too hasty, and she regretted it. She needed some girl talk, but it was foolish to think that Joy would be available, and she could have trapped herself for the remainder of the day as she waited for a return call. Fortunately, she got enough information out of the agent to plan the rest of her day.

It was still morning when Shirley made her way out of the garage and down the back steps. She figured it would be prudent to alter her route, and this gave her a fairly direct shot to the coffee house. She was confident that the barista from the previous day would be in class and that she wouldn’t attract any attention returning for another green tea and some surfing time, but she was anxious to see if Char had discovered anything. She knew enough to retain her receipt this time, and she was pleased to note that the Wi-Fi passcode had not changed since the previous evening. Once she had settled in the same corner and connected she shot Char a quick note.

“Anything yet?”

“Come by any time!” was the instant response.

Shirley didn’t bother answering, as she knew Char wasn’t going anywhere. She packed quickly, and not wanting to waste her tea, carried it out with her. As the laptop banged against her hip she chugged what remained in the cup and dropped it in the nearest public receptacle. While Joy wouldn’t be calling the safe house until the evening, and she was certain to not receive any more visitors during the day, the anticipated excitement of finding what Char had discovered added this urgency to her step.

Upon entering the library she flew right past the volunteer at the front desk and bounded up the back stairs to the reference room, which was thankfully empty except for Char, who had her head down over her keyboard as Shirley approached.

“Looks like we’ve been busy,” Shirley said as she pulled a chair up to the front of Char’s desk. She was only slightly out of breath, but it was as much from the excitement of the moment as from the trip over.

Char slowly raised her head, wheeled back from the desk on her chair, and took a long look at Shirley. After a moment’s gaze she shook her head and finally broke her silence.

“You have no idea what you’re sitting on top of, do you?” she began.

Shirley uncharacteristically didn’t know how to respond, so she decided to break the tension by trying a little humor. “Um, a library chair?” she conjectured, looking down.

“Try a viper pit,” Char said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Shirley asked, a little perplexed.

Char began in with an explanation that had been building in her for the past two days. “Every organized crime family in the New York area is fairly well-documented, whether it’s through news reports, arrest records, trial transcripts, and whatnot. It’s not hard to find the connections between all the major families and their nefarious activities, and only when it gets too out-of-hand do the authorities tend to step in. Most of the time the only charges that stick against them involve tax evasion or extortion, and I would guess that the majority of what they do is simply ignored until they cross the line.”

“Well, that’s not much of a surprise,” Shirley said.

Char continued. “It looks like you’re tangled up in something that isn’t on anybody’s radar. There appears to be a syndicate operating just below the surface here that’s more wide-reaching than anything you can imagine, and it looks like you’re caught smack-dab in the middle of it.”

“How is that so?” Shirley pressed, hoping to get to the gist of the matter as quickly as possible.

“I had to go back to the 70s before I could find any connections among the names in these files,” she explained, giving a nod to the stack of papers spread out on her desk. Many of them seem to go back even farther than that. For example, I found links between Fusco’s dad, Fontana’s grandfather, and Patracelli’s great uncles that went back to the 50s. They were all part of the same big happy family.”

“So what happened to that family?” Shirley asked.

“It appears that in the 60s that particular slice started going legit. They brought in a number of businesses in a lot of the expected industries: construction, sanitation, highway repair, public works contracts, and several others. About the same time there seemed to be a bit of federal pressure on some of their more traditional activities, and a good number of the family’s more prominent members wound up behind bars or under ground.”

“But certainly this has to be well-known,” Shirley objected.

“Oh, it was,” Char concurred. “However, in the mid 80s the last heir apparent of the cartel had an unfortunate construction accident, and it appeared that the entire organization simply dissolved.”

“How could that be?”

“Clever accounting would be my guess,” Char said. She waved her hand across the desk suggesting that the answer lay in the files to her front, as well as in the electrons hidden behind her monitor. “Somehow the individual businesses appeared to break off on their own, and at the same time whatever was happening under the surface just got pushed deeper. Now it’s obvious that during this time drugs continued to flow, hits were still executed, extortion was still paid, and graft was rampant, but nothing has ever made it to the courts to indicate that there was any longer a central control. While other families waxed and waned in prominence, this one seemed to just fade away.”

“Did it really?” Shirley asked, knowing she was setting up Char’s punch line.

“Absolutely not,” she said. “It looks like a highly decentralized network supported by a loose coalition was all that remained, but it’s managed to keep its tentacles pretty much everywhere, from local police precincts to the federal building, into political pockets, and deep into other organized crime organizations, to include some well-known Chinese actors as that the drug bust a few weeks ago pointed us to.”

“So how does this shadow organization manage to function?” Shirley scoffed. “Certainly it’s not a self-organizing matrix that just comes together by component for task execution. Someone has to be calling the shots.”

“There’s a kingpin,” Char assured her.

“Who’s that?”

“Guido Marnacchia,” Char announced.

“Never heard of him,” Shirley said, clearly unimpressed with Char’s conclusion.

“But I guarantee he’s heard of you,” Char countered.

This got Shirley’s attention. “How could that possibly be?” she asked.

“Because if it’s happening, he seems to be in on it.”

Shirley had been sitting forward in her seat since the conversation began, but with this remark she leaned back and slumped down, sending a non-verbal message of disbelief that she punctuated with an accusation. “Look,” she began, “I’ve been on the same internet as you for the past two days, and this Guido—whatever—guy never popped up. How did you just happen to come across him?”

Char leaned back in her seat as well, but it was to convey a more triumphant air. “Tax records,” she announced with as much superiority as satisfaction.

Shirley sat straight up in her chair. “You’re a hacker,” she blurted out.

“I’m a researcher,” Char corrected, smiling.

“So how do you find someone’s tax records?” Shirley objected.

“In this case,” Char explained, “I stumbled across an accountant who likes to back everything up on the cloud, and I just happened to get all his uploads. For some reason I noticed that his name popped up with almost every one of these disparate companies, and when I realized he was an accountant I was able to dig through his data pretty quickly. He even bragged about his secure methodologies in a few venues, and I just took that as a challenge.”

“But still, how did you get his stuff off the cloud?” Shirley demanded.

Char smiled. “Sometimes it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.”

“But you still had to hack,” Shirley insisted.

“It’s not quite hacking,” Char explained. “I didn’t touch anything, I didn’t change anything, and I didn’t download anything. I just read what was there, took a few notes, and drew my own conclusions.”

“So your work won’t be traced?”

“Can’t be. It’s like it never happened.”

Shirley leaned back again. “But you were able to figure out who was at the center of it all?”

“All these activities, all these companies, an entire organization, they all point back to one individual. By all outward appearances he looks like he’s legit, but once you scratch the surface the slime starts to ooze out.”

“But why don’t the feds know about him?” Shirley pressed. “Certainly they have access to all the data you must have seen, plus a whole lot more.” Her recent experiences with the Homeland Defense database had her convinced that there was very little hidden in the electronic realm that the federal government didn’t have quick access to.

“If you don’t what you’re looking for, then you’ll never look in the right place,” Char explained. “Without these files and the connections you had already made, I wouldn’t have uncovered this in a million years. I’m sure the feds are doing some digging right now, but without the starting point that we had, it’s unlikely they’ll get anywhere.”

This brought the two women back to the matter at hand. Shirley indulged Char’s bragging, and her methods and approach to the problem were fascinating, but it was time for them to get down to business. It was also interesting to Shirley that Char seemed to throw a little credit in her direction with this last claim.

“So where do we go with this?” Shirley asked.

“I’ve build a spreadsheet,” Char said, patting the top of her monitor with her hand. “It’s got a fairly complete accounting of Guido Marnacchia’s entire organization, at least as far as I can tell. In addition to all of his legitimate businesses, I’ve found a number of links to law enforcement, including Fusco and Fontana, as well as some circumstantial connections with known organized crime. It’s nothing that would hold up in court, but the connections are clear enough to draw some pretty definitive conclusions. There’s no doubt that the operation off the Carolina coast had his fingerprints all over it, based on the gang that was arrested down there.”

“So did my hint help at all?” Shirley asked.

“I found that before you had left the library on Saturday,” Char bragged.

It was the response Shirley had feared, but suspected. Whatever her computer skills had been at one point, they had atrophied over the past several years. She resolved that once she extricated herself from this web she was going to bring her mind back into focus on practical matters, and not just waste her intellectual efforts on gathering esoteric knowledge.

“So what can we do with this spreadsheet?” Shirley asked.

Char reached into her desk drawer, pulled out a flash drive, and inserted it into the front of the hard drive at her feet. She indicated to Shirley to hand over the laptop that had made its way to the floor over the course of the conversation, and with it in hand she opened the case and hit the power button.

“I’m going to give you this file directly,” she said. “We don’t want it going out over the airwaves and getting picked up by your friends.”

“Is it ready to go?”

“It’s close enough,” Char assured her. “I could probably spend months digging, but there’s enough here now to make a fairly convincing argument about who’s pulling all the strings. It’s certainly more than enough to steer your investigation in the right direction.”

Shirley looked at her friend with gratitude, but Char continued.

“Now I trust you have a plan for getting this information to the right people.”

“You bet I do,” Shirley assured her.

With the file transferred, Char handed the laptop back to her cohort. “You can bring me the laptop when this is all over,” she said. “In the meantime you certainly know how to get a hold of me.”

“Char, you’re amazing.”

“Hey,” Char said, “like I told you, this is what I do. You know how long it’s been since I’ve had a research problem that challenged me? Everything is so over-reported nowadays that the only issue is sorting out the nuggets from all the chaff that’s out there. This, on the other hand, was a true challenge. I really felt like I was breaking new ground when I came across this guy. I’ve gotta’ say, this was fun.”

The two women exchanged a hug, and Char admonished her to be careful. Shirley made her way out of the library and back onto the sun-bathed streets of Hoboken. She realized that this might be the last time she would see daylight for a while, but she expected to have everything she needed now to hasten her release from captivity. As she headed in the direction of the parking garage a casual onlooker might have observed that there appeared to be a slight spring in her step.

The Parking Lot

security cameras had failed to identify the vehicle that Farris and Mohd were using for their reconnaissance visits, but at least they now had identified part of the cell. As Courtney Lee had reported, Mohd was still performing reconnaissance, so the operation must be awaiting an execution order. The hope was that logistics were proving to be the long pole in the tent, and that they could get a tail on the cell leader before he picked up supplies, letting them take down an even more critical part of the organization. Unknowingly, Mohd had recently acquired a significant tail, and Courtney took great pleasure in acknowledging these FBI surveillance experts with a wink every time they entered the mall a safe distance behind Mohd. He had suggested a few things as a young gang member that had been ignored, and on the rare occasion in Korea that he dared approach his chain-of-command with an original idea, he felt the reaction was generally patronizing, albeit appreciative. However, this time he was downright excited to see that a simple hunch of his had resulted in a full-blown federal investigation involving the local police force, the FBI, and some counter-terrorism experts from New York City. With all of his mother’s failed attempts to help him integrate into the American culture, and even with his military service and the inculcation into the country’s set of national values, it had taken this to make him truly feel like part of the team.

However, there was still the matter of identifying the cell leader, and that task was proving to be as elusive as ever. Every contact Mohd made on his cell phone led to a dead end, but that was expected, as many an AQ operative had been betrayed via electronic communications, and the organization had learned that lesson long ago. The growing concern was that with a target as small as the Paramus Mall, there would have to be a large number of other targets in order to make any significant economic or psychological impact. Tony was racking his brain over how they might get to this cell leader, when his thoughts were again interrupted by a phone call.

“Federal Bureau of Investigation, Special Agent Fontana,” came the automatic response.

“Uh, good morning, Special Agent,” started the voice on the other end of the line, “my name is Special Investigator Terrence Fagin with the West Point Criminal Investigation Division, and I hate to bother you, but the Highland Falls Police up here have been watching a character who’s camped out in an apartment on the Academy’s doorstep, and something just stinks about this guy. We have no ID on him, the car he’s driving is registered to a guy down in Brooklyn, and quite frankly we’re just a little bit nervous about him. We hate to bother you with every one of these we get, and I don’t even know if you’re interested, but I’d feel wrong not telling you about this and then have something happen.”

Tony shuddered. The last 9/11 attack had included an economic and a military target. If this was going to be a copycat operation, then West Point would be an ideal location for the military end of it. “Look,” he said, “what can you tell me about the guy up there.”

“Well,” came the reply, “he’s a single black male pretending to be a grad student, but he never leaves his apartment. His landlady said she asked him about school and it was like he had no idea what she was talking about. The guy who paid cash for the apartment said he was renting it for a student, but he didn’t say where—there aren’t a whole lot of grad schools nearby here.”

“Can you describe the guy who got the apartment?” Tony continued.

“The landlady said he’s a middle-aged Arab,” Terrence responded, “she’s the only one who has seen him.”

“Look,” said Tony, “I need the information on the vehicle that you’ve got down in Brooklyn. Then I need you to gather up the local talent, and have them ready to talk. I’m going to be up there in an hour, and I’m going to need a quick visit with the landlady.”

Terrence dictated the vehicle registration information to Tony, and then asked, “So you think this might be something?”

“It could be,” said Tony, and after hanging up the phone, he added to himself, “you have no idea.”

Tony again barged into Tommy’s office, and without waiting for a greeting, blurted out what he had just heard. “Boss, I just got off the phone with West Point CID, and they’ve got a suspicious character camped out on the Academy’s doorstep in an apartment. A middle-aged Arab paid cash for the apartment, and the kid’s claiming to be a grad student. Problem is he never leaves his apartment.”

“Has anyone seen the Arab?” Tommy asked quickly.

“Just the landlady,” Tony answered. “I’m on my way up now to show her some images. Oh, and here’s the information off of the vehicle he has parked up there.”

“Great,” Tommy said. “Take someone up there with you, and get a GPS tracker on that vehicle, if you make a positive match. Even if you don’t, this might be worth looking into.”

“Got it, Boss,” Tony replied as he was leaving to sign out a sedan. Tommy went to work on the vehicle registration lead, suspecting that they might be closing in on the cell leader.

Tony went straight to the Highland Falls Police Station, and got out while the other agent continued in the direction of the apartment complex. He was led to the Chief’s office, where the Chief, Officer O’Rielly, Special Investigator Fagin, and Dana Jerrod were already waiting. As was the custom, he introduced himself as Special Agent Tony Fontana from the New York City Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and he even produced documentation that attested to this fact.

Terrence made the introductions all the way around, and as he finished with Dana, Tony addressed her immediately.

“Mrs. Jerrod, could you please tell me if you recognize either of the men in this image?” he asked, showing her the mall surveillance photo of Faris and Mohd.

“Absolutely,” Dana replied. “The man in front is the one who paid for Marcus’ apartment. He approached me a month ago and paid a cash deposit on a one-year lease for a visiting graduate student.”

“Can you tell me what the grad student has been doing?” Tony pressed.

“Well, that’s the thing,” Dana explained. “He stays in his apartment all day, except when he needs groceries or when his friend comes to visit. Sometimes in the morning his car will be gone, but I can’t tell you how often because I’m usually at work. I did notice it once or twice when I came home mid-morning to get something.”

Tony looked around the room for a moment, and then addressed Dana again. “Ma’am, we’re going to ask you to keep an eye out for this man. Please be very careful, but if he comes by, we’ll need you to call down to the police station. He is a person of interest in an ongoing investigation. You may notice a little more activity around your building in the next few weeks—there should be nothing to worry about, but don’t hesitate to call down to the Highland Falls Police if you get concerned. Just go about your business like you’ve been doing, and everything should be fine. Thank you so much for your diligence—it’s people like you who make this nation safer for the rest of us.”

Tony nodded to Officer O’Rielly, who escorted Dana out of the office and closed the door behind them. As soon as the door closed, Tony addressed the Chief and Terrence.

“She just IDd the head of a suspected AQ cell that is forming around the City for imminent operations. We haven’t been able to track him down yet, but we’re going to put 24-hour eyes on that apartment, and we’re going to track the vehicle sitting outside. We have no idea what they’re planning, but this is going to help us find out. We’ll need your cooperation, but we’re going to keep both your organizations in the loop as well. “

The Chief let out a low whistle. “So this is for real,” he suggested.

“Chief,” Tony explained, “this is as real as it gets. We’ve known about something for a few months, but this break is huge. That nice old lady out there just busted this case wide open, and we’re going to get to the bottom of it before anything can happen.”

Tony left his card with both of the Officers, shook their hands, and walked out of the station to his waiting car. As he walked out, Dana was still talking to Officer O’Rielly, and Tony stopped again to shake her hand and thank her for being a Great American.

The Bold Knock

was precisely what Shirley was expecting from the invited visitor, and when Joy poked her head around the door, Shirley was not disappointed.

“Sorry I couldn’t make it over yesterday,” Joy apologized, “but we ended up staying on sight for a little longer than anticipated.”

“Shoot,” Shirley said, “you just could have called. I know how busy you guys are right now, and I don’t want to be a burden.”

“Heck no,” Joy said. “If we didn’t have all this going on right now, we’d be fighting to come over. It sure beats the hell out of the office.”

“Well, if you didn’t have all this going on right now,” Shirley corrected her, “I wouldn’t be here, would I?”

“Good point,” Joy agreed, “and sorry nobody made it over yesterday. Things are really getting hot.”

“Well, actually,” Shirley began, but Joy cut her off.

“Oh, hell no,” she blurted out. “I’m going to throttle that son of a bitch.”

“You figured that out pretty quickly,” Shirley offered with admiration. “By the way, you want something to drink?”

“I’ve only got a few minutes, but one of those waters would be great,” Joy said.

Joy sat at the kitchen table as Shirley pulled two bottles out of the refrigerator. She put the caps on the counter and joined Joy at the table.

“Look,” Shirley said, “I don’t want to make a Federal case out of this, but Dirk kind of weirded me out yesterday, and while I don’t think he’s going to come back, it’s probably a good idea somebody knew about this. It was my best guess that he came over here on his own.”

“You’re damn right,” Joy confirmed. “Tommy already read him the riot act when he came over here with me and Tony, but I guess he figured he could slip over when the rest of us were tied up yesterday. I’ve got a mind to snap his geek neck.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Shirley offered, “but I just wanted to have a girl talk about this, because I figured no one else would understand how uncomfortable I was yesterday with his, let’s say, unwanted advances.”

“Well, actually, I’m betting Tommy would probably have been pretty understanding too, but then he’d most likely have gone back and gone ninja on Dirk, and we just don’t need another crisis in our office right now.”

“Yeah, but you know what it’s like,” Shirley continued. “I’m betting that you get hit on all the time, and you probably don’t care much for it either.”

“You got that right,” Joy confirmed, and then she added, “you’re not gay, are you?”

“Oh God no,” Shirley blurted out, but as soon as she said it she wished she could have hit the ‘rewind’ and ‘delete’ buttons. Tommy had dropped a huge hint, and even Dirk had included Joy on his list of potential rivals, but these clues were lost on Shirley. It was only now that Shirley realized what everyone else had been trying to tell her.

“Oh, Joy,” she stammered, “I am so sorry. That was really insensitive.”

“No worries,” Joy assured her, and then she added “I thought Tommy said he mentioned it to you.”

“Now that I think about it,” she said, “he did drop a pretty serious hint, but ‘Dumb Ol’ Shirley’ apparently isn’t fully attuned to those clues. Even if he did tell me, I probably would have forgotten about it already.”

“Now don’t give me this ‘Dumb Ol’ Shirley’ crap,” Joy scolded. “I’ve seen the shit you come up with, and I know that nothing gets by you.”

“Well,” Shirley said, “I try to stay pretty tuned in to people’s feelings, but there are some other things that I just suppose I never think about.”

“I heard about the investigation you did on Tony,” Joy reminded her, “and you pretty much gleaned every detail that we still haven’t been able to confirm.”

“Well I certainly couldn’t tell you if he’s gay or not,” Shirley objected.

“Yeah, but you knew he was Italian.”

“Sure,” Shirley agreed, “but only because it gave him a connection to Fusco, and I figured there was a mob boss somewhere in the middle. Until I made the connection with Mike, I never would have thought he was Italian.”

“With a name like Patricelli?” Joy asked. It was great news for Shirley that Joy knew the details of this connection, but she put this thought on hold for a minute. She still had some serious backpedaling to do, and she didn’t want to blow it and risk a new friendship.

“Let me ask you this,” Joy said. “Are there any gay strippers in your club?”

“I’ve got no idea,” Shirley admitted. “I suppose so, but I’m not sure. It just doesn’t matter.”

“You have several,” Joy affirmed. “Edith told me all about them, so I’m guessing as your best buddy she’s probably said something to you about it.”

“I suppose.”

“Damn,” Joy said. “Tell me something, Shirl, does it bother you to know I’m gay?”

Shirley scoffed at this question. “Of course not,” she said. “It doesn’t even bother me that you’re a Federal Agent, and that’s something that is on my radar.”

“So not much bothers you”

“Oh I wish,” Shirley admitted. “I think you know how I feel about our government. Also, I’ve been doing a lot of surfing on AQ, and I’ve developed an unhealthy suspicion of Islam. Plus, I’ve got a healthy suspicion of straight men, but only when they don’t seem to know their boundaries.”

“Like our good friend Dirk?”

“Sadly, yes,” Shirley said, “but I’ve also gotta’ say that I’m pretty quick to judge. I just don’t have a lot of patience with idiots.”

“In another life,” Joy said, “you and Tony would have gotten along great.”

“Why is that?” Shirley asked.

“He’s like that,” Joy explained. “At first I thought it was because he was a dedicated agent, but I always noticed he treated me with the same respect he treated all the other agents. That was before anyone in the office knew I was gay. When the word got out, he didn’t change the way he acted around me one bit. It really meant a lot to me at the time, and I think it said a lot about him as a person. Of course, I’ve also noticed that he has a tendency to lose his patience with people who think a little slower.”

“I hate to burst your bubble,” Shirley said, “but I’m guessing that it’s because he was a mole, and he had so many other distractions that he needed to play it straight up as an agent.”

“Tommy was right,” Joy said. “You are cynical.”

“Speaking of which,” Shirley suggested, “how about Tommy?”

“I knew you liked him,” Joy said with delight. “He was my boss when I joined this field office, and he’s been like a big brother to me. I was getting unwanted advances from a lot of the creeps and geeks—including some of the agents—and he was the first one I told.”

“How did he react?” Shirley asked, ignoring Joy’s lead-in remark for the moment.

“Like a big brother,” Joy said. “He actually suggested that I come out to turn off some of the heat.”

“Did it work?” she asked.

“Sure did,” Joy confirmed. “Best advice I’ve ever gotten. The job’s been a whole lot easier since then.”

“Good for him,” Shirley said. “But now, back to that remark you slipped in when you thought I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Are you kidding?” Joy blurted out. “You should hear him talk about you, and it’s not just because of the help you’ve been on these investigations. There’s no way he’s going to be like that unless you’re sending him pretty good vibes.”

“Joy,” Shirley objected, “he’s old enough to be my…big brother,” she finally concluded.

“Oh, I can’t wait to tell him you said that,” Joy threatened.

“Don’t you dare,” Shirley said.

“Gotcha!”

Both women laughed at this, and finally Shirley regained enough composure to make a final pitch.

“Please don’t tell Tommy about this,” she said. “He’s a great guy, but I’m not sure how it would be if he didn’t have me locked up in this cage.”

“That’s smart,” Joy admitted. “ But if you need someone to vouch for him outside of this cage, I can certainly do that.”

“Well, maybe someday I’ll get to see what life is like outside this cage,” Shirley conjectured.

“We’re working on it,” Joy assured her, “but speaking of which, I’ve got to get back. We’ve got a lot going on right now, and I’m up to my ears in it.”

“So I’ve heard,” Shirley said. “But thanks so much for stopping by—it really means a lot to me, and I really needed a little girl talk after yesterday.”

“Any time, Shirl,” Joy offered, “but hopefully the next time we’ll be chatting it will be outside of this dungeon.”

“That would be most excellent,” Shirley said, as the two of them stood up and walked towards the door.

“Well, we’ll see you later,” Joy said as she opened the door.”

Shirley put a hand on Joy’s shoulder and said, “Look Joy, you be careful this week. You keep us safe, but watch out for yourself too.”

The two exchanged a quick hug as Joy said “You got it.”

While not one to let her emotions overtake her critical analysis of any situation, Shirley reviewed the conversation with satisfaction. She just wasn’t quite sure which part had been the most uplifting.

Shirley reached behind the pillow on the love seat and pulled Char’s laptop out from where she had hidden it. Now that her activities no longer required spreading out stacks of paper from the Fusco and Patricelli files she could relax a little more and work in the relative comfort of her favorite perch. She had made a mental map of the activities that needed to take place before executing the next phase of her plan, and today’s schedule was not going to be too taxing. In fact, by the time Joy knocked Shirley had already completed most of what she had expected to be a full day’s work.

This phase of the plan had begun the previous evening, not long after her return from the library. When it had become late enough for Shirley to be reasonably assured that Dirk was no longer monitoring her every keystroke on the government laptop, and when she had decided Joy had been unable to break off from her mission to return the phone call, she had used the laptop in the safe house to open a gmail account. She had sent out one quick note to the spare hotmail account she had established at the coffee house, ensuring that there would be no electronic links to Char in the trail she was building.

The note had simply said, “What can you tell me about Robert Fusco and Mike Patricelli?”

She was now busy at the other laptop working off-line to prepare the response. Char’s spreadsheet had excruciating detail on Marnacchia’s organization, and Shirley needed to convert the links and implications to plain text—text that could be pasted into an e-mail message that would capture the attention of her captors. Laboring in front of a split screen, she was having no trouble converting all of Char’s connections to simple prose, but as she scrolled through Char’s product she not only marveled at well-hidden relationships that Char had been able to uncover, but also at the fact that Char had so quickly organized her findings into such a coherent, well-presented set of tables.

It was early evening when Shirley had compiled several pages of observations that implicated not only Fusco, Patricelli, and Marnacchia, but Tony and a number of others as well. She wondered what Dirk would do with this, as his eyes were certain to be the first to see the fruits of her labor. She was confident he would not share it with Tony, but could only speculate that he wouldn’t share it with Tommy, Joy, or any of the other agents involved with her investigation. In a way she hoped he would share it as she delighted in the possibility of out-sleuthing the federal government with her connection with a mysterious source somewhere in the great unknown. However, she was more convinced that Dirk would keep the e-mail message to himself and use the information therein to boost his own stock in the office. Either way she was going to win this round, and as she reviewed what she had typed she could almost taste the victory.

She debated with herself whether or not it was too soon to send the response, but she decided that there was no reason to delay, in spite of everything else going on with the FBI office. Her investigation, while on the back burner, needed to continue. She took her time changing, though, as she didn’t want to get to the café before it closed, but once she was convinced her visit would go undetected, she took Char’s laptop and made her exit out the back of the garage.

There was no sign of activity when she arrived at the establishment, so she took a seat at one of the sidewalk tables and opened her laptop. She was pleased to find the network connection, but after three separate tries she realized that the passcode on the morning’s receipt was not going to work for her, and that the owner was somehow preventing the precise activity she was trying to accomplish.

She shut the laptop so the glare wouldn’t attract any unwanted attention, and she sat for a minute and considered her options. There were a few other establishments she had scouted that were potential sources of connection, but she wasn’t convinced she would have any more luck with them. Furthermore, she didn’t want to attract any undue attention in a municipality where at least two of the law enforcement officials wanted her dead. She considered a walk to the university, but again concluded that most common areas would still require some sort of permission to access the campus network, and that she had no desire to risk an encounter with campus security. Paranoia again began to creep in to her psyche as she sat, exposed to the evening, pondering her next move. She hadn’t seen any video cameras in the café, but she wasn’t convinced that her purchases hadn’t been recorded. She only needed to send one message for Dirk to intercept, and even if the federal agents later discovered that she had been the source there would be no ramifications once the case was solved. There was more danger sitting on a sidewalk at night than there was accessing the internet from an obscure coffee house, so she decided to make a quick walk back to the safety of her dungeon.

She was about half way back to the garage when it hit her. She had accessed the café’s Wi-Fi on Sunday afternoon, and again on Monday morning, with the same passcode. That could only mean it changed over at noon, which made sense as a way for the establishment to encourage additional patronage. She chuckled at the clever proprietor who must have concocted this scheme, and she came up with a plan of her own. It would require giving up a few hours of sleep this evening, but with her paranoia—no, the danger was still very real—it would be worth it. It would also delay her response for a day, but she rationalized that this was for the better as she wasn’t entirely comfortable having such a detailed answer return so quickly.

Once back at the garage she circled around the lot to pinpoint Edith’s car and then went straight to the stairwell to navigate her personal security system. Fortunately, the next part of this evening’s plan was going to be more predictable due to Madame Z’s Eastern European penchant for punctuality, as she knew exactly what time Edith would be departing the club.

The dancers generally left the club in small groups or individually, due to Madame Z’s insistence that Carmine thoroughly inspect their belongings for any ill-gotten gains, and the process wouldn’t start until after the final patron had departed. Shirley wasn’t particularly worried about any of the club employees catching her in the garage as she waited for Edith, but in order to avoid any awkward explanations she decided to remain incognito. She had several hours to prepare for the encounter, but since she was already dressed from her recent excursion, her greatest challenge was staying awake and not missing her opportunity.

She passed the time on Char’s laptop, editing the document she had spent the day preparing, and cross-checking it against Char’s meticulously-prepared spreadsheet, all the while keeping an eye on the clock. Once she had reached five minutes past closing time she pulled her hair back, covered her head with the hood from her sweatshirt, and went up to the stairwell to wait for Edith. Fortunately the wait wasn’t long, and she was relieved to see Edith walking alone. She walked slowly towards Edith’s car so that the timing of the encounter would allow Edith a moment of recognition without forcing a startled reaction, and her timing was just about right. Shirley watched as Edith slowed at the approach of another figure, and when Edith stopped in her tracks upon identifying her assailant, Shirley signaled her subtly to continue walking towards the car. Edith complied, and as she unlocked her vehicle Shirley opened the passenger door and slid into the seat beside Edith.

“What the fuck?” was Edith’s predictable reaction, but she followed it with a brief hug across the seat.

Shirley was laughing. “I need a quick favor,” she said.

“How did you find me?” Edith asked, realizing the encounter had not been entirely by chance.

Shirley pretended to look at a watch on her wrist. “Um, it’s closing time?” she said.

Edith looked at her bare wrist and then laughed with understanding. “I guess it is,” she agreed, “What can I do?”

Shirley described the coffee shop a few blocks away, but Edith knew it well and needed no further directions.

“I need you to go there on your way to work tomorrow,” she continued, “buy something, anything, a cup of coffee, a glass of tea, a pastry, whatever, and keep the receipt. When you get to the club, give the receipt to Carmine and tell him it’s for me, and that I’ll be picking it up from him later.”

“This sounds like spy stuff,” Edith said.

Shirley rolled her eyes. *If only you knew*, she thought. “No, Edith, it’s just getting a receipt and bringing it to Carmine. No spying allowed.”

“That’s good,” Edith assured her, “I don’t want to get in any trouble.”

Shirley was hoping to not have to explain the purpose of the mission to Edith, and it appeared that would not be a concern.

“Edith, I really appreciate this,” she said.

“Anything else you need?” came the immediate response. Edith was unlikely to willingly put herself in danger, but she was always eager to help out a friend.

“If you can do this, that would be awesome,” Shirley assured her. “Just let Carmine know that I’ll come by to pick it up.”

“Sure thing,” Edith agreed, and she added, “Hey, do you need a ride somewhere?”

“I’m good, thanks. I’ll make a break for it when the coast is clear.”

Three dancers were making their way towards their cars, and as soon as they had passed the women exchanged a hug and Shirley slipped out. She headed towards the rear exit of the garage where she waited until she was sure Edith had departed. She finally made her way back to the stairwell, through the maze, and straight to bed. Although it had only been a few weeks since she had been on the club’s schedule, her body had adjusted quickly to the more reasonable hours afforded by her captivity.

The Vehicles

Faris had acquired for the operation were going to provide the FBI the break they needed to pin him down. He had debated with himself about how to execute their purchase and registration, and had concluded that providing his true address was the safest tact, for registering them under a false address could conceivably arouse suspicion. If he had more time he might have obtained a second apartment just for the registration, but as he had no reason to suspect that he was going to be a subject of interest until it was too late, he felt this precaution would be unnecessary.

Tommy, on the other hand, was delighted with the results he had obtained. Faris had apparently purchased three vehicles, the station wagon, a Yugo, and a small cargo truck. By the time Tony had returned from his trip to Highland Falls, the Yugo and the truck had been fitted with tracking devices, and Faris’ apartment had been placed under surveillance. Faris had not yet surfaced, but they were able to place Faisel as another inhabitant of the apartment, and while this provided no clue whatsoever as to his identity, they were confident they were nearing the point where they could close in on the cell leader.

The next week saw an intense surveillance effort pay off. Marcus had made three trips, to everyone’s surprise, to the parking lot outside the Synagogue in Kiryas Joel, and the not-yet-identified Faisel had driven the truck through New York City’s diamond district almost daily. They even placed Faris at the apartment, and had determined the Yugo was for his use. Although he had visited neither Marcus nor Mohd recently, he made a number of subway trips that implied he was continuing with the operation’s arrangements and was not quite prepared to execute. The empty truck (it had been scrutinized several times) was going to be used as a bomb against the Diamond District, but the nature of the attacks on the synagogue and the mall was still a burning question for the investigation. Even more pressing, however, was determining if other parts of the operation had been put in place without the observation of some concerned citizens, and when the operation did take place, what surprises might still be in store for the investigators. Tommy felt, and everyone agreed, that the logistics were going to be the key to breaking open the entire operation. Faisel was going to need explosives, Marcus and Mohd were going to require some instruments of destruction that every investigation indicated were not yet in their possession, and any other elements were going to have to eventually make contact with Faris to complete their pieces as well.

The tension in the office had grown beyond unbearable, as waiting for known perpetrators to act in a known manner was even more frustrating than not knowing who the perpetrators were, or what they were planning. A few days before 9/11, though, the FBI got their answer, as both the Yugo and the truck left the apartment at the same time, and after a short drive they disappeared into a warehouse in Harlem. A quick check revealed that the proprietor was a Saudi rug and furniture importer, showing that yet another one of Baqr’s predictions had been eerily accurate. Although the truck rode lower on its suspension as it left the warehouse, Tommy decided not to have it stopped quite yet, as it appeared to be going back to the apartment, and they needed Faris to deliver all of the material from the Yugo’s saggingback end in order to eliminate every element of this cell.

The answer came almost immediately, for to everyone’s surprise Faris and his Yugo made a trip on September tenth that included a stop in Paramus, a stop in Highland Falls, and no others. The scope of this operation was much smaller than had been expected, but as everyone had feared, it was going to in fact be “Son of 9/11.” Only this time, the FBI was going to be there to stop it.

The Quick Knock

caught Shirley a little off guard, as she had hoped Tommy might come by later in the evening, but she wasn’t counting on it. As she had resigned herself to the possibility of being treated to a rushed Tommy at best, that’s exactly who appeared around the door, and a lot earlier in the day than anticipated.

“So, another slow afternoon at the office?” Shirley started in as soon as he poked his head around the door.

“You can’t imagine what’s going on right now,” he said quickly, shaking his head, “but I had to come by after I heard.”

“After you heard what?” Shirley asked, knowing full-well what he meant.

“About your visitor Monday,” he blurted out. “Why didn’t you call me?”

Shirley felt really betrayed by Joy. She had called her because she needed someone to talk to, not because she wanted to make a federal case out of it.

“I thought Joy wouldn’t say anything, or I never would have told her about it,” Shirley protested.

“Joy didn’t tell me anything,” Tommy corrected her.

“So how’d you find out?” she asked.

“Dirk told me,” he said.

“Dirk?” Shirley asked with surprise.

“Yeah,” Tommy said. “I heard Joy dressing him down about something, so when she was done I asked him what it was all about. He got really indignant and complained that the agents can come over here but he can’t. I explained to him that we have a responsibility for our charge, and that this isn’t part of his job. He got real huffy with me—I wanted to snap his geek neck.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to take a number,” Shirley said, “but don’t worry about it. I didn’t really mean for Joy to come over yesterday, knowing how busy you are, but we had a really nice chat. She took care of it for me, and that’s it. You didn’t need to get involved.”

“Well,” Tommy said, “I can assure you he won’t be back.”

Shirley got up from the love seat and walked over to Tommy, who was still standing by the door.

“Look,” she said, putting a hand on his shoulder, “Thanks for coming over and thanks for caring, but it’s really not a big deal. I appreciate the effort you’re making, but you’ve got so much more going on that I don’t want you worrying about me, for goodness sake.”

“Well I was pretty upset,” he said, “and I felt bad.”

Shirley dropped her hand. “Don’t,” she said.

“Well,” he said, “I’ve probably gotta’ get going. I doubt you’ll see anyone the next few days.”

“That’s OK,” she said. “I’ll watch for you on the news.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that,” he suggested, as he turned to go back out the door.

“Oh, and Tommy,” Shirley interrupted him as he was leaving.

“Yes, Ma’am?” he said instinctively.

“Thanks for being a good boss. Joy didn’t need to come by yesterday, but I’m really glad she did.”

Tommy sent a smile over his shoulder as the door closed. He wasn’t expecting n morale boost today, and he knew that he really shouldn’t have made this visit, but as he ascended the stairs to get back to his car, he felt a slight spring in his step that hadn’t been there all week.

Shirley had a few hours before she would be able to visit Carmine, and a few hours beyond that to execute her mission, so she decided to combine the excursions into one trip in order to minimize exposure to the city streets. She passed the time as she had for most of the day between her morning workout and Tommy’s visit—continuing to review and edit the document she had crafted. She was convinced it was just about perfect, but every time she read through it she found something else.

She had introduced the punch line up front, that a Guido Marnacchia was the head of the organized crime ring that had ties to Fusco, Tony, and numerous other individuals in law enforcement. But then she described in detail the relationships that had developed over the past decades, the businesses that had grown up as part of the network, and all of the nefarious activities that Char had been able to uncover, ending with the hit on Backer as a diversion for the drug shipment. It read like an encyclopedia entry with references to articles, court records, tax forms, yearbook photos, and various other sources that Char had included in the spreadsheet’s notes. While there was nothing in the message that would hold up in court or that would help secure a conviction of any type, it included everything an interested investigator would need to get started. When it came time to leave Shirley saved the document on the desktop and packed up for her excursion. She was more than satisfied with the product, and she only wished that she had played a more significant role in the research that had led to its production.

Now it was only a matter of delivering it.

The Cubicles

where Dick and Dennis sat were not in the most private location in the HLD offices, and were certainly within shouting distance of Frank’s desk, so the two contractors were a little startled to have Frank appear behind them with the hushed instruction, “Come to my office now.”

It was the first week of September, and neither of them had heard anything further about their presence at the 3-2-1 Club the evening Baqr was shot. However, they had also heard nothing from their colleagues at the FBI as to what Baqr might have revealed, and what the Feds might be doing about it. They were supposed to be Homeland Defense, and whatever the G-men had going was more than their business. They had even looked into the shooter that the Hoboken police had found at the club, but she had disappeared from the face of the earth, and it was pretty-well assumed that the FBI was holding her somewhere and squeezing her for information, as they had been doing with Baqr. Dick and Dennis followed Frank into his office, closed the door behind them, and sat down.

Frank began. “It turns out we were right.”

“About what?” Dick and Dennis asked in unison.

“Baqr,” said Frank. “He was here as part of the CIA/FBI operation I told you about, and it looks like he was able to spill to the Feds before someone got him, but who that someone was, I’m not sure we’ll ever know.”

“So what’s going on?” Dick asked.

“Well, I’m not supposed to know this,” Frank explained, “so you guys better not have any idea of what I’m talking about, but it looks like there’s gonna’ be an anniversary operation on 9/11.”

“What’s it gonna’ be?” Dennis pushed.

“It looks like there’s a small cell working out of Brooklyn—it’s not a sleeper—they’re all new in country,” Frank continued. “So far it looks like the targets are a truck bomb at the Diamond District, and something yet-to-be-determined at the Paramus Mall and the Kiryas Joel Synagogue.”

“Jesus,” said Dennis, “those bastards.”

“Who do you mean?” Frank asked, “AQ or the Feds?”

“Both,” said Dick. “Why did they cut us out of this?”

“I think it’s a power play to shut us down,” Frank answered. “I think if the Feds can show a positive result without us in the loop, then that would give them their excuse for us to go away. This may be happening at the highest levels.”

“So that’s the extent of the attack?” Dennis asked, changing the subject away from politics and back to the task at hand.

“That’s the problem,” Frank replied. “They don’t know what else might be going on, but I’m guessing lots of little attacks instead of a few big ones. This may just be the tip of the iceberg.”

“So there’s a good chance they might have missed something,” Dick persisted.

“I’m almost positive of it,” Frank continued.

“Well, we’ll keep digging,” Dennis said, as they got out of their seats.

“You guys keep doing what you do best,” was Frank’s final instruction as they walked out the door.

On the way back to their cubicles, Dennis turned to Dick and said, “I think we need to take a walk.”

“I think we’d better,” Dick agreed, as he pulled his jacket off its hook and slipped it on as he walked towards the elevator.

The Basement

of a parking garage created a peaceful setting for solitary confinement. Most of the external noises were dulled by the droning of mechanical equipment, and the slight vibrations felt when cars ascended the ramps were almost soothing. Shirley had been getting better sleep since her incarceration began than she could ever recall. True, the occasional late-night reveler, who could only be coming from one establishment, would honk a horn while exiting the premises, but otherwise it was a serene existence.

Shirley found that leaving the television in the bedroom tuned to a classical music station enhanced the ambiance, and was only a distraction when a particularly interesting piece emanated from the set, forcing her to make the journey into the bedroom so see what was playing. She kept the volume on the laptop low, and she had spent a fruitful afternoon very early in her stay customizing its sounds to her taste, so aside from the predictable knock on the door, she was spared any unpleasant aural stimuli. It was an ideal environment for focusing on any task, and particularly one that would lead to the demise of an organized crime syndicate.

Tommy’s visit that afternoon, while an unexpected surprise, portended an evening of no interruptions or visits, so she spent her time on Char’s laptop putting the final touches on her product. She was simultaneously running the government’s laptop, clicking occasionally on some obscure link to let the federal snoops know how she was spending her evening. She was confident that Dirk would be following her every click, but equally as confident that she would never have to hear of it. She was on auto-pilot, practically droning, when a horrendous noise from the kitchen counter shocked her out of her tranquility.

It was the first call she had received on the secure phone, and she wondered why she had never bothered to check the volume setting. By the second ring she had recovered her orientation and made her way to the counter to answer it, determined to not let it assault her ears a third time.

As it was going to be her first time answering an official government phone, she decided to not waste the opportunity it presented when she picked it up.

“Federal Bureau of Investigation, Hoboken Safe House, Prisoner Shirley speaking,” she announced.

“Cute,” came the reply. “Have you been rehearsing that for the past three weeks?”

“Two and a half weeks, actually” she corrected the voice.

“My bad,” Tommy said. “Hey, I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Not much different than this afternoon,” she teased, “but thank you so much for asking.”

“Well, I was right,” he explained. “It looks like we’re about to be booked through Saturday, and I just wanted to make sure you were going to be OK.”

“You mean if I have everything I need, or if I’m going to pine away with loneliness in your absence?”

“All of the above.”

“Well, if it gets too bad,” she said, “I can always pick up the hotline and ask Dirk to come over.”

“Not on my watch.”

“Aren’t you the gentleman?” she said, but then added, “so, are things really heating up over there?”

“You can’t even imagine,” he said. “Remind me to thank you for suggesting that we keep Tony on this case. If it weren’t for him, Friday could have gotten real ugly.”

“So this was going to be another 9/11,” she concluded. “Well, I’m glad the good guys are going to win this one.”

“We haven’t won it yet, but I’m pretty sure it’s in the bag.”

“Excellent,” she said. “So, anything that you might be able to share with me? Locations, methods of attack, the identity of the perpetrators, you know, the usual top-secret investigation kind of stuff?”  
 “Sure. Let me put together a package for you detailing everything we know and I’ll have a bicycle messenger courier it over to you.

“Hey, that would be great,” she shot back. “You know how much I hate being kept in the dark.”

“Wow, and I thought you liked your little underground cage. Maybe I will have to arrange for a visitor or two over the next few days.”

“Look, I think I can probably manage on my own, since I’ve been doing that for a few years now, so you do what you have to, and let me know when we’ve won this round.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said.

“Oh, and Tommy,” she added.

“Yes Ma’am?” he said again.

“Be careful.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Shirley hung up the phone and went back to the kitchen table to wrap up her final edit. She breathed a quick sigh of relief about her earlier decision to not make a separate trip to see Carmine, as it was likely that she would have not answered the call. For a fleeting instant she wondered if her concern would have been based on the need to concoct an explanation for her captors as to why she failed to hear the phone, or perhaps just a missed opportunity to chat with Tommy. However, as she had work to do she dismissed this debate with a quick shake of her head.

Although the possibility of another visit this evening, much less a phone call, had not occurred to her, she was now confident of her freedom of action for the remainder of her mission. She dressed as she had for all of her excursions, with her hair pulled back and covered with the hood of a sweatshirt. With the laptop secured in a bag over her shoulder she negotiated the familiar escape from her captivity and took the shortest route to the metal door where Carmine would be waiting to help carry out the next step of her plan.

Her knock was answered by the slot opening, and she took Carmine’s eyes peering out in recognition to be an omen that Edith had fulfilled her part of the mission.

“One second, Miss Shirley,” came the gruff response as Carmine’s eyes were no longer visible through the hole.

Shirley checked over her shoulder and was relieved to see that she had the sidewalk to herself.

“Here you go,” whispered the same voice, but instead of two eyes peering through the slot Shirley saw two fat fingers sticking out, dwarfing the small piece of paper that they were securing.

Shirley reached up, grabbed the predictably-stained receipt, and gave the fingers a quick squeeze. “Thanks, Carmine,” she said through the slot, hoping he would hear her above the noise behind the door.

The slot slammed shut.

Shirley began her walk to the café, confident that this evening was going to go as intended. She made a quick check of the receipt, and the passcode for the Wi-Fi was legible at the bottom, in spite of the small amount of coffee that had splashed from Edith’s cup as she executed he part of the caper. A number of possibilities had occurred to Shirley as she planned the evening’s mission, to include the chance that the café shut down its router at closing, but since she had found the network the previous evening she felt this possibility was remote. If the mission failed this evening, she knew she could always execute it the next day as a paying customer, although the timing of the message and the possible presence of video cameras could expose her ruse to her federal cohorts. Furthermore, she always had the option of returning to the library, but that would expose Char more than she cared. She was most concerned, however, with having company on the sidewalk as she sent her message, and she decided to be as efficient as possible when she got to the café. She reached into the bag, cracked open the laptop, and hit the power button so it would be ready to go as soon as she was within range.

The motor’s whirring was audible as the laptop booted up, but it had become dormant by the time she reached her destination. She opted for a seat on the stoops, and was not disappointed to find the network connection as soon as she opened the machine. As anticipated, the passcode worked, and she got down to business. She logged on to the hotmail account she had created for expressly this purpose, and she noted that in addition to the welcome message she had one more piece of correspondence, which was the one she had sent to herself two nights earlier. She opened it and hit “reply,” creating a screen that would contain her response.

To ensure there was no way Char (or her computer) could be implicated in this scheme Shirley had already decided to paste the response as opposed to attaching the document. She opened the document on the desktop, copied it, and dumped it into the open e-mail message. She hit “send,” confirmed it had gone, powered down the laptop, packed it away in her bag, and stood up to leave with the mission accomplished.

The last words Shirley expected to see at this point were “To Protect and Serve,” but those were exactly the words she was staring at as they rolled to a stop in front of her along the curb. She froze in her tracks, and while she considered running for the nearest alley, she thought better of it. The window to the police cruiser rolled down, and a polite voice inquired, “Getting a little free Wi-Fi this evening, Miss?”

Shirley help up Edith’s receipt. “Actually, I’m a paying customer, officer,” she lied. “I’m just finishing up, though, and I’m on my way back home,” she continued, only partially lying this time.

“Well, OK,” the officer said. “We just don’t want to see people patronizing our establishments after they’ve closed.”

“I understand,” Shirley agreed. And then she added, “Sorry, I didn’t quite finish before they closed.” She immediately regretted blurting out this claim, as it would be all too easy to contest its veracity.

“Well, if you’re moving on now I guess we’re OK, then,” the officer continued.

The lie, however, seemed to have worked. “Absolutely, officer,” Shirley stammered. “Sorry, um, thanks.”

“You have a safe evening, Miss.”

“Thanks, um, you too.”

The officer drove off, knowing that he had just made the streets of Hoboken a little safer.

Shirley, on the other hand, was not feeling safe at all. She couldn’t get to the garage quickly enough, and when she finally arrived her heart was still racing. She stumbled through the maintenance closet, almost tripped down the stairs, and didn’t catch her breath until the safe house door had shut securely behind her.

She set her bag down on the love seat, walked to the refrigerator, poured herself a glass of orange juice, and almost chugged it down. *That was close*, she thought to herself, but by the time she had finished the glass she had decided she had gotten worked up over nothing. It was unlikely that she was going to get hauled into the police station for sitting on the sidewalk in front of a café, but if the officer had pressed her much further she would have had to do some explaining. Unfortunately, she knew that while she had an ace in the hole, the federal agents who could get her out of any mess were working on something a little more important and didn’t need to be troubled with her excursions.

“All’s well that ends well,” she said to herself as she set the glass down in the sink.

With her nerves collected, Shirley sat down at the government laptop that was still running on the kitchen table. She opened her g-mail account and was relieved to see the expected message sitting in the inbox. She opened the message and scrolled through the pages of notes she had sent just a few minutes earlier. She hit “reply” and hesitated before typing her response, but she finally decided on “Thanks! You’re awesome!”

She thought she deserved the compliment.

The Elevator

ride down to the first floor was taken in silence, as was the brisk stroll down the sidewalk, but as Dick and Dennis arrived at the park together and took their places on their favorite bench, they started right in on perhaps the most important conversation of their lives.

“Did he just tell us to do what I think he told us to do?” Dennis began.

“Sure sounded like it to me,” Dick said. “The problem is, the last time we went out on a limb like this, we almost got our asses handed to us.”

“Well, do you think we should have asked him for clarification?” Dennis continued.

“There’s no way that’s ever going to happen,” Dick said. “This is going to be Baghdad all over, where if we screw it up, we’re gonna’ hang out to dry.”

“So what do we do?” Dennis asked, loosening his tie and unbuttoning his collar in the Summer heat.

“It looks like we make damn sure that at least one part of this operation slips past the Feds,” Dick said, finally addressing the issue.

“Ya know,” suggested Dennis, “what if there was part of the operation that the Feds missed and we stopped it,” offering a way for them to avoid the explicit task at hand, but still accomplishing its intent.

“If the Feds were sharing with us, we might be able to pull that off,” Dick answered, “but since we won’t know what they’ve uncovered, or how sure they are about not having any loose ends, we could really look like a couple of jackasses if we come up holding a bag that they knew was empty.”

“So what do we do?” Dennis asked, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket in spite of the fact that he knew it would irritate his companion.

“Well, I’ve got a few ideas,” Dick said, “but it’s gonna’ take some quick work.”

The two men had arrived at this bench from very similar paths, although their beginnings showed some significant differences. Dennis’ father had been a factory worker in Houston, but had helped his grandfather run a small farm on the side. He had stood a fairly good chance of moving up to foreman, and had made it as far as shift manager when the borders opened up and the influx of cheap Mexican labor had nearly wiped him out. A sufficient command of the Spanish language became a requirement for plant leadership, and not possessing this particular skill, Dennis’ father was moved back to the line. Since the laws of supply and demand had reduced the wages to what the Mexicans were willing to accept, the family saw their income get cut in half. Dennis’ mother tried to pick up some of the slack with a position of her own in the plant, but by the time Dennis reached high school, the family would not have made ends meet were it not for government help. High school found Dennis struggling academically, as his volatile home environment was not conducive to learning. However, he was able to focus his energies on the gridiron, and athletics became his relief valve. College attendance was out of the question, but a casual conversation with a Marine Corps recruiter after a Friday evening game suggested a way off his dead-end path. As soon as he graduated from high school Dennis reported to San Diego for boot camp.

Dick, on the other hand, had an easier home life, but one that could have benefitted from an infusion of structure. His father ran a small company that provided contractors to the Army Test Center at Fort Hood, Texas, and Dick was a product of the Killeen school system. As most of the kids came and went with their parents’ assignments, Dick found himself as a ring leader by the time he was a senior at Killeen High School. While Dick also played football, he used it more as a diversion than an escape, and most of the hijinx attributed to the “Fighting Roos” could be linked directly back to Dick’s leadership. Unfortunately a Saturday night prank involving the train tracks, some freshmen players, and far too much alcohol resulted in a student losing a leg. Dick wasn’t wholly to blame for the incident, but he received the brunt of the administration’s wrath, and suffered a two-week suspension as well as expulsion from the team. Up until that point college had been Dick’s only option, but his father, wanting to make up for too many years of lax discipline, marched him down to the local Marine recruiter and signed a contract that would also place Dick in San Diego after graduation.

So Dick and Dennis, one by a step up and one by a step down, found themselves in the same Boot Camp platoon and began an association that would last the rest of their lives. They served together at Camp Pendleton’s First Marines for their initial assignments, where they saw action during Operation Desert Storm. After redeployment, having had their first true taste of adrenaline, they volunteered for the rigorous training program that would lead to an assignment with Marine Force Recon, where they were to stay until the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom. As two highly-trained noncommissioned officers they were prepared to return to the desert in leadership roles when they were contacted by an organization that was recruiting security specialists for post-invasion Iraq. With a guarantee of the same level of excitement that the Marine Corps provided, but at three times the pay, they made the jump to the contract security profession, and found themselves in Baghdad after the attack as the personal security detail for some Iraqi politicians.

While the pay was good, the camaraderie and esprit they were used to as Marines was missing, and they found themselves more and more willing to cut corners for the mission, the laws of warfare notwithstanding. Finally, when a co-worker and his charge were murdered in broad daylight, their boss suggested that meeting force with force would be a proper response. Taking the hint literally, as it was intended, Dick and Dennis found themselves on a killing spree that included several innocent civilians as its victims, although a good number of undesirables were terminated as well. When the Coalition Provisional Authority investigated the incident, Dick and Dennis were left holding the bag, and their employer denied any involvement. The duo was moved out of the country, but during a closed-door session with their boss, he agreed to help secure them a position with Homeland Security in exchange for their silence. It was this agreement that led them to Frank’s office where they proved to be resourceful and energetic defenders of the homeland.

Now, as they sat together on a park bench in downtown Manhattan, they were once again facing a situation that would more likely backfire than not, but that also had significant implications for their Department, their contract, and their own personal careers. The values that the Corps had worked so hard to instill in them were no longer retrievable, as the focus of their discussion was not “if,” but “how.”

Dick began formulating their plan. “OK, we have a mall and a synagogue, why not a bus?” he suggested.

“Holy shit!” Dennis blurted out. “That’s really pushing it.”

“Look,” said Dick. “If we want this to be believable, we need to take a page from their playbook. Buses are convincing as a target of choice.”

“OK,” said Dennis, “but what kind of bus do you have in mind?”

“I was thinking a Jewish school bus,” Dick suggested. “We’ll have to do some research, but if we can find a small one, we can take it out with something home-made without too much collateral damage.”

“All right,” said Dennis. “Let me dig something up. This close to 9/11 nobody’s going to complain if HLD makes a check on a local transportation system, particularly if they’re hauling Jewish kids.”

“Ya know,” Dick said, “I was really hoping that you had quit that.” He gestured towards the cigarette between Dennis’ fingers.

By the following morning Dennis had identified the small bus that picked up children for the Rabbi Moshe Kerbel Hebrew Day School in uptown Manhattan. A few more mornings of reconnaissance produced a location that would allow a timed explosive to be placed on the vehicle undetected. Dennis agreed to assemble the device, and after one more rehearsal they were ready to conduct their own attack on the homeland.

The Tenth of September

found Shirley more restless than she had been at any time throughout her incarceration. She knew that no progress would be made on her own investigation over the next few days, in spite of the message she sent the previous evening. The fact that her captors knew in advance that they were going to be indisposed indicated something significant was about to occur. This did not bode well for the safety and security of the Great American Public, and she was really hoping that Tommy’s confidence was well-founded. He had assured her that the Federal Government was fully poised to stop whatever operation was pending, and while he had provided no details, she could only imagine what the scope of the next attack on America would be.

She woke up early and checked the news in case the timing of the event had not gone as predicted, but none of the local or even national channels had anything of interest. She tried the internet, but she only found the same mundane garbage she had been perusing the previous evening, and the general consensus was that nothing exciting was happening in the world. She helped herself to her standard fare of yogurt and orange juice while she hit a few of her favorite news sites for any sign of unusual activity, but she found nothing. As long as the news was quiet she concluded that Tommy’s crew was still doing its job.

When she decided that she had given her breakfast sufficient time to settle she made her way over to the yoga mat and began her morning routine. She was surprised at how nervous she was, so she committed to extending her workout as long as possible. As she stretched she pondered her anxiety, and couldn’t decide if she feared for America, if she was concerned for the safety of her new friends, or if she just hated being kept in the dark while the Federal Government did its thing. Either way it was going to be a long day.

Her extended routine kept her occupied for most of the morning, since after the normal hour on the elliptic counted down she added another thirty minutes to the timer and kept right on going. This took its toll and forced her to extend her cool-down stretch, so she was almost ready to eat again by the time her towel had been hung back on the elliptic and the yoga mat had been returned to the corner.

As she did every day upon returning from the gym, she fried up a couple of eggs, nuked two strips of bacon, and re-filled her morning’s orange juice glass, but this time with Gatorade. She even interrupted her routine to check the news on the laptop, but as the elliptic’s screen had indicated during her workout, there was no new news.

After a quick shower she turned on the background music and plopped down on the love seat to spend some time with the pile of magazines the FBI had procured for her from Char’s collection. If nothing else, the previous weeks had almost gotten her caught up on her favorite reading material. She made it through three magazines, and was confident that the afternoon had been successfully squandered, but when she checked the clock in the kitchen it hadn’t yet made its way to two. She considered a primal scream, but thought better of it as she didn’t see what it might accomplish. Furthermore, although she felt confident her surroundings were reasonably sound-proof, she thought it would be unwise to attract any unnecessary attention while her captors were engaged in giving the American taxpayers their money’s worth.

Finally, out of desperation, she went into the bedroom and flipped the channel on the TV from classical music to the movie channels. Shirley rarely watched movies, but occasionally she would catch something at the local theater if Edith gave it a sufficiently forceful recommendation. She had found, most likely due to the influence of three teenage boys, that Edith’s tastes in movies mirrored her own, and that spending a few hours lost in an action flick wasn’t a bad way to pass an afternoon, provided it was at most a once-a-month occurrence. She settled on a beautifully-shot, Chinese action movie that had ludicrous dialogue, absurd fight scenes, and a sympathetic heroine who Shirley found herself rooting for by the end of the movie. This particular choice of diversion was somewhat serendipitous, as it was followed by its sequel on the same channel, and it was well into the evening before Shirley flipped back to the music and went to the kitchen to re-check the news.

As expected, nothing had happened all day, but at least Shirley felt some amount of encouragement having spent the past several hours watching the good guys win. Since Shirley normally had a light snack before she went to work, she had been able to stay true to her routine this evening by squeezing this in between the shows. She normally didn’t have dinner until Edith returned her to her apartment, and it was still too early for that, so she went back to her magazines. She became engrossed in an article that took her into the late evening, when she decided to nuke an Asian shrimp dish and check the news one more time. To her relief, it yielded nothing.

She would have liked to put in for the evening, but a restless nostalgia was keeping her up. She remembered well the feeling that had swept the nation after 9/11. It was one of anxiety, vulnerability, and frustration over not knowing exactly what had happened, or worse, what was going to happen next. In the intervening years there had been somewhat of a return to normalcy, although something deep in the country’s psyche had been indelibly scarred. If there really was going to be an attack tomorrow, and Tommy and his cohorts couldn’t stop it, then the old wounds would re-open and America would once again plunge into despair. If that was going to be the case, she didn’t want to emerge from her dungeon in the coming weeks to find a bleeding nation with a crushed spirit without at least taking in a final breath of freedom before the hammer fell. She checked the clock and decided that it would be safe to take a leisurely walk along the shore.

Since her employment over the past several years had occupied Shirley’s evenings, evening walks had fallen from her routine, and she missed them. She certainly spent enough of her time on the city’s sidewalks, but that usually involved errands or trips to the gym or library, and the potential for relaxation those excursions offered was eclipsed by her focus on the tasks at hand. In fact, she couldn’t remember the last time she had taken a walk for the sake of taking a walk. Tonight, though, her restlessness, or perhaps it was anxiety, suggested she needed to get out in the fresh air, under a clear sky, to take in the sights and sounds of liberty and security that America had to offer. She went to the bedroom to change.

Shirley paired her hooded sweatshirt with lycra shorts and running shoes. She saw no reason to burden herself with a purse, or even a wallet with identification, and she thought that the more casual outfit might support the “I was out for a jog” alibi lest she encounter another of Hoboken’s finest. For some reason the thought of taking a stroll along the shore was making her feel slightly giddy. It was almost as if she were preparing for a date, but that the date was going to be with her own independence and freedom. She started to pin her hair back, but then decided to push the envelope as she just tucked it behind her ears, covered it with the hood, and confirmed with the mirror that she was sufficiently incognito. She switched off the bedroom lights and headed out into the evening.

Her route took her the same way she had gone when she had encountered Micki in the police station lot, as she went south past the marinas and towards the small grassy parks that dotted the Hoboken shoreline. At the first marina she paused and looked across the water at the lights of the Big Apple, wondering what activities were taking place that might put Tommy in danger, but that would keep millions of others safe. She stood motionless as her senses breathed in everything the scene had to offer, from the waves lapping at the hulls secured below to the flashing red lights atop the skyscrapers that notified approaching aircraft of their presence.

*So this is America*, she thought to herself as she continued her stroll to nowhere in particular. *I’ll have to visit some time*.

Shirley reflected that her life, in spite of its bumps, had been sheltered, and that she had never seen beyond the small sphere of events that impacted her existence directly. This wasn’t to say that she didn’t have a keen understanding of what was going on in the greater universe, either physically, socially, politically, or intellectually, but her knowledge of events was on a superficial level. However, her current situation had provided an intimate view behind the curtain, and she now perceived the mundane with an different perspective. As Edith and her cohorts danced a few blocks away, and as a drooling collection of letches distributed their small slice of wealth so that the ladies could make ends meet, there were people across the river working hard to destroy the fabric of the society that allowed this, and there were people working even harder to keep that fabric from being ripped apart.

Of course the surge of patriotism, or even pride, that many Americans might succumb to at such a moment was not going to overwhelm Shirley as she continued her walk. An understanding, and maybe an appreciation, was all that she would allow as she breathed in the sweet air of liberty, as she was fully aware that this paradise disguised a seedy underbelly that could harbor the worst kinds of evil. Her brief encounter with a hidden crime syndicate, thanks to Char’s able sleuthing, had confirmed this, but other events from her past served as a constant reminder that every field of flowers lies atop a bed of manure. As if to punctuate the point, a streetlamp ahead revealed the silhouettes of two figures walking towards her, and it didn’t appear they were simply out for an evening stroll.

With a quick glance back over her shoulder she confirmed that she wasn’t alone on the sidewalk, as she detected two more figures approaching from the other direction. She breathed a quick sigh of relief, and concluded that if she continued at her current gait she would pass the figures to her front under the illumination of a street lamp, and that the unlikely, but welcomed, crowd on the sidewalk would provide some level of security. She continued her pace, but with more purpose than her wandering mind had allowed just moments earlier.

As expected she came upon the light’s aura at about the same time as the approaching figures, and keeping her head down she attempted to pass them with no recognition whatsoever. However, the light post constricted the sidewalk at that point, and as she attempted her passage she realized it was blocked by the now-stationary figures to her front.

“Excuse me,” she said, glancing slightly upwards and looking for a quick way around, but the figures moved in unison to block her path.

“Where you going, Sexy?” one of them queried as she now looked directly at them for the first time.

*Could this be any more perfect?* she thought as she crafted her response. The street to the right was deserted, and the park to the left was unlit, so she decided that her best position was under the glow of the lamp. “Just back to the police station,” she lied.

“Ooh, I’ll bet she’s a cop,” said her second assailant, “Let’s see your badge, Honey.” He reached for her sweatshirt, but she stepped back quickly and he grasped at air.

“Guys, just leave me alone,” she said, knowing that this overture would fail, but that it might buy her a little more time. In the distance she could see the lights of an approaching vehicle, and she needed to plan her next moves to coincide with its arrival.

“I don’t think so, Doll,” the first said, “we’re feeling hot tonight.” He grabbed his crotch in a manner that left no doubt as to his intentions and she tried hard not to scoff at his pathetic display.

“Sorry guys, I’m not interested,” she said as if she still had any say whatsoever in the matter.

“Yeah, but we are,” confirmed the second.

As footsteps approached behind her she glanced over her shoulder, but recognized that the arriving pair was not going to take her side in this conflict as their age, attire, and demeanor marked them as cohorts of her two assailants. She concluded that her best bet was with the approaching vehicle, and she made an instant move for the street.

Unfortunately one of the new arrivals anticipated this maneuver and grabbed her arm from behind, immobilizing her against any possible escape. She felt another hand grab the hood of her sweatshirt and pull it back, and a cascade of bright red hair tumbled down to the sides of her face as the car passed, oblivious to the fact that a crime was in progress.

With the benefit of the lamp’s glow she decided that struggling was now her best option, and she attempted a well-aimed kick at the crotch-grabber’s zipper. Unfortunately he deflected it, and a second pair of hands grabbed her from behind, subduing her and rendering any further struggle pointless.

“What do you want?” she screamed. “Leave me alone!”

“What do you think we want, you whore?” the crotch-grabber spat. “We want some fucking action.”

“Well I don’t,” she screamed, but in spite of the deserted road, this resulted in a hand being clamped over her mouth from behind.

“Shut the fuck up, bitch,” a voice hissed in her ear through the flowing red locks that draped down over her shoulders.

He grabbed her hair to immobilize her, but this only further enraged her. She resisted with all of her might, kicking and swinging with every ounce of energy, but in spite of the long hours spent working out each morning, she was no match for the four of them. In a few moments she was subdued and was gasping for air after taking several punches to the midsection. She would have been doubled over save for the fact that her assailants were supporting her upright, but what they had all missed in the melee was that the car that had passed moments before had circled back around and was now pulling to a stop just a few feet away.

As they all noticed the car at about the same time, Shirley looked hopefully at the door for letters announcing that its purpose was “To Protect and Serve,” but there was no such advertisement. However, the passenger window on the car was rolling down, and through the fog Shirley thought she heard a familiar voice.

“Shirl, is that you? Can I give you a lift?”

The four pairs of hands immobilizing her released their grips in surprise, and Shirley dove for the handle of the awaiting door.

“Drive!” she screamed before she was inside, but her rescuer needed no encouragement and Shirley’s foot drug along the ground for about ten feet before she could get inside and close the door.

If either woman had looked back they would have seen that all four “boardwalk greasers,” as they called them at the club, had disappeared from sight. However, neither woman bothered to look back.

“What in the fuck are you doing?” the driver shouted as she sped away from the scene.

However, Shirley didn’t need that particular line of questioning to help identify her rescuer. In fact, while she hadn’t recognized the vehicle in the glare of the headlights, once the driver had offered a ride she knew precisely who had suddenly shown up out of nowhere.

It was Edith.

“What in the fuck are you doing?” Shirley shouted back.

“I’m just driving back to the club, and I drive past these greasers on the sidewalk with some chick, but I see her fucking hair and I figured it had to be you,” Edith explained with an eloquence that only she could muster in such a situation. “Now what in the fuck were you doing?”

“I was out for a walk,” Shirley said, “and these assholes jumped me.”

“Where the fuck were you out on a walk from?” Edith shouted.

“A fucking safe house,” Shirley shouted back.

Neither woman had come near to regaining her composure, but the conversation was allowing them to recover from the adrenalin rush the assault and rescue had foisted upon both of them.

“You should stay in your fucking safe house then,” Edith said, “’Cos it’s not very fucking safe out here.”

Of all the reactions available to Shirley at this point, there was only one that was so unlikely in the face of her physical pain and abject terror that it overcame all her other emotions.

Shirley began to laugh uncontrollably.

Edith looked at her in disbelief, but before she could craft another sentence using the word “fuck,” she began to laugh as well.

Both women were out of breath and unable to speak when Edith pulled her car into the all-too-familiar garage, but as she did so, she slammed on the breaks.

“Shit, Shirl,” she said, “where do you need to go?”

“This will be fine,” Shirley said, tears still streaming down her cheeks as she had only begun to regain her composure. At some point a sob or two had worked its way into her laughing fit, but as the absurdity of the situation flooded over her it seemed that laughter could be the only logical response.

Edith parked the car and looked at Shirley in earnest. She took a deep breath and let it out. “Are you OK?”

Shirley took a breath or two of her own. “I’m OK, thanks,” she assured her.

“So you’re just out for a fucking walk?”

“Yeah,” Shirley said. “Go fucking figure. But seriously, what were you doing out?”

“Candy wasn’t feeling so hot,” Edith said, “and it’s a slow night, so I ran her down to her dorm. I was heading back when I thought I saw you.”

Candy was a college student who was far too young to have a surgically-enhanced figure, but she had one anyway. She had always left Shirley alone, perhaps recognizing an intellectual superior, but she enjoyed toying with Edith mercilessly due to the easy target she provided. In fact, as Shirley recalled, the two of them had gone at it backstage just before Backer’s death. Shirley noted how typical it was of Edith to do a favor for anyone in need, and in this particular instance she was grateful.

“It’s a damn good thing you did,” Shirley assured her, “Those assholes weren’t fucking around.”

“You need Carmine to call the cops?” Edith asked.

Shirley shook her head. “Let it go,” she said. “There’s too much going on right now.”

“You OK?” Edith asked. The question didn’t simply pertain to the evening’s incident.

“Yeah,” Shirley sighed. “We’ll be fine.”

“Shirl, what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Shirley lied. It sickened her that some really decent people were busting their asses so those greasy scum could get by with their high jinks. “I probably shouldn’t have gone out.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“I knew you’d come along.”

Both women had a good chuckle at this.

Edith looked at the clock on the dashboard and hesitated, but finally said, “Shirl, I should probably get back.”

Shirley started to offer her assent, but Edith cut her off.

“Fuck it,” she said. “Let’s just stay out here until you’re OK.”

Shirley was really touched by this gesture. “I’m fine now,” she assured her, “thanks to you.”

Edith reached over and grabbed Shirley’s shoulder. “That’s what friends are for.”

It wasn’t the first trite statement Shirley had heard since she began her excursion, but given the situation it made perfect sense.

“Edith, thanks,” she said. “Look, you’ve probably gotta’ get back, and so do I. Please don’t tell anyone about tonight, though. I don’t want anyone to worry.”

“You got it,” Edith said, opening the car door.

Shirley did the same.

As Edith gathered her keys and locked up, Shirley came around to the driver’s side of the car and gave Edith a hug.

“Thanks again.”

“Hey, you fucking got it,” came the all-too-predictable response.

Shirley waited until she was sure Edith was safely behind Carmine’s door, and she made her way back through the stairwell and down to the security of her dungeon.

It was the last evening stroll she would take alone for quite some time.

The Eleventh of September

arrived, for most Americans, like any other day. There were still a few who saw it as a time of remembrance and sorrow, and Shirley had encountered some of this group during her brief incarceration at the Hoboken Police Department. There was a smaller number who were going to put their lives on the line defending the homeland from those who would wish it destroyed, and the only thanks they were expecting was going to come from their immediate superiors. And then there were two who were preparing to execute perhaps the most heinous attack ever conducted on American soil, not necessarily due to its scope and nature, but because of the motivation behind it. As a small crowd gathered at ground zero, and the Pentagon Chapel had standing room only, the rest of these players were preparing to execute their roles while the majority of the country slept.

As Faris and his three cohorts were under constant surveillance, and their vehicles were being tracked with the best technology available, the Bureau felt comfortable for the safety of the American people. However, since the suspects were also now supplied with weapons, explosives, and some unknown implements of destruction, the surveillance teams had to exercise quite a bit more caution than they had during the previous few days.

The evening of September tenth saw the first sign of activity, and as expected it was the movement of Faris’ Yugo that indicated the beginning of the operation. The vehicle had been searched thoroughly and was determined to not be a weapon, but since Faris departed his apartment carrying a small bag he was still considered a threat. Instead of apprehending him in the parking garage, however, the surveillance team chose to tail him in the event that there might be another player who was yet to be discovered. Furthermore, a scuffle in the garage could alert Faisel to the Bureau’s presence, and there was the small matter of an explosive-laden vehicle that needed to be disarmed.

As the Special Agent in Charge of this investigation, Tommy didn’t want to tie himself down to any particular phase of the operation, so he remained at the Command Center in order to monitor the activities of all of his teams. He had assembled the very best the Bureau had to offer, and he, his boss, and Ms. Cruise were going to have the best seat in the house for the next morning’s excitement. They had initially considered keeping Tony in the Command Center as well, since they had another reason to keep an eye on him, but he had shown remarkable perseverance in breaking open this case, and with his demonstrated commitment his superiors decided that his talents would be best used on the ground. Once Faris began to move, however, Tommy had an overwhelming desire to take part in the hunt, and he implored his boss to let him sign out a sedan and join the chase. Ms. Cruise gave a nod to Tommy’s boss, and he headed in the direction of JFK Airport, as he was confident that Dosari was going to make that his final US destination.

Tommy arrived at the airport at about the same time that Faris and his significant tail were pulling in, and he followed the convoy into short-term parking. He had made radio contact with the team, but hung back while the experts did what they do best. As soon as Faris had parked and begun to exit his car, he found himself surrounded by black SUVs and a dozen agents with drawn weapons. He offered no resistance, and soon was cuffed and on the ground. Tommy approached, and after offering high praise to the apprehending agents, he helped Faris up and addressed him directly.

“So, Dosari, where are we going this evening?”

Faris responded in German that he didn’t understand English, but one of the agents asked him the same question in German, and his response, which Tommy didn’t fully understand, included the term “Amsterdam.”

Another agent, examining the contents of Faris’ bag and pulling out a plane ticket, asked in Arabic where he was going from Amsterdam.

Faris despondently answered “Damascus,” and the agent holding the ticked nodded to confirm this fact.

“So, you were just going to let your people die while you ran away?” Tommy asked.

Faris stuttered something in German, but Tommy interrupted him.

“Don’t bullshit me, you fucking scumbag,” he said. “We know who you are, and we know that you’re leaving Marcus, Mohd, and Faisel to die doing your bidding, while you fly off to freedom, only it’s not going to happen. We’ll be picking all three of them up in the morning, and we can assure you that the Diamond District, Kiryas Joel, and the Paramus Mall are all going to survive this September eleventh.”

Faris was stunned. He had no indication that any authorities were onto him, and he had been operating with impunity. Not only did the Feds know the exact composition of his cell, but they knew all the details of his operation.

“How…how could you?” Faris stammered.

“Oh, this was easy,” Tommy said, “and now not only are your buddies not going to be martyrs, but they’re going to be put to death at the hands of the Great American Justice System, along with their leader.”

Faris began to sob. He had failed. It wasn’t so much that he had let down his organization, but that his life of comfort was about to end. There would be no more jetting across the globe, using his silver tongue to recruit unsuspecting young men to do his organization’s bidding, and receiving celebrity treatment in almost every Middle Eastern venue.

Tommy recognized that this coward had the potential to be a great source of intelligence for those fighting terrorism, but he made no indication of this revelation as he instructed his agents, “Get this pig out of here.”

As two agents spirited Faris to the back of a waiting SUV, Tommy took the time to shake hands with every agent on the scene, and to thank them for the phenomenal job they had done in bringing in the head of an al-Qaida cell. He needed to get back to the Command Center, and some of them would return to the apartment building that still housed Faisel and an explosives-laden vehicle, but there was always time to recognize the efforts of these Americans.

The Bureau’s bomb experts were already at work dismantling the blasting caps from Faisel’s truck, which had enough C-4 in the cargo hold to level an entire block. A quick calculation showed that the effect would have ranked fourth on the list of man-made explosions directed in anger, behind Nagasaki, Hiroshima, and Operation Desert Storm, when the US Air Force had dropped a Daisy-Cutter on an Iraqi Regiment. The bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut would have relinquished its position on this list had the blast been successful. The system was surprisingly crude, as Faris and Faisel were not expecting to be detected, and a single pair of wires led to the cab of the truck with only two blasting caps buried in the explosives. There were no anti-handling devices, which was a tribute to the success of the surveillance operation. Had the terrorists suspected anything they might have acted with more caution, but they were confident they had been preparing in obscurity.

Faisel’s departure from his apartment the following morning was observed and recorded, and as he exited the stairwell into the parking garage he found himself surrounded by agents. As he had already resigned himself to martyrdom with his final prayers he saw no reason to acquiesce gently, and he made a valiant attempt to get to his vehicle where he might be able to put the detonator in his pocket to good use. He had a legitimate excuse for ignoring the instructions of the agents, as they were given in English, but even if they had been offered in Arabic he would have ignored them. To his dismay, though, his religious fervor and resolve were no match for the training of a half-dozen agents, and they immobilized him. As he continued to struggle while being escorted to the waiting vehicles, the amount of force applied by his captors indicated that this was no ordinary criminal, but a foreign combatant intent on destroying America.

Mohd and Marcus, however, were allowed to make the trips to their targets, as their destinations were going to be critical in securing convictions. Both Marcus and Faisel had a half-hour drive, and Mohd had less than a ten-minute walk, so once Faisel left his apartment, the other surveillance teams were alerted as to the timing of the operation. The strike was going to be 10:30 in the morning. The synagogue would be full, shoppers would have already flooded the mall, and the diamond district would be bustling. This also minimized the risk of a driver being delayed in rush-hour traffic. Tommy noted from the reports received in the Command Center that Marcus’ departure was five minutes after Faisel’s to afford Faisel the additional time required to attach the detonator to the blasting caps, and to make the drive in an explosives-laden vehicle.

As Mohd had skipped his shift at the mini-mart that morning, he walked the route, as he had done many times before, that took him directly to the mall. Only this time he appeared to be struggling under the significant weight of a new backpack. He carried his usual tail, but as the Bureau had observed his rehearsals, agents from Liz St. Anne’s Field Office intercepted him as he entered the parking lot. Mohd found himself surrounded by a dozen agents with automatic rifles who instructed him to put his hands up and lie on the ground. The Bureau was unsure of the contents of his backpack, and they were taking precautions against a bomb detonating during the arrest, but when it became clear that Mohd did not have a detonator in his hand, and there were no wire leads coming from the backpack, an agent tackled him from behind and pinned his arms to his side as the others closed in. For Mohd, struggle wasn’t even an option, as he was incapacitated by the weight of his burden, which was revealed to be filled with Russian hand grenades. An argument that was to be used, unsuccessfully, at his trial was that these grenades were of such notoriously poor quality that they might have only wounded a few shoppers and the high chance of a premature detonation made Mohd their most likely victim.

Once relieved of his burden, however, and in spite of the handcuffs that now restrained him, Mohd vented his frustration by attempting to kick at or spit on any American pig that dared touch him. This gave the arresting agents the excuse they needed to ensure excessive force was employed to subdue him.

Perhaps the most surprised people on the morning of 9/11, however, were the other members of Mohd’s family. As soon as Mohd had put sufficient distance between himself and the apartment complex, a commando raid captured those members of his family who had remained at home that day. Because there were female suspects, and due to the role she had played in breaking the case open, Liz St. Anne had a position on the team, and was instrumental in preventing unnecessary violence that would have befallen the stunned suspects had she not been present. The other family members were also picked up without incident, but with a great amount of surprise, at either their schools or places of employment. In spite of their innocence, the entire family would have to witness the oldest son’s trial through the filter of Al Jazeera in their new country of residence.

The surveillance team in Highland Falls was tracking Marcus’ activity, and with optical fibers in heater vents had determined that he was going to perform his task with an AK-47 and 400 rounds of ammunition. However, the team that included Joy and Tony in the parking lot of the Kiryas Joel Synagogue had far more firepower than their suspect could imagine. Marcus parked his vehicle much closer to the Synagogue entrance than the agents had anticipated, and as his station wagon blending in with the dozens of others already assembled, the team had to improvise, as the numerous reconnaissance missions had indicated that Marcus would park across the street. Marcus had time to load his weapon, conceal it under a trench coat, exit his vehicle, and begin the walk to the door before a number of agents instructed him from behind to put his hands up and lie face-down on the ground instantly. He made a futile move for the AK-47 hidden beneath his jacket, but a single bullet from a sniper’s rifle incapacitated him and ensured that he would sit through his trial in a wheelchair, having no use of his arms and legs.

Tony was the first to reach him, but instead of disarming him as he was sure he would have to do, he realized his first responsibility was to administer first aid to Marcus’ convulsing body, as Marcus was in no condition to resist arrest, having lost all command of his faculties.

The sound of the sniper shot, however, brought a number of well-armed members of the Satmar sect pouring from the Synagogue. Upon seeing that their parking lot was filled with a collection of jackets with the yellow letters “FBI” emblazoned on the backs, they chose to return their weapons to the concealed mode and send an emissary to the scene of the melee to ascertain what had just happened, and to offer any help that they could. It was later decided that there would be no investigation of possible weapons infractions at that particular institution as the thwarted attack *ex post facto* validated their need. Additionally, a few well-placed telephonic contacts were sufficient to ensure that the FBI and ATF would have no further interest in what happened on the Synagogue grounds. The irony of this realization, however, was that Marcus would most likely have been the only victim of his attack, as the security detail would have been waiting for him had he gotten any closer to the building.

Marcus’ parents, long having given up any hope of ever seeing their son again, would sit through every day of the trial at the Federal Courthouse in Alexandria, Virginia, and would spend the rest of their lives devastated by the series of events that forced their reunion with their son. They would become fierce advocates among the Somali Diaspora for the safety of the community’s children, particularly since the lure of riches due to the insurgence of piracy along the Somali coast was making the recruiters’ jobs far too easy. As Marcus was the only American citizen involved with the attack, the Federal Government would be able to add treason to his list of charges, in spite of his lawyer’s unsuccessful argument that the Village of Kiryas Joel was not a constitutionally legal entity and was therefore to be treated as part of a foreign nation.

The highest levels of the Bureau, much to Tommy’s chagrin, decided that the funding stream and the logistical trail needed to be wrapped up as well. The counter-argument was that they could now be used as unwitting intelligence sources against future cells, but as the day’s arrests would send all of the accomplices into hiding, it was concluded that their capture would be the best way to cripple any cell activities for quite some time. It was the right choice, as the financial trail that could be traced back to the Saudi coffers was of great interest to certain elements of the Saudi government, and the warehouse in Harlem contained a private arsenal, the likes of which most of the ATF agents on the scene had never witnessed. The shipping documents obtained there would allow the cooperation of a number of international agencies to disrupt the organization’s supply channels for years to come.

It started as a great day for America, but on a tragic note a bus delivering students to Our Lady of Sorrows Preparatory School in uptown Manhattan exploded en route, killing all on board. The FBI went on the record as stating that this attack was in no way related to the terrorist cell that had been thwarted simultaneously, but that their investigation into the incident would be given the highest priority.

The Shave

and a haircut knock let Shirley know that not only was somebody not following instructions, but that she was going to be treated to a most unwelcome visitor. She was on the elliptic when she heard the knock, and the morning news had yet to mention anything about an attack on America, so she simply continued her routine, hoping that the intruder would go away.

However, she next heard a voice through the cracked door asking, “Is anybody home?” and she decided that it was time to acknowledge her guest and hopefully end the visit as expeditiously as possible.

She stepped off the elliptic, put it on pause, and turned around. “Dirk,” she exclaimed, “I certainly wasn’t expecting a visit this morning.”

“Well,” Dirk said sheepishly, “all of the door-kickers are out of the office today, and so I figured you weren’t going to have any other visitors.”

“So you figured the coast would be clear for you to come over without getting caught?” Shirley asked.

“No,” he said, “I just thought you were going a few days without a visitor, and that maybe I could fill the gap.”

“Well that’s very considerate.”

“So, do you mind if I have a seat?” he asked, indicating in the direction of the kitchen table.

“Go right ahead,” Shirley invited, and then, deciding to meet this problem head-on, she pulled out the other chair and sat across from him at the table.

“So,” he began with a nod towards the love seat, “have you been reading anything interesting?”

“Dirk,” she said, “I’ve been on pins and needles trying to find out what’s going on with this cell. I’m not really in the mood to discuss science articles.”

“So they haven’t told you much about this operation?” he asked.

“I would think not,” she replied. “I understand that there are security protocols that must be observed.”

“Well, watch the news today. They picked up the cell leader last night as he was trying to leave the country, and they have tight tails on the three operatives who are going to try their attacks this morning. Last night they pulled the blasting caps out of a truck full of explosives, and they’re going to nail those guys as soon as they move today.”

This got Shirley’s attention, and she almost didn’t regret his visit. “Only three attacks with one operator each?” she asked.

“As far as we can tell, yes,” he confirmed. “One in the Paramus Mall, one in the Kiryas Joel Synagogue, and the truck was going to take out the Diamond District.”

“Dirk,” she asked, “are you sure you’re supposed to be telling me all this?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” he said. “By the time you could get to anybody, it will all be over. I’m sure the press will be let in on it by noon, and then it’s ancient history.”

“Well, I must admit I do appreciate the information,” Shirley told him, “but you have to understand if I’m still not real comfortable with you coming over, particularly when I was told you weren’t going to be back.”

“Well,” Dirk said, “some of those door-kickers need to understand where I fall into the chain of command. They’re not my bosses, since I work for our technical director, so I’m not going to let them push me around.”

“Dirk,” she said, “I just don’t want anyone getting in trouble.”

“Well, last time I was here you said you wouldn’t mind talking with me.”

“About what?” she asked, although she knew exactly what he was referring to, and she saw an opportunity to check on the status of her own investigation.

He did not disappoint. “Our digging into Fusco.”

“Oh yeah,” she said, “so how’s that going?”

“I wanna’ know who your source is,” he said. “With all the resources I’ve got, I couldn’t even come close to him.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“I think you know exactly what I’m talking about,” he said. “You know darned well that I’m still monitoring you, and when you set up g-mail to hook up with some PI, you had to know it was going to get back to me.”

“Oh, that,” Shirley said. “I had forgotten I had done that. Did you find anything useful?” She was really enjoying this.

“Very funny,” he said. “I just wanna’ know who else you shared that with.”

“No one yet,” she said, “why, do you think I should?

“I knew you’ve been messing with me,” he said. “Whoever that was had more than enough information to blow this thing wide open. I just need to know who else knows.”

“Why?” she asked, “so you can take all the credit for it yourself?”

“There was so much information there that I have to feed it to Goodwell one piece at a time. Of course, this whole investigation is on hold right now, but once they wrap this cell up we’re going to be hopping.”

“I’m sure Tommy could handle knowing everything all at once,” she said.

“It also explains why you had to tip-toe around Tony when he and I were here together. I’m still not sure how to handle that part.”

“Then maybe you should turn it over to Tommy and let him decide,” she said. “And if you’re not comfortable with that, then at least give it to Joy.”

“So you know they’re investigating him?” he asked.

“I suggested it.”

“So once again, the geek is always the last to know.”

“Not about Fusco,” she said. “I believe you were in on that as soon as I was, and I’m really hoping that it will help me get out of here.”

“So you’re not going to tell me your source?” he asked.

“What source is that?”

“The one at the coffee shop after hours. The one who wasn’t picked up by any security cameras. The one who knew to paste text into a hotmail account so the originating machine wouldn’t be traced. That source.”

“Oh, that source,” she said. “Sorry, can’t remember.”

“Oh my God, it was you, wasn’t it?”

“What was me?”

“OK, how did you do it?”

“All right, Dirk,” she said, “some day I may let you in on how it happened, but for now you have some information that I would really like you to put to use. You’ve been part of my plan all along, and I trusted that you would snoop enough to stumble across it, that you would figure out that it was important, and that you would get the information into the right hands. Since all of the data came in electronically, I figured that you were the logical person to get it to. If it increases your stock around the office, then I’m OK with that, but I really want to get out of here and to get back to my life. If you’re not going to help, then I’ll just forward it to Joy and Tommy and let them run with it.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t using it,” he said, “it’s just that there’s a lot going on right now, and what you sent me was kind of overwhelming.”

“Well, I appreciate that, and I appreciate anything you can do.”

“So how did you know to make me part of your plan?” he asked.

“Like I said, everything in that note had an electronic source, so you would be the obvious person to find it. Plus, you let me know that you were personally snooping into my life here, and as much as I didn’t like that, I thought I could put it to use. Of course, I never expected this to come out in the open, but now that it has, I’m willing to keep it between you and me.”

He scrutinized her for a moment. “Seems fair,” he agreed.

“So now, Dirk,” she said, “I guess we’re done discussing the Fusco investigation.”

“Sure, I can take a hint,” he said.

Shirley did her best to not laugh at this, but she softened her last statement a little. “Look,” she said, “I just don’t want anyone to get in trouble.”

“All right,” he said, “we’ll keep it between you and me.”

“Sounds fair,” she agreed.

“Well. I guess I should leave,” he said.

She neither agreed nor disagreed, so he stood up from his chair and made his way towards the door. Shirley knew that this would be the last time she would see him here, but she couldn’t resist a parting shot to expedite his role in her scheme.

“Oh, Dirk,” she said.

He stopped and turned around. “Yeah?”

She looked at an imaginary watch on her wrist and tapped it. “If I’m not out of here in a week, then all deals are off.”

He rolled his eyes and went out the door.

As soon as he was gone, though, she began to reflect on her own situation. She wondered if her experience the night before had something to do with her disdain for this intruder, or if her behavior had at its roots a greater collection of her life experiences. The club had certainly turned her off to men, but while they were simply creatures to be manipulated—to whatever end—there were some who were less repugnant than others. While she admired Dirk’s intellect, was she shallow enough to pass judgment based on appearance? Maybe he had just come on too strong, or maybe his being devoid of social graces was sufficient reason for her repulsion. Either way she looked forward to her release so she could drop off his radar forever.

Of course, the hypocrisy of this line of reasoning was not lost on her. As she could almost taste freedom now, there was another visitor whom she suspected she might miss. Was she being manipulated by someone who had the good fortune of being less repugnant than this geek, or was she a willing participant in a budding drama? Tommy had been professional, but it could all be part of a ruse. What if he had the same goals as Dirk, but he had the advantage of experience and self-control that let him come across as a gentleman? What if he was simply a nice guy, and a concerned host, who had no interest in her beyond his duties? She vowed to spend the days until her release developing a logical analysis of this situation, as she had always had more success with reason than with emotion. It was time to put feelings aside and embrace an analytical perspective. It was time to finish her workout.

However, even as these noble thoughts crossed her mind, they were overcome with the ones that been dominating her for the past two days. Before she returned to her elliptic she spun the laptop in her direction to see if the media had noted that anything had transpired since her workout had been interrupted.

There was nothing to report.

The Director

rarely called personally to his field offices, but for the second time in a few weeks Cynthia Cruise found herself on the receiving end of a reprimand. In spite of the fantastic work her people had done, and the accolades were just starting to roll in, there had been two major glitches. One would sour the public opinion on an otherwise spotless investigation, and one would sour the political environment on an otherwise spotless program. The first glitch involved how they could possibly miss a bus bombing right under their noses. While the Bureau’s media handlers were already spinning that incident away from the terrorist cell investigation, it was going to overshadow the success, as the public was not going to buy that the timing of the bombing, for some yet-to-be determined reason, was a coincidence. The second glitch, however, was best described in the manner the Director communicated it to Ms. Cruise.

“Who in the hell told those morons at Homeland Security about this investigation? Those incompetent bastards couldn’t organize a gang bang in a whorehouse, and now they’re poking around the most important investigation since the last 9/11. I want heads to roll for this!”

These remarks caused Ms. Cruise untold anguish. It was not the language that bothered her, as she had grown callous to such outbursts very early in her service. It was not even the whorehouse reference, which could have been construed as a reportable case of sexual harassment in the Federal Government’s environment of political correctness. And it was certainly not the contempt that her Boss, the head of a federal agency, held for another federal agency that was supposed to be working with them towards a common goal. It was the fact that in the spirit of inter-agency cooperation, she had personally informed her counterpart in Homeland Defense of the impending operation, and that this seemingly benign act was going to have an adverse effect on her future promotion opportunities.

This was an ass-chewing that she wasn’t going to pass on to her subordinates, for obvious reasons, but there was still the matter of the bus bombing that could plague her office for months, and she needed a quick solution. A solution presented itself sooner than she had anticipated, as Tommy and Tony appeared at her door with Tommy’s boss, the Special Agent in Charge of counter terrorism. She could think of only two reasons for those three agents to show up now. First, she knew the role Tony had played in the morning’s activities, and his chain-of-command wanted to sing his praises in front of the Big Boss. Second, she thought that Tommy might have completed his work with organized crime to determine Tony’s role in the Baqr shooting, and he was being brought forward in the wake of his glory for his proper persecution. However, there was an option she hadn’t considered that would become clear as soon as she allowed her troops to explain the visit. “What do you have for me, Rodger?” She had directed the question to Tommy’s boss, but it was Tommy who answered.

“Ma’am,” Tommy said, “Tony approached me this afternoon, and Rodger and I want to support him on this. A lot of the kids killed this morning were from Tony’s Parrish, and he would really like to play an active role in the investigation. Since most of the victims were Italian, and all of them were Catholic, I know we’re going to have organized crime look into it, but it’s Tony’s old neighborhood, and we think he could play a role in cracking this thing quickly.”

“What do you think, Rodger,” Ms. Cruise asked.

“Well, Ma’am,” Rodger began, “I’d be happy to help OC out on this thing any way we can, and I really think Tony would be a valuable asset with all of the ties he has with those kids. I know the local community would be grateful if we could put his face on this investigation.”

“Sounds great,” Ms. Cruise agreed. “Go ahead and coordinate it with OC. I’ve got to get ready for the press conference.”

“WILLCO, Ma’am,” Rodger responded.

Tommy shot a grateful look to his senior Boss and added, “Thanks, Ma’am.”

Tony nodded his appreciation, and the three of them left the office.

It was a good diversion to help her focus, as she had the most important press conference of her career coming up in an hour. The press had been told nothing about the morning’s operation, so naturally the airwaves were buzzing with conjecture about what had happened that morning, and what the connection was between a number of very public FBI activities and the bombing of a Catholic school bus in Manhattan. She had good people producing talking points that would help her detail the activities of the past twenty-four hours, but she was going to prepare her own remarks. She needed to strike the right balance between her humble acknowledgment that her office had just thwarted the most significant attack on American soil attempted since 9/11, and her firm resolve that the unrelated attack on New York City’s own schoolchildren was going to have her office’s full attention. This was no time to dwell on past glories when she needed to accept responsibility for the lapse in the safety of American citizens.

The press conference went as expected, since Cynthia was more in her element in front of a camera than she was in front of a crime scene, and as soon as she got back to her office the Director’s executive assistant called, passing on the praises of his boss for a job well done. She was a little miffed that the call had not been personal, but she was also aware that the Director would be in with the President, as he would also want his five minutes in the spotlight to take credit for the morning’s success, and to solemnly vow to get to the bottom of the heinous attack on American school children that had occurred under his watch.

Tommy had instructed Tony to keep him informed of his investigation, in case there was in fact a CT connection, and more importantly to keep tabs on him, as he was still part of an internal investigation. Much to Tommy’s surprise, Tony came into his office during the press conference, and told him he had something to share with him.

“Boss, I just spoke with the bus dispatcher—it turns out I played soccer with his cousin in high school—and he shared a couple a things with me that he said were making him real nervous.”

“Like what?” Tommy asked.

“Well first,” Tony said, “he was paid a visit last week by an HLD investigator. He said he was simply doing a routine check on possible targets of interest as another 9/11 approached, and that there was no cause for concern.”

“Who knows this?” Tommy asked.

“Just me.”

“What else did he tell you?” Tommy continued.

“Here’s the kicker. The bus that blew up this morning, it normally carried kids to a Hebrew Day School, but they had a bus go into maintenance yesterday, and the dispatcher had to shuffle some vehicles around. I’m not sure the target was supposed to be Our Lady.”

“Holy shit,” said Tommy, getting up to close the door. “What do you think happened here?”

“Boss, do you really think HLD could have done this?” Tony asked.

“No,” said Tommy. “You make sure the investigation digs deep into every kid on that bus, you make sure you find some connection to one of our City’s illustrious families, and you find some reason for one of them to be a target. That needs to be the focus of OC’s investigation, and you make damn sure you help steer it in that direction.”

“What will you do, Boss?” Tony pressed.

“First,” said Tommy, “I’m gonna’ find out when HLD knew about this, and what they knew. Then I’m gonna’ figure out why in the hell they’re randomly inspecting private bus companies. Then, I’m gonna’ get whatever I find out into the highest political channels and I’m gonna’ sit back and watch the sparks fly.”

“Well, at least we have a quick entry into the political arena,” Tony said, pointing his thumb in the direction of Ms. Cruise’s office.

“She’s finally going to earn her pay on this one,” Tommy agreed.

The Sitting Room

in the safe house was becoming one of Tommy’s favorite places to hang out. He enjoyed Shirley’s company, and while he shared more details of their ongoing investigations than he should have, he found her insights useful, if for no other reason than to confirm what hours of thorough detective work had already suggested. Her cynicism gave her a perspective that was hard to match, as she assumed the worst in people, and when investigating society’s most undesirable elements that perspective offered the quickest route to the truth. But underneath her shell he detected a certain charm, and when it came out he only hoped that this was an indication that she appreciated his company as much as he was enjoying hers.

This morning as he unlocked the door and cracked it slightly, he decided to announce his presence with a “shave-and-a-haircut” knock, to which the response “two bits” was shouted from the love seat. As he stepped into the room and she set down her magazine he detected a lighter air than the one that normally greeted him, and he wondered if she had followied the previous day’s events and was pleased with what had been accomplished. He got his answer immediately.

“So,” Shirley said, “Do I have to pack up all my stuff myself, or is your crew going to give me a hand?”

Tommy looked a little puzzled. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, I see you solved your case, congratulations by the way, so I’m guessing it’s time for me to get back to my life.”

Tommy knew that his response was going to have a chilling effect on her mood, but he felt it was better than keeping her hopes up, so he broke the truth as gently as he could. “Sorry, Shirl,” he said, “but you’re not going anywhere yet. There’s another investigation that’s still going on, and we really need you to stay here until that one’s over.”

The announcement, however, was not received as badly as anticipated. “You mean you’re finally gonna’ nail that Fusco bastard?” she asked.

“That could be part of it,” he said, relieved, but again not wanting to get her hopes up too high just yet.

“Well, then what are you doing here, Dick Tracy? Don’t you have an investigation to finish up? Let’s get going, chop chop,” she mocked.

“Believe me,” he said, “we’re close.” And then he added, “If I didn’t get out of the office this morning, I’d go crazy. I’ve been there since Thursday evening.”

“Said the Agent to the lady who’s incarcerated against her will in a parking garage,” she said, and he shook his head at the insensitivity of his remark.

The gesture let her know she had been a little harsh, so she back-pedaled and tried, “So what’s with this bus? Is that what’s got you down? Besides that it really looked like you guys kicked ass yesterday.”

“Well, what do you think?” he asked, grateful for the rare complement.

“Well, the media spent all day trying to tie it to your AQ cell, but then your boss lady came on yesterday evening and said it was unrelated. Normally I’d believe the media, since you Feds are always trying to cover your mistakes, and if it had been a Jewish bus I’d say Ms. Cynthia was lying through her butt, but as far as I’m concerned, the jury’s still out on this one.”

“What if I told you that the dispatcher switched buses yesterday, and that bus normally went to a Hebrew Day School?” Tommy asked.

“Then I’d say you guys missed something, and you should probably ‘fess up to it before it snowballs on you,” Shirley said.

“What if I also told you that last week a guy from Homeland Defense paid a visit to the dispatcher and poked around his yard?” Tommy continued.

“Wait a minute,” said Shirley, “I thought you guys weren’t letting Homeland Defense in on your little party. Something about ‘those idiots always screwing stuff up.’”

“Well I think our Boss did, and now we’re not sure what happened,” Tommy said.

Shirley thought for a second, and then said, “Holy shit. You don’t think that Homeland Defense did this as a ploy to get back into the game, do you? I mean, after everything you’ve told me about them, I wouldn’t put it past them.”

“Thanks,” Tommy said. “It’s what I’m thinking, but I wanted to hear what you thought before I went too far with this theory.”

“Yeah,” said Shirley, “but what are you gonna’ do if you can show that they were the perps?”

“We’re not,” Tommy said. “I’m gonna’ let Ms. Cruise handle the political side of this, and we’re gonna’ show that it was a Mafia hit with really bad timing.”

“Well, with a busload of Italian girls in New York City, that shouldn’t be too tough,” Shirley said.

“That’s what we’re counting on.”

“See,” Shirley said, “I told you that the Feds were full of crap, always blowing smoke up the asses of the Great American Public.”

“Just doin’ our jobs, Ma’am,” Tommy agreed.

“So why is it,” Shirley asked, “that you guys can know everything about the American public, but we’re not allowed to know the truth about what you guys have going on?”

“Well, that’s not exactly fair.”

“Sure it is,” Shirley continued, “our tax dollars are paying for your services, and we don’t get to know what we’re paying for?”

“Actually,” Tommy said, “our tax dollars—mine included—are paying for a certain level of security. How that security is achieved is up to the agency charged with that responsibility, and more often than not a lack of transparency is required to accomplish the mission.”

Shirley leaned back in the seat and folded her arms, sending a clear message that she wasn’t convinced. “Why is that?” she asked.

“Well,” Tommy said, “in many cases it’s to protect the sources. If every detail of an investigation were made public the critical pool of informants would dry up, either by choice or by chance. If a detail gets traced to a source, then we lose that source.”

“So why do you get to know everything about us?” Shirley pressed.

“We just like being nosy.”

“I’m being serious,” Shirley said. “I just don’t feel real comfortable knowing the Federal Government is looking over my shoulder every time I open a website.”

“Actually,” Tommy said, leaning forward and looking very serious, “a classified report goes to Congress every morning detailing every mouse click you’ve made in the previous twenty-four hours. It’s a wonder that those clowns have any time to produce legislation. And in fact, if you would just surf a little more, maybe we can cripple Congress altogether so they can quit screwing stuff up.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Of course I do,” he agreed, “but as you well know by now we’re only going to access the information on one of our citizens when it’s vital to national security, or maybe when the person’s in trouble and needs our help.”

“Okay, I get it,” she said. She hadn’t forgotten that the Homeland Defense files were able to help secure her release from Fusco’s grasp, although she was having a difficult time getting used to the idea of a “Shirley” file somewhere in Washington.

This wasn’t the snappy response he was expecting, and he allowed the conversation to pause, hoping that she would come back with something more typical, but Shirley just yawned.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Tommy said, “I didn’t mean to bore you.”

“Oh, no,” Shirley said, mortified at her poor timing. “I’m not disagreeing. It’s just that I was up a little late last night, that’s all.”

“Don’t tell me,” Tommy said, “you were surfing.”

“Of course,” Shirley shot back, “wanna’ know the specifics?”

“No need,” said Tommy. “I can just check the details when I get back to the office—you know, look in that ever-growing “Shirley” file.”

She glared at him.

“Actually,” Tommy said, checking his watch, “I should probably be going. We’ve got a lot more to work on this weekend, and I have a few things to wrap up before we meet with the US Attorney tomorrow.”

“And you still managed to come by and pay little ol’ me a visit. Isn’t that sweet?”

“If you wanna’ know the truth,” he said, “I doubt I would have made it over here if there wasn’t something I had to do.”

“And what’s that?” Shirley asked at one of the rare times she didn’t know the answer already.

“I wanted your thoughts on the bus and DHS,” he admitted. “I figured if America’s most cynical citizen would find the bus story plausible, then we’ll have no problem selling it to the rest of the country.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re keeping me locked up inside here,” Shirley snapped. “You want me to do all your thinking for you so you can go take the credit, get promoted, and spend the rest of your career snooping through files on the lives of decent citizens.” She really sounded angry.

“Well,…,” he began to stammer out a response.

“Tommy!” she interrupted.

“Yes?” he said, his voice despondent.

“It was a joke,” she smiled.

His relief was visible, although he felt a little sheepish for being taken in so easily. “Sorry,” he said, “it’s been a long couple of days.”

“No,” Shirley said, standing up to walking around the coffee table to put a hand on his shoulder, “it’s been a long couple of weeks, but it’s been one heck of a couple of days. Your team did great.”

He gazed up at her with a look that was pure gratitude. “Thanks.”

“Now you get your lazy butt back to work so I can get the hell out of here,” she scolded.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said, as he stood up to leave.

As he walked towards the door, she interrupted him once more. “Tommy,” she said in a much softer tone.

“Yes Ma’am?”

“Thanks for stopping by.”

“Just doin’ my job, Ma’am.”

The Private Line

at Guido Marnacchia’s desk rang. He had spent most of the day hoping the call wouldn’t come, as he already knew what the news would be from the other end.

“Hello,” he said, hoping the next voice he heard wouldn’t be familiar.

“Dad,” started the shaking voice on the other end of the line, “Elena was on the bus this morning—she’s dead.”

It was what he had feared the most. His son had eschewed the Family business and had opened a small restaurant on the upper-east side, a business venture that might have failed were it not for the financial backing of one of the city’s most powerful families. The business was now well established, as it had outlived many of the City’s other dining establishments, and he was proud of his son for making it this far in a tough city. Unfortunately, his son’s desire to distance himself from the Family business had also made him distant from his family, but every profession requires sacrifices, and this was Guido’s to endure. However, the old man had taken great delight in watching his granddaughter, Elena, grow up from a respectful distance. She had blossomed into a beautiful teenage girl, and the times during holidays when she had taken part in family gatherings brought Guido nothing but pure joy. He had other grandchildren now, but as she was his first he always felt a special affinity for her.

And now she was dead. He had seen the news reports and had hoped that of the many busses making the journey to Our Lady hers wasn’t the one that had been hit. As the media had indicated this could have been connected to the attacks on the Jews that the FBI had stopped earlier in the day, but now that he knew Elena’s bus had been the target he was convinced that his Chinese partners were sending him a powerful message. It was too soon to act, but he knew that he was in great personal danger, and that he had to do something. A retaliatory strike at the Chinese wasn’t out of the question, but usually an act like this would be followed with a not-so-subtle message. Additionally, he had other investors who could have done this as well, and a long line of enemies he had accumulated over the years. No, it was not the time to strike back, but to wait and gather information. The opportunity to strike would present itself in due time.

“Dad, are you still there?” came the voice at the other end of the line.

“Son,” Guido stammered, “I’m...I’m...Son, I don’t know what to say.” He pivoted in his chair and stared out the window, but only the peaks of the city’s tallest buildings were visible from the angle afforded by his stature. The building tops, a collection of spires, arched roofs, and other monumental shapes created an eerie sight that had never before troubled him, but in the afternoon’s slanting light became clear to him for the first time since he had occupied the tower’s top office. He now knew that he was not looking out over a range of mountain peaks, but over a field of gravestones. The image gave him great pause.

“Dad,” continued the voice, “Please tell me this had nothing to do with your business.”

Guido didn’t know he was telling the truth when he assured his son, “No…No, it didn’t.” And then he added, “But I’ve got some connections around town, and I’m going to get to the bottom of this.”

“Dad,” snapped the voice, “Don’t do me any favors. Just stay out of this. But if we find out this had something to do with your business, I swear…” The voice trailed off and the phone at the other end of the line hung up.

It was the only time in Guido’s career that he would receive such a threat and do absolutely nothing about it.

The Quickest Knock

Shirley had heard on the safe house door indicated that Tommy must have gotten wind of her unauthorized visitor on Friday.

“Come on in,” she shouted, still stretching after her morning routine.

Tommy poked his head around the door, and stepped into the room. “Why didn’t you tell me yesterday?” he said.

“Well good morning to you too,” she said. “I thought you had to see the US Attorney today.”

“That’s this afternoon,” he said, “but why didn’t you mention your visitor when I came by yesterday?”

“Which visitor is that? Shirley asked innocently, “I’ve had so many.”

“Look,” he said, “I found out this morning that Dirk came by on Friday. One of his fellow geeks ratted him out, and I just can’t figure out why you didn’t let me know.”

“Well, I just figured you had better things to do,” she said, “you know, more important things to worry about.”

“Your safety is one of the things I’m responsible for,” he said, “but if you don’t help me out a little, then how can I keep you safe.”

“Tommy,” Shirley said calmly, “I don’t really consider Dirk a threat to national security, or even to me, for that matter.”

“But you know I told him not to come over,” he protested, “and you told me yourself that he made you uncomfortable.”

“Sure,” she agreed, “he did. In fact, he still does, but I took care of that on Friday. He won’t be coming back.”

“But if you knew I told him not to visit, and he came anyway, then why didn’t you let me know.”

“Look,” Shirley said, getting a little annoyed, “I’m not one of your agents. You may expect them to rat each other out, but last time I checked I wasn’t subject to your rules. You told me not to leave this place, and I’ve been behaving, but there’s nothing I can do if the people in your office are out of control.”

“Shirley,” Tommy said, calming down slightly, “I’m responsible for you. That includes your safety, and that includes visitors that you know aren’t supposed to be here.”

“Thanks for your concern, but I can take care of myself.”

Tommy took a deep breath and regained some of his composure. “Look,” he said, “the last person I had in here ended up dead. I just don’t want anything to happen to you. That’s why that phone is there. Now please call if something happens.”

“Yes, Sir.” The response was sufficient to end the discussion.

“I’ve gotta’ get back to the office. We’re going to be busy all day, and I’m not sure anyone will make it over for the rest of the weekend. Now please call if you need anything, and I’ll check back as soon as I can.”

“OK,” Shirley said, and she went back to her stretching as he walked out the door.

It was a strange visit, far too contentious, and Shirley didn’t quite see the point. He wasn’t just “checking the block” on the daily contact requirement, since he could have sent another agent with all he had going on. If he really was concerned that Dirk had snuck in another unauthorized visit, he could have called to ask about it. He must have been real mad, and probably needed to get out of the office before he did something violent to Dirk, but he certainly didn’t need to come all the way across the river to do that, even if the Sunday traffic made the trip a breeze. He might still have been smarting because of Backer’s death, and he was just playing it extra cautious, or he might have felt like his loss of control over his people needed his personal attention. But none of these was sufficient to explain the drive over in the face of everything else he had going on.

Having eliminated all of the logical possibilities for Tommy’s behavior, Shirley pondered the illogical, and the conclusion this produced deflated most of her ire and gave his behavior an endearing quality. While Dirk had been blatant about the identical emotion, Tommy had covered it in so much authoritarian mumbo jumbo that she almost missed it. The inescapable conclusion was that Tommy was jealous.

Shirley continued stretching with a slight grin on her face.

The Greek

deli might have seemed out of place in the predominantly Italian neighborhood, but it had been there so long that the residents never even noticed that the ethnicity advertised on the sign might indicate something different than their own. In fact the sign announcing “Greek Market” over the storefront had reflected the neighborhood’s predominant ethnicity more often than not.

The young couple had moved from the Venetian port of Hania on the north shore of Crete after the end of the First World War, exchanging their drachmas for dollars, packing up their jewelry and as many clothes as they could carry, and boarding a steamer that would take them to the New World and a new life. They had experienced a modicum of success as shopkeepers in their native land, but the strain of the nearby war had taken its toll and the promise of America’s peaceful shores was too great. Furthermore, the tension they felt from their families (her parents were from Albania) was enough to convince them that even as the eldest son he was never going to inherit the family business. It was more promising to start a market in the Land of Opportunity than it would be to stay on the Island and compete with his parents for the limited quantity of currency that circulated through their small village.

After the requisite pass through Ellis Island they settled into a growing neighborhood by the good graces of some fellow countrymen, and with their small amount of remaining cash they were able to secure a temporary lease on an abandoned café that they would use to establish the only business their families had ever known. With a combination of extended credit, the sale of some family heirlooms, and some fierce negotiations with local suppliers, the market was opened less than two months after their ship had docked, filling a niche that had remained empty in that neighborhood for quite some time. Lacking the funds to commission a professional sign advertising the new establishment, and lacking the materials to construct a proper sign himself, the young man stole a shingle, and with a burnt piece of wood inscribed “Greek Market,” as seemed to be the custom for all retail establishments in his new country.

There had been a debate with his wife and the neighbors as to how the market should be named. He wanted to honor his Cretan roots, but his wife’s experiences on the Island and the treatment of her Albanian family there didn’t warrant such an honor. Since Crete had recently united with Greece, and since “Venizelos’ Market” was not going to fit on the shingle, they decided that “Greek Market” was a reasonable compromise. Thus was born an establishment that would witness, and in many ways reflect, the changes of perhaps the most turbulent century in the history of mankind.

While the Twenties saw a greater influx of Italian immigrants into the neighborhood, it also saw increased prosperity, and five years into the decade, the couple was able to buy the establishment outright, including the upstairs apartment where they lived with their two infant sons. While their initial offerings were anything but Greek, with the majority of their supplies coming from American sources, they eventually established relationships with some Greek importers, and the market soon developed a Mediterranean flavor. Among the jars of oil and olives, however, came bottles of their country’s finest Ouzo, and prohibition created an economic boon with under-the-counter sales of “medicinal” products. While there was competition from a few nearby Irish speakeasies, there was a sufficient demand for alcoholic beverages in the neighborhood that the various retail venues could coexist.

One unintended effect of prohibition, in addition to making a young Greek family moderately wealthy, was that it brought an insurgence of mob activity, and as the couple was able to afford a custom sign for the front of their establishment they decided that “Greek-Italian Market” would better suit the neighborhood’s changing demographics, and might somewhat appease the roving bands who were offering protection against their own vandalism in exchange for hefty payments.

The start of the Great Depression saw the fortunes of many neighborhood businesses plummet, but as the couple had stored their earnings under their mattress, the bank collapses had little effect on their financial well-being, and in fact with their hoard of cash they found themselves among the wealthier inhabitants of the upper-east side. While prices plummeted, so did costs and the market’s cash flow continued to be positive. The Depression forced them to eschew the luxury items that had sold so well in the Twenties, but the flow of staples and necessities into the neighborhood kept the business booming. Furthermore, a Greek shipping tycoon was trying to satiate America’s newfound love affair with tobacco, and in spite of the economy, they were able to continue a booming cigarette business at a significant mark-up over the cheap import prices they paid to their countryman.

The start of the Second World War turned the economy, and with both sons drafted into military service the couple was again on their own to run the family business. The invasion of Sicily, however, saw a rock thrown through the word “Italian” on their storefront, and the couple replaced the sign with one that again said “Greek Market.” Only one son returned from Europe, but the sorrow of their loss was slightly mitigated by the joy of a Greek wedding and the arrival of a beautiful granddaughter. The son and his wife took their places behind the counter, as the older couple focused their time on the care of the family’s latest arrival, raising her in the proper Greek traditions that included the expectation of inheriting the family business.

The Fifties saw the addition of a soda counter in the front of the market, but that degenerated into an attraction for seedy types when the drug movement of the Sixties permeated even the working-class Italian neighborhood. The market seemed to be heading towards an inevitable demise when a real estate mogul who had purchased the rest of the block approached the couple with a proposition to buy so he could complete a major apartment complex. With over fifty years in the same location, including numerous upgrades and expansions, the couple was reluctant to sell, but with the enticement of a ground-floor lease on a grocery establishment, in addition to a choice penthouse apartment, the family endured a year of construction to upgrade both their living quarters and their place of business. While the old couple had turned the operation of the store over to the son and his wife, and were contemplating the requisite move to Florida, their granddaughter’s recent engagement to a neighborhood Italian youth resulted in the new establishment again bearing the sign “Greek-Italian Market.”

The market continued to do a reasonable business, and while it was getting undercut by some much larger discount chains, it again found a niche, this time with gourmet fare and kitchen supplies. The addition of an internet café in the Nineties was the son’s final contribution to the family business, as he and his wife followed the older couple to Florida, leaving the granddaughter and her husband as the establishment’s sole proprietors. The granddaughter proved to be much more adept at running a market than she was at picking a husband, but in all fairness, the young Italian man had not entered into a marriage to help his wife run a market. He had aptitudes for other things, and upon his departure from the market, the penthouse apartment, and her life, he launched a recently emptied whiskey bottle through the store’s sign, allowing the granddaughter to make the one more replacement. This brought it full circle back to “Greek Market,” although the original edition had not announced “and Coffee Bar” in smaller letters below the main copy.

The markup that Manhattan commuters were willing to endure for a morning cup of joe was such that the market generated more profit in its first two hours than it did the rest of the day. The business acumen that the granddaughter had inherited was more than sufficient to keep her comfortable, and the work ethic passed down by generations of Greek merchants set the example for all her employees, but also have her bear witness to the most heinous spectacle the neighborhood had endured since 9/11.

The granddaughter, in her advanced years, had no business sweeping the sidewalk every morning. She lived in the finest apartment in the building. She had clerks, stock boys, baggers, baristas, and even a manager who all could have been saddled with that additional duty. But she had seen her grandmother, and then her mother, perform that function for years, and to her it represented a fresh start to each business day, and a humbling reminder that none of her ancestors had enjoyed the luxuries to which she had grown accustomed. It also provided her a few minutes each day amid the morning fresh air before it became choked with the effects of too many commuters. Since her store front was on the Our Lady bus route, she spend the days after September 11th talking with several local authorities and federal agents about what she may have witnessed on the morning of the attack.

One of the neighborhood rules the granddaughter had internalized was that every incident happened for a good reason, and the authorities were not to be bothered with details from a chance witness, as that might upset the good order of the community. Petty crime was practically nonexistent, and her husband’s brief presence in the business had eliminated all unwanted visits. Most of the local cops enjoyed discounts at her counter, so she had nothing to say to the federal authorities who conducted the same brief interview with her as they did with every other merchant on the route between the bus yard and Our Lady of Sorrows Preparatory School.

She did, however, mention something to one of her local favorites, a boy who had been coming to the market with his mother since he was an infant and who now walked a beat as one of New York City’s finest.

“Mrs. Venizelos,” he said, as she had reverted to her maiden name after her husband’s violent departure, “there is a federal agent, he’s from the neighborhood, and I’d like to bring him by to talk to you. He’s working real hard to find out who murdered our kids, and I think you can help him here.”

That afternoon the officer came by with a young man in a suit who entered her office, produced a badge and documentation, and began by saying “Mrs. Venizelos, I’m Special Agent Tony Fontana from the New York City Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I would like to ask you a few questions if you don’t mind.”

“I know your grandfather, Tony,” she said, “and I don’t want any trouble from anyone in this neighborhood, you understand.”

“Of course, Ma’am,” Tony assured her, “but I understand you saw something in front of your store on 9/11 that could be very important to our investigation of the terrible tragedy that happened last week.”

“I can’t be too sure,” she began, “but last Friday morning there was a dark sedan parked in front of the market. Now the people park there all the time when they come in for a cup of coffee, but this man sat there the whole time I was sweeping the sidewalk. He was just reading his paper, and never came in.”

“I understand you sweep the sidewalk every morning,” Tony said with admiration.

“Of course,” she continued. “I didn’t think anything about it, but a delivery truck came around that corner,” as she indicated in the direction of the nearest intersection, “and it stopped right in front of the sedan, in the middle of the street. Now it wasn’t one of my regular deliveries, so I didn’t pay much attention to it, but there was a bus right behind it that was stopped next to the sedan. I might not have noticed, but the bus driver honked his horn a few times. I thought he might be honking at me, since I see him most every morning, but he was trying to get around the delivery truck. Finally the truck pulled off, the bus went down the street, and the sedan left right afterwards.”

“Would you recognize the truck driver or the sedan driver if I showed you a picture?” Tony asked.

“I never saw the truck driver, but I might recognize the sedan driver if I saw him again.”

Tony produced an image of two gentlemen sitting on a park bench somewhere in downtown Manhattan. “Are either of these the man?” he asked, showing her the image.

She brought her reading glasses up to her eyes, and pointed to the man on the left of the image. “That’s him, the one without the jacket on,” she claimed emphatically.

“Are you sure, Mrs. Venizelos?” Tony persisted.

“Absolutely.”

“And you’re sure this was last Friday?” Tony continued.

“Yes,” she said. “I know it was 9/11 because I had already hung a sign in the store window reminding our customers to remember our fallen heroes.”

“Mrs. Venizelos,” Tony said, “I can’t tell you how much we appreciate your help with this matter.”

“I’m always glad to help our local boys,” she said, but she wondered if his appreciation was going to be on the part of the federal government, or more likely on behalf of one of the neighborhood families.

The Flowers

poking from around the door were quite a surprise, but although Shirley had already forgiven Tommy for his transgression from the previous day, she decided to milk this opportunity a little just to see his reaction.

“What is that?” she shouted from the love seat, “a feather duster?”

“Wow,” Tommy said, as he followed the flowers around the door. “Can’t a guy make a peace offering around here without getting his head ripped off?”

“Well, apparently a girl has to be a snitch around here or she’ll get her head ripped off.”

“OK, I was a little upset yesterday,” he admitted, “but as you can see I’m trying to make amends here.”

“Oh,” she continued, “so you thought you could just waltz in here with flowers and I’d swoon and forgive you for being a jerk?”

“Well, I kind of,” he began, but Shirley cut him off.

“And why would you assume I even like flowers?”

Tommy was deflated. He had convinced himself that this gesture, trite as it was, would be appreciated. He had considered a number of options, but he decided that this would be the most unambiguous olive branch he could conjure, yet it was failing miserably. He looked down dejectedly at the flowers in his hand and began to mumble an excuse, but he was interrupted by the sound of laughter.

Shirley was giggling on the love seat. “Tommy,” she said, “I’m messing with you, you moron. I think that’s very sweet. Completely unnecessary, but very sweet. Thanks.”

“That’s not even funny.”

“Yes it is,” she said, “in fact, it’s freaking hilarious. Now are you going to come in or are you just going to stand there all day?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Good,” she said, getting up to walk over to him. “Then at least give me the flowers so I can get them in some water.”

She took the flowers from his hand, went to the cupboard, and pulled out a pitcher. After filling it half-way with water, she unwrapped the flowers, arranged them in the pitcher, and set them on the kitchen table.

“There,” she said, “makes it kind of homey in here, don’t you think?”

Tommy had been watching this and shaking his head, but finally he chuckled.

“You know what?” he said, “In all the years that we’ve had this safe house, I’ll bet that this is the first time there’s been flowers in here.”

“Well, they’d probably be wasted on Mack the Knife, or Sammy the Switchblade, or Frankie the Fork or any of the other illustrious guests you’ve hosted in the past.”

Tommy just rolled his eyes, grabbed his chair, and pulled it over to the coffee table. Shirley walked back over to reclaim her position on the love seat.

“So now that we’re the big heroes,” she began, “have we made any further progress on the less-pressing matters of national security that might move some of us along towards our well-deserved freedom?

“I can tell you,” Tommy said,” that with the bus bombing, Tony has switched into high gear. I thought he was hopping on the cell, but he’s going crazy now.”

“Yeah,” Shirley acknowledged, “but I thought he was going to be looking for a connection that didn’t exist.”

“Right now he’s looking for anything,” Tommy said, “but whatever connection the world might hear about, I can guarantee you that he’s going to find out the truth first.”

“So how does that help me?” Shirley asked. “I thought that he was part of the investigation that’s going to get me out of here.”

“That’s the other thing,” he said, “Joy is also in high gear, although Tony doesn’t know it. As hard as he’s looking into the bus, she’s looking into him.”

“You know, she’s really fond of him,” Shirley said.

“So am I. That’s why this is so hard on us, but we all agree it has to be done.”

“Wow,” Shirley said, “you guys are cold.”

“Remember this whole thing started with a dead informant,” Tommy reminded her, “and he was in our care when he was killed. Plus, if we have a mole, then no one’s safe. We have to get to the bottom of all of this.”

“Good point,” Shirley agreed. “I guess it just means I’m going to spend a few more lonely evenings pining away in my cage, here.”

“Hey,” I’m sorry I couldn’t make it over last night,” Tommy said. “We were with the US Attorney until almost midnight.”

“You mean those guys work late too?” Shirley asked with mock surprise. “You’re completely destroying my image of the US Government.”

“Well, I hope you were able to find something to do with your time,” Tommy offered.

“Oh, there’s plenty to do here,” she quipped.

“Don’t tell me,” he suggested, “you were surfing.”

“How did you know?” she asked. “You must be one great detective.”

“Believe me,” Tommy warned, “we have our ways of checking that.”

“I’m sure you do,” Shirley smiled, “although I don’t think you’re going to find Dirk to be as cooperative as before. I think he may have lost interest in my activities since Friday.”

“Well that would be OK. So,” he continued, “What’s new in the underground parking garage surfing scene?”

“Well,” Shirley announced, “I finally was able to Google that Baqr guy. It turns out I’ve been spelling his name wrong. Not much on him, though.”

“B A Q R,” Tommy spelled it out for her. “It’s a pretty common Arabic name, what’s so hard about that?”

“Somebody needs to please buy those guys a few vowels,” Shirley said, “It’s just un-American the way they spell everything differently.”

“Well, aren’t you the enlightened one?” Tommy accused.

“Well, actually I’m not, but speaking of enlightened, when are you going to nail Fusco?”

“It’s not Fusco we’re after,” Tommy said, “although he’s going to be collateral damage. I can’t tell you who it’s going to be, but you need to keep watching the news over this next week.”

“Wait a minute,” Shirley said, “you can tell me you think that Homeland Defense just blew up a bus of girls, but you can’t tell me who the SOB is who set me up?” She was really hoping Char’s investigation into Marnacchia was driving Tommy’s efforts, but she didn’t want to play her hand yet. It was better to let them do their jobs.

“In the latter case,” Tommy explained, checking his watch, “the investigation is still ongoing, and we can’t risk what we know getting out, particularly since it may involve some people from our office. In the former case, though, there’s no danger of you letting out anything, because if you tried, it would probably go over as well with the American public as your theory on vowels would go over in Yemen.”

“There you go again,” Shirley accused, “always thinking of everything.”

“Just doin’ my job, Ma’am,” came Tommy’s well-conditioned response.

“So I’ve heard,” she said as he got up to leave.

As he made his way to the door, she decided to take one parting shot.

“Oh, Special Agent Goodwell,” she said.

“Yes, Ma’am,” came his quick reply as he looked back over his shoulder.

“Thanks for the flowers,” she said. “That was really sweet.”

“Just doin’ my job, Ma’am,” he teased as he walked out the door.

The Ringing Phone

was not unexpected, but as it came a little sooner than he had even hoped, it startled the old man out of his thoughts of retribution. Guido turned around and picked up the cell that he knew would put an FBI agent on the other end.

“What you got for me Tony?” he said as soon as the phone was to his ear.

“Mr. M., you’re not gonna’ believe this,” came Tony’s quick response. “I’ve got a pretty good fix on the guys who hit the bus, and I think you’re gonna’ want to know about it. Oh, and by the way, I’m really sorry to hear about Elena.”

“Thanks, Tony,” said Guido,. “So who do think this was, the Chinese?”

“No, Mr. M.,” Tony replied, “we think it was a couple of guys from Homeland Security.”

“You’ve gotta’ be shitting me. I thought those fuckers were supposed to be protecting us.”

“It’s real complicated,” Tony said. “Ya’ know all the stuff that went on that same morning?”

“Sure,” said Guido. “you guys did a really nice job with that.”

“Well, we had that thing going on for a while,” said Tony, “and we weren’t letting Homeland Security in on it. I think our boss let it slip the week before, but they’ve got some shady characters over there probably trying to protect their contract, and it looks like they might have actually done the hit. I guess they think they’re doing such a great job that they’re indispensible, and if they have to do their own operations to stay in business, then it’s worth it for the sake of national security.”

“But why hit a Catholic school?” Guido asked.

“That’s the thing, Mr. M.,” Tony said, “I talked to the dispatcher at the company, and the bus they hit normally runs for Hebrew Day School.”

Guido was silent for a moment, stunned by this revelation. However, he had not come as far as he had by staying shocked for long, and he asked, “So you guys are gonna’ make sure these bastards fry, right?”

“Actually, we’re not,” Tony admitted. “It would be too big of a political mess, so we’re gonna’ handle it behind the scenes. Heads are gonna’ roll, but the Great American Public will never know about it.”

“So how are you going to wrap up your investigation?” Guido pressed.

“Well, Mr. M., there were a few Family members on that bus. We’re looking for recent incidents that can be used to explain a hit right now. To be perfectly honest, your shipment’s one of them.”

“Have they tied that back to me?” he asked.

“No, and I don’t think they will,” Tony assured him. “I’m working with OC on the bus, and it doesn’t look like they have any clue about the shipment. They’re still thinking Chinese. Since the public already knows about the haul, it shouldn’t make it too tough to use it as an excuse, and then everything wraps up nicely.”

“So what happens to the bastards who killed my granddaughter?” Guido demanded. “Are they just gonna’ walk?”

“I sure hope not, Mr. M.,” Tony said, and then, getting to the crux of the call, he continued, “that’s why I’m telling you about this, Mr. M.”

Guido hung up the phone, dropped it in the trash, and turned around to look for a phone he had hoped he would never have to use. He dialed the only pre-programmed number on its contact list, but he knew it wouldn’t be answered. It was a contact that he made only in the most extreme circumstances, but the current circumstances were beyond extreme. While he had spent the past five decades on the wrong side of the US Government’s laws, he still considered himself a patriotic American, and he was seething at what he saw to be the most heinous act of treason ever committed on American soil. When the phone rang he got a brief voice mail prompt as expected, and he left the most minimal of messages.

“You need to come see me,” he said, and then after closing the phone, he dropped it into the trash.

As he gazed out the window to the streets below, he squinted at the line of cars so that the tail lights made an unbroken stream of red in every direction. He had no doubt that he was looking down upon the fires of Hell.

The Safe House Phone

ringing let Shirley know in advance that there would be no visitor tonight, but that the reason should include some good news concerning her release. She picked up the receiver.

“Hey, quit bothering me.”

“Sorry,” came the mock apology, “I didn’t realize you’d be busy.”

“Well some of us stick to our schedules.”

“Well unfortunately the bad guys don’t,” Tommy said.

“And which bad guys might we be talking about?”

“Ones that you’re going to hear about real soon.”

“Is someone going to tell me, or do I have to watch the news?” she asked.

“You’d better stick with the news.”

“Darn.”

“Sorry,” Tommy said, “but I just wanted to let you know that we’re not going to make it over there tonight. We’re real close right now, and it’s going to be a busy night.”

“I kind of figured that as soon as the phone rang.”

“You mean all I had to do was let it ring once and hang up?” he asked. “If I knew you would figure out the message without me saying anything I could have saved both of us a whole lot of time.”

“Well, that would have made your office even busier tonight.”

“And why might that be?” he asked, confident that he knew what was coming next.

“Because I’d have to kill you,” she said, “and then there would be another big investigation tied into this illustrious parking garage.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t just hang up, then.” The remark had been as he had hoped.

“You got that right,” she confirmed.

“Well, look,” he said, “I’ve got to go, but I’ll keep you posted on our progress.”

“Hey,” she said, “Thanks for calling.”

“No problem.”

“And by the way, the flowers look great.”

“I’m glad.”

“Oh, and Tommy.”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Please be careful.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The Specialist

had been with the organization longer than Guido had been at the helm, but when Guido had taken over, he was provided with minimal information about his man’s expertise, and nothing about his personal life. Guido had been given a phone number, and it had been explained to him that if he ever needed something he simply had to leave a message. The specialist would come.

The Family employed a lot of muscle, but there were requirements that warranted special skills, and for these the usual thugs wouldn’t suffice. Cash payments, far in excess of what was normally commanded, would be made at the completion of every job, and so far the investments had proved quite fruitful for the organization. There were never any loose ends, never any indication that any traces were left that might implicate a Family member, and there had never been as much as a question from any pertinent authority.

Tony had never taken part in one of the Family’s operations before, but his part of the plan was simple. He was to enter a designated confessional in St. Patrick’s Cathedral at an appointed time, and he was to turn over a copy of the photograph and provide as much detail as possible to the voice on the other side of the screen. He would depart immediately, and if any other agents showed up, he would be terminated along with the operation. Tony had no problem carrying out his requirements with precision.

The NYPD patrol car pulled up in front of the small park, and before the two Department of Homeland Security contractors sitting on the bench realized that they might be the reason for the stop, the two officers had them arrested, cuffed, and escorted to the back of the waiting car. However, they were not driven to a precinct, as the officers pulled into a warehouse, and after a strategic application of duct tape, the officers exited the vehicle and the premises.

Presently a kindly-looking gentleman appeared and let himself into the front of the car, whereupon he turned and addressed Dick and Dennis through the wire mesh.

“My friends,” he began. “Whatever your reasons for blowing up the bus, and I quite frankly can’t imagine what those might have been, let me assure you that it was a grave mistake. I am here to extract the proper retribution for this heinous act. Please let me assure you that this will be neither quick nor painless, but that it will, eventually, end.”

The tape over their mouths kept them from protesting, and in fact, ensured their silence for the duration of their final ordeal.

The Mid-Morning News

caught Shirley on the elliptic, but in spite of the fact that she had been incarcerated for almost a full month, her depth of understanding of the report far exceeded that of almost every other one of its recipients. The talking head began.

“This morning New York City police discovered the bodies of two men in a downtown park. They are suspected to be victims of gangland-style killings, and the mutilated bodies have been identified as Dick Wood and Dennis Garr, both contractors who worked for the Department of Homeland Security. According to FBI sources, the killings were in retaliation for the bombing of the Our Lady of Sorrows school bus last Friday, which was in turn alleged to be in retaliation for the capture of the heroin shipment off the Carolina coast last month. Wood and Garr, both former Marines, are suspected to have been working for the Chinese mafia. It is believed that they conducted the attack on the bus as retribution against a local crime family that was blamed for the loss of the shipment. A search of Garr’s home revealed evidence of bomb-making materials similar to those used in the attack. Officials from the Department of Homeland Security had no comment.”

Shirley continued her routine, but also shook her head. Tony was obviously very good, but to so quickly identify the perpetrators, and to have the mob execute them, must have taken some real magic. She wondered how far this conspiracy went, and how much of it was accurate. Had the two contractors really blown up the bus, or was that a smoke screen so the FBI could cover the fact that they missed part of the attack? How did the Chinese mafia feel about being dragged into this scenario? Did the mob really execute the unfortunate victims, or did the FBI do that themselves to expedite the story’s closure? What had Tony discovered that let them take this plan forward? How high did the conspiracy reach? Did Ms. Cynthia have any idea that the victims were not really working for the Chinese? How far up the chain was this going to be taken? And most important, was Tommy all right?

Shirley realized that she had been given a glimpse into the inner-workings of the Federal Government, and that it wasn’t pretty. With all the elaborate programs in place to stop terrorism, it was the efforts, apparently, of a few ordinary citizens that prevented the next 9/11. She had seen dedication on the part of government employees, but some of it was motivated by a desire to make amends for corrupt activities. She, among very few people, knew the truth about one of the most heinous attacks ever on American soil: that it was committed because of inter-agency feuding and a desire to protect a contract. And she had just seen the press buy, hook-line-and-sinker, a story concocted to keep the American people in the dark.

She wondered how this was going to bode for her predicament. If Fusco and Patricelli had already used the media to convince the Great American Public that she was AQ, then how would she be able to recover her freedom and anonymity when she was finally released, or if she was finally released? The press didn’t particularly care for retractions, and she didn’t know how much clout Tommy was going to have in reversing the public’s opinion of her mistaken identity.

Most terrifying, however, was the efficiency with which Tony’s organization had found and dispatched the bus bombers. If this had been Marnacchia, and there was no doubt in her mind that it had been, then she could be in serious danger. With Tony knowing her location, and having access to it, she wondered what lengths he would go through to protect Fusco, or Fusco’s boss. She regretted the e-mail she had sent to herself for Dirk’s benefit, and she hoped that he was keeping the sordid details to himself. Perhaps the best she could count on was him telling the story without revealing its source so he could increase his own stock within the Bureau. At least, on this last point, she felt that Dirk’s true character would work to her advantage.

She knew this ordeal was well on its way to being wrapped up, but she was not confident that she knew how it was going to end. It was some consolation that she had made the acquaintance of a few interesting people. She could actually picture Joy as a friend, and she hoped to have the opportunity to test this theory in the near future. And then there was Tommy.

As the elliptic machine counted down its final seconds, she decided that there were some issues that were simply too complex for her to resolve.

The Door to the Office

was open, but Frank knocked anyway, awaiting the invitation to enter. His boss, while several years his junior, was already a member of the Senior Executive Service and was still upwardly mobile in the Department. He motioned for Frank to come in and take a seat. As he began to speak, he was shaking his head, and started off slowly.

“Frank,” he said, “I’m not sure what’s going on, but things are a real mess right now.”

“How so?” Frank asked.

“Well, for starters, have you heard about your two contractors, Dick and Dennis?”

“No I haven’t, Sir,” Frank answered honestly.

“Well they were found dead this morning, the apparent victims of a mob-style execution,” his boss continued. “They were left where it would be fairly easy to find them, as if somebody wanted to send a very loud message to DHS. They were covered with burns and were missing body parts—it looks like the shots finished them off after an extended torture session. They were tied up and their clothes were ripped pretty badly, indicating that it wasn’t quick. Now I’m not sure what you had them involved in, and maybe they were working something on the side that caught up with them, but this looks really bad for the Department.”

Frank was shocked. “My God,” he said, “My two guys are dead, and we’re worried about the Department? What about their families?”

“Frank, we’ll worry about that later,” his boss said, “right now we have issues that have far-reaching implications for national security, and the manner in which they were killed has a lot of people wondering what we’ve been up to. Do you know anything about the bus bombing?”

“The Feds aren’t saying much,” Frank said, sticking with the official government story. “I’m hearing it was a mob hit, and that with the number of families represented on the bus, they may never know who it was for.”

“Well, I’m hearing from the highest levels that the Feds have somehow linked Dick and Dennis to the bus. Not sure if they were working for the mob on the side, but I did some deep digging into their records, and they were involved in some stuff a few years in Baghdad that, had we known about it, would have kept them a long way away from this organization.”

“Boss, I’ve gotta’ tell you,” said Frank, “They did a lot of good work for us. They were great Americans, and I can’t imagine that they were pulling jobs for the mob on the side.”

“Well, they were into something, and right now the Feds are looking like they’re gonna’ write this off as mob activity. The FBI will look into it, but those bastards are in so tight with the mob that nothing will ever come out of it.”

“So what does this all mean for us?” Frank asked.

“Well,” his boss began, “That’s what I really need to talk with you about. As you know, the Feds and the CIA have been working counter terrorism together, and have been cutting us out of the loop. It seems we’re not a valued organization. The politicos think we’re bloated, our contracts have been getting a lot of Congressional scrutiny, and an incident like this just makes us look even worse. The Feds stop the most significant AQ attack since 9/11, and the Department not only isn’t involved, but at the same time a couple of our contractors are linked up with a mob hit that takes away most of the President’s good press. It makes us look real bad, and the timing makes us look even worse. There are even some suggestions that we did this ourselves to stay in business, but fortunately nobody’s taking that seriously. Either way, though, a lot of heat is going to come down on us from the highest levels.”

“So what are we going to do?” Frank asked.

“Well,” continued his boss, “we’re gonna’ need to show some initiative around this office if we want to stay relevant. These were your guys, and I’m not sure what you know about them, and to be perfectly honest, I’m not sure I want to know. However, someone needs to show a whole lot of remorse right now, and I think that the best way for us to do that would be for you to submit your retirement packet ASAP.”

Frank was stunned. The Feds had cut DHS out of the most important investigation since 9/11. He had no idea what Dennis and Dick had gotten into, but whatever it was he knew he wasn’t involved, and a few weeks ago he was rolling up his sleeves to help his organization get back into the game. Now suddenly he’s being sent out to pasture. There was nothing worse than being a scapegoat for the transgressions of those around you, and Frank wasn’t sure he would be able to maintain his dignity throughout this charade.

But then he thought better of it. “OK, Sir,” he said, “you’ll have it this afternoon.”

The Pizza Box

poking around the door announced that Shirley had a visitor who needed no introduction. Tommy seemed to be picking up more than his fair share of visits, and in fact had made a few that might have been beyond what the protocols required. However, Shirley appreciated the company, the conversation, and, as she was surprised to discover, the human interaction that was part of the routine that she had always assumed was devoid of that annoyance. But the presence of pizza in the safe house indicated that there may be some good news following shortly, and she tried hard to control her excitement.

“Hey,” she mocked, “get that stuff out of here. Some of us are watching our figures.”

“Didn’t somebody here order pizza?” Tommy asked, unsure if his gesture was unappreciated or just being mocked. He put the pizza and a grocery bag on the table in front of her, and pulled up a chair from the kitchen.

“So this better mean you’re bringing me some good news,” Shirley said, setting down the copy of *The Economist* she had been perusing.

“Can’t tell you yet, but I’m going to have something real soon. Let’s just say today was a good day for interrogations in the Bureau.”

“Did you get Fusco to spill his guts finally?” Shirley asked.

“Not saying,” Tommy said, knowing full well that Shirley would understand the response. He pulled a Corona out of the bag and placed it on the table.

“Well, I hope you had to beat that bastard severely to get him to talk,” Shirley said

Her eyes followed his arm to the bottle in front of her, and she registered a protest. “You should know that I never touch that stuff.”

“What kind of an agent do you think I am?” Tommy asked with mock indignity, “this is for me.” He pulled a cold Gatorade out of the bag and offered it to her.

“You’d better not be drinking on duty, Mister Federal Agent Man.”

“I’m off for the night,” he said, “I just wanted to come unwind after the day’s labors, and I couldn’t think of a better place.”

“Actually,” Shirley said, “I can think of, oh, an infinite number of better places than this little pit in the basement of a parking garage.”

“Sure,” Tommy said, “but you’re not at most of those other places, as far as I can discern, so I thought I’d try this one.”

“Wait a minute,” Shirley said. “You’re not having some of those freaky psychological Lima Syndrome feelings, are you?”

“What in the heck are you talking about?” he asked.

“Lima Syndrome,” she explained. “It’s like the reverse Stockholm Syndrome, where the captor feels empathy for his hostage.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “I know what the Lima Syndrome is, dumb-dumb. I just didn’t think you were a hostage.”

“Oops, my bad,” she said, “I keep forgetting this is just protective custody.”

“You know darned well you can come and go as you please, and unless Dirk’s a lot better than any of us ever knew, I’d guess that you’ve slipped out once or twice.”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Shirley said. It couldn’t have gone better.

“Of course not,” Tommy said. He opened the pizza box and offered a piece to Shirley.

“Look, you moron, I thought I told you I was watching my figure,” she protested as she took a piece and bit into it.

Tommy opened his beer and took a gulp. “You know,” he said, “I don’t think it’s your figure you have to worry about.”

Shirley, far too conditioned to uncouth comments from her clientele, shot back. “So what do I have to worry about, Mister Know-it-all?”

Tommy, anticipating this response, indicated in the direction of the stack magazines on the table and the ones that had begun to accumulate on the floor next to the love seat. “It’s your head,” he explained. “Look at all that junk you stuff into it all day long. It’s probably all bloated by now, and one day it’s going to be positively obese. You’re going to need brain lipo by the time you’re thirty.”

Shirley cursed herself for walking into his setup, but decided that he might not be as Neanderthal as most of the men she had encountered. “Well, aren’t you just the charmer?” she mocked, doing her best southern belle.

“Just doin’ my job, Ma’am.”

“I thought you were off duty,” she reminded him.

Tommy took another sip of the Corona. “Sorry,” he said. A Federal Agent is on duty 24/7/365.”

“Whew,” Shirley said, “I’m going to sleep well tonight knowing that my tax dollars aren’t being wasted.”

“Speaking of which,” Tommy began.

“Don’t you even go there,” she said. “I’m an upstanding citizen, and I pay my Uncle everything he deserves.”

“And he’s grateful, I’m sure.”

“So did you have to use a thumb-screw on Fusco?” Shirley asked, hoping to get an indication of how much longer her incarceration would last.

“Yeah, but he enjoyed it. It finally took hot coals to get Patricelli to spill his guts.”

“That’s a shame,” Shirley said, “I never really objected to him, of course until I figured out that he and his partner were going to have me killed.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Tommy said, “he seemed to be the more unwitting of the two conspirators.”

“So what I haven’t figured out,” Shirley continued, “is exactly how they were planning on taking Edith down. I mean, Mike fired the gun right next to her, he stuffed it in the purse on top of her locker, and he was going to have forensics show how she had been the shooter, but there were still going to be too many holes in their case. She wouldn’t have had powder on her hands, she didn’t have a lot of places to hide a gun in her uniform, and I’m not convinced she’s had a whole lot of experience firing weapons.”

“Who’s this Edith?” Tommy asked, indicating that Shirley was hitting too close to home on a pending investigation.

“Oh, I see it,” Shirley said, formulating a theory on the spot. “The street value of the shipment was going to be so great that by the time they got their cut, they could disappear to the Bahamas. That would probably have happened long before poor Edith could be brought to trial by the fast-spinning wheels of the good old American justice system, and once they disappeared, she gets off with no damage to her reputation. Mike picked her out because there was little danger of her articulating the events of the evening with sufficient detail to exonerate herself. It was only when they screwed up and I landed in their laps that they had to improvise and arrange my untimely demise.”

“So that’s you’re theory for the day?” Tommy asked.

“Oh, don’t even try to deny this one,” Shirley said, “you know I’m right. The only thing I don’t get is how Fusco was able to concoct such an elaborate scheme on such short notice. He’s an evil bastard, but I’m not sure I’m willing to put him in the “evil genius” pile. And there’s no way Mike could think that quickly, and I’m pretty convinced that he wasn’t going to be too happy about me frying, since I think he might have had a bit of a thing for me.”

“Well, it looks like you do attract your share of winners,” Tommy said, changing the topic since Shirley’s theory matched exactly the facts he had gleaned through hours of interrogation, discussion, and negotiation.

“And speaking of evil geniuses, who came up with the story on the Chinese mob connection with the DHS contractors?”

“If I’m not mistaken, that was you,” he said.

“Come on,” she protested, “how high does that one go now?”

“I can’t worry about it,” he said, “that investigation is ancient history. I’m much more concerned with the one I’ve still got pending.”

“So who was the evil genius behind the dumb muscle?” Shirley asked, knowing her theory had hit way too close to home, but still wanting to get an indication of when she was going to be freed.

“Not sure what you’re talking about,” Tommy said, letting Shirley know that she wasn’t going to drag this crucial piece of information from him before he had closed the final loop on the investigation. It wasn’t that there was an outside chance of her being a confederate, or even a risk of her doing something with the information, but he knew that there were certain limits on what he should discuss. While he had far exceeded those on several occasions already, he needed to hold his last cards tight until he could wrap things up. Even if she was the hidden source behind Dirk’s discoveries, admitting the investigation’s details at this point would be verboten.

“I guess I’ll just have to keep watching the news,” Shirley said, with resignation. “You know,” she continued, “I catch the news every morning at the gym, and that’s more of a fix than I usually need for the rest of the day. You guys putting it in my bedroom have made me watch way more than I should, and I think it’s poisoning my brain.”

“We haven’t created a news junky?” Tommy asked with mock surprise.

“No chance of that,” Shirley said, “first of all, I’m definitely not hooking up cable in my apartment when I get out. This has just confirmed that I’m better off without it. Plus, I won’t be as interested when I’m not scanning the channels for anything that might point to my release. I’ve had my lifetime fill of babbling bimbos and stuffed shirts this month, and I’m not going to miss it.”

“Yeah, but what about the other channels? Tommy asked. “Haven’t you enjoyed your long-overdue exposure to the Great American pastime?”

“It’s all garbage,” Shirley said. She complimented herself on the transition away from the investigation, knowing that she had pushed Tommy past his limit.

“It’s not all bad,” he said.

“It’s turning us into a nation of zombies. Not long from now we’ll be no better than a bunch of robots.”

“And you’ll be running the show,” Tommy concluded.

“Damn right,” Shirley agreed. “But just remember, if you please me I’ll give you a nice position in my government.”

“And how might I do that?” Tommy asked, jumping at the possible opening.

“Well for starters,” Shirley answered, “you can get off your lazy butt and wrap up your investigation so I can get the hell out of this cell.”

It wasn’t the answer Tommy was looking for. “I’m trying,” he suggested despondently. “In the mean time, have some more pizza.”

Shirley grabbed another slice. “I can’t. I’ve got to watch my figure,” she said as she bit into it.

Tommy finished his beer. “Well, look,” he said. “I’d probably better get going. I’ve got a big day ahead of me tomorrow, and I’ve got to get this one right.”

“I’m counting on it,” Shirley said as he stood up. As he headed to the door, she held up the box and asked “You wanna’ take a piece with you?”

“Sorry, I can’t,” he explained. “I’m watching my figure.”

Shirley knew that she was going to be free soon, and as excited as she was to have her incarceration end, she also knew that she was going to miss these visits.

The Intercom

buzzed, and the Secretary’s voice came over it clearly.

“Mr. Marnacchia,” she said, “there are two gentlemen here to see you.”

Tommy entered first, with his badge out, and began to introduce himself as Special Agent Goodwell, until he realized he was staring down the barrel of a Walther PPK. As Tony was coming in behind him, he stopped, but Mr. Marnacchia urged them to continue.

“Come on in, Special Agent,” he offered to Tommy, and then to Tony, he added, “Tony, I wasn’t sure if you’d be coming along on this one, but you might as well come in too.”

Tommy’s suspicions about Tony had just been confirmed. He was the leak, but at this point it was going to be unlikely that Tommy would ever get the chance to do something about it. However, Mr. Marnacchia continued.

“So, Special Agent,” he said, “What is it that brings you to my penthouse office today? You must understand I’ve been hosting Feds in this room for over thirty years, so it’s gonna’ be a little tough for me to sort out which line of questioning I’m going to need to answer for you. Let me give it a shot, though, no pun intended,” he continued as he indicated to the pistol in his hand. “Are you here for my shipment that got picked up down in Carolina, are you here for me waxing your raghead informant so I could bring my shipment in quietly, is it because I knocked off those two Homeland Defense bastards who blew up a fucking bus in my neighborhood, or are you here to apologize to my family for your federal government killing my granddaughter in cold blood?”

Tommy decided that it would be for the best if he could keep talking as he was sure that at most two of them were going to exit the room alive, and he needed to buy some time to think. “Well, Sir,” he began, “we were really here to discuss officers Fusco and Patricelli with you. They have been arrested for the murder of one Nasser Baqr who happened to be in the country at our invitation, and they have provided us statements that you were the one who ordered the hit.”

“Ya’ know,” Guido said from behind his gun, “I never should have trusted those guys with such an important part of my plan. They screwed it up royally, but the irony was, it still accomplished its purpose, and I was able to bring my shipment in without any Feds nosing around.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, Sir,” Tommy said, “Your hit on Baqr really threw us into a fix. We had been tracking the ship since the North Koreans loaded your container, and we didn’t take our eyes off of it until the hit. It was just luck that the locals picked it up.”

“Well, it’s not any consolation,” Guido continued, “but I will admit that I’m glad you guys were able to stop those terrorist fucks. I don’t care much for the kikes, but I never want to see America attacked, and I’m not sure I would have knocked that guy off if I had known what he was into. So anyway, what’s your plan here, are you gonna’ arrest me?”

“Well, Sir,” Tommy replied, “That was our plan, but it looks like you’ve changed things a bit.”

Guido chuckled. “Ya’ know,” he said, “That shipment was my retirement, and I personally lost a few hundred million on it. Then, it turns out I off a guy who was helping prevent a terrorist attack, and the god dammed attack almost happens. Next I’m hearing that my own government is blowing up buses in my neighborhood, and finally, my oldest granddaughter’s dead, and my son and his wife are convinced it’s because of me. I’m thinking I can’t get much lower than this, but getting arrested by Tony after all I’ve done for him just ain’t gonna’ happen.”

Tommy was about to signal to the snipers positioned on a building top over 200 yards away, but he didn’t have to. The old man put the barrel of the Walther in his mouth and pulled the trigger. The white marble behind him was sprayed red, and there was grey matter dripping from the cell phones, lined up in perfect formation on the credenza. Tony lunged forward instinctively, and that provided Tommy all the time he needed to draw his service revolver.

“Tony, I’m sorry,” he said. “You just did your nation a great service with all your work on the cell, and I’m not sure we would have broken that case without you, but it sickens me to see you throw it all away with your OC connection.”

Tony shrugged and asked, “So when did you know?”

“Since the last poly,” Tommy’s said. “We kept you busy with the investigation while we were making sure, but we knew it had to be you.”

“So why did you bring me along today?” he asked.

“I wanted to make sure. I’m guessing you tipped him off about the DHS guys as well.”

“Damn right I did,” Tony said, “That one was personal. I wouldn’t hesitate to do it again.”

“Well, that actually made it easier to clean this mess up,” Tommy said, “So I guess we owe you another one.”

“Uh, you wouldn’t consider repaying the Nation’s debt by just letting me walk out of here?” Tony asked.

“Sorry,” said Tommy, “you know the drill. Let’s go.”

The sun’s rays were hitting the glass above the credenza, and the spots of Guido’s blood were amplifying the light as it fell on the floor, creating a pastoral scene on the white marble. Tommy envisioned a field of red poppies as he glanced down, and looking for the source of the effect, his gaze reached the window behind the body of the dead Don. His focus took him from near to far, and he was treated to one of the city’s most enthralling presentations of its own skyline. “Nice view,” he muttered to himself as he followed Tony out the door.

The Evening News

was just starting as Shirley changed the channel from the classical music station. With all that was happening in the world outside, and with its significant effect on her future, she was willing to tolerate this intrusion into her evening routine, particularly since this routine was less than a month old. While the week’s news had focused on recapping the events of the most recent 9/11, with a small amount of conjecture into the bus story, she wasn’t fully prepared for what she was about to hear. The talking head began.

“In breaking news this evening, the FBI is reporting a break in the tragic Manhattan bus bombing that occurred September eleventh. They have recently discovered that the heroin delivery that was intercepted in North Carolina last month was heading to New York for the Marnacchia crime syndicate. The drugs, which were being transported on a Chinese freighter, were believed to be connected with a Shanghai crime family, and that the shipment’s seizure led to the retaliation against the Marnacchia family by their Chinese counterparts. The two individuals who are suspected to have planted the bomb were believed to be working for the Chinese Mafia, and as we reported a few days ago, turned up dead in Manhattan. The head of the Marnacchia syndicate, Guido Marnacchia, had a granddaughter on the destroyed bus, and was widely suspected to have been involved in the mob-style execution of the bombing suspects. Manhattan police have reported he was found dead earlier today in his downtown penthouse office, the apparent cause being a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

In other news, we have a new twist on the story about last month’s murder of al-Qaida informant Nasser Baqr in a Hoboken strip club. Today the arresting officers, Robert Fusco and Mike Patricelli, shown here in this five-news exclusive file tape, were themselves arrested in connection with the murder. The unidentified woman who had previously been held for this crime, and who has been in federal protective custody for the past month, was allegedly set up by these two officers, although the motive for their actions is yet to be determined.

Finally, turning to sports…”

Shirley, who was still standing when the report began, watched with interest. She was hoping to get a bit of good news concerning her predicament, but for some reason she didn’t think it would come this evening, or in this way. She turned off the TV, backed up to the edge of the bed, sat down, and began to sob. Allowing herself no more than five minutes of this petty indulgence, she walked out to the love seat, picked up a back issue of *Scientific American* and began flipping through it. However, she was distracted with the anticipation of what she knew was going to be the final knock on the door.

The Vice President

wasn’t used to waiting for a meeting, but having spent most of his adult life inside the DC beltway, he realized that traffic could sometimes even keep a cabinet member from being on time for an appointment. In this case though, the visit had just recently been requested, and since he wasn’t looking forward to the discussion he was about to have, he didn’t mind the few extra minutes to gather his thoughts. This was part of the bargain he had struck with the President as far back as the campaign trail—the President got to publicly heap praise whenever it was appropriate, and the Vice President was to take care of admonishments behind closed doors. This admonishment, however, was going to be significant, and the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security was not going to take it well.

The Secretary of Homeland Security had always been a bit of a fish out of water. He had grown up in a small town off of Interstate 70 in the Kansas heartland, where his academic prowess kept him from fitting in with the other kids in his high school, but as soon as he got to Georgetown he was marked as a Midwestern hick and found himself once again not fitting in. He had studied international relations, not because it had interested him, nor because he had any particular aptitude for it, but because he thought it might be a way to launch a career in international business, and if nothing else, he was driven by ambition. After two attempts at the Foreign Service exam he returned to academia, and he moved over to College Park, Maryland to pursue a Doctorate in the same field of study.

With his Doctorate he was able to secure an entry-level position with a small lobbying firm, where he found himself representing foreign interests to US congressmen. He made a few connections in this position, mostly with low-level staffers, and was able to secure a recommendation for a position with State. He began to slowly climb through the GS ranks, when a position in the Policy Directorate in the Office of the Secretary of Defense opened up. One of his political connections was able to steer him in that direction where he spent several years learning the military jargon. As part of his responsibilities he attended a number of war games that were run by the Services or the Joint Staff, and he soon found that he could talk about moving units across a map board as well as most people with his level of experience.

His real break came, however, when his Undersecretary was contacted by the Governor of his home state to fill a vacated Senate position, and he grabbed those coattails and landed a position as a personal staffer. This position only lasted fourteen months, but it was enough time to schmooze with lobbyists, this time from the other side. The next few years were spent jumping between minor political appointments and lobbying positions, depending on which ones he thought might provide either the greater opportunity for political advancement or higher salaries. He had secured an appointment as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy for a few months at the end of an administration, and from that point forward he set his sights back on Defense. During a teaching stint at George Mason when his party was out of favor, he took the opportunity to pen a treatise on combat, drawing on his vast experiences as a war game observer, and he got a few former patrons to endorse the publication, including one who touted him as “a leading expert on maneuver warfare.” He was invited to make a presentation at the annual conference of the Association of the United States Army, where he was oblivious to the ridicule he received at the hands of some of the world’s greatest, and most successful, maneuver warriors. He returned to the State Department for a brief stint, where he spent most of his time cultivating relationships with superiors who might provide him an entrée into a higher political position.

He had become somewhat of a permanent fixture inside the Beltway, and when his party finally came back into power, it was reasonably expected that he was going to secure a significant appointment. He lobbied hard for Defense, but even the Deputy Secretary’s position was deemed to be too complex for him, as several better-qualified holders of that office had caused the nation a great amount of harm. However, Homeland Security provided a cabinet-level position that seemed to be running itself, as the entire organization was dominated by contractors, so he finally got the nod. He would not be the first person in government to secure a Cabinet appointment not due to any particular qualifications, but more through persistence and connections that were cultivated through years of personal lobbying.

It was a waste of an appointment, but with the FBI and the CIA showing a renewed amount of inter-agency cooperation on the anti-terrorism front, DHS and its contracts could languish and the American Public would be none the wiser.

However, when the Secretary entered the office of the Vice President, it was clear that the charade was about to end. After the requisite exchange of pleasantries, the Vice President directed him to a seat and got down to business.

“The President and I met with the Directors of the FBI and the CIA this morning, right after the Security update, and we’re a little disappointed in what we heard,” he began.

“Well, I wish I had been there,” the Secretary objected.

“No you don’t,” said the Vice President. “Your Department was the subject of the discussion, and the President wasn’t very happy.”

“Well, if it’s about the cell in New York, we were completely closed out of the loop on that one, and I really think that some of our assets could have helped that investigation,” the Secretary said.

“It looks like they did fine without you,” said the Vice President, “and we’re more concerned with what your two contractors did with that bus.”

“Now that’s really unfair,” the Secretary protested. “There’s no way I can be held responsible for every rogue contractor who’s moonlighting for the mob.”

“Actually, that’s not the way it happened. The FBI put that story together to protect your Department, when in reality those guys were trying to hit a Jewish bus to keep themselves in the game.”

The revelation hit like a brick. That rumor had reached his ears, but his people had assured him it was beltway scuttlebutt, and that the story that had reached the press was the truth. “Mr. Vice President, I...I just can’t believe that,” he stammered.

“It doesn’t matter,” came the quick response. “The President does. Now, here’s what we’re gonna’ do. Your Department has been sucking up a lot of the budget, and with very few tangible results. Meanwhile, we’ve got the FBI and the CIA doing your job for you, and not even telling you about it. It’s a failure of leadership, and while the President would say it’s his, I’m going to say it’s yours. What you’re going to do to fix this is to begin the draw-down of your department. As contracts come up for renewal, I want them cancelled. I don’t want to see any new hires, and over the next four years, DHS is simply going to melt away. Any successful programs you have under way right now, I want turned over to the FBI or the CIA, depending on who would have jurisdiction. We’re about to get real serious about homeland defense, and the way we’re going to do it is eliminate a huge level of bureaucracy. We’re putting the operators in the lead, and we’re going to get out of their way. Now I’m going to need you to put the public face on this draw-down while sending the right message to those who might want to harm us. That’s probably the most difficult part of this task, and we need you to get it right. Now, do you understand what the President and I need from you?”

“Yes, Mr. Vice President,” came the meager response, and being told there was nothing further, the Secretary left the office.

Ms. Cruise had done her job far better than Tommy could have ever imagined.

The Safe House Door

cracked open, as Shirley had been expecting. She wasn’t wearing her earbuds and the TV wasn’t providing any background music, so she heard the light knock, and deciding to not show too much enthusiasm, she put on her raspiest voice and said “Yeah, whaddaya’ want?”

Tommy poked his head around the door, saw her sitting on the love seat, and asked in mock surprise, “You’re not packed yet?”

“You know,” said Shirley, “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. Do I have to haul all my crap back on my own, or is the magic fairy going to transport all this stuff back for me?”

“Well,” Tommy replied, “tonight you can take back what you need. The crew will bring everything else back to your apartment tomorrow.”

“So do I get to keep the laptop?” Shirley asked. She had gotten used to having it at her constant disposal, as opposed to having to rely on the library for her surfing.

“Sorry,” Tommy said. “You see that barcode on the front of it? That means that someone in the Bureau is signed for it, and if you take it home, it comes out of their paycheck.”

Shirley got up from the love seat, walked over to the TV in the bedroom, said “Damn,” and walked back. As she sat back down, Tommy, who had already pulled a chair over from the kitchen table, chuckled.

“I’m afraid so,” he said, “The furniture stays too.”

“That’s OK,” Shirley admitted, “it’s all pretty butt-ugly anyway. So how about my elliptic?”

“We’ll take that back to your gym,” he said, “It’ll be waiting for you tomorrow.”

Tommy was a little surprised at how long Shirley had gone without mentioning the day’s news events, and the suspense was grating at him, so he finally blurted out, “So, did you catch the news this evening?”

Shirley pointed at the magazines on the table in front of her, and said “No, I’ve been reading all afternoon. Why, did something happen that I should know about?”

However, as she asked this, she cracked a slight smile, and Tommy knew that she had been playing him since he walked in the door. “Well, are you ready to go home?” he asked.

“Not sure,” she said. “I’m kinda’ starting to get used to this. I figure’d that I’d just stay here for a few more months.”

“OK, have it your way,” he said, getting up and walking out towards the door.

“Tommy,” she said, getting him to turn around, “Thanks.”

“Just doin’ my job, Ma’am,” came the well-conditioned response.

“Well, you did a hell of a job.”

“Now don’t you go getting all sentimental on me, now,” he said, “it’s not your style.”

“Sorry,” she apologized, as he sat back down.

“Ya know, Shirl,” he said, “I’m really going to miss our chats. As busy as we’ve been this past month, coming over here has been more than just a nice diversion.”

“Wow, I’ve been promoted to nice diversion. I guess I’ll start packing up,” Shirley said, not moving from the seat.

“So, are you going to pick up where you left off?” Tommy asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well,” explained Tommy, “most of the people who stay here have a life-changing experience. Either that, or they’re here because of a life-changing experience, in particular the ones who are under protective custody. They have an opportunity to reflect on how they got here, or where they were going, and they usually leave here in another direction.”

“Oh, you mean like Baqr?”

“Touché,” Tommy said. “Look, I know we’ve made some mistakes, but I was just wondering what you’re gonna’ do with your life after taking a month off from it.”

“What’s wrong with my life?” Shirley asked. “I make plenty of money, I get to do the things I like doing, I spend most of the day reading and surfing, I have more than enough time to stay in shape, and pretty much nobody bothers me. I like it that way.”

“Oh. No,” Tommy said, “I wasn’t trying to imply that there was anything wrong with your life. It’s just that not everyone gets a month of to reflect, and I know that you’ve been doing some reflecting in here, and I was just wondering if you were going to change anything when you got back to your apartment.”

“Well, what would you do?” Shirley shot back. “If you got to spend a month in a parking garage at the Federal Government’s invitation, what would you do differently when you got out?”

“You know, I’ve never really thought about it,” Tommy said. “I’ve never had a month off where I could take stock of my situation, but I’ve seen a lot of people stay in here, and maybe I’m just wondering what it’d be like.”

“So what do all of your other prisoners tell you,” Shirley continued, putting special emphasis on the word “prisoner.”

“Actually,” Tommy said, “you’re the first one I’ve ever asked. To be perfectly honest most of them go from here into the witness protection program.”

“Well, to be perfectly honest,” Shirley mocked him, “I haven’t done a whole lot of reflecting about the grand scheme of things since I’ve been in here. I’ve been more concerned about what my government was going to do about my situation with a couple of crooked cops, and if I’d ever get to walk down the street safely again.”

“Well, you shouldn’t see Fusco or Patricelli for a long time,” Tommy said, relieved to get the conversation out of the hole he had dug for himself and onto something that might cast him in a more positive light. “They struck a deal with the DA when they realized we had them cold, and they promised us Marnacchia. Of course, with his untimely demise, they’ve lost a bargaining chip, and they’re still facing a pretty stiff murder rap.”

“So was it easy to nail them?” Shirley asked, knowing that Tommy would appreciate putting the focus back on the good deed he had done for her.

“Well,” Tommy said, “the next time you see Carmine, you may want to thank him. He corroborated all of the details you had provided me, and was even able to help us ID some of the club patrons who we were able to talk to as reluctant witnesses. It turns out Fusco had an empty file on the investigation, but the two patrolmen, the forensics guys, and Carmine were able to pretty much lock it up for us.”

“Well, you know,” Shirley said, “people aren’t always what they seem.”

“Tell me about it,” Tommy agreed. “So, are you looking forward to getting back to the club?” Tommy asked more directly, still perhaps hinting at a disapproval of Shirley’s chosen profession.

“Absolutely,” Shirley said. “Why don’t you stop by some time for a lap dance? I am, however, looking forward to resuming my previous cash flow situation, but what I’m really looking forward to is walking down the street.”

“Well, hopefully you’ll find the streets a little safer than they were before,” Tommy suggested.

“Thanks to you guys just doing your job.”

“Well,” Tommy said, “fortunately there’s always going to be plenty of people out there who keep me employed. It just seems like human nature.”

“Yeah,” Shirley agreed. “For me too.”

“So by the way, those magazines don’t have bar codes on them, so you could probably keep them. You may want to drop the back copies off at the library when you’re done reading them, though.”

“Oh, I was planning on it,” Shirley said, “since I figured not a lot of folks in your organization would be interested in them. Not a lot of comic books in that stack.”

“Hey, not all of us are Neanderthals.”

“Sorry,” Shirley said, “that was mean.”

“You know,” Tommy said, “I was hoping to ask you if we might be able to get together some time after you return to your normal life, but I’m not sure I’d be able to.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you’d probably just accuse me of doing the whole Lima Syndrome thing, or even worse going all intellectual on me and filling my brain with all that junk in your magazines. Then my head would explode.”

Shirley blushed at the complement, but perhaps more at what she knew she was about to say. “You know,” she almost hesitated, “there are other ways to have a relationship besides intellectual.”

“Like what?” Tommy asked.

The Bedroom Door

closed.