



# *Custody*

Installation Seven  
April 2024

Part One

## Custody

September 22, 1992

*Our story has come to Tuesday, September 22, a day and a half after the horrendous Sunday night crash of Dr. Denison LeClerc's clinic van into Myles Lowry's rental vehicle.*

*Many events unfolded in the last two-part installment it might be helpful to recall before beginning this penultimate month of **Custody**. Part One featured many happenings on Sunday the 20<sup>th</sup>, ending with April Smith agreeing to stay on at LeClerc's clinic to look after the unconscious Myles. Part Two revealed the ongoing search for Linda Lowry and her mother Rosalyn, who is influencing the children and adults of **HAPPYDALE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL** by the books she is providing from the library. The search has become complicated by Myles also disappearing without a trace.*

*Ned Hegerman's colleagues have become immersed in other intrigue while working on the Lowry's case.*

*There is a hidden scandal emerging that ties the Mellon law firm to Hegerman's and seems to be at the root of the poor custody settlement Myles was struggling to overturn when Rosalyn and Linda went missing.*

*A long-unsolved bank robbery on Long Island entangles oncologist Denison LeClerc with illicit bearer bonds used to fund his medical education, oncology practice, and cancer clinic. Through information from his friend and former patient, April Smith, LeClerc suspects Lowry has obtained half of the heist spoils—and the doctor wants them back because his half is running out.*

This month, **Custody** continues to examine themes of adult friendship, personal integrity, corporate responsibility, the predisposition and lure of evil behavior and the inclination to goodness and kindness, greed and generosity, coping with illness and death, responsible parenting, family love and loyalty, law and order, adult and child literacy, and the amazing place that reading books can occupy in the formation of remarkable human persons and a just, peaceful society.

If Dominic Corredor had asked Danny Hart over coffee, eggs, and toast in Danny's kitchen who he thought would be the first person to call on what they both expected to be a busy Tuesday in September, he never would have guessed correctly. He would also not have guessed who would be the second and the third callers, either.

"Hart? It's Flynn. You busy" Danny's recollection was that she wasn't much for pleasantries. He saw her once eating a plain Danish. He asked her why she didn't get one with cheese or fruit. He couldn't remember her exact answer, but it had something to do with not getting distracted from the central idea of a thing.

Danny's answer to her question this morning was, "Not more than the usual. A few things to do. But nothing chasing the clock about. Why?"

"I got to ask you about this lawyer guy, Mellon. His girl, Hayes, woke me at six this morning and said I had to drop everything else to be at that apartment at half past nine. I am to meet some woman there." That was all she said.

"And you want to know just . . . what . . . about them?" asked Danny. But he fluttered his free hand Corredor's way to catch his attention and tapped his ear. Dom understood he was to listen and not speak. Hart gently depressed the speaker attachment so they could both hear Flynn.

"What I want to know, Hart, is . . . do these people usually tell other professionals what to do, as if they were stock and serf?" Flynn was prone to using odd phrases to make sure she was being listened to. Dom looked quizzically at Danny, figuring there was some code he didn't know. Danny smiled and just twirled his free hand around horizontally, pivoting at his wrist in a 'just go with it' gesture.

Hart replied, "I did have some commerce with them on other cases, Flynn. They tended to be very dismissive and haughty to me. Maybe it wasn't as much about me personally as I thought it was."

“Well, you got me into this thing . . . sort of. And it’s been okay . . . so far.” Flynn felt like she wanted to say more, if Danny let her. Since he did not interrupt, she went ahead. “But this Hayes . . . she was really testy. And I didn’t do anything . . . today or earlier . . . to deserve it. So, I’m wondering if it’s just some early morning ‘pass-along’ before she could piss, or what?”

“And you’re asking me this . . . why?” inquired Danny.

“Because I don’t know who this woman is. Not Hayes . . . but the one I’m supposed to meet.” She paused, not knowing if she wanted to ask something more or just see if Hart pitched in to carry his end of the conversation.

But back at Hart’s apartment, Dom was mouthing . . . ‘did she get a name?’

And so, Danny said it out loud. “Did she give you a name? How are you supposed to know who you are going to meet?”

“I wasn’t given her name. I was just told she was an old college friend of the Lowry mom, who was ‘intrigued and troubled’ by her disappearance. Seems this Mellon guy thinks her looking around the apartment might move them a few steps down the road in figuring it out.” That was all Angie had to tell them at this early juncture. “Other than that, I’m as in the dark as it was when she called, it being so overcast and anxious to rain today.”

“Flynn? I’d like to check on something. It’ll take about five minutes. But I’ll need the phone to do it. Can you call me right back in five, please?” Danny inquired. She agreed, without knowing what he could possibly accomplish in five minutes.

He put the phone on the cradle and looked toward Corredor. “Do I tell her about what we know and who this woman might be?”

“Who are you thinking of, Danny?” asked the detective.

“Top of my list is Marie or Valerie—last names still unknown.” I don’t know of any other collegian women in Rosalyn’s circle. I hope there aren’t even more. Time’s running out on finding Linda. And my head’s about to

explode over her husband . . . this drug thing I've gotten myself fixated by," was Danny's answer.

Dom replied, "When I was looking for someone early on in an investigation of a disappearance, I always tried to make it look like I needed more help than I did. If I said stuff that made it look like I already knew too much, then I didn't get cooperation, or it was too focused. But if I left it wide open, people typically offered more information. And I'd learn more—often I'd learn new things I didn't even know enough to ask about."

"So, what would you do if you were confronted like this all on your own?" Danny asked in this way hoping that Dom knew he was asking for help, but not because he was treating Dom like a last resort or an underling—like Flynn had said, as a dumb ox or a peasant.

"I'd ask Flynn to see if she could get a name and contact information, by sucking up . . . or probably even better for this madame x . . . acting as if Flynn felt obliged to serve the lady's desires." Acting that way had worked for Detective Corredor before. Even with some real hard-ass society types, whose spoiled rotten kid had run away—over an allowance dispute or a keys-for-the-car refusal.

The two men used every second they had of the five minutes, because Flynn's return call jangled the phone line. Danny explained as little as he had to. "Flynn, if this woman is convinced you are willing to help her, maybe she'll give you her name and contact data."

Angie said, "Yeah, I can do that. It'll kill me. But it's worth a try if my usual approaches fall flat." She waited, then asked, "Any other ideas, Hart?"

"Listen, Flynn. You've never asked me before. What's got you bothered on this?" Danny pursued the uneasy feeling he was getting from this call.

Her voice dropped to a tone she had never used before with him. "Dan. I'm fifty-fifty on whether this Lowry woman ran away, or someone did her and her kid wrong. So, I'm nervous every time I go up and into that place alone. You know, no back-up, even at a distance." She was relying on her instincts more than her pride. It was new ground for her, and she didn't like the slippery footing.

"I might have something to ease that, if you'd like," Hart suggested and asked in the same breath.

"Good. Then you'll come and watch from across the street, Danny?" It was out of her mouth before she could clamp her teeth upon it and bite its head off.

Hart was shocked. "Okay. But let me ask you something. Have you seen a guy walking a dog around the apartment building?"

"Once. But he was heading up the street and away. Why? Should I be worried about him?" she asked.

"No, the opposite. He's a good guy. And his dog is very protective, if he knows you need help and is told to lend you a paw and a jaw," Danny said, slipping into Flynn's vernacular. "We'll introduce you. But in case you need to know beforehand. He's Mike Riley. Tell him I told you." Danny stopped. He regretted he had said this much. "See you over there. We'll stay in the background."

"We? You and Riley?" asked Flynn.

"No, there's more—" Hart couldn't finish, she interrupted him.

"Danny, just you are enough. I didn't ask for the horse soldiers," said Flynn, now back in her comfort zone.

"No, Flynn, . . . more to tell you. Listen, that'll hold 'til later. But you can't tell anyone connected with Mellon. It could cost that little girl dearly if you did." He thought about it and decided. "And Angie, I'll never forgive you if you do that."

"See you soon," was all she said. It just seemed too much and too early for a Tuesday in early autumn.

On the four days she worked at the luncheonette counter, April Smith was accustomed to being awake at six o'clock. But today it would be a man in a hospital bed, not several on breakfast stools, needing her attention.

She looked on as the professional staff checked all the monitors and got Myles awake. They were specifically evaluating whether he should, and could, sit up and carry on a conversation. The morning staff was briefed on his awaking during the night and then receiving a sedative to sleep until morning. The lead nurse was reviewing his chart and his current monitor readings.

The evaluation was that Myles was well enough to stand at his bedside and seemed alert, though not fully aware of where he was or why. He was asked to return to his bed, which he did without objection. While he lay down, the nurse attending to him removed his catheter. Lowry then was allowed, with a male attendant, to cross over to and use the rest room. The staff brought him a wheelchair to travel to the adjacent recovery area, where there was a patient shower. He returned after a while, freshened up, shaved and ready to sit up in a recliner that maintenance brought him to be ready for his return. April watched all the activity from the couch, as the staff transitioned their services from Lowry-the-patient to Myles-the-resident.

After they all had progressively left, one by one, April selectively hand-rotated a few vanes of the vertical blinds to allow some of Tuesday morning's overcast daylight in the area, while still obstructing any view into the portion of the room where Myles sat. The lounge was reverting from an impromptu sickroom to a shadow of its former sunroom self.

The solarium's 'Miss Smith' was more comfortable in the casual wear that LeClerc had his assistant purchase after asking her sizes and clothing preferences. And now she, April, was eager to see if her newfound friend would mirror the return to 'normal' reflected in his surroundings.

Gabriella Costa was very pleased to have her work friends, Eleanor and Karidja, seated around her kitchen table. Their late-night reunion after arriving back with their protective details had been restorative. They had a renewed confidence that putting together all they had learned from their work, and Hart's reporting, would help Eleanor with Bruce and the accountants later that afternoon. And they were hoping the S.E.C. retiree would add immensely to the legal implications with which Karidja could augment Quatrane's arsenal.

Only after all the Lowry and Hegerman business was completed did their talk turn, at last and inevitably, to how they felt about Danny showing up again.

Karidja Soro seemed buoyed by having his experience available again. She remarked that if it took Danny's absence to add Dominic's expertise to their efforts, she was grateful. Especially, she felt, if Hart was going to be off distractedly hunting down drug cartels and Myles's business dealings. Her hopes were that Detective Corredor would be focused on finding Linda Lowry.

For her part, Eleanor Quatrane found it very uncomfortable to come to terms with having worked with Hart without her colleagues knowing about it. She was certainly not admitting to it this morning. Her sense was it would undo everything they had gained in the last day and night. Besides, she was honing her concentration onto Godfrey Mellon and the looming deadline for Thomas Bruce to provide him with what he needed to unravel Ned's legacy.

Gaby was more personally introspective. Danny Hart was older than she should be thinking of a man to befriend in an exclusive way, while his sidekick, Dominic Corredor, was not. However, the detective was already spoken for, with young girls and a wife waiting for him at home, if Linda Lowry had indeed derailed the haunted phase of his life. Gabs had told Dan the first time they spoke in the reading room, that she was not one of the young, bar-hopping employees of the law firm. Yet, sitting here in her Brooklyn three-story, she wondered if she should fear becoming a spinster—



condemned, first to care for her aging mother, and then left stone-cold-hollowed-out after her mom's passing.

224

The sympatico between a middle-aged veteran living alone and his rescued dog had few comparisons in urban American life in 1992. It was their fond empathy to sense the stiffness in one another's joints on a damp and overcast September morning. Getting out and walking together before it full out started to rain was essential to living this day, so that it did not end in an evening of sterile television and tangible regret, mourning something neither even knew they had lost. Stepping out onto the moistened grass and the drop-spotted cement, each in his own way did know, however, that one of the best things and daily joys of their recent lives were the laughing smile and friendly voice of Linda Lowry.

Of course, Angie Flynn had no way of knowing this about the man and his dog she had seen before. And certainly, Marie Aello did not either. The difference being that, as Hegerman's daughter saw them pass her by in the dead end's parking space, Aello couldn't give what Mike would pick up from the grass between the street and the sidewalk down the block some. And Flynn, at least, had a name to call out if she found herself in distress. She pulled into the dead end to park and look for her assignment several minutes after Mike passed and she did not see him on her way in.

Angie's second foot was not yet on the pavement when she heard a piercing voice call out, "You Flynn?"

"Yes. That would be me. Good morning. And you are?" asked Angie casually and in a friendly tone.

"I are . . . here to see the apartment. You have a key, yes," was all the woman replied.

The two of them made an interesting contrast, standing awkwardly and facing each other . . . in a way that suggested they only needed a costume change, a dirt street, and the OK Corral off in the background. Not quite Mutt and Jeff, they needed something to defuse this about-to-be-standoff.

Flynn was neither a runway model nor a candidate for obesity medications. But at five feet and four inches, she carried more of her 156 pounds between her knees and her bust than she might have preferred. She had never smoked, drank only moderately, and was schooled in two disciplines of oriental balance, tranquility, and if need be, self-defense. She was also annually proficient in her small firearms qualification for her carry permit as a private investigator in the States of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. The latter meant she could keep and display her firearm if she was working around the tri- or bi-state areas around Port Jervis or Trenton or Philadelphia.

Aello stood a slim, well-proportioned five-eleven barefoot. Her daily post-shower, pre-dressing admiration, in her walk-in closet's full-length mirror, confirmed this again just two hours ago. She chose heels today to put her over the desired six-foot mark. After her collegiate and law school domination, she had found that her predisposition to look down on people became aided by physically being able to see them through downcast eyes. But unlike in those early years of practicing law, occasionally some in the legal community were heard to say that, these days, it was only because of those shoes that people looked up to her.

Sounding not quite like a realtor, Flynn broke the street-frieze by saying, "So, you'd like to see the apartment?"

"That's the idea. You can give me the key and wait here," was Aello's reply.

"Sorry, that's not the arrangement I have with Attorney Mellon. No one goes in without my being there," Flynn pointed out, not quite in protest. Just a statement of fact. "I'd have to hear from his office directly to comply with your request." Without missing a beat, she added, "And unfortunately, they've turned off the phone in the place to save paying the bill." Angie's methods were more straightforward than Hart's. They had to be; she was a woman working in a man's world. But she felt this refusal was a good set-up to capitulate later and get the name Danny wanted.

Flynn gambled the woman would not make the call. She did not seem the type to climb into her car and drive somewhere to make a call, only to have to come all the way back again, perhaps disparaged and embarrassed. She was right; the woman did not challenge her.

But so as not to push her luck, and to maintain the balance of power, with the heavier and shorter person at the base of the emotional seesaw, after Flynn turned the key and pocketed it, she stood aside and stayed out on the landing, allowing the woman to enter first and on her own. She was also mindful of not wanting to turn her back on this woman when they were not out in the open. Flynn took a half step forward and placed her foot on the lintel, to keep the door from being accidentally shut or closed belligerently. She watched the visitor from that vantage point as she passed through the front rooms.

Aello's viewing was systematic and unapologetic. She opened drawers and cabinet doors. It seemed she was looking at what was there, not really looking for a particular object or item. She rustled window treatments and moved them aside to see that there was nothing behind them, or even sequestered in them. Like every non-professional searcher, the places the woman looked were more telling about herself than they were about people in general, or knowledgeable about the Lowrys in particular.

When the woman headed down the hall toward the bath and two bedrooms, Angie stepped in and quietly eased the door closed behind her and thumbed in the lock button on the interior knob. She wanted to minimize surprises from behind and keep the odds one-on-one with her potential adversary in front of her and in her sight line. When Flynn passed by the front room window that looked out on the dead end, she was offered another sight line. A welcome one at that. Mike Riley and his dog were at the corner, in a light rain, speaking to a man on the sidewalk whose face was shielded by his umbrella. If the woman in the bedroom saw them, she'd mistake them for neighbors. Angie recognized Hart's ploy to be there and not be there. She was greatly relieved and got on with her task for Danny.

It was an odd thing that Flynn saw the woman doing in the master bedroom, as she looked in unnoticed from the hallway. The middle draw of the dresser was pulled out almost all the way. The woman was down on one knee, her back to the door, and she was reaching into the dresser with her hand upturned to feel the bottom underside of the drawer. The edge and side of the bedspread were still peeled back and laying atop the mussed sheets, as would be the case if someone was searching the space between the mattress and box spring. It was a poor substitute for rearranging bedding to allow a model train to run beneath a bed. Angie stepped back so as not to be seen or

heard. She made her way back inside to the front room and sat down in an armchair, to silently await this visitor's return.

Since Danny had once told her about the mother's disorder and reading fixation, she had taken up a paperback book from a side table and was paging through it to appear to be minding her own business and disinterestingly passing the time. What she was actually doing was making notes on a blank page she had torn from the book, constructing a list of the books visible on the shelves in the room, to give to Hart, if Mellon didn't want it.

She was upset that she was being drawn in by Hart's gravitational pull. She never really went out of her way even to know him, let alone to like him. But she had invited his intercession. She had only herself to blame. It was disquieting to feel that she might be following in his footsteps though, moving from one camp in this divorce and custody struggle to the other. She started feeling that the center of that gravity was most likely neither of the adversaries, but their six-year-old daughter instead.

Mulling these things over was abruptly disrupted by the profane reappearance of the tall woman from down the hallway. "I can't find anything that's going to help Mel . . . my friend Rosalyn. This is a freakin' waste of time. There's got to be more stuff here. Where else could she keep her sh . . . junk?"

"I don't know. All I was given was the key to the door and the mailbox in the foyer, downstairs." Flynn tried to keep this on an even keel. "But if you wish to leave your name and contact information with me, I'll get in touch with you right away if I learn anything else."

Aello looked right passed her—an easy thing to do for someone used to looking right through people as if they didn't exist. "Don't you dare let that mutt piss on my tires," she screamed at the shut and locked window." And with that she fled across the room, almost snapped off the locked knob, tore open the door and was taking the stairs down, two at a time. It was an amazing feat in and of itself, but with high heels on it was somewhat astounding to witness. Angie Flynn only caught up to her as she was attempting to chew Riley an orifice he medically would not find it easy to manage each time he sat on a toilet.

Luckily, while under the umbrella, Hart had been able to warn Mike who this woman was, and he acted with appropriate restraint, with a better goal in mind than the immediate satisfaction he might have demanded in his younger years. But Mike's dog was not having it. "Please lady, take a step back before the dog thinks you're a threat," entreated Riley as he struggled with the twisting, tugging leash.

She did and the dog heeled on command, but growled deeply in his throat. "You two live here?" was the woman's unapologetic verbal attack. The growl elevated to a snarl.

"Yes, we do. May we help with something? My name is Mike." He did not offer the dog's name. No one knew the dog's name, but Mike. No one would ever distract his dog by speaking his name.

The tall woman did not introduce herself. She just barged on into her business. "So where—other than your apartment—can you store things here? Is there a tenants' storage area, or something?"

Before Mike could answer, it occurred to Angie that she had never been told about such a place and, to her chagrin, she had never asked this question. "Please wait here," asked Riley. "I'll put the dog in my apartment and show you."

"I'm in a hurry. Can't you just tie the dog up or something?" she was on a tear, this woman who wished to remain anonymous. Both Riley and Flynn knew if they could just aggravate her some more, she would be frustrated enough to leave them with her name and address and phone number.

"Look, Ma'am. It's raining. I'm not leaving my dog outside." Mike's 'ma'am' ratcheted up her ire all the more. "If he comes with us and you walk where you shouldn't he's liable to bite you in the leg. And if you reach for something, he might go for your arm. So please, just a moment." Mike asserted his will by showing them into his foyer and out of the rain. He asked them to wait by the mailboxes while he ascended the stairs to his place. From his window on the third floor, he saw Hart approach the cars in the dead end and take a picture with his little camera of the lady's car and its license plate. If it wasn't a rental like Myles used, it may tell him what he

wanted. There was no long lens on the camera though, so the chances were not good for Hart to get a snapshot of this woman without being found out.

"It's about time," she needled him, as he came back down the stairs. Riley invited them both to, "Follow me, please." He—and they—walked down and around the hallway in three quarters of a circle. He unlocked the door and reached in to switch on an overhead light illuminating the stairwell. Riley left the door open at the bottom of the stairwell, to benefit adding to the basement lighting. A moment later they were obliterating the sneaker prints in the floor dust. Danny would not get a picture of the clear prints he had hoped for by grabbing his camera as they quickly had left his apartment. .

Mike pointed them toward the cage immediately to their left. "That is the Lowry's storage space."

Angie Flynn stood stock still, just a few footsteps into the basement. She could not imagine how Mellon had left this out. Had not asked her to examine this portion of the rental agreement each week, when she checked out the apartment. Apparently, she might have had more to tell Mellon had she known. She also scolded herself for not figuring out this would be there. And there was a glint in her mind that shone off the piece she would now reserve to give to Danny Hart for his silence on the matter.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the woman's high heels clicking on the cement floor, as she stalked directly over to the locked wood-framed, slashed wire-mesh door, with a singular sense of purpose. As her eyes adjusted to the dimmer light further away from the stairwell, she uttered a profanity befitting an illegitimate child, just not of her gender. "What the fuck happened here? she demanded.

Riley offered, "Only tenants with personal keys come down to their own locked cages, Miss \_\_\_\_\_." But she didn't fill in the blank as he had hoped.

"Mellon only gave me a key for the apartment and the mailbox," chimed in Flynn, firmly putting the woman's own attorney on the chopping block.

"Knife!" the woman exclaimed. There was no reply. She shook the cage door fiercely, thinking it flimsy. She was surprised by its actual sturdiness. In

fact, she was impressed. She dismissed thoughts of random, or neighborly, vandalism of an absentee tenant's belongings from her consideration. "Knife?" this time it was a request, accompanied by extending her hand in Riley's direction.

"Not me, ma'am. That's private stuff in there." Mike's insistence of respecting privacy was taken as a corrective comment the woman did not like. But what she absolutely detested was his 'ma'aming' her again.

"I'm not a fucking ma'am, you asshole. Give me a goddamn knife." Her voice raised an octave up her heels.

"Not from me, ma'am. Now you see I wasn't wrong to put the dog upstairs. He'd be tasting your hosiery by now if I hadn't." Mike hoped 'hosiery' instead of 'pantyhose' would crank her even further.

"If you call me ma'am again, I'll be the one biting. And it'll be your head I take off." She was now up to screaming, severely unaccustomed to not getting her way and not having her wishes anticipated, let alone denied.

"May I ask how you arrived here, please?" Mike asked, calmly.

"How do you think? I drove. Why?" she was furious at feeling played with.

Riley's response reminded Flynn of a flash bang grenade tossed stealthily at a suspect hiding in an enclosed space. "Because I didn't see a chauffeured vehicle and I didn't hear a high horse that might have been ridden onto our property," he paused only a split second for the woman to turn on him and for Flynn to make sure her jacket wasn't in the way of her drawing her concealed sidearm. "And I'd be more than happy to cease with ma'aming you, if you'd be good enough to tell me your name, so I can speak to you properly and personally." His smiling teeth were the only part of his face that wasn't as hard as the stone rip rap lining the railroad ravine out back, where the morning freight was barreling along.

"It's Marie Aello, prick. And Mellon's going to eat you alive when he gets you in court for interference of—"

Now it was Flynn's turn. And with Marie's name in hand for Danny, there was nothing left to lose. "Just wait a moment, Miss Aello, is it? Miss Hayes did not say anything about your being down here. She was very explicit about Attorney Mellon saying you demanded to have a chance to see inside Rosalyn Lowry's apartment, because you thought you could help a friend in distress. That being the case . . . and that being her directions . . . made urgently and unapologetically at six o'clock this morning . . . I think it's time for you to leave, please."

"We'll see about that when we call Mellon's office," Aello claimed.

"But there is no phone here to do that, as I explained when we were upstairs earlier," Angie reminded her.

"What about yours?" Aello demanded of Riley.

He looked at her directly and said, "Sorry, ma'am. Dog chewed the wire he was so excited this morning by all the new cars in the dead end he didn't recognize. You see, he's very protective of the property. Very protective of the tenants and their children. He really loved little Linda. He misses playing with her in the yard."

Flynn just couldn't resist. "You wouldn't happen to know where we could bring the dog so he could play with Linda again, would you, Miss Aello?"

As she spun around and went up the stairs, Aello cursed and swore, suggesting they each perform acts of self-copulation, not presuming them to be in a relationship.

"I'm locking up that apartment, Mr. Riley. Would you mind looking for our friend with the umbrella and see what he wants done next, please? I have a feeling he's not done asking yet."

Eleanor answered the desk phone. It was too early to hear from Karidja, so she wondered who it would be.



Yes, this is Quatrane. Oh, yes, Mr. Riley from the other night. Good morning, how are you this morning.”

“I’m better than Marie Aello,” was all he said.

“How’s that Mr. Riley?” she asked.

“How about we make this Eleanor and Mike, instead. What do you say?” he suggested.

“That’s fine by me, if you’d like.” He agreed it would be very much to his liking and they went back to the conversation. “But I don’t understand what you told me.”

“Hegerman’s daughter’s name is Marie Aello. Attorney Marie Aello. But she talks and acts pretty thuggish for a lawyer,” Mike told her. He then went on to explain the happenings of the last two hours west of the Hudson, and the phone calls that preceded them. “Danny asked me to call, because he’s already off to his next stop and he’s added a new shadow turncoat to the mix.”

“I’m not exactly sure what that means—but from what I know of Danny, and what I am learning about how quaintly you and his other friends express yourselves—I suspect what you mean is that, yet again, another investigator has defected from the ‘dark side’ in favor of our Princess Linda.”

“Hart was so right when he promised I would like talking to you. He says you will hear from him or the new partisan directly, when the time is right.” Riley was about to say he was going to take his dog for a walk, but something more pressing occurred to him, and he changed his mind.

“Wait, wait, something just came to me . . . you have a secure fax number only you see . . . in case I have something else for only you to read?”

“Yes, I do in fact,” she told him and gave him the number, which he wrote down on his phone pad.

“It’s a different number . . . it is separate from this phone line we are on, right?” She confirmed it was. He said, “Good. So, how’s this? I will call you to make sure you know I am using the fax. And I’ll stay on the line to get a

confirmation whatever I sent came through and is clear enough for you to read.”

Quatrane told him, “Mike, I’m on a tight schedule with my boss, Thomas Bruce, for this Mellon thing today. I’m likely going to be out of time by noon for anything I need this afternoon.”

He replied, “I’ll do the best I can. And . . . Eleanor . . . you’ve got my number if you need me, right?”

“All three of us know how to reach you by phone, Mike.” She didn’t wait long before adding. “But I dare say it will take us more time than we’ve had so far to be able to say that we’ve got your number.”

He laughed. Said, “Goodbye, Eleanor,” and hung up before she could reply. He never got to tell her he was going out to walk the dog.

226

It wasn’t the worst retirement home that Karidja Soro had entered to see a client, or to interview a perspective participant in a dispute resolution. But it also wasn’t the top of the line. Its age was beginning to show. The furnishings in the lobby, where she was asked to wait for a representative of the managing office, were clean and certainly comfortable enough, if slightly out of date and more commercial than, well, homey. She hoped the rest of the experience and staff here were as, well, honest.

Karidja had, of late, begun talking to her interior self, debating and weighing things out reflectively. She wondered if it was related to adjusting to working without a mentor or, well, without a friend.

The lawyer thought she heard the voice breaking into her reverie say, “Hello, I’m Missie.” At the same time the slightly high pitched, post-pubescent voice, that might only drop an octave after menopause, said her name, its contrapuntal left hand pointed to the letters on her name tag. Their partner in glee, otherwise known as a right hand, extended itself to be shaken in greeting. Karidja was slow to take up the offer, for she was still stuck back on why this woman’s parents would, first, choose such a name, and, second,

spell it MISSIE. With that few second delay, Soro did take the offered hand to shake it. It was not a convincing welcome. Missie's hand was not exactly limp, but it wasn't reassuring or, well, firm.

Karidja followed Missie toward her first-floor office, as she was invited to do. As she walked, she could not decide if this woman got the job because the hiring manager couldn't resist breaking the paradigm of what guests and business callers probably expected to meet and greet, christened with just that name. It occurred that maybe there were proverbial strings attached. Perhaps that was because Missie's walk was somewhat stilted and mechanical or, well, marionette-like. Soro would soon find out why she was hired; and it was, well, none of the above.

Missie's office looked like a textbook sketch of an OCD workplace. On the one sheet of paper, laid flat in the manilla file folder passed across the desk, Karidja used the sharpened number two graphite pencil to fill out her VISITOR'S INFORMATION FORM. It was the first time she had ever seen such a form have a sizeable space at the bottom remain blank, below the double line circumscribing the heading STAFF COMMENTS ONLY.

It was in that space, after Missie read over the completed form she had accepted back from Soro in the file folder, that she used her own pencil to enter her comments, after asking the visitor a few other-than-standard questions.

"So, Attorney Soro, you wish to see our resident, Mr. Joshua Winston." Missie voiced a statement not a question.

"Yes, please," she answered.

"And you were referred to Mr. Winston, by . . .?" Missie inquired almost wistfully, creating a blank space in which to fill out an answer.

"Excuse me?" said Soro, stalling for time to draw out what seemed to be going on under the surface of this pseudo-conversation.

"I meant to ask who referred you to Mr. Winston?" Missie said quite confessionally.

"I am sorry, Miss . . ." paused Soro, noticing there was no surname on either her breast plate or the desk stand, each only proclaiming 'Missie.'

With practiced ease, Missie ignored the inquiry and repeated her own. "Referred by . . ."

"I am sorry to say that would come under your column for attorney-client privilege." Karidja had learned in negotiating classes that it was important to respect the other party in the discussion, including affirmations of how they saw, and operated in, the world. But in making her own way as a woman in a man's world, she had developed a surgical skill to use that inroad to get under another's skin, not to empathize, but to sow disquiet, if the other party was recalcitrant to the process of mutual exchange of respect and information. The phrase she used as an internal mantra of sorts was, well, hypodermic antagonism.

Missie was undone.

No one had invaded her space, in her own place, like this before. Sure, many who came to see someone living at the retirement home had something to hide—wanted money, wanted a will changed, wanted to sell life insurance—and had anxiously inquired or mildly protested. But she always calmed them and got her way, that is, the forms filled out and her disarming screening of visitors eventually completed successfully.

Based on Missie's profiles, some visitors were never welcome to return; declared as not wanting to be seen by their resident-clients—whose wishes, of course, stated in a sing-songy rejection—'they had to respect, you understand.' Or others whose profiles were set aside. These were culled by ADMISSIONS and developed further. These were candidates to receive unsolicited mailings and phone promotions highlighting the many benefits of their personal consideration to join the facility as permanent residents themselves.

Soro was beginning to see things differently than she had earlier, outside this room. She wondered how many visitors had been lulled into revelations, they may not have made otherwise, by this sing-songy voice that almost seemed to be talking, not to them, but to itself when, well, figuring what to write in the blanks—like she might have done earlier in life on an academic worksheet.

Missie recognized that this Attorney was different from all the rest who had come before her in the two years she worked here for her uncle Godfrey.

In an earlier, pre-treatment time of her life, Missie would have placed the pencil sideways in her mouth and started gnawing it like an ear of corn. But her therapist, ironically working down the hall at that very moment with a resident who had missed his meds, had hypnotized her to imagine that pencil to be other than itself—as something to slather in buttery comments before gnashing it to bits and throwing away the cob after she was satisfied and done. That was how she had been programmed to respond to difficult people who wanted to make trouble for the facility.

She picked up the intercom on the desk, otherwise bearing nothing but the open manilla folder. Without any explanation to Soro, she spoke. “Is Mr. Winston still in his morning preparations?” There was a pause. “And how long will that be?” Another pause “Okay, then. Thank you.”

Returning to the give-and-take with Soro, with no sing-song lilt to be heard, Missie reported, “It seems we have another ten minutes before your client will be ready to see you, Ms. Soro.” She paused and set the INFORMATION SHEET, whose bottom was without comments, inside the precise center of the folder. She closed it and placed it within the center drawer of her desk. Doing so required Missie to move her chair back some and to inhale to extricate her midsection from the space the drawer needed to occupy.

Wanting to be clear and above any charges of deceitful practice, Karidja spoke up. “He is not my client.”

Purposefully mocking the lawyer by repeating her own words back at her, Missie proclaimed, “Excuse me?”

“Mr. Winston is not my client.” Cryptic. Unmistakable truth.

“Well, who then is?” Missie was dutifully interested and less automated in her response.

“That was what is privileged,” said the attorney.

“Do you mean to place a ball of yarn on my lap in front of my . . . me . . . as a kitten . . . to unravel? Or do you plan to reveal your meaning and reason for being here?”

Karidja was thankful for two things. First, that Missie was definitely so off her game that she revealed Karidja should be suspect of this place . . . and perhaps why Mr. Winston was here, up in Riverdale. And second, that she had enough control to stop just before being, well, so crude.

“I am here because Mr. Winston was present at an activity that may have been criminal. I have been sent to see if he qualifies as a potential material witness. More than that I can not say. But I hope telling you this, Miss . . .” there was nothing Missie wished to say to fill in the blank . . . “may assure you that my visit is legitimate and without ill intent.”

Missie took the folder out of her desk drawer, opened it to expose the INFORMATION FORM, took her still intact, unchewed pencil, and neatly printed on the bottom of the form the words: To see about a crime from the past. She rotated the paper to face Karidja and then applied sufficient pressure against the top of the page with her fingertips, passed it across the desk without lifting her hand, saying, “May I ask if this is accurate? Will this do, do you think?”

Karidja said, “Yes. To each of your questions. Thank you.”

After replacing the sheet in the folder and the folder to the drawer, Missie stood and, placing the pencil in the adjacent drawer, declared, “I prefer a number two pencil. What about you?”

Soro had yet to empty the last of her acerbic solution from the verbal hypodermic. This seemed as good a time as any to plunge in the last few ‘cc’s. “As a woman, I prefer them for crossword puzzles. As a lawyer, though, I care for them only in situations where the graphite does not write what polite society calls number two. And when whatever is written is not later erased.”

Missie colored from her forehead down to the top of her collar, and probably below that too, but she was too tightly covered up for that to show. “Your ten minutes is up. Please come this way.”

227

Danny and Dom made one stop on the way back from the apartment to Danny's place.

The desk sergeant didn't know it was Hart coming into the station under the rain protection. But when he saw the umbrella collapse and knew the person entering the station was 'a friendly' he relaxed. After an exchange of some small talk about the weather, he said he would pass along to Howe the new information about Marie Aello, and the license plate and car information Danny photographed and wrote down from memory afterwards. The sergeant promised to ask the detective to run the information, in case it related to the disappearance and activity after that at the apartment. And he would have her send over to Danny any residential address for Aello, if it was connected to the car's registration or a rental reservation receipt.

Dom was surprised when Danny told him all this in the car, where he had remained to stay dry, to keep the car from being stolen, and because they still agreed Corredor should avoid police stations as much as possible, especially those with cameras. Danny said, "The sergeant is clearly respecting Howe's wishes. However cordial he might be to me, that man is a cop, and he surely isn't doing any of this for me, or on my say so. I can assure you that we each know that."

228

Sparked by the previous day's acceptance of the class reading list idea by Administrator Grey, Rosalyn had decided she could stop this Tuesday morning to see Mrs. Steadman before classes began and she went to work in the library. Rosalyn was pleased to see that the teacher must have heard the Monday night voice message request on her home phone and had come in early to begin her day.

Mrs. Steadman started their conversation. "Most of the girls are reading better than they were a week and a half ago. Your book selections, Mrs. Lowry, have been very appropriate for the most part. I'm looking forward to the next round you are going to suggest."

The librarian passed the teacher a typed list she had made Monday after meeting with the Administrator. She gave Mrs. Steadman a chance to look it over before starting to talk about the list, the girls, and the books.

“For Ashleigh and any of the others who were liking Winnie-the-Pooh and the poetry style of *Now We Are Six*, you might find them comfortable enough with the style and the characters to move onto more difficult reading in *When We Were Very Young*. I do not think it matters that the subject matter is somewhat earlier in the life of Christopher Robin than when he was six years old. The girls who are reading this might find the pacing and the rhyming helps with the fun of the reading, and the sounding out of some of the words, expecting them to sound alike at the end of the lines.”

When Rosalyn gave her a copy of the book, the teacher asked, “What about the other Pooh books?”

“Rosalyn said, “I think they will be on the third-grade list for some, and maybe even the fourth-grade list for others. Each of them is more of a story book, if not exactly a ‘chapter book’ as some of the kids and parents and teachers call them. The narrative is more drawn out and requires more remembering of what went before, and nurturing the expectation of what might come next, and how they are connected. That calls for more reading maturity. And the vocabulary requires more ability and confidence to sustain the experience and not to give up on it, and on reading, as a result.”

Steadman opined, “That’s too bad for the poetry lovers in the class.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten them. I just changed the authors and selected a longer book for more weeks of reading. Mr. Shel Silverstein has a lovely book of poems and drawings. Its title is *A Light in the Attic*. I think the Pooh graduates and their parents will find this book enjoyable. I also think you might as well. And, I feel their classmates would be amazed at the poems and dazzled that their classmates can read them, if you invite some of the students to read aloud during a class or two. I think Portia and Denise would do well with that.” Rosalyn handed the library copy of the book to the teacher for her to see and heft.

She continued, “I have picked two books that I think would be wonderful, if not a little challenging for Amanda, Betty, and Laura. I say this because they spend time together and could help each other read and talk



about the books. They are *The Boy Who Held Back the Sea* by Thomas Locker and Lenny Hort. It has glorious artwork they can enjoy and discuss. The text to read is set up to appear not threatening or overwhelming. The letters are crisp and a good size. And they do not fill the page. White space around the type encourages reading comfortably." Rosalyn opened the book she had brought with her for Mrs. Steadman and showed her a page spread or two quickly to demonstrate the appearance of the book's interior. "The story is a retelling of a Hans Brinker tale, so it will give them a head start in knowing that story when they are ready to read it as an original in a later grade."

"These three girls also seem adventurous. A second book I'd suggest for them is this one, *Pea Patch Island*. It's also illustrated, and the story is exciting. I think they will find it engaging. They could take turns reading a page spread to each other and help out with the words, and point out where the pictures are showing what the words are relating." She again opened a page or two to give the teacher a visual sampler of the inside of the book.

And then, Rosalyn carefully moved on to the harder messaging.

"I was thinking that Deirdre should not stay in a reading group with those three girls. She's been leading them around through the *Choose Your Own Adventure* Books. It has ceased being a challenge and the three girls are not breaking out on their own, as far as their advancement in reading, as I see it in their visits to the library. I'm also unsure how much the three are somewhat 'covering up' for Deirdre's reading deficiencies." Rosalyn made her observations somewhat rhetorical, by continuing on apace in her presentation.

"I would like to try an experiment. I'd like to have Deirdre and Clementine work together in a related exercise. I have two fairly intriguing *Choose Your Own Adventure* books for them to use. And I have a board game they can work on together after school in the library—to extend the cooperative challenge that the *Adventure* books nurture." She explained nothing else about it. She just asked about the reading. "What do you think about them reading together?"

Mrs. Steadman appeared a little taken aback. "I don't know that those two girls get along very well. You know they had a set-to a week or so ago."

"Yes, Linda told me. That's why I want to try this. I can really monitor them closely. I have a little more time and flexibility than a full-time teacher is able to direct at just two students. And they won't have any social pressure of other kids looking on." She paused. "Would it be okay with you if I give it a try, for a week or two?"

"I suppose. If Ms. Grey cleared it, I don't want to be an obstacle," said Linda's second grade classroom leader. She switched the subject before Rosalyn had to clarify or correct her assertion about the Administrator. "And what will Linda be moving on to after *Black Beauty*?"

Rosalyn said, "She's starting some stories from *The Arabian Nights* illustrated collection we had in the library."

Mrs. Steadman was a little hesitant, but only said, "Oh. That's wonderful." She waited for the mother-librarian to weigh in, but she only said, "Well, I've taken enough of your time, Mrs. Steadman. I'll have additional copies of the books I've shown you available for the girls when you bring the class over this afternoon." And with that, Rosalyn departed, and Mrs. Steadman went back to getting ready for her class for the day.

229

They had settled back in at Danny's to assess where they should go next. The answer was provided for them when the phone rang—the second time that day neither could have guessed who would be on the other end of the line.

Danny waited to hear the caller begin to leave a message and only then would decide whether he wanted to pick up, or hear the message and then return the call. He did not recognize the woman's voice as the machine began recording. "Hello? I was hoping to speak to a Mr. Danny Hart. I was referred by Mr. Myles Lowry. My name is Itzel Cocom, and I am—"

Danny grabbed the phone handset so she wouldn't hang up. But he kept the anxiousness out of his voice, at the chance to speak to this woman.

"Hi. This is Hart. Who is this again, please? I'm just coming in and I heard you voice, but not everything you said," he feigned.

"Yes. Mr. Danny. This is Itzel Cocom. I am a business associate of Myles Lowry. He had your calling card on his desk. When I saw your profession printed under your name, I decided to call you rather than his law firm." Her speech accelerated with each phrase. He was hoping to keep track of what she was saying, not wanting to ask her to stop and repeat herself. "I am very worried about Myles. I have not seen him or heard from him for too many days. He has missed planned meetings with me. And some extremely important business matters are passing by unattended. I just—"

Danny interrupted her. "Wait, please. Miss Cocom." Danny gestured to Dom and pointed at the handset. He spun his hand in a 'hurry up' gesture, to signal Dominick he should get ready to move. "Are you saying that you think something is wrong? That something has happened to Myles?"

"Yes. That's what I am trying to tell you. I—"

Again, Hart spoke up. It was uncommon for him to do so. He usually wanted to hear everything a client had to say, especially in an excited state, before he cut in. But he had a much bigger issue in mind. "Are you at Myles's office right now?" he asked.

"Why, yes. I am." She said in surprise.

"I'll take the tunnel and be there in less than an hour. Don't call anyone else. And I may bring an associate. Goodbye."

Despite Hart's imperative, Itzel did make one call.

Dominic Corredor had taken it all in, as he was getting his jacket out of the front closet. And it had taken him aback. "Geez, Hart, you didn't even give her a chance. What's with that?"

"She didn't know where Myles was—so he wasn't in need of immediate saving; it wasn't life or death." Hart was gathering his things to leave, keys, billfold, jacket. And straightening out the papers he had been reading. "I desperately want to see his office. Today. While she is there." He

went to the kitchen and washed his hands off at the sink. "And I did not want her asking if I knew where he was."

Danny slowed down. "I am going to use the bathroom." He started toward his bedroom. "I didn't mean to presume upon you, but I'd sure like you to come along, if you would. Are you up for it?" He did not maintain eye contact, so Corredor would have to answer verbally.

"Sure. What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"We'll go over it in the car. Let's be ready in five minutes to hit the elevator, okay?" the last part of his question was hard to hear. He was already past his bedroom door.

230

Mike Riley took the dog out back behind the apartment building for a walk, when he was finished on the phone with Quatrane. After a perimeter walk, some sniffing, and marking some territory, the walk was over, and the work began. They went into the basement together to the Lowry's cage. Mike opened the padlock with the key Myles had left with him for the left side of the pair of enclosures. Riley told the dog to sit and stay outside the cage. He obeyed, but it wasn't easy. He fought off going in to check Dom's lingering scent on the left side or going across the front of the right side to probe where Rosalyn's perspiration from her torn clothing still cloyed to the cage. His instincts were to protect Mike. But he did what he was told, ready for a new command.

Riley carefully peeled back the bent mesh Myles had snipped between the two cages, using the wire cutters Mike had slipped to him on the earlier foray. Mike reached in as far as his arm could stretch. His thumb and forefinger barely touched the envelope that he noticed initiated Aello's temper tantrum about not being allowed in the cage.

Upstairs, with his dog huddled near his legs, Riley steamed open the envelope over his tea kettle. He sat in the morning's increasing light coming through his window, watching the edge of the papers inside the now

transparent package. He did not want to slice the folded sheets as he pried open the loosened glue on the flap.

Mike whistled softly as he re-read the two typed pages, dated in 1972 below the two signatures. As soft as the air was that passed through his lips, it was enough to stiffen his dog's muscles and prick his ears. The man told him, "Easy, boy. I have to go out. Wait here for me."

231

Missie handed Karidja off to some sort of orderly dressed in a medical facility uniform. She did not include a farewell. Her colleague's apparel was a tapered-fit soft fabric outfit, light blue top and tan trousers, over his darker brown soft-soled, comfort shoes.

The blue and tan were the décor color scheme as well. It was most likely an interior designer's nod to earth and sky. The halls had the tan up to a horizontal bar for walking support, with the blue above. In other cases, three walls of the rooms they passed were one color, and the fourth wall accented the space with the companion hue. From one room to another, the colors were exchanged as prominent or complementary. Even the elevator they had taken up a few floors was color schemed.

On the upper floor, they entered a large, bright solarium together. Before he left, the man silently gestured to direct Karidja to two blue fabric covered chairs made of tan finished wood. The chairs addressed a mid-height table and were arranged at ninety degrees to each other. The other sides of the table were suitable for rolling up a wheelchair, as a guest and a resident were doing across the sunroom from where Karidja sat. All in all, there were four arrangements of this type in the diametrically set corners of the room, which also featured four other tables in the center portion of the space. Two of them were set with some paperback books and magazines, but not the morning's newspaper. The other two had jigsaw-puzzles-in-progress. There was ample floor space between all the tables to allow for wheelchair clearance. A more open space, free of table obstacles, faced the windows that looked out on the Riverdale shoreline. One lone resident sat in her wheelchair and gazed out on the morning view of the Hudson and the palisades over in Jersey.

"Miss?" came a soft voice, modulated by practice, so as not to disturb others and to preserve privacy of a conversation. The woman was attired in the blue and tan signature garb. She was slight of build, bright of face, and in her early middle ages.

"Mr. Winston would prefer to have me bring you to his room for a visit, rather than coming to the sunroom this morning. Would that be okay with you?" Her voice came from two places. A pleasant smile and the islands.

Karidja gathered her things and stood to follow, "That would be fine. My name is Karidja. Are your people from the islands?"

"Yes. Jamaica." She pointed to the hall they would go down. "And I am called Angelique by my mother and Angel by almost everyone else. It is an ironic name to have working here, don't you think?"

It was more a Jamaican manner of speech than a question. Even if it had been an inquiry, Soro thought of it as rhetorical. As she did not react, Angelique seemed to think so as well, because she continued her train of exposition, as they walked down a corridor to another portion of the floor of residential rooms, signified by the numbers and names in slotted holders by the door jambs.

As they walked, she asked. "And you, Karidja. Your voice is African, I'd guess. Though here for some time and losing its singularity. Your people are from where, I wonder?" Karidja told her Côte D'Ivoire. And before she could say more, Angelique said "Splendid." This friendly woman seemed more to be hesitant to invade Soro's privacy than being uninterested in her family story.

Her island voice returned as they stopped mid-way between room doors that were spaced further from one another in this hall. "Mr. Winston alternates what he calls me, based on his mood and the time of day. Or perhaps to express gratitude or displeasure with me. Of the latter I am not always as certain as I should be."

Karidja was thrilled to witness that Missie was not the apparent role model of decorum and behavior for Joshua Winston's caretaker, regardless of whether at any given moment she was Angel or Angelique to him.

"We will now have you meet Mr. Winston," she told Karidja. It took just three strides to arrive at the door whose jamb plate had a neatly printed label that declared the room occupant was: Joshua Winston.

Angelique greeted him in her island manner, "Hello, Mr. Joshua. You have a guest today. May I introduce Karidja. She is from Africa." Winston stood up from his chair by his room's window. His room was a single and of a good size. True, it had a hospital bed and a private bathroom, but they were off to one side and did not define the space as a hospital room with furniture. It felt and looked more like a residential room with a bed included. In some other Riverdale building, it would rent for less than a full apartment and be termed an efficiency.

Angelique eased Karidja over toward her charge by placing her hand softly in the small of the lawyer's back. Her years of experience informed Angelique that this visitor was comfortable in her own skin, and in this room, for her spine did not stiffen at the caregiver's touch. She felt it would be safe to leave the two of them alone, unless Winston objected.

Winston held his ground, on which he felt steady, but did extend his hand enough to be offering it in greeting to Karidja. They briefly held hands in amity. Karidja knew better than to shake his hand and upset his balance. He wasn't using it, but she saw a cane next to his chair. It registered with her that a resident-patient, whichever he might be, prone to violence or some emotional outbursts would not be permitted an unsupervised cane within his reach.

Angelique observantly took it all in and felt neither was at risk, so she inquired, "May I leave you two to your visit, then? I'll look back in on you from time to time, as I pass by the room. Please use the call button if you have need to do so, and I will be right along."

"We will be fine, Angelique, thank you," Joshua told her. His voice was firm and assured. "Please bring up a chair for Miss Karidja-from-Africa before you go." He looked behind himself to measure the distance to his chair. After a half step with each foot, he lowered himself and sat upright in his favored position. When Karidja sat in the chair provided, he spoke again. "This is where I enjoy sitting at this time of year. I can see out the door into the hall, but I am not on display, like a taxidermized mastodon at the Natural Museum of History down in Manhattan. The sunlight is bearable except on the hottest

of days, and comforting. And the sunsets over the palisade are sometimes magnificent.”

Karidja listened and observed the man, to find an opening. Soro knew enough to let him talk as much as he wanted. She was learning about him as they went along. Learning very important things for today for her. And in later days for Ned and Linda.

“Amazing creatures, mastodons.” He looked out the window and pointed upriver. “Hudson Valley’s the center for finding them, you know. First tooth was in Claverack and darn near an entire one of these beauties further down, closer to here, in Newburgh.”

“They are like elephants, no?” asked Karidja.

“Probably had a common ancestor way long time ago. But just like with families, time can be a separator more than a unifier. You have elephants near you in Africa?” he asked.

A little light might have started to shine an outline around an opening Karidja hoped. “Yes, sir, we do. In Côte d’Ivoire our national football team’s mascot is an elephant, in fact.”

“See even sports—futbol there . . . soccer here—related? Who knows?” he mused and looked out the window. “I wonder if one of those will outlive the other.” He lingered quietly. “No mastodon’s now . . . but elephants still around, for now.” He looked at her. “Do you think your elephants know their cousins in India, Karidja? And please call me Joshua.”

“I am not sure I have ever thought about that, Joshua.” she admitted.

“Family gives you a lot to think about. That’s for sure. Especially when you’ve got cousins spread out all over the place,” reminisced Joshua Winston.

“My family is mostly still over in Africa. I have many cousins,” she said.

He came back from thinking about cousins and such, it seemed. His focus was sharper for the moment. “What brought you Stateside?” Like several other elderly people Karidja knew, there was no permission sought to ask personal questions, nor subsequent apology for asking them.



"I came to study law in 1988. The civil unrest in Benin was spilling into my country, in schools and shops, and government civil service. It kept me from finishing my studies there." Now it was Karidja's turn to reminisce.

"Civil War here almost put an end to looking for more mastodons. Though one got found in a glacier pit pool up in Cohoes when they were digging out for the Harmony Mills right after the war. Had cotton mills there before that war. But after Appomattox and Galveston, the Harmony—ironically named—became the biggest cotton mill in the land."

"Palm oil and slave trade in Dahomey came before the revolution that gave birth to Benin," she recalled from her history classes." They heard the likeness in their histories, that shared the greed of trade and the infamy of slavery.

After a period of quiet resided between them, Joshua asked Karidja, "What area of law did you read for?" He asked the question in a way that only a person familiar with the profession would. Karidja's antennae were up immediately.

"Conflict resolution. There was going to be a great need for it after the protests and war and I wanted to be ready to contribute." Since graduation, she had not told this about herself to anyone but Ned Hegerman.

"Cousins fighting cousins. Just terrible," he stretched his legs way out in front of him.

Karidja realized his stamina would be an issue in her finding out what she wanted. And Eleanor was going to need to know as soon as she could get to a phone off this property. So Soro took her chance. "Joshua, you asked about me 'reading' law, not 'studying' it. Usually a person who says that had some involvement around the law. Did you?"

"Oh, yes. That's how I've come to know so much about mastodons. I worked up in, and along, the Valley for some years. From civil engineering, to civil service, to finance. Quite the progression. Digging up the land and planning to make it serve commerce. Then regulating and managing it. And lastly, securing money and harvesting the proceeds to do it all again, or oversee others running the same cycle." He stood up and looked out to the river from his elevated window.

"You did that all in the Valley?" she probed.

"Oh, no. After many years you get tired of the same people. Asking for this. Demanding that. Calling in this favor. Trading off that other one. It got to be so much that no one would hire me or elect me at one point in time."

"What did you do? What did you get out of all that effort and time and hard work?" probing deeper.

"More like, who did I get, Karidja," was his corrective reply. "Or even more to the point, who got me?"

"I'm sorry, I don't follow." And like his initial foray, she neither asked permission nor apologized for pushing him on with his story.

"You mean how did I keep ahead of the fate of the mastodon?" he was sounding sad, but not at all lost in the past. He was immediate and present as he turned from the window and looked her face to face. "It was those cousins, like your African mascot and his long lost relative on the subcontinent." He held up a hand to ask for a moment. And then he sat again, but erect, not slumped. The afternoon sun shone on his face, but not in his eyes.

"I had a cousin. A lawyer by trade. By way of my mother's side of the family. What some people called a 'once removed' relative." He huffed a small laugh. "Hearing I was out of work he got me a job with the S.E.C. in an office he just called 'downtown.'" He crossed his legs at the ankles.

"I learned the ropes. I got pretty good at it. Turned out my many layered occupations in the Valley complemented stages of what I had to do for the Commission. For S.E.C. I became something of an in-house 'go-to-guy,' as they called it. I found myself being considered a prime specialist at overseeing acquisitions of companies . . . many reasons in all seasons." He cleared his throat and checked to see Karidja was still interested and hadn't dozed off or wandered away in her own thoughts. Or worse yet, just wandered off by leaving the room.

She hadn't, in fact she looked transfixed. So, he continued, "Some times there were bankruptcy reliefs. Other times it was a deceased owner's kindred splitting up a company; while some were straight out uncomplicated inheritances, or businesses in the common trust." And here he stopped and

looked down at his hands in his lap. Karidja prayed he would finish. And soon.

“But, Karidja . . . but sometimes those ropes I had learned would become twisted, or at least intertwined. And after a while it seemed the petitioners before the S.E.C.—so the ones I was to be overseeing—were learning the rules in order to bend them. Mind you, and I’m aware I’m talking to a lawyer who isn’t my attorney, not breaking the rules or the law, but giving it a pretty bad back-bending, like some of the first growth trees pushed and pushed and pushed by the glaciers that finally snapped them over and relentlessly, slowly buried them. And the mastodons who were stuck in the mud in their path.”

“So, what did you do?” she sympathetically implored.

“I went to see that cousin lawyer who’d gotten me the job and told him I needed to retire. When he asked me why, I told him I had seen his name on a law firm acquisition review. He said he would look into it and take care of it, without me getting involved. He told me to go home. So, I did.” He gathered himself up and straightened his shirt, though it wasn’t wrinkled.

Joshua Winston blinked three times and stared at the lawyer in front of him. “Karidya, it was a small firm that dealt with copyrights and the like. But I should have recused myself and I did not. I oversaw a transaction that was overcommitted and undervalued, and I did not signal that the prevailing S.E.C. requirements applied to have it reviewed by the Commission before it went through.” Karidja saw he was getting near the end of the story. She had no idea what compelled him to say what he was telling her.

“When the broker signed the papers for the million-dollar deal—which wasn’t chump change in 1959—and the multi-million-dollar valuation, he slid the papers over my way. That was my moment. But I picked up the pen and initialed the pages and signed the signature page. And that was that.”

“And afterwards?” she quizzed.

“The next day I was at my desk at S.E.C. when a courier arrived from my cousin’s law firm. He handed me a sealed correspondence pouch. I broke open the seal, as the courier walked out with saying a word. Inside was my letter of resignation, citing personal health concerns. Somehow, my cousin

had typed the letter on S.E.C. letterhead. A small square of paper, unsigned, had a typed message that had three words only: SIGN. SUBMIT. LEAVE.”

He looked around at his room—his efficiency overlooking the Hudson and the railroad tracks on the bank that ran all the way upriver. He told her, “And that is what I did. Two days later I took up residence here, with a disability waiver for being a year younger than the residence by-laws allowed. I haven’t paid a penny for a thing since. My cousin sends them a check each month. He deposits an allowance into my bank every two weeks. The checks have always been signed by a secretary whose name is illegible.”

He shrugged a great weight off his shoulders that September afternoon, thankful for this visit by Karidja-from-Africa and her elephant.

“Why tell me this?” she pleaded, too angry at Godfrey Mellon’s father to let herself cry for this old man.

“Because you were so kind to me from the start. Your hand was gentle. You were patient with an old man telling you about mastodons. And you did not correct me when I said ‘Natural Museum of History.’ Every other visitor, and I have had only three in the last two years, would have ridiculed me by thinking, and found pleasure in telling me, what I had said—purposely—was the blathering of an old fool.” He reached out to take her hand and escorted her to the open door of his room.

On the threshold to his end times, the last thing he said to her that day—and any day to anyone, as he began what was to become a two-year silence that broke Angelique’s heart—was this: “And here I am, Karidja, a mastodon of my own making, knee deep in unforgiving mud, still looking out along that river.”

Karidja Soro was infuriated and saddened in equal parts. She sat in the back of the vehicle affording her protective custody as it was driven down the Henry Hudson Parkway. It crossed the short toll bridge from the Bronx to Manhattan, where the road became the West Side Highway.

Eleanor's phone rang at the same time she heard her fax machine receiving a transmission. It was a cover page from a retail store and a two-page document.

"Hello. This is Eleanor."

"It's Riley. Are you getting it? Two pages and a cover." He made sure he had another quarter for the store's pay phone in case this took time.

"Hold on, I'll make sure it's legible." After a pause she was back on the phone, breathless. "Mike. Where? How?" she said alternately inhaling and exhaling.

"You can't know that. Trust me on that." Mike Riley was more serious than Quatrane had ever heard him before. He asked, "Is it as important as I think it is? Can you still use it? You haven't run out of time, have you?"

Quatrane told him, "Mike, you have seen to it that it isn't my time that is running out." She cleared her throat, surprised that trying to talk about these papers was choking her up. "But you must tell me at least this—can I say I have seen these papers, or will I have to find another way for me and Karidja to know this information?"

Riley said, "You can't know about these papers or that it's from me that you know what you know."

"That's going to make it hard, Mike. Are you sure?" Eleanor asked.

"I'm sure. My dog can't do time, Eleanor."

"Okay, Mike. I tell the others so they don't jump to conclusions and say something out loud that should remain unspoken." They each hung up their phones. Mike left the store to walk back home. Eleanor tapped the two pages to straighten them out. She made two copies and went looking for Karidja and Gaby.

Danny's blood scent was up, primed by the discovery of Hegerman's daughter's last name and, hopefully, if Howe came through as she had always done so far, the place she called home. He imagined it to be a treasure trove of clues—at least to the late afternoon's mysteries Eleanor was immersed within. But maybe even about Linda's fate. Even though he felt tugged hard into the direction of his imagined cartel abduction, which he was hoping to get closer to settling in the next half hour.

He no longer had the advantage of working alone and being free of explaining himself to other people. He knew that when he got to feeling the way he did now on a case it was hard for him to hold back. That part of his personality was what got him in trouble in New York quite some time ago. None of Linda Lowry's advocates he had joined on this matter had seen him in this state. He could tell he was cranked by his recognition that he no longer thought of Linda in terms of her being found. No, now he thought of it as a rescue.

Corredor had been at his Hart's side all day and knew a change was coming over the man. He just didn't know what he was to be ready for—but ready he was. His nape hair was bristled, just as it would be if the freight was slowing down and he would soon have to commit to jumping.

But both men were professional enough to know that there was another matter at hand to address as they arrived at Easton International Medical Supplies. And that was whatever Myles had gotten himself into. Danny told him what Howe told them, 'no Lone Ranger stuff.' But it might now become apparent he did not listen.

Itzel Cocom showed Hart and Corredor into Lowry's office, as they asked her to do, as soon as introductions were completed in the front foyer. Per their discussions in the car on the way over, Hart would run the Cocom interview and Corredor would scan the office.

Whether by deference or necessity, Itzel seemed to have been working at a small circular conference table rather than at the main desk in the office. Both men noticed that.

Dominic was stunned by the view of the river that Lowry's office commanded. The recent addition to Hart's agency field employee roster, now numbering one person, had uninterrupted time to read the post note inside the grandfather clock, in front of the non-moving works, and below the stopped hands that were no longer telling time, nor any other secrets.

Dom listened as Danny asked Itzel, "Why do you think Myles is in trouble or in need of help, may I ask?" Corredor stood off to the side, with his back against the wall, and kept an eye on the two doors that led into the office. The other two had taken seats at the round table.

The Mayan woman began to relate the tale. "He left Friday after a morning session. The week before, he had started taking Fridays off, but that first week was short already, with Labor Day and his lawyer's funeral. Last week he was going out to where he used to live, somewhere on Long Island." Danny and Dom heard nothing in what she said that suggested that the definite urgency in her demeanor was warranted.

Yet her hands trembled when she passed Danny a phone message. "This car rental place called. They said the police on Long Island had phoned them about one of their vehicles. It was damaged in an apparent accident and had been abandoned in a public parking lot by the railroad station." She partially wrung her hands, slowly twisting a fine silver ring with a green stone. Itzel realized her nerves were showing, and lowered her arms to rest, making her braided bracelets jangle against the table.

"Did he rent cars often?" asked Dominic. This was part of their design to throw her off guard, to rattle her into an answer she might otherwise not provide, as two people were vying for her attention.

The scheme backfired, jostling Itzel into a strong place. She was so experienced at handling several sales contacts at once on a convention floor, or multiple questions at a press conference, that splitting her focus snapped her into a comfortable and familiar position. "He had just started the rentals after the custody hearings went awry and his wife and daughter disappeared. He was spending Fridays and weekends looking for them. Until I got the call, I did not know where he was renting them."

Danny tried to swing her away again, toward the sounds in the room. He complimented her taste, "That's a nice bracelet."

"My husband is an artisan—silver and jewelry and the like." She wasn't fazed, at all. Not even by Dom's distraction away from Danny and to a picture on the bookshelf behind Lowry's desk. "This him?" A framed photo showed the Cocoms together in the foreground of El Castillo at Chichèn Itzá.

"Yes, we are from Mexico. Our families are Mayan."

At that moment the desk phone jangled its bell, and Itzel's nerves. Reaching it quickly, she picked up an extension on a table by her side at the window, before Danny could hope to prevent it. It was her husband's voice. All he told her was, "Your receptionist says one of those men, who is in there with you now, is the same person in the photo I showed her from the security tape at the jewelry store uptown."

She replied, "Okay. Please ask them to give me an hour, I should be ready by then to meet. Tell them I really apologize, please." She almost hung up, but she spoke again, "And don't mention anything about Myles to them, please." She hung up and looked thoughtfully at both of the men.

"Back to Myles, if we may," Danny said, feigning displeasure at Dom's distraction. "Can you go over this phone call from the car place with me, please? That's what has you upset, right?"

"I can." Itzel got up from the chair and walked over to the window looking out over the river. She placed herself between the lines of sight of her two visitors, so she could see them both at the same time. When she made this practiced movement, she froze them in place, so they could not keep manipulating the room, the conversation, and—as it was beginning to seem to Itzel they were trying to do—her. She knew how to work a room, socially and in business. She was in her element now, far more than her visitors could have suspected her capable.

Feeling more comfortable and in control of herself and her situation, Itzel spoke to them both. "Myles left here Friday. Discounting the weekend, it's been about two full working days. These are very important days. They are essential to our planning for a strong fourth quarter and start of next year's sales. So, every one of these days away, really magnifies his absence." Itzel went on. "Renting a car for a weekend was one thing. But to be gone, and unaccounted for, is drastic, unlikely, and, frankly, unacceptable. Even the rental agent thought he would get the car back by late Sunday night or first



thing yesterday morning. The rental group had it scheduled for cleaning and to be ready for another client by Monday noon. It's now Tuesday. They are not happy."

She continued, only moving laterally, so they still had to look out the window and at nothing in the room. She did not like how Corredor had been checking things out before. He was clearly looking for something that was not what the Anglo was asking about, the car. In a firm voice, she told them, "When the police called, it rattled the rental agent. They traced the car with the VIN number—I know you are familiar, yes?" They nodded and she did in return.

"Well, you should go . . . investigate . . . that." She insinuated by her use and emphasis of the word, that she did not care for the way she was being treated. "Myles was telling me he just found out about these renters. That the prices were below market. He liked that because the cars were not a company expense. His use was personal. Myles always kept that line clear."

Danny pursued the involvement that most bothered him, by asking Itzel, "Ms. Cocom, you know the Lowrys pretty well, do you?"

"Yes. For many years, our families have known each other," she replied. And then, somewhat abruptly, "And how about you, Mr. Hart? How long have you known the Lowrys? And in what capacity?"

"Only a few weeks, ma'am." Dominic thought he would stop there. He was surprised when the investigator kept talking.

"I've never met Rosalyn or Linda. I only know what they look like from photos. I was sent by her lawyer, Mr. Godfrey Mellon, to look for her and Linda on the morning they went missing from their Jersey apartment. When I took Myles's side in an evidentiary matter in the case, I was fired." He waited a moment for that to sink in. "So, quick turnaround, for sure . . . not to worry, though . . . within a day, Myles's legal team . . . in the person of Ms. Karidja Soro . . . hired me on to assist them in looking for Linda. That's what I started to do full time. And that's why I am here now."

He remained seated. He wanted to acknowledge her primacy, as the one standing, and in whose office, by proxy or for real, he was currently stationary. Of course, accompanied by his own proxy in the person of

Dominic Corredor, standing angled at odds with Ms. Cocom, added the leverage he needed to continue at something less than a disadvantage.

“You see, Ms. Cocom, I wanted to ask you something I did not want to say over the phone. It’s something nobody else working this case, privately or for the police, agrees about with me.” He looked at Dom, who nodded in Itzel’s direction. “Asking you as someone who knows the Lowrys for as long as you do . . . professionally and socially. . .” He now stood but stayed at the table.

“Do you think I should give any consideration to my theory that perhaps Rosalyn and Linda Lowry were taken against their will from their Jersey apartment? And should I then give any credence to the suspicion whispering into my ear that the same thing has befallen Myles?”

Itzel’s face darkened. “Mr. Danny. In our Mayan culture we have feathered serpents, and jaguars, and all numbers of beasts that prey in the jungle.” She waited to see if she was provoking a response. Corredor stared at her and was not distracted by the cityscape out the window. He was asking himself if this woman was about to corroborate Danny’s cartel imaginings.

Itzel saw in Dominic’s face a look of speculation she had seen many times in Mexico before a person was gripped with fear. So, she let him be and asked Hart directly. “Mr. Danny, you asked me a question. Do you want me to answer it with the truth?”

“Yes. Mrs. Cocom, I do. I would expect no less.” Danny stood his ground.

“Then I must ask you first, why have you been less than forthright with me?” And looking back to see that Dominic was still on this side of fear, which he was, she said, “Why did you not tell me you had already been trying to find my husband. And that you have been looking into his art and jewel connections? Instead, you feign an interest to . . . what . . . lay a trap? As you would if you think I and my husband had brought harm upon the Lowrys?”

“Did you?” was all Hart allowed. Dominic found a seat and sat. He felt that would diffuse any threat his standing would convey. And he was correct, because Itzel followed suit and crossed over to sit at Myles’s desk—keeping it in front of herself and between she and her visitors.

"No. We did not. Not by our hand. Nor by requesting such a thing from another's." She extended her hand and suggested that Myles sit. Which he did.

"Let me assure you, that I came to know of your interest entirely by accident. And until these moments you entered these offices, I did not know who you were." She eyed them both and continued. "What I am about to tell you must be kept in the closest of confidence. If you have any friendship or respect for Myles Lowry, you would do as I ask. But as difficult as it is, I must ask you to give me your word before I tell me what I have to say." The men looked at each other hesitantly. She upped the ante. "I would hope not to be overdramatic. But you are interested in helping one girl. Me, I am engaged in saving thousands." She saw they did not put much stock in her assertion, but were not denying its possibility either. So, she piled it on, "But to save them, it appears I need your assistance. These nameless and faceless children may descend into sickness and death unless you can find Myles Lowry and return him to this chair I now sit in by default, and most certainly, by no choice of my own. And I—they—need you to do it quickly!"

Dominic saw Danny was still holding off. He risked Dan's ire by speaking up. "Mrs. Cocom," she was surprised he was the first to speak, but looked his way, nonetheless. "We are compromised sometimes— me as a law enforcement agent by my oath of office, and him as an investigator by his oath of licensing. So, we must know if what you are going to tell us has to do with the commission of a crime. Because if it is, we are unable to promise you our silence. You understand that, right?"

Danny stared at him from within his dwindling fury. All he could recall, to defuse himself, was the beautiful face of Karidja Soro asking him if he considered himself an officer of the court. He spoke aloud, "Well, what the hell, it got me out of a jam to help Linda once before. So, yeah, Mrs. Cocom, I'm good, as long as what Detective Corredor says holds true for you."

Itzel sat back, partially relieved. She still had a long way to go. "Okay, first things first. About you, Mr. Hart." She placed her hands on the desk so they could see them in full view. "Myles has no weapons in his desk drawers. And I have none on my person. So, there is no threat to you here. I swear." She waited a moment and reached for the phone on the desk. But before she used it, she said, "And as far as Bembe, my husband, is concerned,

he is also unarmed. And I wish to have him step in to join us, if I might, please." Both the men nodded approval without looking at each other. So, Itzel depressed the intercom and left it on speaker for them to hear. "Bembe? It is fine and safe for you to come in now if you please. We are all seated and in accord. I am in no distress."

In a short moment, the door opened slowly and a neatly dressed man entered the room, crossed over to behind the desk, kissed his wife, and stood at her side.

"This is my husband, Bembe Cocom," she said. "Bembe, this is Mr. Danny Hart, Myles's friend. And this is . . . Detective Corredor, right?" . . . Dom nodded. Gentlemen it would be wonderful for you to greet one another according to the custom of a handshake please. And then Bembe, you can sit so we can all see and hear one another."

Everyone complied and the four sat together in a somewhat less tense office space.

Bembe said, "You look much more delightful in person, Mr. Hart, than you do on the security camera. Those things are so impersonal. I fail to see, Detective Corredor, how the police ever catch anyone off those images."

Dom did not know the reference, but Danny felt sure that he did. And as Cocom spoke, he was assured of it. "When I made my weekly visit, the jewelry store owner uptown told me that a man was interested in my craft, my connections to Mexico, and my contact information. But he thought it odd, you did not leave a way for me to contact you, Mr. Hart. Because I have some concerns about the particularity of some fellow Mexican citizens' interest in me, we went in the back of his store and watched his security recordings. You were careful, but there was one specific segment on a secondary camera from which we generated a photo. Of course, I could be mistaken, but I am now relieved to see that it was you in that store."

Dominic Corredor thought Danny would be chagrined, but he wasn't giving it away right now if he was. So, Dom wondered if it was not purposeful on the investigator's part to be traceable.

Danny spoke up. "It was a good idea to have the floor display contain a second camera, Bembe, installed in the springtime. But the sun definitely

travels differently at this time of year. The lens gives off a slight reflection. You should have your friend in the store make some adjustments or lower the front awning sooner in the day in autumn.

“Ah. So, if you didn’t find me, you hoped I would find you,” marveled Bembe. Dom saw it was the artist who was chagrined.

“Something like that. But not entirely,” replied Hart.

“Then, what, Mr. Danny?” asked Itzel.

“That’s the big question, isn’t it?” said the investigator. “And now we have reached either an impasse or a grand agreement.” Danny looked at the husband and then at the wife. “Let’s start by saying that we may each have an interest in your Mexican compatriots.”

Bembe was vociferous. “They are countrymen by an accident of our births, but they are not compatriots of ours in any other sense, Mr. Hart.”

Hart, the only Caucasian in the room, and Corredor were silent, until Dominic spoke up deliberately. “And how would a gringo come to be assured of such a thing?”

There was a long silence. The question was being pondered.

It was Itzel who answered. “He would make sure it looked like carelessness, but he would make certain, if these others were not our compatriots of that type, he would not be mistaken to be among their company. For if he was, he might have an accident while driving back to wherever he came from.” She saw Danny’s lack of commitment to an agreement, forcing her to continue.

“So, brother of mine, the investigator came today because I called him. And he is asking about abduction—Roselyn’s and Linda’s at first. But now he theorizes it includes Myles as well. Frankly, he wants to know if we are cartel dependent, and if the cartel has removed the Lowrys from our eyes.”

“Why do you say that, my wife? Why even speak of cartels? And to these men who already told you, as I was listening outside, what they perceive to be their duty under the law? Have you lost your senses?” Bembe

was in control of the strength of his anger, but not of the power of his mind. So, he did not understand what his wife was beginning to see and understand.

“Know that the more objective of the two of us is asking you this, Itzel,” said Corredor. “Are you now giving me your word that no narcotics cartel has a financial interest in your medical supplies business or your husband’s art and antiques concerns?”

“Oh, they are interested in them for sure. If you check my husband’s passport application that Myles arranged, you will see he is here in this country under asylum from their interest and threats. But they have no monetary part of either, which is what you mean to have me promise. And I do.”

“We have seen that application. It could be misconstrued—wielded like a two-edged sword of the finest gems and metal.” Dominic was steadfast. Before she could object, or the other two men could jump in and return the room to a fray, Corredor simply stated, “But now that we have your word, there can be no misunderstanding. And we can move forward together to do what you called us here to do—get on with finding Myles Lowry and discovering what happened to him.”

Dominic had told Hart and Detective Howe, that first time he sat with them in the Jersey apartment—dog-bitten and bleeding—that working alone had forced him to hone his skills for hunting missing persons. And later, he told Danny, while they sat in a parked car together, how he acquired some of the money he needed to stay in pursuit of the kidnapping murderers of four children. Hart had believed him then, on his word. But witnessing him in action live-time with the Cocoms, he really believed in him now.

There still was something else Danny needed to clear up if he was going to drop this drug-connected-abduction idea-of-the-case. So, he asked as he adjusted himself in the chair he’d almost jettisoned out from underneath himself some minutes earlier, before Corredor cooled off the temperature in the room. “Itzel? What about these thousands of children you are trying to save. We’re still out to rescue one.”

“Yes, I better tell you—before you have another loose end begging you to track down the cartel.” She saw him stir. “Oh, no, Mr. Danny, I am not

making fun of you. I am dead serious.” She let him get settled. “We all know the syndication of international drug traffic touches many more places than Mexico. We are here in a center of it in Brooklyn. And now I am going to tell you about our doing business in eastern Europe?” She scoffed. “Why wouldn’t you make such a connection, again—the Cocoms and Myles and Easton and drugs. It would only be logical.” She pointed at Dominic.

“But I have given the detective my assurance, so let me continue to tell you our story—Bembe’s, Myles’s and mine—please.” She looked at him, leaned her head to her left, shrugged her left shoulder, and rotated her left hand a quarter of a turn.

“You know the Soviet is being dissolved. The drugs I am interested in are those to combat diphtheria. It has been raging in many middle European communities, in states seeking political autonomy by separating from the Soviet Union and forming the CIS. Bembe knows businessmen in stone cutting and gem mining in some of those places. The Russians have let the machinery and tools and workings of those mines fall to pieces, even before the wall in Berlin tumbled. They are in a shambles and need to be reborn and revitalized if the new countries are to have financial strength. So, there is an interest we want to capitalize upon.” She waited a moment for them to catch up.

“Myles and I . . . we are right now planning here our last quarter sales efforts for this year and our marketing strategies for our next fiscal year. I asked Myles last week to consider using Bembe’s contacts to provide us—at a profit for them— with a delivery system we can hire to transport millions of hypodermic needles we hope to sell into the region. These will be needed by relief agencies and medical professionals to use to inoculate children against the disease. So many are sick and dying from it already. The UN and UNICEF predict the morbidity and mortality numbers will skyrocket in the face of the imminent collapse of the medical systems that need to be transitioned from the Soviet to the CIS. The markets call this a nexus of politics and commerce. Our needle sales proposal to management and stockholders was to be set forth this week. But only Myles can make the presentation. Without him here, our efforts will fail, and we will lose our competitive edge to multi-national conglomerates in our industry, who aren’t even thinking yet about this as a market, or a humanitarian mission.”

Bembe picked up the story because his wife was emotionally drained. She hadn't slept in days, almost since Myles left Friday to look for his family. "So, when this rental man called, we didn't know what to do. Or where to turn, until Itzel remembered Myles telling her about you and the Lowrys."

"Can we have a minute together in the next room, or somewhere?" Hart asked the Cocoms. Danny and Dom were shown to a conference area and left to themselves, with Itzel's restated plea for help, in a hurry.

234

Marie Aello got home, ripped off her coat, did what she would call 'piss a tsunami in her toilet bowl,' and then grabbed the phone.

"Hayes? Is Mellon there? This is Aello." She did not believe in mincing words, or using two when one would do.

"Godfrey here." He tried to be pleasant, but he knew it would not matter.

"Well, aren't you the happy one. Look before you get silly crazy about our four o'clock melee and money grab, I'm telling you that there's a big miss in your plan. A shitload of Roz Young's stuff from college, and possibly her rogue life while masquerading as Rosalyn Lowry, is locked up in a basement property cage out in Jersey. And I wasn't allowed to get in and look at any of it by your amazing Miss Investigator, mind-the-fucking-apartment, Flynn and a muscled-up nosy neighbor with a dog alleged to like shredding trespassers' tibias and femurs for lunch, chased with desserts of ulnas and a humerus or two afterwards."

"So, what's that got to do with anything?" challenged the attorney, already in his show-me-the-money mode.

"If there's papers she kept, I need to have them before you settle up with that bitch and my father, Godfrey." She screamed into the mouthpiece, at her mouthpiece.



“What could be so possibly important, Marie. It’s a little late for this isn’t it?” Mellon asked.

“It isn’t too late if their audit and payroll they give you today is missing something really important, mister attorney.” Mellon could hear the vinegar that she didn’t urinate into the bowl, dripping out of his phone receiver.

He was losing patience with her now, but she was his meal ticket to a fat percentage of her payday. So, he tried a different tack. “Marie, wait a moment, please. Just what makes you so sure there’s something important in that place you’re talking about, anyway?”

“I saw what I want to have in my hot little hands. I saw it because her things looked like they were ransacked in there—”

He interrupted. “In where, Marie? You’re not making much sense. Settle down, please.” He bit his tongue and felt like he was going to vomit having to talk to her in a civil tone of voice. All he really wanted to do was grab her by the throat and shake her until all the money fell out and she finally, simply went limp.

“In the cage. Haven’t you been paying attention? Stop doing two other things while I talking to you about this, would you?” She repeated it all again. “In the basement—which you never told Flynn to check on—each apartment has a locked cage made of wood too strong to shake apart. I tried. There’re no solid walls, it’s just that diamond shaped mesh wire—reinforced, and more strong than regular chicken wire. I could see right through to her boxes and cartons and things. The box on top was all mangled and I could see a very distinctive envelope from her college days—”

Mellon interrupted her again. “Come now, Marie, you’re telling me you saw a part of an envelope and you recognized it from over twenty years ago?”

“Godfrey, if I had you within reach, I’d snap your goddamn neck. Stop interrupting me and listen for the sake of all that’s holy. Because that’s about exactly what this envelope is. And you know how I can tell it’s the envelope from way back then, Godfrey?”

He took a chance that her question wasn’t rhetorical and he didn’t want to be excoriated again for not paying attention. “Okay, Marie, how?”

“Because it has her name on the front—in my handwriting.”

“And what could be so important in that envelope, may I ask you, please, Marie?”

“If I’m doing the math properly—probably a little over a hundred thousand dollars,” was all she said. And then, inexplicably, she hung up the phone.

235

It had been quite some time before Quatrane and Soro and Costa had placed themselves in the quiet of the reading room to consider together serious matters they were not ready to disclose at large. And this Tuesday noontime they had two such items.

Karidja began briefing her colleagues on her trip to Riverdale. “I spoke to the S.E.C. overseer . . . one Joshua Winston . . . who was in the room in 1959 when the documents were signed for Mellon senior to offload the copyright practice onto our company. He told me outright that he violated the S.E.C. principles and practices by allowing an overcommitted and undervalued asset to be traded without protest or challenge for further review. It was doomed to fail from inception and thus constituted a fraud. The only uncertainty was how long it would take and how well hidden the fraud would remain. He told me these things in confidence, aware that I am a lawyer, but without knowing my connection to Ned Hegerman or his law firm or the Mellons.” She let that sink in and went on.

“He is a blood relative of the Mellon family, though he never mentioned the family name to me. His S.E.C. job was acquired by influence peddled by Godfrey Mellon’s father, whom he suggested was the perpetrator and beneficiary of the fraud. The capitalization of the transaction was a million dollars.”

Quatrane asked, “Karidya, do you think I should tell this to Bruce, for him to use as leverage in this afternoon’s meeting with Mellon?”

Soro told them both, “Mr. Winston is an old man. An impatient person, and certainly a juror, would think him to be senile. But my impression is that his apparently wandering conversation is quite purposeful. I think it would be better for us, for you, to wait on communicating this to Thomas Bruce. He will misuse the information and squander its true value.”

“Why do you think he will do that?” asked Gabriella.

The lawyer replied, “Because he is unable to understand its true worth. He does not have a context to place it within—a context we seem to be constructing quite significantly these last two days. But more, because he has one goal. He is out to protect, by under-evaluation, the assets attributable to Ned Hegerman that Godfrey Mellon is out to acquire—for their net worth and to damage this law firm’s equity position. Bruce is looking to ingratiate himself to the ownership partners and any silent shareholders this firm has. He is trying to save his job and increase his professional standing in the company.” Soro looked to Quatrane for affirmation of her opinion and received it by way of a nod.

But Karidja kept on, “For our part, our goal is to find and improve the living arrangements of Linda Lowry. Our day will come. Probably in open court, in a custody hearing, and not hidden away in these lawyers’ board rooms.” Karidja took in the quiet of the reading room and let it work its serenity on the three of them. “And there is more that we still need to learn about all this. What have you ladies found out this morning? You said there was some excitement over in Jersey?”

Then it became Eleanor’s turn. “We’ve known that Ned had a daughter out of wedlock. Now we know her last name. She goes by Marie Aello. Mike Riley and Angie Flynn found that out this morning in a verbal confrontation at the Jersey apartment. Before that, Mellon and his people pushed Flynn too hard, and she turned to Danny for help. Riley pitched in before Danny could get there, and to conceal Danny’s involvement from Aello. Detective Howe is tracking Aello’s car and plates to get an address.”

Gaby jumped in, “I can go back to my contact at Columbia to find out more about her, when the time is right.”

“But there’s even more. But there are complications. First, I’ll tell you the more. Second, I’ll tell you the complications,” promised Quatrane.

"I have discovered a two-page document from 1972, signed by Roz Young and Marie Aello. Here's a copy for each of you." She handed them each their own to read. "You are going to have to study it, Karidja. It is referred to as an Assignment Protection. It protects Aello's scholarship monies if her political protests at Columbia get her expelled. The money is assigned over to Roz Young. The scholarship is from an exclusive and dedicated trust. Any money not used for Marie's tuition is to be held in trust for any children Aello might have." They each took a few moments to scan the two pages.

"I'm trying to put some pieces together, but I suspect the trust mentioned in this document is the same trust I am working on with Thomas Bruce for this afternoon's audit review and payout schedule to Mellon. But I doubt there's enough time left today to pull enough of this together to be provable," she told them.

Gaby requested, "I know you've told us about this before, but remind me where this issue fits into this afternoon exactly."

"Time being of the essence," said Eleanor, "the long and the short of it is who controls the trust? . . . are remaining funds in the trust part of Ned's personal assets? . . . or are they part of the company assets that need declaration this afternoon?"

"What's Bruce's strategy after all the review by the accountants and your research?" asked Karidja.

"Right now, he does not want the Trust even acknowledged, let alone declared as anyone's asset. He'd like to approach the afternoon as if it doesn't have any role in the conversation," she told them.

Gab asked, "How are you advising him?"

Eleanor said, "My advice to him at this time is to leave it out entirely and not to try to identify it as an asset or not. I told him to expect Mellon's auditors would find the Trust in the next seven days—which the agreement gives Mellon to challenge the audit report. He can figure out how to attack the question in the meantime." She added, "And if Mellon's people don't find it, he'll let sleeping dogs lie; though I have not advised him to do that."

"What should we do?" asked Gaby.

It was the lawyer who answered. "We use the same week to complete the context of all these loose pieces that we have found, and keep finding."

"And then what?" asked Gaby.

Eleanor cut in. "That's where the difficulty arises. We can't know about these papers. And we can't know where they come from. So, we must find another source we can admit to, and submit in court, if necessary — which we could first also use in-house as corroboration, just to make sure these papers are true and correct, as Ned was fond of saying to me during document searches."

"And then what, after the week's up?" repeated Gaby. "I'm asking so I can do something we need done in seven days."

"Then I hope we will have a conflict that requires a resolution," Karidja told them.

And Gaby came right back, speaking without fully thinking it out, and asked, "And, what good will that do?"

Karidja looked at her. "As your . . . our . . ., friend would say . . . 'Give yourself a moment, Gabs. And then you tell me the answer.'"

Gabriella looked at each of the ladies in the reading room. She thought back to good times in that room with Danny Hart. She recalled the confidence he instilled. "Holy sh . . .," she caught herself. "Karidja Soro, you're going to foster a resolution that settles Linda's custody, aren't you?"

Eleanor spoke one of Hart's oft-repeated lines. "Asked and answered, Gabs!"

236

In an anteroom to Myles Lowry's office, elsewhere in New York, Dan and Dom tried to come to grips with the moment.

The investigator asked, "So, what have we got with these two, now?"

The detective said, "It would seem the Cocombs have done nothing criminal. So, I'm still on board and ready to help. Especially if we find we must split up."

Hart asked, "Why would we split up?"

Corredor replied, "No, Danny. Don't jump ahead. Answer your question first. No peripherals yet, what have we got that's core?"

Danny made a mental list and then spoke it out for them both to consider, point-by-point-by-counterpoint, after which, if he agreed, Corredor told him to 'Move on'.

"There is no drug involvement. So, we forget the abduction angle. Completely. Agreed?" Corredor said, *Agreed. Move on.*"

"A rented car, maybe rented by Myles, is smashed up; some time between Friday late in the day and either Saturday or Sunday. Agreed? Corredor said they'd need a police report to know what day was more likely, Saturday or Sunday; was anyone else involved; where was it now; did they know where Myles was? Agreed?" *Move on.*

"No abduction means Rosalyn and Linda had probably not been in danger of being grabbed; were they still together and in just one place; if they were at a school, where; did they go there to teach or to be a student; that's all we know to ask. Agreed?"

Corredor said, "Agreed; and maybe the three ladies have more info from their work this morning. That's enough for now." *Move on.*

When Danny said nothing in reply, Corredor told him, "Danny we need two things as soon as we can. Car rental information and a police report. Should we split up or go together?"

Danny said, "We should go up to the car rental together and expect then to drive to Long Island. If we find something in either place, we could still split up. In which case I could drive, and you could take a train."

“That’s what we’ll do then. It’s too much poetic justice not to,” offered Corredor. “What do we tell—or ask—the husband and wife here?”

Danny suggested, “We first tell them, ‘Thanks.’ We hope they accept our apology about the cartel suspicion. We wish them good luck with the needles and the artwork. We tell them about how to use my phone and not to worry about having to wait sometimes for an answer.” He stopped. “What else?” he asked.

Dominic picked up from there. “We tell them we’re going to check on the rental car, first in Manhattan and then on Long Island. We’ll call to keep them aware of what we find.” He thought a minute and then asked Hart, “Do we give them Howe’s numbers in case they hear something important or that needs urgent action, and they can’t get us right away?”

Hart said, “Good idea. And we’ll let Howe know we did that. It will require we tell her who they are—but the shortest version possible. No cartel, no Europe; just Myles missing.”

Corredor shared an afterthought. “You reminded me of something when you said to tell Howe. How about we ask to use their phones for some calls. We could check in with the ladies and Riley and Flynn. We can tell them to forget about the cartel. And get the latest any of them can tell us?”

Danny asked, “Anything else?”

Dominic said, “Yes, I’d like to borrow the picture in Myles’s office of the Cocoms in the Yucatan in front of El Castillo at Chichèn Itzá.”

“What for?” Danny wanted to know.

“Something like a proof-of-life photo I’d use in a kidnapping case. If you and I must split up, and I’m alone with Myles, and I need him to trust me or to come with me, I may need that photo for him to find me credible.”

And all that is what they did. It took them forty minutes to amass and exchange a huge amount of new information. And then they were off to the rental garage.

The distance was not far, but the traffic tangle right after noontime was considerable. It gave Dominic enough time, as was becoming his practice, to tick off the new information and integrate it into the bits and pieces they knew before.

“So, Danny, here’s what we know:

“Three lawyers, two generations: Godfrey Mellon and his father, and Ned Hegerman. The senior Mellon and Hegerman are contemporaries and have connections, some overt and some not.”

“Some shade from the past surrounds a regulated business acquisition between law firms. The senior Mellon may have perpetrated a fraud, abetted by nepotism and blackmail, that netted him a million dollars.”

“The corrupted relative, one Joshua Winston, now passes the last of his days in a Riverdale retirement home and the blackmailed attorney, your friend Ned, has passed his last day.”

“Four contemporary collegians know each other to one degree or another: – Myles Lowry, Roz Young—our Rosalyn, Marie Aello, and Valerie, born as McKinley.”

“Myles and Roz become husband and wife and now fight over their child, Linda’s, custody. Yet all three have vanished from our sight.”

“Aello is Hegerman’s illegitimate daughter, the fulcrum for the past blackmail engineered by the elder Mellon. Now the vindictive next generation is back, Aello to claim her inheritance and Mellon to destroy Ned’s legacy and bankrupt his law firm.”

“And in some inexplicable way that might involve Linda Lowry, Aello’s trust is in Rosalyn’s power.”

When Dominic was through his recital, Danny chimed in. “Great, so we know the bitch is really a bastard, and some of the rest of them might be one or the other, only in a manner of speaking.” He stomped on the brake to miss colliding into a mid-block jay-runner. “Dom, we need to find out where the Lowrys are and get them in front of Judge McCarver. That’s still our priority.



These other things are only important in as much as they get us to that hearing room.”

237

Gabriella Costa was back at Columbia. She had forsaken the phone and her lunch to get there by one o'clock when the registrar and alumni offices would be open again. The registrar would give her no information about other students. Photo identification or a judge-signed warrant were the only acceptable tender the adamant registrar would accept. She made out better in the alumni office. She gave neither her name nor her law firm connection.

“I was here last week, but needed to get some more information on a former Columbian to make use of your services,” she explained to a counter-clerk she had not met previously.

“How may I be of assistance?” the middle-aged man asked in a manner he hoped was acceptable to the pretty woman across the working surface. He noticed she was not wearing a wedding band, so he placed his helpful hands on the counter to demonstrate they had that in common. Gaby's first reaction was to be put off, but she held that in check in case this could win her an advantage over this functionary whose brain had clearly dropped about two and a half feet as she came through the door. “I was trying to find a current address for Marie Aello. We were acquainted when I lived here in the city, but lost contact during the years I went out West. I shed a hundred and eighty pounds out there—another grad she knew as my husband—and I was trying to catch up with her again. She used to be a lawyer here in the New York area.”

“Have you a date?” he asked.

Ignoring the pick-up line as transparent and deniable, Costa answered pleasantly enough, “You could try in the early nineteen seventies for her time at Columbia Law and earlier for Marie's undergraduate years.” She had not told him she was a classmate of Aello's or was at the school herself, then or ever. Gabriella pushed her eyeglasses up on her nose and hoped the counter hid her nervously pumping right foot. She found leaning in with her elbows on the counter helped to steady her shoulders, and made it look like she was

trying to see the screen on the computer. Of course, the man whose fingers were clicking keys thought the lean-in was for him, so he turned the screen more so she could see it.

"Here we are," he said triumphantly. "Let me write this down for you." He neatly printed Aello's name, her law firm, and its phone number.

As he was easing the paper along the countertop to make fingertip contact, Costa picked up her finger and pointed to the paper, beseeching, "Would you please put down her home address and phone number, too? Then she pointed to show she could see that the fields for those were also filled in on his screen."

As he turned the screen away from her line of sight some, he replied, "I'm not supposed to give you the home information. But I'll give you the address because you've been so nice. But not the home phone number." He smiled.

"What if was nice enough to trade you my home phone for hers?" Gaby felt her skin crawl as she said it. But it got her the phone number she wanted. He did not have as much luck. She just wondered who he would get on the other end when he tried the number she gave him. "I don't get home until after eight," she shared over her shoulder as she was leaving the counter, still without any other customers lined up right after their lunch.

238

By a little after one o'clock Rosalyn had finished making enough of the three-page copies she needed of Rumpelstiltskin to give out to the ladies she expected would like to be in the book club. Her plan was to hand them out at breakfast before she left on Friday for Philadelphia and to encourage them to meet in the library one day during school hours the following week when she returned. She would have to skip Monday for getting together. It would be her first day back and busy. Plus, there were fliers popping up around the campus from Ms. Grey, announcing a special Teacher Appreciation event that afternoon after school on the quad, complete with promised mouthwatering *Free Ultimate Surprise Barbeque Dinner* for all.

As she crossed over the quad and headed to the apartment for lunch, she came across Margie.

“Hi. Margie. How are you?” she asked.

“A little put out. I have to bring Katie to the doctor in town, but they won’t see her until Friday morning. It really would work better in her schedule for Thursday, but they can’t accommodate us.” She sounded disappointed. Her tone lifted when she asked, ‘How’s that book club thing coming along?’

Rosalyn was glad to see her interest hadn’t waned. “Good. I think I’ll have something for you ladies before I go on Friday.”

“Go? Where are you going? On one of your trips? I hope I get Katie back in time if you need her. She sure could use the money.” Her maternal gears were engaged and turning.

“Oh. Sorry, Margie. This weekend it’s all days and two overnights. I asked Alexandria to stay in our place for the weekend.” Rosalyn was not truly as sorry as she said she was.

“Wow. That’s bad news. A weekend would have been a nice payday for Katie. Linda could have stayed at our place.” Margie was heading back to being unhappy again, adding the Lowrys to her well-renowned ‘shit list.’

Rosalyn made one last try. “I don’t think Grey would have approved my trip unless I had full time, live-in, uncommitted supervision. Let’s see how this one goes and I’ll ask you and Katie next month. What do you say?”

“Yeah. Well, I’ll see about the book club,” was her tat-for-tit reply. They went on their separate ways without any other spoken farewell.

It looked more like the hi-rise apartment house underground garage it was, than it appeared to be a car rental business location. The signs were so low key that they simply served to direct a knowing person’s footsteps, not

advertise the service to the uninitiated or unREFERRED. Dom caught Danny's sleeve with three fingers and slowly guided him back to the outer sidewalk. Danny took the cue without incident. They were getting to work together very well.

Twenty-five paces from the garage door entry, Danny turned to Dominic and inquired uncontestedly, "What am I missing?"

"Something's not quite right. Let's stand back a few minutes and see who comes in and out and how the operation works," said the master locator of the missing and the misplaced. He took out a NYC guide map and unfolded it to give them some face cover, a reason to occasionally check the map and lower it to look around, and to avoid suspicion. Danny was learning many things from this man; just as Dominic was mindful of several pointers he had picked up in just a few days of observing Danny at work.

"Let's go over and up to that coffee joint," said the detective as he pointed and stepped off the curb, jaywalking midblock across the crosstown street. The traffic was only one way and the red light at the corner had held it back just enough to make the crossing safe—before the right turners off the avenue advanced down and around a double-parked truck. Danny knew that vehicle would block them from the parking attendant's line of sight.

"What did you see, Danny?" asked Corredor.

"I counted four guys. It looked like three were taking care of bringing cars from inside and one was talking to the customers. But they don't wear uniforms, so it would be very easy for them to scatter and get lost somewhere inside if they needed to do so. How about you?" Danny replied.

"There's no ticket booth. There is a wall phone on that column painted reflective yellow to avoid smashups in the dark. Clients must call ahead, there's been no wait, or dickering over which car they want. They walk in and get greeted and go right to a car that's been valeted and arrives on time, just as they do. And there's no payment exchange, cash or charge. I didn't see anyone returning a car, so I don't know how that works, in case it's different," said Dominic.

"What do you want to do?" Danny asked. He almost had to raise his voice because a truck was starting up nearby and its hydraulics bled noisily.

The detective did raise his voice for the same reason. "I want to get the car that Myles Lowry called ahead and ordered for us. But we must go right now." Tugging Hart's sleeve again, he asked, "You ready, Danny? At my pace, please." Dominic was already walking, shielded from the garage guy's view because the double-parked truck was rolling slowly down the street in the same direction they were walking. "Danny, right in behind the truck when we get to the driveway," were his only directions, having thrown a look over his shoulder up the street and found it clear to cross.

Hart wondered who was more out of practice at navigating the city's streets—the detective who'd been off riding trains for four years, or the investigator who had been avoiding New York work for about half as long.

If Corredor had meant the garage front man harm, the guy wouldn't have had a chance. They appeared from behind the moving truck without any warning and were in the fellow's personal space before he knew they were there. Dominic started talking right away, "Morning, we're here to get the car Myles Lowry called ahead for, please."

Too dumbfounded to make something up, the guy half-stepped backwards and asserted, "You're not members!"

Danny distracted him by saying, "Not us. Myles is the member."

"But —"

Dominic didn't give him any room for leverage. "He's going to be pissed at us if we mess this up. Please don't do this to us, man. We're just trying to do our friend a favor in his time of need. He wouldn't have called us and made the arrangements with you if he didn't need the car."

The poor guy was double-teamed and wanted to even the odds. He called over to his friend, who had just valeted a nice number up the ramp and off to the side of the driving area. "Joe, come here. Fast." And he did. "Joe, these guys say Lowry set up a car for them."

Joe's jaw tightened. "Why? So they could wreck another one?" He turned to Dominic and Danny. "Where is the . . . sorry . . . where is Mr. Lowry? The police were here before and made everyone very, very uncomfortable." He did not stay quiet when he saw Lowry's friends were not

going to tell his whereabouts. "And now you guys show up." He paced and ran his fingers through his sweat-damp hair.

A third driver came on the scene with a mid-size sedan, held the door open on his car so the club member who had just entered and silently nodded to the first attendant, got in the car, minding his own business, and drove out. Now it was three over two and Dominic knew time was slipping away. "Maybe we got it all wrong here," he told the first two, and then spun unexpectedly on the newcomer, "what if we're supposed to see if Myles left anything in that other car. Has it been brought here yet?"

The third guy was too new on the scene to have his wits about him. "Yeah, sure. Brought in on a flatbed not even an hour ago. Come on, I'll show you," and he pointed across the way to a car under a tarp. Before the two others could react, Dominic turned to them again, "Sorry if I screwed up. We'll just look at this other . . . wreck . . . and see what Myles was talking about."

Through all the confusion, the guys settled for the lesser of two problems. They could still take care of other members who were coming in and out as usual. After all, these two friends of Lowry's weren't demanding. to take a car any longer. And nobody had told them what to do with the damaged vehicle yet anyway.

Danny lifted the trunk, which was not locked, with the third guy looking over his shoulder. Hart looked around, seeming to search for something that Myles might have left in the car. He called out to Dominic, who was inspecting the interior of the cabin without any supervision. "Nothing here, boss." Danny walked around the passenger side, followed by the garage valet. He saw the dented fenders and, up front, the shattered windshield. He peeked in and saw the airbag hanging limply. Danny heard a car coming up a ramp, echoing in the low-ceilinged garage and Dominic calling out that it was time to go.

The valet was stepping out of the car and a woman was moving to get in. Dominic walked right in front of her, causing a commotion again. The valets had intended to ask them for their names and how they knew Myles, but the new shuffling and raised voices sown by Corredor's antics took over. "Come on," the detective shouted to Hart. "We'll let Myles take this up with management when he gets himself back here." The two men left, went

down to the first corner, and then turned uptown along the avenue. It was all Corredor could do to keep from laughing out loud, until he had the protection of the edge of the building at the intersection.

They retrieved Danny's car and started driving. A few blocks away, they stopped for a red light. "Did you get what you wanted?" asked Danny.

Corredor was checking the side view mirror to make sure they hadn't been followed. "Yes, I did. Thanks for running interference." They started up again when the light turned green and headed over toward the Midtown Tunnel and Long Island.

Dominic reached in his pocket and pulled out the rental agreement folder that was in the driver's side visor of Myles's wrecked rental. "I grabbed this rental agreement Myles signed on Friday, Dan. I also checked the starting mileage." Dominic looked down at the agreement and did some quick math. "Being that the wreck came back from the Island on a flatbed, there's just enough mileage to get out to that railroad lot where it was found, adding on a few miles for tooling around town over the weekend." He was very satisfied. "So, we probably won't have any other places to look for Myles, I hope."

"Okay, then let's get out there and get the police report," said Danny.

Dominic sat back and mused, "With any luck we can catch the same patrol that found the car before the night side begins again. That way if there's anything in the report we want to check on, we might get it first-hand."

240

Out on the Island ahead of their arrival, more was going on with Myles Lowry. Good to her word to Dr. LeClerc and her promise to April Smith, Dr. Françoise Oulette had driven the fifteen minutes from the next town over to come back to see Myles in the later part of the morning. Since Myles was sitting up in his recliner when she arrived, she stood next to him to begin chatting. Without her being asked, April slid an armchair over nearer to the recliner and then made herself scarce across the solarium. She sat with her paperback book in the daylight, allowed in by the vanes she'd opened of the

vertical blinds. She would have left and gone to the room the clinic set up for her, which she hardly used, except that Dr. Oulette had told her during the night she might need to call April over for help in talking to Myles. Beyond April's earshot, Françoise began talking to Myles.

"Good morning, Mr. Lowry. I am Dr. Françoise Oulette. I must say that you look much better than when I saw you last." She was very practiced in this method of making it possible for a patient to remember her, but only on his or her own terms, according to his or her memory.

"Excuse me, Doctor. But I do not recall meeting before." Myles was polite and certain, not at all argumentative or agitated.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Lowry?" Oulette made the patient the center of attention and not the fact that his memory was faulty.

"I am sore in many parts of my body, actually. And I feel quite tired, though not enough to crawl back into bed." He spoke as if he thought he was capable of such locomotion.

"Do you have an ideas about why you feel this way?" she asked.

"I am told I was in a car accident," was his only admission.

"Someone told you that, here? Or before you got here?" she asked.

Myles replied, "I don't really know where 'here' is. But, yes, one of the orderlies this morning mentioned it when he saw I had bruises when I was being helped to take a shower."

Oulette made a mental note to tell LeClerc that it would be important to have her requests, and his orders, communicated not just to nursing staff, but to any staff members who would come in contact with Myles. This would not be the first time that a well-meaning word, spoken here or there, threw a crimp into a regimen of gradual memory recovery she was orchestrating. Françoise was happy it wasn't April who made mention of the accident. She was hoping she would be able to rely on April, heavily if need be, in the next two days—in some respects precisely because she was not a staff member or a medical nurse.



"Myles, do you have any recollection of time you may have spent in a town called" . . . and here she watched, as was her custom, to see if a patient was anxious to know where they were geographically, or had some trepidation about finding out where they were . . . and she mentioned the name of the town that housed the clinic and the library across the street.

His reaction was not overly charged. He did not act curious or disturbed about her using his first name. Myles said that the name she mentioned sounded very much like the name of the town where he grew up as a young boy. He did not exhibit any agitated concern one way or the other. She wondered if his brain was making the connection between the words she was saying and the reality of the brick and mortar, streets and sidewalks, trees and grass that were to be found just a short walk away outside the clinic.

Oulette signaled by hand for April to join them. She came with a light folding chair that she selected from a group of them that stood flat against a wall. "Myles, this is April. She is one of the people here that see to it that you have what you need."

"Are you a nurse, April?" he asked her directly. He gave no sign of recognizing her.

"No, sir. I am just a volunteer," April replied.

Oulette was impressed at how smoothly April answered and understood the apparent situation. She grew confident in her help, if Myles could be so served.

The doctor returned her attention to the patient. "Myles, may I ask you about that town where you grew up?" she inquired. He nodded, at the same time as he was looking at each of them, one at a time. Françoise watched his face for a sign of dawning awareness or recognition.

She asked him to tell them about the town. At this juncture, she assiduously avoided using the words 'remember' or 'recall.' She did not rush him, letting him take his time. She was evaluating whether the time he needed was a function of memory about the town, or the workings of bringing something in his mind to speech. Each of these things would help

her make a non-invasive assessment of his brain. At the same time, she would be mentoring April in communicating with Myles.

Myles began. "There was a train. Not on the street. Above it." He stopped and seemed to be thinking. Oulette noted his sentences were simple and short. But they were logical in their sequence.

"And there was a church. A big one. With a tall steeple. It had chimes. We would know to come home when they rang." The doctor wanted to ask 'from where' but she knew better. Earlier in her practice she would have asked—and irrevocably broken the patient's stream of consciousness. One time a patient's recollections of the past did not return for two sessions of painful silence, tears, and then recriminations about such an interruption.

Myles closed his eyes and rested his head back on the recliner. He seemed to be resting, not still working at imagining his boyhood home. Careful not to let him catch her doing so, Oulette turned to April, nodded, turned her hands palms up, and mouthed the word "yes." Her eyes and raised eyebrows inflected the word so April properly understood it to be a question.

April looked at Lowry to make sure he still had his eyes closed, and then softly told the doctor, "Yes."

As they looked at each other, a man's voice said, "There was a wall. With boxes made from chalk." And then after a short pause, "And there were newspapers." That was all he said. Myles Lowry seemed to have fallen asleep, upright in the recliner. The doctor picked up the chair's remote device, with built-in TV channel changer and call button for assistance. With April's help she gently lowered the back of the recliner, just enough to have Myles's center of gravity resting against it, to prevent him from falling forward as his sleep grew deeper and his body relaxed all the more.

Françoise motioned for them to step away and April followed. "Do you know where he's talking about?" she inquired.

"Yes. The railroad runs straight through town, parallel to the main thoroughfare. Near the railroad station there is a large cathedral. So, both those things are near one another at that location." April grew very nervous. The doctor misread her body language, thinking her just excited to know what she did, and eager to help the doctor find the location.

"I'm going to meet with Doctor LeClerc and tell him what just occurred—which he will treat as a breakthrough—though I've got to see more to make the same judgment. I want to thank you for your help. Will you be staying here with Mr. Lowry for the afternoon?" she wondered aloud.

"Yes, I told Dr. LeClerc I'd hire on for a month to be of assistance, if it's needed for that long." April was somewhat surprised that LeClerc had not told Oulette that. April certainly didn't think of their agreement as a secret not to divulge to the other physician on the case. With a somewhat uncertain look on her face, Françoise started off to see the oncologist and told her, "Well, I'm glad I can count on you for these few days I signed on for. Thank you, again."

Before she was too many steps away from April, the young woman spoke up. "Excuse me, Doctor?" Oulette stopped, and turned, and realized there was a question forming in April's mind. "Doctor, what you told me about hallucinations . . . and what Myles just spoke about to you . . . how do they fit together? I mean, was he hallucinating then? Was he talking about now, or earlier in life when he was a boy? I'm a little lost here."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I should have explained better, rather than going off and leaving you in the dark. Let's sit a moment. What do you say?" They sat, facing each other, from opposite ends of the couch April had slept on just hours ago in the night. "I think Myles knew he was talking about what he saw in his memory from boyhood. Even if those things are still here today—such as a cathedral and a railroad station—I think he was seeing them from his youth. Transitory things like a game box of some kind on a wall and local newspapers, those are probably not to be found today." She let that sink in for April. "His speech was clear and what he said was spoken in a logical sequence. Myles was not talking about the present, but he was not hallucinating somethings that did not exist for other people. They were real."

April settled herself. "Okay, so now I will know how to listen to Myles if he talks to me when we are alone. But should I be asking him any questions. It doesn't seem right to sit with him and not have a discussion of some kind."

"Let me talk to Doctor LeClerc and I'll come back. I may have some ideas. Let me ask you this, April . . . do you have a car? A driver's license?" Oulette was developing an idea.

"No on the car. Yes, to the license. Why?" April was tentative in her answer. Françoise thought she was seeing an apprehension in the young lady, for the first time.

"I am getting some ideas together to talk to Doctor LeClerc about. I'll tell you after I've seen him. Okay?" she asked.

April was starting to feel some pressure she did not like. It was one thing to be kind to Myles. It was another to begin thinking she was somehow under scrutiny.

241

Eleanor received a rude surprise about two o'clock that Tuesday afternoon. With just two hours to go before Mellon was to show up to see Bruce about the audit and the schedule of asset releases in advance of the end of the year, her boss called her on the intercom. She was not pleased to be unable to see him face to face. She didn't want him to see her necessarily. But she wanted to measure what he looked like. If he was calm. If he was angry or impatient. She was concerned he might make a mistake in how he dealt with Attorney Mellon. She was not, however, to get the chance.

"Look, Ms. Quatrane, I've made up my mind. You've been a big help, whether you think, or know, that or not. I'm taking your advice about giving Mellon the books and a schedule of asset allocations for the balance of the year. There is nothing about that Trust in anything I'm giving him." He paused. It sounded like his phone handset was muted by his putting his hand over the mouthpiece. She heard his muffled voice talking to his assistant. "Sorry . . . I'm back . . . Like you said, he'll have until this coming Monday to bring it back in protest, with or without a court order. So by then, you're going to have to get the rest of the goods you urged me to give you time to discover."

He coughed. "So don't bother coming here for four o'clock. You've got to use every minute you have to be ready for a showdown on Monday." He waited and was surprised she did not protest. So, he asked, "You can do that? Can't you? I'll let you have Soro and Costa for another week to make it happen."

"All she said was, "Yes, sir. We will."

242

Dominic Corredor and Danny Hart made much better time driving out to Long Island faster than they had expected. They were told the rental car was abandoned in a commuter lot under the elevated tracks for the Long Island Railroad in a south shore community. The men felt fortunate to discover the local police station sat within sight, just catty-cornered from where they parked Danny's car in a paved, toll-gated secure lot, between a cathedral and the railroad station.

Following their earlier precautions, Corredor stayed in the car at first and watched as only Hart went to see the police. Danny felt a sense of ease within this stationhouse, not the tension gripping Detective Howe's daily watch over in New Jersey. But strangely enough, it turned out his welcome here was significantly less warm. In fact, when he asked about the case, he was asked to sit in an unforgiving wooden captain's chair, with no wrap-around support to rest his arms upon. The chair was in the front lobby. He was on display for police and visitors alike for almost a quarter of an hour.

Eventually, a short woman wearing street clothes and a NY Mets ball cap approached him from inside the station. She was dressed in blue jeans that were not tapered and a loose grey hoodie, untied at the neck, with the image of a beach umbrella open and lying on its side on the front. It was just an artistic rendition, not a clothing company or team logo. But Hart noticed she was not wearing the sneakers he expected to go with the rest of the outfit. He imagined how much it would hurt if she decided to kick the daylights out of an offender unlucky enough to find himself on the ground within her leg span. They were black and spit polished on the outside for sure, with metal toe caps inside he was willing to bet.

Her voice was as alto here in the station, as it was on Sunday in the church choir. It was full without being loud and harmonious within itself as a solo. And that is how she drove and rode at night. Alone in her patrol car, like the prior night when she came upon what had been Myles Lowry's rental sedan.

"Are you from New Jersey, sir?" was what she asked.

"Yes, I am." Danny decided it was not the time for any smart talk.

"There was to be another person with you. That's what I was told." She looked around the lobby. "Is that person here? Or are you not the New Jerseyite I was to meet?"

"No. I am he. And he is out in the car." Danny did not explain. He did not know they were expected. Was it Howe? Was it Dominic's captain? Or were there other players outside of law enforcement he did not know about?

"Are you both coming in? Or am I expected to come out?" she queried.

"He has been waiting outside, when we have come to houses of the law." It was awkward but Hart didn't know what else to say.

"Perfectly understandable," she declared. "I'll go sit on a bench in the circle under the flagpole. There's a few, plenty of room for three. That's my offer of a fair compromise—my turf, but outdoors. What do you think?" There still had been no introductions. Deniability all around. Cop stuff, thought Hart. Gotta love it.

Dominic walked over with Danny and was about to take a bench for himself. The local patrolwoman stood and pointed to a different bench. She wanted her visitors to have their backs to the front door of the stationhouse. She didn't give a reason. Danny realized she didn't have to give one. It was her house, her front yard, her flagstone circle, her flagpole with Old Glory snapping overhead in a little breeze, and her benches.

Dominic spoke first. "Thank you for meeting us."

"I was told to do so. Everybody's got a boss." Full voiced without shouting. Clearly audible above the cars driving by. Dominic wondered if they'd be able to hear her when a train pulled in down the street, brakes screeching and blowing air and such. She had her hands inside the pouch that ran across the belly of the hoodie. Her boot soles were flat on the pavers. Her legs were definitely not crossed at the ankles, as such a posture was tantamount to having them zip-tied. It was a way to look relaxed, to the unpracticed eye, but Corredor wondered what else was inside that hoodie

pouch she might have been resting her hand upon. He had twice ruined such a sweatshirt—he could never sew a bullet hole or bleach out the burnt fabric around it. But it saved split seconds and maybe even his life one of those times. And it eliminated the risk of getting his sidearm caught on the cotton. To all this, Danny was not accustomed. The difference in the men’s body language informed the patrolwoman of which she would be more cautious. Like the MPs to whom their friend Mike Riley owed so much, this local patrolwoman knew the music of the southern streets around boot camps in the States and the scented cooking of street vendors in several cities of southeast Asia.

Corredor continued the interview, such that it was. “Anything in particular attract you to that vehicle last night?” He was polite even in not knowing her name. He was careful not to address her with any title or figure of speech that might offend her. When she wanted him to know her name, she would tell it to him. And he was not about to tell her his, which she obviously already knew, as if to suggest he could goad her into doing so any sooner.

“Everest phenomenon, I guess,” was her reply.

Hart was not on their wavelength, but he trusted Dominic would bring him up to speed, somehow, when it became necessary. Corredor replied to the patrolwoman’s answer. “Fair enough. After that, when you took a look, anything suggest something other than an accident?”

“It didn’t happen there. Car was parked straight in, tucked behind a column. Pavement was clean. Nothing in the bushes nearby.” She looked at Hart. Adjusted herself on the bench and started again.

“Mr. Hart, I went to the car because it was there. It should not have been. The car had been left there to buy someone time. None of Mr. Lowry’s belongings were still in the car, though some of him was. He seemed to use his face to damage the driver’s side window of the vehicle and his head to smear the air bag and bloody the seat rest.” She took a minute. Looked at Dom. Continued.

“He did not use his credit card to buy a train ticket to leave town. He did not register again for another stay in any of our motels—just Friday and Saturday night up on the main highway through town. Alone the first

night, accompanied the second. The night shift station bus drivers on duty these last three days did not recognize him from the picture his associate, Mrs. Cocom, faxed over. No hospital admissions. We don't have any urgent cares and the next town over didn't record an intake for him." She let them have time to absorb the highlights.

"So, you think he's still in town? His Saturday night guest offer any help?" Dominic was well along the path of his missing person pursuit. He was congratulating this patrolwoman without condescension. She accepted his commendation tacitly and gave him some more information in return.

"She's sort of in the wind. Her two jobs say she left word she had to leave town to attend to family business. Said to expect it would be a month. So, nobody's been looking for her on her own account. But she and your friend Myles got chummy at our local library this weekend—she's a part-timer in archives—over some research project he was deeply engrossed within. Last seen Sunday afternoon by patrons, when they were sitting on a garden bench by the front door, talking seriously but not arguing, or nothing. Discussion and research topic, or topics, unknown as of yet. Hoping to find out what and to where those lead.

Hart felt he had to hold up some part of this conversation. "You've covered a bunch of ground in a very short time."

She replied without acknowledging what she imagined Hart thought was a compliment. "Small town. Everybody has bunches of people that know, or at least recognize, them. But like all small towns, there's plenty of secrets and places to disappear. We have two detectives. One's been assigned. I'm chasing on loose time—before I start again in the car at eleven-thirty."

Danny thought that was her invitation to wrap things up and he reached for a business card to hand her. Dominic just shook his head and chuckled. The two cops watched as Danny tried to ease the card back in his pocket.

"What can we tell you that might help—you and us?" asked Corredor. Hearing him say that reminded Danny of his first meeting with Detective Howe in Jersey, "What can you do for me?" she had asked.



"You know that better than I do," she answered. And here she withdrew her hands and opened a small, leatherette-bound flip pad and a pen. Again, Danny remembered Howe did the same thing. He liked it then. He was liking it now.

"Our interest is a custody battle. Lowry and his wife are divorced. She's got custody he's trying to wrestle back. Day of the hearing she splits with the child, six-year-old Linda—a real cutie, whose won everyone over. Judge in the case says he'll hear their arguments for custody only if both living parents are in the courtroom. We think the husband came here looking for the wife and child, either because he thought they were here, or he could find something here that would tip him off where to go to find them."

Corredor looked at Danny. "Good so far?" he asked. Danny nodded and motioned with his hand to have Corredor continue, as if he was showing him he could walk first through an open door they both wanted to enter.

Dominic went on, addressing their hostess with purposeful verbal and eye contact, "So, we'd be interested in the content of that research he, or they, were doing at the library. We might learn something important from that angle." He looked but she didn't react, so he knew she wanted to hear the whole thing first.

Danny spoke up, because he felt Dominic had passed over the most important aspect of Myles going missing. "And we'd like to help find him and get him back in front of that judge as well. Of course, if he's hurt, we want to make sure he gets the medical attention he needs."

Hart found the silence after he said his peace uncomfortable. He realized it wasn't what he said that seemed out of place. It was that he was the one who said it. A tinge of anger rose in him. This was his case. He was the one who had been searching for Linda in the present, while the ladies in the law offices were chasing down the past. He was the one who recruited Riley and was turning Flynn to the cause. He was the one who chanced going to Howe. And now he felt pushed off on a siding by the onrush of law enforcers who seemed to speak a different, almost secret, language—and who thought about, and saw, the world in a very particular way.

While he tumbled in those lost thoughts, no one said anything.

Dominic picked up the pieces, talking cop to cop, as if Hart was not with them. "Danny's really good at sussing out loose ends and drawing a picture hardly anyone else can see. But he needs to wander around and see things, peek here and there, lift this corner of the carpet, so to speak. He's taught me some tricks of his trade. But he won't do that if it means stepping on your toes. And not because he's afraid to get those steel tips up his backside. It's because he respects what other people do and what they want." Hart heard that Dominic was speaking regularly again, not cop talk, people talk. He exhaled and got back in the game.

It was still Dominic doing the talking, and the patrolwoman doing the listening. "In short, we need to know, the both of us, just what we can and can't do in your town. Who we can talk to and who we should avoid at all costs. Where we can go and where we dare not be seen. Can you help us with this, or do you just want us to leave and wait to hear from you?" He was done.

She stood up and they followed suit, not knowing if they were about to be shown out of town. "You two need to come inside with me. Like I said, 'Everybody's got a boss.' It's time for you to meet mine. Consider yourselves vetted. That's what I was brought in to do once you walked in here." She started walking toward the door. She sensed the difficulty and halted and turned around. Dominic was a few steps behind Danny and not moving toward the door.

"Detective Corredor, please come forward. You are welcome here. Your reputation precedes you, as they say in fancier circles than I turn around in. Your captain phoned my boss while you two were driving out here from Manhattan to ask permission for you to be here. My boss granted it and said he wanted you to have carte blanche. And if Mr. Hart was with you, then he was to be extended the same courtesies. It seems you did not exaggerate about Linda Lowry winning hearts. However, locally this is deemed to be my case. So, my boss told me to get myself over here pronto and feel you guys out. He wants to talk to you face-to-face, but only if I told him I was okay with it. And I am. So, let's not waste time here mutually admiring one another."

But Corredor waited a moment more. Then he told her, "I need to ask you to do something for me, please." He took from his pocket a yellow folder. In it was the rental agreement for Myles's sedan. "We went to see the car. I had to confirm it was Myles and not a straw man who rented the vehicle. And I needed to check the mileage, to make sure he didn't go somewhere in

addition to this town. He didn't." He reached it to her. "But now it appears that your case may involve a crime. So, I'm turning this over as evidence. I should not be keeping it."

She took it and slipped it into her hoodie pouch, wordlessly.

The patrolwoman showed Hart and Corredor into her boss's office. She introduced them all around. And then she promptly excused herself, saying, "I must go back home and get ready for my night shift. I hope to see you guys around. But—know this . . . and know it well—I will not acknowledge we know each other until you make the first overture, in case you are working on something sensitive that requires me not to know you. I'll be told if you need anything, I'm sure." And with that she left.

It was almost a full hour of conversation and briefing that followed. When Dominic and Danny were standing in his office and saying their goodbyes, the patrolwoman's boss told them one more thing. "She's a good cop. I'm going to hate the day the Staties or the Feds come along and scoop her up. But it's bound to happen. She's just too damn good for our town to keep her satisfied forever."

Danny asked, "Why did you give her first option on our being here?"

He stood, a few inches taller than both of them, deciding if he was going to reply. Even though Danny asked the question, it was Dominic who deserved the answer. And this was the answer he gave. "Detective, does the name Sylvia Hammersmith ring any bells?"

Corredor didn't even have to think. The catalog of names to him were not cases, they were people. Danny marveled at his slipping right back into cop talk. "Certainly. Eighth grader. Disappeared from a popular mall out in Suffolk. Shopping for a Bat Mitzvah dress. Gone for a week. Spotted with hair dyed and cut, boy length, in Bensonhurst. I found her being readied for shipment to Syria, for sex trafficking and then for political hostaging, when she was too worn out for abusing any longer." Danny was shocked. It was the first time he had heard Dominic tell such horrid specifics of a case. Dominic inquired, "Why do you ask sir?"

“That half hour outside you spent under the flagpole this afternoon? You were talking to Sylvia’s great-aunt, Maura Hammersmith. You two never met because she was overseas in the military at the time.”

Danny knew better when they got to the car than to say out loud what he was thinking. ‘That’s why she didn’t tell us her name.’ The more time he spent with Howe and Corredor and their superiors, and now with Maura Hammersmith, Danny Hart was starting to ‘get’ what the cops on the Lowry cases were about. He felt better about their chances of finding Linda.

243

Deirdre and Clementine arrived for their second consecutive day at the library to play *Insecta*. Deirdre was enjoying her board supremacy from the day before. She won two of their three games decisively, and quicker than the instructions suggested the game should take to play. Rosalyn had photocopied and given them those instructions to study over the weekend. Deirdre was reading better than Clementine and gained an advantage as a result as they began to play. Against the rules, Deirdre had also asked her friends to help her on that Saturday.

But then at Tuesday lunch, Deirdre learned that Linda had been helping Clementine gain a better understanding of the game’s strategy. They talked about the game walking back and forth from the dining hall to the classroom building, and over lunch as well. Deirdre’s former anger slipped her management efforts, and she was furious at Linda’s intrusion. They only played one game that Tuesday. It seemed to take forever.

Clementine was more ‘street smart’ in altering her insect characters’ movements. She made better choices setting up her insect players at the outset of the game than Deirdre had done. The redhead still lost, in the end, but just barely. She was very excited about her chances the next time they would play—Thursday after classes.

The specter of the bully began to resurge within Deirdre. She began to think of ways to channel that energy into her *Insecta* playing pieces—just as she had become amazingly proficient at choosing her own edgy adventures when she read the books the librarian gave her.

Rosalyn's plan was working, just as she had read about Jean Brodie's doing the same. But Linda's mother would not be present to witness her victory, nor be in a position to turn down the heat when it flared—like the childless Jean Brodie had been able to do.

Continued at April 2024 – Part Two