

# **CAESAR AUGUSTUS**

**By Doug Gentile**

## Caesar Augustus

Arizona sun scorching the horizon. An old jeep drove into an open hangar countless miles into nowhere. Undercover drug agent William Barnes was prompt, as always, for his rendezvous. His contact drove up in an identical jeep. Strategically late.

Joe Rennie unlocked a hidden trunk and pulled out a huge satchel. He dropped the satchel at Barnes' feet. Barnes beheld this guy Rennie, with playboy physique, sheepdog blonde hair, laidback blue eyes, and an icy demeanor which made Barnes not totally convinced. Eyeing Rennie wryly, he opened the sack.

"Ninety percent standard blow, the other ten for rock," Rennie said lazily. Barnes' eyes whitened at the sight.

"Rennie, there's enough coke there to build a beach."

"DEA," Rennie said stridently.

"Huh?"

"DEA," Rennie said louder.

Barnes was indignant. "37 years. Haven't screwed my country yet."

Rennie looked hard at this middle-aged agent with clay face, clumped hair and specks. He looked like a government clerk ready to retire. The biker garb didn't fit. Rennie shook his finger at him now. "DEA!"

"Whatever. We hit the Mob from both sides—at the front end when they buy, and the back end to the distributors—and we don't need half of Bolivia to accomplish that."

"This is the big one. The Guinness Book," Rennie's staccato words belied his bookish eyes, "DEA. You look DEA, talk DEA, even smell like DEA. Which means you're on a suicide mission."

"I am a Federal Officer!" Barnes was genuinely ticked. "Not some alley riff-raff that the Mob can blow away like grass."

Rennie got right in his face. "This isn't the Moustache Pete days. Caesar Augustus doesn't run from Feds, he doesn't bow to them, he has no fear of them. His view of Feds would be the envy of any jihadist."

2

Benny Larrow sat in a padded chair in his Phoenix Mansion and watched the nine-digit figures flashing across his pocket calculator. He hit the subtract button, assessed the latest financial loss and then shrugged.

He'd owned every kind of racket known to man, beginning on his seventh birthday in a Queens ghetto when he won fifteen bucks from a classmate on a stacked deck. Bowing to the great roulette wheel in the sky, then hard-core homosexual porno flicks, white slavery, "pyramid" swindle scams, methamphetamine factory—finally Vegas casino interests, an insurance company, and government contracts.

He owned a revolving bed for a parade of women, some as young as thirteen. Yet

the harder he partied, the more alone he felt. Twenty-five rooms, some as ostentatious as Louis XIV at Versailles, but cold and barren as twenty-five tombs. A slovenly man with crabgrass hair, sagging ivory cheeks, chunky arms and pregnant paunch, Larrow realized he had little to show for himself besides the trappings of a mercenary existence. His only genuine accomplishment was his daughter, Dawn--and calls to her ASU dormitory to touch the nerve of vibrant innocence if only for a few seconds, to remind himself that God, whoever he was, was still capable of miracles.

Larrow was the link between operators and the Santucci Family. This latest debacle would hardly crimp his lifestyle.

His Honduran maid alerted him to a visitor waiting outside the mansion: The New York Commission emissary who Santucci told him to welcome. Larrow staggered out into the blast furnace of the Arizona summer and looked past the spokes of his wrought-iron gate, and there was the limousine, long and shiny. And blacker than death.

As he approached this ominous vehicle, Larrow dwelled upon Caesar Augustus and the Death Angels. Envisioning these faceless, jet-black humanoids floating through the air with garrotes, blending in with the dark of night from whence they struck.

The Italian driver with the black chauffeur's cap emerged and opened the back door to allow Larrow to crawl in the backseat. Beside him was the New York emissary, a husky man solid from head to toe, with blubbery lips and a granite face casting a vague shadow over deep charcoal eyes. Babe Lonardo! This was the coldest Larrow had felt in the desert heat. He knew he'd slid by a gilded existence with ne'er a legal or physical threat. Just bow with respect, pay the feudal tithes, and let Mob Daddy take care of him. Now a crooked, bumpy turn.....

The limousine was the only vehicle on a gravel road cutting through an endless sea of sagebrush and sand. Lonardo glanced back to make sure he wasn't being followed. Satisfied, he motioned the driver to stop the car in a little patch in the middle of nowhere, where the shimmering heat had turned the air into transparent jelly, and where the distant red mountain range appeared as a melting mirage.

With a little groan, Lonardo displayed the headlines of newspaper: FEDS NOTCH ALL-TIME RECORD COCAINE BUST IN ARIZONA.

Feeling awkward and oppressed, Larrow carefully chose his words.

"Santucci's lining up a new Mexican distributor right now," his words were cut short by Lonardo angrily slamming the paper against the window.

"In Maui, sunnin' his ugly self? The thing Caesar Augustus hates the most is to have his Boys embarrassed by the Feds."

Larrow swallowed his fear into contrived bravado.

"Why me? I ain't got nothing to do with it."

"Santucci has a rat in his Family," his baritone voice ringing. Then he held a wallet-sized photo in front of Larrow's eyes: William Barnes. "This one of your friends? A DEA plant!"

Lonardo mocked Larrow's dumbfounded expression. "Caesar Augustus got eyes in the local Organized Crime Strike Force. What you got?"

"Armand flies back tomorrow--"

"This ain't a bureaucracy and we ain't punchin' no clocks. You've disgraced the Organization!" Larrow squeezed his shaking hands together. "You idiots got make your bones again. You're to ice the Fed."

“Clip a Federal Agent? The heat outside ain’t bad enough?”

Lonardo’s huge hands clutched Larrow by the shirt, shook him like a rag doll. Out of sheer desperation Larrow lashed back:

“You go around Santucci and his captains like they ain’t here. Shaking down other families like they’re some kind of street punk, but not here. You come to Armand and ask his permission.”

A few seconds of silence was enough to bring Larrow back to his senses, and he realized what a terrible mistake he had made. Larrow choked down an impulse to weep, and wondered if Lonardo had ever seen Caesar Augustus face-to-face.

Like a provoked gorilla, Lonardo was on top of Larrow, throwing him out of the limo, and pushing his face into the sand. Holding it there about 15 seconds while Larrow flopped like a beached whale.

“You know, Benny, the Death Angels hate Arizona. They get awful nasty. You get exactly 48 hours to execute the contract.”

When Larrow had forced enough coherence to spit the hot gravelly residue from his mouth, the limo was already in motion, disappearing into the blinding inferno. Two hours later, Larrow, dehydrated, half-dead, would be collected.

3

Later that week, 4:30 P.M. The Federal Press Room was packed wall-to-wall. Cameras and notepads primed, and a tension due mainly to the smart lady at the podium.

“We’ve 15 indictments from the drug bust, and we anticipate several more.” A strident alto voice. “This monstrous crime syndicate will know that we’ve hit ‘em and hit ‘em hard.” The name on the placard said Leslie D’Amico, U.S. Attorney. A sharp gray suit, matching pageboy and confident stature framed her well against the huge wall-adorned U.S. Seal.

“How much money would all that cocaine bring on the street?” Came a reporter’s question.

“I think we are missing the point,” D’Amico cut in. “There has never been a more dire threat from a domestic narco-terrorist syndicate. You all missed our government’s multimillion dollar heroin bust in new Orleans yesterday. So, Mister Caesar Disgustus, the score is: U.S. Government 2, you nothing.”

“On the subject of fancy-named tough guys uh, Ms. D’Amico,” came a query from a dean of reporters, “Deep sources say Caesar Augustus’s true identity isn’t known even to much of his inner circle.”

“Again, we are missing the point, because ghosts don’t kill or maim. When we serve the warrant and I personally lock on the handcuffs, there will be a name.”

“One followup,” said the dean. “These regional syndicates, loosely bound under some nationally coordinated leadership for lack of a better word. Yet hundreds of Mafiosi locked up since Y2K. Those facts don’t converge.”

D’Amico hesitated. “Okay. Call it a matter of priority. Narco syndicates somewhere in the double digits of national priority. Well, those who would legalize all the restricted commodities as they say, into a cultural cesspool—I say there are absolutes

the government must stand for. There is absolute truth. Once we say this evil is conditional, and that horror is relative—first a slow leak, then a fast leak. See, we had our foot on the neck of that monster, and maybe we loosened it, and something diabolical, we don't know what yet, sprang up.

“We should have kept our foot steady then.”

“No. We should have taken an ax to the thing.—Excuse me.” Leslie D'Amico made quickly for the exit, a dozen aids in tow. Subtle nods of respect followed her out the door.

5:00 PM. Benny Larrow tore through his mansion. One room, then another. Ignoring his Honduran's maid's call of concern, he thrust himself inside the padlocked bastion, and slammed the door shut. There was a large video screen on the opposite wall, and Larrow fumbled with the control like a junkie for a fix.

“Be there!” He cried out. The screen was still cloudy. “Be there!”

With quiet whimpers, he replayed a video feed from a computer next to a large TV screen. “Daddy! Daddy! Please—they're hurting me.” The voice of an angel. Contrasted with something invisible, unspeakable—off the chart compared to his normal predator activities. “Daddy, please come!—they're hurting me!”

Finally, a stately Don with silverfish hair appeared on the TV screen.

“Armand! You gotta listen to this.” He played the video feed again.

Santucci beheld him with steady eyes. Saying nothing.

“Armand! You answer me! I'm about to kill somebody!”

Recalling Lonardo, he felt that familiar chill. So now he was on his knees, openly weeping. “Please, anything. Tell 'em I'll give 'em my mansion. All the business I own. I'll even cut the fingers off my hand. Just give me my daughter Dawn.”

“What's going on, Benny?” Santucci said, exaggerating his expressions of ignorance. He became larger on the screen. “And act like a man.”

Larrow inhaled, “A Capo from the very top Augustus Comission paid me a visit. Babe Lonardo. Tells me to clip a Fed—like I'm looking to have U.S. Marines doing a room-to-room search of my place.”

“Benny. Benny. I warned you many times about pallin' with gangsters. Want no trouble. But this stupid FBI guy told me, without me askin of course, that Lonardo has six witnesses saying he's been fishing in Florida all week. Signed records, too. You shouldn't be lying, Benny.”

“I got sagebrush in my sinuses to prove it, Armand!”

“And I also heard,” Santucci continued, “Man, you talked back to, disrespected Caesar Augustus's Capo? Ain't gotta be crooked to know that's plain insane. So Benny, I want you divested from my casino. And my hospital.” The screen went blank.

5:30 PM. The second floor of the old warehouse building was dark despite the sun. The sniper sat just inside the open window. He cursed the heat while beads of sweat poured down his pocked face and black cat tattooed arms below surfari shirt.

“Been two hours now,” he said into his headset. He re-aimed his rifle, squeezing his eye against a very powerful scope. The crosshairs followed Phoenix's brand new Federal building, the crowd in front, the cameras, the traffic on the thorofare. Only three

blocks away, but to the enhanced eye, next door. “Come on, baby, you’re making me mad. Make me miss my twangin’ show tonight. In that case I’ll have to kill you twice.”

“You give those escape vaults a dry run? I timed four minutes,” came a voice in the sniper’s ear.

“I did it in three. A minute margin of error. An eternity. Fact, them cotton-pickin’ channels so deep, I betcha I can drop 3 or 4 more G-folks before they’re knowin’ I’m here. But—does the lady have her own vault?”

“Private motorcade in front, you said it, Billy Ray. And you are not going to miss.”

“I don’t miss.”

“You WILL not miss. This is a Caesar Augustus special delivery.—And you been freelancing?”

No way. I’m Organization all the way. And I can explain that. See, I sent this twirlin’ knife airborne, and it stuck right above the ear. 20 feet at least, man, a work of art! No contract, just someone messin’ with my chick. Someone mess with Billy Ray Cox, that’s their problem, not mine.—Wait. Bingo!”

He steadied the rifle, eyed the scope. Deep breath. The rifle cracked, reverberating through the open window.

All smiles from Billy Ray at the sight of people scattering like ants routed from an anthill. One more look at the scope for verification: one bullethole, minimal blood, no mess.

The distant murmur of shouts and screams was supremely comforting. Billy Ray raised his fist in victory.

4

It was a bohemian little joint down New Orleans on the rebound. Cool jazz band, soft lights, bar in the middle. FBI agents Vic Moreau and Sid Jackson occupied a private table in the corner. They blended right in: The stalky Jackson with a 2” afro straight out of the 70s. Moreau with shaggy, collar-length brown hair and tight dreads. The White guy. And knot of blue tie 2” below the Adam’s apple.

“Been an FBI guy twenty-two years. Never seen anything like this,” Jackson said.

“She’s down, man,” Moreau said.

“Who?”

“Mom. It’s terminal, life support stuff,” Moreau said with red eyes. “Ain’t got the heart to pull the plug on her. I don’t create life, and it’s not mine to take, either.” Moreau shook his head, thinking he really needed to get out of his childhood home of Louisiana, and back to the comfortable workaholicism of Washington, D.C. Jackson gave a sympathetic pat and excused himself to the b-room.

Within seconds his seat was occupied, uninvited, by a sleek woman with a red mini-skirt. And very Mediterranean. Moreau gave her a blank look.

“Anybody ever tell you, you look like Bobby Kennedy?” she asked lowly.

Actually, there was a resemblance to the late knighted one. More angular and muscular, though. Then she leaned over and whispered, “Hey Hip Kennedy, how about a taste?”

Moreau manufactured a polite grin with his long mouth. “Love to, honey. Only trading a five-minute fantasy for a possible lifetime of AIDS is supremely stupid.” Moreau thought that would get rid of her. But it didn’t, so he added, “And I’m one of Jesus’s people. We only do it in marriage.” That did it. But in her retreat she flashed him a sharp look. Moreau sensed he’d cross with that woman again.

Jackson returned with a beer, and pineapple juice for Moreau. Moreau took a boomerang device out of his coat pocket. It had a mouth at the tip. Jackson queried, and Moreau chuckled, “A new gizmo. Phone on laser signal. Can’t be traced or tapped. You’re looking at one of about five.”

“Jesus, crimeny, Victor Francis,” came a forlorn voice from the other end of the connection. “What do you want? It’s midnight!”

“You know exactly what I want. Next call comes at 3:00 AM.” There was a different laser: Moreau’s eyes.

“Moreau, you’ve got a top secret unit, official protection, no one hovering over you—”

“And about 20% of the resources needed to liberate some innocent stakeholders.”

“And it’s the same old problem, Moreau. None of your agents with Arabic as second language.”

“The narco-terrorists are organized like never before. It’s now a national conglomerate. Read your history: the independent fiefdoms subjugated by the powerful king. The Caesar in Rome resurrected. Happening today in America.”

“Moreau, you’re just not getting it. The Director wanted you in counterterrorism last year, because that’s where the threat is, and that’s where he wants his best agents, including you.”

“You ain’t been listening at all, Lezcano. I am in counterterrorism,” Moreau protested. “They scorch the inner-cities with their drugs. America’s innocence with their porn. The narco war in Mexico. It aint comin’ here. It’s already here. And we got no moral authority to deal with it.”

“Moreau, you get away with bucking the system only because of your exemplary track record—but your organizational capital is not without limits.”

Moreau hung up, and Jackson inquired. “Paul Lezcano the Attorney-General,” Moreau answered. “No, not the big one. He’s got an A-word in front of his title. Associate, Assistant, Adjutant, abysmal, use your imagination. Frick him.”

They left at 2:00 AM, with Jackson noting Moreau’s melancholy silence from family illness, job frustrations. They walked into the sidestreet where they were parked. A dark figure of a woman, bracing against a storefront, called Moreau’s name.

“You’re not working down the croissant place no more?” Moreau asked sympathetically.

“No sir, done gone. You know I don’t do shelters. Haven’t chowed for a while.” Moreau handed her a Twenty, and Jackson chuckled.

“Anyone in this town you don’t know, Vic? How many years you live here?”

“Only the first fifteen,” Moreau shrugged. “But it’s family.”

An approaching pedestrian; another woman called. Jackson openly laughed, that Moreau was approached in the street twice within a minute. It was the mediterranean woman, mini-skirt covered by a black raincoat.

“Hey, Hip Kennedy! There’s a very private alley here—And you, too, Mr. Ebony.

Make it a twin spin."

"Good night, ma'am," Moreau started to turn. Jackson saw the hand come out of the coat, then the pistol. Before he could find his own gun, he heard the loud shot. Moreau was on one knee, arms extended. The woman slumped to the ground, her subnose .38 clacking against the sidewalk.

Jackson could only marvel at Moreau's incredible training regimen, discipline. But it was something more. Instinct. Jackson ran to the woman, and saw the bloody hole in the chest, and then shook his head at Moreau.

"First time I've killed a woman," Moreau said.

"Feel bad, Commander?"

"No. Evil don't discriminate on the basis of gender."

"Tell you, Vic. Caesar Augustus is invisible, but you're a big bullseye. Not good. But we got your back." Jackson gazed around. About a thousand possible sniper niches.

"That's next," Moreau said, reading his mind and tapping his bulletproof vest.

"Let's get out of here." Farther down the twisted street came a shriek from a window.

"Yeah, we don't need local-yocals digging into Bureau business," Jackson said.

"Forget the locals. It's the news reporters." Like a swastika to a Jew, kryptonite to superman and a white sheet to a Black—So was a reporter to Victor Francis Moreau.

5

Two years earlier.

The sun was fire, scorching the palms and the foot-tall weeds. They said that only alligators and fallen angels roam this, the swamplands of extreme Southwest Florida, a cropduster's spin away from Naples.

On this torrid afternoon, the one jungle-lined road was invaded by a shiny black Cadillac, speeding into nowhere, rocking and churning, mud flying.

Another large flashy sedan followed. Then a third. A fourth. A fifth, piercing, violating the Everglades.

The journey ended where the road ended: at Carlo Lefrelli's beach house, a two-story edifice of white brick and glass walls. It was a diamond amidst the impenetrable thicket. One by one, the sedans crept into the gravel lot. Gangsters, with rings, ties and dark suits, even in the infernal heat.

The warlords greeted each other with a big embrace and kiss to the cheek. And each man was routinely frisked by a burly bodyguard.

The Dons shielded their eyes from blinding rays from chrome, and trotted into the lush sanctuary for air conditioning.

Only the Bosses were allowed on the lower level to formulate the latest decrees. Carlo Lefrelli's Mob-made "chef" made a brief appearance to set the table for the feast. He passed around the hors d'oeuvres and then, striking a little low each time, filled each goblet with wine. The warm scent of the freshly-made pasta touched the senses of each Boss. Made them forget temporarily, the tensions within the New York five-families, and between families in other major cities. It was a half-hour of gregarious laughter, joking,



sharing family stories, travel foibles, annoying ailments. It was all a light prelude to very heavy business. The feast passed quite quickly.

Don Carlo Lefrelli was a stumpy, but muscular man whose brown eyes wore a glassy, calculative expression which never changed. The thick eyebrows of this tan, bald-headed man pointed upward. His hairy chest was draped with a gold lion medallion under an open white shirt. In addressing his colleagues, he couldn't help but laugh inside at the idiot news media: Always naming the wrong guys as Dons of the major Families. Such ignorance guaranteed a low profile for each of the monoliths seated at this table. The Real Commission. He joined each "fratello" in raising his goblet full of priceless wine. A huge portrait of the Madonna overlooked them, as if guiding them. Lefrelli mumbled a brief prayer in Italian, made the sign of the cross and then belied it with an icy stare.

"When we eliminate Rocco Giovanni, it must be a clean sweep. Every capiregime working for him will have to be hit, too. Contracts simultaneous. We must start—and end the war."

But Roberto Columbo, the oldest of the Dons, disagreed. "We haven't leaned on him hard enough, I say retire him. Send him out to Vegas, a lot of cash, but no action."

"It's his lieutenants," Don Carlo shot back. "Cutting each other's throats, greedier and meaner all the time. Sharks!"

"Don Carlo is right, Giovanni and lieutenants are destroying Brooklyn. America!"

A moment of silence ensued. All eyes gradually gravitated toward the respected Carlo Lefrelli, who was always in charge at these meetings. Lefrelli was quite chagrined; these discussions made him nostalgic for the old days when the Dons truly were godfathers of sorts. Respect, honor and trust were becoming obsolete in their secret world.

"In my territory, we got cops," Carlo continued. "These cops are loyal to me. They're also paid to keep the streets clean. But Giovanni can't control his own cops. Young toughs roam the streets, robbing old ladies, giving our neighborhoods a bad reputation. How can you run a business for your people if they can't walk the streets. Giovanni lost the truce with the Ricans and the Colored. He took more of a cut on the drug trade. If it wasn't for the Philadelphia lawyer making the peace, we would have had more bodies in the East River than you could count."

"Don't tell me about the Philadelphia lawyer," Roberto Columbo said.

"I will tell you—and the Philadelphia lawyer will tell you—that some of Giovanni's young stallions have broken the silence. The same-old same-old. The betrayal never stops."

Upstairs, the young underlings had cleaned out all the booze from Don Carlo Lefrelli's wood-carved bar. Rough-talking young Italians in suits crowded around the billiards table waiting their turn. Cigarettes dangling from their mouths. The Philadelphia lawyer was not among them. He had isolated himself from them, content to sit in a corner and read poems by Shelley. He tried to ignore the Sinatra music blaring from a stereo.

"Yo, Vandermere—you don't like us or what?" A billiard-playing caporegime challenged. The Philadelphia lawyer did not respond. He had no interest in trivial games. His three-piece black designer suit told of a businessman rather than a street hood. His thick black beard was neatly trimmed, as was his thick curly black hair parted in the middle.

Vandermere took in the placid sea and boats in the distance.

Finally Vandermere approached the room where the Masters of Power were seated. As one would Christ's tomb. He clutched his cane with both hands so that no one could see the sweat dampening both palms.

"Gentlemen. With all due respect, I am at the service of the Commission." His voice was upper crust Northeast. Ivy League.

Don Roberto spoke with contempt, "You only pal around with bankers and stockbrokers," He accentuated his Sicillian dialect.

"Half-breed!" Another called.

"We called you here, Jody, because the Commission is faced with Giovanni again," said Carlo. "We need a complete readout on Giovanni's operations. I am afraid the time has come..."

"I have already solved the problem," Vandermere's foghorn voice was extremely deliberate. This was the biggest dance with power, among many. "Rocco took his boat out for a cruise from Atlantic City. I suspect the sharks had a good dinner."

"What?" from several mouths.

"Jody, you made a contract without permission from the Ruling Commission?" Don Carlo's question was a recital of a cardinal sin.

Don Roberto stormed to his feet. "This half-breed from Philadelphia knows all our fronts. All of our outlets. He transfers our money. All our operations. He knows us better than we do! And now he's ordering executions behind our backs! —Carlo, this half-breed is totally out of control!"

Vandermere felt the sweat beginning to soak his shirt. And he could hear the pounding of his own heart. But he dared not display any sign of weakness.

"There was no time to convene a meeting," Vandermere said in as calm a voice as possible. "Giovanni was a threat. Had to be eliminated."

"God help you if your mother wasn't a Colazzo," one called.

"Ah, Colazzo!" Don Carlo stood up and threw his arms out jovially. He approached Vandermere with a cigar wagging from his mouth. "Mama Colazzo. I knew her well. She raised a good kid. Sent young Vandermere to the best Catholic schools. Then Princeton. Then law school. Rubbed noses with the elite. But I knew the kid. He knew his roots. We could have started him out as a shylock. Or a runner. With his brains? We knew many, many years he would be polishing our family jewels." Don Carlo could easily extend his hand to Vandermere because Pappy Colazzo had given Carlo several reprieves in the underworld.

"Do I have to remind all of you how Jody saved us from a revolt by the Colored in the Bronx last year? Jody's own cops! Now the Colored. They might think they can beat the Family. But they can't beat Family and heat, so they deal." Don Carlo's head turned slowly to the right. "And that was on your turf, Roberto. Remember?"

Murmurs of mutiny continued. Vandermere looked at his watch like someone waiting for a late train.

The meeting was interrupted by the appearance of Don Carlo's caporegime at the stairwell. He descended the stairs in a brisk transical walk.

"I don't know how, Boss, but there are intruders outside. They got State Police badges."

Rumbles of disbelief emanated from the Mafia's Roundtable.

"Shut up!" Carlo yelled. "And how did the heat get all the way to this house

without us knowing about it? There are supposed to be five of our guys at checkpoints along the road!”

“Forgive me, Boss, but it ain’t no one’s fault. The intruders came up on us by boat. It’s docked outside.”

Don Carlo’s cold, calculative eyes gauged the expression of each man in the room. This meeting was top secret, so the implication was clear: someone had broken Omerta; someone seated at this very table.

“What are we gonna do, Boss?” asked the Capo.

“What do you mean, what are we gonna do? They can join the party. We got nothing to hide. Haven’t we always been law abiding citizens?”

Heels clicking against the wooden steps. In front of rageous expressions of the Supreme Council, capos and bodyguards were marched downstairs in handcuffs by five State cops. Not shy about presenting either the credential or their automatic pistols.

Don Carlo jumped up in defense of his men:

“Are we under arrest? What for? You ain’t got nothing on us.”

Thirteen Dons, eighteen mobsters—the national brain trust—all herded like dogs up the steps and outside. Cops acting more like hoods, kicking and shoving the Mobsters onto the dock and finally onto the deck of the yacht.

There wasn’t another boat within three miles. One of the cops ignited the engine of the yacht and set her into motion. The only background noise was the radio monitor of the local Coast Guard cutters. Each mobster was forced face down against the deck, shackles locked onto their ankles.

The yacht propelled itself away from the shoreline, negotiating the mild swells rolling from the Gulf. Deeper into the open waters. Soon the closest boats were nothing but dots on the horizon; only dancing water, blue sky, and fluffy white clouds were immediately visible.

Suddenly the engine of the yacht was cut off. Hissing of the stiff breeze against the rippling sea. Don Carlo, seated, saw black boots stepping over the cramped and debilitated colleagues. At that instant, he realized that there were not 28 mobsters under siege, but 27.

The Philadelphia lawyer confidently twirled his gold-plated cane. Lefrelli was blinded by a cold fury, destroying all thoughts of Pappy Colazzo’s grace. Centuries of tradition humiliated by a heretic half-breed.

“Are any of these cops?” Don Carlo asked.

“Not a one. Hardware courtesy of my Florida PD contacts.” Vandermere lit a cigar as a silenced bullet was driven into Don Roberto’s skull. One of the ‘cops,’ a brown-haired preppy-looking guy named Gordon Dugan, hoisted the weighted-down dead torso of Roberto Columbo over the railing. Splash.

Vandermere sat down across from Lefrelli with an air of reverence. “As a gesture of respect for you, Don Carlo, this will be painless,” his mouth became an inverted U beneath the beard. “These Dons never showed me respect. I brought genius, corporate innovations and for years I was just a punching bag for bullies. But you were different. Thank you.”

“What on God’s earth are you doing, Jody?” Carlo rasped, his body still quaking with anger.

“My enforcers here have committed an act on camera so revolting, they can never

turn State's evidence. We all know about that, don't we?"

"I never sanctioned that!" Carlo bellowed.

"Sometimes we perfect art before we perfect business. As Shakespeare wrote, 'the valiant never taste death but once.'"

A second shackled Don kissed the sea. Then a third.

"A fading generation of wise guys," Vandermere continued. "The restricted commodities ventures are Jamaican, Mexican, Chinese, Russian. History goes on, and this is Century 21. Diversity, megamergers. Don Carlo, you taught me peace and discipline. Rome is rising again! 'Tis a shame you won't live to see them perfected in the most powerful holding company in the history of the world."

Don Carlo spit, and it landed on Vandermere's cheek.

Vandermere hardened. "You never should have given me keys to all the Don's enterprises. Your legal interference strategy is my gold mine. I am now God. Unarrestable. Unconvictable. Untouchable."

Another Don hit the sea.

6

Return to present.

The J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building, Washington D.C. Deep in the catacombs, Michelle Lopez occupied a reception desk in a quiet anteroom. Jet black straight hair, lined eyes, pettily-pleasant while quietly speaking Spanish into the phone. She terminated the call when another line lit up.

"Who? A Mr. Victor Moreau? No one by that name works here, sorry." A light-touch Spanish dialect.

The red phone to her right rang. "Good morning, Mr. Lezcano, Commander Moreau should be here.—You have a nice day, too."

Vic Moreau stepped in. With a sigh she handed him an anticipated folder.

"You beat my wildest expectations, dahlin," Moreau complimented. "You're the best. That raise will be in your next check."

"Oh, and the tape, sir." She tried to toss it to him as he playfully weaved back and forth.

"Thanks a zillion."

"You have a superday, sir."

Moreau went into a very large room with ample wall cabinets, computers and large video screens. Chairs and small tables haphazardly arranged, and private offices farther back. Moreau sat in front of his favorite video screen. He pulled up photo after photo, each with a narrative abstract of various lengths. Occasionally he would cross-check it with a transcript on the desk in front of him. Several hundred pages piled up.

Moreau pointed to his computer, and the massive citizen database: "FIS. Federal Inventory of Scumbags," he said to no one. "Can hear you wheezin' now, Mr. Caesar-to-be-exposed. We're gonna take you down."

Moreau took a cup of coffee, and noticed the half-full cup right next to it. Loosening his blue tie, he picked up the laser phone.

"Father Thorson, I'm glad you're there. Kind of tough right now. So many waking hours with the lowest common denominators of evil in the world. A nice, normal world, tens of millions of people out there, and I rarely see it."

"Your slumming makes the reality of those nice tens of millions more comfortable, more safe. Take heart from that," the voice responded. "Look in 2 Corinthians. The Apostle Paul speaks about joy of victory, while being stoned, whipped and naked. When's the last time you were naked and stoned with lashes on your back, Inspector Moreau?"

Moreau tried to smile. "Point well taken." When he saw Jackson standing over him, he put the phone down.

"Michelle tells me you never left yesterday," Jackson said. "Twenty hours in here, non-stop?"

"Shower and food bar downstairs. I ain't gonna die."

"That means, no 90.06 chop and launch session," Jackson added. For Moreau a 90-minute regimen everyday of martial arts, target practice, weights and sprints. Moreau needed to be as good, or better, than all the soldiers. On both sides. "Your streak ends at fifty-six."

"Fifty-eight," Moreau said.

"Respectfully, Commander, tired eyes won't hang an accurate profile on Caesar Augustus."

The door suddenly opened for Tom Hull. Short white hair, pale skin, pressed gray suit—a perfect poster boy for Aryan Nations. He carried a bunch of newspapers, which he promptly dumped on the floor. Hull then picked up a wheely chair and hurled it with a crash against the cabinets.

In came Tony De Sario. A striking contrast, with cannonball frame, leathery olive-colored skin, also short hair, except black. De Sario defiantly handed Hull another chair. It also went flying. Wam!

Hull eyed Moreau, pointed at the papers. "This is personal!"

De Sario had been with Moreau almost every moment, right from the FBI Academy. Shared almost every stroke of every project. Moreau thought of De Sario as the Cop's kid from Brooklyn, volunteering for the Police Department at fifteen, having the police pay for his accounting degree, and still doing community work with an Italian charity. Moreau recalled De Sario railing against the Italian Mobsters, for giving the other 98% of Italian-Americans a bad name; overshadowing genuine Italian accomplishments in all life occupations.

Moreau was only half-Italian to compliment his Cajun side, but was no less offended. So he let his agents vent a few minutes.

Hull's chair smashed another cabinet. Jackson broke into a smile. "All four legs touched at once. Perfect ten!"

"Another love-letter from Caesar Augustus," Moreau said, inserting a tape into the panel of machines.

"Athens, Rome, Britain, and now America—a falling decadent empire," came the untraceable voice, sounding like an extraterrestrial. "There's nowhere we won't find you. Your streets, your business, your homes, even your bedrooms. Your house of cards built on taxes. The American government will soon be paying me taxes!"

Moreau silently rummaged through the newspapers. A familiar refrain: Mob

bloodbath in Arizona. References to charred bodies of international businessman Benjamin Larrow and DEA agent William Barnes. Strangulation murder of Larrow's daughter, Dawn. The most screaming headlines told of the assassination of U.S. Attorney Leslie D'Amico.

"That's our Leslie," De Sario reminded.

"I've been here long enough to remember Leslie as an FBI intern, right out of law school," Jackson said against the silence. "Been about ten years, Vic, you, Leslie, and I nailed that racist militia in Oregon. I was her personal mentor, and she'd call me Daddy Bear. Bought me this huge stuffed bear. It's still on my bed."

Moreau concluded the eulogy, "Yeah, and three years under me. Gave her superior ratings every year. A month before we got the green light for our Supra Strike Force, she gets her calling for the Criminal Litigation section. She'd be SSF today."

Moreau called Tom Hull to an adjacent chair.

"Oh, oh the religion caucus," De Sario said wryly as Moreau waved the other two agents away.

"This is our eighth anniversary," Hull reminded. "When you pulled me from the fire." Moreau feined ignorance. "You know, when I tried to take those bikers down myself. Thought God gave me the power."

"Oh yeah," Moreau nodded. "I remember my response: God gives us a spirit. But also a brain."

"I'm sorry, sir, for my tantrum just now. I confess to you and God," Hull said with little inflection. "I had another dream about you, Vic. You saw our precious flag, torn and bloodied. You pick it up, carry it confidently, as they keep shooting you, while the homos and liberals cheer them on. You march on despite the bullet holes. Finally you collapse, but the finish line is at your heels. The flag raises in glory."

Moreau eyed the 2-inch flag on Hull's lapel. "Tom, Tony had it all wrong. That," pointing to the newspapers, "is business. That," pointing to the chairs, "is personal."

"It's my fallen ex-wife again. I've forgiven her, but can't forget," Hull said. "The divorce was never legal. The Bible forbids it."

"I know that."

"And now she's pulling our daughter out of church. The way I read the Bible, my wife is still under submission. We both know I've ways to stop her."

Moreau held Hull's look. "Again, that's personal. That doesn't come into SSF. Do nothing until you talk to your Pastor."

"Yes, sir. One more need-to-know: Your secretary Michelle, she's good, and you're real nice to her. She may be taking it wrong. She's been scribbling private love notes about you. I've got a hidden camera above her desk to prove it. Maybe it's time she leaves."

"We got business, Tom," Moreau said sharply, swatting the folder Michelle just handed him. "But first our weekly test: What's the number of active SSF informants? Just the ones we're actively monitoring? Not secondary on indirect sources."

"631."

"Tom, you're amazing," Moreau smiled. "We got to get Joe Rennie, our deepest throat of all, out of Arizona. A Philly-based marijuana dealer named Cornelius Midlothian is looking for a sturdy mule. I want Rennie there. He needs to be vetted by at least six sources. Can you get that done, please?" He handed over the folder.

"You can count on me, Commander," No doubt about it in Moreau's mind. Hull didn't come close to screwing an assignment since that incident eight years ago. Some people learn from mistakes quite dramatically.

Hull started up, but Moreau motioned him back in the chair. "I've got more small tasks for you. After Michelle leaves tonight, take the camera out of the ceiling, take all the pictures you got, and put it all on my desk. I'll take the honors of burning the stuff."

Hull looked surprised. "—Uh, alright."

"And I've got a Scripture for you, Christian brother: James 2, verse 13: '-judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.' -- Tom, SSF is by nature a judgment organ. We judge, then we act. So we got to give mercy some extra attention."

The door opened for Paul Lezcano. Short man, late fifties, receding hairline, handlebar brown sideburns, dark pin-striped suit. This high-level DOJ official came with a couple of security guys. His presence drew out Jackson, De Sario and a couple other agents.

"Moreau, I want a private meeting. Dismiss your men." An effete Harvard voice.

"My soldiers, Paul. I depend on them," Moreau said. Lezcano stared down Moreau, who nodded them away.

The two men stepped into Moreau's office. Large, padded, like a vault. Ne'er a window. High on the wall was a portrait of Jesus Christ, slightly turned. Lower to the right was the portrait of historical mob-buster Fiorello La Guardia. Lower to the left was the familiar portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lezcano made a statement by sitting at Moreau's desk, relegating Moreau to the side chair.

"How's your mother?" Lezcano asked softly.

"Mercifully unaware of her condition. Uncle Frank's with her constantly. Makes my family neglect only half as bad.--How's your young 'un Lisa, still struggling with Spanish?--The college probably got some Hispanic student support group. Betcha they'll take her."

"Moreau, I say this with trepidation....you finally got what you asked for. Your Supra Strike Force has total carte blanche. Go out and kick some butt. Only don't embarrass us. Never."

"Leslie's the reason," Moreau surmised. "But what touched the American nerve even more was that sweet college girl with a rope around her neck. A serious miscalculation by Caesar Augustus. Public rage means more good data into our FIS."

"I'm not finished, Moreau. Unleashing SSF carries one condition: You take care of your psycho agent."

"What agent?"

"Don't insult me, Moreau, I'm not unaware of Tom Hull's proclivities. —I'm a poor excuse for a Christian, but my Catholic Daddy taught me the difference between true faith which transforms lives, and Jesus as a facade for a sick agenda. Maybe you are the real deal, Moreau. Maybe we'll soon find out."

"Tom Hull has unparalleled insights into the criminal mind, and does the capable work of five agents," Moreau argued. "And a loyalty so unwavering that he tells me his nit-wit plans in time for me to quash them. A delicate synergy, but workable. Better under my watch than loose in society. You think?"

Lezcano stared down Moreau. And became more annoyed when Sid Jackson appeared at the doorway.

"I think Mr. Lezcano needs to hear this," Jackson said. "Leslie D'Amico entrusted SSF with backup prosecution files. Add to that, how SSF's bored into the Arizona Mob with eyes and ears—so I promise that within 36 hours we'll have ID'ed Leslie's assassin."

"Almost on target, Jackson. I've already ID'ed the assassin. Within 36 hours we'll have indictable evidence. Just who do they think they're playin' with? Huh?"

Moreau made his own statement by exiting his own office, leaving Lezcano alone. Except one last thing:

"Our intense surveillance network picked up quite by accident, what appears to be a violent Islamic cell. You'll get the info for your counterterrorism friends. USA-PATRIOT a la mode."

"Sometimes you fish for trout," Jackson shrugged, "and catch a marlin."

"So here's my condition back at you, Paul. Those Islamacists hit us again, don't you blame SSF. Never!"

"Whatever was said today, Moreau, you are still a rogue FBI agent."

7

Late afternoon Arizona sun flirting with far horizon, Vic Moreau and Tony De Sario, wearing khakis and shadow beards, were lodged in the pass of a mesa, looking down. With them was Sergio Gonzalez, the 30-ish agent Moreau was mentoring. Powerful binoculars surveyed a sprawling ranch, fenced in. Stucco house, horses in the back, pickup, SUV and Jag parked beside the house.

Moreau's men, pinpoints in the distance, had the real estate covered with automatic weapons. So with a wave, Moreau inaugurated the newly-embellished SSF.

Three black government-issue sedans roared toward the ranch house. Cars sliding to a halt and agents pouring out in one smooth motion. Moreau, Gonzalez and Louis Tatum, a short black agent with beard, converged like cats on the front door. A dead silence outside. Tatum pounded on the front door. Three agents like time bombs. Slightly off center. Then...

WAM! A vicious left kick by Moreau sent large splinters falling. Inside, a half-naked woman and a gothic scream at Gonzalez aiming his Uzi. She dove behind a couch as a long-haired man ducked inside a room to the left.

"Billy Ray Cox!" Moreau called through the closed door...1,2,3,WAM! A quick twirl away, then Moreau and Tatum both kneeling, pistols aimed.

The mangy assassin, like a deer in headlights, stood next to his bed. Moreau picked up on Cox's quick glance toward a back door. Cox twisted his body, and in an instant a twirling knife soared toward Moreau. A whirling leg kick diverted the knife in mid-air.

Blam! The shot from Tatum sent Cox ducking.

"Alive!" Moreau shouted to Tatum.

Cox, picking up on the value of his existence, lunged toward Moreau. Moreau's final left kick caught Cox's ear and dazed him. Tatum applied the handcuffs.

Gonzalez, hugging the Uzi, gazed admiringly at Moreau, his mentor, who gave



him a hard shove.

"Keep your eye on that woman!" Moreau shouted.

A sprawling Federal facility in Texas. At one isolated corner, there was a restricted sign, and a checkpoint guard, in front of a solid stone compound. Inside were padded cells. The command center was high-tech heaven, including hidden intercoms and several one-way video mirrors.

Vic Moreau paused to consider the exciting new road he was traveling. Both exhilarating and frightening. Humbled by the sheer magnitude, he turned for a private prayer. A higher power, much greater than SSF, prompted him to address his assembled agents almost involuntarily.

"Not one of us is to lay a hand on this prisoner." He turned quietly to his young protegee Gonzalez. "We call this simulation. It ain't real. But then it is. Perception becomes reality."

Phase 1:

Cox was taken into an interrogation room. De Sario paced behind him, never in view, asking the same question, over and over: "Who hired you to kill Leslie D'Amico?" The TV monitor reading Cox's eye movements. Cox was tough; his demeanor remained stoic.

Back to the cell, back to the interrogation room--four times. Meal at the designated hour. No fancy food, TV dinner stuff, but nutritious. Moreau's exact words were, "No fodder for an Amnesty International list."

Phase 2:

Enter undercover Agent Moyanski, a greasy-haired 350-pound hulk displaying ample tattoos on bare arms. De Sario carried the front and back page of a famous daily newspaper. Simulation, of course.

"SSF Publishing House, LTD, " said De Sario, stuffing it in Moyanski's back pocket.

Gonzalez and a reedy agent named Carla Jones applied the handcuffs. Gonzalez sighed; he had rehearsed this many times, but still, he was green.

They walked Agent Moyanski down to Cox's cell. A machine gun-carrying agent opened the steel door. On cue, the two agents shoved Moyanski hard to the floor, below Cox's bunk. Gonzalez made a show of twisting the arm. There was no pain, but Moyanski cried out, anyway.

They removed the handcuffs, and by design, subtly dislodged the newspaper.

Moyanski leaned against the wall, eyeing the prone and cowered Cox. Without the hardware he'd mastered, Cox was Samson without hair.

"Don't take your eyes off of him," Moreau said to Moyanski via the hidden receptor inside Moyanski's left ear. "Work the mouth a little."

Finally, out of boredom, Cox eyed the loose paper.

"Pick it up, scuzzball," Other agents started clapping from the surveillance room, like rooting for their team.

Cox finally beheld the familiar Times logo and bold print: FEDS BUST

CANNIBAL SERIAL KILLER. There was a big photo of the cannibal killer. It matched the face of the guy in Cox's cell. Smaller print described how he'd lure his victims via creative technology. Then kill and eat them.

"Hey little boy," the agent called to Cox. "I raided the Vatican database, didn't even need a computer. Watch something even more amazing."

The agents knew Cox hadn't contacted a lawyer. Gonzalez asked Moreau about it, who explained, "Mob don't know where he is. We ain't the telephone relay system for the Mob. Cox knows he can make a call. But he won't, maybe. Overstepping the Mob. Catch-22 for our prisoner."

De Sario opened the door. "Cox just called his lawyer." The agents broke into loud laughter.

Moreau waved his arms, "Okay, no more questions for the prisoner. Court standards."

"He's cracking," came comments from the SSF agents.

"Tom Caralindo," De Sario said, handing Moreau a photo and profile on Cox's lawyer. "A regular Mob shill."

"This will be easy, Tony."

Phase 3:

Moyanski took from his pocket an assemblage of small wires, foils, tiny transmitter-like devices. "Sometimes the Feds search for the wrong weapons. Totally incompetent," Moyanski made a big show of hooking these nano-like devices together for some consistency. As Cox looked on, the undercover agent started sticking the device in an outlet of sorts. Unbeknown to Cox, the high-tech relays had already been installed.

Moyanski smiled back at Cox mischievously: "Ever want to read Uncle Sam's mind? Maybe tell us how to break outta here."

In Command Central, Moreau handed Tatum and De Sario prepared scripts. Other agents stood in the background, primed for support roles.

Moreau said, "Lights, action—"

In the cell, from the socket where Moyanski's hand was, came the sound of broken, interrupted voices. Like the wires weren't quite connecting. There was a slight adjustment, then a slam and the sound of a toilet flushing.

"Whoops, wrong room," Moyanski mumbled to Cox on cue.

He adjusted the device, and there were voices, some muffled, some louder. The agent and Cox aimed ears at the wall, bodies frozen.

A commotion of voices. References to kill him, fry him.

De Sario: "Out! Get out! Clear this place!"

Angry, macho exchanges between Tatum and De Sario.

Tatum: "I'll handle this. You all go outside." Fading, angry voices. A slamming door.

Tatum to De Sario: "They're not leaving until this Scum's in a box. You don't kill a U.S. Attorney and walk. Or even breathe."

De Sario: "Stand down, agent. You're out of control."

Tatum: "You can't stop us. We're taking that prisoner in pieces. A million ways we can explain it. Escape attempt. Suicide. Hidden weapon."

De Sario: "I am sworn to defend the Constitution."

A pregnant pause, then Tatum, low and loud:

"You've no idea what you're up against, being that scum's bodyguard. Leslie's got powerful corporate friends. I know at least three agents accepted a 100K bounty on Cox."

De Sario: "Cox is very valuable to us."

Tatum: "You've no idea how bad the Mob wants Cox dead. Before he says a word to us. Fine with me, we got other sources. Caesar Augustus's so desperate, he'll be sending so-called friends in here, so-called lawyers, with weapons you can't see. Slow poison, slow death. Let's save them the trouble."

De Sario: "Leave!"

At that point Moreau, silent and smiling, raised his hand, like a conductor. Then lowered it.

Tatum contorted his face, furrowed his eyes. "We'll be back!"

Moyanski, from the cell, bellowed, "What about me!"

Two hours later.

"Perfect choreography," Moreau said, looking intently at the large screen. Depicting Cox and his lawyer sitting across an interrogation table from De Sario.

"Don't say a word," the bearded lawyer Caralindo counseled Cox.

De Sario set up a goblet in front of Cox, poured in some red wine. The mangy one's tired eyes grew large. "We start off nice. There's a much bigger fish we're trying to catch. And I know, Billy Ray, you probably had no choice. I'm prepared to call in an Army Unit to protect you if need be."

The lawyer said, "You're wasting your time—"

"Thought it best to remain with the prisoner," De Sario interrupted quickly, "for reasons I can't discuss."

DeSario handed Cox an earphone. The lawyer got excited about a hidden recorder.

"Just vintage Faith Hill." De Sario put it in Cox's right ear. "Nice? Look, call me Tone." Next, he pulled out a deck of cards. "Poker? 21?"

"Billy Ray!" The lawyer shouted as Cox gulped his wine.

Moreau turned to Gonzalez, "Fifteen minutes, max." Actually, it took a half hour. De Sario asking sympathetic questions about Cox's family. Three games of 21.

"Tone, I'd like a private word with you." Cox stood up and drew De Sario to a corner. The lawyer stood up, screaming. Cox regarded the lawyer's wild face, then De Sario's calm one. "Look, Tone. The Federal joint. What's it like?"

"Depends how cooperative the prisoners are."

"And look, when Tom the lawyer came in—us, did you, uh—" he rubbed his palms up and down his sides.

Moreau got Lezcano on the laser phone. Lezcano told him, "Moreau, I don't ask, you don't tell."

8

Joe Rennie's rented blue convertible crept down a wide avenue in central Phoenix. The striking blonde woman riding shotgun was sullen. They both wore shades as shields

from reflective rays from everywhere; a hint of pungent carbon mono from ample vehicles and still air.

"I have to leave tomorrow," the shaggy-haired Rennie said to his companion. She broke into silent tears. "I'll call you when I get to Philadelphia." She wanted none of it. Rennie's car packed in traffic, she got out and ran away. Three crying gals for Rennie in a week. He felt like a real louse. This Philly assignment, annoying as it was, might help purge a bad habit or two, Rennie thought.

Rennie's sedan reached the source of the jam-up: an intersection closed off by a checkpoint. From the sidewalk he was approached by a handsome, big-boned woman with long, straight brown hair. She tossed some bound notes and photos into Rennie's open car.

"Thanks, Beth. Knowing you, a smoking gun."

"Something heavy's coming down," Beth said in a clear voice. "Feds have set up some kind of green zone around the financial district. G-men with mean-looking rifles on roofs. I've counted more than a dozen guys in \$500 suits taken away in handcuffs, herded into big black vans."

Rennie wasn't surprised. "Feds just experienced another Pearl Harbor," Rennie said lazily. "Consider this Normandy. Maybe Hiroshima pretty soon. These Feds don't play around. —And Beth, please do me one favor," he smiled. "Don't say I broke your heart today."

Armand Santucci was hearing silent footsteps as he sat in his cavernous leathered office. Beholding his own breaths, and an ominous ticking of the clock behind him. He made a call on his cell.

"—They just picked up Roscoe? I need you—Now! I may not have an hour! Got a private plane, touch Guadalajara by twilight."

His office door opened slowly. Within seconds, there was a good lineup of rugged guys in suits. Local Strike Force, AZ State PD and FBI. This sea of heat parted for a guy who struck Santucci as some biker/rocker. Long strands of tight curls. This lead guy approached Santucci's desk, flashed a badge saying Inspector Victor Moreau, FBI.

"Armand Santucci, I have a warrant for your arrest, multiple charges," Moreau said, as if carefully rehearsed. "Including the murders of Federal Officer William Barnes and U.S. Attorney Leslie D'Amico. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law. If you cannot afford an attorney—"

9

The man in the Becker Mansion, that's what the Philadelphia Main-Liners, society's matrons and nobles, called Joseph W. Vandermere III. An interloper taking the estate of the famous pre-Civil War industrialist Robert Becker. Vandermere was an enigma; the gossips had nothing to say. They couldn't even spy—the Vandermere mansion wasn't even visible from the tall, wrought-iron fence. A country mile and a hardwood forest of seclusion. Seeing the bearded Vandermere taking a stroll along the country road with his paraplegic wife in wheelchair was a special spectacle. The few who ventured into conversations only received carefully-contrived pleasantries. Never an answer to their prying questions. High-level contacts reported Vandermere to be an

import-export baron. There were occasional rumors of men on the grounds with guns.

The massive gate to the Vandermere estate parted on this warm spring day for a convoy of stretch limousines. They cruised down a smooth road shaded with a thick mat of overhanging branches, then past a deep green lawn, criss-cross granite workways, fenced-in tennis court, a sculpture of a nude venus, and finally to a circular driveway in front of the three-story mansion. Chauffeurs opened the limousine for four middle-aged bankers in pinstriped suits. The front door with colonial knocker was taller than any human could reach.

A skinheaded, tux-clad butler who could qualify for TV wrestling opened the door, striking a bow.

The bankers' eyes scanned the hundred foot long den resembling an antique showcase. The bankers followed the doorman across a massive Persian rug. Vandermere, black vested suit and trimmed black beard, and twirling cane, was waiting at the foot of a spiral staircase; a rhythmic puffing of his cigar. He directed the bankers away from the staircase and toward his own private elevator.

"I had this personally installed for my wife. Look, it even has handrails for a wheelchair," Vandermere boasted.

Even the bankers were impressed.

Upstairs, there must have been a thousand books arrayed on the bookshelves built into the walls. In the hallway, Vandermere proudly displayed his cache of weapons suspended on a rack. "All legal. My security forces properly licensed. Legitimate free enterprise has become a curse word. Common criminals abound outside those walls. We must defend ourselves."

"Here Here!" The bankers commented. They also admired the award he'd received for his charitable investments in inner-city youth. One asked about a mounted photo of Vandermere with several suit-clad men in front of a courthouse.

"My proudest moment," Vandermere said, puffing. "Distant relative used my name as a reference for casino action. I testified at the New Jersey Casino Control Commission, recommending he be denied a license. We keep our enterprises clean, free of gang influence or corruption."

Vandermere took them into his private study. Portrait-lined, with marble table and thick chairs.

"Tis far better to make laws than break them," Vandermere added, to the amusement of his guests.

Everyone took a seat. Five identical green folders rested in front of them. Gordon Dugan, the preppy butler, wheeled in a tray full of booze. He filled glasses of his guests, striking a bow each time.

This would be a short meeting.

"This gives us exclusive rights for munition sales to the Thai and Sri Lankan security forces. The Pentagon export licenses will be approved within the week. All up an up."

"Except this 2% surcharge. What's this, Jody?"

"A last minute insertion contingency risk. Weapons piracy, insurgency, whatever. It's explained. Contingency risk is very clear to your profession, is it not?"

"Highway robbery," another protested.

Vandermere eyed each of them. "I've sufficient capital assets to make my own

rules here. If you're not interested, there are venture capital groups out there, ready to line up for this gravy train."

A couple were already nodding in resignation. The profit margin was still quite impressive. Vandermere continued, "To borrow terminology from that work of gothic fiction called the Bible, a plank in the hand beats two specks in the bush."

An hour later, Vandermere sauntered through a massive rose garden behind the mansion. He saw his disabled wife on the back patio, doing a crossword puzzle from her wheelchair. Vandermere cut a rose, trolled over to his wife, gave her a big hug.

"To Laura. The rose of my life," he said tenderly. And pinned the rose to her hair.

He retreated deep into the rose garden, with Dugan following. Vandermere was agitated. He tapped a large starfish like medallion on his chest.

"Do you know why I socked them with that surcharge? The way they look at me, condescending blue eyes. I can never be good enough for them. I'm forever the Bully Bag. Receiving bows and tribute from every restricted commodities venture in the US is not sufficient. Someday, Gordy, every Neopolitan gamer, Burmese poppy grower, Yakusa porn peddler, everyone paying dues, bows, respects. When will people learn? I've got crosshairs on this world."

Those crosshairs were born at the parochial Catholic school where young Vandermere studied. His genius was in literature, civics, technology. Never into sports or girls. A consummate nerd in the eyes of adolescent predators. First came the social isolation, snyder comments. An aggressive clique openly taunting him, jostling him, stealing his lunch money. They just wouldn't stop. His rage kept building and building.

Then one day those bullies ran afoul of Vandermere's sharp analytic and technical mind. After careful plans, a bomb with hand detonator found its way to a hidden location in the lead bully's car. Vandermere waited for the perfect time, when all of the predators were inside. Right after Junior Prom.

An explosion and billowing flames such that they couldn't recover the body parts. Unsolved homicide. Exhilaration from that one act of revenge. An exhilaration which never left him.

A college counselor once asked him, "What is evil?"

"Evil is defined as the absence of love."

"What is love, Jody?"

"I haven't a clue."

What about the Southwest, Boss?" Dugan asked.

Vandermere lit another cigar. "I look at silver linings. One, there's still no insurgent venture down there, disrespecting us. And two: All that Federal attention. Just for us. Now Gordy, that's respect."

"What about Philly, Boss? Our last holdout?"

"I was expecting a Christmas gift from you all, and that was the franchise tax from Rossi. And I'm hearing it's still not happening?"

Vandermere glanced to the side, as to an unseen party. He exploded, "This is my back yard! I live here!"

10

SSF HQ, Washington, D.C. Vic Moreau reviewed on his large video monitor the recent email from a politically-appointed Justice Attorney Advisor.

Inspector Moreau: Congratulations on your recent take-down! In an OCU briefing last year, I recalled your reference to the “Wise-Guys Rapture” – the sudden disappearance of several high-ranking mobsters. A theory someone surfaced: maybe these Capos are hiding in Sicily or Naples, and they are collectively, “Caesar Augustus,” running the U.S. rackets from Italy. If so, does our Federal jurisdiction over “Caesar Augustus” end? On another note, it just crossed my mind! Could Santucci be Augustus? Then, could this nightmare be over?

Moreau said a prayer. One for restraint.

Jackson and De Sario were already standing over him, both with a hard copy of the forwarded e-mail in hand.

“The kind of highlevel Federal idiots we put up with, “ De Sario said. “Could Santucci be Caesar Augustus? Moron!”

Moreau tried to smile. “Check the salutation: Inspector Moreau. This guy doesn’t know about SSF. A blessing.”

Michelle pleasantly stuck her head inside the door. “Mr. Lezcano is here.”

Hull joined them, and the four SSF leaders dutifully stood in a row. Lezcano came in by himself.

“On occasion the Department of Justice hands out citations of valor. The highest ranking award for any Federal employee,” Lezcano announced, as if into a microphone. “All signed, personally, by the U.S. Attorney General.” Under his left arm he carried four heavy wooden plaques, nice gold frames. Congratulations, Victor Moreau, Commander, Supra Strike Force, Assistant Commander Sidney Jackson, Assistant Commander Anthony De Sario.” He coughed, “Assistant Commander Hull.”

Lezcano extended his right hand. The FBI execs didn’t budge. Lezcano checked his hand for a disease.

“I gave you the names of several agents worthy of the valor award, “ Moreau said. “Tatum, Gonzalez, Jones, Natale, a few others who deserve the same recognition as us.” Moreau gave Lezcano a copy of the e-mail. “Here, take back my award, and give it instead to this genius for identifying Santucci as Caesar Augustus.”

Moreau, with video control in hand, had his seated agents’ full attention. And his lecture voice:

“Congratulations on a great job, y’all gettin bonuses.” He cut off their applause. “Savor the victory quickly. The next road is more complex and more dangerous.” Thinking about other sharks, far outside Caesar Augustus’s realm.

A map of Philadelphia appeared on the large screen. “The city of brotherly love. The last holdout against Caesar Augustus’s gangland conquest of America.”

An aging Mafiosi popped up on the screen. “Angelo Rossi, Titular Don of the Philadelphia Family. Technically over all black markets here, at least the major ones. Rossi pays no franchise tax to Caesar Augustus. He is in partnership with Marcus Wu,

Chinese Tong leader, who handles heroin traffic. Wu pays dues to Rossi. Not Caesar Augustus.

“And here’s where San Andreas fault lines may be shifting in Quaker city— fault lines: Named Cornelius Midlothian and Joe Rennie. The screen showed a smooth skinned black man, middle-aged, restrained afro, thick moustache.

“A very entertaining, slick dude,” Moreau put some bounce in his voice. “He is strictly marijuana. Will touch nothing else. Says he’s too good for the bad hard stuff. Supervises a goldmine of pipelines, 300 mile radius.” Moreau laughed, “He’s convinced he’s an American hero, extolling the medical benefits of his marijuana, and using proceeds to fund urban musical talent, and anti-poverty, anti-aids programs in Africa. A business well in the nine digits and –“ Moreau paused for effect”-He pays no franchise tax to Caesar Augustus. Or to Rossi. The only independent major operator out there.”

“Give him the Nobel Peace Prize,” De Sario cracked.

Tom Hull raised his hand. Moreau recognized him.

“Reports say because of cross-regional reverence he has in the Black communities, Augustus lets him slide,” Hull said, flat voice, flat eyes. “To keep peace and stable markets in the ghettos.”

“Only we ain’t buying it,” Moreau cut in. “Totally outside the Caesar Augustus world view. Something’s comin down. That’s why we got Rennie in there.”

Hull added sourly, “Midlothian spends all day in clubs, smoozing musicians, socializing, making new friends. Always a big smile for the camera.”

“Life truly is a beach,” said Jackson.

“Forget the Nobel,” De Sario added. “He should run for President.”

And so the assembled agents virtually memorized the abstracts on Midlothian and Rennie.

Hull pulled Moreau aside. “I had another dream last night,” He said quietly. “I saw your name in all the papers. Just like Leslie D’Amico. Printed words, Supra Strike Force. We’d been exposed. In reality, sir, I know two reporters getting close to us. Let’s turn it back on them. Our machines are far superior to their’s. When they know we know they’re less than virtuous, they bother us no more. “Hmmm?”

“Temptations and treachery on our wild road, and the innocent get steamrolled,” Moreau responded, annoyed. “I’ve a special assignment for you, Tom. We’re setting up a satellite SSF office in Philly. Take care of it. That’s all. Do nothing else.”

“Yes sir. – Did you know Rennie is journaling his undercover work? Wants to write a book.”

A cloud came over Moreau’s face. Then he shrugged, “First Amendment.”

11

“The lure of dating is very strong, Father Thorson,” Moreau said from the sanctity of his office. “My Friday night small group Bible study helps with the right focus, but not a day goes by without some distraction. Domestication temptations. Almost as bad as extramarital sex. Because my calling to protect the innocent is all consuming; my wife and mistress.

“Victor. Ever consider a mate in synchrony with your calling?”



Michelle Lopez said into her phone, “If you want to find an Inspector Moreau, please call public affairs. Thanks.” The red phone on her right rang. “Yes sir, he’s in.” She patched the call through. “It’s the Director, Mr. Moreau.”

“Snake-eyes wants a private meeting with you, Victor,” came the authoritative voice. “We can’t say no. Just use your discretion.”

Snake-eyes was a Midwestern Congressman, already under Ethics Committee investigation for auctioning votes to Big Money.

Another ominous sign: Snake-eyes’ aid ordered Moreau to pick up the Congressman on Capitol Hill. Personal chauffeur.

The Congressman climbed into Moreau’s gray Porsche with an FBI agent. Ominous deluxe. Moreau recognized the heavysset man with clumpy hair, freckles, paunchy cheeks. The bullet-dark eyeballs in prominent eyewhites marked his FBI moniker, Snake-eyes. Brenda Stokes was a very pale, hard, scrappy female FBI agent, who most male agents wouldn’t tangle with. Stokes crammed clandestinely in the Porche’s back. Moreau had read of an affair between Snake-eyes and an unknown FBI agent.

They drove through the D.C. congestion, into exurban Maryland, beyond Potomac. Snake-eyes virtually ignored Moreau, preferring to engage Stokes in banter about his legislative calendar. Fine with Moreau; a chance to regroup with a prayer on 1 John 4— “there is no fear in love.”

The final destination: A massive land holding calling itself a country club. Virtually every recreation opportunity at fingertip reach, and a flashy visitor center overlooking a glittering lake.

Inside, the threesome found a private table. Soothing music, glass walls overlooking every flora and fauna, ceiling fans, several padded bars, large TV screens. Seasoned men and women in golf outfits; they needed to impress no one. The waitresses wore tiger outfits, hot pants and long tails. Occasionally one of these rich guys would yank on one of the tails. Some patrons stopped to pay Snake-eyes tribute.

Snake-eyes ordered drinks for his table. “This is the life, isn’t it, Victor? Brenda’s here at least one per week.” The Congressman addressed Moreau like a long lost friend. Then leaned closer, “And those other kind of people aren’t forced on you. If you know what I mean.—And you know, Victor, in the other rooms there games. And other stuff.” He winked.

Indeed, Snake-eyes was in a gaming mood. The most benign game for Moreau was chess. So they went at it for a while.

When in mid-game Snake-eyes took a red folder out of his bag.

“You like keeping dossiers on people, don’t you, Victor? Tables are turned, son. I’ve got one on you.” Snake-eyes smiled widely. “Hmmm. Father a DEA agent. Mostly in New Orleans, but transferred to the Philadelphia field office when you’re 15. Louisiana boy moves to Philly’s ethnic Manayunk, so learns how to fight. Self-proclaimed protector, stands up for the weak against bullies. Cracked the jaw of one of them, so you’re suspended from school a week, so un-FBI-like. So young Vic takes his good guy versus bad guy attitude to Villanova University. Black belt in two martial arts, dual degrees, criminology and accounting. Destination quite known. – Quarterback, Villanova football team. 3-8 junior year, but 2-9 senior year. Very curious. Why would a winner like you deliberately go again with a bunch of losers?”

“Depends on how you define winning.”

“At Nova the FBI glamour-boy-to-be befriends Father Thorson, Black charismatic Catholic Priest. Victor gets religion. Victor Smash Mouth Jesus Freak. This Thorson, what a weirdo.”

Snake-eyes started; for a split second he thought Moreau was about to say something.

“Then on to FBI Academy. Surprise, surprise. Making bones in Philadelphia Field office on different assignments, mostly Mafia-busting.” Snake-eyes hardened, “Then on to D.C., the Organized Crime Unit and your Evangelical church deluding you into thinking you can close the black markets by yourself. When they’ve existed for centuries.”

Moreau spoke with laser eyes. “God said vengeance is mine, Congressman. Sometimes I feel God has deligated some of that authority to me.” That was a constant struggle for Moreau – as he told God, but not Snake-eyes.

Snake-eyes regarded the folder. “Personnel says you’ve been an Inspector in the Organized Crime Unit for 12 years. No change? FBI Inspector driving a Porsche?”

“My only material toy. Leave my Porsche alone.” Moreau reached for his dossier, but Snake-eyes drew it back.

“Yes, but Inspector! People over in the Hoover Building saying agents step aside when you come, supervisor agents for 20 years taking orders from you. And you’re not yet 38?”

“Call Bureau Public Affairs and arrange for a private tour of OCU. See for yourself.”

“Victor, This is just you and I. Your secret. Just make it our secret.” He waited for Moreau to break. No dice, so he waved his finger, “I have the power to subpoena you in front of the entire Congressional Committee. Keep you there a week with non-stop questions.”

“Ask me a thousand questions and you get the same answer. Cause of our very classified work.”

“I can compel your answers!”

“No. You go to a higher authority.” Moreau moved his queen to R8. “checkmate.” He got up and walked away.

Snake-eyes was hyperventilating a little. “Brenda, the boy’s some kind of Sliwa retread, self-righteously punking the guilded subways, annoying the genteel order. Laminated badge, except from a cereal box.”

Brenda Stokes broke into dance and song. “Sli-wa-wa-the-wa-tusi.”

12

Philadelphia. Nine weeks later.

An isolated warehouse in a rundown part of the near-north Kensington section.

“This is a very, very serious audit. We’re like the IRS. Now we get to negotiate.” That was Gorilla Bauer speaking across the table to Marcus Wu. The bushy beard, bushy black hair and prominent hair on stealthy arms earned Bauer the name, Gorilla. Wu was distinguished, gray Chinese man. Harvard versus Hell’s Angels in appearance. Except Mr. Hell’s Angel carried a 44 automatic and Mr. Harvard was tied to a chair.

“Have you nothing to say, Mr. Wu?” The Chinese man had alarmed eyes, but said nothing. His colleagues were hog-tied and gagged only ten feet from him. While Bauer had four gunmen behind . “Did you really think you could get away with paying the organization no franchise tax? That’s America, sir!”

Wu’s eyes darted around. But still no response.

“You say what, Mr. Wu? I didn’t hear you. You say you owe Mr. Augustus a zillion dollars? I dispute that. I count a zillion and a half. Maybe you don’t understand English? Okay, let me put it to you in Spanish.”

A three story luxury townhouse in Philly’s Society Hill, an audible cough away from the Liberty Bell. In the third floor game room, Angelo Rossi and three Capos were singing drunkenly to Tosca. The wine bottle rested sideways on the marble table, along with dirty dishes of tribute to gluttony.

“I’m walking down South Philly. Red carpets everywhere I turn. This little boy about 12, looks up like I’m his favorite Uncle.” Rossi proudly paced, waving around his wine glass. “He says, buon giorno, Mr. Caesar Augustus! I start to correct him. But then I’m thinking--our business is smoke and mirrors. Add it up: Caesar Augustus ain’t touched us. He’s weakened out west. Runnin’ scared, I bet. Both Palermo and Naples have knighted me. Could this be our time?”

A couple of Capos stood, pulled Rossi’s lapel with respect. “Don Caesar Augustus,” one said, bowing.

“Boys, we’re testing the waters. I got two guys in the New York Commission like my blood brothers. They’re getting us some big action in Queens. And guess what. There ain’t no franchise tax gonna be paid to so-called Caesar Augustus or no one else.”

The Capos nodded in approval, as a loud knock sounded. Three hands went into coat pockets. Rossi carefully answered the door.

It was Babe Lonardo. Rossi relaxed. “The Commission’s here already! Like they’re reading our mind!”

“Don Angelo.” Lonardo bowed. With hard eyes. “Excuse me, I got brief business with Rocco.” Indicating a Rossi Capo. “Don Angelo, please wait downstairs. I’m gonna set up a conference call. You, me and a very special guest.”

Rossi gave a thumbs-up sign to Lonardo on the way out. Down the steps, a little woozy from the booze. But the sudden adrenaline was clearing that up. In his private library, Rossi skimmed the biography of the first Caesar—Julius Caesar--while waiting. But he couldn’t contain his excitement. Conference call with special guest!

Like clockwork, Lonardo returned, carrying a small bag used for leftover food. He locked the door behind him.

“Time for our special guest,” Lonardo said, producing a secure cell phone with loudspeaker. “Say hello to Marcus Wu.”

Rossi was confused. He spoke to Wu every week.

“Marcus? What’s going on?”

“Hello, Don Angelo.” It was Gorilla’s voice. “Marcus, say hello to your big bad boss.”

There was a loud groan from Gorilla twisting Wu’s ear.

Lonardo said deeply to Rossi, “That’s Chinese for hello.”

A piercing, drilling sound from the other end of the line. Five seconds, but for Rossi a lifetime. He could almost smell the pungently warm weapons over the phone line.

“One ball, ten down. A perfect strike,” Gorilla said.

Rossi grabbed the chair with both hands. Out of the brown bag Lonardo took three photo IDs of Rossi’s Capos upstairs. All stained with fresh blood.

Rossi turned. Wanted to faint.

“Turn around!” Lonardo ordered. Rossi started to weep. “Disgusting.”

Lonardo drilled three silenced bullets into Rossi’s back.

13

Joe Rennie wanted a low profile in Philly. He’d rented a room in one of the South Philly rowhouses, packed together like endless sardines.

“Please leave. Just get out,” Rennie said to the redhaired woman who’d just finished dressing. Rennie was sitting on the bed, barechest and bluejeans. The slamming door stung his ears.

Nine weeks in Philly, ten partners. The last two were really shaky, bringing on burning and bioxin. There would be partner #11 quite soon; simultaneous heaven and hell. This demon controlled him, like autopilot. No matter how hard he tried to hit the off button, it never worked.

Thoroughly disgusted with himself, he vowed to do society a parting favor. Only one way to accomplish that. He found a .38 special in his drawer, made sure it was loaded. Aimed at his head, more out of exasperation than suicidal determination.

His miserable life flashed before him. Teenage partaker of hard rock, drugs and free love, brought on by peer pressure and sleeping-around parents who didn’t care. Escapes the working-class Queens neighborhood as a marginal CUNY college student, takes up writing. Rejected by journal after journal, barely surviving on odd jobs in a roached-out tenement. Takes up cocaine dealing as the ultimate revenge against the unbroken run of life’s hard knocks. Services the hoity-toity of Gramercy Park. Impresses them! Meets Diane.

The familiar dagger caused him to squeeze the trigger a little. The day of infamy, when Diane died. Three months of obsessive romance. And in one moment she’s gone. ODED on cocaine. Actually those drug savages forced her to swallow a bag for smuggling. It burst inside her.

Rennie put down the gun, remembering the hard right turn in his life: The birth of his life mission. Seeing evil for what it is. The devil in white powder, and avenging Diane every breathing minute of his life. 14 years now of workaholism, with the consuming mission of demolishing every cocaine enterprise, partnering with whoever shared his mission- DEA, FBI, whatever. Channeled rage.

He was startled by a sudden knock. Beth came in, carrying a bag.

“Thought you’d need a friendly visit.” She handed him the sack.

“That’s your favorite,” Beth added, giving him a hug and reading his mind. Next she raised the blinds to let the sun in and started a music CD—a musical classic. Glenn Miller, Rennie’s favorite.

Already it was like a warm bath to Rennie. Beth sat next to him. Totally secure. Rennie didn’t view every woman as a sex machine.

“I know all this is very upsetting to you,” Beth said softly.

“I despise this assignment. Mary jane is no killer. What does The Bureau want from me? They know I’m their point man on coke. Now I have no sense of vengeance, or purpose. On top of that, the guy I’m scamming, Midlothian, is a real nice guy.”

“Tell your mary jane story to the thousands of potheads coming out of college barely literate. Believe me, Joe, when you hand over Midlothian, you’ll be an American hero. And the FBI will give you something special. I just feel it.”

“Thanks for the point of light, Beth.” Rennie smiled for the first time.

Beth didn’t make a big deal of the gun on the bed. She simply put it away.

“Why does Mr. Midlothian like you so much?” Beth asked.

“I keep the lights on, keep the mary jane trains running on time, kiss butt big time. More important, I set up his liability insurance, airtight.”

“Liability insurance?”

“Keep a safe distance between Midlothian and the street operators, so they never have the evidence to finger him if the operation is busted. I’ve made Midlothian mary jane Caesar Augustus. Cops and DEA won’t get near him. That is, until the FBI pulls my chord.—He’s got a big reason to like me.”

“Good news, Joe. Daddy has agreed to bankroll our book.” Rennie sat up, his lazy eyes searching, hoping.

By Daddy, Beth meant Seth Weinstein, Yalee human rights crusader and philanthropist-- his calling prompted by an ancestor in the Nazi chambers. Now Beth’s calling, too.

Rennie chomped on his pad-thai. “The worst thing about this assignment is that micromanaging, idiot FBI handler I have. James Andrews,” he said without malice. “Wants to know now, yesterday, just what is Midlothian’s special independent relationship with Caesar Augustus?”

“You must admit, Joe, a tantalizing mystery.” Beth winked. “A high point of our book.”

A renewed sadness overcame Rennie for a dreaded moment. When he would have the prod Midlothian about his Caesar Augustus arrangement. He could hear Agent Andrew’s barking, military voice in his ear.

Naylor’s was a massive sports and music club personifying Philly, the consummate sports and music haven. More than a hundred of TV screens with sports action, and separate sections for music, some live, some by DJ. Naylor’s was to sports bars like Minneapolis was to shopping malls.

Cornelius Midlothian had an office in one of the side rooms. Rennie, his loyal assistant, was finalizing some paperwork while Midlothian passed on upbeat, happy instructions to Orin, his husky black bodyguard. Midlothian's hero, the late Bob Marley, graced the parallel wall with a collage of portraits. There were encased platinum CDs, reflecting Midlothian's success as a record producer. Mary Jane okay by Marley, okay by Midlothian too—Rennie recalled Orin saying in his Jamaican dialect.

"How do I look, Joe?" Midlothian asked with his constant flash-tooth smile. Rennie brushed the lapel of his shiny brown suit. Midlothian had about a hundred of them, exactly the same. Rennie wondered if he slept in them. "Nothing wrong, Joe? You sure?" He spoke in a polished voice. Like Ohio, or TV.

"Never seen anything wrong with you, Loth," Rennie said, nose figuratively matching the suit. Rennie had never seen Midlothian even close to angry or frustrated.

"Hey Joe, look over here. 15 letters I received from quiet circles, all cancer patients, all extolling emotional highs from Mary Jane taking the edge off chemo. Joe, we should be AMA poster boys, not Federal pariahs.—Joe, I wish I could write a nice note back to every one of these patients." Midlothian sounded a hardy laugh, "But that wouldn't be a good idea, would it, Joe?"

"No sir, not a good idea at all." Rennie laughed along.

"Come over here, Joe, look at this." Midlothian pointed Joe to his desk, and a large photo of five beautiful African-American women, all working for his AIDS cure foundation. "Here's a secret I am sharing with you, Joe. Only five people in the universe know about it." He held his fingers to his lips. "I just proposed. Gonna be married next year. My fiancée's one of my Foundation handlers in Kenya. Try to guess which one."

Rennie made a show of racking his brain, pointing finally to the one on the right.

"Yes! Yes! Gloria! How did you know?"

Orin had told Rennie the secret an hour earlier. "I know you too well, sir."

Rennie and Orin both cracked up laughing.

"Joe, Joe, come here." Midlothian took Rennie by the shoulders. "I'm a little bit worried about you."

"Me? What for?"

"You know what. I don't want you to become recipient of my Foundation. Look, how about I find you a real nice babe? No, I'll get ten, you choose one. I'll try to find you some church ladies. You'll never have to worry." Rennie rubbed his eye. "Hey, Joe, you're like family."

For Rennie, neglectful parents, only child, cold FBI handler—Midlothian was the only family Rennie knew. He and Beth.

A half an hour later, the ballroom was packed. Midlothian stood at a makeshift podium, his multi-race admirers dressed properly, for the occasion.

"Okay, we'll waste no time, the magic moment is here," Midlothian livened the crowd. "Recipient of this year's Midlothian Marley Music Promise Award is—Tania Johnson! Come on up!"

A black teenager with braces came up, all smiles. "You're going to give Uncle Loth a big hug, right?"

Wooh! Came a collective sigh as she squeezed.

"Wooh, wooh, wooh!" Midlothian crooned, to the delight of the crowd.

"Kenny G, step aside when Tania plays the sax.—Everyone, please listen. This has been

a great, great year for my music, so I'm pleased to announce I've donated another million smackolees to my African Aids Cure Foundation and —" he quieted the commotion in the crowd "—You all have matched it to the tune—a lovely tune—of \$925,000!"

Once the crowd quieted, Midlothian added, "And none of this would be possible without the dedication and hard work of my Chief of Staff. Mr. Joe Rennie."

Rennie waved away the attention and applause. While his other hand rubbed both eyes.

Later, the hundreds of patrons were getting charged from the games, the music, the booze. This was Midlothian's night, so he was given the key to the cockpit: The second-story VIP box overlooking the arena atmosphere below. Midlothian invited Rennie up, then handed Rennie binoculars.

"Joe, look down at the closest bar. Find the lady with the short gray hair. The \$50 million lady!"

Rennie found her. Oxford dress suit, bifocals, graceful movements. The beer in her hand didn't match the Princeton Professor demeanor. She spoke quietly to a bearded colleague.

"Gladys Tovar," Midlothian clarified. "That's Dr. Gladys Tovar. Scientist extraordinaire at the new Pentagon research facility over Jersey."

Rennie pondered the 50 million dollar comment, but was hit by an annoying thought: pumping Loth for info about his Caesar Augustus connections. After tonight, it would be even harder, Rennie realized. Agent Andrews would just have to wait. These things take time.

Then came the unexpected gift. The windfall from prior labors.

"Hey Joe, look at me. Did you ever wonder why Caesar Augustus gives me a free ride? I know you do."

"That's too scary a thought," Rennie laughed.

Midlothian looked him in the eye. "I'm no hater, Joe. There's too much love floating around. But there are two exceptions. I hate Augustus and I hate the government. I hate Caesar Augustus, because of all the lives he destroys with his scummy products, and all that senseless violence. But I hate the government more."

Rennie felt a little chill. "Why? They haven't touched you."

"They took away my youth, Joe. I was just an innocent, middle-class kid growing up in Germantown. Tennis, music, good grades, loving parents. Then some psycho charges my school teacher Dad with rape and murder. Wrong place, wrong time. They railroad him into jail." Midlothian said, eyes glassy, showing Rennie a different side. "DNA proves his innocence six years later. But in the meantime, I am robbed of a Dad, of teenage amenities. I had to struggle through Temple with my business degree with so much debt that the administrative job in the record company barely kept me out of poverty."

Midlothian pointed, "Gladys Tovar, the \$50 million woman is the answer."

"Caesar Augustus know about her?"

"Know about her? I've been feeding bits and pieces about Gladys up the organizational chain. Got CA's attention, alright. Wherever he is, he's had his dogs on a leash ever since."

"You don't have to tell me anything," Rennie answered.

Midlothian put his arm around Rennie. “Gladys comes in here a lot, she likes the sports. She likes me, trusts me. One day she confides in me. She’s working on this top secret research team. The team leader tries to take her to bed. Gladys says no. So the lead scientist says okay, Gladys, go sit over here. Do the crappiest assignments.—Talk about the fury of a woman scorned! Gladys and I, we got vengeance against the government figured out. Big time. And Joe, Caesar Augustus gets a rude surprise too.”

Midlothian opened the window of the cockpit. “Gladys!” He called loudly. Gladys looked up and gave Midlothian a wave and a smile. Midlothian returned it. “Joe, when that woman smiles, you smile back!”

Midlothian loosened his tie, opened his shirt, and pointed to a medallion of a starfish. “Gladys gave me this. Hot out of the Pentagon; only four of these in the whole universe. Its purpose is to protect CIA operatives overseas from having their conversations recorded.”

“Tap-proof?”

“Yes. Joe, let’s pretend you are an undercover Fed. I could admit to you that I just killed the President. But when the Feds play back the tape, it all sounds martian. My words are 100% safe. I call this gizmo Gladys I.”

“Does Caesar Augustus have Gladys I?”

“He just got an actual copy as a down payment: On the Grand Finale, Gladys II.”

“What’s Gladys II?”

“Joe. Don’t even ask.”

Pumped with the mystery, Rennie watched his intriguing sponsor mingling with the crowd, pressing the flash, all smiles. A Philadelphia Eagles linebacker walked up to him, said, “Your AIDS charity is good for another 50 G’s, man.” Midlothian slapped his shoulder, and Rennie was thinking, this guy’s real passion is people, not mary jane.

Midlothian retreated to his private office. Within seconds, Gorilla Bauer walked in, unannounced. Gorilla motioned strongly for Orin, the bodyguard, to get out. Orin about ran out.

Midlothian tended to his desktop, ignoring Gorilla.

“Midlothian. Your tax-exempt status has been revoked.”

Midlothian sat down. “Gorilla! What a pleasure! Chill out, you look tense. Grab a drink, watch the Phillies.”

“You and I have an appointment. Tomorrow night, 7:00, at the Venus, to discuss the organization’s terms.”

“That’s Tuesday, mmm. Sorry, man. That’s my Marley Fan Club night. We’ll need to reschedule.”

With deadly deliberateness, Gorilla took newspaper clippings out of a manila envelope. References to the violent deaths of Angelo Rossi and Marcus Wu. “Maybe you’re understanding now, fuzball, just how amazingly merciful the organization has been to you. We don’t have to be talking.”

“Sorry, Gorilla. I don’t read the obituaries.” Midlothian shrugged, smiling.

“Be there!”

“Yo, Bauer!” Gorilla turned as Midlothian waved two fingers at him. “Peace, brother.”



15

Three days later, Thursday.

The passing sun highlighted the multicolored neon of Society Hill, a mecca of nightlife and history between City Hall and the River. Midlothian's compact limo cruised along slowly, allowing Rennie to take in the elegant women pedestrians, his passion rising.

The limo, Orin driving, pulled in front of an upscale restaurant prominently labeled Venus, complete with a sketch of the ancient goddess. Sign looking like a beauty queen.

Midlothian stepped out of the limo. Rennie followed oh so reluctantly.

"Look. This is Venus. As in, haven for Caesar Augustus hitmen," Rennie reminded.

"Joe, you're going to love this irony," Midlothian flashed teeth.

"This is the lion's den we're walking into. Right after after we diss the lions." Rennie remembered Agent Andrews calling Venus a mecca of extravagance and treachery, sometimes both. Venus Fly Trap Restaurant.

Midlothian prodded Rennie toward the canopy and torch-lit entrance. "Joe, you're heard of the TV Seven Second Delay, right? One moment you're thinking one thing. Seven seconds later, it's all a 180° difference. Watch this little miracle."

"I'm not going in there."

Midlothian went in without him. Rennie took another snapshot inventory of his life, then followed him in.

There were waiters in tuxes, soft lights of various intensity, perfectly blended; oil paintings on the walls and musical ballads for a dance floor between the flowered tables. Close dancing. Romance.

For Gorilla Bauer and his entourage, Thursday was cordon bleu and poker night. Midlothian walked past the swan-like receptionist, and found Gorilla and three hoods seated at the table at the far left. They had their own bottle of bourbon and bowls of snacks. In the corner, like a bear in the shadow, stood Babe Lonardo.

"Hey, Gorilla, beautiful day, isn't it?" Midlothian beamed. "Help me out here. That classic song: Tony Bennett or Andy Williams?"

There was a still silence, and Rennie thought he saw hairs rise. Midlothian, still smiling, snatched two clean glasses from a waiter's tray. Set the glasses right on Gorilla's table.

"And Bauer. Joe and I will take a hit of your whiskey, straight up."

Gorilla Bauer erected himself about three inches from Midlothian's nose. Suddenly, Lonardo charged like a wild animal. Shoved Gorilla so hard he stumbled back ten feet.

There were gasps, but within two seconds the polished crowd pretended they saw nothing.

Lonardo said gruffly to Midlothian, "Excuse his lack of manners. No one told him."

"Yeah," Gorilla nodded, looking to the side. "Mr. Lonardo's right, as always."

“Hey, everything’s cool. We all act stupid sometimes,” Midlothian continued to beam. “Even when we are stupid.—And by the way, Gorilla, tell the waiter I want Caesar chicken salad with my drink.”

Midlothian retreated, and Rennie followed suddenly amused.

“Dividends from Gladys I,” Rennie laughed.

“I can’t fool you, can I, Joe?” Midlothian laughed along.

Midlothian slapped Rennie’s chest, suddenly serious. He pointed to a table next to the dance floor. There was a baby-faced guy, wavy black hair, banker’s suit. Seated across from a striking raven-haired woman.

“Ever see that guy before, Joe?”

Rennie shrugged, “No.”

“I see him around a lot. Taking pictures. Can you get a make on him? Complete profile.”

“Sure,” Rennie answered, and then immediately paged the friendly swan receptionist. He handed her a \$50, to check the sign-in requests for dinner guests. Within a flash, she seated Rennie at a vacant table next to the mystery man. She leaned and whispered in Rennie’s ear, “His name is Sergio Gonzalez.”

And as a bonus, she added, “His date is Jane Bradove.”

Rennie was perched five feet from Gonzalez, and he had a close-up view of this exquisite woman named Jane Bradove, whose silky hair spread across her shoulders and down her back like jet-black fire under sensuous light. Her striking face was as refined as a perfect sculpture. Her dark eyebrows were set well above her vivid green eyes which possessed a distinctive natural outline. She reflected a tannish complexion and wore a dark blue gown, slit to the thigh to reveal her shapely legs. She had a sleeky, slender look, just the way Rennie like it. Her subtle red lips made a rose wilt in comparison. Rennie noted her flashy golden hoped earrings, and an expression of eager innocence. Now he knew what they meant about the thousand ships. With each passing second, Rennie could feel the adrenaline rushing faster through his body.

Rennie knew how to steal a few glances without making eye contact. He was close enough to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Gonzalez poured himself a glass of brandy and then stretched the bottle toward Jane, who declined.

“Sergio, you know I don’t drink. Especially brandy.” She made a contrivedly-sour face and made him smile.

“But a gentleman wouldn’t be a gentleman if he doesn’t at least offer,” Gonzalez said.

“Gosh, look at the prices!” She animated upon reading the menu. “I feel terrible. I wouldn’t have suggested this restaurant had I known. Please let me help.”

“Janie, you are worth every morsel. And more.” Gonzalez proved it by showing her a wad of bills in his wallet. Next to the fake million dollar bill.

Jane was amused, and when she laughed, her face lit up like a roman candle. Judging by the spacy look in Gonzalez’s eyes, this woman had thoroughly hypnotized him. Rennie still hadn’t found Philly Partner #11. If it were ever Jane Bradove, there may not be Partner #12, Rennie surmised.

From a distance, a hidden camera zeroed in on Gonzalez. Then the lens became crosshairs, then back...

“Did you ever hear the story about the Welsh Princess and the Blacksmith?” Jane asked.

“No.” His eyes reflected anticipation.

“Way back in the twelfth century in the feudal city of Llanerch, there lived his evil King who ruled the land. He was a tyrant, robbing and exploiting his own people. Those who desired peace were thrown into the dungeon to rot away. Well, this evil king had a daughter, the fair Princess. The Princess was dismayed by her father’s evil deeds. She met this poor Blacksmith. They fell in love. This absolutely horrified the nobility, to think that the Princess would marry a commoner. A good prophet appeared to the Princess and the Blacksmith. He predicted that they would marry and be born a son. The son would eventually be king, a good king. But the Princess’ father, the evil King, was not about to let this happen. So he arrested the Blacksmith and threw him in the dungeon, where he languished for 200 days and nights. Conditions became so terrible in the kingdom that a higher authority intervened. An earthquake shook the land and crashed the walls of the dungeon so the Blacksmith could escape. He rescued the fair Princess, and they were secretly married. For two years they hid in a cave, where they bore a son. As soon as the son was born, the evil king died. The Blacksmith and Fair Queen and the infant King-to-be returned to Llanerch in triumph, and brought peace and prosperity to the land.—Happily ever after, of course.” She beamed.

Joe Rennie offered a quiet smile.

Gonzalez felt awkward carrying the wad in his hand. He stuffed the wallet into his back pocket.

“Let me introduce myself. “I’m your local blacksmith.”

“You’re still just my dear Sergio. Even if the portrait on your bill was George.”

“Bradove. What kind of name is that?” He asked.

“My Dad’s Slavic, so it’s an Anglicized version of something, I don’t know. Isn’t that terrible?” She laughed. “He’s an officer in the Navy so we don’t talk a whole lot. He just made the rules. Good rules.”

“Your Mom is your role model.”

Suddenly Gonzalez saw a strangely sullen expression on her face.

“Is something wrong?” He asked.

“I’m sorry, Sergio. I have to break the engagement we had at the Ballet on Tuesday. I’m terribly sorry.”

“Is it something—

“It’s not you, believe me. Mama called last night. She’s in terrible condition. I have to fly to Hawaii next week to be with her. The flower bearers—.”

“Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“Please don’t ask. It’s strictly a family matter,” Jane said. “God has blessed her because she remains in good spirits. –Thank you for being so understanding, Sergio.” Her smile returned, “you’ve been so wonderful to me.”

An elderly tuxedo-clad maitre hovered over their table. He clapped his hands loudly.

“May I have everyone’s attention for a second,” he called. “We’re indeed privileged to have an honored patron among us. A young actress, the lead in the successful off-Broadway comedy ‘Hideaway.’ One of the nicest persons in show biz, Jane Bradove!”

Jane gasped when a roving spotlight hit her in the face.

“I’m not me—you have the wrong person.” As modest applause accorded her, she lifted the fancy tablecloth to hide her face. Finally she stood briefly. “Hi, everyone. I love you all.” Feigning a fainting gesture, she sat back down—and found a two-year old photograph of herself in front of her.

“Kindly autograph this for us,” the man said. “To the owner, Frank Kichin. We would be honored to have you in our display case.”

“Uh—sure.” Jane said, shrugging her shoulders.

“Dear Frank—best of luck and success and may God bless you—(signed) Janie Bradove.” She read as she wrote. Humored, she handed the pen and the photo to her date.

“Your turn to sign, Sergio.”

“Gladly.”

But he never had a chance because the old man testily yanked the pen and photo from his grasp. Stung by the rebuke, he mumbled under his breath.

Reading his distress, she beckoned to the dance floor. That cooled his temper. They embraced to a slow dance. Gonzalez’s heart beat quicker at her silky hair caressing his face.

“I love you, Jane Bradove.” He kissed her on the side of the mouth.

“I like you very much too, Sergio.”

Lonardo beckoned sternly to Midlothian. His dark limo was parked outside on Lombard Street.

“Get in,” Lonardo ordered. Midlothian hesitantly got in the back seat, Lonardo on the other side. They were alone.

The soft light from the door vaguely sketched Lonardo’s tense, shifting eyes, matted hair, blubbery face and lips over a tortured expression. Midlothian imagined him a fallen angel.

Dark cannonball eyes gravitated toward Midlothian. “Caesar Augustus wants Gladys II.”

Midlothian smiled. “Isn’t Gladys I cool? Like E.T. Beep beep! Can I get you one, Lonardo?”

“Real cutesy. Well, you’ve got exactly one week to turn over Gladys II. Or else your franchise tax kicks in. With back taxes and penalties, if you know what I mean.”

Midlothian licked his lips. “Okay. One condition. I deliver the package personally to Caesar Augustus.” Midlothian saw Lonardo’s jaw drop. Big-time sacrilege. “Look, Lonardo, this project’s too big for any handoffs.”

“Caesar Augustus ain’t approachable! Even for me!”

“The difference is, I’ve got Gladys. You don’t.”

“About the only thing keeping you in one piece right now.”

“Chill, Lonardo, just listen. There’s no risk here. Mr. Augustus can set up any liability insurance he wants. In addition to Gladys I. But I need direct communication so there’s no chance of screwups. You have no idea how big this is. Today you look at a world map. After Gladys II, maybe we look at the world map, differently configured. Maybe Caesar Augustus’s doing.”

“Enough, Midlothian. You got ten seconds to get out. And one week.”

“Have it your way. Who’s Gladys?”

Midlothian felt a big hand clutching his collar. Then a fist pushing hard under his chin.

“Caesar Augustus won’t wanna pass this up.” Midlothian matched Lonardo’s stern stare. “I’ve got a separate line to CR. If he doesn’t get Gladys II, and hears Bauer and Lonardo misbehaving as the reason—it won’t be me he’s hunting down.”

16

SSF satellite headquarters, downtown Philadelphia. The command center was smaller; fewer technology panels, computers, video screens. But totally plugged into the FIS database.

“The social isolation is quite remarkable, Father Thorson,” Moreau, seated at the main terminal, said into his laser phone. “Lots of friends from the years I’ve lived here. But for security reasons I ain’t seeking them out. Low profile assignment.”

“Get yourself a local church, Inspector. Carefully choose some close friends,” the Black Charismatic Priest counseled sympathetically. “If you have some good Christian agents around you, make some Bible study and fellowship time. And never forget service. Serving others, especially in need, builds friendships, strengthens the spirit.”

“I miss my small group study in Falls Church,” Moreau said. “But a few of us here are working on an inner city youth tutoring program.” Moreau laughed. “Tom Hull took me to a local church. But it was all White and had a harsh political agenda.—I think it was you who told me politics divides, but the spirit transforms and unites.”

“Very mature, Inspector. As for Mr. Hull, it seems he needs Pastoral counseling. More than I can deliver. Have him call me anyway.”

Moreau put the phone down at the approach of Hull and Jackson. Prayer and Thorson’s wisdom took Moreau’s mountains of challenges, and turned them into manageable tasks.

“Let’s deal with all the friggin’ problems at once,” Moreau said calmly.

“It’s your favorite young agent, Gonzalez,” Jackson began. “He’s getting careless out in the street, attracting attention. Behaving more like a paparazzo than a technically-savvy surveillance officer.”

“No disrespect intended, sir.” Hull said pointedly. “But our idiot agent is going to be a conduit to SSF exposure.”

“Where’d I go wrong?” Moreau sighed. “Pull him off the street immediately.”

“I have the disciplinary manual ready,” Hall said.

“No, no, Tom. We’re taking him into the office for counseling, maybe job restructuring. There are things he’s really good at.” Moreau ventured a wry grin, “Is this gonna get better or worse?”

“Worse,” Jackson deadpanned, glancing at Hull.

“It’s Rennie, our overpriced free agent,” Hull said flatly, handing Moreau a confidential folder. “Agent James Andrews believes that Rennie has been compromised by Midlothian. Rennie’s given us nothing of value since we came to Philly.”

Moreau pondered. “We’ve been getting some excellent intel from various sources. But you’re right, no breakthroughs on the Midlothian angle. What’s your recommendation, Tom?”

“He’s a Bureau contractor, not an agent. Cut him off. We’re not in the mary jane business. Also, if he is loyal to that drug—pushing criminal—”

“Thank you, Tom,” Moreau said, enunciating each word. “Your take, Sid?”

“You know I am a history buff, Commander,” Jackson responded, “And my history book says Rennie has always been a clutch hitter for us. What’s the harm in waiting a while?”

“Okay, here’s the deal,” Moreau said. “If there’s no change after a month, we pull Andrews and assign Rennie to Natale for close monitoring, slightly-invasive communication. See what happens.—Next?”

“We have a real Roguie,” Hull said on pins and needles, fearing his Commander’s response.” Agent Lyle. Thinks he can shake down the vicious Martinez gang for a tidbit on Caesar Augustus. So he snatches Jose Martinez’ sister Shirley, locks her up for two days, does his own private simulation, which includes food deprivation and threats of bodily harm. It turns out she’s innocent. Has nothing to do with her brother’s life of crime.”

Moreau stood abruptly, and his agents drew back.

“What does zero tolerance mean?”

“Definitely outside Biblical parameters,” Hull agreed.

“You think? A little over the line?” Moreau’s laser eyes sharpened. “Shirley Martinez will get a signed letter of apology by an FBI official. Complete with creatively-anonymous checks totalling \$150,000. SSF totally disowns Lyle, if this leaks out. And he is to be reassigned to Nome, Alaska. His new assignment: tracking the number of poaching incidents involving endangered species at the Arctic Refuge.”

“What does SFF have to do with environmental laws, sir?” Hull asked.

Moreau tilted his head. “We’re SSF! We do what we want!”

17

A flashy complex of glossed-over plywood overlooking a hill and a wooded area. Feeling right at home, Rennie scaled the steps of the “C” building and located room 214 on the second floor. These crepe paper ghettos used the flimsiest of locks, and he could pick ‘em with his eyes closed.

The new home of Sergio Gonzalez. Orin thought he’d seen Gonzalez’s Sedan at the Penn campus. So for Rennie, a perfect opportunity...

Inside, there was plenty of room, a nice view, but very few furnishings. He walked past the balcony and found Gonzalez’s bedroom. It had an antiseptic smell to it like the hallway outside. Everything was neatly arranged. The mounted samurai sword,

photographs of college buddies lined up perfectly along the wall. Spit-shined suits in the closet.

Then Rennie saw the 8” by 11” framed blow up of Jane Bradove on the mural of the bed. Roman candle smile, pyramid of black hair. Rennie stared at the picture, thinking about how both he and his mark were infatuated by the same lady.

Rennie focused on the mahogany cabinet. He examined the drawers. The fourth one down from the top was locked. After a two minute application of criminal liaison training, Rennie yanked the drawer out of the cabinet and scavenged the stacked papers like a hungry junkyard dog.

Rennie found blowup photos of the mangiest hoods in town. Rossi, Wu, Gorilla, dozens more. Private memories.

And one particular reference, repeated over and over: Sergio Gonzalez—an FBI Agent.

The juggling of the outside door provoked a wave of fear. He quickly stuffed Gonzalez’s papers inside his shoulder bag. Frantically looking for an escape route. About a 20 foot drop from the bedroom window to the sloping terrace, Rennie was screwed. He sat on the bed, resigned. Searching his mind for salvaging thoughts.

Gonzalez opened the bedroom door. Disheveled, tie loose, staggering. But it took only a blink to draw his .358 magnum.

“Put your hands up where I can see them.” Rennie complied immediately. He could smell the alcohol breath from six feet away. Now Rennie was really scared. “Identify yourself, right now!”

“Joe Rennie, FBI undercover. And you’re Sergio Gonzalez, also FBI. We’re on the same team.”

“Get down! On the floor!” Gonzalez yelled, waving the gun. Rennie hit the deck. Gonzalez ignored the shoulder bag on the floor and took his wallet.

“Yes, the infamous Joe Rennie.” He handed back the wallet. “Sit up, Mr. Rennie. And explain why you’re molesting my apartment.”

“Midlothian ordered me to check you out. Of course, I had to comply—agent, they have made you like custom pottery.”

“Make yourself at home, Mr. Rennie,” Gonzalez addressed the mirror. Fixed his hair. Fixed his shirt. Fixed his tie. Staggered.

Rennie said, “In football, when two receivers on the same team meet, what happens?”

“They draw a lot of defenders?” Gonzalez said weakly.

“Precisely why, Agent Gonzalez, you are jeopardizing lives. Including your own.”

Gonzalez sled into a chair, covering his face. He wept bitterly. Rennie lazily let the agent cry himself out. Gonzalez composed himself.

“Rennie, I screwed up. I let my boss down, let my men down. I’ve been taken off the team.”

“What exactly is your Bureau role?”

“I’m a trained actor. My calling is sleight of hand, in support of my country. Put some bad guys away with smoke and mirrors for a while, then move on to the big screen, maybe.”

“No sweet lighting of vengeance because of communities destroyed by coke and other sleaze?” Rennie said provocatively.

“Yeah, yeah. Sure.”

Rennie shook his head at Gonzalez’s pulling a bottle of whiskey out of his jacket and taking another swig.

“They may give you a second chance, Gonzalez. But keep on like this, you’ll have no chance.”

Again, the tears came from the agent.

Rennie softened, “How could you leave yourself so wide open? They didn’t train you?”

“It was an accident, I swear. I met this nice lady, an actress. We went out a few times, and just coincidentally we were around those other guys. Off the clock, I didn’t notice.”

“Yeah.” Rennie could emphasize alright. He regarded the striking photo of Jane Bradove. Hypnotic.

“That your girl?”

“Never had her, really. I proposed to her at the Venus. She didn’t say no, but—her response wasn’t exactly enthusiastic.”

Rennie felt vulture instincts rising inside. Gonzalez sprayed cologne on himself, then made for the exit.

“You’re going somewhere in that condition?”

“I’ve got to see Jane. All I have in the world, right now. It’s a date with Jane or—” brandishing the .357—“this.”

Rennie sprang to his feet. Was in Gonzalez’s face. “No, no. When you hit rock bottom, you can always find some rainbow sliding upward. There’s no other option. I know. I’ve been there.”

“Thanks for the uplift.”

“No problem.—How about I drive you over to your lady’s place? The only way you’re gonna get there safe. It’s okay; the Mob’s expecting I’m checking you out.”

Rennie’s imagination was running wild now. Gonzalez really couldn’t say no.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it. You really do care, don’t you?”

Now Rennie was feeling really terrible.

Dusk was rapidly falling as Rennie climbed into Gonzalez’s black cruiser sedan. The agent almost collapsed in the back seat. He handed Rennie Jane Bradove’s address. Chestnut Hill, 10 minutes to the southeast.

Gonzalez swigged again, and passed out almost immediately. Rennie drew his cell phone. “Beth, where are you?”

They arranged a brief rendezvous in Chestnut Hill, not far from Jane’s address.

Like clockwork, Beth pulled up alongside Rennie in her brand new Panther Deluxe sedan. Gonzalez was still out. Rennie went briefly to Beth’s car and gave her the shoulder bag.

“Lock this away. FBI contraband,” he said.

“What’s the big gift from Midlothian?” She was excited.

“I don’t have it yet. Maybe a couple weeks, make sense of it all.” Rennie rolled his lazy eyes. “That stupid FBI agent, Andrews. His latest message was, ‘Rennie, score



‘tied, two outs, bases loaded, bottom of the ninth, and you’re up.’ – That fool calls me one more time, and the FBI won’t get jack out of me.”

A relaxed smile from Beth. “You’ll do the right thing, Joe. I know you will.”

Chestnut Hill. Elegant flats intermingled with the lined stone mansions. Rennie turned into the designated street, and found the right number on a compact two-story gray stone structure. The windows were dark, and there was no car in the driveway.

Gonzalez was coming to, just as Rennie parked on the street. The agent staggered out, and started vomiting on Jane Bradove’s lawn.

From the shadows, in the distance, an infrared camera had its sights on Gonzalez’s wrenching body. The lens grew crosshairs, then back...

“Oh no, there she is!” Gonzalez called, pointing to the intersection and a blue BMW with its turn signal on. “Rennie, don’t let her see me like this. Please.” Then he was out again.

An instinctive impulse grabbed Rennie. Simultaneously creative and reckless.

He began jogging in place. Then, he broke into a sprint about the same time the BMW turned into the driveway.

As anticipated, the tires skidded to a stop at the same instant that Rennie’s thigh slammed against the right fender. He dramatized the contact by rolling his body across the hood of the car and down the other side, where he slid harmlessly to the ground. The car door flew open, and then Rennie got a view of the magnificent face set against the neon streetlight. Jane Bradove gasped at the sight of two still bodies in her lawn.

“Oh, no—Sergio” She rushed over to him and took his head in her hands. “Is he dead?” Her whole body began to tremble like a scared little girl.

“Just drunk, he’ll be fine,” Rennie called to her. He sat up and rubbed his leg. “He had a few drinks and passed out. – But you almost killed me.”

“I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t see you. Honest.” She closed her eyes and bit her lip. “This is awful. Please don’t move. I’ll call a doctor.”

“Never mind. Nothing’s broken.” Rennie “struggled” to his feet. She reached out her delicate arm. He couldn’t help but laugh at Jane’s feeble tugs.

“Go to Sergio, lodge your shoulder under his armpit, then wrap his arm around your right shoulder. I’ll bear the brunt of his weight,” Rennie instructed. Together they escorted Gonzalez up the marble steps to the front door.

“I’m sorry,” Jane said for about the sixth time as she unlocked the front door. They eased Gonzalez into a nearby chair. She switched on a dim yellow light which revealed an elegant den with thick carpeting, matching cushioned furniture, over a dozen fine reprints and a red brick fireplace. Suddenly all of Jane’s features were accentuated, including her loose satiny green dress and a glimmering gold chain necklace. Jane provided Rennie a hugging escort to a long sofa.

“It’s just a little sore. Nothing serious.”

“How do I make it up to you? I never ran over anyone before,” Jane said in a fragile voice. “I suppose you’ll sue me. You have every right, you know—Janie, you really did it this time, girl.”

“We can settle this out of court. Give me your house and your car.” He spoke with dead seriousness and gauged her blank reaction. “—Or tickets to your next three performances.”

“It’s a deal. –What the heck, you can have my car. That way I can’t hurt anyone else. Let me get you something wet., she offered.” Rennie’s heart pounded. “I can’t bring you liquor because I don’t drink. Ice tea okay?”

“Ice tea is fine. I’m giving up drinking, too,” Rennie said strategically. “I feel like I know you already. Sergio talks about you. You’re the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” Jane was briefly stunned by Rennie’s come-on. And by those sulky eyes looking innocently at her.

“Excuse me,” she said softly and left the room.

One glance at the plaque over his head depicting the Poem of St. Francis told Rennie that Jane might be his biggest challenge.

Jane returned with two glasses of ice tea in her slender fingers. She set them down on the coffee table beside the sofa.

“Sergio is still out. He must have had a thousand drinks,” Jane said with a playful laugh and a pronounced shrug of her shoulders. Rennie noticed Jane taking the barrel of Gonzalez’s .357 magnum between her thumb and index finger. Then she started toward the front door, grimacing as if she were carrying a dead fish. She tossed it outside in the yard. “I don’t allow weapons of violence in my home.”

Jane pulled over a chair and sat across from him. He leaned closer to her, almost close enough to touch her delicate face; silky black hair flowing over her shoulders like angel’s hair.; legs crossed underneath her gown.

“I’m Joe.”

“Jane,” she murmured, clutching his hand oh so delicately. He shook her hand once and then kissed it.

Sounding a hesitant laugh, she withdrew her hand.

“I’ve never seen Sergio in such a condition.”

“He lost a friend,” Rennie responded.

“How did it happen?”

“Suicide.” Rennie knew he was talking to fast. Totally dazed. He saw Jane’s face sour just a trace. “Ever have someone close to you commit suicide?”

“Not really.” Her sullen eyes slowly rose toward the wall above and focused unmistakably on the photograph of a dark-haired, middle-aged woman.

“Whoever that woman is, she’s beautiful, like you.”

“It’s my Mama, the most important person in the world to me. Everyone says I look like her. Her name is Marie, and I’m Jane Marie.” Her voice was hesitant. “A Priest in Manayunk once told me she’s a saint. For twenty years, she went into poor parishes and helped families who had very little and –uh--.” Her words faded as she bit her lower lip. She slowly closed her eyes. Suddenly, Rennie sat up and took her hand into his palms.

“It’s okay.”

“There’s no big deal, really,” Jane said, forcing a smile. “Mama found out a year ago she had terminal cancer. The flower bearers came, and one actually said, I hope she won’t commit suicide. Never! Her spirit is too strong--”

“What kind of people would do that?”

“People who call themselves friends.” She spoke without bitterness. “But we asked them to go away, and they did. It’s okay now. My dad’s a Captain in the Navy

stationed in Hawaii and spends every spare minute with her. I'm flying out tomorrow to help out."

"It's great that your mom is carrying herself with dignity down to the last second."

"Did I know Sergio's friend? —Probably not." She answered her own question. "I betcha he was with that project."

"What project?"

"Some undercover assignment with the FBI."

"How do you know about that?"

"He told me." She shrugged her shoulders.

Rennie had been in the business for years. Never seen an FBI guy so careless, reckless. But then the power of a pretty face had never been so perfected.

"Sergio said it's just our secret."

"And now it's my secret, too." Rennie shook his head. "And who knows who else's."

"Do you think he's a spy?" She said with a wide-eyed look of innocence.

"Spying on you. He's absolutely crazy about you. How does that make you feel?"

"Uh—I don't know. Humbled, I guess."

"Humbled?"

"I just met you. Already you sense my distress. I may have hurt him deeply. I haven't the decency to tell him how I really feel." Her voice was a bare murmur as she turned her head toward the back room. "Sergio, I'm sorry. I'm not worthy of your company because if I was I would have told you that I only like you when you told me you loved me. I adore you, Sergio, but I don't love you."

She rubbed her arms as if performing on stage. Finally, she turned toward Rennie.

"See how awful I am? I have to wait until he's half-dead before I can tell him how I feel. I don't want to hurt his feelings anymore."

Rennie said lowly, "I'm trying to read your mind, to find out what else you do besides spill your soul in front of drama critics. —Let's see. You do volunteer work for some charity. Church related."

"Reparations I suppose. How'd you know?"

"You idolize your mom. Besides, I do similar work. I work with war vets trying to kick drugs." He thought of the FBI guys trying to slam the drug pushers. So technically, it wasn't a lie. "In a world full of callous money-grabbers, it's refreshing to meet someone who truly cares about people. You're a very nice person, Janie Bradove." Rennie tried to bring tears to his eyes, but couldn't quite. It turned him on to see Jane lightly bite her lower lip again. He leaned closer to her. Her vivid eyes seemed eager. He moved his mouth toward hers. And felt outstretched palms against his chest.

"Joe, I think we better—"

"—We better slow down before we get carried away," Rennie interrupted, drowning out her voice. He made the sign of the cross and playfully hid his head.

Suddenly, to Rennie, her innocence, a determined one, was more powerful than the beauty and sensuality. Strangely, his raging for sexual gratification gave way to something else. Something deeper.

Gonzalez was now semi-conscious and struggling to crawl on hands and knees. Rennie knew Gonzalez was going to vomit again. So he hustled him outside.

“Don’t let Jane see me like this,” Gonzalez pleaded repeatedly between his wretches and moans.

“Okay, I’ll get you out of here. Let me tell Jane we’re leaving.”

Rennie found Jane standing calmly in the doorway.

“Janie, I’ll look for you—uh, maybe in church.”

“Joe, you forgot something.” Jane handed him a ticket. This time she took the initiative by lightly kissing his cheek. “Thank you for forgiving my reckless driving. Thanks for your company, too.”

Getting Gonzalez back to the car would be a chore; he could hardly walk.

“I guess that means I’m gonna have to look after you,” Rennie said out of genuine concern for his accomplice. “And I’ve got some sound advice for you.” He backed him inside the cruiser sedan, shotgun. “Don’t put too much stock in Janie. She looks upon you more as a brother than a lover.”

Out of the corner of his eye Rennie saw two shadowy figures advancing rapidly toward the sedan. With weak neon light, the identities of the intruders were not revealed until they were close enough to touch.

When Rennie recognized the bushy gorilla face of the lead man, he knew he had rolled seven one time too many. Gorilla. The barrels of two pistols took dead aim at Joe Rennie’s eyes.

“Get inside the car and put your hands on the steering wheel,” Gorilla commanded.

Rennie wasted no time in complying. Gorilla and another hood who looked like Gorilla, except smaller, climbed in the back.

“Okay, buddy, we’re gonna take a drive,” Bauer ordered.

“It’s good right here. Let’s waste them and get outa here,” Chimp interjected in his tenor voice.

“No, we hit the park.”

“Let’s do it now. There ain’t no restrictions.”

“You up there! Start drivin’!” Gorilla called to Rennie.

“The boss says we’re to hit this sucker, no take him for a stroll!”

The two hoods bantered back and forth: A ventriloquism show of terror. Rennie glanced over his shoulder and saw Gorilla’s grisly face and protruding eyes hovering over him, like a werewolf ready to tear him apart under the scattered rays of the moon. Gorilla grabbed Gonzalez by the hair and yanked his head back toward the seat.

“There’s our marked merchandise,” Gorilla said. The semi-conscious agent gazed back at the intruders.

“Who are you?”

“No one said you could speak, creep.” Gorilla let his crane of an arm fly toward Gonzalez’s head. It was a devastating punch, bashing Gonzalez’s head near the temple and snapping it back. He was rendered immediately unconscious.

“You’re gonna do what, you say? You’re gonna bust us, FBI pig?” Gorilla taunted.

“Mess him up a little. But let me kill him. You promised I’d have the next one,” Chimp pleaded. Rennie felt needles from the North Pole rushing through his veins.

Rennie flinched noticeably when Gorilla yanked at his collar.  
 “You! Up there! Who are you? Let me see your ugly puss.”  
 Rennie hesitantly turned around for the thug to gape at him.  
 After a few seconds, Gorilla turned to Chimp. “I seen this guy before. He’s Midlothian’s errand boy. Why are you with him?”  
 “Loth asked me to check him out.”  
 “You didn’t know he was heat? – He wants to put us all in the pen to rot!”  
 “I didn’t know that.”  
 “Hear that, Chimp? He didn’t know that.” Gorilla sounded a gritty laugh.  
 “Midlothian is supposed to be the big guy in this town. He don’t know jack!”  
 “If that means killing Gonzalez, you better reconsider,” Rennie said, fighting back.  
 Chimp looked at Gorilla in disbelief. “Is he telling you what to do?”  
 “Killing him would be a mistake,” Rennie pursued. “Your boss better talk to my boss about it. Loth may have other plans.”  
 “What kind of plans?”  
 “Let him do his thing, maybe he leads us to other informants.”  
 But Gorilla was licking his chops. In a flash, without mercy he drew his .38 and – BLAM! Shot Gonzalez behind the ears. Death just that quick.  
 Rennie yelled. But his protest was abbreviated by a vicious blow. First Rennie felt dizzy. Then the darkness became darker. Then stars started circling his eyes at the speed of light. The last thing he remembered, until he found himself licking dirt. He opened his eyes and almost cried with the throbbing pain in his head. There was a sore lump on the right side of his forehead. Darkness and bush all around him, Rennie knew he had been cast into Fairmount Park. Rennie wept for the raw evil that exploded in his face. He wept for Gonzalez. He had no idea that a guy he’d known for barely an hour could touch his life so.  
 Rennie reached for his secure cell phone and said, “This is 038. I need a lawyer.”  
 The command to activate a coded message to Special Agent James Andrews.

18

Four days later. Pocono Mountains, Northeast Pennsylvania. Moreau and four other agents stood inside a cabin, looking down into a ravine. Fresh green everywhere; spring breeze from opened windows.

Moreau and his agents were clad in khakis and shadow beards; weapons and surveillance equipment resting on wooden tables. The easel next to Moreau had arrows, stars, cryptic symbols. Moreau turned a marker in his hand, and the agents could just about imagine Moreau applying it to his face. War paint. At Gonzalez’s funeral two days before, agents saw Moreau’s head bowed a lot. Sharing with the almighty his grief and rage.

De Sario approached Moreau. “You know that Assistant Commander Hull argued against this operation, don’t you? He wanted Gorilla left out in the street awhile. Bag a few more fish.”

“Did you tell Tom that a loose Gorilla Bauer will probably get more innocent people killed?”

“That, and more, Commander.”

“My Black confessor Priest said to me, quote, view vengeance as a business necessity. Let God take care of the rest. Well, let’s get down to business.”

Moreau took out a lighter-shaped transmitter. “It’s party time, all. I want this cockroach cleanup mission completed before Sergio’s tribute ceremony at the Hoover Building this Friday. Tony, I turn it over to you.”

“Quick summary, men. Down that hill you’ll see Cobb creek, and the Cobb landing docking area,” De Sario said in a loud New York voice. “A full-court press of surveillance and street intel puts the Martinez brothers at the dock at 1300. Loading enough coke on that raft down there to buy a high rise. The raft will connect with a tugboat on the Delaware.

“SSF intel also places the Gorilla Bauer entourage at Cobb landing sometime between 1300 and 1315. Call it a rendezvous, intercept, whatever. The context: the Martinez gang has been late with their franchise tax payments. And Caesar Augustus is not in a charitable mood. So expect tense interactions, drug heist, shakedown, worse. We don’t know yet.”

2:55 pm. “Here they come!” An agent called.

“Full alert!” De Sario said. The agents flipped the wrap-around binoculars over their eyes and grabbed high-powered rifles. A white van approached the dock from the left, on the dirt road. The van stopped. Five men got out. Lounging around the van and the raft, smoking cigarettes, bantering laughter.

“They’re in no hurry,” said Moreau. “Haven’t a clue what’s coming down.”

“Over there!” De Sario pointed to a black armored truck approaching from the left.

“They’re here already!” Came a squeaking voice from the field. “Seven gunmen coming out on abandoned mine shaft. Look to the right!”

The seven men, brandishing machine guns, approached the white van, fanning out in a semicircle.

“This ain’t gonna be tea party communication,” Moreau said to his agents. “Field agents, full positions. Stand down. Only on command.”

The armored truck stopped about 10 feet from the van. Gorilla Bauer emerged. The only man moving. All the other men at the dock were hair-trigger still.

The Martinez brothers were standing on the raft. Their three heavies leaned against the white van. Gorilla was waving to the Martinez brothers. Beckoning to them now.

The Martinez brothers walked toward Gorilla. With horrible precision, seven machine guns were raised. Multiple drilling sounds were audible from the SSF cabin. The slaughter of the Martinez contingent was on.

“Full assault!” Moreau yelled.

Rifles from the agents in the cabin cracked repeatedly, to supplement SSF machine gun fire farther down. Gorilla was crawling on all fours, like a dog chasing his tail. He kept seeing his gunmen drop, one by one.

Chimp jumped out of the armored truck, carrying a machine gun.

“Up close and personal,” Moreau said, raising his rifle and firing a shot. Chimp fell and clutched his shoulder. “Dang! Can’t believe I missed.” Moreau fired again, and drilled Chimp between the eyes.

“Let’s show ’em some real SSF firepower,” Moreau ordered.

Suddenly the armored truck went up like a torch; yellow and orange flames leaping fifteen feet into the air. Then billowing black smoke. “Take out the mine!” Moreau called.

Within seconds, there was billowing black smoke from a second area.

Gorilla was curled up, covering his head.

“Okay, predator babe,” Moreau seethed. “Let me see the whites of your eyes. Let me see that fear coming back on you.”

Gorilla jumped up and broke in full sprint down the dirt road, to the right.

“Run, run, you dog.” Moreau continued. “—Okay, intercept.”

Three agents were on Gorilla like a spider on an ant.

SSF had a large armored vehicle of their own. Gorilla, handcuffed, was seated behind a long wooden plank, facing 5 FBI agents, including Moreau. The large bags of dope, evidence, were stacked up in front.

“Bring in the other prisoner.”

The back door of the truck opened, and another agent dragged in Agent Moyanski, his hulky body handcuffed like Gorilla’s.

They seated Moyanski on the bench next to Gorilla. Moreau and De Sario sat across from Moyanski, ignoring Gorilla.

Moreau took out a legal document. “Damian Lucas, Hazleton, PA. Charged with killing a Federal officer responding to a human trafficking charge,” he pretended to read, looking at De Sario. “Has Mr. Lucas been Mirandized?”

“Of course,” De Sario responded.

“We can’t say a word to him.” Moreau said at the same time he was loading a bullet into a .38 revolver. Spinning the chamber.

Moreau looked at De Sario. Aimed the gun at Moyanski.

“There were certainly witnesses to this senseless crime.”

CLICK!

Moyanski gasped. Eyes wild, body quaking. As the chamber was spun again.

“I can’t imagine this heinous act escaping someone’s eye,” De Sario said to Moreau.

CLICK!

Moyanski let out an audible cry. The chamber spun again.

“Has the prisoner expressed remorse?” Moreau asked De Sario.

BLAM!

The red spot appeared immediately on Moyanski’s white shirt. Growing, spreading. There were gurgling sounds, heavy breathing. Moyanski’s head fell limp.

Agent Tatum raced over to the “prisoner.” Took his pulse. With grave eyes, Tatum shook his head.

Moreau’s eyes and expression were blank. “Road kill,” he finally said. “Get rid of it.”

The large truck was going about seven miles an hour, when the agents opened the back door and tossed Moyanski outside.

Moyanski's hulk was lifeless on the dirt road. Until the truck turned a bend. Then he tore the phony handcuffs from his wrist. Next he unbuttoned his shirt and removed the messy broken bag of thick red dye. Then he removed the bullet from the Styrofoam jacket. Covering the bullet proof vest.

In the truck, Moreau and De Sario sat across from Gorilla. Moreau pulled out a legal document.

"This prisoner is Webster Bauer. Cold blooded murder of an FBI agent. Also caught in the act, multiple homicide."

Moreau put a bullet in the chamber, spun it, looked at De Sario. "Has the prisoner been Mirandized?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Please," came the voice of Gorilla Bauer.

"Please what?" Moreau responded.

19

SSF satellite HQ, Philadelphia, three days later. Vic Moreau reviewed the initial statements of Bauer, then perused the series of FIS photo profiles. Stridently, looking for a match; a name to pin on Caesar Augustus.

Moreau couldn't get rid of a nagging thought. Again, he dialed Father Thorson on his laser phone.

"You still haven't answered my question, Father. Did I step over any lines?"

"I'll answer that with three questions. First, was there any injury or harm in your custody? Second, were any innocent people hurt? Number three, can you conceive of a future scenario where innocents may be ensnared by your simulations?"

"Christians go to war quite often, Father. Circumstances dictate different engagement rules, but the objective never changes: protect the weak and harm only the bad guys. Spiritual warfare in flesh."

Moreau heard a little laugh on the other end. "Just wars can be hard to define. By human wisdom. Keep praying and asking the right questions, Victor. I'll be in all week."

Moreau took it in with a nod. But it bothered him.

Sid Jackson and Tom Hull approached. Hull spoke, "You may be interested in two calls we just got from Maui, Hawaii. Asking for you, personally, sir."

"I got admirers in Maui?" Moreau joked.

"Some showgirl named Jane Bradove. Wanted Inspector Moreau," Hall said dryly. "Dropped a bombshell of a name: Sergio Gonzalez."

Moreau's hairs stood on end. "Calls came into the SSF line?"

"No, regular FBI lines," Hull answered. "Thank God."

"Yeah, I remember a passing reference to her in Joe Rennie's report, sent in by Andrews." Moreau picked up the Rennie report, perused the pages.



“More than a passing reference, Commander,” said Jackson. “Rennie placed Ms. Bradove with Serge minutes before he was killed.”

“So that makes her a material witness?” Moreau said. “Without a direct nexus to the hoods? Did you run a thorough FIS computer scan on her?”

“Sure,” Jackson shrugged. “Nothing came up.”

“Rennie’s take on her involvement?” Moreau asked.

“Incidental,” said Jackson.

“That’s what I read,” Moreau shrugged. “Sit down, relax.”

“Close to a murder, and then a request for a private meeting. A volatile combination, sir,” Hull warned. “And she wants to name the place.”

Moreau flashed back to New Orleans. Hey, Hip Kennedy! Hand coming out of rain coat. Bang!

“I’ll meet with her,” he said finally. “See what she wants. What she knows.”

“At least let us choose the location,” Jackson said.

“Nah, let her do it,” Moreau said to his leary agents.

20

The rendezvous was scheduled at one of the learning halls at Temple University. The time: 10:00 PM. All sorts of ominous possibilities passed through the minds of the FBI executives.

The Temple U. campus in North Philly was quiet and deserted on this damp Holiday night. Even automobile traffic passing by the campus was scarce. An eight square block area surrounding contact point was a virtual green zone. Heavily armed SSF agents on roof of a campus building. Moreau, bulletproof vest underneath brown leather jacket, moved quickly through the campus area, surrounded by four agents.

The agents saw a shadow of a person fitting Jane Bradove’s description approaching the designated learning center. Jane had unlocked the door—somehow—and went inside. Two minutes later, Moreau emerged from a dark crevice and approached the same building. He pulled on the door and found it unlocked. The lobby inside was illuminated with safety lights. Following instructions, he walked up a flight of steps. He made his way to the dark corridor on the second floor. He looked for the number of the class room matching the number on the scrap paper in his pocket.

His squinty eyes battled the darkness until he read the right number. The door was closed, but not tight. Then suddenly—WAM!—he ripped the door open with a swirling kick. Just as quickly, he ducked away from the doorway. No gunshots. Finally he poked his head inside and found a college classroom with blackboards along the front wall, a podium and desks lined up in rows. Outside light shining through the windows brightened the room. Moreau found a slender young woman sitting passively along the front row of desks. He saw her thick black hair, and she was wearing a long red raincoat, long enough to hide anything underneath. One closer look at her face and Moreau saw beauty overpowering enough to be quite dangerous. Gradually she lifted her eyes toward him. Smiling sheepishly, she held up a key in her slender right hand.

“Sergio gave me this. His alumni group used to meet here. They still do, I guess.”

Moreau didn't take his eyes off her hands.

“What do you want?”

“Please, I want protection. The men who killed Sergio. They may come after me. I was with him,” she said softly.

Moreau leaned closer. “Sergio give you my name?”

“These awful men, God knows what they'll do next.”

Trembling slightly, she reached her hand inside her purse. It all broke loose. FBI agents out of nowhere. She gasped upon being hit in the face with bright light from the flashlight. Two .38 pistols were turned on her.

“Drop the purse!” Agent Tatum commanded. “I said, drop the purse!” The purse crashed to the floor. “Now stand up and put your hands on your head!” She immediately complied. Her eyes were wide open and her breath quivered. While Agent Natale held the flashlight, another agent opened her raincoat and patted down her knee-length red dress, on the sides. Nothing. The agents circled her like wolves, and she began to whimper. Moreau retrieved her purse, and searched it thoroughly and found a card addressed to Sergio Gonzalez's mother.

“I hope you would pass this condolence to the Gonzalez family,” Jane said weakly. “I don't have the address. I want to send flowers, too.”

“No weapons, fellows. Not even a nail file,” Moreau said, tossing the purse aside. Jane covered her face.

“Excuse us, Ms. Bradove,” Moreau said and then emphatically motioned his men out of the room.

Outside, the agents looked like they had just puked.

“Now that we've all, especially me, made a jackass of the FBI, can I entertain suggestions?” Moreau said, dismissing his agents.

Moreau turned to the classroom. Found Jane Bradove still wiping tears from her eyes.

“What exactly did Sergio tell you?” Moreau asked.

“He said he works for the FBI undercover, and he couldn't discuss the details. Too sensitive. But if anything ever went wrong, to call you. I was just honoring his final wish.”

Suddenly he beheld her beauty. There was a certain helplessness about her. “I truly am sorry for this incident,” Moreau said. He took the card and gave her Sergio's parents address, from memory.

“That's all, I guess, Jane said. “You know the rest.”

Without expression, Jane Bradove retrieved her purse and walked out of the classroom. Moreau heard the tapping of Jane's heels against the steps outside. Reaching the hallway, he eyed Jane's thick flowing hair descending toward the first floor. He ran down the steps behind her. She didn't look back. Finally he intercepted her in the doorway.

“You walking to your car alone?”

“My car is being repaired,” she said, cell in hand. “I'm catching a cab.”

“In this neighborhood?”—Come on, I’ll take you home.” He abruptly pushed the door open for her. She snapped him a quick wide-eyed glance. “I have to do something right tonight.” Those words made her smile. She walked outside with him.

“You can guarantee my safety, sir?” Jane asked as they walked together across the damp, dark campus.

“No doubt about it.”

There was something intimidating about the quiet late-night darkness, so she clutched his arm. They came upon a lighted street and passed a couple of derelicts wandering aimlessly along the sidewalk.

“You take it seriously, this protecting of the innocent.”

“It’s my life,” Moreau said. “Nothing gives me more pleasure than protecting you right now.”

They approached his Porsche. He opened the door with perfect chivalry. She directed another wide-eyed glance at him.

“Again I apologize for this incident,” Moreau said, firing up the engine. “No more threats, I promise. I will extend your protection beyond tonight.”

“Thank you. —Sorry if I upset your men.”

“Let’s do it right this time. I’m Vic Moreau.”

“Jane Bradove.”

She cordially extended her hand. He took it and shook it delicately.

“You hungry?” He asked.

“Okay. But no business, please.”

“Okay.”

“I refuse to let you spend money on me.”

Moreau smiled quietly. “If you insist.”

On the way to the restaurant, Moreau noticed how peaceful Jane looked, slumped quietly in the passenger seat. The Porsche cruised into Duke’s, a late night restaurant club in Manayunk, a neighborhood marked by jazz and ethnicity. Moreau couldn’t get her innocent expressions out of her mind.

Moreau insisted on opening the door of the Porsche for her. He provided her an official escort. She smiled in appreciation. Recognizing Moreau from an earlier visit, the hostess extended him a warm hello—and then surprised him by greeting Jane by name. Jane disavowed it with a playful shrug of her shoulders.

Duke’s was a dim-lights-and-soft-music place. Although a hole in the wall in size, it catered to the suit-and-tie crowd. Moreau took Jane’s raincoat and then held her chair as she was sitting down.

Moreau ordered sandwiches for both of them and was satisfied to sit back and watch her as she ate. He had a smug look as he dwelled upon her fair features. Occasionally she would look up at him with her big eyes and smile.

Jane glanced toward an adjacent table where an elderly couple were seated. The old man caught Jane’s eyes, then stood up and approached her table. Without invitation, the old man grabbed a chair and sat down beside Jane.

“Hello Ralph,” Jane said to the old man. “Vic, please say hello to Ralph.” Jane prodded him with a nod. A confused Vic Moreau shook Ralph’s hand.

Ralph was a tall, graying man with a freckled face and a white moustache. He wore a bright tie behind his beaten overcoat. Ralph seemed like the kind of guy who would always dress up in a tie even if he couldn't afford to buy new socks.

"He your brother, Jane?" He asked in broken English.

"Do I look like her brother?" Moreau said.

"No, he's not my brother," Jane said, amused. "He's just a friend."

Ralph blurted a hardy laugh. "I just kidding. I never see him before. He no belong to our church."

"Perhaps if you ask Victor, he will come." Jane spoke to Ralph, but looked at Moreau.

"You lucky man, Victor. Strong and healthy. You no die a poor man. You keep working. See the world. But no die a poor man. That is the worst. When I be a hundred years, I still work. America rich country. Yet people get old and die a poor man. I no understand."

"Ralph was just laid off. They closed another factory," Jane explained to Moreau. "Our church is trying to find him another job."

"I lose my job. One kid put in jail in Texas last week. Break Tasha's heart. I have Tasha and the parish. I be in America three and —no—thirteen years!" Ralph declared. "Twelve years good. One bad year and I lose everything gained."

"I must tell you a story," Jane said.

"Oh, another story," Ralph chuckled.

"Way back in the early 1800's there lived this homesteader named Cal. Broke and penniless, he left Philadelphia by stagecoach and settled on a piece of land in the Kansas prairie. He worked hard to build up this little supply store in the local town. When the people needed something, they went to him. Then one hot day a tornado destroyed his house and his store. Twenty years of work gone. He was so upset that he went up into the mountains to die. Then, during his darkest hour, he heard horses in the mountain pass. The Godly townspeople had come to take him home. When they returned, the entire town was waiting for him. His house and store were completely rebuilt. Happily ever after," Jane said.

"There you go, Ralph. How can you lose?" Moreau encouraged.

"Jane always try to cheer me up. Jane is good girl." Ralph patted her head, ruffling her hair a little.

"You and Tasha are out very late tonight," Jane said.

"We eat and then we find a hotel."

"Hotel? What do you mean?"

"Me and Tasha go home in the afternoon. The house all torn up by crazy drug kids. T.V. gone, silver gone. Everything a big mess. Windows broken. Me and Tasha no go home anymore."

Jane gasped and covered her face.

"Didn't you call the police?—or Father Mancini?"

The melancholy old man excused himself from the table. Jane reached out with her delicate hand and grabbed Ralph's wrist. She pulled a key chain from her purse and handed it to him.

“Please don’t lose it. I only have two copies. You and Tasha are staying with me. You know where the house is.—Listen, I insist,” Jane said over Ralph’s protest. “It’s the room all the way back on the right side. Towels are in the bathroom closet.”

Ralph stared at the keys.

“God will bless you, Jane Bradove. —And how is your mother Marie?”

“Much better. Now that the flower bearers have gone away.”

“Yes. Is lucky for you mother.”

“You like ball, Ralph?” Moreau asked.

“Like ball?”

“Yeah. Baseball.” Moreau made a swinging motion with his arms.

“Oh, baseball. Yes. I shall like to go someday.”

“Okay. We’ll go this Sunday. Just you and me. Jane, too, if she’s interested.”

“Yes, thank you.” Jane nodded happily.

“I’ll pick you up and—if I have to cancel, we’ll make it up right away.—See, I work twenty-four hours a day.”

“No. You work twenty-four hours, you go crazy, heh, heh.”

“That’s right, crazy. That’s what I am,” Moreau said with a wink.

“See you later, Ralph,” Jane called. Then she reached out and lightly touched Moreau’s hand. “That was nice of you, Vic.”

“Who are the flower bearers?” Moreau asked.

Her warmth abruptly turned into a reaction of shock at a seemingly harmless question. Moreau paged a waiter and ordered himself a small glass of wine. Like a gentleman, he extended the offer to his date.

“No, but I will have a dish of vanilla ice cream, please.”

“It has to do with my mother,” Jane answered his question belatedly, after her ice cream came. “She’s dying of cancer—She’s doing fine though. She’s in good spirits and the doctor gives her at least six more months.” Jane did a good job of hiding her distress. “Why am I telling you this, FBI man? I betcha you have a thick file on me. This thick.” She indicated with her fingers. “Maybe even this thick.” She spread her fingers further apart, and they both laughed.

“No, we only keep files on the bad guys.”

“Come on, how much do you know about me?” She prodded.

“Top secret intelligence: You’re a good actress.”

“Don’t ever let anyone exaggerate my status,” Jane said. “I’ll never be famous, because the kind of parts I play rarely attract notoriety or money. If you’re looking for a rich socialite, you’d better look elsewhere.” She animated rapidly blinking eyes.

“If you want something bad enough, you can have it.”

“I’ve been performing ever since high school. I broke into the New York scene after participating in a local pageant. There’s always work for me somewhere. New York a few months, then back here for awhile, etcetera. I supplement my stage work by writing children’s books. My real love.”

“Okay. How much do you know about me?” Moreau asked.

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. “—This might sound terribly personal. But as nice and handsome as you are, I’m surprised that some other woman hasn’t grabbed you and hid you away somewhere.”

“That’s because I always tell such women I could never impose my gritty law enforcement life on anyone else.”

“It takes a lot of courage to say that. I appreciate it.”

Moreau slowly stretched his arm toward her.

“I would very much like you to dance with me.”

“Yes, I would.”

The band, another pleasant musical time warp, played nothing but standard ballads. One song passed into another with Vic Moreau and Jane Bradove together on the dance floor. Moreau was no dancer. He barely moved to the music. Moreau looked down at his shoulder and found Jane with her eyes closed and wearing a quiet smile of contentment. It was very late and she didn’t want to move.

Jane was half asleep as Moreau drove her to her Chestnut Hill home. He turned in the driveway, and the headlights caught the rusted chrome of Ralph’s Chrysler. Of course, Moreau insisted upon opening the car door for her. Jane flashed another wide-eyed stare and obliged by offering her hand to him. He escorted her up the marble steps and they stood together under the dim porch light.

“How do you feel?” Moreau asked.

“I am blessed. Tonight you are part of that blessing.”

“Can we do it again?”

“Yes, I’d like that. You did promise protection,” she said wryly.

Moreau bent forward and kissed her on the cheek. He began to turn from her, but she stopped him and returned the kiss on the cheek.

“Do you treat every woman like a princess?” Jane asked.

“No. Just real princesses. I know only one.”

21

Jacques was one of those upscale Main Line restaurants where only violin music played. Mid-afternoon, a sparse crowd, and at a table near a draped wall sat Jody Vandermere, looking at a menu where you almost had to be bilingual, and no number was less than three digits. Vandermere had black suit, black shirt, black tie, black beard, thick black hair parted in the middle but gold watch and gold cufflinks. The tuxedo waiter wordlessly poured brandy while Vandermere took in the Mozart music like a Cheshire cat. Gordon Dugan sat next to him, reading the sports page.

In walked the brown-suited Cornelius Midlothian. Searching. Then stopping. His mouth said nothing, but his wide brown eyes said, Caesar Augustus!

Dugan registered a look of absolute honor. “Boss, you letting an ape into our sanctum?”

Vandermere raised his hand. “Thy place in council thou hast rudely lost, which by thy younger ape is supplied.” A variation on Shakespeare.

“Mr. Vandermere. Truly a pleasure to meet you sir.” Midlothian’s voice was just as polished as Vandermere’s.

After a minute of pleasantries and introductions, Midlothian said, “Gladys I is a trip, isn’t she? And your organization, sir—”

“Excuse me,” Vandermere interrupted. “What on Earth are you talking about?— Mr. Dugan, when our colleague called Mr. Midlothian, I thought it was concerning a publishing referral. Some book he had written.”

“Oh.” Midlothian caught on. “Sorry, let’s get down to business. The idea for my book is a suspense thriller. Domestic terrorism. Let me give you the basic theme.”

“But hark ye, what cunning match have you made with this jest of a proposal?” Vandermere sounded a couple of thunderclaps laughs.

“Shakespeare, sort of—”

“Henry IV,” Vandermere clarified.

“Yes. Here’s the basic plot. Imagine a top secret Pentagon research facility. A team has just developed a devastating weapons system. Only two or three in existence. There are 100 capsules in a 2 X 2 briefcase. But it’s not a weapon you can trigger automatically. It takes technical know-how. After sorting through coded instructions in the briefcase.

“Now the plot thickens. One of the inventors of this weapon is mistreated. So this angry scientist conspires with a project leader, tied to business interests to steal the weapon from the facility. With the scientist holding on intricate blueprint, the heist can be carried out by the scientist, the project leader, the project leader’s trusted assistant, and a hardware dude.

“Once the weapon is loose from the Pentagon, the world never looks the same. The business interest owns the weapon, but needs the technical expertise to activate it. So they need to seek a partner. A rogue nation or Russia, China, a terrorist jihadist group, maybe. The business can charge a fee into the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars for co-ownership. Because the co-owners of this weapon will be the most powerful people in the world.” Midlothian leaned closer. “Each one of these 100 bio-chemical capsules, when properly activated, is capable of killing 20-25 million people.”

Vandermere stared at Midlothian, reading him with creeping eyes. “You are indeed a Black Ian Fleming, Mr. Midlothian. Except your story line falls apart. The businessman would never conspire with the angry scientist. Because the whole scheme could be nothing but an FBI sting.”

“My book addresses that,” Midlothian said carefully. “If something goes wrong, the buck stops with the Project Leader. There’s absolutely no trail of evidence leading higher than the Project Leader. It’s like playing Vegas with no chance of losing. Big, big time Vegas.”

“We’re not interested in your book,” Vandermere said. “But we have your contact information for some other publisher specializing in suspense pulp fiction.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Your book raises a poignant issue of civic responsibility,” Vandermere added. “A reminder to keep handy numbers of FBI authorities. To report any real terrorist plots we may hear of.”

Vandermere wasn’t saying anything else. So Dugan cut in, “You can leave now, Mr. Midlothian.”

The very next morning Midlothian received a call from Babe Lonardo. Caesar Augustus had bitten on Gladys II! Midlothian, pumped, had a vintage Marley CD on full blast, while driving to the New Jersey industrial town to meet Lonardo for further instructions.

Following the directions, he found an abandoned warehouse on the fringes of town. He wordlessly met Lonardo in front.

Lonardo knocked hard on the decrepit door. A big mail slot opened. Inside, Midlothian saw an orange beard.

“Mickey Mantle and Nick make slick,” Lonardo said.

The door swung open with the magic words.

Inside was a semi-dark room with empty boxes and greasy cement. Orangebeard proceeded to a video camera on a tripod. Lonardo drew a .44 automatic and stood over a still body, bound, unconscious.

Midlothian looked closer, to make sure he was seeing straight. Indeed, it was a real human being. Midlothian’s first real encounter with the hideous underbelly of this business.

Lonardo tossed a butcher knife at the feet of the bound boy.

“Pick up the knife. And drive it into his heart,” Lonardo said. “There’s a camera. But don’t look at it.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“Don’t look at me like that.” Lonardo sounded a snide laugh, “The kid’s a drugged-out runaway. No one will miss him.”

“No way.”

BLAM! A bullet landed at Midlothian’s feet. He dived down, kneeling over the bound boy.

“You’re not understanding this right,” Lonardo said. “This is extra life insurance for Gladys II. It’s his life. Or yours.”

Midlothian hesitated. BLAM! A bullet whizzed two inches past his head.

Lonardo motioned for the camera to roll. He didn’t watch. 15 seconds later, he nodded for Orangebeard to stop the camera.

Lonardo suddenly raised his weapon, BLAM! BLAM! Two bullets to Orangebeard’s torso, dropping him immediately. Dodge city, and one less witness.

Lonardo looked back at Midlothian. The bloody hand, the raging eyes. Now siametically wedded to the organization.

Lonardo grabbed the camera. “You’ll get further instructions tomorrow.”

22

Three weeks later.

An old traditional church in hilly Manayunk, well after dark. Dim lights burned from the basement.



In the church's kitchen, Moreau placed hot plates on a large tray carried by Jane Bradove.

"You forgot one. The special primavera for Mr. Jones!" Jane 'scolded.'

"Sorry. Forgive me?"

She batted her eyes with a smile, and he watched her retreat. Black hair pinned back, conservative blue dress cut to the knees. He watched her converse cordially with these homeless men and women, while serving them at the table.

Grace, mercy, innocence, elegance—words came to Moreau's mind about Jane. Always thankful, always considerate. It seemed too good to be true.

Growing up as a teenager, Moreau could never conceive of a dating relationship built on a church charity activities. With Jane, it came with lighthearted variety: the ball game with Ralph. The slow dancing they both liked. Of course, her standup performance of Hideaway at the Ed Rendell Theatre. The service projects and Bible study was the rock, the foundation, which held them together.

Father Thorson's counsel came roaring back: How about a mate in synergy with your calling?

Mutual love for serving the disadvantaged. Jane's good versus evil themes in children's books. His good versus evil themes in job activities. Both with ailing mothers, hospitalized. Jane had empathetically offered to accompany him to Louisiana to visit his mother.

Moreau contemplated God's providence. Found it almost scary.

Moreau's secure cell phone vibrated.

"Are you with Ms. Bradove?" It was Sid Jackson.

"Yeah."

"Get un-with her. Just for a minute."

Moreau stepped outside into the street. "Okay, Sid."

"Our illustrious agent, James Andrews. We just found out that the Rennie Report he sent us was an edited version."

"What in the Lord's creation was he thinking?"

"He said that Rennie was really upset from the trauma. Andrews wanted us to see something short, sweet and coherent."

"No excuse."

"Of note, and hear this Commander, what was on the raw, unedited version," Jackson said. "Jane Bradove disarmed Sergio right before he was murdered."

Moreau took a deep breath. A sucker punch. "A tidbit Andrews didn't feel important enough to relay?"

Jane joined him at his Porsche. Kissed him on the cheek. Driving back to Chestnut Hill, he beheld an understated smile, and a restful demeanor. He regarded Jackson's call as simply annoying. Running counter to every minute of every day he'd spent with her.

Back at her Chestnut Hill flat, she turned the pale yellow lights down low. Christian accustical music played as a whisper from the radio.

Moreau asked her to lay face down on her long sofa. He began messaging her shoulders, back, neck. Little karate chops. Every few seconds she would sigh audibly.

"God gives us these marvelous escape hatches out of temptation," Moreau said. "This is actually better than sex."

“Some day, I’ll find out,” she answered. “You’ve made the comparison?”

“Many years ago.”

Jane sat up. “You never have to worry about me crossing that forbidden line. And it takes two, so you’re off the hook, FBI man.” She gave him a nice smile.

“On the subject of temptation, your profession carries many.”

“Oh yes! I get offers for sexy scenes, even X-rated. But that’s easy resistance for me. I do stage, not screen. I turned down a nice scholarship offer at USC. Too Hollywood. I much preferred NYU, and the little side street theatre jobs.” Jane started the video feed of a romantic comedy. “Never see me on one of these.”

“Sergio had big dreams for the screen,” Moreau said quietly.

“Sergio was nice, but you are truly wonderful, Victor Francis Moreau,” she said. “I imagine your job as surrealistic fiction, sort of. You’re just as much the actor, and if you make the wrong moves, your warped world becomes more dangerous.”

Moreau playfully shook his finger at her. “No business, remember?”

“What do they do with Mafia men when they get real old?” She laughed quietly.

Moreau refused a response.

“I’m sorry.”

“Okay, I’ll turn the tables on you. Who are the flower bearers?”

“You still have a lot to learn about the female gender, FBI man. We cherish our little secrets. Harmless ones.”

“I guess I can relate to that.” And they both laughed.

Jane shared another of her children stories:

“Once upon a time, many generations ago, in a small town in South America, the townspeople were put to a stern test. With the influence of the church mission declining, a gang of mean banditos rode into town,” she animated her voice. “The situation became so intolerable that the townspeople had to send away for Jose, the goodly prince on the other side of the river. Jose developed an intense personal hatred for the banditos. A hatred so intense that he vowed to kill the banditos even if it meant abandoning his goal of restoring justice in the town. The Bishop approached Jose in his anger and counseled him, saying when you fight because of personal hatred and revenge, mankind is doomed.”

Moreau felt her dainty hand reaching inside his jacket. She took the pistol, her finger wrapped around the barrel. Moreau felt unfamiliar needles in his veins.

“How did the story end?” Moreau asked, trying to hide his distress. Moreau could have taken the gun back, but he wanted a question answered.

“Jose listened to the bishop, and there was hope for the townspeople,” Jane answered, and stood up. “And this little dream ends out on the porch. Outside it’s your decision, Inspector Moreau. But not in my house,” she said wickedly. And deposited the gun out the front door.

She added with a smile, “Give your number to the hat check lady on your way out.”

She started the movie.

Moreau reminded himself not to jump to conclusions. Still, he reached down to his ankle holster, to make sure the backup automatic was still there. He was on edge. Oblivious to the movie on the TV screen, even with Jane nestled against his shoulder.

Throughout the movie, Moreau was sensitive to passing shadows outside the window. Noises outside. He was determined, though, not to panic or show agitation.

90 minutes later, when Jane mercifully hit the stop button, he politely reminded her of a 14 hour day tomorrow. Thanked her graciously with a kiss on the cheek.

He peeked outside and saw his gun on the porch.

Outside he took a deep breath as the door closed behind him. Then, all in one motion, he snatched the gun and flipped in a somersault into the row of bushes. He came up kneeling, gun drawn. There were muffled voices from a distant street on this warm night. Whooshing of passing traffic.

He sprinted to his Porsche, taking cover behind the right fender. Looked underneath. He eyed the small piece of transparent tape connecting the hood to the chassis. Still there. After a pregnant pause, he climbed inside the Porsche.

Breaths of relief, now; he was secure behind the bulletproof glass.

Driving with detective-like deliberation, he cruised the intersecting streets. Seeking out anything abnormal, suspicious.

Finally, after 15 minutes, his long mouth broke into a wide grin.

He called Jane on his cell: the unclassified band.

“I owe you a sincere and heartfelt apology.”

“What for?”

“Call it a business necessity secret. I am sorry and I love you.”

“Then I apologize, too, for not being sensitive enough to know what you’re apologizing about.”

They both laughed.

“Good night,” he said.

“Good night.”

Moreau dialed Father Thorson. He got voice mail this time. “Father, I just had a very rare sensation. Fear. Deep and immediate.”

What this deepening relationship could do to his life’s calling.

23

Joe Rennie sat by himself at a table in a quieter section of Naylor’s sports bar. Sipping wine, watching about six or seven baseball games without knowing the score of any of them.

His mind was locked on to the bombshell Midlothian had just dropped on him. He couldn’t have possibly conceived anything of this magnitude. And though Midlothian was all about greed—maybe for a cause, maybe not—Rennie had to admire his tenacity, his ingenuity.

Midlothian had been putting Rennie through the drill for two days. Perfecting the Gladys II regimen. Rennie was totally relaxed, because this would all have a happy ending, all for good. The actual attempted heist probably wouldn’t last 10 minutes. Still,

on paper, the Crime of All Eternity! Rennie chuckled repeatedly in the wild anticipation of it all. Something he would tell his grandchildren some day.

One sad note came to mind: The magnitude of Gladys II meant the FBI would surely pull Rennie out of Philly right away. He (and Beth) were destined for—who knows where?

A deeper sadness was Jane Bradove. How deeply she'd touched him with just two encounters. He yearned to see her one last time. On the pretext of asking her for the second ticket she owed him, he'd called two hours earlier and asked if she could bring it by Naylor's. She graciously agreed.

In Rennie's reverie he didn't even noticed that Jane had arrived! He saw her at a booth, across the room. Familiar jet-black angel hair, turquoise skirt. Rennie kept thinking, on a scale of 1-10, Jane Bradove rated an exponential. Seated with her was a red-haired actress he recognized from the Hideaway play.

Heart pounding, he started for Jane's table. He stopped when some high-roller type in a red blazer walked up to her uninvited. Rennie was close enough to hear the man making small talk. Jane and her friend were trying to be diplomatic.

Then the guy sat down at the table across from Jane. "How abouts we go out? Right now?"

Joe watched the guy lay two hundred dollar bills on Jane's table.

Jane looked up at him. "That will cost you a thousand dollars." Her friend covered her face in laughter; a twinkle of a smile from Jane.

All eyes were still when the man took more hundreds out of his wallet. 10 c-notes lined up on the table.

"What did I say? Ten thousand?" Jane said, now alarmed.

Rennie wasted no more time. "Excuse me." He reached out his hand. Jane took it. Rennie led her far away from there.

"You're a life saver." She covered her face in embarrassment. Then they both started laughing. And they kept laughing.

"Ten thousand dollars, huh? What if that guy was an undercover cop?" Rennie asked.

"I'd tell him it was all a joke."

"Right, tell that to the judge. Jane, I'll be moving soon. Would you honor me with a dance?"

"I'm really sorry. I'm taken now." She saw his sadness, and gave him a sympathetic hug.

She reached into her purse. "Here's the second ticket I promised you. And here's a gift. For being nice, and sparing me. Not once, but twice. Thank you, thank you."

Rennie really was going to cry. After a parting kiss on the cheek from Jane, Rennie heard the hardy laughter from Midlothian. Taking it all in.

"Major putdown, Joe." Midlothian continued to laugh, with fingers pointed toward the floor. "The master heartbreaker gets his ticker rocked!"

"Loth, it's not funny."

Midlothian took Rennie back into his private office. Locked the door. They sat for a while in awkward silence, both knowing a certain end was near. Suddenly Rennie knew he'd miss his misguided friend.

“Handoff of Gladys II will have to be fast. So face time between us will be tough for a while.”

“I don’t get a full Marley collection as a going away gift?” He tried a joke. Then came the tears. Because of Joe Rennie, Midlothian would probably spend the rest of his life being led around by people in uniforms. Torturous loyalties.

“End game Joe. For your ears only. I trust you like a brother,” Midlothian indicated Gladys I hugging his neck. “Caesar Augustus will never get Gladys II. Got my private underground railroad to Africa. Before he can blink, I’m outa here.”

“Parting words of encouragement,” Rennie nodded.

“I know the terror CA’s pigs puts people through,” Midlothian said. “Not half what they did to me. I won’t even go there, Joe. Be assured I’ve got ten times the reason to despise Caesar Augustus.”

Midlothian’s famous flash-tooth smile: “Joe, Eden is only 48 hours away. I’ll be down Kenya with my wife-to-be. Music and charity. Surrounded by an army unit, because they appreciate our mission of mercy. I’ll be imagining the look on Augustus’s face. Expecting the key to the world. But looking at sand in his hand.

“So where’s Gladys II going?”

“Here, Joe.” Midlothian tossed him a silver cell phone. “That’s our life line. Just you and I, brother. You can reach me anywhere in the world. Try to be patient on your 10% cut, the transaction may take time. The Pentagon never goes to Africa to stop human rights abuses. But the Pentagon will deal in Africa for this. Yes sir.”

“Ah, the 50 million dollar lady,” Rennie mused.

“Don’t you think Gladys II is worth \$50 mil to our government?”

Midlothian unlocked a closet, took out a suitcase, set it next to Rennie’s chair.

“This’s my gift to you. For loyal service, priceless friendship, and a down payment on Gladys II. Don’t count it, just believe it’s there, man.”

Rennie opened the case, put Jane’s package inside, and saw the stacks of C-notes. “\$200 grand.”

Midlothian gave Rennie a big hug.

Back in his dinky South Philly apartment, Rennie was almost paralyzed with cascading thoughts. What he could do with all that booty money from Gladys II! And keep the one guy who truly appreciates him out of jail.

He stood at the brink. Ready for a big step over the threshold. Then Beth’s voice came to him: Joe, I know you’ll do the right thing. Beth and the book was all he had left to live for.

Rennie bit the bullet, and dialed the secure line of Special Agent James Andrews.

“This is 038. I need a lawyer.”

D-Day. Nighttime in sleepy New Jersey exurbia. Rennie, Gladys Tovar and hardware specialist Eddy Rarick sat in Tovar's rented red SUV. A block in front of them stood the large research facility. Tall chain-link fence, mounted cabins with armed guards. Rennie imagined a polished Nazi death camp.

Nothing was moving in this town. Down the street, to the left, was a large neon sign, reading D NER. He could almost hear the buzzing of the shorted-out "I" in the quietude.

Gladys Tovar was a tall, stately woman. Dark pin striped pants suit, collar-length hair graying distinguishably, specks, and a facial expression very animated, always searching. An hour earlier, Gladys had described the layout of the compound point by point, voice projected like a college professor. A voice out of National Public Radio. Poised, confident.

Gladys checked her watch. "Two minutes."

Rennie discreetly eyed the surrounding street. For any clues of FBI agents, ready to pounce. His heart beat faster.

Rennie had a burning question. He and Rarick were disguised in brown beards and wigs. But...

"Dr. Tovar, you're going in just as yourself," Rennie said. "Make it easy to connect you to the theft."

Gladys's lips rotated for a second. "The genetic makeup of my gender makes us incapable of significant scientific breakthroughs." Her sarcasm was undisguised. "Within hours the known universe will know that Gladys Tovar has developed the world's most advanced weapons system in the world. And beat the most elaborate security systems. A life mission fulfilled, new identity and life in Europe. Don't worry about me, Mr. Rennie. You have a job to do."

"Yes, ma'am." Rennie saluted.

They approached the gated, lighted checkpoint. An armed officer stepped out of the cabin. Took the familiar ID from the familiar scientist.

"Good evening, Dr. Tovar. Burning some midnight oil?"

"Caribbean vacation next week, Scott. Won't be taking work down there." Dryly cordial voice.

A second guard with a machine gun approached the SUV. Looked right at Rennie and Rarick in the back seat.

"Okay, Dr. Tovar, your guests will need to sign in, surrender IDs and submit to bag and body search."

Totally anticipated. The guards weren't worried about—didn't notice—sheer clear gloves covering the hands of Rennie and Rarick.

They crossed checkpoint through a green area, into a parking lot with few cars. Rarick was a man of no words. A mind totally wrapped around his collage of technical tricks. Midlothian had called him the best in the world.

The compound itself was a large modern four story steel structure. All windows were opaque, except for the large one at the front entrance. The three approached the door, then Gladys stopped.

“Before we go any further, Mr. Midlothian promised me that the weapon capsules will be sold back to our government. With no involvement with forces hostile to our nation. I want that promise repeated.”

“That’s what Midlothian told me,” Rennie said. “The promise will be kept.”

Gladys waved at an unseen window. “Sayonara, Dr. Morris. He tries to screw me, and so ends up screwing his country out of many millions of dollars.”

Getting real close to the priced merchandise, Rennie thought. He thought maybe the FBI would move in right now. Before someone gets hurt.

Gladys waved a plastic card at a sensor. With a beep, the glass panel slid upward like a reverse guillotine.

Passing through the lobby, they proceeded left into a sterile, brightly lit, deserted corridor.

She led them through a door on the right, halfway down.

“One of the rooms not under video surveillance,” she narrated. “It’s only a maintenance closet, surrounded by other surveillance, so they figure, no worry.”

She stepped over loose janitor equipment, then inserted a second key into a large locked cabinet. Inside was a sprawling duffel bag. Rarick took it out, unzipped it, and took an inventory of his tools.

Gladys had prepared well. Rarick gave the okay sign.

Using his tools, Rarick removed a grid panel from the wall. The threesome crawled inside, and saw a 4’ x 4’ steel shaft. It was dark, so Gladys gave Rennie a lighted hardhat to wear. The shaft’s ceiling was 25 feet high.

“The laboratory is right up there,” Gladys said quietly.

Rennie sighed deeply. The FBI should be on their way. The three had to trade their sneakers for magnetic shoes, to aid their ascent. Next, Rarick took out a prop gun, and shot it upward. A suction device popped against the ceiling. A rope with a series of rings dropped down to their level.

Using the ringed rope and the magnetic shoes, they started to climb. About 12 feet up there was an indented landing, allowing them to sit while crouching. Gladys held a finger to her mouth, then pointed to another grated panel. Rarick took the duffel bag off his shoulder and went to work opening the panel.

Rennie inquired.

“Connecting wires to the surveillance cameras,” Gladys said. “Rarick will disable the camera in the Lab.”

“The guards won’t notice?”

“We’ve downloaded a microtape of previous rotating camera shots. Seen the trick in movies, right? It works!”

“Done,” Rarick said. So they proceeded to the large grated panel near the cabins. Rarick removed it from the inside.

Rennie couldn’t believe it. They were actually inside the Lab. Where was the FBI now?

There were private glassed cubicles with blueprints, high tech gadgets, worktables. The main lab area had long grey cabinets with red Xs painted on the drawers. Between them and the cabinets were twelve rows of the gold-colored steel bands.

“Touch these, and the alarm goes off.”

Rennie still couldn't believe that they got this far.

Gladys indicated another small panel in the wall. Rarick opened it. They saw a curved hammer touching a steel sensor plate. Rarick poked around the hammer with his tools.

"No, the hammer cannot be removed. Just lifted," Gladys said. She took Rennie's gloved hand and inserted it between the hammer and the sensor." Don't move your finger," she said, "Or the alarm will be triggered."

Gladys closed her eyes, then placed her weight on the first steel rod. Nothing happened. She relaxed and, smiling went to the second cabinet on the left. She needed three keys to unlock it. The three keys were supposed to be kept by different people for security reasons. But over time she'd managed to copy them.

Gladys took out a 2' by 2' briefcase. The case of infamy.

This couldn't be happening, Rennie thought. Could not happen!

Rennie removed his hand.

An ear deafening ringing, together with an escalating siren.

"What have you done?" Gladys yelled.

"It went off before I moved!" Rennie lied.

"No!" Gladys yelled as Rarick hit the red door button. A steel door shot up like a reverse guillotine. Rarick panicked and ran out the door. There were loud commands to halt, then gunshots. Rarick dropped immediately. Gladys grabbed a remote, and the steel door slid down, guillotine style.

"They didn't see us," Gladys said. She hit a second the remote. "It's locked. We have about five minutes."

She calmly emptied the tools from Rarick's duffel bag and inserted the case. Traded two sets of magnetic shoes for sneakers. She was determined, alright. She made for the shaft, duffel bag on shoulder. Rennie knew he had to stay with her.

They touched down in the maintenance room. She said to Rennie, "We follow Mr. Midlothian's instructions. Outside the gate, we split up. I divert them in one direction. You take the case, and bring that baby home!"

"Yeah," Rennie nodded.

Duffel bag on the shoulder, Gladys grabbed the door. "It gets dicey. Out there we're on camera. Walk fast, but don't run."

The multiple alarm was deafening out in the familiar corridor. Nobody was around, to Rennie's dismay. He followed her, sort of trotting, through the lobby, out the door, and into the parking lot. There was a vague distant commotion as they entered the SUV.

"About now, they're inside the Lab, finding the capsule weapon missing. The surveillance guys are asking questions about us."

Gladys fired up the engine. "We have about fifteen seconds."

Checkpoint drew closer and closer. They both saw the machine gun man reach for a mobile phone. Then the checkpoint soldier waving his arms.

With a bonzai yell, Gladys swerved around him and crashed through the closing steel gate. The SUV rocked, one headlight out, but it kept going.

The SUV made a sharp right, about fifty feet outside the checkpoint's line of sight. It screeched to a halt.



“Get out!” Gladys screamed. In the same instant, Rennie was shoved out into the street, along with the large duffel bag. Gladys roared away to the left, past checkpoint.

Rennie heard rifle shots. Heard the clanging of bullets against the SUV’s chrome. Soldiers emerged, chasing the SUV on foot. Then a jeep came barreling out in pursuit.

Rennie watched the SUV racing away. There came distant claps of gunfire. Suddenly, in the distance, sparks from the SUV. Then a collision with a parked car.

The SUV spun, then stopped. The gunfire continued. All parties, foot and motorized, converged on the scene two blocks away.

An eerie calm surrounded Rennie. He saw absolutely no one. And checkpoint was around the corner, out of view. He’d expected an army of FBI agents. He discarded the hat and beard. Maybe they’d recognize him now.

Still undercover, not wanting to make it too obvious he was giving himself up, he walked down the street, the priceless merchandise hosted over his shoulder.

He felt a car coming up on him very fast. Slowing now. Finally! Rennie sighed. He dropped the bag and raised his hands in anticipation.

The driver’s door opened up. It was Orin! In a flash, Orin snatched the bag, sped off, and made a quick left down an intersecting street.

Rennie was stunned. All chances to turn in the devastating weapon were now gone. He had actually carried out, to completion, the Crime of All Eternity! Totally unintended. Something was totally wrong.

A wave of fear overcame him. No FBI visible protection, and Caesar Augustus’s syndicate didn’t need him anymore. Just a potential material witness. He could hear the baying of death angels. He kept walking. The D NER sign grew closer. He heard the buzzing. Electrocutation!

He tore off in a sprint down a cross street. He had no idea where he was going. First away from there. Fly if he could.

Finally he slowed for a hiding place. This was a single family neighborhood; no alleys or vestibules to crawl into. Finally he found an unlocked car and crouched down in the back seat. He took out his sole remaining possession, a cell phone.

“Beth! You’re all I have left.”

“You were going to tell me about Midlothian’s trick.”

“I will! I promise! It went very very wrong. I am a marked man, with no money, wallet or keys.”

“Where are you?”

“Thank you. I’ll give you precise directions. But first, I need a big, big favor. Take your extra key, go into my South Philly pad. You will find two suitcases. One, filled with a gift and lots of cash. The second filled with phony IDs from FBI stings.”

“Let’s see,” Beth pondered. “Daddy has some sanctuary contacts in Monterrey, Mexico. Let’s get you down there. Not out of a local airport, though. I’ll drive you to Pittsburgh, as a precaution.”

In a town a half hour away, Orin turned his sedan into the driveway of a small ranch-style house. He literally ran with the bag inside.

Midlothian was pacing in anticipation.

At the sight of Orin, Midlothian grappled with the bag like a shark on raw meat. Opened the case, and glowed at the sight of 100 sealed capsules lined up in rows of ten, covered by a bound red book with the words TOP SECRET.

“Gladys II,” Midlothian said transically, as beholding an oracle. He directed Orin quietly into his private study. “Get everything ready. We’re leaving in 5 minutes.”

Four minutes later, while gently stroking his prized possession, Midlothian heard the door open.

“Orin!”

He saw Orin. Face down on the floor, underneath the hall light. Babe Lonardo stepped inside, carrying a silenced pistol.

Lonardo regarded the open case with a twitch of the eyebrows. “I see you’ve served the Organization well. For that, Caesar Augustus is giving you a nice reward. Your own private bodyguard. Me.”

25

The following morning. SSF Satellite HQ, Philadelphia.

Hull said to Moreau in Moreau’s private office, “Back when I was an FBI cadet I was a little overwhelmed, intimidated. Other cadets would push me around. So I waited until they were together, then held up a frog by its legs, dropped in my mouth, swallowed it whole. From that moment on, I had no problems. Confidence, respect.”

“Uh-huh, I can see why,” Moreau played along.

“I had another dream last night, sir. You were driving through Louisiana to visit your Mom. But there was a giant mountain, like a Rocky Mountain, blocking your way to New Orleans. Through faith and courage, you picked that mountain up and threw it in the Gulf of Mexico.”

“No magic frogs to eat.” Moreau looked around jokingly.

So Hull took a pencil from Moreau’s desk, and bit of the end of it. Chewed it, and forced some shreds down his throat.

Moreau hesitated, looking at Hull from the side. “I have a very important assignment for you, Tom. Agent Andrews is over U of P hospital. Had a very severe heart attack three days ago.”

“We are just hearing about it now?”

“Apparently he was running without IDs when it happened. He’s obviously not big on following precautionary rules, but his condition eclipses that. He just came out of it. I’ll visit him. You need to take Louis Tatum and download all of Andrews’ equipment.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And after that you need to contact Agent Reynolds. He was Andrews’ backup on this sensitive project, and left town suddenly when his son was in a car accident.”

“I will, sir.”

“Three days blind in this business can get you blindsided.”

Out in the command center, Moreau found Sid Jackson near the computers, wearing head phones. Jackson beckoned.

“Couldn’t sleep last night, Commander. Stirred for some reason. Came in about 5:30 this morning. We’ve been getting chatter intel crossing into our SSF fields, from counterterrorism sources.”

“Don’t go there.”

“Well, apparently there was an attempted breach of the VTRC last night. One intruder, shot dead. One of the master scientists was shot. Being held as a possible material witness.”

“The VT what? Don’t throw the alphabet at me, Jackson.”

“That’s the Vineland Tertiary Research Center. Jointly funded by Homeland Security and CIA. Even government insiders call it the Mystery Mansion.”

“SSF doesn’t have a bead on their mission over there?”

Jackson shook his head. “All we know is they have the U.S. Army guarding the place.”

“Okay, here’s the deal. We’re sending all that Vineland Tertiary intel over Homeland and the Agency. Our patriotic duty.” Moreau gave a little salute.

Later that morning Paul Lezcano approached Moreau in his office. Wordlessly sat across from him, and handed him a briefing file.

Moreau took about three seconds, “Vineland Tertiary stuff. Get this crapola out of my face.”

“Read it!” Lezcano said loud enough to get Moreau’s attention.

With each passing moment Moreau grew more docile. Recognizing the gravity of the situation.

“Makes you wonder who’d even want to make a weapon like this.”

“Governments always make weapons,” Lezcano answered. “Because they can.”

“Nobody has a clue where this thing disappeared to?”

“That’s your job now, Moreau. As of noon today, you are in Counterterrorism. The entire SSF is temporarily reassigned to the Director of National Intelligence.”

Moreau nodded with resignation. “Then why are you here?”

“I’m the liaison between DOJ and Intelligence.” Lezcano smiled flatly. “I just can’t get rid of you, Moreau. You’ve got some big new wheels behind you now.”

“I’m supposed to be jumping up and down like a jackrabbit? All that means is, I fail, I fall harder.”

“We all fall harder.—We gave you the power. Responsibility comes with it.”

“Don’t mean to alarm you, Paul, but things are stayin the same. Stayin the same in a worse way. Eddie Rarick, the guy they killed. He works for the Mob.”

“Moreau, your narco-syndicate conspiracy theories won’t fly with the National Security brass.”

“I’m just giving you the down, Paul. Rarick’s never done a job other than organized crime syndicates. Take it or leave it. – Now this Gladys Tovar. Where is she?”

“Recovering from the wounds. But under strict military guard.”

“Give her to SSF. There are 3-4 simulations we can spring on her.”

“It’s out of my control. She’s under authority of the Pentagon.”

“Paul, we need Dr. Tovar. Get her transferred.”

“The best I can do is arrange SSF contacts through the DOD Special Ops Office.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re asking me to solve the greatest threat against our nation in history. But tying a hand behind my back.” Moreau tossed the top secret Vineland Tertiary file across his office. “I ain’t going for it.”

Lezcano stood slowly. “You will accept this assignment, Commander Moreau. Or I will draw up papers for your removal from the Federal service.”

Later in the afternoon, Father Thorson said over Moreau’s laser phone, “You must accept, Victor.”

“Yeah, I’ll apologize to AAG Lezcano.”

Sid Jackson came into Moreau’s office. Louis Tatum followed him in, gingerly, respectfully.

“I’m sorry, sir. Did you hear the Rennie tape?” Tatum asked.

Moreau rubbed his eyes. “I had a hard time making Rennie out. Yet key puzzle pieces are coming together. Delayed intel from the Andrews and Reynolds absences. Rarick’s involvement. Rennie’s and Midlothian’s involvement. No Midlothian franchise tax to Caesar Augustus. “

Moreau focused on his agents. “This is looking like a Caesar Augustus show, alright. Certain National leaders may think us a little paranoid, maybe crazy. Are you guys with me on this?”

“Yes sir.” They both nodded.

“Jackson, cancel my flight to Nawlins. Tragically some work crises do override family.”

“Go ahead and see your mom, Vic. Just tell me what needs to be done.”

“Thanks, Sid. But I ain’t leavin my troops in their greatest battle.”

26

Three days later. The Sanchez ranch, outside Monterrey, Mexico. “That cash laying around wasn’t a good idea,” Beth Weinstein said to Joe Rennie. “I opened an account in my name. Just let me know how much you need every week. Pesos.”

“Thanks, Beth,” he trusted her totally. “Without you, I’d be dead. Death may be preferable to this heat.”

“This will help.” She handed him a tall glass of iced tea. Temporary relief. He looked outside, and the air seemed to shimmer in the inferno, marking the orange and brown scenery as dancing images. The modestly-furnished stucco home had no air conditioning; the breeze coming through the screened windows was a blast furnace. His discomfort was exacerbated by darker thoughts—.

“How long was I out?”

“I told you, don’t worry about it. The hospital said it was just exhaustion.”

Rennie was hungry, thirsty, uncomfortable, tired, nervous and scared.

“Just a coincidence that I collapsed right after I got off the phone? They make these tiny darts they can shoot into your neck. You die slow.”

“Joe, you need to rest your mind and you need to rest your body. Next thing will be a heart attack.”

“Rest? I’ve got no protection here!” Rennie yelled. “What’s to stop them from coming right over these mountains, right into the room!”

Maria Sanchez, a middle-aged woman in flowered dress and dark hair pinned up in back, appeared at the curved doorway. Quiet, sympathetic eyes. And easy-going smile as always.

Rennie tried to smile back. “I’m sorry, Ms. Sanchez.”

Even in his misery, it dawned on Rennie how horrible and ungrateful a guest he’d been. Julio and Maria Sanchez had fed him three meals a day, cordially asked him about America, sent their two young children, also named Julio and Maria, to involve Rennie in board games. Ms. Sanchez had even given him a Bible in Spanish and translated a few of the words.

“I’m even worthless as a co-author.” Rennie downed his iced tea, then clasped his trembling hands together. “So Beth, what’s the end game?”

She wiped away her sweat; it made her straight brown hair look a little greasy. It didn’t seem to bother her. “The end game is, we finish the book. Daddy’s working on the sponsorship with a mainstream publisher.”

The book was about 75% complete. Rennie hadn’t a clue what the other 25% would look like, and it raised his paranoia level to think about it.

“In the meantime,” Beth added, “The offer from the Sanchez family is indefinite. They may appreciate it if you help around the ranch a little bit and tutor the kids in English. Other than that, we just relax here and write.”

Rennie’s look of desperation returned. “This is my end game. I can never go back to my country, register my name with an institution, even go into town without risk of being tracked by Caesar Augustus’s tentacles. They have no bounds.”

“Joe, look at me—with your ample cash and Daddy’s connections, you are secure here.”

“What are these connections?”

“Julio Sanchez spends most of his day out there behind his fences, tending to his cattle. Maria goes into town 30 hours a week to teach school. But their real calling is refugees.”

“So they help move illegals into the U.S.”

“Not at all. They are part of an elaborate network crossing national boundaries. Relocate or provide sanctuary to victims of political persecution, religious persecution, human rights abuses. Mostly though Christian churches.”

“But your father is Jewish. Did he convert?” He tried to smile.

Beth slapped his shoulder. “Don’t be silly. Say what you want about corrupt televangelists. But many serious Christian churches out there exhibit remarkable courage and good deeds in the face of oppression. Daddy works with anyone who shares his human rights crusade.”

Rennie saw the big bronze crucifix hovering over the Sanchez’s dusty fireplace. Every time he saw one of those, he harkened back to Queens and that homosexual priest who propositioned him when he was a teenager.

More dark thoughts. “Did you read that private diary Sergio Gonzalez wrote about the FBI?”

“Yeah.”

“Enough to make anyone want to flee the U.S. And it’s worse than you think, Beth. Did you hear the news today?”

Rennie took her into Julio’s study. They switched on a TV; multi-channel satellite. They navigated past the myriad of Spanish language shows, and found an American cable news station.

Before long, a Vietnamese-American woman shared a breaking story. “As a follow up to the Vineland Tertiary encroachment incident, we just learned from Defense Department officials that Dr. Gladys Tovar, the wounded scientist held for questioning, has been pronounced dead. They did not divulge the cause of death. Analysts questioned the announcement, noting that previous government statements said that Dr. Tovar’s wounds were superficial. The Secretary of Defense refused to comment, and the Administration continues to downplay the significance of the Vineland Tertiary break-in.”

Rennie flipped the TV off, retrieved the Gonzalez diary from his bedroom, and dug through the pages with renewed urgency. Beth gave him a big hug.

“It’s going to be okay,” she said. Seeing that newscast again made Rennie tremble like a little child. Finally he jabbed this index finger against one of the pages.

“Right here. I think we know who Caesar Augustus is. I think you can figure it out, Beth.”

“I don’t have a clue, Joe.”

“What did Sergio call this FBI secret police? The Supra Strike Force? They’re not accountable to anyone. They operate totally in the shadows, anonymous to the world. That matches the profile on Caesar Augustus. It explains perfectly why the FBI ignored my distress call. And who else but he omnipotent Supra Strike Force could pull off the murder of Gladys Tovar under military guard? SSF Commander Victor Moreau is Caesar Augustus. Stone cold, Beth.”

“I’m not quite ready to add that reference to our research.”

“There’s no government official we dare approach. Paranoia is not always a disease.”

“Daddy has government contacts. Maybe he can make discreet inquiries about Commander Moreau.”

At Beth’s prodding, Rennie convinced himself that self-paralysis and a bad attitude were no answers to his dire circumstances. The next day he drove Beth’s beat-up gray VW and ventured into the nearby town. Narrow streets, old cars, modest multi-colored houses, ubiquitous Mexican music which Rennie enjoyed. Sipping coffee in a small, western style café, exchanging smiles and Spanish with the locals, gave Rennie an odd comfort. He had passed a test. No one in the town, in reasonable eyeshot, was paying him serious attention. Good!

The sight of nicely-dressed senioritas on the street, with an occasional flirtatious smile, conjured those addicting passions again. He knew he had to get out of there. But not before buying Maria Sanchez two nice vases, and Julio a new sombrero.

Rennie’s appreciative attitude carried over to helping the hired hands with chores around the ranch. They didn’t understand much English, but they took to him. They

even let him try to ride one of the horses. It threw Rennie hard to the ground, and they laughed. But they helped him up.

The lure of senioritas was too much. Rennie couldn't help himself. That evening he skipped the Sanchez's patently delicious tortilla dinner to visit the only brothel in town. As with previous virtually-involuntary sexual encounters, he felt that familiar self-loathing. Several hours later, when he returned to the ranch house in the dark, he was too ashamed to even look at any of the Sanchez's. Again, he saw the crucifix, and surmised that he was a walking offense in their home.

The next morning he woke up with those familiar dark thoughts and fears. In the small closet he suddenly noticed the nice red and white package that Jane Bradove had given him as a gift. In all these frenzied few days, he'd never paid attention to it.

He was already comforted by recollections of Jane. With warm anticipation, he tore open the package.

Inside were ring-bound versions of three children's books she'd written.

It was Saturday, and Rennie heard Maria's lively voice calling her children in for a mid-morning snack. Rennie had started tutoring Maria Jr. and Julio Jr. in English. So he asked Ms. Maria if it was okay.

Big smile in return. For Joe, it was a perfect segue into Jane Bradove's gift. He carried a book entitled, "Darla's Song." Gathered the children around him, as a cooler-than-usual breeze whipped through the windows.

The Sanchez children were thrilled by the colorful animated sketches on the pages. Rennie began to read aloud the large print. Slowly, so they could comprehend:

"Once upon a time, there were two teenage pen pals, Kelly and Darla. Kelly wrote to Darla: Woe is me, I am too poor to have nice clothes and all the playthings my classmates have. Darla wrote back: May you have all the abundant riches I have. Kelly was angry at Darla for the putdown.

"Kelly wrote a second letter: Woe is me, I am heavy and shy and shunned, with few friends. Darla wrote back: May you have the multitude of wonderful friends that I have. Kelly's anger and jealousy toward Darla doubled.

"Kelly wrote a third letter: Woe is me, parents abandoned me, and I have no one. Darla wrote back: May you be reconciled to family like I am.

"Angered beyond measure Kelly wrote a final letter to Darla: Dear Snob. She decided to deliver it to Darla personally. Kelly got Darla's address. Kelly looked for the snobbish castle, to tell off the snobbish queen and all her snobbish friends.

"Kelly found a hospital. Darla could not move. Tubes were everywhere in her body. Darla had two weeks to live. Horrified, Kelly asked, where are your riches? The riches are in my heart. Where are all your friends? Love is in my heart so my friends are everywhere. Where is the reconciliation? I am reconciled to you because I wish you blessings even though you hate me. How can you be joyful in your world with your hopeless suffering? My world is the next one, not this one. My joy is from a God who loved me so much that he poured blood on me through His son Jesus more than 2000 years ago. God's disciple named John wrote that there is no greater love than giving your own life for your friends. And so Darla died, and Kelly lived on, now under grace."

In the left pocket of Jane's book was a pamphlet on St. Francis. A hero to Jane, as Rennie recalled the poem of St. Francis in Jane's Philadelphia home. A real man shunned by family, dire poverty, homeless, sick most of his life. Yet transforming the

society around him. And millions more, spanning hundreds of years. An unnatural phenomenon. By standards of this world.

Blood dripping from the Sanchez stucco ceiling. Not real. But an image Rennie could not expel from his mind.

Another smile from Maria Sr. And from Maria Jr., “Read it again. Please Uncle Jose?”

27

The next morning. SSF Satellite HQ, Philadelphia.

Paul Lezcano stepped into Vic Moreau’s large office, closed the door. His approach was very meek, even tortured. Like walking on nails, Moreau regarded his computer, taking in traditional jazz from his small radio. Ignoring Lezcano.

“May I sit down, Victor?”

Moreau wordlessly pointed to the chair. There was banging outside.

Lezcano chose his words carefully.

“How’s your Mom now?”

“She went home.”

“They released her from the hospital?”

“Yeah. Took her home.” Moreau pointed to the sky.

“I’m sorry.” Lezcano said. There was another banging sound.

“Don’t be. Better off than us, she is.”

This time the banging was louder. Lezcano flinched.

“I owe you an apology, Victor. Actually, two. First, the evidence does point to involvement of the Augustus syndicate with Vineland Tertiary. You are right.” Another banging. “What on Earth is that noise?”

Moreau stood up. “Tom Hull’s personal exercise regimen.” Moreau grabbed the last free chair and threw it against his cabinet. Not viciously. But hard enough to make a clang. “Instant replay?”

Lezcano shook his head. Moreau briefly opened the door. “Alright, Tom.”

“Nice show, Moreau. You made your point. Now, my second apology. I should have done more to have Dr. Tovar transferred to SSF.”

“What was the official cause of death?”

“Slow-acting poison. Mixed with her food. It was definitely a homicide.”

“Oh? You think? I ain’t carryin anger over the fiasco. Apology is accepted. Let’s move on. I do have one condition.”

“I guess I’ll be hearing it.”

“I will have no contact with the Director of National Intelligence or any of the Defense brass. My dealings will be strictly with you or the West Wing. The Pentagon will receive no SSF intel or records.”

“You’re not suggesting, are you, that the DNI is conspiring with Caesar Augustus?”



“I accuse no one. But there are very few people I trust. The 99% over there are surely clean. The 1% or less we don’t see may get us all killed.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Uh-huh, you do that. I need to be straight with you. A thoroughly simulated Augustus hit man Webster Bauer, aka Gorilla, is now 100% SSF. Do you know what we can do with that kind of information?”

“I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“Bauer, like everyone else we’ve taken down, is on the wrong end of the missing link. Meaning, he has no direct contact with Caesar Augustus himself. What he’s given us is priceless intel on the inner workings of the Caesar Augustus syndicates.”

“Another scary thought,” Lezcano said dryly.

Moreau stood up, pacing behind his desk. “Get rid of that Harvard straightjacket and use your imagination. No one knows we have Bauer. His associates were killed in combat.”

“Combat?” Lezcano said sourly.

“Using Bauer’s intel, we also took down a major New York Capo named Jason Marrini. We had so much evidence on Marrini, he rolled over for us like a showdog. No one knows we have Marrini, either. You figuring this out yet?”

“I’m trying not to.”

Moreau stopped pacing. “We have a name for this project: Counter Caesar Augustus Simulation.”

“I’ve heard enough, Moreau.”

“Stay with me. Word is going out on the street. Jason Marrini and Webster Bauer, both trusted Caesar Augustus lieutenants, now rebelling to set up their own independent syndicate. A direct challenge to Augustus. Word is also out that Bauer recruited a private army of enforcers. Disillusioned war vets. Of course, those so-called war vets are really undercover SSF agents.”

Lezcano was breathing hard. “Hypothetically—and I do emphasize hypothetically—exactly what is the purpose of this syndicate?”

“Caesar Augustus will go nuts. He is being openly challenged by a force that he cannot defeat. We’ll shake the tree hard enough for ripe bananas to fall. He’ll get desperate, careless, and we’ll get some good intel, leads, on the Vineland Tertiary plot.”

“How is this challenge initiated? –Lord help us.”

“Through undercover SSF agents, we will target key heroin and cocaine distribution networks. Offer them dope 15% below Caesar Augustus’s going price. That will get big attention, big time.”

Lezcano closed his eyes. “And where is this dope to be found?”

Moreau unlocked a drawer in his desk. Tossed him a good sized bag of white powder. “Don’t pour that in your tea. It won’t sweeten it.”

“Moreau, you’re out of your mind.” Lezcano dropped the bag like a snake was on him.

“Don’t look at me like that. We’re not pushing narcotics. We are targeting only existing outlets. Once this project is finished, which should be a matter of a couple weeks, we send all evidence over to regular DEA and let them pull down all these dope operations.”

“No.”

“No?”

“You heard me. No.”

“You can chalk up this simulation to your negligent and/or corrupt DOD friends. Destroying the only link we had to Vineland Tertiary,” Moreau said, laser eyes flashing. “What else would you have me do, Counselor, with tens or hundreds of millions of lives in peril?”

“The answer is still no.”

Moreau sat back in his padded chair. Very calm, nodding slowly. “I’ll save you the trouble of removing me from the Bureau. Maybe I’ll just resign, and start a civil rights investigation firm. As you know, my second passion. There’ll be no guarantees about SSF exposure.”

“No, Vic, I know you. You would never turn a light on SSF. You’re too—boy scout.”

“You’re right. I would never violate a confidence entrusted to me, especially SSF. God is my witness. What about all those agents who may follow me out the door? I can make no guarantees for them.”

Lezcano was annoyed again as he stood up. “Alright, Moreau. You walk this scary tightrope all by yourself. If you fall, I won’t be there to catch you.”

“Thanks, Paul,” Moreau said. “I’ll give you a play by play.”

“No. Please don’t.”

28

Three days later. A new office building on the fringes of downtown Philadelphia. To the right of the lobby, a glass entranceway read, “Marrini Travel Agency.” Fresh paint.

Jason Marrini sat in a lush, leathered-up private office. Wavy gray hair, impeccable dark three piece suit covering a paunchy frame. An SSF agent was clipping Marrini’s fingernails.

Agent Tony De Sario, alias Dwight Collins, with thick red wig and red beard, appeared with a bottle of scotch. Wet Marrini’s glass.

“Get my cigars. I need to go out for a smoke.”

“Yes sir.” Collins bowed.

Marrini was loving his role. Fine with SSF; that’s the way they wanted Marrini to act.

Out in the bullpen area were travel agents with maps and computers. All undercover SSF. Automatic weapons concealed by jackets. Eyes alert, always on call.

Collins returned with the cigars. Marrini lit up right up in the no smoking zone. Good, a restrained touch of defiance, Collins thought. He handed Marrini some travel books.

“For a travel baron, Boss, I’m not sure you even know how to drive to Cleveland.”

“I don’t do New England,” Marrini responded, puffing. “If it ain’t Brooklyn, it ain’t nowhere.”

Collins beckoned Marrini to the window facing the avenue in front. “Look, boss.” He indicated a 15 foot long black stretch limo. Double parked, of course. “Bullet proof, private bar inside. You think maybe the competition is noticing?”

“It’s better in my office,” Marrini responded, Brooklyn dialect. “So I don’t have to sit here and watch all the homos and coloreds walk by.”

Collins brushed Marrini’s suitcoat. “Jason Marrini. Up like a lion. A convoy wherever he drives. Tough guys always around. The flash of a boss on the rise!” Collins said. “The only problem is your mouth. Every time you open it, you sound like a degenerate.” Collins fitted Marrini’s left pinky with a gold ring. To match the right.

One of the SSF travel agents gave Collins a wary look. Collins said lowly to the agent, “A little degeneration is fine. One gutterrat will attract another.”

Collins proceeded to the front lobby, near the entrance, to meet Commander Moreau. Inspecting the front lines, his soldiers.

Moreau was Francesco Ferrari. Shoulder-length brown hair, matching beard, three piece suit, packing big time. The right side of his neck had a tattoo of a spider and web. The left side carried the tattooed initials, FF. All removable.

“Are we going to surface Bauer?” Collins asked Ferrari.

“Nah. We’ll have Gorilla deliver communiqués from a hidden location. Kinda like our own Caesar Augustus.”

Collins laughed. “We got some intel already from Mob sources. They are very impressed with that army of angry, dispossessed war vets Bauer assembled.”

“Gorilla is justifying his Rep. Fearsome. Ruthless.”

Collins took Ferrari outside the doors. Hot and sticky, and noisy from traffic and construction off to the left. They took in the diverse pedestrians, and the assortment of stores and staggered highrises.

“The protection perimeter extends to the threshold of the most powerful weapon,” Collins explained. “Our best camouflage snipers, master sensors, the highest tech out there. Perimeter moves in synchrony with Marrini’s limited travels. A hidden rat trap.”

Ferrari nodded. “Very slick, Tony. I don’t see a thing.—When did our agents first make contact with major distributors about the discounted narcotics?”

“It started 48 hours ago.”

“No Mob bites yet?”

“No sir. Not even a warning about paying the franchise tax.”

“I don’t anticipate any warnings,” Ferrari said. “Come right after us, they will. That’s what I want.”

There came a low buzzing from Collins’ coat pocket. “We got a hit! Commander, you’re just in time for a live action shot.”

They both ducked into the lobby, into a private corner. Collins flipped open a cell phone like device.

The screen revealed live photos of unwelcome intruders. Together with exact quadrants.

“Zone 3, East LA.” Collins said. “.44 Magnum. Can’t tell if the other one’s packing. Fifty feet from our guy. Closing.—Right outside the door. Two guns drawn. DNA check. Not cops.—Ah, ugly FIS profiles.”

“Intent clearly established,” the Commander said. “Take ‘em down, Tony.”

29

“Moreau is doing what?” Lezcano asked Hull a week later at SSF Satellite HQ. Hull, sitting in his office, blinked rapidly to the side. Surprised by Lezcano’s unannounced visit.

Hull played with his computer, bringing up a gridded, colorful map of the USA.

“Here, sir. You can see that the SSF has established the equivalent of green zones in various urban locations. A very limited terrain, targeted based on contacts between SSF agents and major narcotics operations. Carefully delineated zones, where we could expect syndicatia interactions very advantageous to the government—are your familiar with the term, green zone, sir?”

“Mr. Hull,” Lezcano said petulantly, “you are speaking as if lecturing an economics class. But describing what sounds to me like urban warfare.”

“Very limited, sir,” Hull responded flatly. “And as you know, only with the most spectacular technology to make civilian casualties a virtual impossibility.”

“Civilian casualties? You and your Commander declared war? I thought only Congress could do that.”

“Respectfully, sir, this is war. Not a Congressional war, of course. An administrative war.”

“Mr. Hull. Communicating with you is like talking to a machine. You’re not analyzing the implications of all this? Don’t you think?”

Hull seemed totally confused. “I am not paid to think, sir. I am paid to take orders.”

Lezcano looked at his notes. “This reference here: Missed the extra point.”

“Oh, that sir, is a football term. I’m a Californian, went to USC.”

“I know about football, Mr. Hull,” Lezcano said impatiently. “What is the specific application of ‘missed the extra point’ to this so-called simulation?”

“Well, we’re keeping score. It’s 13 to zero. 13 syndicatia down, no SSF casualties. 13 is two touchdowns, one extra point.”

Lezcano looked hard at Hull. “Okay, Mr. Order-Taker. I’m giving you an order. Tell me the grand climax of this simulation.”

Hull’s eyes widened. “That’s easy sir. We are winning by a blowout! Caesar Augustus cannot continue to play this game! It’s either negotiate or panic. Just ask Commander Moreau.”

“Good idea. Get him on the laser phone.”

“Hello, Paul, how may I grace your day today?” Moreau’s calm voice carried clearly over the speaker.

“I want a detailed report of your wild west show.”

“We are hitting Caesar Augustus three ways. One, he’s feeling the squeeze from our simulation. Two, we’re feeding evidence from the many associates Bauer gave us to traditional law enforcement. If you’ve been watching, you’re noticing a lot more Mob

and drug dealer arrests. We're squeezing him the third way with Midlothian. There's ample justification from Rennie's statement to Andrews for a Federal capture bounty on Midlothian. Squeeze Augustus from the left, right and behind. Squeeze and squeeze. Then watch a life-saving gem fall out of his pocket."

"I still want a complete report."

"That was my report," Moreau answered.

A breath-retrieving pause. Then Lezcano said, "Have you looked at yourself in the mirror, Moreau?"

"What am I supposed to be seeing?"

"Not Caesar Augustus, that's for sure."

"You don't mean that."

"Maybe a little piece of it. Vic, I say this to you as a friend, honest to God. You're on a slippery slope."

"Hard for you to be understandin', Paul. But I've prayed very hard."

"Pray some more."

The laser phone was silent for a good while. Lezcano leaned forward. "Vic. Are you there?"

"You're a good man, Paul. But you're needing to hear that this assignment is overwhelming to me, and very humbling. I think of pulling people out of bed at three in the morning, coercive interrogations of marginal suspects, public intimidation, massive prison camps. All that out of the question. Equally out of the question is just one innocent American being hurt by the capsule bomb. I don't have to look hard for lines in the sand I can't cross. All it takes is lifting my foot."

"Thanks for that mature insight," Lezcano said quietly. "But if one of your so-called green zones becomes messy, what will I tell the Attorney-General and the DNI?"

"If New York City is wiped of the map cause of your micromanagement, what will you tell the President?" Moreau answered.

"For your good and everyone else's, Vic, I'm putting you on a leash. SSF is being line-itemed. You have one week to categorize everything. You will requisition every activity."

Lezcano pulled away from the phone, expecting a strident protest.

"Okay," Moreau said.

30

Germantown, a working class minority community in Philly.

Jane Bradove, with Moreau standing beside her, knocked hard on the door of a modest flat. The door opened for a Black teenage girl, slightly heavy.

"Lena Maxwell? Accepted to Harvard, right?" Jane said, her vivid green eyes exploding to life. "Congratulations. You've won a scholarship!" Jane handed her a check issued by the charismatic Catholic parish Jane attended. Moreau shook the girl's hand briefly, then heard the call of the laser phone, tucked in the large inside pocket of his blue blazer. Moreau had to step several yards away.

"All the plans are set," Sid Jackson said to Moreau. "Contacts have been made."

“Good. The Lombardy Nuclear Option has got to come down by the weekend. After that, Lezcano’s straight jacket kicks in.”

Jackson laughed, “A big surprise for Caesar Augustus. We’ll have you back from Italy the day before Lezcano’s audit.”

“On the edge, we are, with the Lombardy Nuclear Option, Sid. But the world will truly be a better place for it.”

Disconnecting, he saw Jane and Lena’s mom wooing him inside.

“Please don’t pay me any attention, ma’am. I’m just the chauffeur.”

Back in Moreau’s Porsche, in retreat, Jane said, “That scholarship you and I worked so hard on, she almost didn’t get it. I visited a matron, but her husband answered the door. My goodness, he became so abusive! He says, who is this prostitute? His wife felt so bad she invited me in for dinner. The husband didn’t argue when she wrote us a check for \$5,000!” Moreau could feel the enthusiasm in her voice.

As he drove, Jane brushed loose strands of long curly hair off his forehead.

“My gosh, your eyes, Vic. They’re totally bloodshot.”

“There are days, when I got the sensation of being tied to a tree, beneath a snowcapped mountain. There here comes a massive avalanche. The avalanche is still there, but at a distance. The ride comes with a wonderful, fresh breeze when you’re around, Jane.”

Jane unbuckled her seat belt and cuddled next to him, her thick black hair caressing his cheek.

“I almost collapsed yesterday.” Her voice was a murmur. “I was supposed to take a month off between plays. Then two of the leads say they want out of “As you Like It,” over at the Shakespeare Theatre. I get the emergency call. I can’t say no to Shakespeare. Breakneck rehearsals.—Come, there’s somebody I want you to meet.”

Jane had never driven a Porsche, so Moreau let her have fun with it. Gleefully driving it up and down the hilly streets of Manayunk, the San Francisco of the east. Brick and stone rowhouses climbing the hills like a staircase. Descendants of Slavic and Irish immigrants, working two jobs sometimes, and trying to stave off the encroaching bohemian crowd. Dusty union organizing halls next door to jazz clubs.

Halfway up one of the hills, Jane stopped the Porsche in front of a stone flat so narrow that the Porsche could almost touch the two walls. Jane led Moreau through a small yard, to a rickety wooden porch.

“Ms. Hudak is a precious family friend. She and Uncle Duke go way back,” Jane explained. “Actually I’m sleeping at her place tonight.”

Ms. Hudak was a hefty, mole-faced woman, ash blonde hair sloppily covering her shoulders. Her son Eric was a lanky, short-haired teenager. Judging by the speech and mannerisms, Moreau could tell he had a learning disability. The small house was very sparsely furnished with worn sofas and wooden chairs. But it was spit-shine clean. Dated family pictures adorned the dark wall.

Moreau caught the strong scent of goulash Ms. Hudak was making. A heavenly aroma! He was suddenly famished. Ms. Hudak kicked Jane out of the kitchen, so Jane sat across from Eric, and happily narrated one of her children’s books from memory. Moreau beheld Jane: gold-colored dress, gold crucifix, golden grace, even a touch of gold hue to her skin. He knew this lady was pure gold. Jane a vacuum, sucking him in, deeper and deeper. For Moreau, a familiar tightening. Encroaching dependence.

The goulash tasted even better than it smelled. Ms. Hudak narrated family stories in a slushy, dialect-ridden voice Moreau found hard to follow. After dinner, Jane took Moreau to the front porch, where they sat in hard wooden chairs to take in a warm early evening breeze.

From a nearby roof a camera lens found Moreau. The lens grew crosshairs, then back.

Jane took an envelope out of her designer bag, handed it to Moreau. “A very recent secret God does not want me to hold on to.”

Moreau saw the Mexican return address. Opened it. He surpassed any outward reaction. “Joe Rennie.”

“He was with Sergio and I the night of the murder.”

“I know about Joe Rennie.” He shrugged with an easy laugh. “So you and Joe Rennie are having a wild love affair. Okay by me.”

Jane erupted into laughter.

The camera lens again found Moreau. Crosshairs, then back.

“He was real nice, so I gave him some of my books. That’s just a thank you note. It’s okay to read it. I’m not hiding anything.”

“Won’t pry into your private communication, Jane. I trust you.” He handed her back the letter. Put the envelope in his coat pocket.

Jane looked at him wickedly. “Am I venturing close to that forbidden topic? Business?” She reached out and grabbed his hand. “Forgive me, please, but I have to know something. As dangerous as your job is, how do you prevent some crazy person from –walking up and shooting you? I couldn’t bear the thought of something happening to you.”

Moreau wagged his finger at her. But her eyes were pleading, almost desperate.

“Alright, if it makes you feel better. No details, though,” he said, then tapped his chest. “Bulletproof vest. That’s just openers. I also got a little security perimeter. Can’t see them.”

Jane exaggerated a gasp. “You mean, like the President?”

Moreau sounded a laugh, “Okay dahlin, I have some authority. If I’m gone, they got to spend a whole lotta money.”

Jane cocked her head. “That’s all?”

Moreau rolled his eyes. “This is slick, and the last thing you get. Our secret.” He leaned forward. “Advanced high-tech sensors. Similar to the ones which unmask terrorist activity near the White House on Capitol. Any explosives or loaded weapons inside the protection perimeter, and I’m alerted.”

“Any loaded weapon?” Jane asked, wide-eyed.

“Well, no. If there’s a loaded hunting rifle in someone’s closet, nothin’s gonna happen. The sensor is programmed to exclude weapons registered to Federal law enforcement or military. Other than that, once a loaded weapon touches the human hand—”

Jane smiled slowly. “You’re making all this up.”

“Come on, I’ll buy you an ice cream.” Indicating a corner parlor, homemade brand.

As they crossed the street, the cameraman on the roof put down the camera. Took a rifle out of a long sack. A box of ammo.

The glass walls provided a view of pedestrians outside the sloped street. Jane and Moreau both ordered fudge-covered vanilla in a dish, and sat at one of the formica tables, while a small group of teenagers frolicked on the other side of the room.

“This is my neighborhood, FBI man. My teenage years, spent here in Manayunk, right up to my NYU days.”

“What a coincidence—no, you first.”

“Dad was stationed at the Naval Yard, and Uncle Duke worked the mill until they closed it. Dad liked the genuineness, the stability, the family values. He sent me to a nice private school. So I saw the best of two different worlds. It helped me along my spiritual journey.”

Moreau detected just a trace of Northeast/Manayunk dialect in her voice. He said, “My Dad finished his DEA career here in Philly. I spent my teenage years way up that hill. Attended Roxborough High.”

“Then you know the story,” Jane said lightly. “The farther up the hill you go, the snobbier the people get.”

“Yeah. Next door neighbors, we were.” Moreau snapped his fingers. “I remember trippin over that little black-haired girl on a tricycle. You came up to my knees.”

“I don’t think so,” Jane razzed, lifting her hand higher and higher.

Moreau took from his pocket a chain medallion with a very old crucifix. Held it up next to the cross necklace on Jane’s neck. Moreau’s by comparison was clumsy, off-color, worn-looking.

“My spiritual mentor is a Black charismatic Priest working over Villanova. Very connected, he is, with church memorabilia. Tracked this down for me, found me a nice price.—This, Jane, is one of the original crucifixes worn by St. Francis of Assisi. Preserved only for very special people.”

Moreau fastened it around Jane’s neck. “Made for a princess.”

Jane wiped tears from her eyes. “I’m speechless.”

Moreau felt that familiar current. Jolt into reality. “We got an alert! Get down!” Jane covered her mouth in open laughter. “Not funny! It’s real!” Moreau grabbed her hard and pushed her under the table. With his left hand he pinned her head down and with his right hand he popped open the ruzo.

A good live photo of the gunman. Precise quadrants.

“Do you have him, sir?” Came a tinny voice. “50 feet. Northwest.”

“Yeah. Take him alive.”

On the roof a wiry short-haired Black man knelt and addressed his scope. A loud shot. He yelled from his rifle flying rudely out of his hands. Two more loud shots, and he was curled up, prone. From his peripheral vision he saw the other gunmen on an adjacent roof. He reached for his throwaway cell.

“Officer X, I’ve been made. No chance.”

“Don’t worry, Ray, we have a nice surprise for Mister Big-Time Organized Crime Buster,” came the response from Officer X. “No matter what, we’ll spring you.”

Failing the Organization is usually spring into death, he realized. He saw the descending plates of the rooftops. He lurched up into a full sprint.

The shot came immediately. He twirled from the leg wound, then tripped over a vertical ledge and fell with a cry to the street.



Moreau released Jane, and she walked to the window, thick hair partly covering her eyes. She saw the body in the street. Heard two distinct screams.

“Oh my—”

“It’s time to go,” Moreau said calmly.

Two hours later. Manayunk was calm again, dusk advancing rapidly into darkness. Jane returned to the Hudak house in her BMW.

The porchlight was on. Jane saw the dull yellow light burning behind the window.

Still a little dazed from the evening trauma, she stopped. Closed her eyes for a silent prayer. Clutched the Crucifix of St. Francis.

Finally, she knocked on the door. No answer. It was unlocked, so she let herself in.

All was quiet inside, except for some light scuffling in the back. Finally, two large rugged men emerged, wearing uniforms of some kind.

“You’re Philly PD? What’s happening?” Jane asked, quite concerned. “Ms. Hudak!” She called.

Babe Lonardo, the largest of the men, flashed a badge for a second, then withdrew it.

“Been an accident,” Lonardo said gruffly. “She took a drug OD.”

“What? Ms. Hudak doesn’t do drugs.”

“Tell that to her,” Lonardo shrugged, as the officer dragged the sedated body of Dolores Hudak out from the back. Her wrists were roped together.

“I’d like to see your badge again, please,” Jane said sharply.

Instead Lonardo pulled out a .357 magnum. “I’m Officer X. He’s Officer Y.” Indicating the other man, now working the buttons of a video camera. “You’re under arrest, Ms. Bradove.”

“What for?”

“For fraternizing with the FBI. What else?” Lonardo took a large butcher knife from the back of his belt. Tossed it down beside Ms. Hudak.

“Where’s Eric?”

“He’s also being detained. At another location.”

Jane closed her eyes. “What do you want?”

“I want you to kneel next to your lady friend.”

“Not until you tell me—”

Words cut short by a hard slap to the side of her head, knocking her down.

“Ms. Hudak?” Jane breathed in her tears. Jane saw her friend’s slow, steady breathing. “What have they done to you? God help us.”

“Ms. Bradove, why do you hang around a loser like Vic Moreau?” Lonardo taunted. “Heading for a crash landing. FBI? Given your family background?”

Jane looked at him sharply. “I am not my family background!”

“Speaking of family—have you spoken to your mother lately? How about your brother?”

“Just who are you? What are you?—Haven’t I seen you before?”

“You have never seen me,” Lonardo said, voice rising. “Now pick up the knife. And stick her with it. Right in the heart.”

“No.”

“And don’t look at the camera,” Officer Y chimed in. “He’ll ask you nice one more time.”

Jane was totally knelt over, hands together, thick hair touching the floor. Lonardo forcibly took Jane’s hands. The rest of her body still wasn’t moving. He wrapped her hands around the knife.

“You’re not strong, Ms. Bradove. You’ll need both hands,” Lonardo said with frigid finality.

Jane dropped the knife.

“Look at me!” He yelled. Jane gradually raised her eyes. The .357 was a foot away from her, aimed at her nose. Lonardo wanted her to see the dark, deathly barrel. “Last chance, Ms. Bradove. Either it’s her life. Or yours. You got 10 seconds.”

Jane slowly lifted herself. Stood four inches from Lonardo. She spit in his face. “Then you take my life.”

31

The Sanchez Ranch, Mexico.

Upbeat Spanish music played from the den area. Julio and Maria Sanchez were teaching Rennie some of the local dances, both traditional and contemporary. Periodically Rennie would interject a CD of his favorites—Glenn Miller and Big Band contemporaries, at least three generations removed, but Rennie reminded them it was the equivalent of American Classical. Like Beethoven, never dies. Rennie invited a reluctant Beth to join them, to make a foursome. The festivities concluded with Rennie doing his own herky-jerky dance, bouncing off the floor, while attempting to balance a straw hat. Three ranch hands were there to clap in rhythm to the pulsating beat. Sweat was pouring down Rennie’s face. Soaking his New York Yankees T-shirt. He didn’t feel it though.

Finally, he showered and politely asked Julio if he could use the desk in his study. Beth found him writing.

“Hot notes for our book?” She asked.

“No. Another Fed-ex letter to Jane Bradove.”

“You two are becoming pen pals. At least from your end.”

Rennie smiled. “I’m curious if she’ll send a letter to me down here in Mexico. Besides, I want a contact in America to help us expose this scary FBI Supra Strike Force. Too big for us to sit on. I trust Jane. That she’ll know how to handle the hot info we’re giving her.”

“Maybe we should just make Jane a third co-author of our exposé,” Beth said with a note of sadness.

“Oh, Beth. This isn’t a fling thing,” Rennie said gently. “Beth, you and I have just been good friends. Nothing changed. I’ve always had a fascination for Jane Bradove. She’s got a boyfriend somewhere. So nothing’s changed there, either. We’re all just friends.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” Beth relented with a wave. “She threw stardust at you or something. I’ve noticed a big change in you. Spending more time with Sanchez kids. Making friends with the ranch hands. Maria said you’re even helping them with paperwork for their human rights network. Joe Rennie, suddenly Mister Positive. Renaissance Man.”

“That reminds me. A second reason for a follow-up letter to Jane. I owe her a debt of gratitude.”

“What for?”

“On the subject of attitude—because of Jane I became a Christian.”

“I’m confused—I thought you were always a Christian, Joe.”

“Now I’m confused. My previous lifestyles of drugs, sexual liaisons and vengeance have nothing to do with Jesus Christ.”

“Well Jose, you’re certainly not Jewish,” Beth laughed. “I never knew you to dabble in Buddhism. Or Islam.”

“Census says about 70% of Americans are Christians. But that includes cultural Christians. But true Christianity is not a birthright, or a family tradition, or from showing up at church. It’s a personal choice, commitment. Christians know they’re Christians.”

“Whatever it is has brought you out of your shell of paranoia,” Beth said.

“Yeah, since my conversion I have this unexplainable sense of peace and power. Those sex urges—I still have them, but now I can control it. A confidence and courage too, like I don’t care what happens to me in this little world. On the subject of courage, there’s a phone call I need to make.”

“Who?”

“I think you know who, Beth.”

“That is definitely risky,” Beth said lowly.

Rennie found the private, two way cell. Said a prayer before punching the numbers. Rings of anticipation....a voice.

“Hey Loth! It’s Joe—”

“Joe! My man! How are you doing, man?”

“Just checking in.”

“It’s too early to talk about payment, Joe.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I can’t talk long. It didn’t go well.” Midlothian said, lowering his voice. “Caesar Augustus intercepted Gladys II before I could run. Technically, I still have Gladys II. But they’re watching my every move.”

“Where are you?”

“Alive, that’s where. There’s only one reason I’m alive. They need a point person to actually move Gladys II. Caesar Augustus or anyone close to him wouldn’t be caught dead with that kind of weapon in their possession. They also know I can never cooperate with the government. So I’m the fall guy every way imaginable.

“We’ve already made connections with a partner, to begin the worst kind of blackmail, or terrorism, imaginable. Once the relay system is complete, they don’t need me, Joe. A coffin already has my name on it. I haven’t figured a way out yet.”

“Let’s keep in touch. Call me in a couple of days? I’m not worried. Let’s both work on a happy ending to your story.”

“Not worried? You’ve got a protector somewhere?”

“Yes I do. Call me.”

Rennie had begun sharing stories of his own with the Sanchez family. At dinner time, Rennie spun a yarn—fictitious, of course—about an evil secret police who conspired with a criminal gang to steal a dangerous weapon and threaten Mexico. The Sanchezes were wowed by that one!

The next day, Rennie was in horse heaven. The Sanchezes had taught him well. He was galloping into bliss, watching the Mexican prairie fly past him, en route to a colorful mountain range. Like the old west, he would occasionally slap the horse with his sombrero.

After an hour, Rennie returned the horse to the corral. He noticed by a stable, a new guy. Friendly discourse with the familiar ranch hand. Maybe he was a new ranchee. Except he looked American. Rennie recalled the classic movie character Indiana Jones. The same hat. Except this guy had long curly hair covering his forehead, ears, collar.

This new guy tried to get on a horse. Everyone laughed at his ineptitude. The horse brayed, and the guy went flying. He was an American, alright, Rennie concluded. Probably a Hollywood celebrity here to promote the Sanchez’s refugee movement.

Inside the stucco house, Rennie got confirming note from Julio, saying, “Expect a visitor today, Jose. Discuss human rights.”

The American knocked on the door.

“Are you Joe Rennie?” He said cordially.

“Yeah,” he responded guardedly.

“Do you have a few minutes?”

Rennie let him inside the den area. The man pulled out his badge. “Inspector Vic Moreau, FBI.”

Rennie was like a tiger, ready to pounce. Hair Trigger. He took some deep breaths for strength, wisdom.

Moreau picked up on it. So he said gently, “Not to worry. I just need some information, that’s all.”

Rennie sighed again. La Potente Caesar Augustus right here on the Sanchez ranch!

“Please wait in here, Inspector.” Rennie indicated Julio’s study. “I’ll be back in five minutes. Coffee? Tea?”

“No thank you. Got some catfish?” Moreau said lightly.

Five minutes later the door to the study opened for a bearded ranch hand. He carried an ugly, long-barreled pistol. Aimed right at Moreau.

“Mr. Rennie said take off all your clothes,” he said in accented English.

Moreau, hands raised in the air, nodded. The ranchee tossed him a T-shirt and brown shorts to replace Moreau’s khaki outfit.

Minutes later, Moreau was led out at gunpoint, looking like an Australian golfer. Rennie carefully inspected the discarded clothes and hat for weapons, hi-tech equipment. Satisfied, he sat Moreau at a brass table in the den. Rennie sat across from him, while the gunman, joined by a second unarmed ranchee, hovered.

“How did you find me?” Rennie asked.

“Easier than you can imagine.”

Rennie glanced at Julio's note. "What can you possibly know about human rights? Inspector Moreau?"

"That is my job," Moreau said evenly. "I come in peace. I need your help. A world in crisis."

"What crisis—except for your stormtroopers."

"Let's cut the bull. There are no arrest warrants. We're not gonna hassle you. This will be as simple as retrieving e-mails. Like I said, I'm here in peace."

"Peace? With the holocaust you've unleashed across America?" Rennie's lazy eyes didn't leave Moreau. "And I was part of it! Someday, I will have to face God with that horrible truth."

Moreau was prepared for Rennie blaming him for the FBI not acting on his alert. So he quieted even more, "Mr. Rennie, America needs that weapon back. Please help us."

Rennie slapped the table. "Look around, Moreau, I'm in charge here! Leviathan in US, you're nothing down here. You will tell ME where the weapon is!"

"I will have that glass of tea, please," Moreau said.

Rennie, caught a little off guard, nodded to the ranch hand without the gun.

Moreau, waiting, noticed Rennie lightly stroking a Bible with his fingers.

"You gettin security, protection, from that book?"

Moreau's tea arrived. He took a little sip. Burned his lip.

"It teaches me never again to compromise with evil. Beginning right now."

"That's what you think I am? Evil, Mr. Rennie? You're right, there's a little evil in all of us. Says that right here." Pointing to the Bible.

Moreau looked rightward toward the empty-handed ranchee. "How about you. Am I evil?"

From his peripheral vision, Moreau saw the gunman look at his friend. In an instant, Moreau tossed the hot tea and cup in the gunman's face, did a sideflip, kicked the gun from his grasp, twirled and kicked him in the knee, dove for the gun, and come up crouching, gun aimed.

The gunman was prone and a little sore. The other man was stunned into inaction.

Moreau rose. "Both of you, sit over there." Indicating a nearby sofa.

"Si, señor." They both nodded rapidly.

Moreau, still standing, aimed the gun at Rennie. "Bang! You're supposed to be dead by your theory. You never saw me comin. Blown you away, I could of. Surrounded this place with Mexican Staties. A thousand ways to have you captured or dead. Why ain't it happening, Mr. Rennie? Just maybe I'm telling the truth, you think?"

Moreau ran outside to a rented sedan 30 feet from the house. Returned briskly with a brown suitcase. Set the suitcase in front of Rennie, then sat down. He took all of the bullets out of the pistol, then slammed the empty gun down on the table.

"I said I come in peace. I wasn't lying."

Rennie demurely opened the case. There were an assortment of recent medical records for Agent James Andrews.

"What's the date on Andrew's admission to University of Pennsylvania Hospital? And what's the date of your alert on Vineland Tertiary to Andrews?"

"You never got my message," Rennie murmured.

“Oh yes we did. After the Vineland Tertiary incursion.”

Rennie also found an old red Bible. He perused the pages, and saw yellow highlights and notes in the margin. Lazy eyes looking at Moreau were gentle, searching.

“That goes where I go, Mr. Rennie. Our spiritual journeys ain’t that far apart. Can you quote James 4, verse 17 for me?”

“To be honest, I haven’t got that far.”

“It says, if we know there’s some good we got to do, and don’t do it, it’s a sin. If for some insane reason you still think I have the weapon, then sit there and do nothin. But the other alternative is too horrible to think about. You got no option, Mr. Rennie.”

“Call me Joe.”

“Vic.” Moreau extended his hand, and Rennie shook it.

“Okay, what?”

“Last time I checked our computer, you were still on our payroll. Contract never ended. You were given an assignment, weren’t you, Joe?”

“Midlothian?”

Moreau nodded. “Nothin has changed. Except this: You were contracted by a rising syndicated headed by Jason Marrini and Webster Bauer. Made you an offer you couldn’t refuse. Midlothian gets the juicy details.”

Moreau gave Rennie a direct line telephone. More secure than the one Midlothian had given him.

32

Lombardy Nuclear Option, D-Day.

Vic Moreau, alias Francesco Ferrari, and Tony De Sario, alias De Wayne Collins, arrived in Milan, Italy. Their contact, Lieutenant Nuccio of the Italian State Police, had been thoroughly vetted by SSF.

Nuccio was the Italian government’s undercover contact with the Supreme Council—the umbrella Crime Commission for the families in Sicily and Naples. Nuccio was told to expect two undercover American agents. The names Vic Moreau and Tony De Sario never entered his vocabulary.

Nuccio could not guarantee the two Americans that his drug smuggler contact would do business. But he did guarantee an audience.

At 10:30, Ferrari and Collins hit the Milan streets. They found Milan a paradoxical city: Block after block of old grey and white provincial buildings contrasted against the modern skyscrapers.

The two Americans found one of a myriad of churches in Milan. This church with huge Corinthian columns had open doors, but was empty nonetheless. Inside, next to a ten foot high cross of Christ, two Americans met briefly with another American, straight from J. Edgar Hoover Building.

Ferrari, carrying a thick envelope, returned to his hotel and found a note under the door.

The Ristorante Giuseppe at 2:00 please. Restaurant is halfway between Piazza and Opera House.

The Ristorante Giuseppe was an open-air café in the middle of a shopping gallery. Both Americans enjoyed a combination of veal and rice sautéed in butter, wine sauces and spices. Milanese performing for photo lens. Many more passing the gallery on trains, or especially on bicycles.

A Fiat stopped in front of the café. According to description, the Americans recognized it and climbed inside the back seat.

“Lieutenant Nuccio,” the driver introduced. “They know me as Chiz.”

“De Wayne Collins.”

“Francesco Ferrari.”

With a long coat, course, creased skin, low-billed hat and skimpy moustache, Nuccio looked much the gangster.

“It took me two years to get inside their structure,” Nuccio said in fluent English. “It is the prime distribution point for all European heroin going to North America. We identify one more cell, then shut down this vast drug network.”

The Fiat turned left past a munitions factory and drove straight into Lombardy Plain: Mile after mile of following wheat fields. The Fiat drove further into isolation and then came across a sprawling mansion guarded in front by six stone lions tied with a thick chain. The Fiat continued seemingly into nowhere, driving two miles through a dry woodland. Crossing an irrigation ditch, the road turned to dirt. Finally the road ended at small stone houses set back against the brown trees.

The Fiat stopped just as an elderly man with freckles on his head struggled out of the nearest house. A limp, a glass eye, clumpy hair and hearing aid. Three gunmen stood behind him. Beards, M-16s and army fatigues.

Upon recognizing Nuccio, the old man stretched both arms toward him. The two men embraced and then exchanged kisses on the cheek.

“O, Don Luigi Petacci. E necessario che lie veda un dottore. Dove sono i suoi bambini. Loro devono essere con lei. La responsibilita della famiglia,” Nuccio said.

“Sono troppo cechi per vedere un dottore, Chiz. Sono tropo vecchio per i miei bambini,” Petacci replied.

“Ah, Don Luigi. Americanos.” Nuccio pointed to his guests.

“Which one of you is Marrini?” Petacci asked in broken English.

“No, we represent the Marrini family. I’m Francesco Ferrari. This is Collins.”

“You’ve heard of my boss, Marrini?” Collins asked.

“Si. Lei non e famiglia. Siete tutti morti. –Morti! Morti!” Petacci was emphatic.

“He knows the New York Commission has put a big price on Marrini. How do you call it—an open contract,” Nuccio said.

“We are here to do business with you,” Ferrari said.

“How is that possible? You are not Family. There is one customer in the United States,” Petacci said.

“What customer? This psycho who has spilled needless Family blood?” Ferrari questioned.

“Not you, Francesco. You are not on the list,” Petacci said. “Who do I sell it to? I do not know. The Dons are gone.”

“I know. Senseless violence from an insurgent who would defile his mother’s grave. That’s why there is a Marrini Family.”

“Then may you return well, with our deepest wishes, my bambino,” Petacci slapped his cheek, shaking. “I should like to help you, Francesco. But I must continue. I have done business with the Family all of my life.”

“We are the Family now,” Ferrari said.

“If I sell to you and disobey the Family, the Patriarchs here will have me dead.” Petacci, trembling from Parkinson’s disease, turned toward Nuccio. He braced himself against Nuccio’s arm.

“Al inferno con quelle stallone che hanno l’audacia di usurpare il pettere dei Don! E tutto per quel mezza-razza d’avvocato. Solo lui lo poteva fare. Sapeva tutto della famiglia,” Petacci said.

“What did he say?” Collins asked.

“He said that he thinks the new leader of the Commission, the one who calls himself the new Caesar, is a half breed lawyer,” Nuccio explained.

“Who is this half-breed?” Ferrari pressed. “What is his name?”

“My father taught me, that in the old Holy Land if the Israelis approached the mountain of Moses, the Almighty would strike them dead. You are asking me to throw myself on that mountain.”

Nuccio took Ferrari quietly aside, “The old American Dons were Don Petacci’s buddies. Now he is dealing with a very impersonal and cold contact named Lonardo. Last week, Don Petacci speculated with Lonardo about this quiet new leader of the American family. Petacci quoted a former Don, Carlo Lefrelli, as talking about a half breed lawyer handling all of the Commission’s front businesses. Lonardo responded to Petacci, that the last person who asked a question like that, found his different body parts in different American cities.”

Ferrari addressed Petacci, “I do not fear him. For a true man would reveal himself.”

“Yes, you are a brave man, Francesco,” said Petacci. “And full of honor. Since I am so old, and you are so brave, we may be able to deal, Francesco.”

He beckoned his guests toward the stone hut in the back. Struggling with his limp, he led them into a stuffy room cluttered with cardboard boxes on cement floor. Ferrari opened the top of one of the boxes and found several cellophane sacks of white powder, all processed.

Ferrari lowered his sunglasses, whispered to Collins.

“You know how much this stuff is worth on the street?”

“How much is Mr. Marrini prepared to offer?” Petacci called.

Ferrari didn’t answer right away, but instead eyed the stern gunman perched next to the doorway. Then he walked behind a tall pile of boxes, out of everyone’s view.

“Mr. Marrini will go five percent over the Commission’s price,” Ferrari finally answered as he pulled the envelope from the inside of his green jacket. Then he sealed the envelope and slit it between two boxes.

“Do you think my life is worth more than five percent, Francesco?” Petacci chuckled.

“We’ll go to six,” Ferrari said, emerging. “Mr. Marrini will not authorize any higher.”



Having examined the merchandise, the two Americans followed the two Italians outside. Petacci hugged Ferrari's shoulder and leaned against him.

"Francesco, I will need time to consider your offer. This decision may mean the priest will be giving last rites to both of us soon."

"Just call me at the hotel, please Don Luigi—if there is anything else you want to tell me." My plane leaves at 3:00," Ferrari said. They exchanged kisses on the cheek. Then the threesome retreated toward the Fiat. "Buon giorno, Don Luigi."

In retreat, Nuccio said to Ferrari and Collins, "Don't mistake the cultural realities here. The connection between the American Family and the Italian Families goes back generations. Petacci looks at this nameless American Caesar as a great emperor. Rebelling against him would be like the President of Italy declaring war against the United States."

"Then what did he want from us?" Collins asked.

"Everything. His mind is like a computer. Less than an hour from now, he will be discussing everything that happened here today with the American Family. He will describe each of you to the finest detail—and tell them about Mr. Marrini's offer, to negotiate with the Commission for a higher price. He will have no more contact with you, and will never deal with the Marrini Family."

The next day, Nuccio drove the two Americans to the Milan Airport. Pulled into the departure lane, and extended them hugs—when Ferrari said, "You may need a new undercover role soon."

"Listen Mr. American Agent, whatever your real name is—"Nuccio's voice was sharp. "This is a very delicate situation. You operating over here and leaving me blind puts me in great peril."

"Lieutenant, we are dealing with a potential 911, multiplied by thousands. We will do what we need to do." He patted Nuccio's shoulder. "If you need it, we'll arrange for \$200 thousand American dollars and an American visa. Just name any other family members, and we'll have it all ready in 48 hours."

Exiting the car, Ferrari said to Collins, "Right according to script, Tony. And they didn't even have to rehearse their lines."

At sunset, they were seated together on a jet flying over Southern France. Vic Moreau looked at his watch. Started counting down quietly.

"Five, four, three, two one—"

A deafening explosion suddenly ripped the stone hut of the Petacci mansion. The structure shattered like glass, sending chunks of stone flying in all different directions, and sending the wide-eyed gunmen driving for cover. Bright orange flames shoot up 50 feet from the decimated hut. The flames grew as the white powder fed the fire. Thick black billowing smoke surged skyward, darkening the far northern horizon of Milan.

Before the FBI agents returned to their Philadelphia quarters the next morning, they saw the headlines in the newspaper:

**EXPLOSION ROCKS ESTATE OF ITALIAN INDUSTRIALIST**

Smaller bold print recorded the destruction of over a billion dollars worth of heroin. All headed for Caesar Augustus distributors.

33

SSF Satellite HQ, Philadelphia.

Vic Moreau found a letter lying on his desk, routed to him via the Field Office. He tore open the envelope and silently read the note inside:

“My darling Vic,  
The Hudaks and I left town on Monday morning. It’s an emergency involving Eric. I will explain everything to you as soon as I return.

Love,

Jane

Moreau stared at the note for a few seconds. Why not a phone call? He thought. All the previous FIS computer scans to try to identify Caesar Augustus always spewed out a collage of garbage often including singers, politicians, etc. Now Moreau added three more indicators to the list of common denominators: (1) attorney; (2) 50% Italian; (3) prior connection with the New York Commission.

“I want no more than ten names,” Moreau instructed Agent Millie Nye. With a nod, she retreated in her wheelchair to make the run.

Jackson and Nye returned to Moreau’s office with the written results. The quickest computer job Moreau had ever seen.

“Here are the ten names you wanted,” Sid said with the twitch of the eyebrows. Moreau snatched the printout and read the name at the top of the list: Joseph Walter Vandermere. He read the second name on the list: Joseph Walter Vandermere. All ten slots on the list: Joseph Walter Vandermere.

Moreau grimaced, “This friggin computer has gone haywire.”

“He only has to be half Italian,” Jackson reminded.

“What do we have on this Vandermere?”

“Well, he comes from a prominent Eastern establishment family, but he’s got Mob blood on his mother’s side: Colazzo. He’s a former trial lawyer who represented Fortune 500 folks, but some Mobsters. According to friends he had to give up courtroom dramatics because of a couple heart attacks. He gradually assumed his father’s businesses, expanded them profusely, diversified into many fields. Munitions dealer totally legit, a philanthroper of the arts, no record of him ever being in the same room with a Mafioso for at least five years.”

“Rap sheet?”

“Not even for jaywalking. The only thing notable that I can see is that some of his clients in his trial days were in the wise guys rapture group. You know, Lefrelli, Cardenale, Columbo, that bunch.”

“Very interesting,” Moreau said, “Now’s the time to determine whether the computer and Petacci were straight. Advanced surveillance on Vandermere, home and work.”

Later that day, Moreau received a call on the laser phone: Tony De Sario.

“Touchdown,” De Sario related. “Lombardy Nuclear Option hit critical mass. Caesar Augustus blinked. He wants a meeting with Marrini.”

34

D-Day. De Sario, alias Collins, stepped inside the huge, marble-encased lobby of a downtown high-rise. Sharply-dressed businessmen were routinely returning from lunch hour. De Sario made eye contact with blonde, suit-clad Jim Jensen, the agent with encyclopedic mind for Mob faces.

De Sario turned into a hallway on the left. The meeting room was the first door on the right. Inside, everything was set up by building management, like props for a play: A tray full of coffee and pastries. Six padded chairs neatly surrounding a polished mahogany table. De Sario speculated on whether or not La Potente Caesar Augustus was destined to occupy one of those chairs.

“You know, I won fifteen bucks on the Packers. No one else thought they’d do it.”

De Sario’s dialect-ridden voice sounded loud and clear at the checkpoint manned by Moreau and Jackson.

Jackson had already set the digital recording into motion. He nodded toward Moreau, who held in his left hand a Ruzo to monitor Jensen’s relays. The receiver picked up Jensen’s nasal voice:

“Still no sign of enemy activity.”

“Ditto,” came the voice of a nearby SSF sniper.

Marrini’s bullet-proof Rolls bolted to a stop in front of the glass door, the gold chrome shinning like a lantern. It was by now quite routine for Agent Natale to open the car door. Marrini, dressed to kill in his jet black suit and black tie, lit a cigar and smiled smugly.

De Sario greeted his accomplices inside the lobby and then struck a little bow toward the “Boss.” Marrini and De Sario went into the conference room. Natale waited in the lobby.

A minute later, three men made an abrupt appearance inside the lobby. They wore loose designer shirts. All three were rugged. One had a broken arm, thick cast. They made eye contact with Natale. Small talk.

“The enemy trio has arrived,” Jensen said limply.

Moreau leaned forward in anticipation of follow-up words.

“Come on, Jensen, talk to me. Who are they?”

“They look like labor toughs from the docks or something—I’m sorry, Commander. I don’t recognize them.”

“Jensen losing his touch?” Jackson asked.

From the tiny surveillance chip a snowy video of the conference room appeared on Moreau’s Ruzo.

Marrini sat in one of the cushioned chairs and imagined a throne. Authority like an opiate. He hammed it up by pulling another cigar from his shirt pocket and snapping his fingers. De Sario had an obligation to light it.

Jensen relayed an action back to checkpoint:

“Alright, an enemy mark is approaching contact point. The one with the large cast on his arm,” Jensen continued. “They are being detained by unidentified Black male who followed them in from the parking lot. –Nick Natale attempting to coax enemy marks toward the door. The Black male persists with his conversation.”

Suddenly, the voices from the meeting room sounded over Moreau’s Ruzo.

De Sario: “Get ‘em up. Come on, higher.”

Hood: “Take it easy on the shirt.”

De Sario: “Okay, the pants leg, up—you know the rules. –Wanna see how it’s done? Here. Look. I’m clean, see?”

Hood: “How about him?”

Marrini: “My juice is my piece. Here, wanna kiss my—”

De Sario: “Okay, drop your pants, bozo.”

Hood: “Up yours.”

De Sario: “You wired? –Remember when you were a kid? –I’ll show you yours if you show me mine.”

Hood: “Faggot.”

De Sario: “Yeah, and you act like one. That’s why I think you’re a cop. This meeting ain’t moving until I’m sure we’re all clean.”

Suddenly, Jensen’s quiet voice sounded over Moreau’s receiver:

“Commander, I’ve made the Black intruder. He’s a major narcotics distributor named Cornelius Midlothian.”

“I know Midlothian quite well,” Moreau said, perking up. He and Jackson slapped hands. “Thank you, Joe!”

“Midlothian is trying real hard to get to contact point. Trying to circumvent Natale and the enemy marks, but they won’t let him through.”

Moreau switched the frequency on the ruzo. “Natale. Give him 5 seconds of resistance. Then let him in.”

“Here’s a curious twist,” Jensen said. “Natale motioned Midlothian in, but the Mob guys are hassling him.”

“—Alright, Midlothian just opened the door. Did you pick it up?”

“Got him.”

Midlothian, wearing a bright brown suit, entered the meeting room and found Marrini and De Sario seated at the table with the cast-arm hood standing over them. Midlothian was greeted rudely with nasty-looking stares. De Sario rose from his chair.

“This is a private meeting. There’s the door.”

Midlothian ignored De Sario and addressed the hood:

“Robin Karris. You were hired to enforce a contract against Marrini. \$500 grand waiting for you.”

Midlothian’s words left the other three speechless. De Sario gauged the shattered look on Karris’ face.

“What’s this ape babbling about?” Marrini said.

“How you know so much?” Karris demanded.

Midlothian was strangely amused as he took the hood by the shoulder.

“Because I got laser ears. Know what laser ears do? Dissect brain waves. With you real easy. –Take your \$500 g’s and walk.”

“Who ordered this contract?” De Sario asked, suddenly primed for action.

“I want you both to observe Karris’ tremendous threshold of pain,” Midlothian yanked hard on the sling supporting Karris’ cast. Before the glazed eyes of the observers, Midlothian wrestled the bulky hood to the floor and clutched at the cast with both hands. He loosened the plaster-colored clay hiding a two-inch gap between the cast and the arm. The bulky plaster mold slid off Karris’ arm.

Taped to the inside of the cast was a tiny blow dart gun.

“The poison on the tip of that tiny dart is instant death,” Midlothian said.

Wearing a smirk, he tossed the micro-weapon to De Sario.

“Sensors won’t pick up dart guns,” Moreau said from checkpoint, to Jackson.

“Mr. Karris was just leaving. He and his friends.”

“Who you talking to, spade—” But those were Karris’ last words as De Sario gave him a good body slam.

The two hoods outside heard the commotion and charged inside. Natale tackled them both from behind. De Sario and Natale dazed the hoods with rapid punches to the sides of their heads.

“Put ‘em down good!” Marrini cried, waving his cigar and loving all of this.

“The contract’s off, man,” Midlothian said to Karris.

“Who says?”

“Snow White—who do you think? The organization put me in charge of this show. At least until certain merchandise is delivered.”

De Sario and Natale exchanged a brief look. “This meeting’s over for you three. You broke the rules,” De Sario said. “You stay.” Indicating Midlothian.

The very rugged Mike Natale clenched his fists.

The three scowling hoods finally left.

“Why the sudden interest in my boss?” De Sario said when the commotion had cleared.

“I’ve a business proposition to make.”

“Have a seat,” DeSario said. Midlothian took one of the padded chairs, crossed his legs, relaxed. “Who’s pulling your tail?”

“Use your imagination.”

“Caesar Augustus? You?” De Sario barked loud laughter. But his ears were wide open.

“He has something that belongs to me. Consider this mutiny. I’ve been declared dead. There’s not much to lose.”

“What is this something?” Natale asked.

“You may be his star halfback, and he’ll still turn on you in a second,” Midlothian said.

“So what? That’s the nature of the business,” De Sario said. “It’s an act of honesty to kill your rival instead of drinking a toast to him while your Capo is muscling in on his action. Any Don dumb enough to leave himself open deserves to die. You want us to play the violins? You want us to cry for you?”

“Those three hoods will deliver a negative report. We have an hour or two at best, to get this done.”

De Sario lit another cigar for Marrini. “What do you have to offer us?”

“Five hundred grand, man. Not a merger, just a one-shot deal.”

“What for?”

“To rent those incredible armed cadres of yours, just for two hours.”

De Sario laughed.

“A million,” Midlothian upped.

Now the laughter stopped; Midlothian drew intense stares of anticipation.

“You’ll be pulling off a heist. The easiest mill you ever saw.”

The air seemed ten times heavier. De Sario and Natale exchanged glances. They both knew. De Sario had about a hundred things he needed to discuss with the Commander, but couldn’t. He was on his own. Like never before, he became self-conscious of every word.

De Sario eyed Marrini.

“What you say, boss?”

Marrini snapped his fingers at Natale. “Will you sit down? You’re making me nervous.”

De Sario beckoned Midlothian closer. “The boss isn’t saying nothin. That means he’s not impressed. We’re risking our lives and you won’t even tell us for.”

“The merchandise is scheduled to leave our shores tonight. I am the final point of contact on a relay team.”

“What’s in this job for you?”

“Revenge against Caesar Augustus for what he made me do. Before I retire where they can’t touch me.”

“You have some specifics on this relay team?” De Sario asked.

“Three couriers. Courier One hands the papers to Courier Two, here in Philly. He takes the merchandise to the third party in Berlin. Number three is an agent of the partnership organization.”

De Sario as Collins looked Midlothian dead in the eye.

“What is the exact location of this exchange? And how much of Caesar Augustus’s muscle are we confronting?”

“No way, man. You don’t get that information until we have a deal. This is my show. And I want non-monetary benefits. Good will.”

De Sario hesitated several seconds for the right words.

“My boss would never consider a move without a good faith down payment. Could you arrange a quick transfer of 300 grand into one of our accounts?”

Midlothian’s arrogant smirk registered immediately. “Since I own a bank, it wouldn’t take fifteen minutes—You’ll get the balance of 700 grand when I have the prize.”

De Sario turned toward Marrini and straightened his coat a little.

“How about it, boss. —Are those terms acceptable?”

“Nah, the job is worth at least two mill.”

De Sario cursed quietly.

Midlothian relieved De Sario’s agony by citing the words “One and a quarter.”

“One and a half,” Marrini countered.

Midlothian paused. “One and a half it is.”

De Sario and Natale registered blank stares as Marrini and Midlothian shook hands.

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FBI Philadelphia Field Office. Routine business was winding down with the close of the afternoon. With portraits of the President and the Director hovering over his wood-carved desk, the middle-aged Special Agent-in-Charge turned his tall swivel chair toward the wall to relax a few minutes before departure.

He had no idea how early his departure would be until he heard the door opening behind him. By the time he swung his chair around toward the front, Vic Moreau was standing over his desk.

Without a word, Moreau handed his counterpart a discretionary emergency decree. The SAC had never seen such a document in his life. But the signature was unmistakable.

“In accordance with this order, I am assuming total command over this Field Office,” Moreau said. “You and your agents have fifteen minutes to vacate the premises.”

The abruptness of the moment caused the SAC to hesitate.

“Do you understand the instructions?” Moreau pursued.

“Yes—uh, if I look confused, I haven’t heard such a siege command since those exercises at Quantico.”

The SAC started out of his office like a legionnaire leading his legions into a jungle of the unknown. He glanced back at Moreau and then looked at him a second time as he opened the door.

“Level with me, Vic. Is this a civil alert?”

“Didn’t I just ask you and your men to vacate within fifteen minutes?” Moreau said, squinting one eye.

“Yes.”

“I changed my mind. You’ve got ten.”

36

5:30 P.M.

Midlothian and Agent Natale remained stationary inside Midlothian’s rented sedan parked in a deserted school lot in West Philadelphia. With each passing minute, Midlothian’s large brown eyes tensed up a little more. Another half-hour of this nonsense, and he would lose his big chance for both deliverance and vengeance.

Finally De Sario trotted across the asphalt lot and climbed into the back seat.

“What took you so long? The computer transfer doesn’t take an hour,” Midlothian said with mild anger.

“The boss don’t like to be rushed.”

“Did you get it?”

“Yeah, we got it. Our heavies are ready for action. So we need the details of the exchange right now.”

“It’s coming down at 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station,” Midlothian said. “On the east side you’ll see a drive for cabs and busses. You walk farther toward a parking area, almost to the river. You’ll see these giant concrete pillars. You can’t miss them, man. The third one from the left is where it’s happening. Courier II will identify himself by carrying a big brown envelope. Courier I will have a black briefcase and will walk to the third pillar and the exchange will be made. There’s to be no deviation from the plan—let’s go.”

Later, a sedan carrying De Sario, Midlothian and Natale occupied an isolated parking space, close to 30<sup>th</sup> Street station. The car didn’t budge. Midlothian could hardly believe that his two accomplices remained still while the clock was running on his deliverance scheme.

“We can sit here all night, man, or—”

“—The boss says we don’t move until you tell us about the merchandise.”

“Alright,” Midlothian whined. “It’s a box. Advanced weapon developed by the Pentagon.”

“Who’s the receiving party?” De Sario enunciated.

“A German, an agent for Red China, put together a package worth a billion dollars to purchase the package.”

“And you’re offering us how much? You think we’re stupid?”

“You’re incredibly stupid if you think I’m pulling down anything close to a cool billion for this. Once the weapon is intercepted the deal is off, man. I’m certainly no flag waver, but I could never live with myself knowing I’d given the weapon to an overmilitarized dictatorship capable of threatening America.”

“Why didn’t you think of that before you stole—?”

“Gladys Tovar and my original plans were to sell it back to the U.S. government.” Midlothian said sharply.

De Sario and Natale exchanged brief stares.

“What do you intend to do with the weapon after tonight?” De Sario asked quieter.

“Sell it back to the Pentagon for ten million. Big deal, it’ll mean they’ll have two less toilet seats.”

Midlothian didn’t notice Agent Tatum approaching the sedan in a sprint. Tatum opened the front door and pushed himself inside, forcing Midlothian toward the middle of the seat. Tatum offered a discreet nod at De Sario.

Recalling Marrini’s racial remark, Midlothian wondered how Marrini’s army could include someone like Tatum. In desperation, Midlothian glared back at De Sario.

“I demand to see Marrini in ten minutes, or I’ll take on that relay team myself!”

De Sario leaned on Midlothian’s shoulder.

“Who’s Marrini?”

Suddenly Midlothian had a sickly feeling, which was reinforced when Tatum drew a .38 and flashed an FBI badge. With the proverbial spear piercing his heart, Midlothian closed his eyes and collapsed in resignation. De Sario pushed his shoulders downward while Tatum affixed the handcuffs.



“You’re under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law,” Tatum began. But his ritualistic words ceased when he came across two airline tickets in Midlothian’s pocket. He handed them to De Sario.

“On the other hand—” De Sario said, “Nairobi, Kenya, huh? How much did you pay for these tickets?”

“Pittance,” Midlothian said sourly.

“I don’t think my boss will object to sending you to Nairobi,” De Sario said.

Like carrots on a string, the tickets were dangled in front of Midlothian’s face. His eyes grew wide and followed the motion of the tickets toward his pocket.

Just like that, De Sario snatched them away.

“Those tickets will cost you.”

“How much?”

“Save your money. Payment begins right this moment,” De Sario said. He unfolded a photograph of Joseph W. Vandermere III and held it before Midlothian’s eyes.

“Yeah, deferred trip. After about a year of Kafkaesque legal torture,” Midlothian said. “Feds make deals like Marrini.”

De Sario glanced around. “Who’s Marrini?”

“Who’s the man in the picture?” Midlothian responded.

“Louie. Trade those tickets in for warrants for narcotics trafficking, terrorism and sedition against the United States.”

6:15 P.M, Pennsylvania R.R. Station, Philadelphia. It was a routine evening for the hundreds of commuters flooding through the massive stone edifice, touching main arteries into every Northeastern city. Agent Jensen posed as a suit-clad businessman waiting for the airport bus to stop along the east wing of the train terminal.

Jensen drifted back to lay low among the exterior contours of the building. The mammoth pillars were only fifty feet in front of him.

Over the span of a half-hour, Jensen had studied the face of every pedestrian passing along the east side of the terminal. No one had come close to the pillars.

A dark-colored gas guzzler was a trademark of the Organization, so eyebrows began to rise when one such vehicle crept into the parking area. A multitude of hawkeyes followed the motion of the sedan turning into a parking space beyond the pillars.

Moreau’s ruzo at the checkpoint sounded the alert from the sensors.

Jensen checked his watch: 6:26. Just about time.

A gypsy cab cruised past the pillars and then stopped.

Out stepped a woman dressed in black. She clutched a 2’ by 2’ briefcase in her hand, a la Courier I. It was unmistakable.

“Attention, checkpoint. Female subject walking slowly through the parking lot. She passed the first pillar, now the second—and she stopped at the third! This is it—No make on the subject. She’s Caucasian, but she’s wearing veil over her head. Muslim gear or something.”

Jensen again eyed the Cadillac sedan. It flashed with the radiance of fresh polish, a dash of the Organization’s synthetic class. Jensen tried to get a make on the men inside, but all he could see were three shadows.

“Mob monitors in Cadillac. Identities unknown.”

“Sensors picking up a second Mob vehicle a block away,” Moreau said.

Jensen checked to watch: 6:29. He was alerted to the approach of a man from Kennedy Boulevard: A frail, graying man with a tweed coat and beret. Jensen relayed the news back to checkpoint. Then he gauged the reaction of the woman awaiting her contact. She did not acknowledge his presence. Both of her hands clutched the briefcase tightly.

The man veered toward the leftmost pillar. His scuffing footsteps slid to a stop as he touched the towering cylinder of concrete. The envelope was visible. Courier II identified.

“It’s happening right now,” Jensen dramatized. –“Wait, the woman is moving away from the pillar before contact. –I don’t believe it, she’s just walking away! Toward the terminal!”

Barely before Jensen could blink his eyes, the woman raced toward a parked cab. She slapped her hand against the glass once and then leaped into the back seat. Jensen could see the woman motion frantically to the cab driver. Within a second, the cab was laying rubber on the driveway and racing past Jensen’s position.

A sedan came roaring down the driveway from out of nowhere and bolted to a stop five feet from Jensen. The passenger door flew open instantaneously, and Jensen got in. It tore off in pursuit of the cab.

The enforcers in the black Cadillac were stunned that Courier I would dare defy the Organization. A hood in the back seat screaming at the top of his lungs.

The Cadillac bolted, but its path was blocked by parked sedan. Now all three hoods were screaming. The driver laid on his horn for five seconds.

Rear tires smoking, the sedan screeched into reverse. To the disbelief of the enforcers, the opposite side of the driveway was also blocked by an automobile!

The Mob’s sedan was imprisoned by a rectangular cul-de-sac of cars and pillars. a

Lonardo, the lead enforcer, was absolutely blind with rage; he reached for a .357 to blow some folks away. But he became strangely pacified by the number count: Four men in the car in front of him and four more in the car in back. The suit-clad Babe Lonardo remained quite calm in leaving his sedan and approaching the car in front of him. The agent on the driver’s side cracked his window a couple of inches in anticipation.

“I’m gonna ask you nicely just once to move this scrap,” Lonardo said. He slowly reached his hand inside his coat.

“The Organization’s already cut you in, right?” The undercover SSF agent said.

Lonardo removed his hand from his coat and flopped it down to his side. He knew an M-16 when he saw one. Aimed directly at his nose.

“Perhaps you might go back to your car and relax,” the agent said.

“Yeah, you got a point,” Lonardo agreed.

The FBI sedan kept the cab within a block’s surveillance. Jensen relayed his position to checkpoint:

“Suspect proceeding east on Market Street, past City Hall. Alert! The cab has stopped at 6<sup>th</sup> and Market. Female suspect leaving cab with briefcase in hand,” Jensen called. “Suspect walking toward Courthouse. Over.”

“This is Moreau. Jensen, you are to apprehend the woman and take her and the case to Field Office. Tatum, pull the cab over and search it, any way you can,” Moreau enunciated. “Are the instructions clear? Over.”

“Affirmative.” Both men answered.

Moreau was back at the Federal Building within five minutes. He tore through the deserted lobby, past the armed guard and up the elevator toward the Field Office.

Just as he had commanded, the Field Office was a ghost town. He proceeded down the quiet corridor and looked inside one empty room after another. The dim silence was interrupted by a murmur of a voice he could recognize anywhere. It hit him like a thousand spiders, and the haunting sound propelled him toward the lounge. He kicked open the door with a slam, and there she was: Jane Bradove, looking as striking as ever with a jet black dress to match her brilliant black hair.

Jane sat perfectly still in one of the cushioned chairs. Her lively green eyes addressed him for a split second before glancing away. Moreau had no idea that betrayal could be so brutal. And he never felt so tortured by beauty. He flashed a look at Jensen, who waved the briefcase in apparent victory.

“She came up her voluntarily,” Jensen said, to ease the blow a little. “She’s unarmed.”

But her very face could kill. Like a *deja-vu-gone-bad*, her purse was emptied on the floor, just like that first encounter at Temple University.

Not even a nail file, Moreau recalled, and he flinched at the thought. He saw a long black scarf draped across the table.

“I didn’t want to be recognized,” she explained in a soft voice. “Please don’t tell anybody I came here.”

“I’d rather you were a prostitute,” Moreau mumbled.

Her slender fingers clutched at a pen, and she scribbled down some words on a piece of scrap paper, then handed it to Moreau. “The address of my mother and brother. They’ve threatened to kill me and my entire family if I don’t do what they want. They also have Ms. Hudak and Eric. Please find them before they’re dead.” Her vivid eyes pleaded.

Moreau pondered. Suddenly, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. He took a deep breath, like someone who had just gotten a second wind. He pulled up vital info on Jane’s mother and brother.

“I’ll check on it.” Jensen, feeling awkward, was happy to volunteer.

Moreau looked at the briefcase. Opened it. 100 capsules, in 10 x 10 rows. He saw the cover sheet for the instructions, and the TOP SECRET stamp. But the actual instruction pages were missing.

“Jane?” Moreau said leadingly.

Her vivid green eyes were confidant, with a touch of indignance.

“I had no idea what this sick game was. But I was determined not to play it.”

“Where are the papers, Jane?”

“Please don’t get mad at me, Vic. I only had one chance, and one place to hide them. I figured this diabolical box wouldn’t work without the top secret papers.”

“You figured right. Good girl.” He tenderly patted her face. “Please wait here, Jane. By the way, I love you.”

Out in the hallway, Jensen said, “We’ve made the lead enforcer: top iceman for the New York Commission, Michael Lonardo. Does his own jobs. Ruthless. He gave us the locations of the Hudaks.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes sir. We’re picking them up now.”

Moreau cocked his head in surprise.

“The agents are on the way to the Bradove father, mother and brother. They’ll be shielded within the hour.”

“A million thank yous, Agent Jensen.”

Moreau beheld Jane Bradove, elbows on knees, hair dangling downward.

Profound innocence, but one with a hidden strength.

Moreau pulled up a chair, sat directly across from her. Said a silent prayer over the impending question. An old question.

“Jane, Lonardo and his hoods targeted you. Was it to get back at me? Or is there another reason?”

Jane looked up, surprised at the question.

“Jane, who are the flower bearers?”

She shook her head.

“Jane, where is the trust?”

“That’s not fair,” she murmured. “Trust me, I was totally honest with you. I told you the flower bearers is my own personal secret.”

Moreau gently placed his hand over hers. “Trust goes both ways, Dahlin. Who are the flower bearers?”

“I was born with a curse. Those hoodlums involved me with those secret papers just to remind me of my roots—You see, I’m the niece of a crime boss named Carlo Lefrelli.”

“No way. It’s not possible. We’d have had a file on you from day one.”

Moreau grabbed the nearest phone and again dialed a secure line to Washington, the J Edgar Hoover Building.

“Huey, Moreau. It’s an emergency. I need an FIS read on a Mafioso named Carlo Lefrelli.”

Moreau waited patiently for his agent to respond.

“Lefrelli, Carlo D.” The voice said from the other end. “Capo, the largest family. Though other files tell a story of a higher pinnacle of power. Local Rap sheet: Two numbers bust. Hung jury both times. Suspicion of murder. Charges dropped. Loansharking. Mistrial. Fed rap sheet: Interstate gambling. Mistrial. Interstate racketeering. Mistrial. Interstate gambling again. Hung jury. Income tax evasion. Settled out of court. –A member of the infamous wise guy rapture. Disappeared.”

“Forget about that. Just give me immediate family. Brothers and sisters.”

“One sister named Marie. Deceased.”

“Deceased?!” Moreau directed a squinty-eyed stare at Jane. She stared back passively.

“Okay, the offspring of both Carlo and Marie,” Moreau enunciated.

“Carlo had one son named Dominick. Nothing on Marie.”

“Nothing at all?”

“No, but there’s something wrong with this file. There’s no indication about how she died. –I’ve been keeping these files for six years, and I know when they’ve been tampered with.”

Moreau pondered with the receiver still in his hand.

“Commander?”

Finally he clicked it down.

“I can explain all that,” Jane offered. “May I?” She picked up her purse and took a pocket photograph from her billfold. She handed it over.

“This is Marie Lefrelli Bradove—Inspector Moreau.”

It was starting to come back to him even before Jane handed him the photo. Just one glance at the woman’s picture, and there was no doubt. Suddenly Moreau looked like he had just seen a ghost.

Jane helped his recollection by recounting the incident word-for-word:

“Eleven summers ago, I still had braces on my teeth. My mother and father were separated. It’s not as if father didn’t love Mama. It’s just that he was an officer in the Navy and couldn’t tolerate Uncle Carlo and his hoodlum friends coming by the house all the time. I lived with father during the separation, which saddened Mama deeply. But she insisted on it because she knew it would be better for me. That’s the kind of person she is. But she just couldn’t break ties with those people. Someone she knew was getting arrested or shot at or something.”

Jane paused for a moment, and those striking green eyes became fixed. She licked her lips. Then her soft voice continued:

“Mama went to a dinner party at Uncle Carlo’s villa in Babylon, New York. She didn’t dare miss it because it was Dominick’s birthday. Uncle Carlo couldn’t stay clean even for his son’s birthday. He was in the back of the house wheeling and dealing with some gamblers from New Jersey. Then the FBI raided the house. Everyone was arrested, including mama. All the degradation and third degree was more than she could stand. She broke down in front of the three FBI agents that were questioning her. She pleaded with these agents to help her. Just to get away from those hoodlums if nothing else.

“One of the FBI agents came to her later on. Mama said he was very young, but was the toughest interrogator of the three. But when he returned, he seemed embarrassed, even a little nervous. The young agent apologized for not helping her earlier, explaining that he could have gotten in trouble with his boss. The young agent took her away and gave her a new name and a new set of identification cards. He promised to destroy any connection between her and the family. He even set up another nursing job for her and introduced her to some nice people. Mama said she could never forget that young agent as long as she lived. His name was Special Agent Victor Moreau.”

“Yeah, uh—I didn’t make the connection with the name Bradove. She wasn’t using it at the time. I remember our new name. Moran.”

“Moran, that’s right.”

“After about six years, we were convinced that we had finally broken ties with the family. We were wrong. They found her in Hawaii. Now she’s dying of cancer, and those hoodlums still won’t leave her alone.”

“The flower bearers,” Moreau said.

“Yes, the flower bearers,” Jane echoed soberly. “You can’t imagine the pressure of being the niece of Carlo Lefrelli. Since the death of Dominick, I’m the closest thing he has to a child. Some of these hoodlums look upon me as Carlo Lefrelli’s daughter. I’ve gotten dinner invitations, offers of trips around the world. –I’m put on a pedestal, like some kind of doll. Some of them ask me where Uncle Carlo is, as if I’m supposed to know.

“I feel embarrassed when friends or stage producers ask me about my family background. Hiding my face when a Mobster greets me in the street. Now this latest scary incident. It’s a congenital curse.” A tear rolled down Jane’s cheek, and she rubbed it away with her slender finger.

“I’m sorry, Jane.”

“Mama never stopped talking about you. I grew up wondering what it would be like to meet you. What you would look like. When Sergio mentioned your name, I couldn’t resist the encounter. But would you be as handsome and as nice as mama said? You brought peace to my family for many years. There’s nothing I won’t do for you, Vic Moreau. You’re truly beautiful person, and I love you with all my heart.

“Those fairy tales I write are an anecdote to the curse. God’s way to provide merciful therapy, while providing a spiritual anecdote to the pain, the violence, which has gripped the Lefrelli family. My stories don’t give me near the pleasure of being with you right now.

“Besides, FBI man. We have no secrets. None at all,” she added playfully. “A few days ago I received a letter from a mutual friend Joe Rennie.” She pulled folded stationary from her purse and reached it toward him. But he motioned for her to read it. He loved to hear the sound of her dainty voice.

“Dear Janie,” she began.

“—I am writing this letter in hopes that you remember that goofy guy you almost turned into a pancake on that warm night in Chestnut Hill. The same guy who you owe one more ticket to your play. I knew you’d remember. Who could forget Joe Rennie? I assume you didn’t get my first letter. You never responded. But those books you gave me are priceless.

“I also think about your mother and your concern for her. That giving spirit I saw in you, in action and through your books, led me to an incredible encounter with Jesus.

“I try to spend time as I can working with Native population, whose hardship is unimaginable to most of my brothers north of the border. Although I don’t fear death, I will continue to fight for my life as long as there is a breath left in me.”

Jane reflected an aura of fascination about the letter, although she had read it once already.

“My experience with the American criminal justice system has revealed a startling secret. The FBI has its own CIA called the Supra Strike Force, accountable to no one. It’s like they make up their own laws as they go along. The SSF in a democratic society?”

Jane was not finished, but she stopped abruptly when Moreau retreated to the opposite end of the room.

Moreau always knew the danger of the secret being exposed. But he never knew it could happen under such circumstances. Moreau felt some life blood dripping from his body.

Sensing his despair, she lightly touched his sad face.

“I won’t tell anyone, okay?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s like bacteria trapped inside a little bottle. Once you pull the cork.”

Moreau blinked hard at the escalating sound of alien footsteps approaching from the corridor. The sight of Snake-eyes standing by the door was enough to draw Moreau ominously from his chair.

“The taxpayers have decided it’s time to audit your activities, Moreau,” Snake-eyes said. “These things must be unannounced, understand.”

Snake-eyes Agents, Brenda Stokes and Jim Peabody, were on his flanks, and they both drew revolvers to freeze Moreau’s advance.

Jane started to leave, but Agent Stokes, smiling quietly as if she had the world by the buttocks, motioned for her to remain seated.

Peabody concluded his search of Moreau by removing the .38 from his shoulder holster.

“We’ve learned a lot about you since that day you insulted me at the club. Organized crime files at FBI headquarters are replete with references to hoods straight out of a war zone. Sending quite a ripple through the underworld. Why don’t you tell us about it?”

Moreau sneered at Snake-eye’s question.

“You don’t think I have allies? Hey Brenda!” Snake-eyes called to Stokes standing by the door. “How long have you been assigned to Philly?”

“About three months, sir,” Stokes answered with a smug smile. “And you people have no monopoly on advanced surveillance equipment.”

“Did you know, Moreau, that Agent Stokes is also an accomplished photographer? He got a real exclusive on New York gangster named Jake Marrini. Worth millions.”

Snake-eyes pulled the photo from the inside of his coat and set it in front of Moreau. “It was taken at an open air restaurant in Philadelphia.”

Moreau, as still as stone, refused to look at it.

“Don’t you recognize some of the men seated at the table with Marrini?”

Finally, Moreau glanced at the photo.

“Never seen them before.”

“That’s understandable. Their own mothers wouldn’t recognize them with these costumes. The owner of that restaurant told Stokes she’s a great waitress. Only minutes after this picture was taken, Mr. Marrini and the men pictured here passed around a large salad bowl. Stokes took it to the FBI for analysis. Naturally, Marrini’s fingerprints were recorded. But the names matching the other prints are quite interesting: Inspector Anthony De Sario. Special Agent Mike Natale. Special Agent Mario Baez.”

Snake-eyes beckoned to Stokes, who took three steps toward the table and made the announcement:

“Inspector Victor Francis Moreau, I have a duly authorized warrant for your arrest. The charges are as follows: Interstate racketeering, conspiracy, obstruction of justice.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” Snake-eyes offered. “All charges pending against you will be dropped. In return, you do two things for me. Number one, I want every detail about

the involvement of your secret squadron with Jake Marrini. Names, dates, places, numbers, operations. Number two. I want that case stolen from the Pentagon.”

Moreau was startled that Snake-eyes had even heard of the Pentagon’s prize. But he had the discipline to suppress any outward reaction.

“The case?” Moreau asked, wide-eyed.

“Save your breath. Stokesey’s equipment is just as thorough as yours.”

“First of all, I don’t have the case. Second of all, the Justice Department—”

“You seemed to forget our conversation at the Maryland club,” Snake-eyes said. “This is not about a public inquiry. It’s about you and I sharing secrets.”

“I don’t believe this,” Stokes interrupted in her husky voice. “You’re insulting the only man who can keep you out of trouble! He’s doing you a favor, so show the man a little respect!”

“Let me see that warrant,” Moreau insisted, noticing the sheer gloves on Snake-eyes’ hands.

Suddenly, Snake-eyes and his lackey seemed at a loss. Snake-eyes sat down and calmly folded his hands together, showing Moreau his solid gold cufflinks. Again he forced a prefabricated smile.

“Let me explain to you the facts of life, Mr. FBI. In Washington, I represent certain commercial interests. Your noblesse is causing them concern. But they’re more interested in this quiet rumor floating through board rooms about this group of Federal agents who are nothing less than grand dragons of the Republic. A blank check to plunder and even kill without answering to anyone.

“Businessmen never expect something for nothing. In return for your cooperation, I am authorized to transfer 10,000 shares of preferred stock of ten stable multinational companies into your account.”

Moreau said nothing, so Snake-eyes took Moreau’s revolver from the top of the cabinet. He plopped himself down at the table with a vengeance. Then he flicked open the chamber and counted the bullets.

“I’m going to ask you some questions, and you will respond.”

Snake-eyes removed the bullets from the chamber. But he left one behind. Moreau knew this game quite well.

“I’ll ask you just once. What have you done with that case stolen from the Pentagon?”

Snake-eyes spun the chamber. Then he locked it in. Moreau had sense enough not to look into the barrel rotating toward his head. He closed his eyes. Remembered Jesus’s promise about the next life, not this one.

The first click not only reached his ears, but permeated his consciousness. Like a cannon blast.

When the second click sounded, Moreau’s eyes gravitated toward the gun—and found it aimed a foot above his head.

Snake-eyes didn’t have the guts to go through with it. He was obviously desperate for information. What if the thing went off?

Moreau sighed in victory. But each victory was only a grace period to prepare for the next assault.



“Have it your way, Moreau. We’ll see how silent you are when every news reporter, every wire service in the nation, will have your clandestine army to kick around as a journalistic football.”

Two doses of kryptonite in one day was more than Moreau could bear. His face cringed at the words, “news reporter.” Sensing that he had somehow nailed Moreau in the Achilles heel, Snake-eyes went straight for the jugular. He took Peabody’s gun and aimed it at Jane’s head.

Snake-eyes, though, seemed disappointed. He’d expected Jane to be groveling, pleading, shaking. Instead, she blinked hard, reflecting an indignance. God had brought her through the terror of Lonardo. This was nothing by comparison.

Agent Stokes found the 2’ x 2’ case. She set it on the desk. Opened it.

Her eyes morphed. “My my.”

Snake-eyes nodded, “My my, indeed.” He sealed the case.

For Moreau, the vision déjà vu: he was tied to a tree. The avalanche heading right for him. Then he beheld Jane. The cart of escape. Then the warm, wonderful breeze. Her quiet strength. The Lord’s strength, courage.

Moreau’s voice was calm: “Okay, Congressman, your offer is hard to resist. What do you want?”

“Your connection with the Marrini syndicate.”

“What’s there to say? You know I’m into power. It’s like an addiction. So I conspired with Marrini to confront the Caesar Augustus empire. Together we have the power to do it. And we’ve proven it. By taking this weapon case.”

“Those two agents, talking between Philly and Washington about the weapon. They’re in?”

Moreau had to be careful. “Everyone in the so-called secret police is in. We’ve learned to put on a show. Example: We’ve been avoiding you, not because we’re disinterested in your offers, Congressman. You’ve been considered a security risk because of your close ties to the government.”

Snake-eyes was eating it alive, breathing hard from Moreau’s careful contrivances. “You two agents mentioned someone named Vandermere as Caesar Augustus.” Pie eyes awaited the answer.

“That’s right.”

“Joseph Vandermere, the international financier and munitions dealer?”

“The only one I know of.”

“Can you prove Vandermere’s Caesar Augustus?” Snake-eyes asked.

Moreau caught himself. “Proof? Sicily knows who he is. Calls him the half-breed lawyer. Like I said, we’re into power, not evidence.”

“Power is a big word for your friend Marrini,” Snake-eyes said. “Especially if it includes the presumption that he is big enough to overthrow Vandermere and the Caesar Augustus Commission.”

“That’s been misunderstood. Mr. Marrini has no intentions of deposing Caesar Augustus. He’s simply seeking an east coast franchise on preferred terms.”

“Vandermere won’t negotiate?”

“That’s right,” Moreau said.

Snake-eyes was almost drooling. “I think a meeting can be arranged between Vandermere and Marrini. Don’t you think? Especially since we have some valuable merchandise with which to bargain.”

“Should I give Mr. Marrini a call?” Moreau asked.

He slowly reached his hand toward the only phone in the room. He looked and saw the barrel of Stokes’ pistol as a reminder.

“Remember, Moreau. You’re on tape, too.” Snake-eyes added.

Moreau dialed the number of the Travel Agency where the Counter Caesar Augustus boys were freezing Marrini.

“Yeah.” De Sario’s voice answered.

“Hello, boss. The weather girls were just great!”

De Sario hesitated.

“Did you read the papers today? The White Sox won again.”

De Sario hesitated again. “Oh, good.”

“The score was 6 to 4. –No, 7 to 5. –We scored big.”

“Mmmm.”

“Look boss, I think I’ve found a way to force Mr. Vandermere to negotiate. He still doesn’t know we have the papers. A call from one of the couriers would confirm it. Right boss?”

“One of the few who can.”

“I’m sure you can handle him, boss—I’m at the field office—okay, I’ll expect your call, --Goodbye, boss.”

Moreau politely clicked down the receiver and then collapsed in his chair for an indefinite wait. He yearned for the chance to see the expression on Vandermere’s face. Getting calls on his private cell from both Jason Marrini and Webster Bauer.

“Vandermere will bite?” Snake-eyes asked.

“Our calls to him will let him know we know he’s Caesar Augustus. Now naked, his syndicate has made a promise to Red China, but can’t deliver the goods. Be needin some fast information, he will. You think?”

Later the phone rang. Snake-eyes nodded for Moreau to pick up.

“Yeah.”

“It was Agent Baez: “Vandermere disavowed any knowledge of Marrini or the stolen papers. But through one of his lackeys he gave a Verbatim; here it is: ‘Out of civic responsibility, I have to make constant sacrifices and I hope you don’t abuse my charity. But in the spirit of entrepreneurship, I will meet briefly with your client Marrini to explore his business needs.’

“It’s on for ten o’clock tonight.”

“Could you confer with the boss? The parking lot of Dukes? 9:30?” It was the first time Moreau had given an order with three questions.

Snake-eyes parroted a few nods in Moreau’s direction.

“One more thing, Mario. What’s the status of Francesco Ferrari?”

“Word’s out that the Commission put a seven-digit figure on his head. Open contract.”

“Good. We should bring him.”

“Who’s Francesco Ferrari? Snake-eyes demanded as Moreau disconnected.

“An alias, in all public dealings with wise guys. To protect my job.”

“Agent De Sario and I have to accompany Marrini to the meeting,” Moreau added. “We handle all Marrini’s overseas contracts, and Marrini relies on us for specific kinds of information. Without us, the meeting wouldn’t go anywhere.”

“—Alright.” Snake-eyes agreed. “100% unarmed. That’s our monopoly.”

“Marrini’s contingent will also include Jane Bradove for a total of four.”

“Her?—You’re nuts!”

“She’s the niece of Carlo Lefrelli. Symbolically, she represents a very powerful family on the Mafia Commission. Her presence with Marrini implies a major defection to the other side. She is also one of the couriers of the weapon. We take all our trump cards.”

Snake-eyes’ nod was barely perceptible. He looked at Stokes: “Lock Moreau with the Bradove woman until it’s time.”

Stokes marched Moreau down the corridor, opened the second door on the right, and gave him a shove inside. A little message about how tough she was.

“You have a nice day, too,” Moreau responded with a smile.

A small conference room. Shiny table, padded chairs. She whispered, “Are they monitoring us?”

Moreau silently pulled a credit card from his wallet. A small panel on the corner of the card. Moreau pushed it twice, then returned it to his wallet.

“Sophisticated jammer. Temporarily immune from aural and visual surveillance, we are.”

Moreau’s little trick perked Jane up. Moreau took her shoulders.

“You been marvelous, Dahlin. We’ll need that marvelousness just a few more hours. The performance of your life. Your audience is the real deal, dependin on you.”

“I don’t have any lines,” she shrugged.

“Don’t need any. Remember, you’re playing the Lefrelli card for Caesar Augustus, in anger over the terrible ordeal they put you through. They ask questions about your family? Just tell the truth. All you need is strength and a little attitude.”

“What if the Congressman notices the key pages missing?”

“Snake-eyes doesn’t know what he’s looking for,” Moreau dismissed. “All he’s heard about is a break-in and an advanced weapon. On the subject of the missing papers—.”

“There was a gunman with me every moment I had the case,” she said quietly. “But at the end, they put me in a cab by myself, with two cars of gunmen in front of and behind the cab. My only chance.”

Jane lifted the left side of her loose black dress up to her waist, then took Moreau’s hand with her free hand. His hand touched the papers. Wrapped around her left hip, pinned by her panties.

“The same on the right side,” Jane said. “You don’t have to feel.”

of Philadelphia's pastoral suburbs. Barely visible were dim lights from the windows of mansions set off to the sides of the winding tree-lined road.

The shadow of the Vandermere fortress crept into view behind the trees. The sedan turned right onto a narrow driveway. Its path was blocked by a huge steel gate. The second sedan stopped about twenty feet behind the first sedan and extinguished the headlights.

Moreau, alias Ferrari, stepped out of the first sedan and approached the steel monster. A telephone to the left gate. He picked it up and waited for acknowledgment from the other side.

"Mr. Marrini to see Mr. Vandermere," Ferrari announced.

Jane, who had been riding in the trailing sedan with Snake-eyes, switched to the first car carrying De Sario (Collins), Marrini and Moreau (Ferrari).

"First an ape. Now a babe?" Marrini complained.

Against the darkness, the mammoth steel plates gradually disengaged. Snake-eyes pulled his sedan several yards back out of sight. The Marrini sedan drove halfway down the driveway—until blocked by three uniformed security guards.

"Please step outside for a weapons check," one said. "Mr. Vandermere's orders. It's routine."

The four complied without protest. One guard stood back while the others frisked the three men. They shined flashlights and searched the interior of the car. Finding no contraband, they waved the guests through.

The sedan continued its trek down the paved, lit driveway, cutting through a pasture of perfectly manicured grass, the fountains, the indoor tennis courts, and the bronze statue of Venus. It finally wound around to the left, toward the brightly-burning kerosene lamps lining the front of the Vandermere stone mansion.

No one opened the car door for Jane: no chivalry; she was simply one of the negotiators. Wide-eyed at the unbridled display of wealth, Jane followed on the heels of the Marrini threesome as they scaled the marble steps. They came upon a towering door, and Collins took the honors of ringing the bell.

The door was opened by tuxedo-clad Gordon Dugan.

"Mr. Marrini?" He said to Ferrari.

Marrini grunted and offered his hand.

Dugan led the foursome into massive museum-of-a-den, with the ankle thick carpet. The proprietor suddenly came into view with his black suit 'n' tie, thick black beard and wavy black hair. Twirling his gold plated cane, Vandermere sauntered toward his guests.

"Jody Vandermere."

"Jake Marrini." They exchanged a firm handshake.

"Mr. Vandermere, I want you to meet Jane Bradove. The niece of Carlo Lefrelli," Ferrari said.

Jane offered her hand and a half-smile.

"This Mr. Lefrelli should be proud to have such a lovely niece," Vandermere said.

An awkward silence ensued, while Vandermere continued. "I don't mean to seem rude, but you gentlemen picked a most inopportune time for a business meeting. I've urgent business overseas for the next month, and I am very exhausted from an all-day stockholders meeting. Rabble-rousers and radicals buy two or three shares of stock and

disrupt our meetings. My attorney suggested I go ahead and meet with you all. Please be brief—Follow me, please.”

Vandermere directed the visitors toward the back of the house.

“Gordon, drinks for my guests.”

He set up glasses on the mahogany bar off to the right.

“What would you like?” Vandermere asked stiffly.

“Whatever you have is fine,” Ferrari answered.

“Scotch for everyone.”

“Nothing for me, thank you,” Jane said.

Dugan struck a bow each time he set a drink on the brass table.

Marrini lit a cigar and offered one to Vandermere. But Vandermere lit his own, which was longer.

Vandermere politely folded his hands together. “Alright, Mr. Marrini. How can I help? You need financing? Consultant work on issuing securities?”

Vandermere didn’t get a response.

“Do you have a business portfolio?” He pursued.

“I run a rich travel agency,” Marrini answered.

“Most of your clients are young professionals?”

“Uh, yeah.” Marrini’s eyes shifted towards Collins.

“Is your business a partnership? Privately-owned? Or have you gone public?”

“I keep to myself. What’s it to you?” Marrini retorted.

Nobody wanted to be the first to breach the sensitive subject. So Ferrari fired a mild salvo:

“The status of the boss’s travel agency is not what we’re here to discuss.”

“That’s fine. But tell me Mr. Marrini. Do you give discounts to corporate customers? What are some of the hotels you service in Paris?” Vandermere continued. Even Marrini’s cigar seemed to have atrophy.

Vandermere bit down on his cigar and spoke through his flashing teeth: “Do you have difficulty with the English language?”

Collins rescued, “You haven’t showed the boss no respect since he walked in here. You know why we’re here.”

Vandermere startled Jane out of her casual observer role by shaking his finger at her.

“What’s your entrepreneurial relationship with Mr. Marrini, young lady?”

Jane did her best to reflect a streetwise rebuke with her eyes.

“My boss is seeking autonomy for his Mid-Atlantic operation,” Ferrari ventured further. “We find it impossible to negotiate with death warrants hanging over our heads. What we need now is good faith evidence of cancellation of these hostile actions.”

Collins became acutely aware of the invisible contact lens in his right eye. Cutting-edge surveillance capable of overriding Gladys I.

“Contracts? You gentlemen are gangsters? – I’m sorry, but you’ll have to leave. I don’t do business with gangsters.”

“Very well. Then you won’t be interested in this,” Collins said, unbuttoning his coat to reveal the paper stuffed inside. It was the cover sheet of Gladys II. TOP SECRET.

“This is your business plan?” Vandermere’s eyes emitted a look approaching innocence.

“Don’t finger the merchandise until you quote a bid,” Ferrari said.

Vandermere twitched his beard while puffing away rhythmically on his cigar. “This some kind of technological breakthrough? My consultants will have to dissect the formula, check the patents, and receive assurance that this is owned by private concerns before there’s any quote.”

Three people suddenly appeared at the front. Two pistols were drawn. Dugan ran ahead to warn his boss: “FBI, sir.”

Vandermere was frozen with glaring indignation that these lawmen would dare invade his sanctum. Peabody and Stokes waved their badges like flags.

“Please sit down,” a polite Snake-eyes said to Dugan, who joined the others. Everyone put your hands on the table.”

“Do you have some kind of warrant?” Vandermere demanded.

“This isn’t about a warrant,” Snake-eyes said.

“Then you people have fifteen minutes to depart before my high-priced attorney files suit. I have violated no law, and I resent this intrusion upon my privacy.”

Snake-eyes’ sagging cheeks reflected a smug smile at Vandermere’s tirade. “You don’t recognize me? – You don’t see the levers at my disposal?”

“Identify yourself sir!” Vandermere boomed.

“Don’t these papers belong to you?” Snake-eyes tantalized. Vandermere didn’t respond. “This man, Jake Marrini, conspired to hijack a top secret weapon from your possession. And they would have succeeded if it wasn’t for me and my two agents risking our lives to stop them,” Snake-eyes dramatized. “I humbly approach you, Mr. Vandermere, to discuss compensation to me and my men for service to the Commission.”

Seething, Vandermere gritted his teeth behind his cigar.

“I must remind you that I have saved the Commission millions of dollars,” Snake-eyes said.

“It was you who set up this charade?” Vandermere asked.

“Yes. To return the weapon so we can both profit. Plus the added bonus of delivering these heretics so you can dispose of them.”

Vandermere exploded, “You bring hot merchandise to my domicile, and then drag these lowlife along with you, and you want a reward?!” He ominously rose from his chair.

“Don’t talk to him like that,” Stokes rebuked.

“Settle down, Brenda.” As a paternal gesture, Snake-eyes approached his tough woman agent and took her by shoulder.

“Show Mr. Vandermere some respect, Stokesy. He’s your boss. This man is a genius. He’s the first man in history of civilization to fuse together the investment banking community and black market operation into an untouchable axis. The most powerful alliance in the world. If we do this right, we no longer need to fear an army. We can hire our own-- I want both of you to take a good look at La Potente Caesar Augustus.”

“If you cannot tie your tongue, perhaps you might consider cutting it off.”

“Please accept my loyalty to you and the Commission.” Snake-eyes bowed.

“What is it you want, sir!” Vandermere shouted. He pounded his cane against the table; the crashing echo reverberated off the distant walls.

“I expect a fair commission for returning the merchandise. I’ve been assured that sum of 20 million dollars is but small fraction of what the Commission stands to receive. With your means, Mr. Vandermere, I’m sure a transfer into my overseas accounts will be but a routine transaction, one which can be accomplished within minutes. I’ll also give you ideas how we’ll execute these rebels who show Caesar Augustus no respect.”

“Are you insinuating that I would perpetrate an act of physical violence on my own property? You are insane!”

“Mr. Caesar Augustus, I’ve always admired your magnificent exercise of power. Killing any threats to your authority without blinking an eye. But right now you disappoint me. Do I detect weakness?”

Vandermere slammed his cane repeatedly in rage.

“Excuse me, Mr. Vandermere, Mr. Marrini has a counter-proposal,” Ferrari said calmly, breaking the steel-thick tension.

“—In the spirit of the cooperation we discussed earlier, and since these documents were brought here in our hands, Mr. Marrini suggest 15 million as a fair price. 8 million to be transferred to the three persons, and the remaining 7 million to be deposited into accounts controlled by Mr. Marrini.”

“I would like to meet privately with my associate,” Vandermere announced, beckoning Dugan toward the side. The gunbarrels of Snake-eyes’ minions followed Vandermere’s footsteps toward the near corner of the room.

Vandermere and Dugan quickly returned to the table.

“I have made my decision,” Vandermere announced through his burned-downed cigar. “I will accept Mr. Marrini’s proposal.”

Snake-eyes laughed in defiance. “You will accept my proposal, Mr. Vandermere.”

Vandermere was incredulous: “You proclaim allegiance to me, sir. Then I have given you an order. Are you disobeying it?”

“No, Mr. Vandermere. I would never disobey you,” Snake-eyes mocked, and he pulled Moreau’s pistol from the inside of his coat. He toyed with it a few seconds. He aimed it at Vandermere. “Negotiations are still in progress.”

Then he rotated the weapon toward Marrini.

BLAM! BLAM! —Marrini was blown out of his chair, and he tumbled to his death at Jane’s feet as blood spilled from his abdomen. Jane covered her mouth to cover a scream.

For the first time since that steamy afternoon in Florida, sweat dampened the palms of Caesar Augustus.

“Now that your property owns a corpse, and now that the Marrini factor has been removed from the equation, two dilemmas have been resolved at one,” Snake-eyes said.

Stokes and Peabody turned in unison when they heard scuffling sounds coming from the secluded hallway to their left. This was the prelude to an unleashing of an ear-shattering racket. Even the air itself seemed to scream at the simultaneous loud drilling noise from four machine guns. Four horizontal planes of lead ripped through Vandermere’s den as bullets tore into the mahogany and porcelain and satin. China shattered, silver scattered, and icons sprung holes. Light blue pungent smoke rose toward

the chandelier. It looked like the Beirut massacre all over again, with bodies sprawled all over Vandermere's all-wool Persian rug.

But no one was hurt; the bullets had passed over everyone's head. Ferrari was the first to crawl to his feet, and he saw four mangy men with battle fatigues and scruffy beards: Marrini's "crazed Vets."

SSF zealots, led by Agent Baez, kicked through some six-digit debris and found the pistols resting harmlessly on the rug. Ferrari retrieved the pistols and inserted them into his belt. Moreau, grinning quietly, had to savor this moment, with Snake-eyes and his two agents stiff on the rug with paralyzing fear. One could hear a pin drop as all eyes gravitated toward Moreau, for with Marrini basking in his own curdled blood, Francesco Ferrari was in charge.

Vandermere rose and reached his bulky arms skyward in submission. Forcing a steadiness of hand, he opened one of his handcrafted cabinets and took a bottle of whiskey. A rigid smile appeared from behind Vandermere's beard as he spoke:

"May I offer you gentlemen a drink?"

The words "open fire" shot out of Moreau's brain like a bullet, rested on his tongue. A floating vision of Father Thorson. Then Jesus.

He beheld his beautiful Jane Bradove, tired and shell-shocked, with her slender, bronzish arms braced against the table to forestall her collapse. In her weary eyes, Moreau could see trust. Blinking twice, he beheld the fine line which separated the good guys from the bad guys. So, with a sigh, he addressed Vandermere:

"We'll take these three intruders off your hands. Our business proposal is still on the table."

"Like I said before, I don't do business with gangsters," Vandermere answered.

Moreau, maintaining his Ferrari pose to the final second, took Jane, his agents, and the unarmed Snake-eyes contingent away from the mansion.

As they made felt their way out the gate, Moreau could perceive Snake-eyes' swagger. The politician's delusion of invincibility had returned. Perhaps he sensed that Moreau was trapped by his own rules, an abiding moral code that this piece of the world couldn't conceive. Moreau could read his thoughts: *Nobody* would dare shoot an esteemed member of Capitol Hill!

Moreau escorted Snake-eyes, et al, under machine gun cover, to their car. He dropped the keys into Snake-eyes' glove covered hand.

Firing up the engine, Snake-eyes registered a whimsical sigh, as if returning from a country club outing.

Moreau poked his head inside the vehicle," You got it all figured out, don't you?"

"Good night, Mr. Moreau. I may seeing you sooner than you think."

Moreau slammed the door shut with a vengeance, then stood idly by as the car retreated underneath the lavish branches of the willows.

Moreau felt Jane's presence. A quiet hesitancy, as if saying, being the SSF pampered doll is not much better than being the Lefrelli pampered doll.

Bearing no modesty in the near darkness, Jane raised her skirt, reached inside her underwear, and handed Moreau the heart of the Defense Department's most prized project. Moreau tightly clutched his genuine accomplishment of that day.

"I'll call when all this is resolved," Moreau said. "If you can still tolerate me."



“You kept your promise, Inspector.” Jane lightly brushed Moreau’s cheek with her fingertips. Then followed Agent Tatum. Her official escort.

Moreau was left with some charged-up SSF agents. De Sario said to him quietly, “Some of our guys didn’t want to leave the Vandermere mansion. If you know what I mean.”

“Vandermere kept himself clean right up to the end,” Moreau responded. “He did nothing illegal or said nothing incriminating that wasn’t prompted by the point of Snake-eyes’ guns. Arrest Vandermere? First they’ll be screams of entrapment. Media circus on FBI tactics. A picnic in court for Vandermere’s lawyers. Vandermere will walk; we’ll self-destruct, Tony.”

“Crosshairs on the one and only Caesar Augustus.” De Sario responded. “They weren’t thinking in terms of arrest.”

“I know. Me too. Let’s all call it a day.”

38

The next morning. SSF HQ, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C.

Paul Lezcano’s personal entourage and U.S. Marines stood in alert in the bullpen area. Lezcano sat opposite Moreau’s desk, taking Moreau in along with Jesus, Dr. King and La Guardia.

Moreau snapped open the case, spun it toward Lezcano. Everything neatly arranged.

“Tragedy averted,” Moreau said.

Lezcano raised his hand in salute. “Your heroism will have to be recognized very privately. The downside of SSF.”

“Glory ain’t my thing, Paul.”

“Where are we on Caesar Augustus?”

“Read our summary. We’ve unmasked him, but we still can’t take him down. He’s real smart.”

“All that fancy hi-tech surveillance on Vandermere didn’t pick up anything incriminating?”

“Are you kidding? That’s why he’s Caesar Augustus! But we did catch communications between his deputy Gordon Dugan and a high-ranking Army official. Nailed down Caesar Augustus’s informant in the Pentagon, we did. Arrest warrants at the right timing. We also have Michael Lonardo, the leader of Caesar Augustus’s infamous Death Angels. And Midlothian. The walls of the Empire are beginning to crumble.”

“Whatever you’re going to do, Vic, do it fast. There are dark clouds on the horizon.”

“Snake-eyes,” Moreau said to the side.

Snake-eyes presented a brief to the Attorney-General this morning accusing you and about five fellow butt-kickers with criminal conduct over the Marrini Affair. Used the term Supra Strike Force. You’ll be ordered to face a Justice Department hearing.”

“Snake-eyes will bring a murder rap on himself just to get me?”

“Don’t be naïve, Victor. There will be no murder rap for the Congressman.”

“What about the scene at Vandermere’s? Ain’t you believing it?”

“Of course I do. But he’s got some chits to call in, and so-called witnesses will place him in McLean, Virginia or some place yesterday. Merchant politicians pass laws for them to wallow in, and everyone else to obey. You jerked around the wrong guy. Out of your league.”

“What does Snake-eyes have on me?”

“So far, photos and fingerprints of your agents with Marrini. He has a letter written by your informant, Joe Rennie, warning about SSF abuses. He will call your girl Jane in for two reasons. One, to verify the Rennie letter. And two, to intimidate Jane so she doesn’t breath a word against the Congressman. Shakedown though the legal system. Painting a picture of her Mob family connections, conspiring with Marrini to frame a Congressman to hide the fact that you, her boyfriend, murdered Jason Marrini at the Vandermere estate to destroy the one person who could incriminate you.”

“Shake down Jane Bradove?” Moreau was amused.

Lezcano wasn’t. “I haven’t figured out how to counter Snake-eyes yet. He’s got big, filthy guns ready to sing for him.”

“Not to worry, Paul. Just remember that last night, when Marrini was killed, the White Sox won.”

## SCENE 39

SSF detention facility, New Jersey.

Moreau sat in a conference room, reviewing key questions, evidence. Tom Hull knocked and came in.

“What’s this hot tip, Tom?” Hull stiffly shoved him a photograph. A cute college-aged girl, straight black hair. Nice smile and sorority pin. “Who’s the girl?”

“Audra Lonardo. She just graduated from Dartmouth.”

“That’s nice.” Moreau’s eyes hardened at the idea of Hull bringing this up.

“Our super super suspect just adores her. It may be good strategy for us to take her.”

“Take her? Take her where, Tom? On what grounds?”

“On the grounds that her father and friends are a menace to fine Americans.”

“Who does she remind you of, Tom? Dawn Larrow maybe?”

“Respectfully, sir, sometimes you have to fight dirty with this kind of evil. We won’t hurt or threaten her. Just keep her iced in an SSF safe house until Lonardo rolls over for us.”

“Speaking of daughters, how’s yours, Tom?”

“On the edge a little. My lawyer is still monitoring her mother’s immoral influences on her.”

“I think you need to spend more time with her. I’m going to reassign you back home, to Fresno.”

“When? What about—”

“SSF has a critical need to know demographic profiles on narcotics users, based on race, income, geography, religious background. I’m counting on you to get this done for me. A big office, nice view. Your precious daughter a mile away.”

After Hull left, Moreau dialed Father Thorson on the laser phone.

“Father, I’m about to go one on one with Caesar Augustus’s most vicious lieutenant. He brought his sleaze into my very heart and soul. I’m feeling hate. Just one smart-aleck answer to a question, and I’m capable of tearing that animal into a hundred pieces. God forgive me, restrain me.”

“It’s very good you recognize that, Inspector.”

“Sometimes I feel like this SSF I started is barely controllable. And if I can’t control it, maybe it’s time I bury it.”

“When you pray, do you expect God to hang a big sign from the clouds? He works through people. Keep eyes wide open for circumstances and subtle messages. On Lonardo, why not let one of your Assistants handle the questioning?”

“Cause I’m checking my own friggin parameters. If I fail this test, it gives me clear direction for SSF. Or lack thereof.”

“Accountability?”

“Sid Jackson is going in with me. I’ve given him an order to use his weapon if necessary. On Lonardo. On me.”

The glass encased holding cell had a rectangular table. Lonardo and a bearded lawyer sat on one side. Everyone knew Lonardo’s reputation; there were two SSF agents with automatic weapons right outside the door. Moreau entered, sat across the table. Jackson took a corner chair.

Lonardo, with his hulk, Neanderthal face and lifeless eyes, looked even more fearsome in the prison jump suit.

“What do you want?” He asked Moreau.

“Michael, don’t say anything---”

“Shut your face!” Lonardo yelled at the lawyer. “You ain’t in my shoes. You’re getting in my space. Sit over there.”

Lonardo blasted Moreau with his eyes. “I’ve learned one lesson in this life. It’s all about power. The best men in the world find that power, never let go, never blink, and never relinquish it. When I joined with Caesar Augustus, he reminded me of the first Caesar Augustus. Two generations of unchallenged dominance, and the art of stability and discipline. I thought Caesar Augustus’s reign would outlast my life. I was wrong. Your power center was greater. Congratulations.”

“On the subject of power, Mr. Lonardo.” Moreau took papers out of a briefcase. Handed them to his lawyer, three chairs away.

“Two of your colleagues just rolled over. Executions? Betraying your country? The Bible says Adam lived hundreds of years. Even if you were Adam, you wouldn’t get out of jail alive. Assuming you don’t get capital.”

“I’ve already given your power center a gesture of respect: The Hudak family. Alive.”

“You like us now, Lonardo, because we got the bigger stick? King of the mountain, maybe?”

“I got just one condition.”

“Condition? The power’s on this side of the table, you think?”

“I got something you want! Or you wouldn’t be here!” He yelled. Moreau nodded. “Just one request. My daughter Audra. My flesh and blood. I want her financially secure, and given a new life, not bothered by the old business. Assure me that, Mr. FBI, and you can drain my brain and throw my life away like a rag.”

Moreau excused himself and returned two hours later.

“The American taxpayers will not pay for your daughter as a consequence of your crimes. The government is entitled to all the millions of your criminally-gotten gains, to distribute to victims. We will allow a percentage of your confiscated booty to be used for a safe and secure life for Audra, an innocent party.” Moreau handed him a document. “Signature of two government officials, promising the new life to Audra. Our responsibility to her begins as soon as we verify your statements. One lie, and the deal is off. Payment from you to us begins this minute.”

Lonardo signed in the presence of his seething attorney. Then Moreau took out a photograph.

“That’s Jody Vandermere,” Lonardo said instantly.

“I want everything you know on Vandermere.”

Lonardo described the super-secret Black Queen Pact of the New York Commission, more than two years earlier.

FBI turnouts were everywhere, so the Dons of the five families- Lefrelli, Cardenale, Gambone, Columbo and Giovanni—decided they had to do something extreme to keep their own top Capos in line. Cardenale came up with an idea: kidnap male teenage prostitutes and force the Capos of each family to murder these boys on camera. Then they could never turn state evidence.

The Commission put it to a vote. It was 3 to 2 in favor, with Lefrelli and Giovanni voting no. Lefrelli finally agreed in protest, but Giovanni absolutely refused.

The pact was carried out, anyway, involving all of the top Capos. 17 Capos participated in the murder on film, while two refused, and were murdered themselves.

The Commission had to decide who would safeguard the murders on film, deemed “life insurance.” The Dons decided it would be the three “Super-Consiglieres” who worked directly for the Commission as a whole. They were: Tony Minghetti, who handled the day to day legal issues for the Commission; Babe Lonardo, who carried out high-level hits for the Commission, including the resistant Capos; and Jody Vandermere, who handled sensitive special projects, and, in keeping a low profile in the underworld, served as the Commission’s link to legitimate Big Business.

As a practical matter, Lonardo yielded control of the tapes to Minghetti and Vandermere. But Minghetti and Vandermere didn’t get along.

Minghetti couldn’t stand Vandermere. His high-brow, snobbish attitude. His refusal to hang out with the regular group on gaming activities. And also, Vandermere’s insistence on involving his four creepy, yuppie law partners in Mob business. The presence of Vandermere, this half-breed Ivy Leaguer at such a sensitive Family affair was the last straw. Minghetti vowed to kill Vandermere. But it would have looked like an accident. Minghetti jostled Vandermere around. Minghetti reported gleefully to Lonardo that “Vandermere’s got no guts; he didn’t fight back.”

Moreau’s fierce eyes constantly studied Lonardo’s expression. It was horrible enough to be true.

“I haven’t seen Vandermere since the Pact.” Lonardo said, concluding his discourse. “I hear he’s broken all ties with the Families and is tending to his own business. I think Tony Minghetti scared him to death. Vandermere’s got heart problems. I’m surprised he’s not dead from fright.”

“What if I told you that the Bureau found Tony Minghetti’s body in Staten Island junkyard?”

Lonardo’s granite face soured. “I ain’t heard that.”

“Feds keep secrets, too,” Moreau smiled. “You never wondered why Minghetti hasn’t contacted you in two years?”

“I always assumed he was part of the secret order and couldn’t talk no more.”

“Who is La Potente Caesar Augustus?” Moreau challenged.

“I was always contacted anonymously. They spoke to me in a code language which left no doubt who they represented. They told me to put together a team of enforcers.”

“The death angels.”

“Whatever. It’s obvious that Caesar Augustus is just a code name for Lefrelli and the Dons calling the shots. They moved to Italy or somewhere, because they ain’t been around for two years.”

“Don’t you consider it ludicrous that Lefrelli would order you to terrorize his own niece?”

“If you’re family and you party with the enemy, you get whacked around.”

“Use your brain, Lonardo. Minghetti is dead, and you don’t have the Black Queen tapes. Even a friggin Italian Don asked you about him!”

“You mean Vandermere? You’re nuts. Vandermere don’t got the balls or the respect to be Caesar Augustus. Ain’t you been listening?”

Moreau could only shake his head. So even Lonardo was on the wrong end of the missing link. Some Vandermere.

Moreau picked up on one of Lonardo’s statements. “These law associates of Vandermere. The ones Minghetti hated. Was one of them named Gordon Dugan?”

“Yeah.”

Moreau, containing his excitement, sternly leaned forward. “By tomorrow night I want all names and activities of Dugan’s associates. And I want all the death angels.”

“Alright, yeah.”

40

The day after Lonardo had turned, Midlothian was escorted into the same room and was thrust into the same chair still warm from Lonardo’s corpulent buttocks.

They let Midlothian wear a dark brown vested suit and carried his Wall Street Journal under his arm. Moreau entered and took his seat at the opposite end of the table. Gone from Moreau’s face was his scowl. This was different.

“My colleagues tell me you’re bent on suicide. Ready to lay down your life for a real demento.”

“Hey, man, what makes you think I’ll tell you anything different than I told your friends?”

“The tickets to Nairobi are real. You don’t trust us?”

“Should I?”

“Have you been assaulted, threatened, or maltreated by any Federal officer?”

“I can’t exactly choose my quarters.-Or restaurants.”

Moreau said honestly, “If you knew the fate of some of your peers who ran afoul of us, you’d consider yourself very lucky.”

“Right.”

“I’ve heard some good reports about you. Saved a couple guys’ lives, sold off your end of narcotics operation, risked your life preventing state secrets from falling into the hands of foreign adversaries. You’ve come a long way and I respect that. You’re coming home, and now you’re going to throw it all away.—You cut your throat with your silence.”

Midlothian brushed his suit with the Journal. “My silence seems to be your problem.”

“I know your feelings about Caesar Augustus. If just the two of us in this room, you and me, decide to do him in, then it’s done. It’s that simple.”

Midlothian calmly folded his hands and crossed his legs properly:

“Let me reiterate my position for the millionth time. I’ve never heard of anyone named Vandermere; I had nothing to do with any stolen weapon. But, if you will be so kind as to deposit me anonymously in Kenya, I’ll check into it for you. – And you may be happy with my investigation.”

“Justice—what is justice?” Moreau dramatized waving his arms. “Justice is defined by the system in power. Is that form of justice just? So let’s dispense with the system’s justice, for argument. You define justice. In the real world, Cornelius Midlothian dies slow from electrical current and Vandermere walks away scot-free, laughing and plundering. Is that Cornelius Midlothian’s idea of justice?”

Midlothian’s cool demeanor was growing more fragile. But he shook his head. “You don’t want a horrible Pandora’s Box opened, do you.”

Moreau wasn’t sure whether or not the Herodian ritual had touched Midlothian. But the lurch in Midlothian’s body gave him his answer. He leaned over the table until he was almost nose to nose with the Black man:

“Tell me, Midlothian. Did you stick it straight in, or did you twist it?”

Suddenly the composed entrepreneur was cold turkey. The Wall Street Journal fell to the floor. The vision of the teenage boy flashed through his mind, and he cringed to the brink of tears.

“I sympathize with your dilemma—your life or his, right?” Moreau rested back in his chair and patiently watched Midlothian restore his psyche. “Tell me about your plans in Africa.”

Midlothian was overcome with a sudden placidity. Without knowing it, he revealed a trace of smile.

“I’ll be joining my fiancée. She went down there to get away from my bad habits, you know. I’m not worried. We’ll be married within a week of my arrival. Bliss with

charity work and music. Maybe I did miss an opportunity. Some people need a good whack in the head to wake up. But that doesn't solve our problem, does it?"

"We don't have a problem," Moreau said. "What if I tell you that if your film falls into my hands, I'll burn it?"

"Not good enough."

"Fine. What if I tell you that you could do a number on Vandermere without signing any affidavits, without pointing a finger, without seeing a courtroom? What if I told you we can arrange a time lapse whereby no misfortunes would beset Vandermere until you're well on your way to Africa?"

"And which archangel do I have to bribe to pull all that off?"

"I'll let you think it over for a while before I solve the riddle."

Midlothian stared straight ahead, a pensive gaze of fascination. His eyes widened as Moreau's words gradually took conceptual form: This FBI guy couldn't be serious. The audacity of such a scheme combined with the anticipatory thrill of putting Caesar Augustus permanently out of action prompted Midlothian to sound a few quiet laughs.

"How can I be sure I can trust you?" Midlothian asked.

"That's easy," Moreau responded, flipping a pen. "If we didn't like you, someone would have killed you by now."

41

On the thirty-seventh story of a midtown Manhattan highrise stood the Suite, the nerve center of a multinational holding company named Tyrene Paramutual Trust Corporation. A mid morning meeting of the Board of Directors was scheduled, and at staggering intervals, the tall mahogany door swung open for men positioned ten positive standard deviations from the mean of world power. These barons seemed like clones with their dark pin-striped suits and advancing years which had earned them either a receding hairline or a gray mane. And they took seats in identical maroon chairs, the backs of which towered over everyone's head.

The conference table had been so exquisitely waxed and shined that each man could look down and see the deep lines in his forehead. Along the west wall was a double-plated, bullet proof window, and one could look outside and behold the stone and steel jungle impinging upon the grimy, soot-filled skyline of North Jersey. The florescent lights built into the marble wall reflected upon the massive gold leaf symbolizing Tyrene's hegemony over the developing world.

Everyone was present except for the Chairman, who always savored his appearance for last. Finally an Iranian hireling opened the door for Joseph W. Vandermere III, his gold-plated cane swinging like clockwork pendulum. The black-clad Vandermere squinted from the glare of the eastern sun against the brilliant, silver-line Citicorp Center glowing in the gotham jungle. Vandermere took his place at the head of the table. Striking a bow, the underling poured coffee for the Chairman, then departed.

The senior most member of the Board handed Vandermere a stack of printouts representing financial statements. Vandermere impatiently scanned the sheets and then addressed his underling:

“Any change regarding our client nations?”

No. Romania and Poland still approaching default,” the elderly man said. “I met with some of our investment subsidiaries and there was some concern expressed because of certain forces contrary to ours lobbying for foreclosure.”

Vandermere waved him off. “A refinancing package is already together, gentlemen. I’ve reviewed it and it’s acceptable. You’ll all receive a summary on Friday. Capitol Hill will be no problem.”

Cornelius Midlothian and Tony De Sario, alias Collins, stole quietly into the ornate lounge bordering Vandermere’s private office suite. The two uninvited guests, dressed to kill in their shiny suits, waded through the thick carpet, seated themselves in the light red cushioned chairs and waited, among the overhead Swiss Clocks, Ciceronian paneling and opus of Mozart, for the arrival of Caesar Augustus. Midlothian pulled back his coat sleeves to reveal solid gold cufflinks and then reached inside his coat pocket for his gold chain watch to check the time.

Thirty-three minutes later, the outside door opened. Vandermere stepped inside and his vivid green eyes rested heavily upon the two intruders. Yet he spoke not a word.

After seeing his colleagues out, he proceeded directly into his private office.

Collins and Midlothian barged right in, ignoring the protesting secretary.

“Are you gentlemen lost?” Vandermere asked, but received no response. Then he turned to his secretary, “I’ve a busy day ahead of me. Do they have scheduled appointments?” The secretary shook her head, flushing of embarrassment. Vandermere dismissed her with a wave of his hand. “—You have exactly five minutes to leave before I call security.”

“The spirit of Jake Marrini sends its best regards, Mr. Vandermere,” Collins said. “His enterprise is alive and quite well.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

Caesar Augustus raised his cane and pinned the tip of it against the Black man’s chest.

“Stay where you are, sir.”

Midlothian struck a little bow and said, “No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize; revenge should have no bounds.”

“That’s from King Lear, is it not?”

Midlothian smiled, “Hamlet, my man.” Vandermere bristled at being outdone on Shakespearian quotes.

“I didn’t know they taught such things at Howard,” Vandermere said tersely.

Midlothian smiled again, “I’ve never been to Howard. But I’m sure they do.”

“Are you the spokesman here?”

“I spoke to our partner,” Midlothian said. “Not pleased. Ever hear curse words in Mandarin? They’re still waiting for the train to get back on the track.”

Collins added, “We respect your organization, and want a partnership. Not a fight. With anybody. Peace and security is every man’s dream.”

“I’m sorry gentlemen. But I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Vandermere stroked his beard and addressed Midlothian directly:



“Do you have any other business dealing with which my investment company can relate?”

Midlothian handed him a fancy card.

“Fine. You may be hearing from me. I have consistently provided opportunities to minority owned business,” Vandermere said. “Good day, gentlemen.”

Within 24 hours they received bank account numbers for electronic transfers. None under the name of Joseph W. Vandermere III.

42

A call from Midlothian to the Partner Nation’s representative reestablished the transaction, as originally planed. The reason given for the interruption: sudden illness of courier Kevin Himmel. He was being replaced by Francesco Ferrari.

Moreau, alias Ferrari, touched the streets of Berlin, and felt uneasy. Berlin was a serpentine fire of spies and terrorist cliques. Third World outlaws and rising superpowers lusting for instruments of destruction. His contact, Wollschlaeger, was a Chinese mole in a German multinational.

At 10:00 PM, Ferrari sat for the rendezvous in a gasthaus in the Schluterstrasse district. The tavern was packed with frisky, informal young people enjoying German-style jazz. Beer flowed like water, and along the walls were tributes to the Green movement. He searched through the smoke and clamor and finally picked out a distinguished, academic-looking man dressed in dark wool and supporting shaggy gray hair. He wore specks far down the bridge of his nose.

After making eye contact with Ferrari, Wollschlaeger turned and walked outside without a wave or gesture of any kind. Ferrari followed him out and into awaiting Mercedes. They exchanged introductions. Wollschlaeger took a flashlight from underneath the driver’s seat and shined it into the face of Ferrari comparing it with the photo provided by Midlothian.

Wollschlaeger led Ferrari inside one of the dark flats. It was a grimy place and the floorboards creaked. He switched on a dim, dusty light.

This Agent was taking no chances. He wasn’t satisfied until he placed an around-the-world call to Midlothian, forced Ferrari to talk to him, and asked for verification of Ferrari’s voice. With a nod, Wollschlaeger disconnected. It was time for business.

“Well, Mr. Ferrari, has your boss come to terms with his ticklish problem?” The German asked, in obvious reference to the delay.

“People have gotten killed for asking questions like that.”

“Yes, I see,” the German waved with a chuckle.

“My boss has already solved his problems,” Ferrari said. “Your organization and my organization both understand the need for occasional force to insure our survival.”

“There is an important difference,” the German said sharply. “I do not work for a warlord. On those rare occasions that a Marxist uses force, it is exercised with extreme reluctance, and only with consent and support of the people.”

“A major distinction,” Ferrari said with understated sarcasm.

“There will have to be a simultaneous exchange,” the German said. “How else do we assure that one party or the other does not take their prize and run?”

“This transaction involves the discreet transfer of large amounts of money to different bank accounts, so you know that there’s no such thing as a simultaneous exchange,” Ferrari said.

“Of course. I was just testing you.”

“My instructions are that we are to follow the terms set forth in the original agreement,” Ferrari said. “Number one, we are to verify that we own the weapon. You’ve received prior confirmations. Then you begin moving your assets into our accounts. My colleagues will be monitoring these accounts, and when 20% of the billion dollar price has passed into our hands, then I will get on the phone and instruct my contact to deliver the weapon. You transfer the remaining balance of 800 million.”

Ferrari opened up his briefcase and handed Wollschlaeger a revised listing of bank account numbers, and an enlarged photograph of the capsule bomb.

“Well, I guess that about does it,” Ferrari said.

“We are not finished, Mr. Ferrari. There is another condition attached to the agreement. Your own Mr. Midlothian suggested it.”

“What’s that?” Ferrari feigned ignorance.

“It’s what you Yankees call insurance. Each party is to identify a high-level person who is responsible for enforcing the agreement. The name and key information about this official was supposed to be stored on microtape and made available to the other party. If you fail to deliver the weapon, or we fail to forward the balance after the hardware is received, then either party knows where to go for redress. In other words, our payments do not begin until you have identified your leader and we verify that he exists. In today’s world of technology, such verification will take long.—Mr. Ferrari, if you are here without the microtape, then you have wasted a trip to Berlin.”

Ferrari smiled dryly. “I know, I was just testing you.” And he reached into the briefcase and handed the German a tiny roll of film. The German reciprocated by handing Ferrari the microtape on his client.

“One more thing,” Ferrari added. “My boss has a favor to ask. Actually, a matter of courtesy. The source of my boss’ power is his anonymity. Very few people know his true name. After this is over, that’s no problem, because the boss intends to change his identity, change his appearance, and retire with his fortune in some beautiful part of the world. Would it be too much to ask you not to discuss my boss’ name with anyone? You know, a little discretion.”

“That’s agreeable. Who would I tell, and for what purpose?”

“Good. Mr. Vandermere will be forever grateful. And you’ve no need to worry. Mr. Vandermere has never cheated a client.”

Everybody shook hands to officially consummate the business deal.

Several hours later, Ferrari and Wollschlaeger informed each other that there was no problem with the information on the microtape. So the money began flowing from East to West, and when the 20% threshold was passed, a Chinese agent proceeded to the drop point for the weapon. And received a five year old copy of the Congressional Record.

43

Joe Rennie and Jane Bradove occupied a brass table of an outdoor coffee shop, the canopy extending ten feet to the busy Philadelphia street.

Jane handed Rennie the final of the three stage tickets. Striking green, matching Jane's dress and eyes.

"Shakespeare! Never seen one of his plays," Rennie said.

"Renaissance art at its most exquisite," Jane said with enthusiasm. "Only three hours from now. Right there." Pointing to the new Shakespeare Theatre within eyesight. "I'll look for you in the audience."

The late afternoon summer day was dark. A loud thunderclap, followed by sheets of rain driven by a gusty wind. They felt the air temperature drop. Jane couldn't keep the thick flowing hair out of her eyes. So she pinned it behind her head. Thick furry tail.

"That sums up our lives the past few weeks," Rennie said. Indicating the weather.

"As we can see, the storm is still raging." Jane said, giving Rennie a little rebuking smile. "You don't believe it happened? I was there. The most cold-blooded thing I've ever seen."

"Graduating from children's books to suspense drama, Jane?"

"No, really, Joe. They're forcing you and I to testify at that Congressman's hearing. Murdering politician. You need to know what happened."

"All because of my letter. I'm sorry."

Jane waived him off. "I should buy you another nice gift."

Rennie sounded open laughter. To accompany shoulder length shaggy hairs, jeans and T-shirt. A man seemingly without a care. Infectious, too, as Jane also laughed at nothing in particular.

"Shakespeare would love the irony. Here I am, trashing Vic Moreau and his SSF. And all along, you're dating him. You never said a mean word to me, Jane. Never sent that pit bull of yours after me." Rennie laughed again. "What's the verse in the Bible? Turned him over to the torturers until they paid the last penny?"

"Vic is not like that, silly." Jane struck a little pose. "That thou didst know how many fathom deep I am in love." Stealing a line from the play.

"One day I'll be calling you First Lady?"

"In a sense, I'm already married to him. Agent A and Agent B." She said, pointing down the street. "Ying and yang."

"Thanks again for calling me about Congressman Whitmer's hearing. It's nice to know when a private letter is being used with illicit public interest.

"You didn't have to testify," Jane observed. "They can't force you to come up from Mexico, can they?"

"I was due in the States, anyway. The FBI scheduled a private awards ceremony for me, for helping them foil the terrorists. A little blessing from God. And I got your back, sweetie."

"Thank you, thank you. I've no idea what I am going to say at the Congressman's hearing."

"Pray."

“Yes, pray. Lift to the Lord my recent encounters with extra-terrestrials.”

“Who?”

“The Congressman called me in for a so-called pre-conference, with his lawyer. He wants me to lie, and say that I was visiting him in Washington the night Mr. Marrini was killed. He says he already has proof that he was in Washington that night. He says if I don’t play along, he’ll destroy my acting career, and create other problems with the government.”

“You think he can do that?”

“I don’t know. But then I get a second strange visitor, an FBI agent named Hull.”

“Does he know Vic?”

“I think so, but he was real secretive, like he didn’t want Vic to know. He offered me witness protection in Europe. He told me some terrible things Mr. Vandermere did as Caesar Augustus—brutal killings of children. He said I am in serious danger. He made me feel uncomfortable, like I was some kind of threat. But the monetary offer was substantial.”

“That’s what you want? Run?”

“No,” Jane said emphatically.

Rennie laughed. “We both know it takes a thousand dollars to buy off Jane Bradove.”

“No, ten thousand,” Jane laughed back. Harkening to that silly scene at Naylor’s.

The Shakespearean play was “As You Like It.” The playhouse was packed. Right before curtain rising, an usher escorted Joseph W. Vandermere, a prime sponsor of the Shakespearean Society, to the front row. An orchestrated entrance, like an audience cameo.

Jane was determined to turn in a rousing performance. Even as a fill-in. Tonight was the Grand Finale. Using breath-catching moments she would try to pick out Rennie in the audience. No dice.

Come curtain time, the audience showed their appreciation with vigorous applause. She beamed with gratitude as she took several bows.

Suddenly, her vivid green eyes fixated on one individual in the audience. Front row. Her lips mumbled the words, “that man.” For a few seconds she was distracted. When the curtain fell for the last time, she literally ran to her dressing room.

A half hour later, the last patron was driving out of the indoor parking lot next to the theatre. Jody Vandermere stood next to his gold Rolls, conversing cordially with the Producer. Two burly men accompanied them. Finally, Vandermere took a checkbook out of his pocket, and wrote the producer a check of substantial value. They shook hands, and the producer departed.

Vandermere’s toughs climbed inside the Rolls. Vandermere opened the back door, but hesitated when alerted to a female pedestrian approaching.

Jane Bradove stopped right in front of the Rolls. Headlights highlighting her striking beauty. A tan raincoat covered her from shoulder to knees. Silent, she stared at Vandermere impassively.

“Maybe she wants a check, too, boss,” came a laughing comment from inside the car.

Tires screeched loudly from a lower level of the parking garage.

Jane offered a weak smile and a stage bow. That drew a smile from behind Vandermere's beard and the baron applauded loudly. "—Bravo! —Bravo my lady!"

As if captured by a microcosm of time, Vandermere froze completely at the sight of the pistol in Jane Bradove's hand, and before he could blink his eye, her arms were extended into a deadly aim at the bridge of his nose.

—Hell hath no fury! —those words gripped his every fiber, and in a second which seemed an eternity, his mind screamed at the highest pitch possible that it was not possible for a master of power to be conquered by such an innocent, harmless being. Vandermere's ego felt the first mortal blow. Then every muscle tensed from winking at death. His body could not handle the shock of it all. First came the spasms gripping his chest, then the excruciating pain hitting him like a bolt of lightning.

Jane finally squeezed the trigger, and the red dye shot out of the prop, splattering Vandermere's closed eyes, his forehead, and tainting his trimmed beard.

"The blood of your innocent victims!"

Somewhere deep inside Vandermere was a sigh of relief, but his body wasn't getting the message. He stumbled back against the Rolls moaning and gasping, as the pain paralyzed his left arm and clamped a vice hold on his chest and neck and numbed his jaw. He desperately reached inside his coat pocket for the nitro bills, but he dropped the container.

Jane, the practitioner of creative assertive nonviolence, was aghast at Vandermere's convulsions. Her human instincts were taking command, and the sight of this man in abject agony drew her toward him with sympathy and regret.

Tires screeched again, this time from a sedan, diplomatic plates, stopping beside the Rolls. Two dark ninja-like figures jumped out. The pumping of the automatic pistols was silent; however, the windows of the Rolls shattered.

One of the Ninja guys aimed a weapon at Jane. Agent Louis Tatum leaped out from behind a pillar and —BLAM— dropped the gunman.

Tatum aimed at the second gunman. Then hesitated as the gunman dragged a moaning Jody Vandermere into the diplomatic sedan. It screeched away in rapid retreat.

Minutes later, the diplomatic sedan was parked near an isolated pier. The two men inside exchanged words in Mandarin.

Vandermere was still moaning, gasping. One bullet from a silencer took care of that. Like a breath. They fastened 20 pound weights to his ankles.

Caesar Augustus again became invisible. This time at the bottom of the Delaware River.

The report by Special Agent Tatum prompted the serving of arrest warrants on Gordon Dugan, his immediate associates, and all of Lonardo's Death Angels.

Low murmuring inside a parallel conference room. Vic Moreau and five SSF agents were assembled behind a long table. Snake-eyes and his attorney sat at a small table.

The door was opened by an armed female guard. In walked two career lawyers, middle aged, one Asian, one Hispanic. Both in gray suits--an air of judges, without robes. They sat at a raised dais with a raised desk in front, with pads of paper and feathered pens. Hovering behind them were portraits of the President and the Attorney-General.

The gold plaques of the DOJ Officials had already been prepared: Martin Kim and Gloria Mendez.

"This is a closed hearing, convened to discuss misconduct charges against six Department of Justice employees; FBI agents on special detail to the Director of National Intelligence," Mendez said in a clear alto voice. "This is not a trial. We will present our report to the Attorney-General, with recommendations which could run the gamut from criminal prosecution to administrative sanctions to findings of innocence. The accusations are being brought by the Honorable Congressman Angus Whitmer from Illinois."

"I'll read the names of the accused," Kim said enunciatively. "Please raise your hand when your name is called. Inspector Victor Moreau. Inspector Sidney Jackson. Inspector Thomas Hull. Inspector Anthony De Sario. Inspector Mario Baez. Inspector Michael Natale."

Snake-eyes said, "For the record, respectfully, this is a widening scandal. Other agents are involved. Also, I am not bound by the findings of this hearing, as I represent a different Branch of government. I carry certain immunities."

"Noted for the record," Mendez said. "The Congressman has already provided photographs, fingerprints and other evidence. Categorized Exhibit A, B and C. Could you summarize your accusations, sir?"

"Inspector Moreau and his rogue array of agents are guilty of interstate racketeering. Partnering with organized crime chieftain Jason Marrini. A major black marketer, including heroin. They operate their own private army, a death squad, outside the law and DOJ authorization. Their terror squad has a name: Supra Strike Force."

Kim said, "Your photographs and fingerprints establish a clear association between these agents and Mr. Marrini. Do you have corroborative evidence? Bank accounts, financial records, showing personal financial gain for these agents from these activities?"

"Well, no." Snake-eyes was annoyed.

"Response from the other side?"

A young red-haired lawyer sitting with agents rose. "Bobby McDermott, counselor for defense. A little knowledge can be truly dangerous. That's what Mr. Whitmer has. This was a major sting operation on the Marrini syndicate. We have proof. Copies of transactions with heroin operators. Followed by incarceration records of those operators, and confiscated heroin, worth hundreds of millions of dollars."

Counselor McDermott handed a stack of papers to the Hearing Officers. They silently read through it.

De Sario said out loud, "Tell us, Congressman. Why don't you bring Jason Marrini here to verify your allegations?"

“Tony!” The lawyer McDermott rebuked.

A few minutes later, Mendez looked hard at Snake-eyes. “This seems to be a classic FBI undercover operation. And a very successful one, I may add.”

Snake-eyes furrowed his eyes in anger. “Did you read the statement from Agent Stephen Lyle?”

“Yes, Exhibit B,” Mendez said. “His statement makes no mention of the Marrini affair, or the so-called Supra Strike Force. He accuses Inspector Moreau of abusing his authority. Forced reassignment. Separated from his family. 24 hours notice?”

“That shows the extent of Moreau’s unbridled power,” Snake-eyes said. “Totally out of control.”

“If you please,” McDermott responded, “Agent Lyle was forcibly reassigned to Alaska for a reason. He had abused the Constitutional rights of an innocent, a U.S. citizen.” McDermott handed the hearing officers more papers. “The file describing an incident involving a schoolteacher named Shirley Martinez.”

The Officers ardently perused the papers.

“Why isn’t Lyle here with you, Mr. Whitmer?” Kim asked. “So the agents can confront their accuser?”

“Lyle resigned from the FBI and declined to attend today. Obviously fearing reprisals.”

“If I have any criticism of Mr. Moreau,” Mendez said, looking at no one in particular, “it’s that this agent Lyle did not receive more formal discipline.”

“It seems there has been two serves,” Tom Hull blurted out, “and two returns.”

“Enough, Tom,” Moreau said to his agent.

“This hearing is not close to being over,” Snake-eyes said ominously. “I have two eyewitnesses.”

“Joe Rennie?” Mendez said. “His letter, Exhibit C, is the first, last and only reference to this so-called Supra Strike Force. It has raised my curiosity. Mr. Moreau, have you ever heard of the Supra Strike Force?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Mendez waited for more words. Receiving none, she added, “Can you tell us about it?”

“You mentioned it, Congressman Whitmer mentioned it. Y’all talkin about it. The term seems to be in vogue.”

The agents couldn’t contain quiet laughs. Mendez flashed skeptical eyes. At everyone in the room.

“Bring the witnesses in,” Kim said.

Jane Bradove came in, wearing a gold knee-length dress and gold hopped earrings. Rennie wore a suede jacket and bluejeans. They sat at a small table between Snake-eyes and the agents.

“Go ahead, Congressman. They’re your witnesses,” Kim said.

Snake-eyes pulled his chair next to Jane. “Go ahead and state name and address for the record. You feel alright, honey?”

Jane nodded. “Name: Jane Bradove. Address: Somewhere in Philadelphia.”

“This letter from Joe Rennie to you. When did you receive it?”

“It’s been a couple of weeks.”

“Good. Do you have reason to believe that Joe Rennie wrote that letter?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“Good. And I’m sure Mr. Rennie will discuss his concerns with the Supra Strike Force. Now, an important question, Jane: You gave me that letter, right?”

Jane hesitated. “Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“You took it from me,” Jane said quietly.

“Took it? Of course.” Snake-eyes reached hurriedly into his bag. “I still have the original copy of the Rennie letter. This was originally your letter, but now I have it. So common sense says you had to transmit that to me. Is that right?”

Jane didn’t answer. Moreau saw her lightly stroking the Crucifix of St. Francis.

“You had grave concerns about the Supra Strike Force, didn’t you, Jane?” Snake-eyes pursued.

“I don’t know. I know Vic, but he doesn’t like to discuss his job.”

“Alright, fine. Will you enlighten everyone, Mr. Rennie, about this Supra Strike Force?” He was standing, pontificating.

Rennie shrugged. “Yeah, a real scary concept I shared with Jane. I heard about it from somewhere.”

“Somewhere?” Snake-eyes asked sourly.

“Well, I’m a writer. I get ideas.”

“The Supra Strike Force is a whim and fancy of yours, Mr. Rennie?” asked Mendez.

“Maybe it exists, maybe it doesn’t. I’ve never seen it in action. But I did hear the term from someone. Honest.”

“Mr. Whitmer,” Mendez said. “Have you any hard evidence?”

Snake-eyes pounded his fist hard on the table. “Moment of truth, Ms. Bradove. Please describe a meeting you had with me in McLean, Virginia on May 9, when you gave me the Rennie letter, and shared your concern about Moreau’s dealings with the Marrini syndicate and the Supra Strike Force.”

“No,” she shook her head.

“No? I have five signed statements pointing to a meeting in Virginia. Two of those statements said you were there with me. Are you going to lie to the U.S. government?”

“No,” she said more firmly. Her right hand trembled slightly. Until it again clutched the St. Francis Crucifix. “I saw you kill him.”

The two hearing officers whispered to each other. Then Kim said, “Ms. Bradove, can you repeat what you just said?”

She looked at the dais. “I saw Mr. Whitmer shoot Jason Marrini. In Philadelphia, not Virginia.”

Snake-eyes’ polished lawyer leaped to his feet. “We have just heard this witness make an outrageously slanderous remark against a respected member of Congress of the United States. I demand that you summon a Federal officer, put her in handcuffs, and file charges of perjury.”

“Order!” Mendez called. “Does one of you have something to say?” She noticed the agents nodding and pointing to Jane. “Mr. Moreau?”

“Some of us will verify Jane Bradove’s statement.”



“And just why are there no statements on the record to that effect?” Mendez demanded, visibly angry. “You consider that an afterthought to this hearing?”

“Statements have been submitted,” Moreau said, “Corroborating Ms. Bradove.”

Mendez made a show of leaning over the dais. “You have thirty minutes to get them for me.”

“No, ma’am. They’re top secret. You haven’t been cleared.”

The air was like kerosene, waiting for a match. Angry faces, searching for words. Some eyes gravitated toward the left, where the door was partially open. Low conversation came from the armed guard to a man whose face was partially visible.

Finally, she announced, “Associate Attorney-General Paul Lezcano is here.”

Lezcano, short frame, receding hairline, pinstriped suit, sauntered in, carrying sets of stapled papers. He handed two of them to each of the Hearing Officers, then held one in front of his eyes.

“This hearing is terminated, order of the Attorney-General and the DNI. There can be no more discussions of the activities of Vic Moreau and these agents, on national security grounds. It has to do with attempted terrorist activities directed at our Homeland. Which Moreau and his agents heroically averted. Everyone go home, and ask no more questions.”

“Graymail! Graymail!” Smoke-eyes stormed. “You think this Order of yours will stop a Congressional inquiry? I’ll have Moreau, Ms. Bradove and you, too, Lezcano, on Capitol Hill answering inquires for two weeks!”

Lezcano saw that the Congressman’s saggy cheeks were beet-red. He hesitated, then said, “Could we have a private conference, Mr. Whitmer? Just you and I?”

They went into a small office. Lezcano set a digital device, not much bigger than a jewelry box, on the table.

“Are you a baseball fan, Congressman?”

“The Cubs—let’s get the point,” he said, agitated.

“Apparently, Vic Moreau made a reference to the White Sox. A neat way of ordering his agent to arrange personal surveillance at the Vandermere estate on May 19.”

Lezcano pushed a button on the black digital box.

There were two gunshots. Then Snake-eyes voice sounding loud and clear, “Now that your property owns a corpse, and now that the Marrini factor has been removed—.”

Snake-eyes sat in shock . His flabby face pale white now.

“Friends can lie on a piece of paper. But verified voices on this machine don’t lie. Your agents, Peabody and Stokes, are already in custody.”

Later, Lezcano found Moreau in his private office in SSF HQ. Moreau was quiet, subdued.

“Where’s your swagger, FBI hot shot?”

“The Good Book reminds me of the vastness of existence, compared to my puny presence. A day doesn’t go by that I don’t find just one more thing I can’t control.”

“Even heroes can skate on thin ice. You just slid by, my friend.”

“With some divine mercy.”

Lezcano gave Moreau a wry look. “Ripped off the Red Chinese for \$200 million. Amazing. Thanks for letting me know. After it happened.”

“I gave you all the bank account numbers. The government hasn’t frozen them by now, it ain’t my fault.”

“Yeah. This time the Secretary of State inherits an SSF adventure. I have no idea how she’ll explain this one.”

“By far, the easiest part of this assignment, it is.” Moreau smiled flatly. “American government shuts down vicious capitalist imperialist crime syndicate. Immediately returns the money to China, as goodwill. Big time brownie points. –Even if the money could be better spent here. You think?”

“I’m still trying to get you out of my life, Vic. Something tells me I’m still going to fail.”

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The next day. Moreau, Rennie and Jane were seated at a metal table of an outdoor parlor in Foggy Bottom. All casually dressed in slacks and T-shirts to cope with the summer Washington heat.

Rennie raised his orange juice, and Jane her vanilla ice cream in a cup, in tribute to Moreau.

“Victory. Congratulations, Inspector,” Rennie said. “The Lord does care for his own. Teaches us along the way.”

“Yes, a happy ending Vic,” Jane smiled. “Like my books.”

“Wait, wait. As my late mother once said, when things are bad, they are never as bad as they seem. And when things are good, they are never as good as they seem. More challenges to come, I say.”

“A fallen world,” Jane added.

Rennie handed Jane and Moreau some invitations.

“Not mine,” Rennie said. “Midlothian’s wedding in Kenya. We’re all invited. Loth said we’re all VIPs if we come. And he has a quote for us: music Marley invited, but no mary jane Marley.”

“Who’s Mary Jane?” Jane asked Moreau.

“I don’t know. Ask Joe,” Moreau said amidst mutual laughter.

“Vic, I’ve talked to Beth and”—he hesitated. “Out of respect for you, we decided to make our expose a fiction novel. Beth has already lined up a major publisher.”

“Life after FBI, Joe?” Moreau asked.

“I think I’m called into the seminary, full-time ministry. Experiences I’ve had can help wayward youth. Mine was certainly wayward enough.”

“Why did you do it, Joe?”

“Do what?”

“Cover for SSF at the hearing?”

“I’m no fan of SSF. But I didn’t want it to be a sacrificial lamb for the criminal-corporate complex in the USA. A much bigger threat. I think some Christians need to do a better job standing up to corporate plunder and social inequities.”

“Yeah.” Moreau and Jane looked at each other, nodding.

“SSF is not the answer, though.” Rennie added.

“There is a role for classified strike forces in a world gripped by terrorism,” Moreau argued.

“Conceded. But the key is accountability. Checks and balances. Historically, power gets abused when just a few people can exercise it. Thank God SSF was able to work. Because you were there. Could you imagine SSF under the command of say, Tom Hull? On that note,” Rennie stood. “Adios.”

Moreau and Jane exchanged smiles. She gave him a bite of her melting ice cream. He made a sour face.

“So what does happen to SSF?”

“Discussing business again,” Moreau razzed. “The answer is no.”

“No to business? Or no to SSF?”

“No to both.”

“I’m sorry,” she touched his arm.

“Don’t be. It was a mutual decision between Lezcano and I. SSF came to a certain threshold, it had. The world changes.”

“What next?” She asked wide-eyed.

“I’m to be the Special Assistant, jointly between the Attorney-General and the DNI. For special projects, challenges, whatever. There’s more bad guys out there I’ve got to protect our citizens from. The difference is, as Joe said, more accountability. Other than that, Dahlin, you don’t ask, I don’t tell.”

Jane gasped. “I just had a thought. You and Mr. Lezcano put on a show in that hearing. He could have stopped it before it started.”

“Smart girl,” he winked. “We just wanted to see how it would play out with Snake-eyes and those DOJ bureaucrats.”

“Me, too. Don’t deny it,” Jane said. “You were curious what I would say. Trust, Vic?”

“Trust now and forever. I just wanted to hear it from you. See your courage. A real joy.”

“How about our journey?”

“What journey?” Moreau said.

“You and I. Where are we?”

Moreau held out his arms. “I don’t know. Does it matter?”

“God counsels His children in the Bible, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day.”

“Well, yeah. Do we have to plot this on a graph?” Moreau said, and they both laughed.

Then Jane leaned closer. “You’ll call me later?”

Moreau’s expression grew grave. “I don’t think so, Jane.”

“To quote Joe, on that note—” she stood to leave. Then she spun around. A gentle smile on her face. “I’ll call you, then.”

“It’s a done deal.”