

The Yemeni Visitor

“You’ll want your umbrella before the day is out.” My roommate appeared to be fully engrossed in a dusty volume he had perched on his knee as he lay sprawled sideways in an overstuffed chair. His eyes hadn’t left the book when I walked through our living room, but he was obviously aware of the fact that I was going out. His eyes remained on the book as I went back for my umbrella, but I thought I detected a hint of a smile on his lips. A few months ago I would have ignored his comment. The weather forecast promised a glorious fall day, with no precipitation until the weekend. Actually, a few months ago I had challenged him on a similar prediction, pointing out that none of the local weathermen agreed with his view. He simply dismissed their forecasts, claiming they had underestimated the “vertical distribution of Theta-E.” I told him I’d cast my lot with the experts and I left my umbrella in the closet. By the time I returned I was soaking wet.

In the months since then I had learned quite a bit about Robert Borland, but I still didn’t feel that I knew him well. We met in a used book store. My wife had died shortly after I retired, and I suddenly found myself with time on my hands. After a prolonged period of grieving and self-pity I decided to write a book. The history of the First World War had always interested me, so I began searching the local bookshops for source material. In this shop I found a thin journal, handwritten in German, with entries dated 1917. My German was a little rusty, but it appeared to be lab notes related to chemical warfare. I was thrilled to have found original source material on such a unique subject, but when I took it to the case register the proprietor said he’d promised it to a gentleman who had called just a few minutes earlier. As we were speaking, a bell above the door tinkled and Robert Borland entered the shop. He was a tall, thin man, and I would have been hard pressed to guess his age. He was one of those men who looks the same at 70 as they did at 40. He seemed quite energetic, but the lines on his face made me think he might be my age. When he learned we were both interested in the same book he immediately suggested we split the cost, scan the book to make an electronic copy, and flip a coin to see who would get to keep the original. That seemed reasonable to me, so we paid the proprietor and left the store together.

“This really is a most remarkable find” Robert said after we were outside. “I didn’t want to discuss it in there because the store owner was already asking an exorbitant price, but this is an original lab notebook kept by one of Fritz Haber’s assistants. You’re familiar with Haber’s work, of course.”

“I know of it” I replied, frantically trying to figure out why Haber’s name was familiar. It was to be the first of many times Robert assumed I knew as much about some arcane subject as he did.

“I learned about this book from a retired chemist I was consulting as part of my research into the effects arsenical smokes. He recalled that his college professor had showed him the book many years ago. It took a while, but I finally traced it to this book store.” Robert was eagerly thumbing through the book as he talked. Then he looked up and saw that we were

close to a coffee shop. “Care for a cup of coffee while we exchange names and addresses? We need to decide who’s going to scan the book?”

We quickly decided he would scan the book, as I didn’t even own a scanner. I won the coin toss, so the book would be mine after he scanned it. A few days later he called to say he was finished. He offered to bring it to me, but since my wife’s death I had not been particularly diligent about normal housekeeping and maintenance tasks so I wasn’t eager to have a guest over. Instead, I drove to his house, which was a small brick abode in an older neighborhood. As soon as I stepped inside I realized I needn’t have worried about my house. This was obviously the home of a long-time bachelor. There was very little furniture, with the exception of dark oak bookcases which nearly covered the walls. The bookcases were filled with books, and boxes of books sat beside them on the floor. Antique radios and phonographs were scattered about, and what free wall space remained was adorned with old swords, crossbows, and other curios. Mr. Borland retrieved the book from a side room that had once been a bedroom but which now seemed to be a combination of workshop and laboratory. He invited me to have a seat and offered me a beer. I had no pressing engagements that afternoon, or any other afternoon for that matter, so I readily accepted.

Mr. Borland asked me about the book I was writing. When I confessed that I really hadn’t settled on a topic he seemed intrigued, and immediately began suggesting ideas. We wound up spending the rest of the afternoon discussing World War 1, and he loaned me several books to take with me when I left. I had thoroughly enjoyed our visit, although it did bother me a bit that he seemed to know more about the subject than I did, and I was the one who was supposedly writing a book about it.

About a week later he called to tell me he’d just purchased an unpublished diary of a World War 1 Zeppelin crew member and of course I rushed over to see it. We wound up having dinner together at a local bar and grill. Neither one of us enjoyed cooking, and in the ensuing weeks we quite often got together for a casual dinner at one of the many local restaurants. I enjoyed our dinner conversations, and I was impressed with the wide range of subjects in which he seemed to be an expert. Once, when he made a remark about his college years, I asked him what his degree was in. “I had a dual major” he replied. “Physics and Sociology. I took more computer programming classes than I did classes in either of those subjects, but a Computer Science degree would have required a few courses that didn’t interest me.” I also learned that his college education had never really ended. He still took an occasional adult education class, but more commonly he audited courses at the university or took online courses on topics that interested him.

Working on my book and occasionally having dinner with Robert help me recover from the shock of my wife’s death, but there was no help for my steadily worsening financial situation. I had retired after a long career with the State Department. I wasn’t a diplomat, although I had diplomatic immunity, but my specialty was repairing computer and communications equipment. Much of the equipment I worked on was used more by the CIA than by the State Department, but I was careful to keep quiet about that aspect of my job. The job had meant

my wife and I lived overseas for most of our adult lives, moving from country to country and staying in a variety of State Department houses and apartments. We never even had an opportunity to buy our own house until I retired and we settled down. Unfortunately, that proved to be a bad time to buy a house. We bought at the peak of the housing bubble, entering into a mortgage that charged what would prove to be an exorbitant interest rate when the bubble popped. Most of my retirement savings were in stocks and mutual funds, and those took a nose dive too. My wife's illness forced me to sell those at a loss, and I was left living on a pension that was too small to pay for my mortgage and allow me to eat. Finally I decided I would have to sell my house. I had what was, under the circumstances, an extremely generous offer from a couple who really wanted to move into my neighborhood. I found a small apartment on the other side of town which I could afford. I told Robert about my impending move one night while we were enjoying fish and chips at a local pub.

"Why don't you just move in with me?" he suggested. "I inherited my house so my living expenses are extremely low. You could pay me half of what you'd pay for that apartment and it would seem like a fortune to me. I'll have to clean out one of the bedrooms, of course, and I suspect you'll want me to stop performing biology experiments in the kitchen, but I think this could work out well for both of us."

On the whole, things went very smoothly when I moved in. My furniture helped make the living room and the dining room look more like a home than a fraternity. We had enough room to pretty much live separate lives. Often we never even saw each other until dinner, and not always then. Robert could be a pretty good cook when the mood was upon him, but the mood was seldom upon him. Most of the time I cooked. While Robert sometimes joined me for dinner, it was not unusual for him to remain entombed in his bedroom, researching some new and bizarre interest at the library, or off on some mysterious errand. At first I was irritated by the fact that I never knew if I should cook for one or for two, but since we split the grocery bill 50/50 I eventually decided to always cook for two. If he deigned to eat with me, fine. If not, I'd put the leftovers in the refrigerator. Sometimes they disappeared later that night. Sometimes I ate them for lunch the following day.

His hours were as irregular as his meals. Some mornings he was out of the apartment before the rising sun roused me. Other days when he joined me for dinner it was obvious that he had dragged himself out of bed for the occasion. Sometimes he would stay up all night, slouched sideways in his overstuffed chair, typing away on his laptop computer while occasionally consulting one of the books he had scattered around the chair.

Robert never talked much about himself. When we first met I assumed he was retired, but I didn't know from what. When I told him I had worked for the State Department, he told me that he had worked for them too. Occasionally. He said he was more or less a consultant. He had also consulted for several corporations, had taught a few college courses, and had worked in a research lab or two. Sometimes when I didn't see him for several days I wondered if he really was retired or if he was off somewhere consulting.

Neither of us had much of a social life. I was still grieving for my wife, and Robert seemed to have no interest in any form of romance. In fact, he sometimes seemed to have no emotions whatsoever. Or at least, no positive emotions. He could be irritable at times, especially if I did anything to disturb his concentration, and he got angry with himself if his studies weren't going well or if (heaven forbid!) he made a mistake. He kept these emotions under control, however. At the very most he would slam a book shut when he got frustrated. Then he would stare at the ceiling for a moment or two, take a couple of deep breaths, and open the book again.

We had few visitors. Most evenings Robert sat sprawled in his overstuffed chair, engrossed in his books and his computer, while I pored through musty volumes of history trying to find information for my book. One evening while we were both so engaged we were surprised by a knock on our door. I got up from the couch and answered it.

Two men in dark suits were standing outside. One was fairly tall, with dark hair and a swarthy complexion. The other was of medium height, with short blond hair. He was a little heavier than his companion, but they both looked as fit as military men. The tall man was carrying a briefcase. "Is Mr. Robert Borland in?" the tall man asked.

"Let them in, Bill. Let them in." Robert called from his chair. He closed his laptop and stood up. "Bill, this is Brent Hopkins" he gestured toward the tall man "and Philip Martin. Gentleman, this is my roommate, Bill Downing." We shook hands somewhat reservedly.

"Could we have a private word with you, Robert?" Mr. Martin asked.

"I don't think it needs to be private" Robert replied. "Bill used to work for The Company. He had a top secret clearance until he retired, and that wasn't very long ago. He's a sharp fellow, and I sometimes I like to talk things over with him. It helps me work things out in my mind. Besides, it's pretty hard to keep secrets from your roommate." The two men in suits looked at each other as they considered his words. Personally, I was shocked. I had never said a word to Robert about my work for the CIA or my security clearance. Robert seemed oblivious to the surprise on my face and continued to talk to our visitors. "Now don't pretend you haven't already checked him out." He turned to me and continued. "Bill, these two men are FBI agents. They have access to some remarkable computers, with information about the character and spleen of every person on earth. Those computers can answer almost any question you could ask, but you have to ask the right question. Sometimes I help them find the right question."

Mr. Martin nodded to Mr. Hopkins, and Mr. Hopkins spoke. "If talking to Mr. Downing helps you work things out, I guess he's got a need to know. His clearance hasn't expired yet. Could you please turn off your phones?"

I looked at Robert for guidance and he nodded as he pulled his phone out of his pocket, so I turned mine off also. Then Robert returned to his overstuffed chair and the other two sat on the couch. I grabbed a chair from the kitchen and set it near the couch so we were sitting in a small circle.

“Jamil Mansoor entered the country last week.” Mr. Martin began. “He used a false passport, of course, but our facial recognition software identified him from the security cameras. Unfortunately he left the airport before we could respond. He hasn’t used the name on his passport since then, and he’s pretty much vanished from sight.”

“Jamil Mansoor is a troublemaker from Yemen.” Robert explained for my benefit. “He’s not a religious fanatic, although he’s perfectly willing to act like one if it gets people to do what he wants. What he wants most is power. He missed out on the Yemeni revolution because he was hiding from police in Germany, and now he wants to stir up a new revolution so he can take over the government.”

“We consider him more than just a troublemaker” Mr. Hopkins interjected. “He’s near the top of our list of wanted terrorists. We’ve connected him with two suicide bombings already, and we suspect he helped plan the Benghazi attack.”

Phil Martin continued. “If you want to gain a following among some people in the Arab world, the best way to do it is to attack Americans. An attack in Libya is one thing, but if he could pull off an attack in the US he’d be a celebrity to those people.”

“That’s why we need your help.” Brent said to Robert. “He wouldn’t have risked coming to this country if he didn’t have something big in the works.” He opened his briefcase and took out a slim black laptop. “Same login and password as last time. The encryption and VPN key have been updated. Plug it in to your router. Don’t use wireless.”

Robert looked at the laptop without accepting it. “Not much to go on” he said.

“That’s all we have” Brent replied. “If we hear anything new we’ll let you know.”

Robert shrugged and picked up the laptop. “No promises. I’ll give you a call if I find anything.”

The two agents thanked him and said their good-byes. After they left Robert said “They’re really asking me to pull a rabbit out of a hat this time. They’ve come to me with sketchy data before, but this one really takes the cake.” He picked up the laptop and started toward his room.

“Wait a minute” I said. “How’d you know about my security clearance?”

“I suspected it when you first told me you repaired computers for the State Department.” Robert said. “There aren’t many people who work on State Department electronics who don’t also work for the CIA. It was none of my business, so I let it go. When you first mentioned your financial problems, though, I decided to look a little deeper. It’s always worrisome when anyone with a high security clearance has financial problems. Mostly I looked up your background because I suspected you were eventually going to have to sell your house, and I was considering inviting you to move in with me. I couldn’t do that unless you had the right credentials, though. The CIA and the FBI are two of my best customers.”

“Didn’t you trust me?”

“You told me you worked for the State Department. Did you not trust me enough to tell me you also worked for the CIA? It’s not a question of trust. It’s just best not to advertise such things unless the other person has a need to know who you work for.”

I realized I wasn’t going to win this argument. “Can I turn my phone back on now?” I asked.

“As long as we’re not talking about the case. They probably haven’t tapped your phone yet, but they record all phone calls and use computers to search for key words or phrases. If they find something that interests them, they download a bug that keeps your microphone active all the time so they can monitor it.”

“I know what they can do” I said a bit peevishly. “After all, I used to work on those systems. But who are ‘they?’”

“Well, there are probably a dozen or more countries that can do it. Some of them are what we call ‘rogue nations.’ They sell the information to terrorist cells like the one Jamil runs. Actually, it’s more like a subscription. The terrorists subscribe to the key phrases or specific phones they’re interested in, and they get the data streamed to their computers in real time.” He turned back toward his room.

Something about what he’d said bothered me. “What do you mean they haven’t tapped my phone ‘yet?’” I asked, but he closed the door without answering.

I saw nothing of Robert for the next three days. A growing pile of coffee cups, toast crumbs, and empty peanut butter jars in the kitchen told me he was still alive, but for the most part he stayed entombed in his room. On the third night I was reading an account of the first phosgene attack at Verdun when he flopped into his overstuffed chair with an exasperated grunt. He was wearing the same clothes he wore the night the agents came, and he obviously hadn’t shaved since then.

“It’s hopeless” he said. “They ask me to find a needle in a haystack, but they don’t give me any data about the needle.”

“Does he have any known aliases?” I asked.

“He’s too smart to ever use the same one twice.”

“Any co-conspirators, lieutenants, or associates?”

“Not in this country.” Robert answered. “His followers are either extremely smart or so damned anti-social they can’t even get along with each other. They operate in small, dispersed

groups that never communicate with each other and only rarely communicate with him.” He rubbed his hands over his face in fatigue.

“What’s his modus operandi?” I asked.

“Primarily terrorist bombings. In Yemen he targets political opponents, but in the rest of the world he tries to disrupt Western institutions and make headlines. He goes in for assassinations on occasion, but only of his opponents. There are no potential targets expected to visit this country in the foreseeable future.”

“If he’s planning a bombing, he’ll need explosives” I said. “Any references to dynamite, amonal, TNT, nitroglycerine, or plastic explosives?”

Robert smiled at me indulgently. “Your knowledge of explosives is so outdated as to be quaint. Do you visualize a big black ball with a fuse? In any event, the CIA computers would sound the alarm bells if he even whispered those terms. Also RDX, PETN, or any of the more modern explosives.”

“Well then, how about slang terms?” I suggested. “Foo gas, boom stuff, coal box, Jack Johnson, bangsite. . .” I realized my knowledge of current slang was extremely limited.

“Isn’t bangsite the stuff you put in toy canons on the 4’t of July?” Robert asked. “But you’re on the right track. I’ve spent many hours searching for slang terms, but I didn’t try those.”

“Does he go in for arson?” I asked.

“Not that we know of” Robert answered thoughtfully.

“Firebug. Scorcher. Torch. Torcher. Cinderize. Up in smoke. Light up. Joy Juice. Scout water. Black gold. Coal oil. Dinosaur juice. Charcoal lighter. . .”

“Dinosaur juice?” Robert asked incredulously.

“I’m just brainstorming” I said. “People say that oil comes from dead dinosaurs, so I thought. . .”

“But oil doesn’t come from dinosaurs. It comes from prehistoric plants.” Robert interrupted.

“It doesn’t matter where it really comes from” I said. “What matters is where people think it comes from.”

“Interesting.” He sat lost in thought for a few minutes. Then, without a word, he stood up and walked back into his bedroom.

The next morning, when I staggered into the kitchen for my wake-up cup of coffee Robert was making scrambled eggs. He had showered and shaved, and seemed in an excellent mood. He slid a plate of eggs in front of me, sat down with his own plate, and began to tell me about a new anoxic plant species which scientists had found near an undersea volcano.

“I take it you’ve found the Yemini visitor?” I asked.

“I believe I’ve found his trail” Robert answered. “He was using blogcoms. The messages were from before he entered the country so they can’t help us find him now, but he was talking to a confederate in the US. The FBI should be able to locate that guy, and he’ll lead them to Jamil.”

“What’s a blogcom?” I asked.

“It’s a private communication concealed within a thread of blog comments. Two people on opposite sides of the world can leave messages for each other within a blog. As long as they carefully word their messages to more or less fit with the general conversation nobody realizes there are hidden messages. Since they’re just adding comments to an Internet blog there is no e-mail trail or other record kept on their computer. They don’t even save copies, since they can always go back to the blog site if they need to re-read a message. Here, I’ll show you.” Robert stepped into his room for a moment and returned with a few pages of computer printout. “This is from a blog about some rock band concert tour.”

Alicia427: Anyone catch the concert in London?

Gr8rock2: Awesome!

Alicia427: I missed it. Where they playing next?

Bonnylass12: I heard Los Angeles

PigMan_@#: Really? I hadn’t heard that

Francois553: I’ll be traveling there in mid-September

Gr8rock2: I just looked on their web site.
Birmingham on August 23rd.

Everready77: Look me up when you get here.

Kornhead: I’d rather see a Nightslayer concert

PigMan_@#: Nightslayer sucks!

Kornhead: Ahh yes. Another sophisticated comment
from our erudite critic.

Bonnylass12: I wouldn't go to a Nightslayer concert without a bag of turds to throw at that tone-deaf lead singer.

Francois553: Don't waste the fresh stuff. Bring coprolites.

PigMan_@#: ???

Kornhead: Petrified dinosaur turds, for those of you who don't know how to use a dictionary

Everready77: How much?

Francois553: About 25 kilo

PigMan_@#: That's a lot of shit!

Alicia427: Can we get back to the Birmingham concert?

Kornhead: Why?

Alicia427: When do the tickets go on sale?

Gr8rock2: July 1'st

Everready77: Do we have to be there, or can we do this remotely?

Gr8rock2: You can get them on Ticketmaster

Francois553: Get front row seats. It's best if this is up close and personal.

Alicia427: I had front row seats for Korn in Brussels. It was awesome! I couldn't hear for a week afterward, but it was worth it.

Gr8rock2: Wasn't that the concert where they got sued?

I read the paper twice, thinking maybe I'd missed something. "I don't see anything incriminating in this" I finally said.

"You're not supposed to." Robert answered. There's a private conversation between Francois and Everready after Bonnylass says 'Los Angeles.' Look at this." He handed me a sheet with the relevant entries highlighted.

Francois553 I'll be traveling there in mid-September

Everready77: Look me up when you get here.

Francois553: Bring coprolites.

Everready77: How much?

Francois553: About 25 kilo

Everready77: Do we have to be there, or can we do this remotely?

Francois553: It's best if this is up close and personal.

"Francois553 is Jamil. Everready is one of his lieutenants in the US. 'Coprolites' is their slang for explosives. Everready asks if it's going to be detonated remotely, and Jamil says they need a suicide bomber."

"How do you know that 'coprolites' is a slang word for explosives?" I asked.

"Because it makes sense" Robert answered. "You put me on that trail when you said that people thought oil came from dinosaurs. Coprolites were dinosaur droppings, which would have made good fertilizer. If you combine oil with fertilizer. . ."

"ANFO" I replied. "Ammonium nitrate fuel oil. The classic homemade explosive. Still, that's quite a jump from coprolite to ANFO."

"It was purely a guess at first" Robert said. "I spent three days guessing at slang terms and code words that might refer to explosives and then searching the FBI database for those terms. I found the usual assortment of crackpots, blowhards, and wannabes, but nothing promising until I found this. You'll have to admit, 'coprolites' is an odd term to use in a discussion about a music group but it makes perfect sense as part of the hidden communication."

"But it's not that unusual" I argued. "Bonnylass turned the discussion in that direction."

"Yes, she set the stage all right. She's also the one who brought up 'Los Angeles,' which the others quickly dismissed because there was no concert scheduled there. I suspect Jamir may be entering comments as 'Bonnylass' as well as 'Francois.' That makes it easier for him to write the messages he needs to send and still make them look like part of the conversation."

"I'm still not convinced" I said. "The message you highlighted sounds sinister, but it could mean nothing. I'll bet if you spent three days searching for hidden messages in other blogs you could find a dozen equally sinister sounding clips."

"I did just spend three days looking for hidden messages, and I assure you there was nothing that could compare to this. But if this was all there was, I would have my doubts too."

After I found this I started searching for other conversations between Francois and Everready. I found this.” He set another printout in front of me. This time he gave me the highlighted version first, so I could focus on the hidden message.

Francois553: You’ll need to prepare a guest house.

Everready77: Someone you’re bringing?

Francois553: We’ll pick him up.

Everready77: Friendly?

Francois553: Unwilling might be a better term.

Everready77: How long will your friend be staying?

Francois553: Until the bill arrives.

“A kidnapping?” I asked.

“That’s the way I read it” Robert answered. “I must say, I’m rather disappointed in Jamil. He doesn’t usually go in for penny ante crimes like kidnapping. Still, I guess he’s got to finance his operation some way.”

“Did you find anything else?” I asked. “This is just a ‘heads up.’ Surely it takes a lot more planning and coordination to pull off a kidnapping.”

Robert shook his head. “I didn’t find any more conversations between Francois and Everready. But that didn’t surprise me. Jamir is much too clever to use the same name over and over. It’s like those code books where you use a code once and then tear out that page and use a different code on your next message. I’m sure there are lots of other hidden conversations in other blogs, but they’re under other names. I was lucky he used this name twice.”

“What’s next?” I asked with anticipation.

“Next we enjoy these eggs” Robert said as he sat down to eat. “Then I think I’ll take a little nap. Staying awake is easy when the adrenaline is pumping, but now I can feel the energy draining out of me.”

“But don’t we need to stop Jamir?”

“That’s the FBI’s job” Robert replied with a yawn. “My job was just to put them on the right scent. Jamir has traveled to this country since he wrote that, so his trail is cold but Everready is his contact in this country. I called agent Martin an hour ago, and I’d be surprised if they don’t track down Everready before the day is out.”

Robert turned his attention to the morning paper and I ate my eggs in silence. A moment ago I had been thrilled at the thought of tracking down a dangerous terrorist, and now I realized I was going to sit on the sidelines while younger men saved the world. The word “retired” suddenly left a sour taste in my mouth.

Three days later Robert and I were just finishing breakfast when Agents Hopkins and Martin showed up. Robert greeting them warmly. “Did you track down Everready?” he asked?

“We traced him to an apartment in Huntington Park” Martin said. But he hasn’t been there since we staked it out.”

“Yesterday afternoon there was a kidnapping” Hopkins added. “We think it may be the work of Jamir. We were hoping you could help us find the victim.”

“Who was it?”

“Ken Sinclair.”

Robert gave a low whistle. “The mystery writer? He’s been writing best sellers since I was in grad school. He must be worth a pretty penny by now.”

“The kidnapers are asking for ten million dollars, to be paid by noon today.” Hopkins said.

“Interesting.” Robert commented. “I wonder why Jamir picked Ken Sinclair.”

“Hello-o” said Agent Martin. “What part of ten million dollars don’t you understand?”

“Oh I understand that part.” Robert said. “But Jamir isn’t really interested in money. He needs it to continue his operations, but he must have another reason too.” He paused for a moment, with a look of deep concentration on his face. Then he continued. “Twenty four hours doesn’t give us much time. But that’s the way Jamir wants it. He needs to give the family just enough time to get the money, but not give the FBI time to track him down. How was the ransom note delivered?”

“From the victim’s cell phone” Hopkins explained. “Mr. Sinclair was flying to a book signing in Boston but there was a long line at security and he missed his flight from LAX. He drove to Burbank to catch a flight out of that airport. He disappeared shortly after he got to Burbank. About an hour later his wife got this text message.” He handed Robert a printout with a photo of a blindfolded man with duct tape over his mouth, standing in front of a concrete block wall. Underneath it said “Prepare to send \$1 million to a bank account in another country. You will receive a message at noon tomorrow with details. You must send the money within five minutes of receiving the message or you’ll never see your husband alive.”

“Five minutes.” Robert shook his head. “Just enough time for her to make the transfer if she’s at the bank and has everything arranged, but not enough time for us to intercept it. We can’t put every bank in every country on alert. By the time we get a foreign bank to cooperate the money will have long since disappeared into a Gordian Knot of transfers, deposits, and withdrawals. What else do you have?”

“We found his car in a Burbank airport parking lot. These are the texts he sent to Mrs. Sinclair since he left the house this morning. We traced the cell towers that relayed the texts and they’re consistent with his movements.” Agent Martin handed Robert a printout of the text messages:

Mariam 8:57 AM	Forgot to ask. Did you pack your meds?
Ken 10:13 AM	Yes, I packed them. I’m parked in Lot C, section D.
Mariam 10:14 AM	Good. Lucy called. She invited us to a dinner party on Saturday night.
Ken 10:18 AM	Could we tell her I’m just beginning a long illness?
Mariam 10:18 AM	No!
Ken 10:32 AM	I know. They’re good people. I just don’t like dinner parties, and I’ll miss the Dodger’s game. They’re only two games out.
Mariam 10:33 AM	So we’ll go?
Ken 10:35 AM	Yes, we’ll go.
Mariam 10:36 AM	Love you
Ken 10:36 AM	I love you too.
Ken 12:05 PM	Missed my flight. Security took forever. Taking a flight out of Burbank.
Mariam 12:07 PM	What?!! That’s an outrage! Is TSA going to pay for your new flight?
Ken 12:08 PM	Doubt it
Ken 1:13 PM	Traffic on El Camino. Ill take Coldwater Canyon.
Mariam 1:15 PM	Sorry about the traffic
Ken 1:36 PM	I’m parked in Section DD.

Robert studied the printout of the texts. “Mrs. Sinclair asked him if he’d packed his medication?”

“Yes,” Martin replied. “Mr. Sinclair has severe diabetes. He has to take an injection every twelve hours.”

Robert peered up from the printout. “You’re prying in to medical records now?”

“Mrs. Sinclair told us.” Martin replied defensively. “She was worried that his kidnapers wouldn’t let him take his shots. He also had one of those medical alert bracelets that calls 911. He accidentally set it off about six months ago, so he shows up in the emergency services database.”

“Curious” Robert said as he continued to read the texts. He frowned slightly as he studied the texts. “Does this not strike you as odd?” he asked as he pointed to the message about traffic.

The two agents looked at the text, and then looked at each other in confusion.

“No?” asked Robert. “Maybe I’m just old fashioned but it looks odd to me. Actually, this whole case doesn’t add up. If I were you, I’d check the tapes from the security cameras at the LAX passenger checkpoint.”

“You mean Burbank, don’t you?” Agent Martin asked.

“No, I mean LAX.” Robert said testily. “I don’t think Mr. Sinclair went to Burbank.”

“But we tracked him to Burbank” argued Hopkins.

“You tracked his phone there, and you found his car there. That doesn’t mean he was there. Jamir threw out a false scent to lead you away from LAX.”

“What about his texts to his wife?” Martin asked.

“They were written by his kidnapers” Robert replied. “Look. First of all, he got to the airport almost two hours before departure. We know that because he texted his wife to tell her where he parked the car. She asked him if he remembered to pack his medication, they had some normal husband/wife messages, and then nothing for well over an hour. Then he texts her to say he got held up in security and missed his flight. Have you ever been held up for two hours getting through security? Lines don’t get that long unless there’s a bomb scare or something else so dramatic we would have heard about it on the news. Also, Mr. Sinclair never texted his wife that he was held up. He’s standing in line for two hours, growing more and more impatient, and he doesn’t complain to his wife? Then, when he misses his flight, he books one out of Burbank? LAX is a much busier airport than Burbank. I’d be very surprised if there wasn’t another flight out of LAX that could have gotten him to Boston, probably in less time than it would have taken him to drive to Burbank and fly from there.”

“Then there was the text which you two don’t seem to find unusual. Actually, all of the texts after noon are suspicious. Ken Sinclair is not a young man. He didn’t grow up with cell phones. He’s spent thirty years writing books. Using the English language to earn his living and being forced to satisfy an editor in the process. A man like that doesn’t communicate in incomplete sentences. Look at his morning texts. His wife takes shortcuts now and then, but everything he writes is grammatically correct, including punctuation. He also doesn’t text while driving. His wife asks him about his medication at 8:57 and he doesn’t reply until over an hour later, after he’s parked the car. But in the afternoon he texts her while driving, using incomplete sentences, to tell her he’s taking a detour? And he leaves the apostrophe out of ‘I’ll.’ The spell checker in his phone wouldn’t flag that because ‘ill’ is a real word. But it’s not the word a professional writer would have used. No, someone else wrote these e-mails.”

Agent Martin stared at the log. Agent Hopkins and I looked over his shoulder. A few minutes ago I had read the log and seen nothing out of the ordinary. Now the clues seemed to leap off the page. “Is there anything else we’ve missed?” Agent Hopkins asked.

“I think the medial alert bracelet is suggestive” Robert answered.

“But he always wore that.” Hopkins protested.

“Exactly” said Robert. “He always wore that. So why didn’t he set it off when he was kidnapped? He had a cell phone too, but he might not have had time to dial 911 before he was captured. But all he had to do was to press a button and the bracelet would have called 911 for him. Why didn’t he?”

“Maybe the kidnapers grabbed him by the arms before he had a chance” Agent Hopkins suggested.

“In the middle of LAX airport?” Robert questioned. “For that matter, even without the bracelet, how do you grab a man in the middle of a crowded airport and drag him kicking and screaming to a waiting car without anyone noticing anything unusual and calling the police?”

The two agents looked at each other in confusion. Neither spoke. Finally Robert broke the silence.

“The answer is, you don’t.” He continued. “You dress up in TSA uniforms and politely ask him to come with you as he steps through the security checkpoint. His phone and his bracelet are in a plastic bin which you carry with you as he meekly follows you away from the crowd.”

“But the other TSA agents wouldn’t recognize the kidnapers. Surely they’d know something was wrong.” Martin insisted.

“They could have been bribed, or they could have been threatened” Robert answered. “But I think it’s more likely there were just distracted. In an airport as big as LAX it’s probably not unusual to have new faces show up now and then. If the lines were crowded and the TSA agents were busy doing their own jobs they might not have even noticed a new agent or two.”

“I don’t know, Robert” agent Hopkins said with a frown. “It sounds pretty far-fetched to me.”

“Do you have a better suggestion as to how a man could be kidnapped in a crowded airport with nobody noticing anything out of the ordinary?” Robert asked. “Even if we ignore the bogus text messages and go with your first theory that he drove to Burbank, he still disappeared in the middle of a crowded airport.”

The two agents looked at each other for a long time. Then Hopkins nodded and Martin speed dialed a number on his phone. “Hello, Chris? This is Phil. I need you to go to LAX. Figure out which security checkpoint Sinclair would have used to get to his flight and have the TSA folks show you the video surveillance of that checkpoint. See if they show Sinclair being taken into custody by TSA . . . I know TSA hasn’t got him, but the kidnapers might have posed as TSA agents . . . Look at the tapes between 10:30 and noon yesterday morning . . . Brent and I are on the far side of town. We’ll get there as soon as we can. . . OK. Thanks.” He hung up the phone and slid it back into his pocket.

“Thanks for all your help, Robert” Hopkins said as he reached to shake Robert’s hand.

Robert shook hands politely. “I think Bill and I had better go with you” he said.

“Sorry Robert. You’re a civilian now.” Hopkins turned toward the door.

“I’m a consultant” said Robert. “And not to put too fine a point on it, but I suspect you may need my services again before this case is over.”

Hopkins looked a little puzzled.

“We haven’t exactly covered ourselves in glory so far, Brent” commented Martin.

Hopkins gave a sigh of defeat. “OK Robert. You guys can ride with us.”

“That guy deserves an Oscar.” Frank McCollough, the head of airport security, offered his opinion to our group as we watched a tape from the airport security camera. “What a performance.”

As we watched, a German tourist was protesting the removal of three unopened bottles of bourbon from his carry-on luggage. A TSA agent was trying to explain that he couldn’t take liquids on the airplane, but the tourist spoke no English. He wasn’t quite belligerent enough to get arrested, but he was loud enough to catch the attention of every security agent in that part of the airport. Two roving agents walked up to him to provide back-up for the agent who was talking to him, and the rest of the roving agents moved closer so they could assist if needed. Agents who couldn’t move kept one eye on the German tourist as they X-rayed luggage and screened passengers. Finally a translator arrived on the scene and the situation

quickly returned to normal. The tourist apologized profusely and told the TSA agents they could keep the bourbon as a gift from him. Even though I knew what to look for I almost missed the fact that at the height of the tension two uniformed TSA agents approached Ken Sinclair as he came through the line and then quietly led him away from the screening line.

“They knew exactly what they were doing” Frank said as he stopped the tape. “They led him out of the security camera’s field of view and never showed up on any other security cameras. There’s some construction near there, and security cameras haven’t been installed in the new construction yet. We think they led him into that area, and from there it’s hard to say where they went. The door to the construction area is locked, but based on how well they prepared everything else they probably had a key.”

“Don’t you have security cameras throughout the airport?” Agent Chris Hollings asked this. He was the agent Phil Martin had called to work with Airport Security while we were fighting our way through traffic.

Frank McCollough shook his head. “Only in the public areas” he said. “We’re supposed to get them throughout the airport, but we haven’t gotten funding for the back areas yet. You know, the hallways, store rooms, utility tunnels, and other areas used by the maintenance crews who take care of the airport.”

“Is there any way to leave the airport through these back areas without passing a security camera?” Martin asked.

“Yes” Frank replied. “Most of the employee entrances don’t have security cameras.”

“Shit. They could be anywhere.” Agent Martin almost spat out the words.

“I think they’re still in the airport” Robert said thoughtfully. “Even if they could leave without passing a security camera, you can’t leave the airport without passing people. Day or night, there are people coming and going. Ken went with them quietly enough when he thought they were taking him to a TSA office, but once they got into the construction area he would have known something was up. What are they going to do then? Hold a gun on him? Tape his mouth shut so he can’t call out for help? How are you going to lead someone like that through a crowd, without anyone noticing something’s wrong? Especially with someone famous, like Ken Sinclair. They wouldn’t take that chance.”

He paused while the agents considered this. Then he added “We can search the airport, or we can give up. We have no other clues.”

“We’ll search” Agent Hopkins announced. Frank McCollough pulled a radio off his belt and raised it to his mouth.

“Don’t use your radio” Hopkins ordered. “They may be monitoring it. Phil, scramble your phone and get some agents over here to help Frank.”

Frank turned to start rounding up security guards but Robert stopped him. "Can you have someone take me to the facilities office?" he asked. "They'll have the floorplans and keys we'll need to do a thorough search."

"I know where it is" Chris Hollings volunteered. When the others looked at him in surprise he said "This is my beat. Anytime they want to investigate anything at the airport they call me."

Chris led us through a zig/zag path of intersecting corridors until we came to a door marked "HVAC Shop." Inside was a large room cluttered with workbenches, storage cabinets, and tool boxes. On the back wall there was a window and a door into a break room. We walked into the break room, which consisted of a battered Formica table surrounded by six well-worn and mismatched chairs. A coffee pot with a half-inch of exceedingly suspicious sludge sat on a filing cabinet beside the table, and a grimy looking refrigerator sat at the other end of the room. A door on the far wall of the break room led to supervisor's offices.

"Not much of an office area" Martin commented.

"It's a case where the cobbler's children go barefoot" said Robert. "These guys are so busy taking care of the rest of the airport they never spend any time on their own area."

Chris knocked on the half-open door to the supervisor's office. A voice inside barked "C'min."

Ted Jacobs, the mechanical superintendent, swiveled his chair to face the door. His massive body overflowed the chair and made it look like a toy by comparison. He wasn't grossly overweight, just broadly built with a bit of a paunch all around. A fringe of sandy hair framed his bald head. He broke into a smile when he saw Chris.

"Hey, Chris! What brings you to my neck of the woods? Hunting some sort of pervert, I suppose."

"Kidnappers." Chris's voice was all business. "Posing as TSA agents. They abducted a man from the airport yesterday, and we think they may still be holed up here. We wanted to look at your floorplans."

"I got all the As-Builts." Ken waved his hand toward a metal table behind him. My hopes fell when I saw that the table was buried in faded blueprints. Some were lying flat, with their ends curling up. Many more were rolled up in thick bundles secured by rubber bands. His long, narrow office was jammed with gray metal cabinets filled with more drawings, and every horizontal surface was piled high with papers, file folders, and drawings.

"It might be quicker to use the computer." Ken suggested. He clicked on a few icons and typed in a password. The screen filled with a colorful floorplan of the airport. "Any place in particular you're interested in?"

“They were last seen at the Terminal 7 security checkpoint.” Chris said. “The camera caught them going into the construction area there, and they haven’t been seen since.”

Ken clicked on a few links and brought up a floorplan of that area. Most of the rooms were colored green or yellow but there was a large empty white area.

“What do the colors mean?” Robert asked.

“That tells me what the temperature is” Ken answered. “Green is comfortable. Yellow is a little warm. During the winter you’ll see some blue areas. I can check on the air conditioning, the fire alarms, the security system, and a bunch of other stuff. I can see almost anything from here.”

“The security system?” Robert asked in surprise.

“Yeah, these little camera icons show me where the cameras are. Here, if I click on one. . .” he clicked and a window popped up on the screen that showed us a live feed from that camera. “I could turn it back and forth if I wanted to, but the Security folks get upset when I do that.”

“The system they showed us didn’t look like this.” Hopkins commented.

“They’ve got their own system.” Ted answered. “We gave them an account for this system, but they never use it. You know, not invented here. They’ve got their own system. Cost ‘em almost three million bucks to put their system in, and they can’t look at it from home.”

“Can you look at this from home?” Robert asked.

“Oh hell yes.” Ted answered. “That’s one of the best things about it. I get calls at all times of the day and night. I used to have to drive to the airport to check things out, but now I just log in from home. Nine times out of ten I can figure out what the problem is without leaving my chair.”

“Can anybody do that?” Robert asked.

“No,” Ted reassured, “You need to have a password to do that. We keep a pretty tight control over those. My guys have them, of course. My boss has one. So does the Energy Manager, and I think a few of the guys working for him have them. The Security folks have a couple, although they’ve probably forgotten about them. The contractor that installed the system has a master password, as he helps us take care of it.” He paused for a moment, obviously in deep thought. “I think the IT folks have an account or two. And probably the Airport Manager. The Fire guys *might* have one, but that’s about all.”

Robert leaned toward Agent Hopkins and whispered “I’m glad they keep tight control over this.” Then he turned to Ted. “Let’s look at Terminal 7 again” he said. “What’s this big white area?”

“That’s where they’re doing the new construction. The sensors in that area aren’t hooked into the system yet.”

“If you were going to hide out, where would you go?”

“Let’s see” Ted said thoughtfully. “The best place would probably be in a mech room, but that takes a special key.”

“Just one key?” Robert asked.

“Different mech rooms take different keys” Ted answered, “but there’s a master that can open any of them. I’ve got one of the masters” he said with a touch of pride. Then he quickly added “But we keep pretty tight control over the keys.”

“The men who did the kidnapping had access to TSA uniforms” Agent Hopkins said. “They probably also had TSA ID cards or they couldn’t have gotten into the secure area. Any chance they could have gotten a key, too?”

“Maybe” said Ted. “Those guys insisted on access to almost everything when they moved in. That was right after 9/11, so nobody wanted to argue with them.”

“Where are the mech rooms?” Robert asked.

“Well, let’s see.” Ted answered. “The main boiler room is here, and the chillers are over here. We’ve got pump rooms here, here, and here. There’s an electrical closet over here, but it’s pretty small. . .” Ted touched the screen with a beefy finger as he pointed out each room.

“What’s this little red triangle on the pump room mean?” Robert asked.

“That means the door isn’t shut” Ted replied. “Except in this case it just means the door switch is bad. We’re supposed to replace it next week, but I don’t know why. We never pay any attention to those switches. Some suit in TSA had this wild idea that we should alarm all the mech room doors. We were supposed to call the control center to deactivate the alarm before we entered, but nobody ever remembered to do that. They finally got tired of all the false alarms and turned off the system.”

“Are any records kept of when the doors are opened?” Robert asked.

“I think those points are trended” Ted answered as he began searching through screens.

“We’re looking for a door that was opened around noon yesterday” Robert said as he peered at the screen.

“Here” Ted announced triumphantly. “12:17 yesterday afternoon, the door to the auxiliary boiler room was opened. I didn’t have anybody working in there. Those boilers aren’t even turned on this time of year. You want me to take you there?”

“Let’s go” Agent Hopkins said.

Ted moved surprisingly fast for a man his size. He led us through a labyrinth of passages framed by concrete block walls. When he slowed and took a key ring out of his pocket Hopkins stopped him and held a finger to his lips. Hopkins took the key and herded us well clear of the door. “Right, left, hallway” he whispered as he pointed to himself, Agent Martin, and Agent Hollings. The agents pulled their pistols and crouched next to the door. Hopkins nodded his head three times, and on the third nod he threw open the door. Hopkins and Martin plunged inside while Hollings crouched back from the door, with his pistol leveled at a point where anyone trying to escape the room would have to cross.

“Clear.” “Clear.” The voices of Agents Hopkins and Martin called out. Then Hopkins shouted “Phil, call 911!”

We followed Agent Hollings into the room. A limp figure was duct taped to a large vertical pipe. He was blindfolded and gagged with duct tape. Hollings was removing the tape that held him to the pipe, and Martin helped ease the figure to the floor. He tore off the blindfold and the gag while Hopkins checked for a pulse.

“He’s alive!” Hopkins said with relief. “Chris, call Frank McCollough and have him get his security folks down here. Ask him if there are any EMTs available. We’ve got a probable diabetic coma.”

“I can call him” Ted said as he pulled a radio from a holster on his belt. Robert stopped him.

“No radios” Robert said. We don’t know where the kidnappers are, and they may be monitoring your frequency.”

We tried to make the unconscious author as comfortable as we could while we waited for Security. Ted found a piece of canvas someplace which we used for a blanket, and Chris took off his jacket to make a pillow. It seemed like hours before we heard footsteps in the hallway, but in reality it was only a few minutes. Frank McCollough rushed into the room with two EMTs and a handful of Security agents. The EMTs took charge of Mr. Sinclair while the FBI agents brought the Security agents up to speed on what had happened. Suddenly Hopkins looked at his watch.

“Shit!” he exclaimed. “It’s five minutes after noon. I forgot about the ransom.” He whipped out his phone and called the FBI agent working with Mrs. Sinclair. A few minutes later he hung up and put the phone back in his pocket. “Odd,” he said. “Mrs. Sinclair never got a message telling her where to send the ransom. I wonder if the kidnappers got cold feet.”

“Jamil wouldn’t get cold feet” Robert said thoughtfully. “And he wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to get \$10 million with one untraceable text message. There must be another

reason.” He put his fingers to his temples and bowed his head in concentration. Suddenly he looked up. “He knows we found Sinclair and wouldn’t pay the ransom” he announced.

“How would he know that?” Hopkins asked. “We’ve kept it off the radio.”

“I gave my guys strict instructions not to touch their radios.” Frank declared.

“The 911 call” Robert said decisively.

“Are you sure?” Martin said with skepticism. “That’s one of the few unscrambled calls I’ve ever made with this phone. I don’t know how they’d know to monitor this phone.”

“They weren’t monitoring *your* phone” Robert answered. “They were monitoring the 911 line. They knew that whenever we found Sinclair, before or after the ransom was paid, we’d call for an ambulance.” He turned to Frank McCollough. “How would an ambulance get to this part of the airport?” he demanded.

“There’s an emergency vehicle gate off an access road” Frank answered. “That way ambulances, fire trucks, and any other emergency responders can avoid the airport traffic. The gate is manned 24/7. We gave them a heads-up call to expect an ambulance as soon as we heard you needed EMTs.”

“Does that gate give them access to the airfield?” Robert asked.

“Well, yes.” Frank answered. “Vehicles are supposed to stay off the runway and taxiways, but there are no physical barriers.”

“Call the gate!” Robert commanded. “Tell them not to let the ambulance through, but don’t make the driver suspicious. They’ve got to get him out of the ambulance before they arrest him. There’s a bomb in the ambulance, and it’s driven by a suicide bomber. If they spook him he’ll blow it up.”

Frank grabbed his cell phone and quickly made a call. Agent Hopkins pulled Robert aside.

“Robert” he said. “Are you sure about this? How would Jamil know what ambulance service the 911 operator would call?”

“He doesn’t have to know that” Robert answered. “All he has to do is station his ambulance closer to the airport than any hospital so he can get here first. The guard at the gate doesn’t know where the ambulance is supposed to come from. He’s just expecting an ambulance.”

The minutes dragged by like hours while we waited in the dingy mechanical room. My mind was focused the access road gate. My neck and shoulders began to ache, and I realized I was braced for the sound of an explosion. Finally Frank’s phone rang.

“They got him!” he announced triumphantly, with his phone pressed to his ear. “They told the driver his rear tire was flat, and they nabbed him when he got out to check it. They say the back of the ambulance is loaded with explosives. They’re calling the bomb squad now.” He listened a little more. “Robert” he called out. “They say another ambulance just pulled up. Can they let it in?”

“Tell them to check for explosives, just to make sure, but it should be OK.” Robert answered.

The next morning Robert again surprised me by getting up and fixing breakfast before I woke up. He cheerfully set a plate of eggs and bacon in front of me as I staggered to the table with a cup of coffee.

“They rounded up most of the terrorists” Robert announced. “The ambulance driver wouldn’t talk, but they arrested Everready when he returned to his apartment to get a passport. He led them to the phony TSA agents.”

“And Jamil?” I asked.

“Not yet.” Robert shook his head. “I’m not surprised. He gets others to do his dirty work, and if things go wrong he’s nowhere near. On a positive note, Ken Sinclair has fully recovered. Now we know why Jamil picked him out of all the possible kidnapping targets.”

“Why was that?” I asked.

Robert looked at me with surprise. It was one of those maddening moments when I realized I was mystified by something he considered perfectly obvious. “Because he was a diabetic” he explained. “Jamil knew that whether we found him on our own or we found out because we paid the ransom, the first thing we’d do was to call an ambulance. He was monitoring the 911 dispatcher to listen for a call about a diabetic coma at the airport. That was his cue to send in the suicide bomber. To him, the kidnapping was just a side show. The genius was that it was a side show that would keep the FBI focused on the wrong threat and which might even net him \$10 million.”

“So what was the real threat” I asked.

Robert set the morning paper beside my plate. It was opened to the sports page. There was a long article about an upcoming FIFA championship series game between the US and the Israeli soccer teams. “They kept the travel plans secret, which is usually good practice but in this case it almost backfired.” Robert said. “If they’d told a few more people, we would have known what Jamil’s target was. The Israeli team landed at LAX yesterday, at 12:47 in the afternoon.”

I let out a low whistle. “He wanted to duplicate the ‘72 Olympics” I said.

“On a smaller scale, perhaps, but yes. Blowing up an Israeli team at a US airport would have carried a lot of weight with his crowd.”

“Any idea where he is now?” I asked.

“No, but I hope to find out.” Robert showed me a blog on his computer. It was the same rock concert blog I’d seen before, but the most recent entry caught my eye.

Everready77: The concert was a bust. My tickets were found to be counterfeit and I almost got arrested as a result. Last time I buy from that dealer.

I looked up at Robert. “It’s a long shot, I know” he said. “But if he doesn’t know we’ve arrested Everready, this may convince him he can’t use his current passport to leave the country. He may ask Everready to help him get a new one.”

“But you said Everready was in jail” I protested.

“Yes.” Robert answered. “The security on these blogs is abysmal. Jamil has taken advantage of that for years. I thought maybe it was time to show them that two could play that game.” He looked at me with a mischievous smile.

Unfortunately, urgent problems with my late sister’s estate forced me to fly to Wisconsin before anyone replied to Robert’s posting. I spent several unpleasant days with bankers and lawyers before everything was in order. When I checked with the airlines, I was overjoyed to find I had just enough time to catch a nonstop flight back to LAX. Late that afternoon, when the cab dropped me off in front of our house I felt a great sense of relief to be home.

Robert was sitting in the living room and looked up at me in surprise when I stepped through the door. “Bill!” he said. “I didn’t expect you until tomorrow at the earliest.”

“I was lucky to catch an early flight” I said as I collapsed into an overstuffed chair. “I’d forgotten how much I hate working with lawyers. Would you believe. . .”

Robert cut me off. He was looking out the window. “Sorry, Bill, but we’ve got company coming. Stuff this in the chair cushions where you can grab it quickly. Hide it with the newspaper.” He handed me a 9mm Glock automatic. He put his finger to his lips before I could ask any questions. Just then the doorbell rang. I stuffed the Glock in the cushions while Robert answered the door.

“Come in! Come in, Mr. Armstrong. I’ve got the papers ready for you to sign.” Robert waved our visitor into the room. He was medium height, with a dark complexion, black hair, and an expensive business suit. He immediately eyed me with suspicion.

“I thought we were going to be alone.” He said.

“Oh, that’s just Bill” Robert said lightly as he crossed the room and stood near the door to the kitchen. “Bill’s my business partner. I never conduct any business without Bill. Or Luther, for that matter.”

At the mention of this second name an enormous German Shepherd trotted in from the kitchen and sat beside Robert, with his eyes fixed on our visitor.

“Get rid of the dog!” the visitor said. “I don’t like dogs.”

“Oh, Luther wouldn’t hurt a flea” Robert said as he bent over and scratched Luther’s head. “Unless you make a sudden move, of course. Then he’ll rip your throat out.” When Robert straightened up I saw that a gun had miraculously appeared in his hand and was leveled at the visitor. I took this as a signal and pulled the Glock out of the cushions.

“It’s amazing how many people are more afraid of a dog than they are of a gun.” Robert continued. “I assure you I could put three bullets in your heart before you even touched your gun, and Bill would be doing the same from the side. The two FBI agents who are backing us up are better shots. They’d be turning your brains into porridge, just in case you were wearing a bullet proof vest. And of course, Luther would be at your throat before your body hit the floor. Some people are willing to go down in a blaze of glory, but very few want to become a life sized chew toy.”

Agent Hopkins magically appeared from the kitchen and Agent Martin slipped out of the hallway as Robert spoke. The stranger briefly glanced at them and their guns, but his eyes were riveted on the dog.

“The game’s up, Jamil.” Robert said. “Lie down with your face to the floor. You can use your hands to ease yourself down, but keep them well away from your body.”

“I, I don’t want to get down. That’s where the dog is.” Jamil pleaded.

“The dog won’t do a thing unless I tell it to” Robert answered. “Or unless you threaten me. If that happens, it won’t matter whether you’re standing, kneeling, or lying in quicksand. The dog will get you.”

Jamil still looked undecided.

“There is another advantage to lying face down,” Robert continued. “It protects your groin.” Jamil gave Robert a questioning look. “Luther doesn’t always go for the throat” Robert said. He clucked his tongue softly after this last sentence. Instantly Luther rose to a crouching position. His ears lay back and a snarl exposed a vicious set of teeth.

Jamil began carefully dropping to his knees. He kept his eyes fixed on the dog and made excruciatingly slow movements, but he eased forward until he was lying face down on the floor. He was careful to keep his hands well away from his body the whole time. Agent Martin frisked him, sliding Jamil’s gun across the floor to Hopkins. Then he handcuffed Jamil’s hands behind

his back and jerked Jamil back to his feet. Luther wagged his tail and barked approvingly when the prisoner was secured.

After Hopkins and Martin had left with their prisoner Robert turned to me and said "Thank you, Bill. I wanted to wrap this up before you got back because I didn't want to expose you to danger, but I'll have to admit I felt much safer with you backing me up from the side. I'm afraid if it had just been me he might have gone for his gun."

"I think Luther might have had something to say about that" I replied.

"Well, maybe." Robert laughed. He looked at his watch. "It's a little early, but I've been so busy making arrangements for our visitor I haven't had anything to eat today. What do you say we grab some fish & chips and an ale at Bradley's?"