

Another Way

Beyond the Status Quo

A MANIFESTO

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Prologue

Dobie shook his head and said, “Somebody has to at least try to make the world a better place. Can’t you see that? That’s all I’m trying to do, Reggie.”

“Is *that* all?” Charonne was sarcastic, then added, “But, seriously, don’t call me Reggie.”

Semmy Speaks

It was in Las Cruces that things got weird. Dobie was in the middle of a speaking tour in support of his manifesto, *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo*. From his adopted home of Tennessee, he had driven north through Kentucky and Indiana, then down through Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas and, finally, New Mexico on the southern edge of the Rockies.

He was feeling pretty good about things after a rough start, now selling more books online, in stores, and in person. He felt he was winning the war against those who would shut him up. Word was spreading. Crowds were growing with each passing week. He was now filling up those previously half-empty hotel conference rooms, even the occasional small concert venue, as he shared his plans for “saving the world.”

He was no savior, but did feel a bit like The Pied Piper. He just hoped his story had a happier ending than that one. He knew he had no business giving lectures and trying to solve the world’s problems, but the world had gone crazy, and nobody seemed to be doing anything about it. Nobody he trusted to get it right, anyway. Someone had to inject some no-longer-common sense and decency into the conversation, so why not him? Whenever he asked that last question aloud, he got such a long list of reasons that he stopped asking.

His book laid out who and/or what was running things on this planet. There was nothing much new in it for anyone well-versed on the prevailing conspiracy theories, except for one big difference: *Another Way* had solutions. Real solutions, from better toilet seat design to new forms of government, and everything in between – assuming there *was* an in-between.

He thought he had all the answers and, best of all, none of them required anyone's assassination.

As mentioned, it was in Las Cruces where things got otherworldly as he and his raven-haired, blue-eyed girlfriend, Kaylie, shared a dream about a little blue alien. Neither of them was into aliens or science fiction – or drugs – so it was a mystery where it came from.

“How is it even possible,” he asked afterward, “for two people to have the same dream at the same time... unless it wasn't a dream?”

Whatever it was, a smiling, big-eared, blue-eyed little alien humanoid with blue skin and hair sat in front of them in a wide, beige, over-stuffed wing-back chair. Its face was that of a feminine male or masculine female. With its bare feet firmly on the ground, it sat like a king on his throne wearing a simple beige robe that blended with the seat. The legs were also bare from the knees down, creating a disembodied-at-each-end sort of look.

He or she sounded like a man with a feminine voice – or vice versa – speaking English in a Hindi-British accent in the “royal we.”

~

Our name is Sematalanthoyop, but you can call us 'Semmy.' We are from beyond the Pleiades, in the eighth dimension... when we're not slumming it down here in the third and fourth dimensions. Most of you spend most of your time in the third dimension, influenced more than you know by the fourth, only occasionally reaching the fifth. Point being, we're exponentially better than you! Just kidding. Don't let the term 'higher-dimension' fool you. For one thing, it's more of an 'outer' dimension. Pretty much everything is spherical. And, to assume higher-dimensionals are better is like assuming someone who can swim while you cannot is better just because you were never taught; or, someone told the answer is smarter than those not told. Never confuse better-informed or -trained with just plain better. No human is innately better than any other, it's just that some of you have gone off the rails worse than others.

Do not be frightened. We're the good guys.

~

In real life, Major Randall Watson, Air Force Special Ops, Retired, was in a hard, plastic chair in a small, cramped room within a secret military location nearby. A more cynical person might think it was a little too convenient that Dobie just happened to pass through Las

Cruces near this base, but Watson didn't give it a second thought. He wasn't the conspiracy theorist, Dobie was.

The alien, Semmy, was happy with how things were working out.

The two "space nerds" – as they called themselves – next to Watson sat in much more comfortable chairs, but they all wore military-grade virtual reality helmets plugged into the same broadcast Dobie and Kaylie were seeing. These "nerds" were well-versed in projecting dreams and images into people's heads, but they swore that this "Semmy Speaks" broadcast was real. Nobody knew where it came from or how they captured it – other than entirely by accident – but they had it and everyone who watched it was blown away. Even their "aliens-in-residence" were unfamiliar with this blue race "from beyond the Pleiades."

Watson assumed the "nerds" were lying. Half of everything labeled "top secret" was a lie, designed to throw people off the scent of the other half that was legitimate. "Either way," Watson said, "I'm gonna have some fun with this!"

Nothing else he had tried had worked on Dobie. Hiring people to rough him up, break a few bones, put dents in both him and his car only made Dobie that much more determined. The two men were alike in that respect, but Watson had no clue how to shut Dobie down.

Early on, Major Watson's former commanding officer, Colonel Reginald P. Charonne, Retired – who also happened to be Dobie's

former civilian boss – had said, “At the very least, get this dimwit Dobie – Pokorny, is it? – talking about something other than capitalism and conspiracy theories!”

He was so adamant that Watson thought some of Dobie’s theories must have hit a nerve.

Colonel Charonne had thought firing Dobie from his company, SaynCorp, and contesting his unemployment benefits would break his spirit and send him on a downward spiral of job applications and failed interviews. He remembered how disheartening it had been for him, personally, that one time *he* had to interview for a job – only to be rejected – before his daddy pulled some strings and got him into officer training school so long ago.

Charonne’s subsequent military success – rising to the impressive rank of Colonel – was all his, but he was then simply handed the reins of the family business, SaynCorp.

He would argue strenuously against anyone accusing him of benefiting from nepotism, being “born on third base thinking he’d hit a triple,” but they were right and he knew it. Was it his fault he took advantage of life’s gifts? Anyone else would have done the same. His accusers were just jealous.

He smiled at the thought of Dobie flipping burgers or digging ditches for a living, and hoped that by pulling the rug – his corporate job security – out from under him it would be the end of Pokorny’s lofty aspirations and “obvious messiah complex.” Faced with such adversity, he assumed Dobie would succumb like millions before

him and beg for the next soul-sucking corporate job to pay the bills, then assume his “rightful” place as a mere cog in the wheel of modern, industrial/corporate society.

Charonne was dead wrong about Dobie, who surprised everyone by taking lemons and making lemonade. He printed out a bunch of copies and launched into his book tour.

Major Watson was Colonel Charonne’s “ground force” in this “little war” that had, as Charonne put it, popped up “like a delightful summer shower.” He loved a good war, and his junior officer Watson’s orders were to “keep an eye on Pokorny, follow him, keep him from getting too popular.” Watson’s plan was to wear Dobie down with “agents” planted in his audiences bombarding him with questions, heckling and negativity. Your basic harassment.

Phase two was to set Dobie up with beautiful women who were so far out of his league that, in his eagerness to impress them, he would speak out of turn and reveal his secrets.

“Pillow talk,” Charonne said. “Spy Craft 101.”

When that wasn’t enough, Watson was not above hiring thugs to attack and chase this “New Age Pied Piper” out of parking lots. “If all else fails,” Charonne said, “we can always kill him. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Major Watson hoped this “Semmy thing” did the trick on Dobie. If it worked but Charonne *still* wanted Pokorny dead, Watson was

out. Done. Finished. He would, for the first time, not follow a direct order. He was not going to kill an innocent man. He might even start that pot farm in Colorado he'd been dreaming of. Being a connoisseur of the stuff, it only made sense he should grow it himself.

~

Dobie and Kaylie's dream / hallucination / episode continued a bit longer before Dobie's version stopped abruptly, as if interrupted. Semmy was saying...

Your solar system used to be at the center of the galaxy – just off center, actually, where the alpha waves are at their most righteous. It was *the* most happening solar system where all the cool kids hung out, until it was flung third- and fourth-dimensionally into *this* part of the galaxy.

Unfortunately, this area was already inhabited by a particularly nasty race of beings, if you want to call them that. They are not fully corporeal but *are* obsessed with all things carnal – like everyone else on Earth – but we digress!

This section of the Milky Way was originally designed as a negative counterbalance to the galaxy's otherwise positive nature. A cosmic septic tank, if you will. That's why it's so hard to get anything done around

here. It's like slogging through knee-deep sewer mud! Only those with the best hip-waders make any real progress.

It was never meant for highly complex, sentient, sensitive beings like yourselves. It was meant for those of a more primitive and sinister nature, a dark force that has cast its pall over your way of life. No one wants to talk about it, but we tend to speak the unspeakable. It's what we do. Like a public service. You're welcome!

Still, despite all this, perhaps because of it, brave souls have been coming here to test their mettle. Give it a go against all odds, and all that. The rallying cry for those of us from beyond the Pleiades is 'Lighten up! Play it by ear!' Bit of an inside joke.

Others have been dumped here, incarcerated for criminal acts or because they were legitimately insane and Mother Earth has been identified as a very good therapy planet. Seriously, go outside sometime, stand barefoot, and just *feel* the Earth beneath your feet!

This dark force has manifested in a variety of ways throughout your history. Been anthropomorphized – a childish habit of Earthlings – countless times; given names like Necuratu, Beelzebub, Satan, The Dark

Prince, The Adversary and, last but not least, the High Priest of Gray Areas, the scariest of them all to anyone insisting that everything is strictly black or white!

Okay, that last one was a joke. It makes us laugh to think of a 'High Priest' of anything. Humans aren't the only ones with a sense of humor. Seriously, though, do not be frightened but don't relax too much, either. The negative force / urge / thought is real. They call themselves Ceytons, but we call them 'stupidity incarnate.' For eons, they have influenced political, religious and financial leaders, social clubs, supposed charities, groupthink tanks, designated villains, novelists, screenwriters, the entire news and entertainment industries. Anyone or anything with influence.

Directly and indirectly through their minions, Ceytons have been manipulating humans for thousands of years. Their *m.o.* is quite simple: They float ideas, sending out the stupidest, most destructive thoughts they can come up with, mainly because stupidity and destruction is all they do. Like fishing, they wait for an idiot to come along and take the bait, grab the idea and claim it as their own without thinking things through. Works like a charm, no pun intended.

~

Kaylie's version of the dream became interactive as it continued after Dobie's ended. Semmy's voice changed slightly. Even his color was different as he spoke. He maintained his blue center but alternated around the edges between all the Earth human skin tones.

The first thing the now-multi-colored alien said directly to Kaylie was to suggest she get pregnant. In her dream state, it sounded like a good idea, though she did at least ask why.

So that we can be born into a physical body! We want to explore your world as a physical human!

“Okay, sure,” Kaylie agreed. “You won't be blue, though.”

We'll adapt. Skin color is not such a big deal for us, but you need to mate with Watson, not Pokorny.

“Who's Watson?”

That tall, very dark and handsome gentleman following you around? Major Randall Watson.

“Him?” she was surprised. “Not really my type, but if you say so...”

Yes, please. He is much more interesting than that loser, Pokorny. You should dump *him* right away.

“Okay.”

~

As soon as Kaylie woke up, Dobie asked simply, “Little blue alien?”

“Yes!” she said, wide-eyed. “You, too?”

Dobie nodded and asked, “Think any of it was true?”

“Just a dream, I guess, but, are all aliens blue?”

“Don’t know,” Dobie had to think about that one. “That was my first one.”

“After you left the dream, Semmy said I should get pregnant.”

“What?”

“Yeah. What do you think?” She wanted to see how he reacted to the *idea* of her being pregnant. Details like fatherhood could be hammered out later. Her own father had left her and her mother years ago. Now that she was leaving her mom behind, it felt like the right time to start her own family.

“Of you being pregnant?” Dobie was uncomfortable with the subject. Last time he had this conversation was in high school when his girlfriend at the time turned up pregnant. He had to put college on hold and get a job. His friends said he should dump her. The kid probably wasn’t his. But he wanted to do the right thing. His friends ended being right and she ran off with her baby and its *actual* father after Dobie had conveniently paid all pregnancy expenses.

That experience alone soured Dobie on woman for quite some time. He got over it, but found out in the process how difficult it was to recover from such betrayal.

“I, uh, I’ll have to... um,” he stammered now, “hey, isn’t there some kind of military or government research facility around here? I think so. Supposedly top secret, but more like an open secret in conspiracy circles. It’s all just crazy. Somebody’s messing with us!”

He could not accept that their shared experience was anything more than some sort of induced hallucination. His theories had to remain within the realm of probability. That was kind of his thing. Sure, aliens were *probably* “out there” somewhere – given the odds – but he was *not* one of those tin-foil hat types who always jumps to the conclusion that “it must be aliens!”

“They have military-grade sound cannons,” Dobie explained to an only mildly interested Kaylie. “LRADs. ‘Long range acoustic devices.’ Basically, a ray gun that emits sounds and vibrations meant to drive us crazy. They can even tailor it based on your sex.”

Kaylie wondered if he would ever answer the pregnancy question.

“I’m serious!” he said, mistaking her look as one of questioning his sanity. Most people did. “I’ve read about sound weapons. They’re not just for crowd control. They can *cause* riots, too. “

Kaylie was left shaking her head. Now that the idea had been planted, having a baby sounded better all the time, though she still wanted to know how Dobie felt about it. She would prefer him as the father but was now determined to have a baby, one way or another.

Gone Missing

A week later, in Taos, they slept in before taking a leisurely stroll, hand-in-hand, to breakfast at a restaurant across from the hotel. It didn't have the same charm as The Blue Spoon Diner where they met, but it was not bad. Dobie just wanted something better than the free hotel meal. He could afford such "luxuries" now.

After breakfast, still mid-morning, they made their way to a small outside courtyard near the center of town. Finding themselves surrounded by a surprisingly large crowd – both seated and standing – with his talk due to start, Dobie smiled and stepped up onto the "stage" which was no more than a small area two or three bricks higher than everywhere else. He imagined this was where the band played, whoever that might be any given night. Kaylie took a seat in a fold-up chair behind him in the shade of a beautiful, twisting, old walnut tree.

He smiled back at her, as had become his routine prior to every speech, and was about to speak when the alien, Semmy, returned. The "blue dude," as Dobie called him in his head, was in that same wing-back chair, and he was sitting right there in the front row. That's how it looked to Dobie, anyway.

He shook his head to break the hallucination, but it didn't work. He turned to Kaylie again, this time looking for any sign that she was seeing Semmy, too. She smiled back, not seeing the alien but

now wondering what the problem was. Several in the audience seemed to be wondering the same thing.

Kaylie thought she might have to step in for him. She had been itching to get up in front of the crowd herself, anyway. She had heard all of his speeches by that point and was ready for the spotlight. Not sure what she might say, doubting that she could improvise like he did, she was nonetheless confident she would think of something.

Ever since their escape from her home town of Taylorville, Kaylie had been sitting up front with Dobie at his appearances. This was primarily because nobody could kidnap her while in front of an audience. Hopefully. But, she also wanted – through osmosis from Dobie if nothing else – to see how it felt to be in front of a crowd and *listened* to, not just ogled for her beauty. *That* would be something new.

Dobie spotted Watson leaning up against another walnut tree at the back of the crowd. The man was no longer even bothering to hide. Idly wondering now if this area used to be an orchard, Dobie turned to Kaylie for the third time. Out the corner of his mouth, gesturing with his eyes in Watson's direction, he said, "That guy is like a bad penny."

Something clicked inside Kaylie at the sight of the "tall, very dark and handsome man" at the back of the crowd. She practically leaped to her feet. "I'll talk to him," she said, finding him suddenly much more interesting and physically attractive, though she was un-

sure why. She had never been with a black guy. Not a racist, she had simply never met one who she found attractive. Whatever the attraction was now, however, she felt compelled to hurry up and meet him.

Dobie watched, helpless, as she met Watson at the back of the audience. She was being awfully friendly, he thought, but that was Kaylie. She had every man she ever met wrapped around her little finger within seconds. She said something to make Watson smile as they slipped through the door into an adjacent building. He wondered what that was about but couldn't chase after her. He had an audience to entertain.

Kaylie's disappearance and Semmy's reappearance put Dobie in a mood for anything *but* his usual political talk. *Funny*, he thought, *how the threat of lost love puts politics into proper perspective.*

He couldn't talk about his "girl problems" in front of everyone, so he talked about the Semmy dream. He knew it wouldn't help his credibility, but had to talk about something. He could laugh it off later as someone slipping him peyote.

"So, I dreamt about an alien the other night," he began. "Probably no big surprise in these parts, eh? Anyway, his name was Semmy. Actually, he said his full name was – let me see if I can say this – Sematalanthoyop. Ever heard of him?"

He was not expecting an answer, but a thirty-something, mostly bald white guy with long blonde hair around the edges nodded his

head, raised his hand and said, “I know Semmy. He comes to me in my dreams all the time!”

“Really?” Dobie was incredulous.

“All the time!”

“What does he look and sound like?” Dobie tested him.

“Oh, uh,” the man hesitated, “he’s, um, about seven feet tall, with blonde hair... and looks and speaks Norwegian. But I speak all languages in my dreams.”

“Okay,” Dobie dismissed the man. “Well, my alien was about five foot nothing. I guess. He never stood up, but he had blue skin, blue hair, and sounded like an Indian couple with a Hindi accent speaking at the same time. So...”

“Oh, you said Semmy!” the man tried to save face. “I thought you said Svenny!”

“Uh huh,” Dobie smiled politely but was careful not to shake his head or roll his eyes. He was still trying to get the hang of not pissing people off. It had been a while since any audience members had accosted him, and he’d like to keep it that way.

“Anyway, he said our solar system used to be closer to the center of the galaxy ‘where all the cool kids hung out.’ I like the sound of that! Does that remind you of anyone?” he gestured toward the entire audience.

He knew flattery worked, and often used it, but it was not disingenuous. He honestly believed those who attended his talks were the

“cool kids.” He interjected clarification as needed as he retold Semmy’s story.

~

Rumor has it that a team of scientists was responsible for your solar system’s accidental relocation. Arrogant, overpaid eggheads on a government contract lacking even the foresight to give themselves the excuse of being drunk. They were completely sober and playing with matches – and by matches we mean subatomic particles – energy fields, actually, but we won’t get into the physics – when – BANG! – the bulk of your solar system ended up over here near the galactic edge.

As for these Ceytons we keep mentioning, they are idiots. But, remember what they say about arguing with an idiot: They will drag you down to their level and beat you with experience! So, don’t do it. You just step around them like dog crap on the sidewalk. You know they’re there, but you avoid them.

It has been argued this is no better than pretending they’re not there. But, you’re not ignoring them, and you’re not engaging with them, either. They *want* you to focus on them, hate and despise them. They know their negativity and your fear will swallow you whole if you let it.

But you are not afraid. You are strong. Just be yourself. That's the most important thing. People go on and on about their 'real world' accomplishments, their life's achievements, but if they can simply maintain – if not strengthen – their sanity, humanity and personal integrity after an entire lifetime in this outdoor insane asylum, *that* will be their greatest accomplishment. It's like diving into shark-infested waters and living to tell the tale!

Speaking of which, don't be scared when you feel you are about to die. You're not frightened when you wake up in the morning, are you? Same thing. 'Life is but a dream!' And, when you turn in your score-card at the end of this round of golf we call life, don't forget to return that little pencil along with it!

Ha! Just a little afterlife humor.

~

Dobie thought that would cheer him up – and it did a little – but he was still so distracted by Kaylie's absence that he made distraction itself the subject of his talk. Others might have said "screw it," quit the talk, and gone looking for her, but he never liked to leave people feeling cheated.

"One of the most powerful forces in the universe," he powered through, "is distraction. It is quite possibly the purpose behind al-

most every man-made thing, keeping us occupied. Distracted. Harmless. It's no big deal until it distracts you from your purpose.

“And what is the greatest distraction of all? It used to be television, then computers, now it's the so-called smartphone. Granted, they can be useful and are almost exactly what Douglas Adams described as *The Guide* itself in his book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* which came out 30 or 40 years prior. The man was a genius! And, no, all that stuff about Semmy was *not* me channeling the good Mr. Adams. Maybe he was channeling Semmy? That's what I'm going with, anyway. I don't recommend channeling.

“I believe smartphones are destructive to the mental, emotional and especially spiritual health of humans, but don't panic!” He added that last bit with a laugh in honor of *Hitchhiker's* catch phrase, though only a few in the audience seemed to get the reference.

“Electronic devices make us lazy. They do things for us like long-distance communication and remote viewing that we were once able to do ourselves, mentally/psychically, if you believe in past and/or pre-Earthly lives. On a more mundane level, those GPS mapping programs obviate the need for our innate sense of direction, and calendar reminders have the same destructive effect upon our sense of time. Even if we *wanted* to develop our psychic, mental and common-sense abilities – recapture them, really – we now have these convenient smartphones to render such abilities unnecessary, moot and, ultimately, lost.”

There was no response from the audience. Crickets. He thought he had chosen a subject more attuned to this crowd. They were paying attention to Semmy's story moments earlier, but the mere mention of smartphones had everyone now staring at theirs.

Dobie had always heard Taos was a mystical, almost magical place. *Or, was that Sedona?* Now he wasn't sure. Whatever the case, even here people were addicted to their phones.

He was deflated. He didn't even stick around long enough to sign more than a few books before loading everything into his car, *Sabina*.

He needed to find Kaylie.

~

He ran into Major Watson in the parking lot just outside the hotel's back door. Trying to sound casual, exchanging monosyllabic grunts, Dobie tried to ignore the smell of marijuana as he asked, "Oh, hey, have you seen Kaylie?"

"Just left her a minute ago," Watson smiled knowingly, hiding the "roach" behind his back, out of habit. "That's why I'm down here enjoying this. You know... after."

"After what?" Dobie's smile slipped away. He knew what Watson was implying.

"It's best to hear it from the woman herself, my brother," Watson said with a smirk, took a long drag and exhaled in Dobie's direction

just to irritate him. He could guess a Boy Scout like Dobie did not imbibe.

“I will, *my brother*,” Dobie almost spat the words out.

“One more thing,” Watson scratched his chest with the thumb of his roach hand. “You need to leave the country.”

“Come again?”

“It’s not safe for you and Kaylie here,” Watson explained. “Remember Colonel Charonne?”

“My old boss? How could I forget?”

“He’s got a thing for you. Hates you. Keeps going on about ‘stamping out The Red Menace’ or some such. I’ve seen it before. Kaylie will be safe, as long as I’m around, but you need to go away if you know what’s good for you.”

Dobie gave him a long look before saying, “Ha! Had me going there for a second! We’ll take our chances, thanks.”

He pushed past Watson into the hotel, and ran up the two flights of stairs. The smell of marijuana dissipated as he climbed higher but, from that point forward, that smell would always remind Dobie of what happened next.

Taylorville

Several weeks earlier

Some of Dobie's best ideas – epiphanies, even – came to him while behind the wheel. The rhythmic hum of the open road often brought a sense of calm. Not tonight.

The rain was coming down in sheets as he drove *Sabina* to his next book signing. The darkness, solitude and treacherous driving conditions only heightened his anxiety. *Probably should have skipped that last coffee*, he thought.

He had been checking his rearview mirror the past hundred miles or so. No one seemed to be following him anymore, but he was still trying to get over that last crowd. The hotel security guard had kept him safe while he packed up his display after that talk, but once out in the parking lot Dobie was on his own. That's when four thugs came after him and put a dent in *Sabina's* rear panel. He normally would have stopped and demanded restitution, but felt lucky to escape with his life.

Note to self: Try not to piss people off so much.

Further down the road, in southern Missouri on the outskirts of a little town called Taylorville, the lights on a billboard up ahead on the left flickered off. Dobie barely noticed.

A car in the fast lane came up from behind and passed Dobie. He looked over, as had become his habit, but couldn't make out the driver. It was too dark and stormy out there. "A dark and stormy night!" he said aloud with a laugh to cheer himself up.

All he could say for sure was that the car was a dark, late-model Cadillac Escalade. Just as it cruised past him, the billboard he noticed earlier, now directly to his left, came back to life, bright as a full moon. It was blinding.

He slammed on his brakes and came to a complete stop on the Interstate. He sat there a moment, like an idiot, staring at the billboard. It was done in retro Americana style depicting a rosy-cheeked, smiling blonde woman in a blue apron; one hand on her hip; steaming hot cobbler in the other. "Come see us at The Blue Spoon Diner!" she said in the cartoon bubble. "Next exit!"

The tagline proclaimed that they were "Serving up the best blueberry pie this side of the berry patch!"

There was nothing special about that over-sized ad as far as anyone else was concerned, but Dobie got an overpowering feeling of belonging. Home. *Déjà vu*. He was 99% sure he had never been there or seen that billboard before but he suddenly knew this was where he needed to be. It would go down as "the most important billboard, ever" in his personal history. There is not a lot of competition in that area for most people, but this was the second billboard to have a profound effect on Dobie.

He was still in the slow lane of the Interstate, not moving, when a big rig came up from behind blowing its horn. It swerved and barely missed him. That snapped Dobie back to reality, and he took the next exit. He hadn't planned on stopping in this town, but the feeling of home/*déjà vu* could not be denied. *I'm stopping here!* He just hoped it had a hotel with an available room and a place to give one of his talks.

~

The off-ramp curved around and dumped him at a stop sign down in a hollow. The billboard on the highway had flickered off again, leaving the streetlight across the road as the only source of light. To Dobie's right, the asphalt disappeared into darkness under the overpass. The hotel and diner were on opposite sides of a *cul de sac* to his left, with the diner sitting several dozen yards off the curb at the edge of the woods, ensconced in front of towering old pine, dogwood, red bud and beech trees. The diner was so well-hidden, in fact, no one but a local ever would have known it was there if not for that billboard.

Now safely within his hotel room on the third floor, looking down upon the hotel, Dobie was tempted to check it out, and almost did, but decided in the end that he *really* needed a good night's sleep. He was exhausted. It could wait until tomorrow.

With one last look out the window, he spotted Major Watson's black Escalade slowly entering the hotel parking lot below. He then,

just as slowly, eased down the aisles. Dobie might have ignored it if not for its deliberate movements. Also, he had been seeing a lot of Escalades lately. *Or, maybe just the one, repeatedly?*

If someone was following him, he would let them. If they attended his talks, maybe they'd learn something. If they were there to break into or steal *Sabina*, he could not stop them. She was locked but had no alarm. Either way – as he had learned from all the *Serenity Prayers* he saw on so many desks in so many cubicles in any corporate job he ever had – it did no good worrying about it.

One last thing he needed to do before collapsing into much-needed sleep was to fill out the generic Will he found online. Given the recent altercations, assaults, murder attempts – call them what you will – from audience members in towns large and small throughout the tour, it seemed prudent.

“I, Dobromir Sean Riley Pokorny,” he filled in the blanks, “being of sound mind, do hereby declare my Last Will and Testament.” He considered adding “as sound of mind as can be expected” but didn't want to undermine his own credibility on an official document. He did enough of that in the real world. What he couldn't resist adding after “testament” was “... before I can be killed or suicided for revealing too many truths. You're only allowed a few truths in this life before they assassinate you like Gandhi, JFK, MLK and John Lennon.”

Paranoid? Yes, but as the bumper sticker on the back of his car said, “Just because I’m paranoid, it doesn’t mean they’re *not* out to get me!”

He was simply getting his affairs in order. All he needed now was something to bequeath and someone to bequeath it to. The only thing he owned and cared about at that point in life was his beloved *Sabina*, a refurbished 1977 Ford LTD Landau older than himself.

~

The next day – after his regimen of stretching and breathing exercises, followed by the hotel’s complimentary breakfast and coffee – Dobie paid a visit to the local grocery store. This was how he ensured, before anyone could chase him out of town, that he at least had a few groceries.

He walked there because it was just a few hundred yards away. Along the way, a middle-aged woman in a minivan drove by staring at and videoing him with her phone camera. He laughed and assumed she was just paranoid. He had no idea she was Kaylie’s mom. At that point, he had no idea who *Kaylie* was.

Returning to his room and stocking its small refrigerator, he showered, shaved, splashed on some home-made essential oil cologne, and donned his green suit. No tie. Never a tie.

A couple hours later, after going over a few research notes, he made his way down to his assigned conference room. Upon entering, and

holding his favorite “Don’t shoot the messenger!” coffee cup, he ran his free hand through his sandy brown hair and surveyed his audience.

There were ten or twelve people – quite a few, he thought, given how last-minute it was – ranging in age from two to eighty-two. He assumed they had come in response to the fliers he hastily put up all over town last night and that morning.

He smiled, introduced himself, and apologized in advance for “probably not living up to the hype on the fliers.” He then spoke of “the people at the very top of the food chain” rigging things in their favor.

“The one percent of the one percent,” he said, “going way back, have been pulling the strings and ruling the world, with people like you and me as their unwitting victims. They are the so-called ‘hidden hand’ that has been jerking us around for far too long.

“That’s right,” he smiled as if caught, “I’m a conspiracy theorist. Sure, some scoff at the mere thought of conspiracy, but ask any detective, lawyer or judge – if you can find an honest one – and they’ll tell you conspiracies happen all the time. From conspiracy to commit fraud to conspiracy to rig an election. From petty theft all the way up to global conquest. *Pinky and the Brain* are not the only ones trying to take over the world!”

When no one but a couple of kids seemed to get that reference, he added, “You know, that cartoon with the two laboratory mice...? I love that one! I’ve got the t-shirt, actually. Anyway, but seriously,

there's the inevitable obfuscation of facts, conspiracy of silence to cover their tracks, ridicule – even murder – of their accusers.

“Coincidence and synchronicity happens, sure, but if you're not at least a little bit of a conspiracy theorist these days, you're just not paying attention. George Carlin summed it up nicely when he said, ‘Do I believe powerful people ever get together and plan for certain outcomes? Naw!’

“He was being sarcastic, of course. Call it collusion if you like that word better. Same thing. I also like ‘alternative’ historians like the one who said the Great Sphinx is thousands of years older than mainstream academia would have us believe. Like him, I never blindly accept anything espoused by anyone claiming to be an authority, past or present.

“Question everything! That's the scientific method, although too many scientists are not very scientific. They'll come to whichever conclusion their bosses want, like the corporate accountant or election pollster who asks ahead of time what the result should be before they perform their algorithmic sleight-of-hand.

“And too many scientists who *are* scientific think the physical sciences alone explain everything, leaving no room for things that defy logic. For example, they explain the beginning of the universe with a theory called ‘The Big Bang.’ Give me a break. Who or what created the conditions and raw materials for this Big Bang, hmmm? To this, they say ‘Never mind the man behind the curtain!’

“People have said I have authority issues, and I’m okay with that, though I’d argue it’s more of a short-sighted-idiots-in-power issue. We should all have such issues! I do believe in some sort of Creator and some sort of intelligent design, but I’m not getting into that now.

“Throughout history, those with too much power and no sense of decency have engaged in collusion, conspiracy, or simple cooperation – like I said, whichever word you prefer – to keep the rest of us like mushrooms: In the dark and fed a steady diet of manure. History is written by the victors, and they will always portray themselves as right and just, no matter who or what they destroy.

“But I don’t sit at the computer in my underwear in my parents’ basement, complaining about it online. People who complain but don’t provide solutions are just whiners. Oh... and, I wear pants! Usually. And hanging in my closet are my Big Boy Pants. I put those on one day and put a few solutions to the world’s problems in a book... for those who still read books. It lays the groundwork for a completely new society.

“I am, as Gandhi suggested, being the change I want to see in the world. Creating the reality I want to live in. Unlike ol’ Mahatma, though, I won’t be leading any marches or starving myself in protest. I might starve, but it won’t be in protest. When I get to the ‘pearly gates’ I simply want to at least be able to say I tried. At a minimum, I want to remove the ‘un’ from us ‘unwitting victims’ and document for posterity my own answers to life’s questions.”

He spoke another several minutes before stopping, taking a sip of coffee, and leaning up against the lectern. The talks themselves were not long, typically. It was the Q&A afterward that took most of the time. “And now,” he said with a smile, “it’s your turn for questions.”

An attractive thirty-something blonde woman in tight blue jeans and a white silk blouse raised her hand. Out of habit, Dobie checked her ring finger. It was bare. He nodded and, again unconsciously, ran his hands through his hair.

With the idea of keeping things civil and not letting people hide behind their anonymity, Dobie had recently begun asking people at his talks to stand and introduce themselves before they asked a question. Accordingly, this woman smiled, stood to speak, and dutifully introduced herself as Audrey. She tossed back her honey-blonde hair and undid the top button on her blouse. Dobie guessed she was only trying to cool off – it was stuffy in that conference room – but she now had his full attention. There was a twinkle in her hazel eyes, a pout to her full lips.

I love this job, he thought as he smiled back at her. He noticed the tall black man – Watson, though at this point Dobie had no idea – standing at the back of the room. The two men had not yet met. Other than sensing his “military” air, Dobie thought nothing of him. They were both focused on this captivating woman.

A combative sneer then broke the spell Audrey had over Dobie, and she launched into her attack. “How *dare* you question the au-

thority of history's greatest professors, scientists, political and business leaders?!" she said, suddenly indignant. "Did *you* study for years before graduating, getting your masters, then doctorate from any of the prestigious schools that these great men and women did?"

Dobie sighed, smiled, and calmly said, "Well, for one thing, politicians are not 'our leaders.' They're our representatives – at least, they're supposed to be – but, believe it or not, I hate arguing."

"Because you never win?" she snorted, building up steam.

"Not to brag," he ignored the jibe, "but my 144 IQ is well above average, not that I put much stock in IQ tests. Still, like any man with anything bigger than average, I'm quite proud of that!" Those who got the joke laughed. Audrey was not among them. "I've always liked the symmetry of the number 144. Twelve squared. Maybe not technically a genius, depending on the scale, but high enough to feel good about myself. Low enough to keep me humble. Okay, maybe not so humble, but my surname does mean 'humble' according to those websites about the meaning of names. And, if it's on the Internet, it must be true, right?"

"Sarcasm again. Anyway, to answer your question, yes, I have studied for years and years on my own, reading books and articles all by myself without an 'authority' telling me what to read and what to think of it. Studying a subject in school doesn't make you an expert when your course materials are tainted by corporate interests, as is the case at most major universities. I know, it can be difficult knowing who to trust, but you can eliminate anyone with any sort of fi-

nancial interest in the subject. As they say, follow the money! That's the underlying force corrupting pretty much everything. But, I make my own observations, consult my intuition, and come to my own conclusions."

Two middle-aged women passing by in the hallway – the conference room door was open – paused, nodded at each other, and joined the audience.

"Anyway," Dobie nodded and smiled at them as he continued, "I laugh when employment ads require a college degree for jobs that I know from experience do *not* require a degree. Half a brain? Sure. College degree? No. And half of them don't even say exactly *which* degree is required. They just want proof you were gullible enough to invest four years of your life in The System and accumulate enough student debt to make yourself a virtual indentured servant for the rest of your life!"

Another extremely attractive woman then stood to speak, this one younger, with dark-brown hair, bright blue eyes, and dressed in a two-tone blue, loose-fitting, checkered jumper. "Is my entire audience made up of beauty pageant contestants," Dobie joked, "who stumbled into the wrong conference room?"

The eldest in the audience, an 82-year-old woman, nodded and smiled as she raised her hand. Everyone laughed.

"Just so you know," Dobie continued with a chuckle, "there is no 'conspiracy theory' portion of the pageant."

There was another smattering of audience laughter. Dobie hoped this young dark-haired beauty now standing before him was friendlier than Audrey.

“I agree with *you*,” she began awkwardly, as if not used to speaking in front of an audience.

Dobie sighed in relief. She apparently *was* friendly.

“Some of the smartest people I ever knew,” the woman continued, “never went to college. They had to work for a living right away. Daddy was 15 when he dropped out of school to work at the factory.”

Dobie was happy to see that he had the blue-collar vote. His fellow “commoners” were, until recently, the only people whose opinion he cared about. He knew if he was going to change the world, though, he had to get down in the gutter with the people in suits.

“Thank you, Miss...?”

“Daniels,” she introduced herself with a smile and slight curtsy. “Kaylie Daniels.”

Her jumper skirt was modest by today’s standards, and Dobie appreciated that. *The world could do with more modesty*. She had nothing to do with her current attire, but Dobie didn’t know that.

The previous woman, Audrey, glared at Kaylie, to which Kaylie smiled sweetly back. Dobie was impressed that she had curtsied. *Who does that anymore?*

She felt familiar somehow, but he shrugged it off. Pretty girls always seemed familiar somehow.

“Well,” she said finally, “I’ve got to get back to work, but I’m right next door at The Blue Spoon Diner. Come see us!”

He felt stupid for not realizing she was wearing a uniform but, now smitten and watching her leave, wanted to shout, “Don’t go!” It was a good thing she never asked him any questions. Under her spell as he was, he was not sure how intelligently he might have answered.

He liked to tell himself that looks were not as important to him as they were to others. “Just give me someone presentable,” he would say, “not too dumb, and with a personality.” In reality, he was a sucker for a pretty face. He knew it, and hated that about himself. He could feel his brain stop at the sight of a beautiful woman. It was a serious character flaw.

His average height, fairly symmetrical face, friendly brown eyes, boyish grin and charm gave him a chance with most women, but he knew better than to expect to date beauty queens like Kaylie, or even Audrey. He was definitely never going to be cast as a leading man.

He considered himself a thinker – so long as no beautiful women were around – forever theorizing and finding the underlying cause of things. Constantly asking why this, why that? Where did this concept of “beauty” come from, anyway? The usual explanations – an indicator of good health, cultural preference, subconscious reminder of his mother – all made at least a little bit of sense but did not entirely explain it for him. How and why were certain bodily and facial shapes, contours and combinations more attractive than others?

And, why did it hold so much power? Like so many other things, Dobie wanted to know the source of its power underlying it all. That and countless other mysteries floated around in his head waiting to be solved.

The alien, Semmy, could have solved that riddle for him, but he was trying his best to *not* meddle in these lower-level humans' lives any more than absolutely necessary.

With one last alluring smile over her shoulder, Kaylie disappeared out the back of the conference room. A gray-haired woman sitting next to her the entire time – though Dobie never noticed – now stood and joined Kaylie on her way out. He never got a good look at this second, older woman's face.

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When there were no more questions from the audience, Dobie took a seat in his fold-up metal chair behind his fold-up faux-wood table upon which sat a fold-up cardboard display surrounded by his books like gifts around a Christmas tree.

"I'll be signing copies for anyone who wants to ruin an otherwise good book!" he said with typical good cheer and self-deprecation.

He hoped Kaylie would come back. Instead, it was that Audrey woman now standing in front of him, wanting his autograph.

Seeing the sour look on his face, she gave a half-hearted apology. "I get worked up when I argue."

“No worries,” he smiled. “So do I.” With apologies all around, he hoped she would take her signed book and be on her merry way.

Instead, she asked, “Would you, um, like to go for a drink later?”

“To hurl insults at each other? No, thanks. I’m good.” It was Kaylie who he hoped to hook up with later, not College-Professor-Dating Barbie here.

“I thought we might have dinner,” she persisted. “A glass of wine, then... who knows? No insults or arguing, I promise.”

She was a beautiful woman – he had to give her that – and beautiful women were Dobie’s fatal weakness, after all. Not just that, but it was The Code of every “red-blooded American male” to seek out and date as many beautiful women as possible. Who was he to break The Code?

She was also suspiciously eager – and couldn’t hold a candle to Kaylie – but, with Kaylie nowhere around, the old saying “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” popped into his head. Tired old sayings were forever popping into his head these days. Some of them rang true. Others made him wonder how it ever became a saying.

Audrey smiled and took a seat in the front row of chairs to wait patiently for him. The tall “military” man, Watson, was still hovering nearby, but Dobie assumed he was just another autograph-seeker. He never noticed the glances back and forth between him and Audrey. It was only when Watson disappeared without an autograph that Dobie became suspicious.

~

On this book tour, Dobie was doing exactly what he wanted: Staying sober – for a change – and saying what needed to be said. *Another Way* had started as an assignment for an online writing course that his more artistically-inclined singer-songwriter ex-girlfriend suggested he take. And so he did.

“Write your manifesto!” the instructor had implored his students. And, he dutifully wrote what became the culmination of pretty much everything he had ever heard, read or thought about life, politics or religion. Five hundred pages of everything you’re not supposed to talk about in polite company. He never knew he had so many ideas waiting to get out, so much pent-up frustration inside him. He was only now realizing the true depths of his own despair... and resilience.

He was so proud of his “great work” that he kept some of the best ideas out of the version he turned in for course credit. He didn’t want his instructor stealing or selling his best ideas before Dobie could get it published and be given proper credit. After that, people were free to steal its ideas.

Good ideas, he believed, should be spread however and whenever possible, as long as people were properly recognized and somehow compensated for their contribution to society.

~

At some point several weeks earlier, after reading an advance copy of Dobie's manifesto, his best friend Bucky said, "What the hell is this?"

"My manifesto," Dobie replied as if everyone writes one.

"Well, it sucks. Put in some jokes!"

"Jokes are easy," Dobie said soberly. "This book is important. Who knows? It might even save the world."

"Now *that's* funny!" Bucky laughed, "but you need to get over yourself."

With the most sage and wise look he could muster, Dobie looked Bucky in the eye and said, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor."

"That sounds familiar," Bucky looked off into the distance, where people keep their slightly familiar quotes and other vague, random thoughts. "Wait," he was now shocked. "Did you just quote the Bible?"

"Yep," Dobie smiled. "*Book of Mark*, if I'm not mistaken."

"Wow, you've changed, man."

"No," Dobie argued, "I'm just saying out loud what has always been in my head. And, I like to give credit where credit is due. I always thought Jesus was cool. It's organized religion that I have a problem with. Anything hierarchical, really, with permanent – or even semi-permanent – members. I agree that there are right and wrong, healthy and unhealthy, ways to live your life. I don't sub-

scribe to this ‘anything goes’ attitude promoted by pop culture. Remember Sodom and Gomorrah?

“But, we have to remember to ‘hate the sin, not the sinner.’ I hate self-righteousness – especially my own – and don’t go around thinking I’m the smartest guy in the room. In fact, I’m usually willing to accept that I’m one of the dumbest until proven otherwise. I’m just trying to be helpful these days.

“I’m not a fan of taking someone else’s word as gospel, though. I mean, just because somebody said something two or three thousand years ago, what makes their judgment and conclusions any better than mine? I’m not a fan of worship, either, unless you’re worshipping health, hope, consideration, decency, and life itself.”

“Wow,” Bucky shook his head. “There was a time when you woulda just told me, ‘Whatever, dude,’ not given me a lecture.”

“I guess so,” Dobie had to laugh. “Too much?”

“Just a little, yeah.”

Dobie knew Bucky was right about the need to get over himself, but that was not going to stop him from speaking his mind.

The first billboard to have an effect on his life was a government PSA along the Interstate saying something like “~~Someone~~ *I* should do something!” He was now simply taking its advice and hoping his ideas resonated with people.

“You always take advice from billboards?” Bucky wanted to know.

“When they make sense, sure. It doesn’t matter who says what, so long as it’s true.”

The Blue Spoon Diner

The Blue Spoon Diner was a long, narrow, mostly-white building with blue trim and lots of windows, topped off with an attached sign – like a dorsal fin, ten feet high – over the entrance with its name painted in a blue cursive font. It sat quite a bit off the curb and maybe sixty yards from the neighboring hotel, but the two buildings were the only inhabitants of that *cul de sac*.

The twilight shadows of the trees surrounding the diner reminded Dobie of a scene from a horror movie. He half expected an ax-murderer hiding in the hedge that ran the length of the diner under its front plate-glass windows. Or, maybe an ogre lurking behind a sign that read “None dare enter here!”

He was hungry, though, and had been meaning to check the place out since he arrived. Best of all, he now knew that girl Kaylie worked there, so he forged bravely ahead.

His unexpected date, Audrey, stopped on the sidewalk. “Where are you going?! I thought we were going to your car.”

“I’m hungry,” he said. “Gonna give this diner a shot. It looks... um, quaint, don’t you think?”

“No!” she was aghast. “It looks like a good place to be murdered. Doesn’t the hotel have a restaurant?”

“Come on,” he almost hoped she would abandon him. “How bad can it be? That girl Kaylie works here.”

That last point was the real reason Audrey wanted to go elsewhere. She knew she would never get anywhere with Dobie if Kaylie was anywhere around. Besides, it truly did look like a good place to be murdered.

The parking lots of the hotel and diner were adjoining, but the diner's was much older and mostly gravel. Just a few spaces closest to its front door were paved. Dobie figured whoever built the place didn't have enough asphalt at the time, then never got around to paving the rest of it. That was how his mind worked: See something as mundane as a parking lot and wonder how it came to be. He never outgrew his childhood propensity for asking why.

The air was now damp with impending rain, so he whipped out his old blue Milwaukee Brewers baseball cap – the one with the “ball-in-glove” logo from his childhood, before “some marketing genius” changed it – and pulled it down over his head. After a few steps, he turned to Audrey and said, “Well, I’m headed for that diner.” Left unspoken were the words “with or without you.”

Once the rain began in earnest, she grudgingly followed him. The front door chimed as she entered the restaurant. Dobie was already inside, standing with his hat in hand, running his hands through his hair while trying to decide if he should wait for a hostess or just seat himself.

The first thing most people noticed upon entering the diner was a miniature version of that “best pie” highway billboard on the wall behind the cashier. Dobie was no different, and it brought a smile to

his face, like a reminder that this really was where he belonged, though he was still unsure why.

Then he saw the drawings of various types of pie, framed and hung on the walls, over each booth with its own unique color scheme. None of the booths matched. There was a blue-and-yellow one, a red-and-black one, another one was blue-and-beige. There was even a booth in a hideous baby-puke green. Then it hit him: each booth matched the drawing of the pie hanging above it... sort of.

There was nothing corporate about this diner, Dobie decided, and he liked that. Even the room temperature was comfortable, not barely above freezing like so many franchises kept theirs. He came up with a conspiracy theory on the spot: Corporate-run restaurants keep their franchises cold because studies have shown that people order more food if it's just a little too cold inside. He had no idea if this was true, but it seemed plausible.

This place was just a quaint little mom-and-pop-owned diner. Its mismatched multi-colored booths were probably considered "cool" or "bitchin'" when it was first built, back in the day. Now, it was well past its prime.

Young Miss Kaylie then came flying around the corner to greet them, and Dobie's eyes lit up. Tying her apron strings behind her back, she smiled warmly and said, "Welcome to the Blue Spoon! Sit anywhere you like!"

The place was almost entirely empty, with just one table toward the back occupied by a middle-aged couple Dobie recognized from his earlier audience. He generally avoided audience members after speaking engagements unless they had already established themselves as friendly. Such encounters almost never went well.

He chose the blue-and-yellow striped booth along the window, halfway between the aforementioned couple and the front door.

“Excellent choice!” Kaylie smiled again, lighting up the room. “That’s my favorite!”

Audrey rolled her eyes.

Kaylie saw a tinge of paranoia in Dobie’s eyes – or maybe exasperation – then decided she should not be surprised, given who he was with. He probably lost a bet or was taking pity and buying Audrey dinner.

Either way, she was going to rescue him from this pity date like she rescued him earlier at his talk. Who knows, he might even be “the one” to take her away from all this like in one of her favorite romance novels. It should be an interesting evening, either way.

Audrey slid into the booth first, closest to the window and facing away from the front door. She was surprised when Dobie slid in beside rather than across from her.

See the look on her face, he asked, “Did you want me to sit across from you?”

“No, no, that’s fine.”

“I always like to face away from the front door,” he explained, “so anyone who enters doesn’t immediately recognize me.”

Mentally, she was rolling her eyes. To his face, she gave the sweetest smile that she could muster.

Kaylie handed them each a menu and walked away to give them time to look it over. Rather than focus on the menu, however, Dobie watched Kaylie. He couldn’t help it, she was so familiar, and not merely from his talk.

From where?

She seemed too young and pretty to be working in a place like this. In his experience, waitresses at run-down hole-in-the-wall diners were bitter, tough old chain-smoking broads with bad skin and a few missing teeth, ready to break a beer bottle over anyone’s head. Kaylie was nothing of the sort.

Dobie normally wanted to be left alone by servers. He never liked their incessant interruptions every few minutes with, “How ya doin’? How is everything? How many times can I catch you with a mouthful of food?!”

With Kaylie, every time she walked away, he wished she would hurry back. She gave a knowing smile over her shoulder before turning her attention to her other patrons.

From the moment she introduced herself at his talk, Dobie felt like he knew Kaylie. And, she was getting the same feeling about him, but she *knew* he was not from around there. With her jobs as a

cashier at the only grocery store in town and waitress at the most popular diner, she knew everyone.

A few minutes later, she returned to their table to take their order. She did it without writing anything down, which always impressed Dobie. He hoped her memory and listening skills were better than his.

She walked over to the little pass-through window into the kitchen and relayed Dobie and Audrey's order to the small, scruffy, salt-and-pepper-haired man within. Blount. He was at least twice Kaylie's age, but his eyes never rose above her ample bosom. She never knew or cared what his first name was. Everyone just called him Blount. Either way, his constant lecherous smile, almost drooling, was becoming a concern.

As soon as she could, she escaped to a blue padded stool at the counter. *Why did I agree to work today?* she asked herself. *Oh, right, I need the money.* After the regular girl failed to report for duty, Kaylie reluctantly agreed to cover her shift. The pay from the grocery cashier job wasn't cutting it, and no one else in her life had any money, so here she was.

Ignoring Blount as best she could, she picked up the remote control and pointed it at the television. There was nothing but static on every channel. It was working just fine before Dobie and Audrey walked in. Strange.

Dobie watched her every move. Seeing the problems she was having with the television, he had to wonder – crazy as it sounded –

if he had anything to do with that. More and more, lately, he could not come anywhere close to an electronic device without it going haywire. Having that sort of effect from such a distance would have been a first, though.

Audrey rolled her eyes as Dobie continued to watch Kaylie. Normally, she would storm out in a huff for being ignored like this, but these were not normal circumstances. She swallowed her pride, turned on the charm and reached out. Gently grabbing his chin, she turned his head to face her and, with a practiced smile, said, “Earth to Dobie. Is it true love?”

“I’m sorry,” he smiled sheepishly. “I didn’t mean to be rude. I just... can’t take my eyes off her. She’s so familiar, but I don’t know from where...”

“Your dreams?”

“Yes... actually.” He was surprised by his own answer. “That’s it, but how is that possible?”

Audrey bit her tongue and turned away, trying to hold it together.

The Ogre

By the time the cook, Blount, shouted “order up,” Kaylie had given up on the TV and was wiping down tables at the other end of the restaurant while chatting with the older couple in the corner. Taking a moment to collect herself, she smiled sadly at them, draped the damp rag across her shoulder and said “duty calls” as she walked toward the kitchen.

Dobie’s grilled-cheese sandwich and Audrey’s Cobb salad – each on its own blue ceramic plate – sat waiting at the base of the kitchen’s pass-through window. Kaylie set the coffee pot down, deftly placed the two plates between the thumb, forefinger and middle finger of her left hand, then picked up the pot with her right.

Taking advantage of her hands being occupied, Blount then stroked her forearm and giggled gleefully.

“Don’t touch me, creep!” she snapped, then glanced, embarrassed, at her customers.

He cackled with delight as if enjoying being caught more than the act of touching her. Kaylie then realized in horror that while Blount’s left hand was stroking her arm, his right hand was hidden under his apron. His shoulder was making a jerking motion. It was all she could do to not drop the plates.

Watching all of this play out – though he couldn't see what Blount's right hand was doing – Dobie realized there was an ogre in their midst, after all: This cook.

Kaylie moved quickly toward their booth, cheerful despite it all, and set their plates down in front of them. "Here you go!" she said. With a nod in the cook's direction, she added, "Sorry about that."

"No worries," Dobie commiserated. "I know all about obnoxious co-workers. I used to be one, in fact." When Kaylie gave him a concerned look, he quickly added, "But nothing like that! I can honestly say I have never touched anyone inappropriately."

His date, Audrey, forced another smile as she dug into her salad. She was hungrier than she realized.

A movement outside the window then caught Dobie's eye, and he was suddenly more interested in what might be lurking out there. It was dark out, but he caught a glimpse of a man in a hat and trench coat standing in the rain. Then the man was gone.

In the window's reflection he saw Kaylie watching him, following his gaze outside, only to return her attention to him. She never saw anything but the rain beating down on a dark, mostly empty parking lot.

It's Blount that I'm worried about, she thought to herself, but said nothing.

Audrey could guess who was out there, but she remained focused on her salad. Occasionally glancing at her phone on the table, she too said nothing.

As Dobie picked up his fork and aimed it the small dab of potato salad next to the sandwich, Kaylie gently placed her hand upon his shoulder. Leaving the food untouched, he looked up.

“So, what’s your name, again?” she asked. “I know it was on your sign at your talk, but I’ve got a terrible memory for names. It’s no fair I have to wear this name tag, but my customers don’t! We should make a new rule! Everyone who walks through the door has to write their name on one of those sticky labels!”

Noticing Kaylie touching Dobie every chance she got – oldest trick in the book – Audrey gave a mocking laugh as a reminder that she was still there, sitting next to him, stupidly believing that she and Dobie were on a date.

“My given name is Dobromir, but friends call me Dobie.”

“Oh, right,” Kaylie pretended to finally remember, though she had known all along.

“But I’ve said too much!” he said playfully, looking around, feigning nervousness.

“A man of mystery!” she gushed, then released the most beautiful laugh. There was so much joy and infectious energy in that laugh, it was almost musical. Dobie had to sit back and appreciate it a moment. When he didn’t stop staring after the appropriate few seconds, she smiled and asked, “What?”

“Sorry, bad habit. I’m a people watcher but gotta remember to look away before it goes from watching to staring to restraining order.”

Kaylie giggled and nodded knowingly. She was used to men staring at her. When he reached for his grilled-cheese sandwich, she again touched his wrist to keep him from taking hold of it.

Audrey cringed. This was all just too much.

While refilling Dobie's coffee, Kaylie leaned in very close to him. He stupidly hoped she might kiss him. Instead, she whispered, "I wouldn't eat anything on that plate if I were you."

He gave her a questioning look while trying not to stare at her cleavage now so close to his face.

"Trust me," she said. "I'll order you a new one. Coffee should be okay. And," she nodded in Audrey's direction, "your date's, um, salad dressing shouldn't have anything in it she's never swallowed before." With a devilish smile, Kaylie then wandered off.

As if only now remembering Audrey next to him, Dobie turned to her and said, "So, where were we?"

"Nowhere," Audrey snarled between bites of salad. "I realize our waitress is cute, Dobie, but forget about her. She's just a hill-billy girl. You and I have much more in common. So much more to talk about. Or not talk at all. I've got a French maid's outfit, if you're into uniforms. Or, I could steal that bitch Kaylie's uniform."

He laughed, assuming that last part was a joke. Like a dog distracted by a treat, he then admitted, "That *does* sound good."

"I think you and I..." she began in her sexiest bedroom voice.

"Sorry to interrupt," Kaylie reappeared. "I know you're, like, a complete stranger, and all," she said to Dobie while pointedly ignor-

ing Audrey, “but my ride was supposed to pick me up, like, an hour ago. And you seem, like... I’m saying ‘like’ too much, aren’t I?” she giggled. “But you seem... respectable. And, if Blount the Boob Whisperer back there grabs me one more time...”

“Blount the Boob Whisperer!” Dobie laughed. “Good one!”

“Yeah, just a little nickname I came up with. Anyway, d’ya think you could give me a ride home?”

“Sure!” he agreed too eagerly.

Audrey audibly gasped, saying “Am I invisible here?!” as she swallowed her food and sank into the back of the booth.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Kaylie arched an eyebrow.

Dobie tried not to smile.

Patting his shoulder, Audrey said, “Let me out. I need to pee.”

Charming, he thought. *Whatever happened to ‘powder my nose’?*

Blount came around the corner from behind Audrey just as she was getting out of the booth. He was pleased with his own good timing. Watching a woman walk away – especially an attractive one in tight jeans, like Audrey – was one of his favorite things. He particularly enjoyed them in yoga pants. He was so glad that was a trend these days. Better still, this time of year, Blount could usually be found out by the hotel pool, drooling over the bikini-clad women.

Dobie was climbing out of the booth after her when a large, bearded man – obviously drunk – staggered in. The man barely fit through the front door, he was so big, but did not look like the same

man spotted earlier outside in the rain. For one, there was no hat or trench coat, but Dobie could not be sure.

“Honey, I’m home!” the man said to the room loudly, with a laugh. To Kaylie directly, he snapped, “Get in the car! Let’s go!”

Blount giggled. He knew this newcomer well and often wished he could trade places with him. Just one night with Kaylie, Blount fantasized, and he could die a happy man.

“No, JD,” Kaylie spoke as if to a misbehaving child. “You’re drunk. This nice man here, Dobie, is giving me a ride.” She smiled reassuringly at the latter.

Dobie gave a little wave. Clearing his throat, he said, “Yep, she’s coming with me. Like she said, you’re drunk. Maybe I should give you *both* a ride home?”

Kaylie stopped smiling. Being anywhere near JD when he was drunk was not what she had in mind.

“You don’t want to violate your parole,” Dobie added, “with another DUI, do you?”

“Naw, man... wait, how in the hell did you know I was out on parole?”

“Wild guess.”

“Nobody’s that good a guesser!”

“I am, actually,” said Dobie. “Always have been.” He could hardly believe what he was about to say, but speaking the truth “come what may” was his new *m.o.* “Belligerent, drunken redneck

like you? It figures you'd be an ex-con with multiple DUIs, doesn't it?"

JD was stunned. No one ever talked to him like that, especially an older, relatively puny guy like this Dobie dude.

"Ah, I see what's going on," JD finally managed to speak. "You think you and Kaylie..." He shook his head and laughed. "She's just using you, dude. That's what she does. An old guy like you doesn't have a chance with her. This one here," he pointed at Audrey, "looks more your speed."

Audrey was offended.

"Come on, time to go!" JD ordered, looking directly at Dobie while grabbing Kaylie's petite shoulder in his catcher's-mitt-sized hand. "Let's go!"

If there was one thing Dobie hated, it was abusive, belligerent people. Bullies. Anyone taking advantage of anyone else, really. It was the founding principal of his latest book.

Either way, JD fit the bill. *And who is he calling 'old?' Ten years older makes me 'old' now?*

Kaylie pulled away from the big man, and Dobie – with "old guy" still ringing in his ears – stepped in between the two of them.

JD smiled and said, "Oh, you wanna play?" And he threw a drunken, off-balance left hook aimed at Dobie's chin.

Kaylie watched with a mixture of horror and delight. *Two men are fighting over me!*

Audrey watched with absolute glee. *Dobie's about to get his ass kicked!*

Blount giggled like a fiend.

Dobie surprised himself by dodging JD's swing. He was not a fighter – normally, physically – but the recent attacks on his book tour had honed his reflexes.

Inspired by both Kaylie's and Audrey's presence – because even intelligent men will do the stupidest things to impress women – Dobie took a step forward and threw a right jab.

Kaylie gasped in surprise. She didn't know he had it in him.

JD easily parried the thrust and threw his own wild, roundhouse right in Dobie's direction.

Dobie dodged to one side, stuck out his foot, and let the big man's momentum send him crashing into the nearest table, where he hit his head and fell to the floor, unconscious. The fight, if it qualified as such, was over within seconds.

Audrey was surprised that Dobie fought back, disappointed that he had won.

Like a predator hoping for a straggler to be separated from the herd, Blount waited to see which woman Dobie chose. He would grab whoever was left behind. In all the excitement, he had maneuvered himself next to Audrey, assuming that she would be the one left unclaimed. And, he was okay with that. He was self-aware enough to know at his age with his looks he had to be satisfied with

leftovers. This Audrey woman would still make for a “tasty morsel,” as he would say in his own inimitably creepy way.

It was only then that Audrey noticed his hand on her ass. She thought she had been leaning up against the table. She had to laugh, despite herself. At least *someone* in this diner was responding to her in a manner to which she had become accustomed.

She swatted Blount’s hand away and stepped over JD’s prostrate body on her way toward the front door. Kaylie disappeared around a corner and into the kitchen area.

Seeing both women vanish so quickly, Dobie was left wondering what happened. He was relieved to see Kaylie a few seconds later with her purse. She then led him by the hand out the front door, behind Audrey.

Kaylie realized at the last moment she had forgotten her jacket, but she left it. It was old, worn out – with empty pockets – and nothing special, anyway. Dobie could buy her a new one. She did not consider herself a user of men as JD had implied but did allow herself to take advantage occasionally. A girl’s prerogative. Guys liked buying her things, anyway, so it was a win-win.

Either way, she wanted to be long gone before JD regained consciousness.

Once outside in the parking lot, she laughed with relief. Holding onto her purse with one arm while reaching up to the sky with the other, she soaked in the rain.

Her exuberance alone told Dobie he had made the right choice in picking her over the dour, bitter Audrey just a few steps ahead of them. He could be dour and bitter all by himself. He needed someone happy like Kaylie to balance him out.

~

Kaylie guessed correctly that Dobie's car was the one with the "Question ~~Authority~~ Everything" and "Just because I'm paranoid..." bumper stickers. What she never would have guessed was that it had a name, *Sabina*, in honor of one of Carl Jung's alleged mistresses.

Most teenage boys have famous athletes or musicians as heroes – and Dobie had a few of those – but, mostly, for him it was Jung, Kierkegaard and Gandhi. It occurred to him Freud might have frowned upon this "mistress" reference to his car, but he never liked Freud. The man was entirely overrated. Aside from a few ideas on repressed memories and the "narcissism of small differences," the smartest thing Freud ever said was, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

But that was all neither here nor there. Several decades after coming off the factory floor, *Sabina* was the most reliable vehicle Dobie had ever owned. "Because she's American-made," he would tell anyone who asked. Growing up in Michigan, he valued anything made in America. Too many friends' parents had lost their jobs to near-slave-wage labor in Mexico and China. It was that cold-

blooded “profits over people” attitude, in fact, that first made Dobie hate corporations.

He would have preferred *Sabina* in a color other than the factory-original “dark jade” but, after spending so much just getting her roadworthy, only to lose his job at SaynCorp, he couldn’t immediately afford to do anything about it. He could afford it now, but it was no longer a priority. Besides, the color was starting to grow on him.

She had no remote control, just this thing called a key that you had to insert into the door lock. Old school. He used it now and held the door for Kaylie, his damsel in distress, as she climbed in, smiling, amazed to have someone holding the door for her.

This was all the proof she needed that chivalry was not dead. Soaking wet from the rain as she took her seat, she was happier now than she had been in a very long time. This Dobie dude was cool, even if he did drive such an old car. There was just something about him she couldn’t quite figure out, and that was saying something. She had been figuring guys out since at least the age of twelve. With her looks, it was a survival skill.

A Night to Remember

Once Dobie was in behind the wheel with the doors closed, Kaylie slapped the glove box and shouted through her laughter, “Go, go, go! He’s right behind us!”

“Who’s right behind us?”

“Nobody,” she admitted. “I’ve just always wanted to do that! Next time, I’ll slide across the hood and jump in through the window like they do on TV!”

Dobie was laughing as the skies opened up, pouring again, as *Sabina* pulled into the street. This girl was crazy. The good kind.

Once on the highway, Kaylie pulled out her phone to make a call. “That’s weird,” she said, holding it up, “I usually get a good signal around here, but now, nothing.” Dobie could guess he was the problem but said nothing.

As they got onto the Interstate, she said, “We’re not far. Second star to the right, and straight on ‘til... Exit 109,” she paraphrased *Peter Pan* with a laugh.

He wondered who she meant by “we.” Himself and Kaylie? Herself and JD? She and her fellow lunatics back at the asylum? He would find out soon enough.

~

Meanwhile, inside the diner, JD was picking himself up off the floor. Shaking his head and collapsing into one of the booths, he said to Blount, “Well, that didn’t go as planned. Time for Plan B.” Blount had no idea there was any plan, A or B.

~

Major Watson was in his Escalade in the hotel parking lot, watching with disappointment as Dobie came out of the diner accompanied by Kaylie instead of Audrey. He was so upset with Audrey’s failure that he considered letting her walk in the rain without an umbrella to the nearest bus stop, and find her way home from there. He wasn’t finished with her, though. Charonne would have done something like what just occurred to Watson, but Watson liked to think he was better than Charonne. He rolled down his window and barked at Audrey, “Get in!”

~

Driving Kaylie home, Dobie was amazed by his recent good luck with women. He did alright before but ever since leaving Corporate America, he noticed that women seemed drawn to him. There was Crissie and Martha from work; a few women he had met and bedded along the tour; then Audrey; and now Kaylie. *Unprecedented!*

He guessed there was something about standing up in front of an audience that turned women on, but he didn’t want to over-think or jinx it. Of course, Crissie and Audrey had been hired to get friendly

with him, but Dobie didn't know that. Either way, no matter the machinations behind it, his manufactured "good luck" with women ignited a legitimately successful trend in that area. Confidence breeds confidence. What had started out as fake was now genuine with Kaylie. He hoped.

Approaching the latter's Interstate exit, she instructed Dobie to get off there. He had to stifle a joke about "getting off." *Be cool!* he told himself.

Out of the blue, she then offered to guess his age and weight. He wondered where this was coming from. *Nerves*, he guessed. *Some people get chatty*. He hoped for her sake it was not normal for her to be jumping into strange men's cars.

When he gave an incredulous look, she explained how a woman at a carnival had guessed her age and weight so accurately one time, even though everyone else thought she was younger. She was inspired to try her own luck.

"I might add it to my résumé if I'm any good at it. You never know when you might need to run off and be a carnny! Anyway, I'd say you are 43 years old, 192 pounds and Sagittarius, Leo rising."

"Forty-three?!" he was insulted. "Try *thirty-three!*"

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Okay, 35," he hoped that wasn't still too old. He guessed she was 26 but didn't dare ask. "And last time I stepped on a scale I think I was 173 pounds. Otherwise, you were close!"

"Pfft, all that's left is your sign!"

“Well, you got the ‘Leo rising’ part right,” he lied. “And some people say that’s the most important part.” He had no clue if that was true. His actual vital stats – if astrology could be included with anything vital – were: 36, one year older than admitted; 5 pounds heavier than acknowledged; and Pisces, with nothing “rising” that he was aware of.

By the time they entered Kaylie’s house, Dobie was feeling pretty good about things, but also a little nervous. This woman was so perfect, and he was so... not. As was his wont, he took refuge in social commentary. He used to use humor in such situations until several women told him it was a turn-off. “Nobody,” one had said, “wants to sleep with a giggling idiot.”

“Money is the root of all evil,” Dobie announced as he surveyed Kaylie’s small, cramped, cluttered house.

“Well, I must be extra good, then,” she quipped, “because I’ve got none!”

“Good one!” he laughed, “but it needs to be abolished.”

“What, money, or good comebacks?” she gave a smile while pulling a small suitcase out of the hall closet.

Smart-ass, he smiled as she watched her wrestle with her luggage. “Here, let me help you with that.”

“No, I got it.”

“Anyway,” he continued, “I was referring to money. There’s no greed or corruption with my proposed system because there’s no profit motive. It’s the profit motive that ruins everything! Think

about it: Almost every one of society's ills goes back to money at its core. That, and people trying to get ahead. Socially healthy people don't need to feel like they're 'ahead' of anyone. Friendly competition is great, but people take it too far. And, my system is not Communism, or even a cashless society. Those are traps. I'm saying there will be no money at all.

"Everyone still has to work for a living. That's very important. You don't want people getting lazy and greedy, like those currently at the top of the socioeconomic strata. Everyone's time, attention and energy – our greatest gifts – will be the only currency. A huge bonus is that there would be no salesmen. Just think about that. No salesmen or telemarketers! That and the fact that we'd have no professional politicians should win me a Nobel Prize right there!"

She looked at him askance as she disappeared into the bedroom. She had not brought him home for a political debate but, to be polite and now speaking loud enough to be heard from the bedroom, she asked, "How does getting rid of money solve all the world's problems? Seems to me like it'd make things worse."

"That's what they *want* you to think!" he shouted back before stopping himself. He was alone with a beautiful woman... in her house... at night. This was no time for arguing.

When she reappeared, the suitcase was noticeably heavier. At least, Dobie would have noticed if he wasn't now mesmerized by her absolutely perfect figure bursting out of her gray yoga pants and or-

ange V-neck t-shirt. He had admired the modesty of her clothing earlier but was not going to hold this new look against her.

To keep from drooling, he changed tack. “You know what Gandhi said about Western civilization, don’t you?” As she shook her head, he attempted an Indian accent and delivered the punch line, ““I think it would be a good idea!””

It took a second before she laughed that beautiful laugh. “A laugh to launch a thousand ships,” as he would call it. If he had a “smartphone” he would record it and sell it as a ring tone. He’d be rich... in the current system. But then everyone would have it, and he wanted her all to himself. Selfish, he knew, but he forgave himself in this case.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said as she set the suitcase down and pulled a black leather jacket off the coat rack by the front door.

“Where are we going?”

“The hotel,” she said. “JD has a key to the house. So, unless you want him in bed with us, we need to go. Now. I just hope he’s not still at the diner to see us coming back to the hotel.”

“Good point,” he agreed, though he was now focused on her assumption that they would soon be in bed together.

Reaching for the front doorknob, trying to be a gentleman, he took a step back when a middle-aged woman smelling of alcohol and cigarettes emerged through the door.

She was a handsome woman – or would have been if not for the smell – and slightly familiar, but not the same sort of *déjà vu* famil-

ilarity he had been experiencing with Kaylie. The woman was barely *twenty* years Kaylie's senior, but looked like a gray-haired version of the latter, thirty years on. Hard living had added a dozen years.

"Oh, hey, Mom," Kaylie was clearly surprised to see her. "You're home early."

"Yeah, they let us off..." the older woman's raspy voice trailed off – her right hand buried in her purse – as she eyed Dobie warily. "Who's this?" she asked as if he was not even there.

She knew exactly who he was, but she wanted to hear what Kaylie had to say.

"Oh, this is Dobie, um, Pokanorny," Kaylie flubbed his last name. "You know, from that talk we sat in on at the hotel? Dobie, this is my mom, Claire Ra..."

"He don't need to know my last name!" she cut her off. "Tell him my social security number while you're at it! Don't never tell a man nothing he don't need to know!"

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," he smiled cautiously, trying to be diplomatic, ignoring her double-negatives. "And good advice. Keep everyone on a need-to-know basis. My last name is Pokorny. There's no point hiding it since it's on the fliers, and all."

Claire gave him a dirty look, and it hit him that she was well on her way to becoming that "tough old chain-smoking broad ready to crack some skulls" that he had imagined back at the diner. He was trying to remember if she was the one who had joined Kaylie on her way out the door at the end of that talk, and Kaylie now confirmed it.

When he extended his hand, she looked at it like it was a dead squirrel. It then occurred to Dobie that, in her case, squirrel might be what's for dinner on any given night.

It was all he could do to keep from laughing out loud. Claire saw the laughter in his eyes and gave him another dirty look.

Recognizing the animosity in her mother's eyes, Kaylie said in her most cheerful waitress voice, "Well, gotta go!" And, she once again led Dobie by the hand out the door.

From the front porch, Claire's eyes burned holes through Dobie's back as her precious only child followed him to his car. It was not a coincidence that she showed up when she did. She did not like how this "smooth-talking stranger" had waltzed into town and swept her daughter off her feet. He was all she heard about as she and Kaylie walked back to the Blue Spoon after his talk.

He wasn't even especially good-looking, Claire thought. *It made no sense!*

She then pulled her phone out to make a call.

~

Back out on the road, Dobie said, "So... your mom is... interesting."

Kaylie laughed. "Yeah, she takes some gettin' used to, but you shouldn't have laughed at her."

"I didn't laugh at her!"

"Your eyes did. She hates that... and so do I."

“Sorry. I just had a funny thought when I went to shake her hand, and you know how hard it is to *not* laugh when you know you you’re not supposed to. I thought I did well to keep it in.”

“What was so funny?”

“Nothing. It sounded funnier in my head.”

“Well, I don’t know what’s worse,” she changed the subject, “her liking you or her *not* liking you. She’s like a bitch in heat when she steals my dates. Like that time I got out of the shower and wondered where everyone went? Only to catch her and my date in bed together! I mean, who does that?”

Dobie was now focused on the image of Kaylie coming out of the shower. “Well,” he finally managed, “I don’t see that happening with me.”

“Count yourself lucky.”

“You’re like a flower,” it occurred to him, “surrounded by... fertilizer.”

“Um... no one’s ever said that to me before. I’m not sure how to take it.”

“It just popped into my head, so I said it. I do that... a lot. No offense.”

“No,” she smiled, enjoying the sentiment, awkward as it was. She appreciated his honesty and lack of filter. “That’s okay.”

When the conversation hit a lull a few minutes later, he filled the void with more rhetoric. It gave him something to talk about besides

their impending tryst. He *hoped* there was an impending tryst, and she wasn't simply leading him on, using him, as JD had said.

“Corporations today,” he began, “are founded on three principals: Lying, cheating and stealing. But, we don't need corporations. All the necessities of life can be provided by organized, qualified volunteers available for any task, as long as we have access to training and the required machinery. We, the workers, have the know-how. Our bosses aren't the ones doing the actual labor. We are. And, because of that, if you have any sense of fairness you will see it is the workers who are the true owners of that product. Yes, I know ‘life is not fair’, but we still must strive for it.

“We just need to come together like family members do – healthy families, anyway – and help each other out. Like the Amish or Mennonites, without the religion... and that beard-but-no-mustache thing they do.”

She laughed.

“The hard part,” he continued, “would be transitioning from the old system to the new one – and I've got some ideas on that – but, if nothing else, corporations should be limited to just a couple hundred employees each and be forced to implement profit-sharing. The profit-sharing will keep the workers happy, and the smaller company size will leave room for more mom-and-pop businesses like The Blue Spoon Diner.

“Screw ‘economies of scale!’ It's better economics for all businesses to be small businesses. But I don't have a degree in econom-

ics, or business, or anything else – and I don't put a gun to anyone's head – so nobody in a position of power listens to me.

“To get rid of corporations entirely, there would have to be some sort of referendum and compensation to the owners of the equipment. But once it got going, for most of us it would mean less work. A *lot* less because, when it comes right down to it, all we really need is food, shelter and something to do.”

“I thought all we need is love,” she said. “Turn here.”

“I was referring to physical needs,” he said.

“So was I,” she smiled suggestively.

“...but my ideas are too radical for them,” he tried to focus.

“‘Them’ who?” she asked.

“The keepers of the status quo. Those who like things just the way they are. The one percent of the one percent.”

“Come on,” she argued. “Things ain't so bad, but I like what you said about saving mom-and-pop businesses.” Pointing straight ahead, she said, “The Interstate's just up there.”

“They *want* you to think things aren't so bad,” he argued. “But they could be a *lot* better for those not among the so-called ‘elites.’ So why not try?”

“I've got an idea how to make things better,” she said with a smile as he got *Sabina* onto the Interstate and up to speed.

“Yeah? What's that?” It was his turn to be a little slow on the uptake until she slid up against him. Their legs made contact and created an actual spark. His foot involuntarily pressed down on the

gas, and he swerved into the fast lane. When she placed her hand on his thigh, he got it up to 90 miles an hour before he knew it. *Sabina* had great acceleration.

Where is that hotel?! they both wondered.

El Lobo Solo

Kaylie had never dated a public speaker before. She admired anyone who could do anything she could not. Sure, she could talk all day long, but not in front of an audience, and not about the things Dobie talked about.

During his earlier talk she was thoroughly enjoying herself until that bitch Audrey stood up and started arguing. Kaylie only did what came naturally when she stood to defend him, despite her mom trying to pull her back down into her seat. When Dobie stood up for her against JD at the diner, that clinched it. It was as if they were meant to be together.

She felt a complete lack of apprehension with him, which usually meant the guy was boring, but not this time. He might be too opinionated – and older than previous boyfriends – but he was doing something with his life, making something of himself, and that made him more attractive than anyone else in town. The fact that her mom didn't like him helped, too.

He was either her ticket out of there or her next mistake... though she usually had a good sense of where a relationship might take her. Up until now, that had been exactly nowhere, and she was ready for an upgrade.

They were both very happy to get to the hotel. There was a lot of panting and petting as Dobie fumbled with the key card to get into

the room. It was taking so long, Kaylie almost suggested they just do it in the hallway. She didn't want him to think she was some sort of freak, though, so she said nothing.

He might have been okay with the hallway himself if not for the security cameras recording everything. He could never run the risk of someone finding and using such evidence against him.

In their haste to pull into the hotel parking lot, they failed to notice the cook, Blount, out front, smoking a cigarette and taking note of where they parked.

~

Half an hour later, Dobie and Kaylie were lying in bed and catching their breath. Dobie was smiling as he looked up at the ceiling. There was nothing quite like the first time with somebody, except maybe the second, third, fourth and fifth time.

Kaylie was lying on her side, watching him. She suggested they sneak out in the middle of the night. She still wanted to get as far away from JD as possible. "Tonight was a slice of heaven," she said, "but I don't feel safe here."

"I've already paid for the conference room in the morning," he argued. "People are expecting me. I'm trying to practice what I preach and be a responsible person. We're perfectly safe."

~

In the morning, still in bed, Kaylie once again broached the idea of her joining him on the road. “We can be like Bonnie and Clyde,” she giggled nervously, “until you get sick of me, anyway.”

There was a pregnant pause from Dobie. “I’m more of a one-man band,” he began cautiously. When he saw the dejected look on her face, however, he softened the blow with an uncomfortable laugh. “A lone wolf. *El lobo solo.*”

“You’re just making up words!” she smiled uncertainly.

“That really was Spanish, I think, but I do usually work alone. Old habits die hard, and all that.”

“What about me?!” She assumed last night would have sealed the deal. It usually did. “It’s just wham-bam, thank you ma’am?!” She was kicking herself for jumping into bed too soon once again.

“No, I’m just explaining why I hesitated,” he fumbled for a plausible excuse. “You gave me that hurt look. I’m saying yes. Definitely, yes. I thought you were just messing with me. I had to be sure.”

“Oh,” she smiled and snuggled close. “Well, alrighty then.”

And they picked up where they left off last night.

~

Dobie was late for his own talk. It was Saturday and he had scheduled a mid-morning appearance. It took serious effort to leave Kaylie, but he eventually managed to get dressed and down to his assigned conference room on the ground floor.

Kaylie went back to sleep.

Taking the stairs down, Dobie walked with a new spring in his step as he reached the kitchen area where he went in search of the hotel's complimentary coffee. Upon entering the conference room, he surveyed its padded metal chairs scattered throughout. *Half-full*, he thought with a smile, *not half-empty*. That middle-aged couple from the previous night was back, and he took it as a compliment.

An attendee he never expected to see was the cook, Blount, in the back row. Dobie supposed he should take that as a compliment, too. Others wandered in and out as they came and went to and from their complimentary breakfast in the dining room.

Taking another sip of coffee before setting it down on the lectern's interior shelf, Dobie introduced himself to his audience and launched into one of his favorite and typically better-received speeches.

"No one ever accused me of being ambitious," he said with a self-deprecating grin, "but I've always had an overriding need for the truth. Some might call that ambition. I call it compulsion. I don't know. What I do know is that people don't always appreciate or give credence to someone else's version of the truth unless that someone has an impressive title and wears the right clothes – with amulets and talismans in all the right shapes and symbols. They must perform the proper rituals, too, of course, preferably in front of a microphone with enough reverb to give their voice that 'word of God, spoken from on high' sound. If they have a secret handshake

and say ‘thy,’ ‘thou’ and ‘thee’ a lot, it helps. Lacking all of the above, people want to discount it as myth, folklore, superstition or mere opinion.”

A woman in the audience was staring at his crotch, or into space at nothing. He wasn’t sure which. Was his fly open? He checked. No, but he made a mental note to get that woman’s number. *Wait, no*, he reminded himself. *I’ve got Kaylie now... until she comes to her senses*. The thought of her made him smile, but this other woman thought he was smiling at her. He had her rapt attention throughout the talk.

My first groupie! he thought.

“The world gives us problems,” he continued with a smile, spreading his arms out wide. “I give the world solutions! No, I’m not pretending to be anyone’s guru or savior. I want people to be their own savior, and I’m not here to be idolized. It’s not like I’m a rapper, actor, athlete, or any one of those so clearly worthy of your worship.

“Personally, I find ‘gurus’ annoying. I know I’m up here acting like one but, if you’re like me, you don’t want someone else’s answers. You want to find your own. Most of us only listen to know-it-alls like me for confirmation of what we already know. It’s the mystery of life, the *lack* of answers that keeps us going! So-called gurus don’t know any more than you, really. They’re just better at putting it into words. Everyone can teach everyone else something.”

And, for that, Dobie received a standing ovation – his first – from a sizable portion of the crowd, at least. His “groupie” up front was the most ecstatic. He looked behind him to make sure no one famous had walked in. Nope. It was all for him.

What surprised him most was that it came after his completely off-the-cuff and unrehearsed remarks. He laughed to think maybe he should speak more often without thinking, or at least start each day in bed with Kaylie. *Preferably the latter. Something* had inspired him.

“I haven’t always been a pseudo-guru,” he continued. “Hey, ‘pseudo-guru’ can be my stage name from now on!”

~

Kaylie was blissfully asleep in their room, facing away from the door, only partly under the covers. When she heard the door open behind her, she rolled over to greet Dobie with a smile, only to recoil in horror and pull the sheet to cover herself when she saw who it was.

JD filled the entire doorway with his massive frame. He was not happy. He thought he and Kaylie were still a couple.

“Mornin’, sunshine!” his mouth formed a greasy smile, but his eyes were dead as he slipped halfway into the room.

“How did you...?” she looked around. More than just startled, she was downright frightened. She knew what JD was capable of when betrayed.

His almost palpable brutality was what first attracted her to him. He was exciting, but now she feared for her life. She was not one to scream and run at the first sign of trouble, though. Her father had taught her to always stop and think. There was always time for that, he said, and almost always a way out of any predicament. “You might be able to talk your way out of it,” he had said.

She was doing her best to follow that advice, but nothing was coming to mind. She thought she might have to physically submit to JD, then escape while he slept it off – as he always did – but that would be her last resort. The thought of him touching her again sent a cold chill down her back.

Still wearing that greasy smile, he held the door ajar. She didn’t know if he was keeping it open for his own quick exit or, worse, to let someone lurking behind him into the room.

“Jimmy’s working the front desk,” he answered her unfinished question. “Loaned me a master key and told me what room you were in.”

“Well, that was mighty nice of him,” Kaylie was sarcastic, “but the manager of this hotel is one of my best customers at the diner. Remember, the one who’s always ‘joking’ about leaving his wife and taking me away from all this? I’ll make sure Jimmy gets fired.”

“You mean the manager I put in the hospital ‘cuz he wouldn’t stop hitting on you even though I asked real nice? Yeah, I remember him.”

This was news to Kaylie. It also explained why she hadn't seen the man in a while. "Anyway, you need to get out before I scream and someone calls the cops! You know how loud I can scream."

Her own words reminded her to look for her phone. She spotted it on the small table in the opposite corner of the room, out of reach. She'd never get to it before JD stopped her.

She then crawled out from under the sheets and slid off the far side of the bed. No matter what might happen, she decided, she would at least be dressed.

She looked for something to throw at JD, but there was nothing. No matter how hard she swung the alarm clock on the nightstand at him, it would never hurt him. The reading lamps were built into the wall. There was nothing.

She had just gotten her bra and panties on when Blount the Boob Whisperer came through the door. When he saw her half naked, he squealed in anticipation and rushed in to get a better look.

That's when she screamed at the top of her lungs. Down the hall, Doris, a small, middle-aged Asian-American cleaning woman heard it, dropped everything, and called the front desk. Jimmy took the call but, of course, did nothing about it.

~

Two floors down in the conference room, Dobie was onto the subject of his book, *Be Good*, his initial foray into publishing. He explained to his audience that he had read so many philosophy, self-help, and

motivational books over the years, he decided to write one himself. “How hard could it be? The hardest part was quieting the internal voices telling me to not even try.”

Watson’s most recently hired agent provocateur, Dobie’s “groupie,” was standing before him now, asking about it, keeping him occupied. *Be Good*, he explained, was inspired by his own name, Dobromir. According to his research, any word starting with “d-o-b-r” (or their Cyrillic equivalent) roughly means “good” in several Slavic languages. And Dobie meant “be good” as in being good at something, making all the right moves. One’s behavior is important, of course – “you shouldn’t be greedy and scheming to take advantage of others” – but his book was not a “how to” on being a well-behaved suck-up. Every corporate *Employee’s Handbook* had that covered.

Based on the poor sales of *Be Good* – though he told himself it was not bad for a first attempt – Dobie’s greatest fear upon starting this current tour was to end up “living in his van down by the river.” He was pleasantly surprised, however, how well *Another Way* was selling. So well, in fact, it was not long before he was making as much if not better income than when he was slaving away at Sayn-Corp. If he had foreseen that – as well as meeting Kaylie – he would have quit the corporate world years ago. He seemed to be a natural at this public speaking stuff.

“Know that you are good,” he now read aloud a few lines from the book. “A good attitude leads to good behavior, which leads to

good performance, which leads to good results. So... ‘Be good. Be creative. Be yourself.’ I’ve got that on bumper stickers. Five bucks each.

“Coming up with sayings is a favorite pastime. Another one is, ‘Mind over matter is all well and good, but heart over mind makes you do what you should.’ I’ve got that on bumper stickers, t-shirts and coffee cups, too. What I’m saying with that one is that the mind is a wonderful thing – and of course ‘a terrible thing to waste’ – but in a lot of ways it’s just a dumb computer that needs your heart and soul for proper direction.

“Your heart is almost always right. Your mind, only sometimes. There are so many smart people – me included – who are still too stupid sometimes to do the right thing. Point being, don’t go around thinking intellect is the end-all, be-all.”

He never heard Kaylie scream, but did feel something, an unexplained feeling of dread. He stopped talking, listened for a moment, then shrugged it off and continued.

“Of course, the worst kind of idiot is the one who only *thinks* he’s smart. And, no, I’m not talking about myself.” That got a laugh from the crowd, and Dobie took that as his cue to take a seat and sign autographs.

As soon as she got to the front of the line, Watson’s agent / Dobie’s groupie was asking him out on a date, and he was seriously considering it. He was crazy about Kaylie but had to assume that this meant she would not be sticking around. That’s how it usually

worked. The woman now standing before him could be his backup plan. *All is fair in love and war*, he reminded himself.

Major Watson never asked this woman to date Pokorny. He only caught on now because she was wearing a wire. He had assumed Dobie would never be stupid enough to jeopardize his relationship with Kaylie. Watson never would have. His agent was improvising, going off-script, which left him thinking Dobie might be that charismatic leader that Charonne feared, after all.

Dobie never noticed Watson, but did see that Blount was gone. And, there was just something about that creeper's disappearance that convinced Dobie to not ignore this odd feeling he was having. He needed to go check on Kaylie.

He stood up and told the audience, "I'll be right back."

~

Blount let the heavy door slam shut behind him to block out Kaylie's screams. JD pushed him out of the way to get to her first. He tried to cover her mouth, but she slipped out of his grasp and hopped back onto the bed. Her weight shifted from one foot to the other, almost dancing, as she stopped screaming to focus on finding a way past Blount and out the door.

Looking up at her in her sexiest bra and panties – chosen especially for Dobie – Blount stood mesmerized, almost drooling. Using this temporary stupor to her advantage, Kaylie bounced up then down into the bed, leveraging its springs to launch herself toward the

door. She assumed she could get past the much older and slower Blount, but he was quicker and stronger than expected.

He pulled her into his arms and held tight. A lifetime of blue-collar jobs had kept him in decent shape. It wasn't until recently that he was forced to be a cook because no one else would hire him.

She was screaming again, so he grabbed her roughly from behind and placed a hand over her mouth. Clutching her, Blount gazed over her shoulder and down upon those perfect breasts, rising and falling with every frightened breath. Giggling like a fiend – this was a highlight of his miserable life – he placed his left hand on her left boob while his right hand remained over her mouth until JD could drag duct tape across it, which he did, but only after forcing Blount's hand from Kaylie's breast and down to her waist.

As JD went looking for the rest of her clothes, Blount laid his head on the back of Kaylie's neck and began to make humping motions from behind. Tears came to her eyes and she screamed again but, because of the tape, nothing came out.

She threw an elbow with all her might into Blount's rib cage. He lurched forward in pain, but that only pushed him closer into her, causing him to hold tighter still. She squealed in pain as Blount's hand – which he had placed back on her boob as soon as he could – reflexively squeezed it harder.

Her instinctive response was to stomp down hard with her right heel onto his toes. His work boots kept it from hurting as much as it might have but it was enough to cause him to briefly let go of her.

JD came back around the bed with her pants and shirt in hand. Seeing the two of them struggling as they were, he shook his head, dropped her clothes onto the bed, and pulled a stun gun out of his back pocket.

Blount quickly recovered from her assault, and once again grabbed a hold of her, this time with one hand on her hip while the other hand tried to pull down her bra.

“Let me have her, JD,” he begged the larger man. “Just once, and I can die a happy man!”

JD ignored him and fired the stun gun. Its terminals hit Blount directly, but the electricity flowed through him and into Kaylie, knocking the legs out from under both of them.

“We’re not doing this for you to get your jollies, old man!” JD yelled. Blount was now on the floor underneath Kaylie, probably enjoying that, too. “If you’re not careful, you will die, but you won’t be happy.”

JD attempted to get Kaylie’s clothes back on her, though he had made it more difficult on himself using the stun gun. Putting her clothes back on was not an attempt on his part for any sort of modesty or good manners. He simply wanted her to be less conspicuous as they escaped. The only “gentlemanly” thing he did for her was to wrap her hands and ankles in duct tape instead of zip-ties.

He then picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. With a smile, he then said, “There’s yer proof, bubba, that all ya need for fixin’ anythin’ is duct tape or WD-40!”

A bruised and slightly disoriented Blount got up and held the door as JD carried their prize catch into the hallway. Watching for witnesses, trying to be nonchalant – as if that was possible – they moved quickly toward the stairs at the far end of the hall.

The same cleaning woman, Doris, came out of a room two doors ahead of them. She saw them, realized Kaylie was the one who had been screaming, and immediately disappeared back inside the room, leaving her cart in the hallway. The deadbolt could be heard locking from the inside.

JD thought about shooting her through the door but didn't want to draw any more attention than necessary. He just hoped she kept quiet. If not, he knew where to find her.

With Blount taking the lead, the kidnapers took the stairs two at a time down to the propped-open back door. JD's black, late-model Chrysler 300 with blacked-out windows waited outside with the motor running.

Some New Moves

Dobie had climbed up the stairs on the opposite side of the building and was walking down the hall toward their room when he heard the downstairs hotel back door slam shut. He didn't think much of it until he spotted one of Kaylie's hairbands on the hallway floor by their room.

Opening their room door and calling out to her, getting no answer, he checked every inch of their room. Nothing. He was starting to think she had come to her senses and dumped him, but then he saw her phone on the table on the far side of the room. She never went anywhere without that thing.

He realized then that she had not dumped him, she had been taken. He grabbed her phone, bolted out of the room, and ran down the back stairwell.

~

A small, mixed-breed, gray-haired dog was sniffing around JD's car. When it saw JD, its tail began to wag. The big man's response was to kick it in the side, sending it yelping away. Blount giggled at the dog's misfortune as he tried to get into the backseat with Kaylie. JD grabbed and threw him into the front passenger seat.

"What'd I tell you, Blount?! Don't touch her! You can have her mom."

“That old bag?” Blount complained.

“She’s younger than you, dumb-ass! Play your cards right, and I’ll stop banging her and let you have her all to yourself.”

Kaylie’s eyes went wide. JD saw her reaction in the rearview mirror and he cursed his own big mouth. He had just ruined the mother-daughter combo – though the daughter was unaware – that he had been enjoying these past few months.

He liked to imagine himself as Claire’s husband and Kaylie’s father, during sex, and/or Claire’s son and Kaylie’s brother during sex. He never mentioned it to Kaylie, of course. She wouldn’t understand.

~

Dobie came out the exit door, around the corner, and planted himself in front of JD’s car. It occurred to him too late that he should have brought his gun. He kept it in the glovebox but was so *not* a “gun guy” that he forgot he even had one.

All he knew was that this was deadly serious. No time for his usual joking around. He had to get Kaylie back. He couldn’t see her in the backseat but assumed she was either there or in the trunk.

“Hey!” he shouted.

~

Watson and Audrey had spent the night in the same hotel. He was in the parking lot following through on his lie to Audrey that he needed

to get something out of his car. What he actually needed was to get away from her for a few minutes. She was a little too “lovey-dovey” lately, and “joking” about marriage, which he could not abide.

When he saw Dobie come around the corner to confront JD, he smiled and slipped inside his Escalade to watch in comfort whatever might unfold before him. He only wished he had popcorn.

~

JD was behind the wheel and about to step on the gas when Dobie stepped in front of him. He could have easily run him over, and probably would have if it was anyone else. Instead, he shook his head, shifted back into Park, and got out to deal with the “old man.”

“Time for a rematch!” he said with a smile as he got out. “And this time, *you* ’ll be the one on the floor!”

“Ground,” Dobie reflexively corrected JD’s choice of words. He had no idea why. It just came out.

JD sneered. “Whatever! I’m about to kick your ass, and you’re correcting my grammar?”

Dobie shrugged.

JD watched a lot of professional wrestling and ultimate fighting, and seriously considered getting into one or both himself. Now was the perfect opportunity to try some of those new moves he had come up with. He shouldn’t even break a sweat.

Dobie noticed JD smiled a lot, but it was never friendly. It was more like an animal baring its fangs. He then wondered if animals

thought humans were baring their fangs when they smiled, but now was not the time for such thoughts.

He then remembered he had Kaylie's phone in his pocket. He tried to think of a way to get it inside JD's car. Its screen was locked, but he hoped someone might use one of those tracking apps and track her down. It would be nice to use "surveillance state" technology to his advantage, for a change.

One flying spin move and punch from JD later, however, Dobie's clever idea was a moot point. It *was* his turn to hit the ground, unconscious, after all.

JD laughed as he got back into his car. He was right. He hadn't even broken a sweat but did hurt his hand on Dobie's face.

"You still got it," Blount tried to high-five him as he climbed in, but JD only glared at him. High-fiving would have hurt too much.

He checked to make sure Kaylie was still in the backseat. She was on her back, glaring at him, but still there. He was a bit surprised Blount wasn't back there on top of her.

He finally sped off toward Blount's trailer in the woods on the outskirts of town, burning rubber all the way out of the parking lot. It was not the best way to remain inconspicuous, but that was JD.

~

With JD now gone and Dobie lying unconscious, Watson got out of his car and walked over to check on the latter. Looking down, smoking a cigarette, he was disappointed to find Dobie still breath-

ing. Things would have been easier if he was dead. That way, when he rescued Kaylie from wherever JD and Blount were taking her, she would be so appreciative she would happily let him replace Dobie as her new man. It was time to let Audrey go, but he always liked to have a replacement bitch lined up first.

Watson left Dobie lying there. Someone would find him and call for help... eventually. He did take the opportunity to replace the old tracking device planted in *Sabina's* wheel well. The old one had short-circuited, which had never happened before. Those things were rock solid.

Though Watson had not had any trouble following Dobie up to this point, the tracker did allow him to follow farther behind, letting Dobie get beyond visual contact so that Watson might not be so obvious. The same model tracking device had been planted in JD's vehicle, as well, installed the moment that Watson realized JD was Kaylie's ex-boyfriend. Its broadcast signal was now going to lead him to Blount and JD's hideout. There was nothing like a jealous ex-boyfriend to lead him to an ex-girlfriend, in this case Kaylie. Wherever she went, JD was sure to follow.

~

No one ever did come to help Dobie, though the same stray dog that JD had kicked walked up, sniffed him, and peed on his leg. Dobie was oblivious. When he came to, he was alone on the hard pavement. Loose dirt and bits of gravel stuck to his skin. JD and Kaylie

were gone. It was a mystery how long he'd been passed out on the ground, but he then caught a whiff of urine.

It wasn't until he got up and started walking toward *Sabina* that he felt something damp against his leg, accompanied by that distinctive smell. Looking down, he realized he had been peed on. He assumed it was JD's doing.

He closed his eyes in exasperation, shook his head, and returned to his hotel room to change clothes. The back door was still propped open, so he went that way. He and the cleaning woman eyed each other warily as she came down the stairs while he went up.

~

Dobie set about searching for Kaylie, completely forgetting the audience left hanging in the conference room. His first stop was at the diner. *Someone there might know something.*

An older man and woman – presumably the mom-and-pop owners – were working the day shifts of Blount's and Kaylie's respective jobs. They seemed genuinely shocked and saddened when told what had happened to Kaylie, but not surprised to hear Blount was involved.

When Dobie asked if they had any idea where they might have taken Kaylie, the man suggested Blount's place. "Him and JD hang out there a lot..." he began.

"... partying with whores from the truck stop," the wife finished his sentence. "He never came in today."

“Where does that creep live?” Dobie asked as a shiver went down his back.

“I’ll text you his address,” the woman said.

“Can you just tell me? I don’t have a phone,” said Dobie. When she gave him the usual surprised look, he forced a good-natured laugh. “I know. Who doesn’t have a cell phone these days, right? Long story. Oh, wait, I’ve got Kaylie’s. She left it behind.”

The woman texted Blount’s address to Kaylie’s phone. Not knowing its password, Dobie would try to memorize the address in those few seconds that it was visible on the screen. He then hurried toward the door. On his way out, they assured him that Blount would be fired immediately.

He turned, gave a slight chuckle, and said, “He’ll be *dead* soon, if I have anything to do with it.”

“The town would owe you a debt of gratitude,” said the man. “But, uh, you wouldn’t happen to have experience as a fry cook, would you?”

Dobie again chuckled on his way across the parking lot.

He then remembered the audience he had left waiting. Returning to the now-mostly-empty room, he noticed quite a few of his books were missing. “What else can go wrong?” he wondered aloud.

Things had been going so well for him lately. Up until now. Too well, apparently, he told himself. *This is the universe balancing things out.*

His groupie was gone. To the few people still hanging around patiently awaiting his return – or simply slower to steal a book and run – he said, “The show is over, folks! Sorry. Something’s come up. Take a book on your way out. They’re apparently free today.”

The stragglers all got up and rushed toward the front of the room to get their free book. Dobie doubted they cared about the book so much as it was just something free, and they didn’t want to miss out. Their fellow audience members became their competition, and they pounced like hyenas on the carcass of Dobie’s presentation to get their share of scraps.

Two male police officers, both white, one a decade older than the other, arrived just as the feeding frenzy started. Dobie assumed they were there to talk about Kaylie, but the frenzy stopped with the officers’ arrival.

“It’s okay,” Dobie said, guessing everyone feared arrest. “Go ahead and take one. But just one!” To the officers, he said, “We can talk while I pack, if that’s okay. Pack what’s left, anyway. I would file a police report about the stolen books but, you know, I just don’t care at this point.”

“Don’t get any ideas about looking for Miss Daniels yourself,” the older cop warned. “We’ll do that. You just sit tight and let us do our jobs.”

“I could say ‘yes, sir’ like a good little boy,” said Dobie, “but I’m not a good little boy. I’m telling you right now, I am not going

to sit tight while you do your jobs. You should appreciate the help, actually.”

The man shook his head but didn't argue. “Stay out of the way at least?”

The younger one – watching Dobie closely, maintaining eye contact, looking for signs of deception – asked, “So, when did you last see Kaylie?”

The guy looked genuinely concerned for Kaylie's welfare. Dobie guessed he might be one of any number of males in town with a crush on her. He made a face at the cops' suspicion but answered the question. “This morning, right before coming down here for my talk.”

“Where have you been all morning?” the older one asked.

“I just said, right here, talking. Ask anyone who attended. While you're at it, ask if they plan to pay for the books they stole.”

“Did you give your room key to anyone?” the older cop ignored Dobie's request.

“Why would I do that!?”

“Just answer the question, sir,” said the younger one.

“No!” Dobie said angrily.

“No, you didn't give your key to anyone? Or, no, you won't answer the question? I've heard about your kind – ‘sovereign citizens’ you call yourselves – not cooperating with the police.”

Dobie scoffed in disbelief. “I didn't give my key to anyone!” he shouted at them. The younger cop put his hand on his gun, so Dobie

softened his tone. "Sorry, but I tend to shout when under duress." He wanted to say "when dealing with idiots," but he controlled himself.

He had no faith in these two finding Kaylie. They probably never had to deal with a kidnapping before, but he reminded himself that they were just trying to help. He had to play nice. *Be good!*

Once the questioning was finished, Dobie expected one of them to give him a business card. When they didn't, he asked for one. Dobie then had to admit to not owning a cell phone when the older cop asked for *his* number. They gave him the usual look.

"Well then," the younger cop wanted to know, "how are you gonna call us if you ain't got a phone?"

Dobie closed his eyes and turned away before saying something he regretted. Turning back, he said, "I'll use a pay phone or the hotel phone or borrow someone else's phone! I've got *her* phone, actually," he just remembered. "She left it behind, but I don't know the password."

"We'll need that," the older cop spoke immediately, and held out his hand. "For evidence."

Dobie was not comfortable giving it up, though he could not think of a good reason other than Kaylie's privacy for keeping it from them. "No, I think I'd better hang onto it."

"There has been a kidnapping, sir," the older one barked at him, "and that phone is evidence! You need to hand it over, right now!"

The younger one took a step back and pulled his gun on Dobie.

“Okay, okay!” Dobie was surprised by this over-reaction, but relented and gave it up.

Both cops gave him a dirty look before walking away, shaking their heads and muttering to each other.

The Barn

At Blount's house, JD drove too fast down the long, gravel driveway while Blount pressed imaginary brakes until they came skidding to a stop in front of the barn. They had chosen Blount's place as their hideout because that long, noisy driveway made it hard for anyone to sneak up on them.

They pulled Kaylie out of the back seat, still bound and gagged and angrier than either of them had ever seen her. JD hoisted her onto his shoulder and moved quickly toward the dilapidated old barn twenty yards to the right of Blount's double-wide. It reminded him of his high school football days, recovering a fumble and running for a touchdown.

Seeing the large, sliding barn door padlocked, JD said, "Shit, Blount, dumb-ass, it's still locked!"

"Hold yer horses, bubba," Blount smiled as he pulled out his keys. He was on his home turf now and feeling more assertive. Opening the padlock slowly, just to irritate JD, he said, "We got time."

Once inside the barn, JD set Kaylie down upon the torn-up, brown leather couch set up against a stack of old, gray hay bales. "Don't bother trying to run," he warned as he untied her feet. "We'll just chase you down. I might even let Blount here have you, after all."

This brought a smile to Blount's face, though JD had no intention of letting that happen. He was just putting the fear of God into her. Not wanting to hear what she had to say, he left the duct tape on her mouth. Hands, too. He knew from experience that the girl could pack a serious punch when riled.

She shouted at him through the gag, but he ignored her, lit a cigarette to help him think, and tried to figure out his next move. He was realizing this abduction had not been planned as thoroughly as it should have been.

When his phone rang, he dug it out of his front pocket. Checking to see who it was, he answered, "Yeah?"

"Is that how you talk to me now?" Claire – Kaylie's mom, the architect of all this – asked on the other end. "How is it going? You didn't hurt her, did you?"

"No. In the middle of it," he hoped he was being cryptic enough. "What do you need?"

He then nodded a few times as if taking orders, finally said "Alright, alright," then hung up. "I got something I gotta do," he announced to the room. "Blount, you stay with Kaylie. I'll be right back."

When he caught the look that Blount was giving Kaylie, he stopped, turned, looked him in the eyes, put both hands on his shoulders, and said, "Blount, I'm only gonna say this once: You touch Kaylie while I'm gone, you die. Got that? If I get back and she says

you did anything to her – anything at all – you’re dead! *Comprendé?*”

“Got it, boss!” Blount reverted to the prisoner’s habit of calling anyone who might hurt him “boss.”

Leaning in and whispering, JD said, “Remember, we’re only using her...” He stopped when he saw Kaylie listening in. She had sneaky-good hearing. Could read lips, too. So, he just stopped talking altogether.

Kaylie could not hear what JD had whispered, but did take comfort in his threat to Blount. It provided a path to ridding herself of The Boob Whisperer once and for all. She could simply say Blount touched her and – no questions asked – JD would kill him. She knew JD well enough to know that. She was not the type to knowingly get anyone hurt, normally, but if push came to shove, she could see herself pushing Blount off the nearest cliff.

“Hey,” she tried to shout as JD walked away. “Ungag me!” JD did not understand a word of it but got the gist. Turning around, he removed the duct tape from her mouth.

Something about the way he pulled it off gave Kaylie the creepy feeling that he had done this sort of thing before.

“Need something to drink?” he asked, feigning good manners.

She wasn’t falling for it but was so desperate for a drink she said, “Yes!”

~

The barn had not been a proper barn in years. Upon inheriting the property – after his parents died under questionable circumstances – Blount converted the barn into a “party room” complete with kitchenette along a side wall. There were plastic utensils, cups, and paper plates on the shelves above the sink. A portable stove sat to the right of that. Two feet away along the front wall sat a small refrigerator. The focus of the room was the big-screen television.

Despite JD’s long-standing friendship with Blount, Kaylie had never set foot on the latter’s property before. She always made an excuse to leave whenever Blount tried to tag along. She would not have expected him to afford such a large, new TV. Then she realized it was most likely stolen.

JD went to the fridge and pulled out a two-liter bottle of Sun-Drop. Unless Blount had bought a new one, he knew this one was spiked with party drugs meant to take advantage of anyone unwary enough to enter their lair.

He filled a cup for Kaylie and handed it to her. “Here you go.”

“You didn’t put anything in it,” she asked, “did you?”

“You saw me,” he feigned innocence. “I just now poured it straight from the bottle!”

She was suspicious, but also incredibly thirsty. She took a sip and gave it a second to make sure it tasted right. Satisfied, she gulped down the rest.

~

Approaching from the west, Dobie spotted JD's car a couple hundred yards ahead as it pulled out of Blount's driveway as he went on his mysterious errand. With JD now directly ahead of him, Dobie continued past the driveway, pretending to be just another car on the road going who-knows-where. There was a dip and turn in the road ahead that Dobie hoped might work in his favor.

As per her instructions, JD was on his way to Claire's house. He was also keeping an eye in his rear-view mirror. He always made a point of knowing who drove what in the area, so when Dobie's car, unfamiliar to him, failed to reappear after that dip and turn, he guessed what had happened. He scoffed, shook his head, and turned back around.

Dobie drove slowly down Blount's driveway while looking for a place he might turn around and escape, should that be necessary. He parked pointed toward the road, allowing for a quick exit. Closing its door quietly as he got out, he crept toward the trailer, looking for a window to peek through. He had no idea how ironic it was for someone to be peeping into Blount's windows instead of the other way around.

A man's angry voice, not directed at him, came from inside the barn. He turned and headed that way. It might have been Blount, but it was hard to say. He had never heard the man say anything other than "order up" back at the diner.

He checked both sides of the barn for another way in besides its front entrance. He would have checked the far side of the barn, too,

but thick woods, overgrown brush, and rusted-out farm equipment made that too slow-going. It would have to be the front door, which had been left open.

It occurred to him, again too late, that he should have brought his gun from the car. He was kicking himself for such continued stupidity.

The man's voice was louder now. "You're gonna enjoy this, honey. Just you wait!"

There was no time for Dobie to get his gun, so he sneaked into the barn. Blount looked up, hearing something. Not seeing anyone, though, he quickly returned his attention to Kaylie. He was *not* going to be distracted from this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity sitting hog-tied before him.

The barn had a small foyer sort of area in front of Blount's make-shift "man cave." The two areas were separated by a wall with an open doorway large enough for a tractor. Behind this, Kaylie sat on the torn-up old couch.

Dobie could not see her, but found an empty horse stall on the left, diagonal and opposite from the refrigerator in which to hide. He was trying to find a crack or gap to peek through when he heard Kaylie's voice. His heart leaped into his throat.

"Didn't you hear JD?!" she said. "He's going to kill you!" Her voice sounded slurred, as if drugged.

"He said we're only using you," Blount corrected her with a giggle. "This is me using you! Whatever he does to me, it'll be worth

it.” He said that last part with a finality that convinced her he was completely serious. He then giggled maniacally and unzipped his pants, exposing himself to her. “Say hello to my little friend!” he quoted the line from *Scarface*.

“Little is right,” she tried to ruin it for him, but it only made him angry.

“You think that’s funny, bitch!” he took a step toward her with his hand raised, but didn’t strike.

“Please, Blount. I’m sorry. I’ll be nicer to you from now on,. Don’t do this!”

“That’s right you’ll be nicer to me,” Blount said. “Starting now!” He pulled her shirt up over her head and mostly off, but her hands were still duct-taped behind her back, so it got caught around her bound hands.

He then pulled out a large pocketknife to slice through the shirt. She misread his intentions and tried to let out her most blood-curdling scream. Her lungs, however, were not up to the task. The drugs had taken her voice. The attempted scream came out as no more than a wheezing gasp. She tried to kick him between the legs, but the drugs also made her slow, so Blount evaded her kick.

Laughing now like a twisted, greedy child unwrapping the greatest Christmas gift ever, Blount went to work on her bra. He thought about slicing it off with the knife but didn’t want to risk cutting her.

“Don’t want to damage the goods!” he said as he put the knife away, still giggling. He told himself he was being considerate. A gentleman, almost.

That’s when Dobie emerged from the shadows. He’d stayed quiet and hidden for fear others were lurking nearby, but once Blount started tearing off Kaylie’s clothes, he had to do something.

“Hey!” he shouted, but Blount was either hard of hearing or so focused on Kaylie that he never even noticed.

At that exact moment, JD re-entered the barn. Banging noisily into the barn door, he squeezed his large frame through. Gun in hand, he appeared just a few feet ahead of Dobie. A look of surprise crossed his face when he saw Dobie. He could have easily shot him, but that was no longer his priority. He “shushed” Dobie with a finger to his lips.

Crying hysterically now, Kaylie wriggled off the couch and across the hay bales toward the back of the barn, away from Blount. With his pants still unzipped and drool literally dripping from his mouth, Blount was oblivious to everyone and everything in the world other than his beautiful half-naked prey before him.

When he finally did see JD, he didn’t say a thing. He knew he was a dead man. There was time for just one last giggle.

JD took an extra step forward to keep Kaylie out of the line of fire, then shot Blount three times. Twice in the side, and once through the left ear hole, into his brain.

The ogre was dead.

Still unable to scream – stunned by what had just transpired in front of her – Kaylie tried to catch her breath. She stared in shock at JD.

He ignored her as he stood over Blount's body. "There you go, Blount! You died a happy man! Well, almost happy." And he gave a sickening laugh.

Taking his opportunity to escape, Dobie bolted out of the barn, jumped into *Sabina* and started her up. He was not going anywhere just yet, though. He leaned forward, reached into the glove box and pulled out his Astra A70 9mm semi-automatic. It had been years since he last fired it. Even then, it was just for target practice. He hoped he remembered how to use it. He hoped it still worked. He had heard semi-automatics had a tendency to jam.

Seeing that it was not loaded, he cursed himself for the hundredth time and set about loading the damned thing. He had the gun in one hand and its clip in the other when Major Watson appeared out of nowhere at his passenger window.

Startled, Dobie pointed his gun at him, but Watson only smirked and gestured for him to roll the window down. The man was somewhat familiar from Dobie's earlier talk but he had no idea what he was doing there. *Hopefully he's not with Blount or JD!*

As old as *Sabina* was, she did at least have power windows, not the old hand-crank type that most cars her age had. Dobie lowered the front passenger window about a third of the way down.

“Even if it was loaded,” Watson laughed, “it’d be hard to shoot me with the safety on.”

“Who *are* you?” Dobie asked, confused. “What are you doing *here*?”

“Keep your voice down,” Watson ignored the questions and said, “and give me that!” He deftly grabbed the gun and clip out of Dobie’s hands. “I’ve got this. This is what I do. You stay in the car while I do my thing.”

Well, now I’m screwed, Dobie thought. Aloud, he said, “That’s basically what the cops told me, but here I am, and where are they?”

Still hoping this guy was one of the good guys, Dobie shut off *Sabina*’s engine, and said, “I’m coming with you!”

“To do what, get you and her *both* killed?” Watson shook his head. “Just stay here!”

When Dobie followed after him, anyway, Watson turned, shook his head and asked, “Do you at least know how to use this thing?”

Dobie nodded. Watson made sure it was loaded and cocked before handing it back to him with the barrel pointed downward. “Alright, I guess a little back-up never hurts. Just don’t shoot me in the ass!”

Standing to the side of the open barn door a moment later, Watson whispered and pointed, “I’m going in. You stay here and shoot anyone that comes out before me or the girl.”

Dobie nodded again.

“Oh, and,” Watson grinned, “release the safety first.” He was enjoying himself. He hadn’t seen live-fire action in years.

Seconds after he slipped into the barn, several shots were fired, followed by dead silence.

~

Dobie stood in front of the barn, ready for action, fairly sure this would be his last day on Earth. He didn’t dare guess who might be coming out. He was not the heroic type and he knew it, but never expected his weakness for beautiful women to prove literally fatal.

Watching the barn doors, with his gun locked and loaded, he swallowed hard twice and whispered to himself, “Be good! Don’t miss!”

Situations like this tended to focus a person. Not Dobie. He wondered – if only briefly – how and why in the human evolutionary path it was deemed necessary for a person to swallow hard like he did just now. He also wondered if Kaylie wasn’t so pretty, *Would I still be doing this?* He liked to think he would, but was not entirely sure.

~

Kaylie stuck her head out and looked around. Dobie's heart leaped with joy, and a huge smile came to his face. Kaylie's eyes softened at the sight of him, but she was not smiling. Either way, he was relieved to know that neither of them would be meeting their Maker that day, after all. He waited a second to make sure she was coming out alone and of her own volition.

Finally confident everything was okay, he smiled again and let the gun drop to the ground. Unfortunately, it was still cocked. Both of them ducked for cover when it went off.

Even Watson, battle-hardened veteran that he was, flinched as he made his way out of the barn.

The stray bullet put a hole into Blount's trailer, but the cook was no longer around to complain about it. Looking in that direction, Dobie now saw that this was not the trailer's first bullet hole.

Kaylie tried to run toward him, but her legs refused to work. He met her halfway, and she fell into his arms, clinging to him, crying with relief.

Watson holstered his weapon and limped toward them. Seeing the blood on his shirt, Dobie asked, "You alright?"

"Flesh wound," Watson grimaced and shook his head.

Dobie smiled at the "tough guy" act but said nothing.

County sheriffs arrived after the crisis was over and Dobie had already escorted Kaylie back to *Sabina*. He shook his head at the convenient timing of the three squad cars now speeding down the long driveway, in full sirens and lights, flinging gravel and stirring

up dust along the way. He would not have expected so many deputies to be available, let alone showing up, in such a low-population area. *Must be a slow day.*

Dobie and Kaylie were comfortably inside the car, with the engine off, by the time they were interrogated. The deputies had ordered them out of the car when they arrived, but Dobie insisted that Kaylie needed to remain sitting.

“You can interrogate us all you want,” he said, “while we sit in the car. Or, not at all.” After what he and Kaylie had been through, he was feeling like a bad ass. A little bit like Obi Wan Kenobi, the *Star Wars* character who, through the power of suggestion, convinced the storm troopers to leave him alone.

Call me Dobie Wan! he thought, but was in no mood for his own stupid jokes. With Blount’s maniacal laughter still fresh in his mind, he didn’t want to do anything – not even laugh – if it reminded him of that creep.

He and Kaylie each had their own deputy at their respective windows, asking questions and taking notes. Dobie was glad they were not the same cops he spoke with back at the hotel, but these guys were not messing around. They had positioned one of their cars to block *Sabina* in. He and Kaylie weren’t going anywhere until the cops were finished with them.

Watson had been pulled aside to be interviewed separately. He seemed to be having a hard time convincing them that he was the good guy – hero, even – in all of this. “The bad guy,” he explained with some aggravation, “is dead on the floor of the barn!”

Once Dobie and Kaylie finished their statements and their interrogators had cleared them to leave, Dobie noticed the problems Watson was having. The other deputies noticed, too, and quickly came to the aid of the first. Both reached for their guns as they approached.

“This can’t be good,” Dobie mumbled as he opened his door. “I’ll be right back. Just wanna see what’s going on with our new best friend over there. I don’t even know his name. Do you?”

She didn’t respond.

“He saved our lives, and saved you from a fate worse... I guess JD saved you from that. But we don’t even know his name. And these cops assume he’s guilty.”

Kaylie never said a word, only stared at her feet or nothing at all in front of her. Dobie knew she needed to be checked out at a hospital as soon as possible, but he wanted to check on Watson first.

Heading in Watson’s direction, he spotted his own gun on the ground. He left it where it lay. He did not want to be shot while picking it up by one of these trigger-happy cops.

“So, what seems to be the problem, officers?” he asked as he approached.

“None of your concern, sir,” said one of them. “Official business. Please remove yourself... Has he been cleared to leave?”

“Affirmative,” said another.

“Please evacuate the area, sir. We’ll take it from here.”

Dobie scoffed at how these guys talked. “This man saved my life,” he explained, “and saved Kaylie from a fate worse than death! I’m not gonna stand by while you treat him like a criminal. He has rights. He’s a decorated Army veteran!”

“*Air Force*, Special Ops,” Watson corrected him with a smile. “The Army is for wusses.”

“Air Force veteran!” Dobie corrected himself. “He’s earned the benefit of the doubt!”

“And we thanked him for his service,” another officer replied, “...even if it was only in the Air Force.” Everyone laughed, including Watson. “But, sir, please, you need to clear out. You’re free to go, so...” And he made a “get going” motion with his hand.

“Don’t worry about me, my brother,” Watson said, shaking his head. “These fellas just can’t grasp the concept that a black man might actually be the good guy. Either way, I’ve got friends in high places. I might spend a few hours in jail, but that ain’t no thing.”

“You sure?” Dobie asked. “Anyone I should call?” When Watson shook his head and spit something disagreeable out of his mouth, Dobie continued, “Well, alright, then. Oh, but, hey, while I’ve got you... why have you been following me?”

“Just doing my job.”

“Your job?” Dobie frowned. “Who *are* you?”

“Major Randall Watson, Retired, at your service,” he saluted and released. “Your old boss and mine, Colonel Charonne, asked me to keep an eye on you. Make sure you didn’t turn into some sort of charismatic leader like Fidel Castro or Mahatma Gandhi or what-not.”

“Pfft,” Dobie scoffed. “I appreciate your help, Major, but seriously, you can stop following me. Being a leader, charismatic or otherwise, is not my thing. Other than by example, I’m against leadership. It requires followers, and I despise followers.”

Watson and the deputies stared at him in disbelief. One of them shook his head, placed his hand on the back of Watson’s head, as they do, and guided the Major into the back of the squad car. Another one jumped in behind the wheel and started the engine.

Turning to leave, Dobie noticed that the third officer – the young, tall, skinny blonde guy who had interrogated Kaylie – had wandered off and was now crouched down inspecting the crime scene. He picked up Dobie’s gun in his gloved hand, set the safety, and held it dangling by the end of the barrel so that Dobie could get a good look at it. “This belong to you?”

Dobie gulped, shook his head no, and continued toward his car without a word. They could keep the gun. It wasn’t cheap, but if losing it kept him out of trouble, it was worth it.

The officer dropped it into a zip-lock baggie. The patrol car with Watson in back was already at the top of the driveway and getting back onto the road by the time Dobie was at *Sabina*'s door.

"Oh, hey," Dobie began, remembering Kaylie's phone, "what about Kaylie's phone? One of the cops in town took it earlier. Can we have it back?"

"Don't know anything about that," the man shook his head. "Sorry."

"Well, crap," Dobie said to himself as he watched the second patrol car on its way up the driveway and off the property. "There goes that."

For his own peace of mind, Dobie wanted to see someone taking JD's body away. He didn't need such assurances about Blount. There was no doubt that guy was dead.

They could not wait for the coroner, though. Kaylie needed to get to the hospital.

Life Story

Once Kaylie was cleared to leave the hospital – no real physical damage had been done beyond the expected scrapes and bruises – they got onto the Interstate and drove off into the sunset, literally. Dobie did not have any speaking engagements booked any time soon. Even if he did, he would have canceled them. Their drive could be as long or as short as Kaylie needed, but they agreed to get as far away as possible.

The rain had started up again and it, along with Kaylie’s silence, combined to make him anxious.

The radio was no help. The only station with a reliable signal played nothing but rap. Every song – if it can be called a song when there is no melody – wanted him to hurt someone, especially “The Man,” one way or another. It was not the sort of attitude Dobie encouraged, though he had to admit “The Man” (as an abstract) could do with some slapping around now and then. It was, in fact, pretty much what he now did for a living.

Sabina’s tape deck worked, but he had no tapes. He had CDs but no player. He was not a member of any online music streaming service. Did not even own a smartphone. He was free from the “entertainment-industrial-complex,” as he jokingly referred to it, as well as the surveillance that smartphones provided. Even his car was, by choice, old enough to be free of “hackable” electronics.

“So, what’d the doctors say?” he broke the silence while checking the rearview mirror. “You gonna be okay?” Kaylie nodded “yes” but did not speak. “It must suck sometimes,” he continued, choosing his words carefully, “being so beautiful. I mean, no matter what the situation, everyone just wants to have sex with you.”

He shuddered at the thought of Blount, with his pants down, falling to the ground, dead. There was no way to unsee that.

“Story of my life,” Kaylie smiled and, with some difficulty, tried to laugh.

He was happy she was able to joke about it. He nodded and said, “Nothing bad is ever going to happen to you again, babe. I’ll make sure of that if it’s the last thing I do.” He then purposely used the same words she used last night in bed. “Until you get sick of me, anyway.”

She normally cringed at such sentiments. Guys – including her kidnapper, JD – were forever promising to protect her, and she hated it. She was a big girl, and fully capable of taking care of herself. Normally.

Under these circumstances, however – with Dobie saying it, and calling her “babe” for the first time – it was exactly what she needed to hear. She felt secure now for what felt like the first time in months though it had only been half a day.

“You really need to come up with something better than ‘hey,’ though,” she said with a smile, “for every time you rescue me.”

“Huh?”

“At the hotel when I was in the backseat and you tried to stop them from getting away, you said ‘Hey!’ Then when Blount tried to...” she paused to choke back the tears and smile her way through it, “... with Blount, you stood up and said ‘Hey!’ again. You need to come up with a better line than just ‘hey!’”

He smiled but, unlike her, was not able to laugh about it just yet, if ever. “I’ll work on that,” he promised. As she fell back to sleep, he looked at her, smiled, and said softly, “Things can only get better from here, babe.” Kaylie would have preferred that they drive peacefully into the evening from that point forward, but Dobie kept talking.

“So, what about JD?” he asked. “I mean, I guess Watson killed him, but for my own peace of mind, I’d like some sort of confirmation from you that he’s dead.”

“I don’t know,” she grudgingly opened her eyes. “When I woke up after passing out, all I saw was Watson standing there, um, massaging my feet.”

“What?!”

“Yeah, he was massaging my feet. I mean, like, getting into it, if you know what I mean, until he saw me watching him. Then he stopped and turned away.”

“Okay, that’s creepy, but what about JD? Was he dead or not?”

“I never saw him again. When Watson helped me up, all I saw was Blount. And JD’s pretty hard to miss, even if he’s dead on the floor.”

~

Several hours later, cruising down the Interstate just outside of Tulsa, Dobie saw in his rear-view mirror what looked like Watson's Escalade. The highway was well-lit in brief moments leading up to each off-ramp, allowing glimpses of whoever might be behind them. When he looked again the car was gone, but he mentioned it to Kaylie, anyway, as an excuse to say something. He needed her to help keep him awake while he drove. They hadn't yet gotten as far out of town as they wanted.

"Don't look now," he said, "but I think Watson is following us."

"Really? Why?" she asked sleepily. Turning to look, she said, "I don't see anyone but that big rig."

"He must've dropped back out of sight."

"Why has he been following us, anyway? You never said. Or, did you, but I forgot? I've been out of it."

"They said you were in shock when I brought you to the hospital," he explained. "And no wonder. I was probably in shock myself, and nobody tried to..." He stopped himself.

Shaking her head, she changed the subject. "So, tell me your life story."

"Why, so you can go back to sleep?"

"Yes!" she laughed. "Just kidding. Tell me the interesting parts." She wanted something to take her mind off Blount.

“It’ll be pretty short, then,” he laughed. He didn’t particularly feel like talking about himself at the moment. Everything about him was so trivial compared to what happened to her. But, if that’s what she wanted, that’s what he would do.

“It only just recently got interesting,” he began. “But, as you’ve probably guessed by now, I’ve always been quite the ladies’ man.”

“Really?” she pretended to believe him.

“Yeah,” he played it up, “women just throw themselves at me. It’s embarrassing! But seriously, what I can honestly say about myself is that I’ve always been a truth-teller. It gets me in trouble, but I can’t stop myself!”

“Oh, my gosh! Me, too!”

“It got me fired from my last job, actually, but that’s not a bad thing, given where I am now. Despite it all, this – with you – is much better.”

She smiled warmly and asked, “So, why were you fired?”

“The short version,” Dobie laughed, “is I deserved it. Never really belonged there. The slightly longer version is that I was in the break room at work one day, chatting up a couple of women. Ladies’ man, remember. And, before you, of course.”

“Of course.”

“I mentioned Neanderthals interbreeding with early modern humans. You know, typical break room conversation, right?” She made a face. “Most people talk about the weather, how bad the coffee is, or the latest annoying company policy like people having to

provide their own plasticware and coffee cups. Not me! Naturally, I talked about the love lives of Neanderthals!”

“Naturally,” she played along.

“It was just something I’d read, but then I made a joke saying the boss, Colonel Charonne – because of his prominent brow and big nose – probably had more than his share of Neanderthal blood in him. I didn’t know what I was talking about. Hadn’t done any real research. Everything I know about Neanderthals could fit on a Post-it Note. It was just an excuse to talk about sex. Again, this was before you.”

She nodded and smiled, enjoying this peek into another side of him.

“I didn’t know about the listening devices picking up my every word. Yeah, the place was bugged. The entire company! Charonne was a freak like that. Anyway, he got so mad when he heard me on that tape, he made a rare appearance at the office that week. Just for me! He usually spent the summers holed up in northern Michigan.

“Anyway, he found a copy of my book, read it – speed reader, I guess – and had me fired the next day.”

“Wow.”

Dobie then told the story of his actual firing.

He was called into the HR Director’s office, a sad hovel compared to CEO Charonne’s palatial suite, but still much better than the cubicle Dobie was assigned. Dobie and Director

Kenneth Norwich exchanged the usual pleasantries upon entering the office and taking their respective seats.

“We have quite a list of things to talk about,” Norwich began, glancing at papers in front of him. “For starters, there was that email you sent to Colonel Charonne – The Colonel himself! – suggesting his salary be just \$1 per year until the company showed a profit after his ‘bone-headed’ decision to buy out our biggest competitor. Frankly, I’m surprised he didn’t fire you on the spot!”

“He knows I’m right,” Dobie said confidently. “Giving up his salary is the least he could do.” He had no idea this was an exit interview. He assumed Norwich was – finally – bringing him into his office to pick his brain after all the great ideas he’d emailed to him in the time that he’d been there. “That merger,” Dobie continued, “nearly ruined the company! Anyway, executives shouldn’t get salaries, only a percentage of profits, if any. But, as often happens with clueless egomaniacs like our Dear Leader, Charonne missed the point.”

“And,” Norwich was not finished, “there was that time you walked up and shut a VP’s office door during one of her open-door meetings.”

“We have conference rooms for that!” Dobie exclaimed, now feeling like he was on trial. “Her office has a door. If she had any consideration for those around her – common de-

gency – she would close it so we don’t have to hear her and her suck-ups cackling from half way across the office while we’re stuck in our ‘open office’ cubicles with no walls, no privacy, and no noise abatement! These ‘open workspaces’ as they call them are presented as promoting co-worker communication and collaboration, but they’re actually designed so our wardens can keep an eye on us at all times. And don’t tell me to wear headphones! If I wanted a job requiring headphones, I’d be one of those guys out on the tarmac with the batons guiding jets into the gate!”

Dobie knew “speaking freely” with directors, CEOs and vice presidents was not wise, but he couldn’t take it anymore. He also knew that, in order to tolerate typical bureaucracy, one must tune it out and “go along to get along.” Writing *Another Way*, however, had brought all of his complaints about “the system” to the forefront. He was violating that most basic of Corporate survival edicts: Don’t think too much about your idiot bosses. It’ll drive you crazy.

“And,” Norwich continued, “there was that time you expressed a, shall we say, brutally honest opinion to that same VP. You can’t do that, Dobie.”

“I guess constructive criticism is not allowed?”

“Constructive criticism?!” Norwich was incredulous. “In front of everyone, you called her an insufferable bitch! How is that constructive?”

“Well, now she knows,” Dobie could barely contain his smile. “Don’t you think it’s helpful to know what people think of you, Kenny? Maybe now she’ll adjust her attitude. But, what I actually said was that she was insufferably strident. ‘Bitch’ was implied. I’ve got one of those Word of the Day calendars, Insult Edition.”

“It’s Kenneth, not Kenny.”

“Sorry. Kenneth. Normal, healthy people need to express their feelings on occasion. Otherwise, you turn into a brain-dead corporate toady.” He gestured toward Kenneth as he said it.

“And, we’re done here!” Norwich stood up, insulted, and pointed to the door. “Have a nice life, Dobie... somewhere else. You’re fired.”

“Fired?! What the...” He was not surprised but felt the need to protest, on principle.

With nothing left to lose, he then loudly sang his own version of the pop group ABBA’s *I Have a Dream*. “*Oh, I have a dream... of a world without corporations...*”

“What is this, a musical?” Norwich had given a nervous laugh, wondering if Dobie was having a breakdown right here in front of him.

“More like a Greek tragedy,” Dobie sighed. “Hey, what’s my book doing in your trash?!” He grabbed it before

the security guard rushed in and escorted him out, stage left. “It’s all slimy!”

Norwich smirked.

Immediately after being fired, Dobie went out and got drunk. He was not officially a recovering alcoholic but had promised himself long before that night that he would never do that to himself again. He thought he had grown past it, but apparently not.

At some point during this (hopefully) last bender, he had stepped out for some air. The moon was full, and he was drunk, so, naturally, he barked at the moon. It made sense at the time. “You telling me I can’t speak my mind?!” he yelled at the old gray orb. “I’ll make a *living* speaking my mind!”

He never noticed the woman in the shadows, watching and listening. What he did notice – disturbingly – was a hazy blue humanoid figure in the corner of his eye that disappeared whenever he tried to focus on it. It was like a distant star seen in the corner of the eye that disappeared every time he tried to look directly at it. He assumed he was hallucinating.

All he knew for sure was that he awoke the next morning with a woman from work, Crissie, lying beside him. He had always found her attractive – nice figure, dirty-blonde hair,

gray-green eyes – but never seriously considered asking her out. She was a bit too aggressive, for his taste. Too quick to anger. Plenty of men had no problem with moody women, he knew. She probably had dozens of them on a string waiting their turn with her, but he would not be among them.

Worse still, Crissie was the assistant to one of the executives at work. Sleeping with her would be like sleeping with the enemy. And yet, here they were in bed together.

She had been at the bar that night, making eyes at him. Flirting. He assumed she was drunk. Possibly near-sighted.

He found the 80s pop hit *Simply Irresistible* on the karaoke machine and pressed “play.” Singing directly to Crissie the entire time – “*She’s so fine, there’s no telling where the money went!*” – he wished he had beautiful backup dancers like in the video from back in the day, but oh well.

The details were fuzzy, but the modern-day version of serenading a woman still worked. He took this as a sign of good things to come.

~

“So,” Kaylie now asked, “what’s up with you and cellphones?”

“Oh that,” he chuckled, belatedly realizing he had provided way too much information. She was not interested in hearing about some slut he picked up in a karaoke bar.

“I’m jinxed when it comes to anything electronic, especially computers. I couldn’t watch TV or use a ‘smartphone’ if my life depended on it. Remember how the TV at the diner got all staticky when I showed up, and then you couldn’t get cell service after we left? I was probably the cause of that. Wouldn’t be the first time. My body emits electromagnetic pulses – EMPs – or something.

“Anything electronic I come in contact with or too close to tends to short-circuit. A mechanic friend is the one who suggested I buy old *Sabina* here because she has no electronics. Actually, he suggested the station wagon model, but I said no thanks.

“Not sure what’s going on with the EMPs, exactly, but as long as ATMs still work for me, I guess I’m okay. I’ve become quite the Luddite because of it.”

“The what?”

“Luddite. Someone averse to technology, like Mennonites.” When she gave him a look, he added “... but, without the religion.”

“How can you live?!” she joked... sort of.

“I realize phones are a necessary evil – convenient evil, anyway – but I somehow manage without them. Since abandoning computers and phones, I’ve been much happier. I have to read a newspaper for news. Remember those? But, that reminds me of something Mark Twain said: ‘If you don’t read the newspaper, you’re uninformed. If you *do*, you’re misinformed.’

“And, if I’m not in a hotel, I have to use a pay phone to make a call. Do you know how hard it is to find one of those these days?”

“How does anyone call *you*?”

“I guess they just hope *I* call *them*.”

“You don’t have anyone back home?”

“No one I need to talk to, no,” he frowned. He thought of Crissie and the other woman from the old job, Martha, but neither of them wanted to join him on the road.

“If it’s important,” he continued, “they can leave a message with my answering service. I check in occasionally.”

“Where is ‘home?’”

“Muskegon, Michigan, originally. More recently, a little town called Spring Hill just south of Nashville, Tennessee. But now, the road is my home.”

“Oh, right, the ‘M’ on the ball cap you wore into the diner. ‘M’ for Michigan?”

“‘M’ for Milwaukee, actually, across the lake from Muskegon, but that’s very observant! You’ve got an eye for detail. Ever considered being a spy?”

“I have, actually.”

“Wait,” he played along, “you’re a spy? Are you ‘on the job’ as we speak, keeping tabs on me?”

“No, silly!” She released that beautiful laugh, and he breathed it in. “You don’t look like a writer,” she added. “Can I say that? You know, not the scholarly type.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Maybe I should wear thick-rimmed glasses and a tweed jacket with patches on the elbows?”

They had another good laugh, and both felt their connection to each other growing stronger still. Kaylie wiped away a tear, hoping Dobie didn't notice.

"What about you?" he asked. "What's your story? How'd you end up surrounded by so many creeps? I know you can't choose your parents, but what about JD?"

"My mom's okay... or, she used to be, anyway. As for JD, he scared me at first, but I saw him as a challenge. You know what JD stands for? Juvenile delinquent. That's what his mama started calling him as a kid, and it just stuck. His real name is Theodore, if you can believe that. Anyway, he bought me a drink at the bar. I let him think he was teaching me how to shoot pool. And the rest is history."

After a moment, looking out the window at nothing, she continued sadly, "My Dad was a good dad... until he left. I think Mom drove him crazy. I *guess* that's what happened. I hope it wasn't because of me, but after he left, Mom started drinking again. Heavily. Then she hooked up with JD! Can you believe that? He was dating me and my mom at the same time. Ugh! Makes me want to puke!

"I don't know why that reminded me, and I probably shouldn't even ask, but, um, are you a Christian?"

"No," he was smart enough to tread lightly, "but I agree with a lot of their principals. And, as Gandhi said, 'I like your Christ.' I do think everyone should read the Bible, if for no other reason than their own education. There's some good stuff in there. Same goes

for the *Vedic Hymns*, Buddhist *sutras*, *Book of Mormon*, the Babylonians' *Enuma Elish*, Jung's *Man and His Symbols*, maybe even Scientology's *Way to Happiness*, though I don't necessarily endorse any of the organizations built up around those. Read everything by anyone inspired to help, not control, others.

"Either way," he continued, "watch out for those that only pretend to help. They flatter and convince you you're better than everyone else. You're not. Don't get me wrong, we're all wonderful, but as the old saying goes, 'you are better than no one, and no one is better than you.' Another saying I like is, 'You *are* special... just like everyone else!'

"Some of the worst religions and organizations also tend to have 'esoteric' or 'privileged' texts; in other words, something to hide. Their explanation is that lowly plebes like us are not 'ready' for these higher truths, but I call bullshit! We are all ready for the truth. Sure, the truth hurts sometimes, but we can take it!

"Back to the Bible, though. 'Do unto others as you would have done to you' – the Golden Rule – is the best advice ever given. We could make that, alone, the basis of a worldwide religion and I'd be okay with it."

"What about an afterlife?" she asked, surprised to be having such a conversation so early in their relationship.

"Heck yeah," he replied immediately. "Notice I didn't use the word 'hell?' I don't believe in hell as a permanent place. It's a condition and/or state of mind/spirit. Of course, in the afterlife (and 'be-

fore' life) your state of mind is exponentially more important than it is here in this reality. Heaven, on the other hand, is our 'default' state where we 'go' between lives.

"Anyway, what happens to you – your spirit, your self – after your body dies depends a lot on your own beliefs. I believe we are all immortal, but your spirit (you) go wherever you want to, or at least wherever you've been made to feel you *should* go."

"Do you believe in God?" she asked.

"Yes. God, our Creator – which I define as everyone and everything that ever was and ever will be in all possible states and dimensions, taken as a sentient whole – is inherent in the act of creation itself. In other words, if you want to be close to God, be good and be creative! God is not somewhere 'up there' but in here," he put his hand over his heart; "making sense of things through here," he pointed to his head; "for some of us, probably in here, too," he patted his belly, which made her laugh.

"Actually, our gut biome is vastly underappreciated. Anyway, look inward without losing sight of what's outward to 'find' yourself and reconnect with your Creator."

Wow, he was impressed with himself. *That was some good stuff! Where did that come from?* He had not meant to go off on such a dissertation, it just came out.

Somewhere unseen, Semmy laughed.

Sergeant Bladgett

They both saw the flashing blue lights in their respective side-view mirrors. Dobie quickly pulled over and tried to quell the butterflies in his stomach. Whether or not he had done anything wrong, his heart always started pounding whenever he was pulled over. He assumed this was because of a seriously criminal past life. That, or he had been tortured by the police in a past life. Then again, it might simply be a normal, instinctive animal reaction to being caught from behind.

He then remembered his earlier words to the owners of The Blue Spoon Diner in regard to Blount: “He’ll be dead soon if I have anything to do with it.” Maybe Dobie was now a suspect? There was no telling what Watson – or Colonel Charonne, if the investigation went that far – might have said about Dobie’s part in what happened at the barn.

He closely watched the woman officer in his side-view mirror as she approached the vehicle. She was a brunette or redhead with most of her hair hidden under the cap. Looking to be in her late thirties, she had a wide, unremarkable face and ruddy complexion.

“License and registration, please,” she asked politely.

“Papers, please,” he joked. “I’m pretty sure I wasn’t speeding, officer.”

“Radar says otherwise, sir,” she corrected him.

“Pfft,” Dobie couldn’t help but scoff. She glared at him. “If I was speeding, it was just a couple miles over the limit.”

“I clocked you at 72 in a 65 zone, sir.” When he scoffed again, she added, “The speed limit is the speed limit, sir, not ‘just a couple miles over.’ Then, you failed to use your signal when I pulled you over.”

“Are you kidding me?” Dobie was now incredulous. “I shouldn’t have to signal when the person knows I’m turning, especially when you’re the one pulling me over! And seven miles an hour over? Isn’t safety supposed to be the spirit behind all traffic laws, officer? The roads are clear. There was absolutely nothing unsafe about my speed or how I gently pulled to the side of the road.”

It was her turn to scoff, in this case at his word “gently.”

Dobie was getting riled up, as he often did just prior to one of his speeches. “Are you behind on your quota, ma’am?”

Now she was pissed. He had gone too far. She was not feeling it before, but now she was all in. *Game on!* “Step out of the vehicle, sir!”

“Are you kid...? What for?”

Undoing the holster’s retention strap and putting her hand on the gun while leaving it holstered, she stepped back, assumed the “quick draw” stance, and ordered, “Step out of the vehicle now!”

He opened his door slowly, got out of the car, and raised his hands in the air though she had not asked.

Kaylie remained in her seat, cringing, hoping she was not asked to get out, too.

As Dobie – hands still raised – came toward the officer with her gun now drawn and pointed at him, passersby gawked at the scene playing out along the side of the road. At least it had stopped raining, he thought idly.

“Put your hands against your vehicle,” she ordered, “and spread your legs.”

“Do I look like a terrorist? The police and their political masters are the terrorists in this country.” He knew he was making matters worse but, as he would later tell it, he was proud of himself for “standing up to tyranny.”

Being alone – on the road in the middle of Oklahoma with no partner – the officer was taking no chances. “Hands against the car now!” she ordered. “And open the trunk.”

“Well, which is it?” Dobie gave a snarky smile. “Open the trunk, or hands against the car? I can’t do both. And the keys are in the ignition.”

Pursing her lips and narrowing her eyes, the officer was getting angry. She left him spread-eagled against *Sabina* and went back to its still-open driver door. She holstered her gun, ducked down and reached inside the vehicle to shut off the engine and pull the keys out.

Seeing Kaylie in the passenger seat, looking quite distraught, she asked, “Ma’am, are you okay?”

Kaylie nodded vigorously, put her hands in the air, but said nothing. The light through the windshield from the highway lamps towering overhead was such that the woman's name tag "Sergeant Marsha Bladgett" looked, at a glance, like the last name said "Blount." Kaylie could not control the panic now overtaking her.

"Are you being held against your will, ma'am?" Bladgett asked firmly but quietly.

Kaylie was obviously not alright. She stared at the officer, frozen in fear. The words "held against your will" were now emblazoned upon her psyche. She was not sure how to respond. No words would come. In her mind, she was back at the barn and this Bladgett woman was Blount bent forward and trying to grab her. The officer was doing nothing of the sort, but if Bladgett had looked at all like Blount, Kaylie might have passed out from sheer fright.

"Please answer the question, ma'am," Bladgett began. "Are you being held...?"

"Hey!" Dobie complained loudly from outside, still spread-eagled against the car. "Do you mind?! I'm uncomfortable out here! And it's starting to rain again!"

That broke the spell. Kaylie could not help but crack a bewildered smile. Finding himself in another difficult situation, Dobie could think of nothing better to say than "Hey!" And they had just talked about that.

She gave a little giggle, followed by a full, slightly hysterical laugh. Bladgett wondered if Kaylie was messing with her. Seeing

the look on Bladgett's face, Kaylie then lowered her hands and spoke reassuringly.

"No, ma'am, I'm fine. I just kinda froze up for a second. We're fine. He's just showing his ass... as usual. That's how I know things are back to normal, or getting there. Please don't arrest him. We're just trying to get away. I'll make sure he drives slower from now on."

The officer rolled her eyes, backed out of the vehicle with the keys in hand, walked to the rear of the car, smirked at Dobie, and opened the trunk. Seeing nothing but luggage, books, fold-up chairs and tables, she called him over and asked, "What's in the suitcase?" She was not yet convinced everything was okay.

"What's usually in suitcases?!" Dobie snapped, in no mood for this. It was harassment, plain and simple. "And, I couldn't help but notice you're a County Sheriff. The problem is that this is the Interstate Highway System. You don't have jurisdiction!"

"Are you serious?" Bladgett snorted at him. "I am fully within my jurisdiction, sir. Are you a lawyer?"

"God, no. I hate lawyers." He shook his head but dropped the subject.

"Where're you headed?"

"Southwest," he replied. When she raised a questioning eyebrow, he elaborated. "We have no real destination right now. Just getting away, you know."

“Getting away from what?” she asked, suddenly more interested. Kaylie had used those words, and now Dobie.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean like a ‘getaway,’” he laughed nervously. He wished he could shut up, but his mouth had a mind of its own when under duress.

“What’s up with your girlfriend? Is she alright?”

Dobie’s body language changed completely at the mention of Kaylie. He went from a combative, defensive posture to a much more relaxed stance. “Well,” he began, “if you must know...” He then told her the story of what happened back at the barn.

Kaylie watched through the back window, once the trunk was closed, as Dobie and the officer had a somewhat lengthy conversation. She wondered what they were talking about, and was surprised when the sergeant handed his keys back and wished them safe travels.

Dobie laughed when the sergeant double-tapped the roof of the car. That seemed to be the universal cop signal for “you’re free to go.”

“Well, that was fun,” Kaylie said with a sarcastic smile as they pulled onto the highway. “But you need to...”

“I know, I know,” he said. “I need to just shut the hell up sometimes.”

“She was nice,” Kaylie added, “once you stopped acting a fool.”

“Yeah, well, you know me. Acting a fool is kinda my thing.”

~

Sergeant Bladgett left her lights flashing while parked on the side of the highway, filling out the incident report. She wondered who called in the bogus “stolen vehicle” report precipitating this whole thing. She shook her head. Half of her ‘calls for service’ turned out to be false alarms or not truly worthy of law enforcement involvement.

Will She Be Dancing?

Something Dobie did prior to every speech – “for good luck” – was a moment of quiet meditation. People often mistook it for prayer – and there was not much difference – but it was simply a moment of silence and visualization of whatever he wanted to achieve that day.

No chants were hummed. No words were spoken, not even internally. That was the goal, at least, though he didn’t always have the mental strength to turn off his internal word spigot.

Somewhere in Texas, his “prayer” for the day was for Kaylie to go unmolested. “In preparation for this tour,” he began his latest talk, “I attended one of those ‘all-star speaking tours’ you hear about. Just wanted to see how the pros did it. So, let me go down the checklist. Wireless microphone clipped to my ear and wrapped around in front of my mouth? Check! Obligatory glass of water on a stool nearby? Check! Or, *is* it just water?” There was a smattering of laughter from the audience. “Beautiful assistant?” he pointed at Kaylie. “Check! Huge, adoring crowd...? Okay, three out of four ain’t bad.”

“That’s a C in my class,” a smiling, wire-haired woman seated up front chimed in. “And an F in grammar for saying ‘ain’t!’” Everyone laughed.

“Fair enough,” Dobie smiled, happy to have an engaged audience. They were a lot friendlier, he noticed, with Kaylie there. Hav-

ing a beautiful woman by your side gives you instant respect... and instant competition, he thought. When the 70s song *When You're in Love with a Beautiful Woman* came to mind, he laughed.

“Anyway,” he continued, “when one of those motivational speakers asked if anyone knew why only two percent of people succeed in life while ninety-eight percent do not, I stood up and said, ‘Because your definition of success is completely wrong? Most of us don’t measure success strictly monetarily. Besides, the only true failure is to not even try.’ The speaker was speechless for a minute. I was quite proud of myself.

“He then accused me of being a philosopher, as if that’s a bad thing, and pretended to clear his throat while saying ‘loser’ under his breath. Yes, he actually did that. I wanted to shout back, ‘Oh yeah? *You’re* the loser!’ But, juvenile behavior from either side never helps, so I just sat back down.”

A giggling teenage boy then stood up as if on cue, pointed at Kaylie and asked, “Will she be, uh, dancing and shit? It’s why we came.”

“You said ‘came!’” his already-giggling young friend then howled with laughter.

Dobie involuntarily made fists of his hands and gave the boys a look that he hoped conveyed his willingness to physically hurt them if necessary. He could do without this sort of audience engagement. They were lucky he had lost his gun.

“I passed by a strip club on the way here,” he said as calmly as he could manage. “I suggest you go there.” When they didn’t budge, he shouted, “Now!”

“Okay! Chill, dude!” one of the boys said as they both stood to leave. The other one held up his phone, pointed at it, and said, “Call me!” to Kaylie as they walked away. On their way out, laughing hysterically, Dobie noticed they both wore their pants down below their asses. Shaking his head, he wondered how that ever became a thing. Being “pantsed” was something to be avoided when he was a kid, but these guys did it to themselves.

Kaylie glared at them. This was why she hated to be in front of an audience. Some women liked to be ogled, happily using it to their advantage. Not Kaylie. She merely accepted the inevitable and tried to handle it with as much charm and grace as possible.

Once the punks were gone, she turned away from the crowd to hide the tears that had come to her eyes.

“You okay?” Dobie asked softly. “Wanna go up to the room?”

She shook her head, no. She was going to power through this. “I am never going to be alone in a hotel room again,” she said with a forced smile, hoping the microphone didn’t pick that up.

“Remind me to buy another gun,” said Dobie, hoping the microphone *did* pick that up.

Watson was just outside the door waiting to pay the punks as they exited the conference room. He was tired of this operation. All he wanted was to go back home to his golfing, fishing and chasing tail. He hated tormenting Kaylie but was under orders, and he had never disobeyed an order. He hoped she would hurry up and tell Dobie she was done, could not go on, had to quit the tour, make him take her somewhere far away and, most of all, stop talking politics.

Reporting their vehicle as stolen had had no effect. He was hoping that being harassed by an authority figure – Bladgett – so soon after Kaylie’s kidnapping would have pushed them – Kaylie, at least – over the edge. No such luck.

They were persistent. He had to give them that.

He was in his hotel room that night, asleep, when his cellphone rang. His latest girlfriend – Chartreuse, or something, he could never remember – was awake and watching a sci-fi flick.

He had dumped Audrey after Taylorville. Standard operating procedure.

Seeing the name “Charonne” pop up on his phone, Chartreuse – or whatever – muted the TV and roused Watson as per his orders.

“Nothing you’ve done is working!” the Colonel’s deep voice boomed through the phone. He wasted no time with pleasantries. He was in no mood. Like a dog on a bone, he had been thinking of Dobie to the point of obsession. “Pokorny’s still out there selling

that tripe and it needs to stop. Now! I want him gone! No more messing around. You know what I'm saying?"

"What!?" Watson knew exactly what he was saying. Charonne was putting out a hit on Dobie. Watson was surprised by the sudden urgency and reluctant to act upon it. He always tried to keep murder as a last resort. "He's just a guy driving around, talking to people. Harmless. Trust me, he can't even handle a gun."

"You're not growing fond of him, are you?"

Watson stood up and staggered sleepily out of the bedroom and into the hotel's little kitchenette. Shutting the bedroom door behind him, he opened the fridge and searched for a beer. "When one door closes, another one opens!" he said softly to himself. With a laugh, forgetting who was on the phone with him, he added, "I've been hanging around Pokorny too long."

"What's that?" Charonne asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking out loud. Dobie's just another smart-ass know-it-all, but his girlfriend, Kaylie. Wow. Have you seen her? That is one fine piece of ass!" Watson thought better of her than that, but such crudeness was expected when talking about women with a fellow old soldier.

"So, you and Pokorny are on a first-name basis now?" the Colonel continued. "You should've eliminated him back at the barn. Let the mom or boyfriend take the fall like you planned. What happened there, anyway?"

“Pokorny didn’t run scared like we thought he would,” Watson spoke with a reluctant respect for Dobie but took care to not use his first name. “Back at the diner, he actually fought JD. Then, at the barn, he tried to be the hero. You can’t just shoot someone like that.”

“Sure, you can,” said Charonne. “You and I have done exactly that. Remember Iraq? You shot that *Hajji* in front of his wife and kid then ended up with the wife?”

“I was interrogating that woman,” Watson began angrily before calming himself, “when her husband shows up and starts shooting. Luckily, those guys can’t shoot for shit. I nailed him with my first shot, right between the eyes!” He smiled now at the memory.

“If it was me,” Charonne returned to the present, “I’d fuck that bitch – Kaylie, is it? – right in front of Pokorny, *then* kill him. You have to put people in their place. People *like* to be put in their place. Especially bitches, and I’m not talking about Kaylie. Ha!” He laughed at his own joke. “You still haven’t sent me a picture of her.”

Watson shook his head. He *had* killed people, but only in defense of himself and others, and only during sanctioned ops. He always assumed Charonne – now the head of a thriving business – had successfully re-entered society as an upstanding member. Apparently not.

Charonne’s ideas on what to do with Kaylie sounded pretty good, though.

When Watson did not respond immediately, Charonne barked, “You still there, Major?”

“Still here, sir,” Watson replied without the usual forced military enthusiasm.

“You hearing me? Just do it!”

“No need, sir.”

“I’ll tell you what is needed, Major!” the Colonel used his “command” voice on his junior officer. When Watson again failed to respond immediately, Charonne changed tack, opting for a more conversational tone.

“If you could go back in time, wouldn’t you kill Hitler, Stalin or Chairman Mao before they got too powerful? Of course, you would. Anyone would. That’s all we’re doing. But, make no mistake, Major, either you take Pokorny out or I send in someone else to do the job. And they might take *you* out in the process. Accidentally, of course. You know how that goes. Your call.”

Watson hung up knowing he had no choice but to get rid of Dobie. Sure, he could kill Charonne – problem solved, and good riddance – but the final half of the agreed sum had not yet been paid. And Watson needed that money, so that was not an option.

~

After the punks with their pants falling down were gone, Dobie gave a quick look back at Kaylie, nodded and smiled, and launched into another favorite speech.

“Anyway, there was a corporate takeover of Western governments a hundred years ago or so. Wars are now fought over natural resources under the guise of patriotism and protecting our freedom. No offense to the soldiers – I have nothing but respect for what they have been through, dealing with their own military, most of all – but they’re just pawns. The smarter ones know that, but the people running the wars are trampling our freedom and civil rights for corporate profits and as an excuse to sell weapons.

“They attack any country that won’t play along. The mainstream media does its part by manipulating its readers and viewers – manufacturing consent, as they say – into supporting military conflict against the latest designated bogeyman, so-designated for refusing to be anyone’s bitch. Pardon my language. The big banks finance both sides, thereby guaranteeing profit for themselves and their defense industry cronies no matter what the outcome. As World War I General Smedley Butler said, ‘War is a racket.’ Yes, people in the know have been warning us for a hundred years, but we never learn.”

Still following his credo of trying not to piss people off too much, left unsaid was his opinion that only the gullible believed these never-ending wars were legitimate.

~

Ever since the kidnapping at Blount’s barn, JD and Claire had been out looking for Kaylie and Dobie. At a truck stop in Oklahoma – where her daughter and that “know-it-all city slicker” had coinciden-

tally stopped the day before – Claire asked, “What are we gonna do when we find them?”

The whole thing was her idea, but now in JD’s presence she allowed him to believe *he* was in charge. During the kidnapping when she called him, her intent was to remove him from the scene long enough for the local sheriffs to get there.

The idea behind the abduction was to get Kaylie away from Dobbie. She assumed this would scare him off. Once the plan was in motion, however, she worried JD might do something stupid.

She was not worried about Blount. She honestly thought her daughter could handle the old cook on her own. She had no idea Kaylie would be bound and gagged.

And now, after getting the full story from JD, she hated herself for what she had done. *At least Blount’s dead now*, she tried to console herself.

“You let me worry about the details,” JD snapped at her now as they drove. He hated it when bitches questioned his actions. That was one of the first things he took care of – usually with a hard slap across the face – when first hooking up with a woman.

He never did that to Claire, though. She was different. Like no other woman before, she had managed to get under his skin. She had a way of telling him what to do, and he would do it... and like it. He would never tell her or anyone else that, of course.

Seeing the worried look now on her face, he added, “Don’t worry, babe, I ain’t gonna hurt her.” The same could not be said of

his intentions for Dobie. *Nobody* steals, or even *tries* to steal, one of his women and gets away with it, not even his now-dead best friend, Blount. JD also held Dobie responsible for ruining the mother-daughter thing he had going. Dobie must suffer the consequences for that, if nothing else.

Leaving

Present day, in Taos

Still catching his breath after climbing the hotel stairs, and surprised to find Kaylie asleep, Dobie croaked softly, “Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said as she rolled onto her back and smiled sleepily. She closed her eyes again only after verifying it was Dobie, and only Dobie, in the room. “Why?”

He shook his head. After the kidnapping, she had said she would never be alone in a hotel room again. And yet, here she was.

“I just ran into that Watson guy,” he began cautiously. She opened her eyes. He scoffed and continued, “When he’s not saving our lives, he’s being a complete dick. He led me to believe you two had sex. What a...”

“Yeah, no big deal,” she said with a yawn.

“Wh... what?!” he struggled to get the words out. “Are you kidding me?! You have sex with him, and it’s no big deal?! I thought you and I... I thought we...” The vice grip he once had on his feelings was now suddenly gone. His confidence, shattered.

He had tried to keep things cool with her up to that point in their relationship. He knew beautiful women had no respect for guys who fell in love too easily, but his self-control was now slipping.

“I should’ve known you were too good to be true!” he snapped, angrier at himself than anyone else. “That’s how it goes, I guess, when you fall...” He stopped himself.

She finished his sentence for him “... in love?”

Looking at her evenly, he said, “Until you had sex...”

“We didn’t, I swear! He *wanted to*,” she giggled, “but we didn’t. *That’s* what was no big deal. I got rid of him then took a shower. I meant to go back down and be with you on stage, but I guess I lay down for a nap and slept longer than I meant to.”

She failed to mention how Watson had grabbed and kissed her once they were in the room together. She knew Dobie would not handle that as well as she had. Some women would scream “sexual assault,” but that was not her style. Growing up with her looks and taught by her mother to embrace and make the most of that beauty, Kaylie just rolled with it. A kiss was no big deal unless the guy got too aggressive too soon, or was a flat-out creep like Blount.

Half of her relationships, in fact, had begun with a grab and a kiss.

“But you chased after him earlier,” Dobie persisted. “What was *that* all about?”

“I don’t know, to tell you the truth. Whatever it was, it passed.” She didn’t want to say she had fallen so hard for Dobie that Watson never stood a chance. Information like that goes straight to a guy’s head. She was definitely not going to tell him what a good kisser Watson was.

“What did you say to him that made him smile?” Dobie persisted.

“I don’t remember saying anything...”

“At the back of the crowd during my talk,” he was getting angrier. “At the door before you went into that building together. What did you say to him?!”

“I don’t remember! Okay? Can I go now, officer!?”

After a few calming breaths, Dobie said, “Sorry.”

“It’s alright,” the smile quickly returned to her face. “I forgive you. Hey, that was our first fight!”

“Yeah,” he grumbled, “I guess so.”

“It is weird, though, huh, how I can’t remember what happened?”

He nodded. “We need to figure that out.” He wanted to believe her but was not entirely convinced she had not cheated on him.

“Are we good?” she asked, with an exaggerated pout.

Her loyalty was a big deal for Dobie. With almost any other woman, it would not have been. With her, for some reason, she had to be “all in” or he was gone. He cared too much to be ambivalent about it.

Once he did allow himself a grin, eventually, he said with a devilish twinkle in his eye, “You and I should probably, uh, go ahead and, uh, do what Watson *wanted* to do. You think?”

“Probably should,” she sat up, smiling, and kissed him. And, they spent the better part of an hour making up.

~

Kaylie awoke first. Dobie was asleep next to her but throwing punches in the air. She carefully tapped his shoulder. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Opening his eyes and gathering his bearings, he focused on her. It was all he could do for a moment. He wanted to soak her in, she was so amazing. And, after a round of good old make-up sex, there was no doubt that she was his.

How did I ever get so lucky?

A powerful calm rose within him at that last thought. After everything they had been through, together and separately – taking his show on the road, meeting each other, helping her through the ordeal at Blount’s place – it had taken them and their relationship to new heights. It had also taken him to the edge. Followed by the trauma of almost losing her – twice now – Dobie was *over* the edge.

Something had to change. He was finished with writing and talking about the world’s problems. It was time to *do* something. His hero Gandhi might not have approved of what he had in mind, but oh well.

Returning his gaze, Kaylie said, “You’re scaring me, Dobe. What are you thinking?” She saw a simultaneous coldness, warmth and deep resolve in him that she had not seen on a man’s face since her father had left her and her mom.

“You’ll see,” he said melodramatically before gazing out the window and off into the distance.

“I can always tell you’re serious,” she teased, “when you look off into the distance like that!”

He smiled despite himself. She could always do that to him.

Before he did anything drastic, however, he needed to get her somewhere safe. He hated to admit it, but Watson was right. They needed to leave the country, and not just because of Colonel Charonne. He was worried about Kaylie’s old boyfriend, JD, too. Whatever happened to him?

Dobie asked Kaylie where she would live if she could live anywhere in the world. His income had been steadily increasing to the point where he could now afford to be one of those semi-retired “expatriated Americans” that Jimmy Buffett sang about. For a while, at least, until his finances forced him out of retirement.

“You keep asking and saying things no one has ever said before!” she smiled warmly. “I don’t know. Saint Louis, maybe? I went there with my parents as a kid...”

“Saint Louis?! No, somewhere outside the U.S.”

“Why?” she lowered her voice. “Did you kill someone?”

“Not yet. I just gotta leave the country for a while, and I want you with me. Just choose, please?”

“Well, if I had to choose, I’d say the Azores.”

“The Azores?” he laughed, trying to remember where that was. “Really? Not the Bahamas or French Riviera? Your first choice is

Saint Louis. Failing that, it's the Azores? Those are the islands off the coast of Portugal, right?"

"Yeah, my father's side of the family is from there. I've seen pictures. It's beautiful. And I like how no one thinks to go there. It's like a secret hideaway kinda place."

Dobie liked the sound of that. Another benefit of leaving the country, he hoped, was that it should rid him of that Semmy character. There was just something so deeply, disturbingly familiar about that little blue guy. More importantly, Dobie was still unsure what may or may not have transpired between Kaylie and Watson. He wanted to put some distance between them. Finally, he hoped it would put them beyond the Colonel's reach. Out of sight, out of mind, at least.

"The Azores it is, then!" he said, making a mental note to update his will to leave everything to Kaylie in case the next thing he had in mind went badly.

~

Kaylie never talked about her father, but the man had called a few months prior to say he had immigrated to the Azores. He apologized for abandoning her but claimed he had no choice.

When he asked her to join him there, she hung up. *How dare you abandon us*, she thought, *only to call – how many years later? – wanting a reunion?!*

After everything that had happened recently, however – including her own mother apparently complicit in her kidnapping – reuniting with her estranged father didn't sound so bad. The only problem was that she had slipped up and told her mom about the call. She never said which island in the Azores, but it was a relatively small chain. If Kaylie did join her father there, anyone who went looking would not have much trouble finding her.

JD was listening in on the conversation, and he suggested that Claire have Kaylie install a location-sharing app on her phone. Luckily, Kaylie declined.

~

Dobie was no more than a blip, if that, on any sane person's radar. Unfortunately, Colonel Charonne was a certifiable psychopath. At his therapist's suggestion at one point, she had him – “just for fun” – take a psychopathy test. The lower the score the better, but Charonne scored 33 out of 40 and was quite proud of it. His therapist was understandably concerned, but Charonne told her – and himself – that the entire concept of psychopathy was created by “namby-pamby losers” like her and her colleagues looking for ways to “take their betters down a peg or two.”

He was not insane to the point of killing random people on the street – as far as anyone knew – though it had crossed his mind. One ideation he did act upon was to have his therapist's office ransacked, and all its computers and entire filing cabinets carted away after he

stopped seeing her. Once his own files – paper and electronic – were destroyed, he went through every other file looking for ammunition against possible enemies who had the misfortune of being one of her patients. He was pleasantly surprised to find a file on Pokorny.

Long before taking the “psycho test,” Charonne had named his company SaynCorp, pronounced “sane corp.” He now laughed at the irony. To those who asked about the derivation of his company name – and he was surprised how often it came up – he gave the usual spiel about honoring his grandparents from Rouen, north of Paris, along the Seine. He didn’t honestly care about his grandparents but knew it looked good to have such a “deep respect” for his lineage.

In addition to pedigree and abject ruthlessness, another key to Charonne’s success was good old espionage, both electronic and human. He had informants strategically placed within government agencies, NGOs, and various companies throughout multiple industries.

One of those informants was his own niece, Therese Bourges, working at a low-level deep in the bowels of the U.S. State Department. She was hard at work one day removing staples from sheets of paper, only to replace them with paperclips in preparation for digital scanning.

It was an excruciatingly boring task, but preferable to the sexual favors her uncle demanded whenever he was in town. That was the deal she made in exchange for using Charonne’s contacts to land this

“sweet gig” at the State Department. More recently – with the promise of a thousand-dollar bonus for each substantial lead – she setup an alert on her computer to tell her when the names Dobromir Pokorny and/or Kaylie Daniels showed up in any requests for passports or visas. When both names appeared, along with a stated destination of Macao, Therese snapped a photo and texted it to “the old perv,” Charonne.

Based on this new information, Charonne then sent Therese’s younger brother, Adam, to Macao to find Pokorny and take care of “that thorn in my side once and for all.” His nephew was trying to establish a career for himself, and Charonne was only too happy to help the kid become a man. A hit man, in this case. His nephew consoled himself with the thought that at least he didn’t have to have sex with his uncle. He hoped.

In addition to killing Dobie, the kid’s orders were to leave Kaylie unharmed and bring her back to Charonne. Even Adam, not the brightest bulb, knew what Charonne meant by “I’d like to meet her.”

~

After New Mexico, Dobie and Kaylie went north to Colorado for a couple more appearances before leaving the country. These went well, blissfully uneventful, and they parked *Sabina* in long-term parking at Denver International Airport. As Dobie said a prayer that nothing should happen to her in his absence, he remembered the many conspiracy theories regarding this particular airport.

His first reminder was the 32-foot “demonic” red-eyed horse statue out front greeting visitors. And then there were those “apocalyptic murals” on the walls, though he personally never saw any. Several other items supposedly begged for a conspiracy theory of their own, but Dobie couldn’t remember the details now. The “clincher” was the Masonic symbol adorning a time capsule buried onsite during its opening ceremony. He did not particularly believe these theories – he tried to limit his hypotheses to provable conspiracy facts – but had to admit the demonic horse was strange.

Either way, he tried not to think about it as he and Kaylie boarded their flight from Denver to Boston to Angra do Heroísmo on the island of Terceira, Azores. Both of them were completely exhausted from jet lag and lack of sleep by the time they hailed a cab in Angra.

It was approximately 2 AM local time when they arrived at their hotel. They each grabbed their own luggage as it was handed to them by the friendly, dark-haired middle-aged cabbie. They paid their fare plus tip and wheeled their suitcases behind them to the check-in desk.

Dobie tried to speak Portuguese to the young woman behind the counter. “*Obrigado, por favor,*” he struggled. “*Quarto para Dobromir Pokorny?*”

With a laugh, she said, “It’s okay, Mr. Pokorny, we speak English here.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“Here are your keys. Upstairs. Room 28.”

“Key cards!” Dobie exclaimed, surprised.

“Yes,” she said with a smile, “on top of Old World charm, we have all the modern conveniences, too. It is the best of both worlds!”

“Don’t mind him,” Kaylie apologized. “He thinks everyone outside of large cities is a backwoods hillbilly.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but he was too tired to argue. The woman mouthed the words ‘backwoods hillbilly’ but continued unfazed. “Your room is on the second floor, all the way in back. Enjoy your stay!”

Dobie wondered if ‘second floor’ in the Azores meant the third floor everywhere else. He had heard of some countries doing that. Ever since Taylorville, he had promised himself to never stay on the third floor of any hotel ever again. It was silly and superstitious, he knew, but he was not going to tempt fate.

They now boarded the elevator and pressed “2.” At the last door at the end of the hall, the key worked – which was all that mattered – and they stumbled into their room.

He almost joked about this being the wrong room and having someone walk in on them while they slept but stopped himself. He was not quite that stupid, but did joke how the last time they stumbled into a room together there was a lot of heavy breathing.

“Go back down and take the stairs up if you want heavy breathing,” Kaylie suggested with a smile, “but I’m going straight to bed... to sleep.”

~

Kaylie arose with the sun while Dobie slept in. Stepping out onto the balcony and breathing in the cool beachfront air, she was refreshed as the laurel trees, swaying in the breeze, reached up from below and caressed the railing in front of her. She used to think she never wanted to leave the United States but now she felt reborn – liberated, even – with an overpowering urge to go out and explore this strange new land. She wondered if being here, physically reconnecting with her ancestral roots, had anything to do with that. Then she laughed and said to herself, “I’ve been hanging out with Dobie too long.”

She considered waking him and having him accompany her, but he had looked so peaceful in bed, she let him sleep. An hour or so had passed by the time she stopped at the front desk and asked the young man on duty to please let her “husband” know that she was only stepping out for a bit, should he come looking for her.

The young man – Eduardo, according to his name tag – nodded and said with a big smile as he looked her up and down, “Or, you and I can shower together in one of the empty rooms, but tell your husband that you only went for a walk!” He then winked at her.

She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing but, not wanting to send the wrong message, gasped, “I beg your pardon?!”

Seeing her reaction, he realized he had misjudged her. This approach almost always worked on the female American tourists. Not this one.

“No, no,” he back-pedaled, “I meant to say I hope to ensure that everything is ready for your shower... or whatever you might need!”

“Uh huh. That’s very kind of you, but I’ve already taken a shower, thanks.” With a playful look in her eye, she then added seductively, “In the shower, naked and all soapy...? I waited for a strong, handsome man like you to bust through the door... but you missed your chance. Sorry!”

Eduardo was left speechless and soaking in her perfect female form as she walked out the door.

She shook her head in disbelief at what she had done. It was so unlike her.

~

Adam Bourges was at an outside table at the café across from the hotel. With an unfiltered French cigarette in one hand and a demitasse of unfiltered coffee in the other, he was pretending to be French. Being French-Canadian and a Francophile since childhood, he dreamed of one day dropping the “-Canadian” from his nationality and moving to the “mother country” of France. He knew the Azores

were not French, but this was the closest he had ever come and he could not wait to play the part.

As he set down his cup to hold the local Portuguese-language paper in front of him, he pretended to read it while waiting for Dobie or Kaylie to show their faces.

He was going to enjoy this hit. When Pokorny wrote Macao as the destination on his passport paperwork, the misdirection cost Bourges time and money that might have otherwise been spent in his beloved France.

As soon as this job was done, he would text “mission accomplished” to his uncle, verify payment into a Maltese bank account setup just prior, and catch the next flight to his namesake town of Bourges or Paris or the French Riviera. He hadn’t decided yet.

~

From Watson’s third-floor window – diagonal to both the café and the Americans’ hotel – he sneaked a peek through the sights of his H&K G28 rifle. Not even Charonne knew he had followed Dobie across the Atlantic. He now had a clear shot at Bourges... or Pokorny, should the latter come out.

~

Kaylie smiled when she saw the quaint café and its round little umbrella tables. When she spotted Bourges, however, she got a seriously creepy vibe. She had no idea who he was, but her “spider

sense” was still on high alert. It was like Blount all over again, only younger, and it sent her in the opposite direction.

Bourges had meant to pretend not to notice her, but could not help himself, just for a second. It was okay, he thought. It would be suspicious *not* to notice her.

And now, as Kaylie hurried off in the opposite direction, he was reminded of Charonne’s one-liner: “I hate to see you go but *love* to watch you leave!”

At least Pokorny had a piece of that before he died, he thought. Most guys never get anything close to that. And that was all the proof Bourges needed in order to convince himself that Pokorny must die. He was not the type to require much justification for his actions. Like the Colonel, all the excuse he needed was “because I want to.”

When Kaylie looked back over her shoulder, feeling the weight of his stare, Bourges quickly and quite clumsily returned his attention to the newspaper that he could read.

~

“Rookie,” Watson scoffed and shook his head as he watched it all from above. “Not much of a hit man, are you?”

The world was full of hit men and Watson knew several of them. This guy was not familiar. Whoever he was, he was clearly new to the trade. A good hit man makes himself and his gaze invisible. He

masters the art of watching his prey without his quarry feeling watched.

Watson has no idea Bourges and Charonne were nephew and uncle. He had a good eye for faces and family resemblance but, beyond their pale skin and wavy head of hair, there was not much similarity between the two men.

The Azores

Armando Lopes was behind the counter tending to his customers as he did every day but Mondays, twelve hours a day since emigrating from the U.S. A well-tanned man of average height and thick gray hair, his poker buddies called him Wrong Way Lopes for emigrating from the United States to the Azores instead of the more typical other way around. It was all in good fun. Everyone knew him as a good man, even if he was from the “wrong side of the pond.”

He had a habit of regularly glancing out the window – an instinct, he supposed – to ensure that no one sneaked up on him. It was during one of these glances that he saw something that made him smile. On the other side of the plate-glass window, a beautiful young woman was smiling to herself and checking out his wares.

It had been years, and she was all grown up now, but he could never forget that face, that smile.

He apologized to his customers, recruited a young assistant to cover for him, and hurried out the door. He had to find out for sure. Had to move fast, too, before she moved on to the neighboring shop.

“Excuse me, miss?!” he said in English as he came out the door.

She turned and smiled uncertainly. Still recovering from jet lag – and that hotel desk clerk – she lost her balance, mid-turn. Reaching out to help steady her was a man she had until recently assumed

was dead. Standing before her, beaming, was Arnold Daniels, her father.

“D... Dad?” she said as soon as her mouth allowed her to speak.

“Kaylie! It is you! I can’t believe it! Of all the gift shops in all the world, and you walk past mine!”

“You sent me a postcard,” she frowned, not getting the *Casablanca* reference until after she had already replied. She hated when she did that.

She then realized that mentioning her dad’s whereabouts to her mom was no big deal, after all. Living together as she and her mom did, surely Claire had at some point spotted the postcard on the kitchen table.

“Everyone...” her dad turned to introduce her to everyone, but there were only strangers passing by. He felt silly but never stopped smiling, ear to ear, as he grabbed Kaylie into a bear hug and spun her around. His back was not as strong as it used to be, though, so he quickly set her down. If not for that, he might have never let go.

She felt an unexpected warmth toward him, too. Her long-held bitterness magically evaporated. She even surprised herself by taking his hand.

~

Dobie had been asleep in the hotel room this whole time, dreaming of the alien, Semmy. He wished he would stop, but this dream started with Dobie walking into a theater halfway through a movie.

Kaylie was there with popcorn, already in her seat, waving him over. Before he could get to her – it was slow-going due to the knee-deep sewer mud – Semmy grabbed and pulled her into the movie screen with him, where she disappeared.

At the exact moment that Kaylie took her father's hand, Dobie awoke with a start, realizing she was not with him. He jumped out of bed and, still in his underwear, checked every room looking for her, including the closets. She was nowhere to be found.

Maybe this is one of those dreams, it occurred to him, where I go out in public in nothing but my underwear. He had to make sure, so he went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face.

“Whoop!” he shouted involuntarily. “They keep their water *cold* here in the Azores!” He was awake.

He tried calling Kaylie's new cellphone from the room phone, but it was long distance and required some sort of code. The canned operator's voice was in Portuguese, and he had no patience for technical difficulties in a foreign language first thing in the morning.

He donned the same pants, socks and shoes he arrived in, but did at least find a fresh shirt. Sliding the key card into his breast pocket, he let the door close behind him as he entered the hallway.

He then remembered their room had a balcony, so he turned around, re-entered, and hurried toward the sliding balcony door, calling Kaylie's name all the while.

Finding it locked, he doubted she would be out there. But maybe that was the problem? She locked herself out. Women tend to do that.

He couldn't see the entire balcony from inside, so he slid the door open, stepped out into the cool air, and looked around. She was not there, and he felt like an idiot for even looking.

Less than a minute later, he was downstairs in the hotel lobby, forcing a smile at the young man, Eduardo, now on duty at the front desk. "Have you seen a young woman?" Dobie asked. "Beautiful, white, American, dark brown hair, speaks English? Do *you* speak English?"

With unsmiling eyes, Eduardo slowly looked up from his phone and shook his head, no. Dobie didn't know if that meant he spoke no English or had not seen Kaylie. *Not as friendly as that overnight girl*, he thought.

Of course, Dobie had been quite courteous with that one, and Kaylie was with him, which always put him on his best behavior. He thought he might ask about the hotel's conference room rates while he was down there, but Eduardo's attitude left him disinclined to say more than was absolutely necessary.

Eduardo clearly felt the same way.

Dobie then realized how rude he was being. Caught up in his own anxiety to find Kaylie, he first assumed the man spoke English though this was not technically an English-speaking country. Then

he asked in a snotty tone whether the man even knew *how* to speak English.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m being an ugly American. We’re not all like this.”

Idly thumbing through a magazine, Eduardo never looked up.

Dobie shook his head and resumed his search. Not finding her anywhere in the hotel lobby, he finally shrugged and went out the front door.

My next book should be called “Finding Kaylie.”

From behind the counter, Eduardo looked up, happy to see that Dobie was leaving. He had a clear view of the café across the street and was about to get quite a show.

~

Young Bourges had been trying to get the attention of an attractive young woman at a nearby table and so did not immediately notice Dobie. When he did glance over to see Pokorny, he got so excited that he spilled coffee all over his newspaper.

His frantic reaction to the spill snapped Watson out of his stake-out-induced stupor. At this distance, looking down upon Bourges at the café, despite his chosen rifle’s accuracy failings compared to others, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

He almost felt guilty as he pointed his rifle at the target. Almost, until Bourges stood up and reached into his coat pocket.

~

Kaylie and Armando strolled hand-in-hand down the sidewalk on their way to the hotel to meet Dobie. She didn't know how the two men might react to each other. *Badly, probably*, she thought, but she was confident she could handle it.

When they happened upon one of her dad's poker buddies coming toward them, the man smiled at the sight of Lopes out and about with a beautiful young lady. Armando introduced her in English as his long-lost daughter. The man laughed, gave him a friendly punch in the arm, and said in Portuguese, "That makes more sense, Armando!"

"What is that supposed to mean?" her dad joked back, also in Portuguese.

"A pleasure to meet you," said Kaylie.

"The pleasure is all mine, young lady!" the man replied, then continued on his way.

Once he was out of earshot, Kaylie turned to her father and asked, "Did that man just call you Armando?"

"Yeah, I had to change my name when I got here," Lopes gave a sheepish smile. "Long story."

It always is with you, she thought, but immediately dropped it. *No need for that.*

"I'll tell you all about it someday," he continued, "but people here know me as Armando Lopes. You can still call me 'Dad.'"

"Okay, Armando!" she teased. "How do you say 'dad' in Portuguese?"

“*Papai.*”

“Okay, *papai,*” she said with a happy smile.

~

Watson considered letting Bourges go ahead and just kill Dobie. Although he never told Charonne that he was in the Azores, he was sure his boss would be cool with Pokorny dead, no matter who pulled the trigger.

Watson then thought there were probably plenty of people that would be cool with Dobie dead. The guy had no concept of leaving well enough alone. Always stirring up trouble. Not a bad guy, really, just so completely wrong about so many things.

On the other hand, Watson would benefit from Dobie’s death. Should the latter accidentally take, say, a bullet to the head, Kaylie would be vulnerable to Watson swooping in and lending a sympathetic shoulder for her to cry on. A good soldier always remembers successful tactics, and that had worked before.

Charonne was partly correct about that woman in Iraq whose husband he had killed. Watson simply didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of being right. Watson *had* shacked up with her after shooting the husband, but it was not premeditated, merely opportunistic.

Watson saw Kaylie now coming down the sidewalk toward him, arm-in-arm with a man he had never laid eyes on before. He felt a pang of jealousy, then grabbed the binoculars. Now seeing a clear

resemblance between the two of them, he realized he must be her father. An uncle, at the very least. Whoever he was, both of them were walking straight into Bourges's line of fire.

Watson was okay with the old man being shot. If he was her father, he would be Watson's primary competition for providing that sympathetic shoulder to Kaylie.

~

As Dobie crossed the mostly empty cobblestone street toward the café, he was oblivious to Kaylie behind him, Watson above him, and Bourges lying in wait directly in front of him. When he saw Charonne's eager young nephew, he thought nothing of him. He would later chastise himself for being so unguarded, but even *he* was not paranoid enough to jump to the conclusion that anyone there wanted to kill him.

~

Watson had to choose between letting Bourges kill Dobie – with the very real chance of Kaylie being hit in the crossfire – or killing Bourges himself to protect them all. *Then again*, he thought as he lined up his shot, *two, maybe three shots could kill Pokorny and Bourges before anyone knew what happened.*

A street-sweeper then came around the corner, and Watson smiled. Its noise would provide perfect cover for any number of silenced shots he might fire.

With Bourges still in his sights, he again considered letting him kill Dobie. When the assassin stood up from the table and reached into his coat pocket, however, Watson's training kicked in. Everything for the next few seconds was purely muscle memory.

There was an active shooter in front of him. No time to think. As programmed, he fired off two quick muffled bursts.

Bourges never knew what hit him. He would never make it to his beloved France.

A bullet whizzed past Dobie's head, though he could not tell from which direction. He dropped to the ground in the middle of the street, not sure what was happening. All he knew was that the man thirty yards away at the outside table had stood up with a gun in his hand.

There was a gunshot. Just one, from what he heard. The man's gun then dropped from his grasp just as Dobie fell to the ground.

Why would someone here want to kill me? he wondered. He had only just arrived. Hotel front desk clerk aside, he had not had time to piss anyone off, at least not to the point of wanting him dead.

Confused, not knowing where the shot came from, Dobie was at least smart enough to know he was a sitting duck there in the street. He picked himself up and ran back to the hotel. There, he found Kaylie and her new older gentleman friend.

She was so happy to see him, she had tears in her eyes. She was, once again, enduring the horror of seeing someone shot dead right in front of her.

She tried to wrap her arms around Dobie, but he urged her and everyone else into the hotel.

Eduardo was disappointed to see the “ugly American” still alive.

Should I Be Flattered?

Watson closed his third-floor window with the kind of satisfaction that only comes from killing someone who needed killing. He smiled and gave his rifle a kiss before carefully packing it away, then picked up the spent shell casings. His pistol remained in its holster on his left hip under his loose, untucked shirt.

He hurried down the stairs, through the lobby and out into the street to meet the Americans. Trying to act casual, gaping and gawking like a tourist as he crossed the cobblestones, he shook his head at the sight of Bourges's dead body.

What a shame, he thought, for something like this to happen in such a quaint little town.

He didn't believe it for a second but had learned long ago that covert ops worked best when you "sold it," played the part, all the way down to your inner-most thoughts. *Any op, actually, covert or not.*

He found the Americans standing together in the hotel lobby. Dobie and Kaylie were excited and animated. Armando was quiet, subdued and keeping a wary eye on Watson. All of them were coming to grips with what just happened.

Watson tapped Dobie on the shoulder as he moved past him toward an available table. After a moment's hesitation, Dobie followed, with Kaylie and Armando close behind.

Once they were all seated, Watson whispered to the table, "I was the shooter. I just saved y'all's asses... again!" He would not normally admit to such a thing, but he wanted Kaylie to know who the hero was.

"Who was that guy?" Dobie asked. He had twisted his shoulder when he dropped to the pavement out in the street, and he was now rubbing it. "I guess it was a hit man? I guess I should be flattered?"

Kaylie scoffed.

"Charonne sent him," said Watson. "I told you he had a hard-on for you." He involuntarily glanced at Kaylie at the word "hard-on."

Armando and Kaylie both noticed.

"You also said we'd be safe out of the country," said Dobie.

"No," Watson corrected him, again with a glance at Kaylie. "I said *Kaylie* would be safe if *you* were out of the country and she stayed behind." He winked at her. She winced.

"Well, I'm not going to hide from him," said Dobie, "no matter how many hit men he sends out. I meet my enemies face-to-face!"

"You're so brave," Kaylie teased with a smile, now rubbing his arm.

"Good idea," said Watson. "Go back to the States. Kaylie will be safe here with me... with us," he quickly added with a gesture toward Armando.

Dobie gave him a distrustful look. "You keep trying to put as much distance between me and Kaylie as you can."

Watson shrugged. Kaylie smirked.

Armando glared at Watson. He did not like the man at all, hero or not.

“I don’t know about y’all,” Watson looked around for a waitress, “but I need a drink.”

Dobie glanced at the clock on the wall. “At nine o’clock in the morning?”

“It’s 5 o’clock somewhere!” Watson said with a huge laugh. When no one else laughed he added, “I love that saying!”

“Yeah,” Dobie dead-panned, “someone should write a song about it.”

He had never seen Watson so animated. Giddy, almost. Killing people clearly agreed with him, or at least got him ready to start the day. *Who needs coffee?*

Dobie was not going to complain, though. The guy had saved their lives... again. He did not want to be beholden to him, but there was no getting around it. He would try not to judge.

Ever since he started speaking out on tour, people said he shouldn’t be so judgmental. We all have our weaknesses, they said. And so, as a favor to the world, Dobie would now do his best to *not* judge the stone-cold killer beside him.

In another lifetime, Dobie could see himself being a lot like Watson, killing anyone who needed killing. This time around, however, he wanted to take the high road, reach that next level, if possible. Do things the right way. Stop the endless cycle of retaliation, eye

for an eye, tit-for-tat and its resultant (he believed) cycle of birth, death, rebirth, *ad infinitum*.

It bothered him that he was trying to solve the world's problems peacefully and intelligently but, so far, his own problems were being solved with a gun. Not his gun, but it still irked him. Whatever happened to "not requiring anyone's assassination?"

~

Kaylie and Dobie would be checking out of the hotel in favor of Armando's place in the nearby village of Serretinha. The latter asked Dobie to keep Watson occupied while he and Kaylie relocated. He knew Watson could find them if he tried hard enough, but he was not going to make it easy for him.

Being completely unfamiliar with the city, Dobie asked Armando where he and Watson might go as a diversion, if Watson was open to it. Having just killed a man, he might be expected to want to head straight for the airport, though Watson actually seemed more interested in hanging out with Kaylie, not Dobie. At least she was not reciprocating.

"So, what is there to do in this town to wind down?" Dobie asked, again dead-panning, "You know, after you've been shot at or maybe even killed someone?"

"Well, there's the *Palacio*," Armando smiled. "Old government building. Fascinating architecture. Or maybe the *Museu*."

Dobie nodded. Watson smirked.

“Maybe the *Igreja da Misericordia*, the big blue church. Or the fort, or *Convento*. Talk about amazing architecture!” Armando continued. “If you like natural wonders there’s *Monte Brasil*, the old volcano.”

When none of the above elicited an especially positive response, Armando added with a smile, “How about whale watching? Horseback riding? Maybe a nice bicycle ride?”

To these they both gave a disapproving look.

“Well, I gave you some ideas,” he defended himself. “Take your pick, but KayKay and I are going back to my place. And, no, you can’t come.”

“You haven’t called me KayKay in years!” Kaylie gushed as she took her father’s arm and led him back to her room to fetch her things.

~

At Armando’s small, modest home in Serretinha, Kaylie was introduced to Elena, the stepmom she never knew she had. The three of them then gathered in the living room, with Elena by Armando’s side on the couch as he held court.

“I was out looking for Clarence here...” he pointed at the large Portuguese Podengo dog lazing on the floor at Kaylie’s feet.

“Clarence?” Kaylie interrupted. “As in mom’s name, Claire?” The dog looked up at the sound of his name. Kaylie reached down and patted his neck and shoulders.

“No comment,” Armando smiled and continued. “I found out later he was just out on one of his ‘walkabouts.’ I hadn’t had him long by that point and I thought he was lost. Elena was a friend of a neighbor of a friend’s neighbor, or something,” he winked at her, “and she helped in the search. We fell in love and she is now my wife. So now, whenever I get too mad at Clarence, Elena reminds me I still owe him for bringing the two of us together.”

Taking Elena’s hand in his, he continued, “She was born here on the island, and she keeps me grounded. I keep her laughing. Usually *at* me, but sometimes *with* me.”

Kaylie smiled, happy to see her father had found happiness.

~

With Kaylie out of the picture, the only thing Watson wanted to do was drink. So, he and Dobie stayed in the hotel bar and did exactly that. Dobie made an attempt, at least, but the taste of beer first thing in the morning was God-awful, so he ordered breakfast and coffee instead.

The hotel clerk, Eduardo’s, duties had shifted to waiting tables by that point, and he had demonstrated his ability to speak perfectly good English.

Dobie asked for a few sight-seeing ideas.

“May I suggest cliff diving?” Eduardo said with a devious smile.

“There aren’t any diving cliffs around here, are there?”

“People dive off cliffs all the time!” the young man argued.

“But do they survive?”

Eduardo only shrugged, already tired of their conversation, and he wandered off.

“I don’t think he likes you,” Watson said with a smile.

“It’s time for a showdown,” said Dobie.

“With the waiter?” Watson was incredulous.

“No! It’s time to meet my enemy face-to-face. You know who I’m talking about. My enemies used to be fear of ridicule and fear of poverty...”

“Ah, geez,” Watson complained, “you’re not gonna give another damned speech, are ya?”

“No,” Dobie was embarrassed. That was exactly what he had in mind. Speechifying came second-nature to him now. Whenever he came under attack – and his attempted murder definitely qualified – his response was to stand up and speak his mind.

“But I’ve got a psycho sending hit men out to kill me,” he continued. “I never would have thought... Hell, you work for him. Are you gonna stop me from going after him? I probably shouldn’t have said anything. Nothing like jet lag, assassination attempts, and bad beer first thing in the morning to make a guy speak out of turn.”

Holding his own beer in one hand, Watson gripped Dobie’s shoulder with the other and said, “My man, you are all right. I hate

to say it, but you are all... right. How someone as ugly as you ended up with someone like Kaylie, though, I will never know.”

Dobie laughed. “I ask myself that same question all the time!”

“I won’t stop you from doing whatever you need to do,” Watson promised. “I’m tired of Charonne’s bullshit just as much as you are. Okay, maybe not as much, but we are through, him and me!”

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” Dobie smiled and raised a glass. “Here’s to, um, doing whatever comes to mind!”

Now that they were so chummy, Dobie asked where Charonne lived. It was worth a shot, and he was surprised to get an answer. It could be a lie, of course, but it jibed with what he had already researched. Maybe Watson really was sick of his former commander.

Mackinac Island

Mackinac Island was not the sort of place a lot of tourists visited between November and April, but from late spring through fall, it was very nice. Dobie grew up just a few hundred miles south but had never once visited. Didn't know much about the place. He and his parents passed by on a summer trip to Canada when he was a kid, but it was not one of their stops.

He wanted to see how the other half lived, but his dad was driving and didn't want to stop. "End of discussion," his father said, laughing as only dads can, adding, "You can look at it as we pass by."

Now reunited with his beloved *Sabina*, Dobie drove her slowly over the bridge. The island was to his right. It was a beautiful day, beautiful drive, and he found himself wishing he could afford to live in such a place.

He doubted that would ever happen – not in this lifetime – unless he won the lottery, or one of his karaoke performances earned him a recording contract. The money from his books was surprisingly good, but not "private enclave, gated community" good. Still, the irony of making so much money while talking about abolishing it was not lost on him.

"Well, gaw-aw-ll-ee!" his friend Bucky then did his best impression of Gomer Pyle. It completely ruined the moment for Dobie, as

intended. Bucky enjoyed the scenery as much as anyone, he was simply incapable of *not* acting like a jackass for any stretch of time.

Dobie rolled his eyes, sighed deeply, and said, “Tell me again why I brought you?”

“Because I am a crucial part of your devious plans!” He then let out his most evil laugh, “Bwa-ha-ha!”

“No, that can’t be it. And, you’re a sorry substitute for Kaylie.”

“Your girlfriend? Well, I’d hope so. You think I’ll ever meet her?”

“No!” Dobie snapped, then softened his tone. “Well, at our wedding, maybe – if I survive this, and she hasn’t dumped me, and you prove yourself worthy of being my Best Man – I’ll pretty much have to let you meet her, won’t I?”

“Wedding?! You? Mr. I’ll-Never-Get-Married? And I get to be Best Man? Why, it’ll be an honor, my good sir.”

“Was that your best posh English accent?”

“How do I prove myself worthy?” Bucky returned to normal speech. “Obstacle course? Walk across the backs of a pit of alligators? What?”

“I’ll think of something,” Dobie said with a laugh at the alligator imagery.

“She must be incredibly hot,” Bucky added, “for you to take the plunge like that.”

Dobie nodded and smiled, but felt the need to clarify, “It’s not her ‘hotness’ that has me thinking marriage. Okay, maybe a little, but I’m in love!”

That was the first time he ever said that aloud – about anyone. He was surprised how much it brightened his mood just thinking about her instead of this thing they were about to do.

“I just hope she doesn’t make me trade in *Sabina* for the station wagon model!”

He and Kaylie had said their goodbyes before he left the Azores, but the thought of seeing her again remained his primary motivation for surviving this latest escapade.

~

Before Watson would agree to help – and Dobie definitely needed his help – Dobie had to make it look like he was leaving Kaylie behind in the Azores, for good, and never coming back. “I’d better see tears in her eyes,” Watson insisted.

Dobie’s initial response was, “I’m not doing that!” And he had argued vigorously, but Watson had what Dobie wanted so he gave in. “You are such a dick,” he tried, perhaps a little too hard, to sell Watson on the idea that Dobie was disgusted with himself. “I guess it’ll benefit Kaylie,” he continued with his bogus justification, “as much as anyone else to have her thinking that she and I are over, in case I don’t survive this.”

Watson agreed with a satisfied smile. And, just as when Dobie ran into him behind the hotel back in Taos, he fired up a joint.

Watson, of course, had no idea Dobie and Kaylie had come up with code words to use in case of emergency while they were still out on tour. With Dobie's controversial ideas and people trying to kidnap Kaylie, they agreed it was a good idea.

"Taser" meant "I'm in trouble." "JD" meant "Don't believe a word I'm saying."

Dobie had used the latter code word several times, but saying goodbye to Kaylie was still the most difficult acting job he had ever performed. He assumed she would see through his act but, judging by her reaction, she either missed her own calling as an actress or he had truly hurt her.

The tears in both their eyes were real, but it steeled Dobie's resolve. If all else failed, he consoled himself, at least she had gotten a free trip to the Azores and reunion with her estranged father out of it.

He just really hoped she didn't believe anything he was saying.

~

"We'll be setting off an EMP blast," Dobie explained "The Plan" to Bucky now as he guided *Sabina* across Mackinac Bridge. EMP was his weapon of choice because of his own body emitting EMPs.

He didn't know for a fact that's what was going on. Never had it checked out. How does one check that out? But that was the situation as he understood it. Whatever its cause, he might as well use it

to his advantage. He just hoped his own body didn't disrupt the device.

"It'll ruin every electronic device for a hundred-yard radius and send Charonne back to the Stone Age – or at least pre-digital. He loves technology, so I'm basically taking away a spoiled child's toys. Revenge is a dish best served cold."

"Huh?"

"It means you wait 'til your enemy thinks it's over, then you strike! I had Watson tell Charonne that he had killed me *and* Bourges, the hit man. He'll be surprised to see me. Payback's a bitch! Anyway, the idea is to level the playing field. I can't compete with a guy like him and all of his resources but I can at least bring him down to my level so it's just two fellow human beings using only our God-given talents against each other."

"O...kay," Bucky began, his voice kept low, enjoying the conspiracy of it all though it was just the two of them in the car. "But, isn't this guy... Sharone?... *m-m-m-my Sharona!* out to kill you? And all you wanna do is melt his electronics? Last time I checked, guns don't need electronics, just bullets. It'll be like that scene in Indiana Jones where the Arab guy is doing all these fancy moves with the sword, only to have Indy pull out his gun and just shoot him. You'd be the Arab guy in that scenario."

"Yeah, I got that," Dobie had to laugh, "but I've got a few tricks up my sleeve. I'd tell you what those were, but..."

“Don’t tell me! Naked cage death match! That’s always good. But seriously, you, Mr. Conspiracy Theorist, are now part of your own conspiracy?”

“This one is a good cause.”

“Well, yeah,” Bucky countered, “your own conspiracy will always seem legitimate, won’t it?”

Dobie pretended to not hear that.

Their first stop would be the town of Saint Ignace on Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. They were off the bridge and into that small town when Bucky asked, “So, how are we doing the part where we melt his electronics? Can you tell me that much?”

“All we need is a high-voltage pulse capacitor capable of a few hundred Joules.”

“In English, please?”

“That’s about as simple as I can put it, Bucky,” Dobie snapped. He was feeling on edge as they cruised down the main street. It was all getting too real, the closer they got.

He missed Kaylie. She had a way of keeping him grounded and thinking straight.

Sensing his aggravation and seeing the far-away look in his friend’s eyes, Bucky tried to lighten the mood. “Sounds like *Back to the Future*. ‘We need 1.21 jigawatts of power!’ Does this town even *have* a clock tower?”

Dobie smiled reluctantly. Kaylie was not the only one who could pry a reluctant smile out of him.

“So, Sharone, Borgeous, and Watson,” which was how Bucky spelled them in his head, “are the bad guys, right?”

Dobie nodded, not bothering to go into more detail on Watson.

“So,” Bucky continued, “where are we getting this... pulse capacitor?”

“It’s being delivered.”

“I didn’t know FedEx delivered flux capacitors,” Bucky laughed at his own joke as Dobie pulled into the parking lot of a small diner on their left.

“Already arrived,” Dobie said as he eased into a parking spot. “Then a local delivery service takes it to the island. At least, that was my understanding until they sent an email saying I had to sign for it here in Saint Ignace.”

At the diner’s front door, Dobie turned and pointed across the street at a beige, nondescript building. The name “Acme Shipping” was splashed in red across its aluminum siding. “The delivery service is right across the street.”

“Acme Shipping?!” Bucky laughed. “Does that make you Wile E. Coyote? Did he have a sidekick?”

“I’m not joking, Bucky. If you can’t take this seriously, I’m cutting you loose right now.”

“Okay, okay! You’ve changed, man,” Bucky accused him for the second time.

“Maybe you’re right,” Dobie had to agree. “I guess going out on tour, talking about changing the world, saving the love of your life

from a couple of psychos, then dodging bullets from a hit man tends to have a profound effect on a person.”

As they entered the diner, Dobie was reminded of the Blue Spoon. It even had a beautiful young hostess now leading them to their table, though it was Bucky doing the drooling this time.

As Bucky slid into the booth, Dobie pointed at the shipping company and said, “I’m going over there to sign whatever needs to be signed, then coming back to wait ‘til their truck comes out.” In a more hushed tone, he added, “Then we follow them in our car onto the ferry, onto the island, and through Charonne’s security gate, assuming he has one. Order me a western omelet and black coffee, okay? I’ll be right back.”

~

When Dobie returned a few minutes later, saying nothing for the moment, leaving Bucky in the dark, he took a seat at the table, grimaced as he put a fork-full of omelet, gone cold, into his mouth, and said, “Change of plans. I signed for the package, and they’ll take it to the island, but apparently no motorized vehicles are allowed without special permission over there. We have to park in the lot and take the ferry as pedestrians.”

“Well, shit!” Bucky said with what he hoped was the appropriate amount of disgust, though he didn’t honestly care. He was just being a good sidekick. “So, how do we get them delivered to this dude’s house?”

Dobie shook his head, not entirely sure of the answer. “I never woulda guessed Charonne lived on an island with no vehicles allowed. I wonder if Watson knew that and is now laughing his head off. Probably. They said they’d deliver it to Charonne’s house, but you and I won’t get there at the same time as the delivery. We’ll be on foot.”

“No problem!” said Bucky. “We just knock out the delivery drivers, take their uniforms, hijack their truck, and deliver your flux capacitor to this dude’s house ourselves!”

“Yes, that is what would happen on television or the movies,” Dobie rolled his eyes. “Only problem is this is real life!”

“Suit yourself,” Bucky shrugged, “but, you gotta admit it’s a brilliant plan.”

“No,” Dobie began. “For one, if you hit someone over the head, you risk seriously injuring them. And, unless it’s in self-defense, that would be contrary to everything I believe in. No, we leave *Sabina* here in one of the lots, get on the boat, then you just follow my lead. I’ll show you how things are done!”

Dobie had no clue how things might be done. He would be “winging it” from that point forward.

A moment earlier, coming back from Acme Shipping and waiting at the crosswalk, he had taken a moment to “ask the universe” for advice. He did not do this very often. He was more inclined these days to *tell* the universe how things should be done, but he did

try to be humble and, on occasion, admit when he was in over his head.

It was at times like these that he would “stop and ask directions.” He didn’t need a special place for that. A crosswalk was as good as anywhere else. Appropriate, even.

“The universe’s” answer came to him clear as a bell: [Lighten up!](#)
[Play it by ear!](#)

He never realized back in the Azores when toasting Watson that the words “whatever comes to mind” would end up being his actual approach to things. It felt right, though.

“Is this Charonne guy even home?” Bucky now asked between sips of coffee, though he was more interested in the young waitress than anything else.

“He doesn’t need to be home, but it won’t be much of a ‘show-down’ without him, will it? One of my spies – remember Martha from work? – texted saying she just walked past a conference room where Charonne was up on the screen lecturing the managers and directors about something or other. He only does that remotely from home, which is on the island just a couple miles from here.”

“Wait,” Bucky asked with a laugh, “you received a text? And an email before that? I thought you were allergic or something.”

“My new best friend Major Watson,” Dobie explained with a smile, “gave me a ‘military-grade’ cell phone and case that he swore would not go haywire in my presence.”

“I thought Watson was one of the bad guys. More importantly, I thought *I* was your best friend?!” Bucky feigned a hurt look. “But, if you’re using a phone that some military guy gave you, you know it’s bugged, right?”

Crap! Dobie shook his head. The thought had never occurred to him. Ever since leaving Kaylie – especially because of how that was done – he had been feeling like he lost a step, lost his edge, as if he had not left just Kaylie behind, but his good sense, as well.

Bucky didn’t need to know all that, though. Putting on a brave face for the troops (Bucky), Dobie said aloud, “Oh well, too late now.”

~

Charonne much preferred the cooler climes of northern Michigan over the oppressively hot summers of The South. He preferred almost everything about Michigan over Tennessee but, being “a mere cog in the automotive industry gears,” and seeing an opportunity to play a much larger role in the industry, he had moved his company south after General Motors built their Saturn plant in Spring Hill. When the Saturn brand was discontinued several years later and the plant closed, Charonne was on the verge of moving back to Michigan. He was looking forward to it. Then GM reopened and retooled the plant for other models, and SaynCorp remained in the Volunteer State.

More often than not, Charonne conducted his meetings remotely by video. He loved gadgetry – technology of every sort – and Sayn-Corp made some of the electronics found in several vehicle brands. Charonne’s happiest moments in life were spent learning new tech – any new tech – but especially spy gear. He was a nerd at heart – a hyper-competitive nerd – and always wanted to be the first to have whatever the latest gizmo was before anyone else. Failing that, he wanted to be among the first people conversant with it.

When his therapist said it was unhealthy to be so competitive, Charonne ended their session immediately. As he walked out the door, he said in that deep, resonant, yet still somehow nasal voice of his, “What you call ‘unhealthy’ is what got me where I am today, baby!” He gave her one last look up and down – his way of putting her in her place – and walked out.

~

When the delivery truck pulled out of the Acme Shipping parking lot, Dobie looked up from his breakfast, stood up, and said, “Show-time!” He left enough money on the table to pay for their meal, plus tip, and hurried out.

Bucky took one last gulp of coffee, handed his business card and an additional \$5 tip to the waitress with a wink and a smile on his way out, and chased after his fearless leader. On the back of his card he had written “Call me!” If Dobie knew he was handing out busi-

ness cards while on their “secret mission,” he would have been apoplectic.

~

Boarding the ferry, Dobie had to laugh at the sign over the ticket booth saying, “Please *do* pay the ferryman!”

It then hit him – with a considerable shiver down his back – Charon was the ferryman of Hades in Greek mythology who carried souls of the newly deceased across the River Styx to their final resting place.

Charon? Charonne? What the hell am I getting into?

As they made their way through the crowd of fellow passengers disembarking onto the island, the only “vehicles” Dobie saw were horse-drawn carriages. Everyone else was either on foot, horseback or riding a bicycle. Horse manure was the first smell he noticed upon arrival. He half expected to see a few penny-farthings, the original bicycle with the huge front wheel, but no.

He watched as the Acme Shipping truck drove off the ferry, then the short distance to a designated building. From there, its two large, muscle-bound male occupants got out and loaded everything from the back of the truck onto the biggest dolly that Dobie or Bucky had ever seen. The men pushed that thing from store to store, dropping off their orders. They barely used the truck except to go from the dock to that one building.

“Are you kidding me?” Dobie said to no one in particular. “Even if we wanted to hitch a ride on their truck, we couldn’t. And they just roll that monster dolly all over the island?” Then pointing at the over-sized drivers, he asked Bucky, “You still think we can knock them out and steal their uniforms? Even if we could, their uniforms would fit us like tents.”

“No problem!” Bucky again had the answer. “We *walk* to this Charonne dude’s house, climb over the fence, steal his car, drive back here, take our package off the truck ourselves, and drive it over to *m-m-m-my Sharona’s* house.”

“Okay, genius,” Dobie countered, “but how do we get back through Charonne’s gate from the outside? You think they’ll buzz us in when they see their own car wanting back in?”

“If my car was stolen, I’d let it back in, no questions asked!”

“Do you know how to hot wire a car?” Dobie asked. “We don’t know if he even has a car here where they’re not allowed.” Bucky shrugged. “And, wouldn’t the cops stop us since cars are not allowed?”

“Maybe,” Bucky countered, “but he’s rich, and the rules don’t apply to guys like that. You’ve said so yourself. Think he’s got a Rolls-Royce? I would *love* to get behind the wheel of one of those!”

“We’re like *Dumb and Dumber*,” Dobie shook his head.

“I guess that makes you Dumber, then,” Bucky laughed, “since I’m the one who keeps coming up with answers!”

“I don’t *think* so!” Dobie disagreed, though he was starting to appreciate Bucky for making this poorly-thought-out – frankly, naïve – plan almost fun. “We should probably come up with a name for ourselves. You know, like Caped Crusaders, Dynamic Duo, or Frick and Frack?”

“Frick and Frack?” Bucky scoffed. “How old *are* you?”

“Yeah, probably lame to reference things from my parents’ days but being back in Michigan has me thinking of them.”

“Hey, I know,” Bucky continued. “How about ‘Dobuck’ or ‘Buckobie’? You know, like Benjen or Brangelina ‘ship’ names?”

“Um, those were celebrity couples,” Dobie explained. “I love you, man, but we are not celebrities, and definitely not a couple! Besides, ‘Dobuck’ would make me the female deer. And, like I keep saying, I don’t *think* so!”

Into the Lurch

Dobie and Bucky arrived at Charonne's front gate by way of horse-drawn carriage. It was not what either of them originally envisioned but that was their only option after Dobie explained to the delivery men that he had changed his mind and wanted to deliver the package himself. He was surprised they let him have it back, but they did. He just had to sign a waiver.

Bucky tipped the friendly middle-aged woman carriage driver, and she put her horse into a trot to make their way back to the docks along the narrow tree-lined road under a canopy of mostly maple and beech. Dobie and Bucky stood at the gate with the crate – the size of a portable generator – and waited for the carriage driver to get beyond earshot and around a corner before they discussed their next move.

“So, who gets to climb the fence?” Bucky wanted to know.

“Let's flip for it,” Dobie offered. He pulled out his lucky fifty-cent piece and, of course, had to make a political statement. “He died before I was born, but I'm pretty sure JFK was our last decent president. So, of course they killed him. I call heads.”

“No!” Bucky protested. “It's probably two-headed. I call heads.”

“Suit yourself,” Dobie shrugged, and flipped JFK into the air. He caught it in one hand and slapped it down onto the opposite arm. “Heads, you win. You climb over.”

“Ha! Nice try,” Bucky argued. “Heads means *you* climb over!”

Shaking his head, Dobie said, “We’re a couple of juvenile delinquents, aren’t we? I think maybe you’re a bad influence on me.”

He liked to think he had matured quite a bit in the past several months, but maturity was obviously a work in progress. Especially when in the company of his best friend, Bucky.

At a glance, he could see the compound’s white brick wall would be much easier to scale than the gate itself. It was only about three feet high at its lowest point between posts. More decorative than anything else.

With Bucky giving him a leg up, Dobie was up and over in no time. It did trigger an alarm, but Charonne always muted those prior to his teleconferences and he failed to notice now.

Dobie then marched down the driveway – very matter-of-fact, as if this was normal – toward the front door thirty yards away. He didn’t like how exposed he was. It was about the same distance from himself to the front door as it had been between him and the assassin, Bourges, back in the Azores, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Sometimes you just have to throw yourself into the lurch, he once read. He was not entirely sure what a “lurch” was but – after thinking things through, contemplating various scenarios, and coming to

the conclusion that this was a suicide mission – *this* should qualify as a “lurch.” It fit in with that whole “playing it by ear” idea, too.

Charonne’s front door then opened in front of him. *Busted!* Dobie thought. Shading his eyes from the morning sun, he expected to see the Colonel glaring at him. Instead, it was an attractive young blonde woman in the doorway, wearing a silky lavender bathrobe and slippers, both with fluffy pink trim.

Hell-o! he thought with a smile.

“Dobie?” the woman gave her own surprised smile. “Is that you?!”

“Crissie?” he could barely believe the woman from that fateful karaoke night was now standing before him. *Everything is coming full circle.*

“It *is* you!” Crissie was genuinely happy to see him. “What on Earth are you doing here? And why are you walking down my driveway instead of waiting for me to buzz you in?”

He had to think fast. “I did try the buzzer,” he lied. “Stood there five minutes pressing the button. Must be broken. So, I hopped the fence, or wall in this case. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Okay, but why?”

“Delivering a package to your boss, Monsieur Charonne.”

“You’re a delivery man now?” she said it with open disdain.

“No,” he laughed. “Charonne hired me to deliver and demonstrate the item,” he continued the ruse.

“Item? What sort of item?”

“Flux capac...” he began before silently scolding Bucky and correcting himself, “*pulse* capacitor. Part of some project he’s working on. He said it was very time-sensitive.”

“Yeah, everything needs to be done yesterday with him.”

“And, like I said, the buzzer wasn’t working, and every time I tried the ‘call’ button, it went to voicemail.”

“Okay, well,” she seemed to be buying it, “Reggie’s been on the phone in a meeting all morning. So, that’s why it went to voicemail.”

Reggie? Dobie never thought of Charonne as a “Reggie.”

“God knows *I* never answer the phone,” she laughed. “That’s my job at the office. I’m not gonna do it here, too! Would you like to come in?”

“Sure! But first, can you open the gate? My partner and I still need to bring in the package.”

“Partner? Are you gay now?” she teased, knowing full well he was not gay.

“Partner,” he rolled his eyes, “as in co-worker? How could you think I was gay after you and I...?”

She shrugged, laughed and buzzed the gate open. And there, in the distance peeking through, stood Bucky. Dobie started walking down the driveway toward him until Crissie pointed to her right and said, “Take one of the golf carts.”

There was a white one with a red stripe given the name *Charlie*, and a yellow one with a white stripe named *Jeffrey*. Unaware of the

significance of their names, the red-striped one reminded Dobie of a golf ball he remembered having as a kid, so that's the cart he chose.

Remember, 'whatever comes to mind.'

Charonne happened to look out the window in time to see Dobie driving Charlie toward the gate. He was not especially alarmed. Service people were forever coming and going, but they almost never borrowed one of his carts. Then he remembered Watson's telephone call the other day saying he should be expecting a package, though his junior officer refused to give details. He could hear the stifled laughter in Watson's voice, but failed to extract anything useful out of him. Over the phone, he rolled his eyes, but let it go.

He frowned now, put the conference call on hold, and stuck his head out to ask Crissie what was going on.

"Who is that driving my cart?"

"Your delivery." Crissie smiled and gave the limp wrist gesture signifying nothing to worry about. "I told him he could use it 'cuz there's something wrong with the gate."

Charonne did not follow the logic but trusted Crissie's judgment. She was possibly the only person he trusted these days. Besides, he had to get back to this call. He nodded, said "alright," and returned to his teleconference.

A moment later, the co-conspirators had the package loaded onto the cart and were returning to the house. As they set the crate down near the carts' parking spot, Crissie waved them in with a smile.

“Come on in! Please. It’ll be good to talk to a couple of regular guys for a change.”

“Reggie’s not a regular guy?” Dobie teased.

“Pfft!” she scoffed and ushered them into the house. “You know what an asshole he is.”

“You talk openly about your boyfriend like that?” Dobie said in a hushed tone, not knowing where Charonne might be lurking.

“He don’t care,” she reverted to her childhood bad grammar. It was how she spoke with anyone she considered “just folks.” “And he ain’t my boyfriend. At least, not the only one. We’re just sleepin’ together.”

“Okay, well,” Dobie changed the subject as she led them into the living room. He did not want to hear about her love life. “Would you mind if Bucky and I went ahead and set things up? That way it’ll be all set by the time Reggie gets off the phone.”

“Only I can call him Reggie,” she warned. “You better call him Colonel or Sir while you’re here. But, sure, go ahead with your little setup.”

Bucky made a face at that.

Dobie had not yet figured out this part of their operation, either, but things were working out so well at the moment that he simply went with the flow. He had read plenty of New Age advice about going with the flow. Things were going surprisingly well, almost suspiciously well, but he didn’t question it. *The universe loves me!*

Yes, but it also punishes stupidity.

Dobie heard Semmy's reply, but mistook it as his own thought.

Bucky was impressed with how brazenly Dobie was carrying out their dastardly plan. More importantly, he was intrigued by Crissie's take on her relationship with Charonne. *Just sleeping together*, she said. *Not the only one.*

"I'm Buckminster Nagy," he introduced himself with a smile as he stuck out his hand. "Friends call me Bucky, but the ladies call me Buck Naked." Dobie rolled his eyes, but Bucky continued undeterred. "Maybe when we're done here, you and I can get to know each other better."

"Seriously?" Crissie scoffed. "You're hitting on me in my own home? Besides, has that line ever worked on a real, live woman?"

"Well, no," Bucky was surprised she called him out on it. "I'm always trying out new material..."

"Maybe you should go back outside, Bucky," Dobie said, "and set up the device?"

~

Charonne's Mackinac summer home was impressively appointed. Inside, the windows were covered by long velour drapes in deep reds and golds with rope fringe. The walls were papered in large tan, mustard and burgundy floral patterns with animal heads and horns mounted throughout. Decorative gold molding was everywhere.

Dobie never would have chosen this dark and gaudy look for his own home – especially the decapitated beasts on the walls – but at least it wasn't that cold industrial look. He never liked that look, but figured Charonne was the type who would. The chosen décor seemed to work here in the living room, though Dobie knew ultra-wealthy people like the Colonel had more creative names for the various parts of the house. When it has dozens of rooms, you have to get creative. Maybe this was the Sitting Room. Whatever. Everything about the place said, "I'm rich!"

All the woodwork and furniture was walnut or mahogany with ornately carved edges. His seating options were: A tufted sofa; matching love seat; upholstered wing-back chairs; or, the chaise lounge.

Gilded picture frames and mirrors were interspersed among the dead animals on every wall. Fine China filled gaps between the books on the shelves. A pair of matching gargoyle bookends elicited a raised eyebrow from Dobie. Ornate chandeliers provided the only light when the curtains were drawn, as they were now.

Dobie had heard Charonne absolutely hated the South, and yet his chosen décor was the epitome of the Old South. *Go figure.*

Stalling, giving Bucky the time he needed to place the EMP device outside on the side of the house, as discussed, Dobie asked Crissie, "So, what've you been up to?"

“Oh, nothin’ much,” she said. “Please, have a seat.” She pointed at what Dobie would have called a love seat, though it probably had a more impressive name.

He sat directly in its center and assumed she would sit on the couch across from him. Instead, she told him to scoot over. When he complied, she surprised him.

Bucky was going to be so jealous when he told him, and he was definitely going to tell him.

She untied her bathrobe, pulled it open a second “to adjust it” then re-tied it.

“I’m sorry,” she feigned embarrassment for flashing him. “I’m still dripping from the shower. Had to make a quick adjustment, but you didn’t see nothing you ain’t seen before.”

“Hey, no problem!” he smiled. He was trying not to get too excited. He had Kaylie in the Azores awaiting his return. *Hopefully.*

He wished Crissie would go back to using proper English. He had a weakness for smart girls who consciously chose to use bad grammar. He didn’t know why. It was just another one of those mysteries floating around in his head.

[Because you think they’re easy.](#)

Dobie looked around, wondering if anyone else heard that.

“So, where were we?” she asked.

“I, uh, completely lost my train of thought.”

To distract himself from the woman beside him, he decided to focus on The Plan. Some guys use baseball to keep their mind focused in similar situations. Then he remembered there was no plan, and the stress from that thought wilted any plans the lower half of his body might have had.

Assuming that Bucky followed his instructions – which might have been a stretch – the EMP device’s switch should by that point have been flipped to the “on” position, though it would still require the signal from the remote control now in Dobie’s breast pocket.

He could hear Charonne’s muffled voice from somewhere on the other side of the wall in front of them. “Don’t worry about him,” Crissie noticed his attention drawn in that direction. “He can go on for hours on the phone.” She ran her fingers up his arm. “You and I might be stuck here for quite some time. We might need to, um, keep ourselves occupied somehow.”

“That sounds nice,” he said. He was only playing along – thinking of Kaylie – but the lower half of his body responded as nature intended.

“They don’t call these things ‘love seats’ for nothing,” she cooed as she straddled him and once again undid her bathrobe, leaving it open this time. “I’ve missed you.”

Then again, he now argued with himself in full view of Crissie’s naked body, *are Kaylie and I really still a couple?* They had said some pretty mean things to each other. For all he knew, she believed everything he said and had dumped him the moment he left.

Hearing Crissie say she missed him, that tired old “bird in the hand” phrase came to mind again. *Maybe I should just go ahead and...*

He placed his hands on Crissie’s waist and moved in closer while trying to decide just how far he should take this. Her response was to throw off her robe, then tear off his shirt along with the EMP remote. He paused at the sound of it clattering to the floor, then shrugged it off and reached down to undo his belt...

No! he reminded himself. *You and Kaylie are not over! Be strong!*

Trying with all his might to keep a detached view of things – for Kaylie’s sake – he forced himself to psychoanalyze the woman now on top of him. “Mind over matter” and “heart over mind” were both going to be required for this.

He assumed Charonne would shoot him if he and Crissie were caught *in flagrante* like this. For all he knew, that was exactly what Crissie was hoping for. *She probably wants him to walk in on us*, it occurred to him. He had known a few women – admittedly, mentally unbalanced women – who had to make things dangerous for themselves just to get into the proper mood.

Showdown

A door opened, and Dobie peeked over Crissie's shoulder. He expected to see Charonne standing there, angry as a hornet, pointing a gun at him, but there was no one. To his right, he then saw Bucky in the foyer. The front door was wide open behind him, and he was wiping sweat off his brow.

"It's all set, and the gun..." Bucky began, before realizing what he was interrupting.

This got Crissie even more excited, but when Dobie crawled out from under her and waved Bucky over to take his place, she complained, "Hey!"

"No offense," Dobie apologized, "but I've got a woman back home, waiting for me." The Azores were not really home, but home is where the heart is.

Crissie was so hot and bothered by that point, she said, "Oh, what the hell" and let Bucky replace Dobie like one dance partner stepping in for another.

And Bucky was up to the task. He was on her before Dobie could even get off the love seat.

"Yet another sight I will never be able to unsee," said Dobie, fully aware that no one was listening. "I really wish that'd stop happening."

He put his shirt – now missing a button – back on and checked the EMP remote. It appeared to be intact, so he headed for the door to check on the device outside. He didn't want to be around when Charonne came out of his office. It had been a while since he last heard the Colonel's voice through the wall.

He was hurrying toward the wide-open front door – like an antelope fleeing a lion – when Charonne roared from somewhere behind him. “What the hell is going on here!?”

Dobie turned toward him, trying to think of what to say. Charonne's office had double doors, both of which were now open as Charonne stood with his hands on his hips, looking ready to explode.

Dobie recognized the corporate office's large conference room on the big-screen behind Charonne. Everyone on the remote end of the just-concluded teleconference had left the room, except for the IT guy tasked with shutting everything down. He did a double take upon seeing Bucky and a naked woman on the love seat. He could not see Crissie's face.

Still underneath Bucky, Crissie calmly turned toward Charonne, smiled coolly and said with a wicked laugh, “Just entertaining our guests, babe.”

From her vantage point, she could also see the big screen in Charonne's office, but not the IT guy. That conference room was up on the screen so often, usually empty, that she barely noticed anymore. And now, distracted as she was, she was oblivious.

“I can see that,” said Charonne, “but who are these...” he began before recognizing Dobie. Despite being a former employee, Charonne had seen him only in photographs and brief video clips that Watson had sent from the road. “You’re that Commie bastard, Pokorny! I should shoot you where you stand!”

“At your service,” Dobie gave a little wave and smile – happy to see Charonne was unarmed – “but not a Communist. The word you’re looking for is ‘Sortitionist.’”

“Huh?”

“It’s an ancient form of government...” Dobie began.

Charonne waved him off. “I’ll deal with you in a minute. This,” he pointed angrily at Bucky being on top of Crissie. “What the hell is this? You said there was some kind of delivery?”

“Oh, he’s delivering, baby,” she said with a throaty laugh.

Bucky had not let up despite the interruption. He was not going to ruin this fantasy-come-true. If Charonne shot him dead, so be it. *What a way to go!*

Charonne’s anger, like an on/off switch, then turned into a smile. Pointing at Crissie and laughing, he said, “This is why I keep her around! She’s even crazier than I am!”

He undid his belt and top button of his pants as he came around from behind Bucky. Dobie cringed for Bucky’s sake and wondered how they were all going to fit on that love seat but he didn’t spend much time thinking about it. Glancing back at the teleconference screen, he noticed the IT guy had brought in a couple more people –

Was one of them Martha? – now equally engrossed in the show playing out before them.

Dobie noticed that the right-most of the double doors, the one closest to him, was slowly closing. It was out of balance and gravity was bringing it back toward the other door, which meant Dobie was now off camera.

He escaped out the front door, leaving Bucky to fend for himself, and attended to his EMP device outside. He could set it off while Bucky proved useful as a distraction.

The blast would have had more impact had Charonne been in the middle of something important when it all went poof. That video teleconference would have been perfect, but Dobie missed his chance. And now he didn't want to do anything to interrupt the feed and ruin the show for the good folks back home.

It occurred to him in that moment that the blast would kill every refrigerator and freezer in the vicinity. The thought made him cringe. *All that rotting food going to waste! Starving kids in Africa, and all that.*

Then again, everyone might feel obligated to cook and share all their food and drink before it went bad. *Instant block party!*

The damage and injuries caused by any cars in transit whose engines had been killed would have been scary, but Charonne had removed that from the equation by living where no motor vehicles were allowed.

A few golf carts might die, but Dobie never liked golf. If you call something a sport, it shouldn't include leisurely rides during the game. Hockey players don't ride the Zamboni during the game. Football players don't ride that flat-bed golf-cart thing unless they're injured. And so on. His "internal word spigot" was in full gear again, a sure sign of stress.

As that beautiful blonde country singer – whose name he could never remember – says, *Just breathe!*

He was on the east side of the house, on one knee dealing with the pulse capacitor, when a single-engine prop plane flew overhead. *Better not set this off with one of those flying overhead!*

He was still looking up at the plane, wondering if he should just call the whole thing off – the song *Let's call the whole thing off!* then popped into his head – when Charonne came around the corner.

With his gun in hand – an actual gun, his fly was zipped up – the Colonel snarled, "So, you say you're not a Communist?"

"Geez!" Dobie recoiled from the man's deep voice. He quickly stood up, dusted himself off and said with a nervous laugh, "Don't sneak up on a guy like that!" He then looked around for the gun that Watson promised he would hide in the shipment for him. Bucky had started to mention it, then never finished that sentence because, well, Crissie was naked.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Charonne was sarcastic. "I didn't mean to interrupt your little... whatever the hell you're doing here. What is this, a generator?"

“Pulse capacitor,” Dobie replied nonchalantly, sticking with the honest approach.

“To what end?” Charonne feigned ignorance. He was in fact quite familiar with the technology.

“I came here today,” Dobie began, sounding a lot like a politician, “to politely ask you to call off the dogs. Stop trying to stop me. What’s your problem, anyway? Afraid of a little competition?”

Charonne scoffed. “Ha! Please!”

“I’m sorry, where are my manners?” Dobie took a moment to compose himself. Extending his hand, he said, “We already know each other’s names, but we can at least restart our acquaintance by shaking hands.”

Charonne sneered. “Queensbury Rules, eh?”

“If you say so,” Dobie had no idea.

“Alright then,” Charonne reluctantly shook Dobie’s hand. Dobie half expected to get a creepy feeling all over – like in Stephen King’s *The Dead Zone* – but there was nothing.

“Anyway, Reggie, this here,” he held up the remote control, “is in case we cannot come to some sort of agreement for *you* to leave *me* alone. One false move, and I blow your electronics to Kingdom Come. You might shoot me, but it’ll be worth it knowing I melted all your toys! Don’t worry, I’m sure there’s an Amish or Mennonite village somewhere nearby that can teach you how to live a productive life free of electronics.”

“What’s to stop me from just shooting you and dumping your body in the lake?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Civility? Common decency? But, also, if you did that you’d miss my epic verbal beat-down of you!”

“Ha!” Charonne scoffed. “Think you can go toe-to-toe with me? You have no idea the pain and suffering I have inflicted upon people with my tongue alone!”

“Hey, your sexual predilections are your own business!”

Charonne had to laugh. “Good one. You might be a worthy opponent, after all, Porky. Let’s do this.”

“It’s Pokorny, and, game on! Wouldn’t it be better in front of an audience, though?” He thought of the teleconference audience. “It’d be a shame anyone should miss seeing you cry.” A devious smile crossed his lips.

With a glance at Dobie’s “doomsday” device, Charonne gave his own devious smile, waved his gun and said, “Yes, let’s go inside, shall we?”

Dobie wondered what Charonne was smiling at but he agreed, “Let’s!”

~

Back in Serretinha, Armando reluctantly allowed Major Watson into his home. He only agreed after Kaylie gave him the “you’re embarrassing me, Dad!” look that he hadn’t seen since she was a teenager. When she escorted Watson into the guest room, Armando followed.

When she closed the door behind her, Armando immediately re-opened it.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but you need to keep this door open. I don’t know what happened between you and Dobie, but I will not allow any sort of monkey business in my house!”

Monkey business? She wondered when he started talking like that. Aloud, she said, “We just need to talk, Dad. Privately.”

“You can talk privately with the door open!” he snapped at her, instantly regretting raising his voice, but it was too late. Elena, watching from afar as she stood in the dining room, nodded in support of her husband.

“Fine!” Kaylie snapped back, reverting to the angry, defiant teenager that Armando thought he had left behind years ago.

She pulled Watson by the hand out of the house, just as she had done with Dobie out of The Blue Spoon Diner in what seemed a lifetime ago. Flagger down the same cabbie who brought them there just as he was pulling away from the curb, Kaylie and Watson returned to the hotel.

~

Watson had switched to this hotel after he killed Bourges. And the desk clerk Eduardo smiled wickedly to see them arrive without Dobie, only to disappear into the elevator together. He would have preferred himself with Kaylie, but as long as it was someone *other* than

Dobie with her, he was happy. He could not remember why he hated Dobie so much, he just did.

~

Kaylie found herself alone in a hotel room with him once again. She could see in his eyes the ideas running through his head.

Things were very different from last time, however. She was not under the influence of any sort of spell as she tried to convince him to return to the States with her. Dobie could do whatever he wanted to Charonne, but she did not want him thrown in prison for it. Despite any harsh words they may have spoken before Dobie left, she still cared about him enough to at least keep him safe.

And for that, just like Dobie before her, she needed Watson's help. "I need you to do that rescue thing you're so good at," she said.

Watson agreed, but only after Kaylie agreed to let him do something else he was pretty good at. She had been afraid of that, but she relented, for Dobie's sake.

~

Back on Mackinac, after he and Dobie agreed to their verbal duel, Charonne entered the house without noticing the teleconference screen. The right-side door to his office had, as it was wont to do, closed far enough to block his view of the crowd gathered on the other end.

Charonne waved his pistol at Dobie. As he took a seat on the couch with his back to the camera, he ordered, “You first.”

“You know,” Dobie began, pointing at Charonne’s gun, “I’ve often felt under fire during political arguments, but have never done it literally at gunpoint before. Is that really necessary?”

“I suppose not,” the Colonel reluctantly set it on an end table, out of reach for everyone but himself. “So, what are you trying to accomplish with your book and little tour, Porky?”

“It’s Pokorny, and I’m doing my part to restore sanity, decency, common sense, common courtesy and consideration to the world. The little things, like pronouncing a person’s name right, you know.” He liked the sound of his own words as he spoke them.

“Is that all?” Charonne was sarcastic.

“You keep saying I’m a Communist,” Dobie continued, his arms folded across his chest. He didn’t know what else to do with them. He usually had a lectern to lean on. “But nothing could be further from the truth!” He threw his hands out as he spoke, which caused Charonne to glance at his gun. “I don’t want anyone getting anything for free. It has to come as a reward for individual effort. Isn’t that the true spirit of capitalism? The difference in my system is that it’s cooperative and, by removing the profit motive from the equation – the most corrupting force the world has ever seen – there’s not so much greed. It’s quite simple, really. Simplicity is the essence of intelligence, so of course it goes right over your head.”

Back at SaynCorp in Tennessee, Martha put her hand over her mouth in surprise. She could not believe Dobie just said that.

Charonne picked up the gun, and Dobie worried he had crossed a line. He wished he had his own smuggled gun, but had no idea what Bucky might have done with it. Either way, this wishing-for-his-gun thing had to stop.

~

JD and Claire might have followed Kaylie and Dobie to New Mexico, but, as Dobie's luck would have it, JD was arrested for disorderly conduct in Oklahoma after a barroom brawl. As things turned out, however, as inconvenient as jail time may have been, it did save JD time and gas money. Saved Claire, actually, since she was the one paying the bills.

She had managed to later find the man who started that brawl. It was because he was giving her the eye that JD got jealous in the first place. With JD in jail, Claire then shackled up with the other man until JD got out of jail. As she liked to tell Kaylie, "Why pay for a hotel or drinks when all you gotta do is put out and the man pays for everything!"

At the time, Kaylie only cringed and shook her head.

Once Claire had gotten word from her spy, Watson, that Dobie had returned to the States, she had reunited with JD, and they made their way north toward Michigan.

~

Dobie exhaled in relief when the Colonel walked casually to the wet bar, set the gun down, picked up a bottle of whiskey, admired its label, and poured himself a glass.

“Whiskey?” he asked. “Single malt!”

Dobie shook his head, no. “Got any beer? A nice pale ale, perhaps?” He purposely used “perhaps” instead of “maybe” because he thought it sounded more sophisticated.

Charonne made a face. “Beer?! And to think *you* called *me* a Neanderthal! Yes, I’ve probably got some beer in here somewhere.” He bent down to open the mini-fridge. “I keep it on hand for my less-refined guests. Would you like it in a glass, or straight from the bottle? In the dog’s water bowl, perchance?”

“Bottle, thanks,” Dobie answered with a laugh, “but you are throwing down the gauntlet in this debate, aren’t you, using words like ‘perchance!’” Charonne rolled his eyes. “So, you *did* hear that Neanderthal conversation I had in SaynCorp’s break room. I guess that entire building is bugged?”

“No comment,” Charonne smiled as he walked across the room and handed Dobie his beer.

Dobie was happy Charonne did not glance over to see he had left the teleconference up and running. It crossed his mind that Charonne might “pull a JD” and spike his drink, but he saw the man just now use a bottle opener, followed by the expected sound of vacuum-packed air escaping.

Returning to his seat on the sofa, Charonne gestured for Dobie to take the love seat. “Please, sit.”

As he sat in his assigned seat, Dobie looked around and realized that Crissie and Bucky were gone. “Where’d the young lovers go?”

“Guest room,” Charonne answered after a moment, also briefly forgetting where they had gone.

Nodding absently, Dobie said, “Well, there goes that audience I was hoping for.” It was all he could do to *not* look up at the video conference audience that only he knew about.

A moment of clarity then hit him. “But I’m just now realizing... if not for that one brief lapse in discretion, if I had just kept my mouth shut and not called you a Neanderthal, you never would have made that special trip to the Spring Hill office. Never would have known who I was. I could’ve written my book, gone on tour, and lived a perfectly wonderful life free from you and Watson.”

“Probably, yeah,” Charonne smiled as he set down his glass. Dobie shook his head, feeling like his own worst enemy. “It is a sad truth,” Charonne continued, “that we are often defined by our lapses. One false move, and all that. But, don’t beat yourself up too much, Porky. Given what little I know about you, you would have done something equally stupid to end up in similar circumstances.”

“Aw, thanks!” Dobie was sarcastic. “And, it’s Pokorny.”

“No problem,” Charonne ignored the incessant name correction and resumed the argument. “So, anyway, what I’m wondering is, who runs this candy-canes-and-unicorns system of yours? And, inci-

dentally, because your book keeps harping on greed – which I happen to think is good, as they say in the movie *Wall Street* – I should mention it is the pursuit of *power*, not *money*, that makes people greedy.”

“*Ta-may-toe, ta-mah-toe*,” said Dobie, sipping his beer. That Fred Astaire song came to mind again, but he pushed it aside. “In today’s world, they are one and the same. And, everything about the *real* Wall Street is bad.”

He hadn’t realized how thirsty he was. After taking a long swig of ale, he then exhaled with an exaggerated “Ahhhh!” only to be disappointed when Charonne was not offended.

“If power is given to a bunch of goody-two-shoes idiots,” Charonne pointed out, “we’re *all* in trouble.”

“Idiots, sure,” Dobie countered, “but what’s wrong with being a goody-two-shoes? Shouldn’t everyone want to do the right thing? Shouldn’t everyone at least try to be a decent human being?”

“In a perfect world, okay, but...”

“That’s what I’m working toward, Reggie, a perfect world! At least a decent world. May I call you Reggie?”

“No, but you remind me of Pollyanna and Chicken Little rolled into one.”

“O... kay,” Dobie laughed, “but somebody has to make the effort to bring about a perfect world – or as close as possible – and that’s all I’m trying to do.”

“I’d like to teach the world to sing,” Charonne sang the old Coca-Cola ad song, *“in perfect harmony!”*

“Hey, you’re not a bad singer!” Dobie was genuinely surprised. “We should karaoke together sometime!”

“I don’t see that happening,” Charonne was not falling for the attempt to soften him up.

“You and your ilk,” Dobie continued, “laugh at pie-in-the-sky idealists like me, but we are the bravest of them all.”

“Ha!” Charonne scoffed. “You missed your calling as a comedian, Porky!”

“And you as a folk singer, Reggie. But, people like me are the ones who haven’t thrown up our hands, given up, and acquiesced to one side or the other in the false choices of ‘capitalist or communist,’ ‘conservative or liberal,’ ‘Democrat or Republican!’ Some of us refuse to take sides when both sides are idiots who too easily fall for the old ‘divide and conquer’ ploy.”

“You are a persistent little bugger, I’ll grant you that.”

“As to who’s in power...” Dobie was distracted momentarily by the sound of a thump against the wall, followed by the muffled laughter of Bucky and/or Crissie in the other room. “... the answer is everyone, on a rotating basis and only after proper training. Everyone will have a say and a part to play. Hey, that rhymes! That can be our catch phrase. But, seriously, all good ideas will be considered. And no more company secrets.”

“Still not buying it,” said Charonne. “A person has to *earn* their power. You can’t just *give* it to them, or you’ll have clueless, entitled idiots running things!”

“Like we have now?” Dobie countered. “Most of the executives at your own company – with their la-di-da degrees from overrated colleges – are idiots. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Yes, but...”

Dobie couldn’t help but glance at the teleconference screen this time to see his ex-fellow employees’ reaction to their boss calling his own company executives idiots. What he saw were several employees – every time he glanced over, there were more of them – high-fiving each other. He almost wished they were not muted, but then Charonne would end this debate immediately, and he didn’t want that.

“Anyway, I predict that everyone who is able to will *gladly* volunteer their time in my system once they see that they have a voice, their ideas are heard, and they’re allowed to participate! The only reason they don’t do that now is because the system and assholes like you keep squashing them.”

“It is fun squashing people.” Charonne smiled.

“Some people think I’m crazy,” Dobie continued. “Okay, a lot of people think I’m crazy. But, who’s crazier? Me, for trying to bring about a more fair and just way for us all to live our lives – and thinking I have any kind of chance – or you and your employees and millions of others like them who enable the current system, going to

work every day to a job they hate, working for a bunch of overpaid corporate executives they despise,” he gestured at Charonne, at which the Colonel scoffed, “just so they can afford healthcare and the latest gadgets and subscribe to 500 channels of mind-numbing crap, 495 of which they probably never watch? It’s pretty clear to me who wins the Bat-Shit Crazy Award!

“I want society to be run by everyone and no one, not governments. Definitely not corporations. It will be populated and managed by responsible individuals – properly trained, as I keep saying – on a rotating basis so that there’s no time for the power to go to anyone’s head. We will finally have rule of law, not rule of men, that our misleaders have been promising for so many years.”

Crissie and Bucky returned to the living room – now both dressed, if Crissie’s bathrobe qualified as such – and Dobie quipped, “Hey, look who’s rejoining us. Maybe arguing is better than sex, after all!”

He thought surely both of them could now see the teleconference screen behind Charonne but, if they did, they were not letting on. The Colonel was, for a change, the only one in the dark.

“I wouldn’t go *that* far,” Crissie laughed, “but I like what you’re saying, Dobie. What I heard, anyway. I took Poly Sci at one of those overrated colleges but don’t remember anyone making as much sense as you do. But, even if Reggie can’t admit he’s wrong – and, trust me, he never will – I’ll reveal a few of his dirty little secrets until he cries uncle.”

“What secrets?” Charonne asked.

“Well, for one, that time one of your buddies told you about a huge new contract he was about to sign, only for you to go behind his back and steal it out from under him. He went bankrupt, you know.”

“That’s just business! Everyone does it! Survival of the fittest! I would expect you to do the same if and when you inherit the company. Otherwise, I’ll have you removed from my Will.”

He had Crissie believing she had been added to his will, with ever-increasing bequests “for good behavior.” He had brought in a fake attorney and had her sign fake documents, but it was all a ruse to keep her around. It might have seemed like overkill – even cruel – to most, leading someone on like that, but that was just Charonne entertaining himself.

““Just business,”” Dobie repeated Charonne’s words. ““Survival of the fittest.’ What are we, animals? Most of us have evolved beyond that. I’m trying to get people to rise above their selfishness!”

“Good luck with that!” Charonne gave a derisive laugh, happy to see he was getting a rise out of Dobie. “But, that reminds me. I took the liberty of perusing your psych file.”

“What ‘psych file?’” Dobie was confused.

“Remember Dr. Hieronymus?”

“No. What is that, Greek?” Dobie had no idea what Charonne was talking about, but the Colonel had gotten everyone’s attention.

“Yeah,” Charonne gave the same wicked grin he gave whenever he revealed to an opponent that he had discovered their weak spot. “It seems we shared the same therapist back in Tennessee!”

Dobie remembered now. He was unconcerned. Other than a few stupid missteps – like anyone else – there was nothing terribly embarrassing in there. He doubted the same could be said of Charonne.

“You’ve actually been to a therapist?” Dobie was honestly surprised. “I would not have figured you for the type. But, go ahead, tell us what you found. I’ve got nothing to hide.”

Crissie stood up, glanced at the teleconference screen, pulled open her bathrobe ever-so-briefly – giving the boys back home a show – then wrapped it tightly around herself with a smile.

“Yeah, go ahead, Reggie,” she said. “Be a complete dick. Tell us all about the man’s most personal, private confessions to his therapist. That’ll win everyone over.”

Crissie’s sarcasm, combined with Dobie looking honestly unconcerned, had ruined it for Charonne. *No point turning the screw*, he decided, *when you have no screw driver*.

Crissie went to the wet bar to pour herself a drink. It occurred to her she might want to get properly dressed. Then again, why bother at that point?

“If you had read my book more slowly,” Dobie continued with Charonne, “giving it time to sink in, it would be clear I’m not promoting anything like Communism. An intellectually lazy person might jump to that conclusion, but the last thing I want is for anyone

– especially some power-mad person like you – to have absolute control over the masses.

“I have no problem with capitalism, per se. The problem is the inevitable corruption and greed. And, because greed and lust for power are part of human nature – for the unevolved, at least – the solution is obvious: Make it impossible for anyone to have too much power. The framers of the Constitution knew that. Why not apply it to the economic system, as well?”

Charonne scoffed and took a sip of whiskey.

“You, on the other hand,” Dobie continued, “are perfectly happy with naked aggression, clawing your way to the top, survival of the fittest, bullying taken to extremes. That works for you. You’re good at it.” Charonne smiled. “But, people like you have no place in civilized society.”

Charonne scoffed more loudly this time, then looked to see what Crissie was up to at the wet bar. She stuck her tongue out at him for not pouring her a drink earlier. Seeing his gun on the counter, she thought about sneaking it back with her to the love seat but had nowhere to hide it.

“Need some help, babe?” Charonne asked. She saw the concern in his eyes and knew it was for his gun, not her.

“No, I’m fine, thanks,” she said.

“Can you bring me my gun... and that bottle of George Dickel?”

“I’m not touching your gun!” she said with disgust. “Or your Dickel,” she added with a smile.

“That’s not what you said last night!” Charonne said with a laugh as he got off the couch and slowly made his way toward the wet bar.

She rolled her eyes and put the requested bottle on the bar for him. “My joke was better than yours, but you might want to slow down on the booze.”

Bucky then remembered the gun that was hidden in the shipping crate. And now, like Dobie before him, he wished he had brought it with him.

We Heard Shouting

Kaylie and Watson allowed themselves in through Charonne's unlocked front door. Dobie stood up in surprise at the sight of Kaylie. Everyone else turned and looked.

"We heard shouting," Watson explained, almost apologetic. He was not expecting everyone to be staring at him as soon as he opened the door.

Kaylie gave him a friendly smile. *A little too friendly*, Dobie thought.

"C'mon in! Join the party!" Charonne laughed as he waved them inside, gun in hand. "Is this Old Home Week and I didn't get the memo? Did you hop the fence, too?"

Crissie returned to Bucky.

"The gate was open," Watson said with a wary smile, keeping an eye on the gun. From his angle, he could not see the teleconference screen through the office doors.

Charonne frowned. "Maybe it really is messed up. I assumed Porky was lying."

Kaylie was getting her first glimpse of Charonne, the man responsible for all of Dobie's problems. If she had no idea who he was, she might have found him quite handsome. As it was, he was hideous to her.

To Dobie, with a smile and laugh in her voice, she said, “Still making friends and influencing people, I see, Dobe.”

“You know me!” Dobie said as he started toward her. He had been at least ten yards from the front door, and she and Watson had not yet entered more than a few feet.

“This must be that ‘fine piece of ass’ you’ve talked so much about!” Charonne nodded in Kaylie’s direction as he returned to the couch, still blissfully unaware of his hidden audience. He remembered the conversation he had had with Watson in which he mentioned what he would like to do to Kaylie while Pokorny watched. He was getting aroused now at the thought of it.

“Charmed, I’m sure,” Kaylie was sarcastic.

“That’s my fiancée you’re talking about!” Dobie said angrily, now halfway to her. “Have some class!”

With a surprised smile at the word “fiancée,” Kaylie said, “Don’t worry, Dobe, he ain’t getting anywhere near this fine ass.”

Charonne smirked and took a sip of his drink. He liked a woman who talked back. This Kaylie girl had potential. *She could use a good spanking.*

Crissie also perked up at the word “fiancée.” She announced to the room, “Dobie and I were lovers.”

“You and every man in this room, I’m guessing,” Kaylie laughed, unconcerned.

Crissie frowned. There was no need for that. She suddenly did not like this Kaylie person at all.

Several employees back at SaynCorp again high-fived each other between handfuls of popcorn.

Dobie was hoping against hope that Crissie did not mention how close they had come earlier to rekindling that relationship. *Please don't say anything*, he projected his thoughts at her, hoping she heard him. *Please, please, please don't say anything!*

He had called Kaylie his fiancée – and that was what he considered her though he had not yet actually proposed – but now he was not sure she would accept his proposal.

She noticed that Dobie's shirt was missing a button, but she said nothing. *Probably just snagged it on something.*

He had used the “JD / Don't believe a word” code word several times prior to leaving the Azores, but had to be careful to not make it too obvious. Watson would have caught on. Did Kaylie not catch that? If she believed what he had said, he was screwed.

A shiver went down his back. *What have I done?* He steeled himself for the possibility that Kaylie was now with Watson. *They are awfully chummy.*

There was only one way, Dobie decided, to find out for sure. He stepped up, took Kaylie's hand in his, pulled her close to him, and looked deep into her eyes

She smiled warmly but glanced back at Watson. Dobie hesitated at that glance. He then took her strongly into his arms, and she let him. *So far so good.*

When he kissed her, he purposely pulled her toward the middle of the room so that they were on camera. She had not noticed their audience yet.

It was a long, slow, “you have no idea how much I missed you” kiss. Once finished, they returned their attention to everyone else in the room – and beyond – only to find all of them watching.

Kaylie blushed, and then blushed even harder when she saw their audience on the big-screen in the other room. They were all standing up and applauding, though their microphone was off and no one heard them.

Dobie laughed. Bucky was giving him the thumbs-up sign. Crissie had a jealous look.

Please, please, please don't say anything!

Watson gave a wan smile before turning his attention to Crissie. It would have been nice to get to know Kaylie better, he thought, but she had made it clear that she belonged to Dobie.

The smirk never left Charonne's face until Kaylie pointed at the screen and asked, “What is that?”

Charonne turned around and finally saw that their entire conversation had been on camera. His face went white. “Has that thing...” he pointed.

“... been on the entire time?” Dobie finished helpfully. “Yep! Your entire staff now knows that even you think your executives are idiots!”

“Ah, well,” Charonne gave a defeated little laugh after another sip of whiskey, “they had to learn eventually, if they hadn’t already figured that out themselves.”

Kaylie and Dobie returned to the chaise lounge while Watson moved further into the room to see the teleconference screen for himself. He shook his head, chuckled to himself, and returned to lean up against the wall next to the wet bar. Charonne had pulled the gun from out of there, so Watson wanted to be close to that in case there were more guns where that came from. It had the added benefit of being out of camera view.

“What’s with the gun?” Watson finally asked Charonne.

“Oh, nothing,” Charonne’s words were now slurred. “We were having an argument. Pokorny was babbling about rainbows and lollipops, and I thought I should have a gun on me in case I needed to shoot him. You know, S.O.P.”

“Standard operating procedure?” Dobie clarified. “Yes, when you’re unable to carry on an intelligent conversation it is comforting to know you can always just shoot the messenger.”

“Please!” Charonne spat. “You are absolutely losing this argument! Am I right?” he turned and asked Crissie.

When she reluctantly shook her head, no, he waved her off angrily and pointed at Bucky. “Even you must know your friend Porky here is full of shit.”

“Well, yeah, he is full of it,” Bucky surprised everyone. To Dobie, he winked and said, “I think you took Frosty the Snowman’s advice a little too seriously, dude.”

“Huh?” Dobie was confused.

“*So be good for goodness’ sake!*” Bucky sang the line from that Christmas animation classic’s theme song.

Dobie scoffed and said with a smile, “Bite me.”

“But his name is Pokorny,” Bucky turned back to Charonne, “and *he* is winning this argument.”

Charonne shook his head. “What about you, Major? You’ve been listening to Pokorny’s bullshit longer than anyone. Surely, you have an opinion.”

“I can take him or leave him,” said Watson. “Some of it is completely wrong. Some of it is the God’s honest truth. Doesn’t matter much to me, either way. Mind if I smoke?”

“Yes!” everyone in the room turned on him.

“Well,” Charonne did the math in his head, which took a moment because he had by that point drunk most of that bottle of whiskey. “I guess that makes three and a half for him, and one and a half for me. No, wait, add in ‘piece of ass Kaylie’ here and that’s four and a half for Porky.”

“That’s it!” Dobie stood up, furious. “You either apologize to her or I kick your ass right here in front of everyone!” To prove he was serious, he took a step toward Charonne.

“Ha! You wish,” Charonne slurred, now noticeably drunk. He had been holding his liquor well up to that point but it was now hitting him. “I could kill you with my bare hands. But... I just had a manicure and don’t want to ruin it!” He did not like to get his hands dirty, literally or figuratively.

With a smile to his employees back home, he then asked, “What do you all think? Unmute yourselves and let us know who is winning this debate! Just remember you’re fired if you don’t agree with me! Ha, just kidding... maybe. But, seriously, show of hands, who thinks I’m winning?”

Everyone turned their attention to their remote audience. There were about thirty people visible now, and who knows how many more listening in off camera. Roughly a quarter of them reluctantly raised their hands while glancing around meekly at the other three-fourths.

Charonne scoffed angrily, “Bunch of idiots!”

“And who back home thinks *I’m* winning?” Dobie asked with a smile.

Everyone else raised their hands and gave a huge cheer. And that was it. This was all the proof that Dobie needed to declare at least an interim victory in his “war upon the status quo.” He was winning the people’s hearts and minds! It was a small sample size, but he took great comfort in the thought that he was on the right track.

A great weight lifted off his shoulders. He had not been this happy about anything in a very long time. Anything unrelated to Kaylie, anyway.

He had a big, goofy grin on his face as Bucky ran out the front door. “I, uh, forgot something!” said Bucky.

“Coward!” Charonne shouted after him. “I should shoot the bastard for desertion!” Turning to his remote employees, he added, “And I am going to have anyone who didn’t vote for me fired!” Several of them – HR Director Norwich among them – crept away to get off camera.

With Bucky gone, out the door, Dobie raised his remote control and warned Charonne, “Un-un-uh, Reggie! Don’t forget your toys!”

“I can buy new toys,” he shot back. “I’m rich! Besides, *your* little toy won’t work. Go ahead, press the button.”

Dobie gave Watson a confused look, hoping for support, but Watson only shrugged. Dobie then pressed the big green button on the remote control, fully expecting the lights to go out, white noise from household appliances to go quiet, and the teleconference connection to be lost. Instead, just as Charonne had predicted, nothing happened.

With Dobie clearly distraught, Charonne smiled and explained, “This entire house is a Faraday Cage. The walls, roof and windows have a film deflecting incoming radio waves. You all may have noticed your cellphones don’t get a signal in here. Wi-Fi doesn’t work, either. Anything wireless.”

“What about the video conferencing equipment?” Crissie asked.
“How is that working?”

“That’s wired, not wireless,” he snapped at her before returning his attention to Pokorny. “When you pressed your little button, you just fried all of my neighbors’ electronics but left me untouched! Now I can break into their homes and steal whatever I want without worrying about their security systems! Or, I can let them piggyback off my own undamaged electrical system and charge them exorbitant fees! You, of all people, have just enabled me to make a profit at the expense of those less fortunate, Porky! Thank you! Capitalism at its finest!”

Dobie was completely deflated. Charonne had known all along that his pulse capacitor would not work. That explained his mysterious smile earlier. Dobie had just ruined everyone but Charonne’s day.

All that rotting food! “Hang on,” it then dawned on him, “a Faraday Cage will block all wireless signals, incoming and outgoing! My EMP device never even received my remote signal. I didn’t damage anything!”

“Aw, hell,” Charonne was disappointed. Pokorny was not as stupid as he hoped, but this whole thing had gone on way too long. He finally cocked the gun and pointed it at Dobie.

Watson raised his own, for self-preservation if nothing else, but held fire.

Bucky returned from outside up just in time with that gun from the packing crate. He did not like the look of things, or the look in Charonne's eyes. To stall him, he asked, "So what's up with Charlie and Jeffrey out there? Your golf carts."

"Oh them," Charonne laughed. "Those are my two favorite psychos! You can guess their last names."

"Oh...kay."

Charonne then finally arose from the couch and staggered drunkenly into his office. With one last smile at his employees back home, he flipped them off, said, "Show's over, folks!" and shut down the teleconference. He did not want any witnesses to what he was about to do.

Winning the crowd over as Dobie had done, Charonne decided the "Sortitionist" had to die. The Colonel had tried to get others to do his dirty work for him, *but if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself!*

Returning to the living room, shaking his head – deeply disappointed in Crissie, Watson, and his entire office staff – Charonne pointed his gun at the "enemy combatants." Bucky was armed, so he came first. Next would be Dobie, then Crissie for her sexual betrayal. She was supposed to ask permission before having sex with anyone else. That was the agreement. He assumed Major Watson was still on his side, so he ignored him and fired at Bucky.

You Had Your Turn

Bucky went down, apparently hit, but not before he fired off his own wild shot. It went through the open office doors and into the tele-conference big-screen, destroying it.

Charonne then pointed his gun at Dobie, but Watson – completely sober and almost always the best shot in any room – very efficiently put three slugs into his now-former boss: Abdomen, heart and head, in that order.

As was the case in the Azores with Bourges, the Major might have been okay with Dobie being shot, but Kaylie was sitting next to him and Watson did not want to risk her being collateral damage.

With the Colonel now dead on the floor, and Watson grinning that “killed someone who needed killing” grin, he crowed, “That makes *how many times* now I’ve saved y’all?!”

“Bucky!” Dobie shouted as he leaped from his seat, ignoring Watson as he ran up and took a knee next to his friend to check on him.

Watson tried to high-five Kaylie as she passed by on her way to join Dobie at Bucky’s side, but she only gave him a curt “thanks.” She did not share his celebratory mood.

Feeling rebuffed, Watson very seriously then returned to business. “We need to get rid of the bodies.”

Laughing as he propped himself up onto one elbow, Bucky cackled, “I’m okay! I’m okay! He missed completely! I was just playing dead!”

Dobie rolled his eyes and scoffed. Kaylie exhaled in relief. They both looked over at Charonne to make sure that he was not also faking it.

Crissie answered that question when she reached down and took the man’s pulse. “He’s dead!” she said with a happy little laugh.

Bucky, still giggling at his own ruse, then made a suggestion. “We could pull a *Weekend at Bernie’s*. You know, check Charonne here into the Grand Hotel and leave him!”

“Or,” Crissie joined in happily, “we could stuff and mount him like one of these poor animals on the walls!”

Major Watson laughed with the other two, but Kaylie and Dobie were shaking their heads, not seeing the humor.

Leaving Charonne on the floor, Crissie said, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to call my lawyer. Being the new owner of Sayn-Corp, and all, we have things to discuss!” That got everyone’s attention, so she added, “Yeah – you probably heard him mention it earlier – I had him put me in his will a few months ago. I saw it with my own two little eyes.”

“Congratulations... I guess,” Dobie said, half-hearted, as Kaylie took him by the arm. “But we need to go before the cops show up. Bucky, you coming?”

With visions dancing in his head of himself as one of Crissie's newly-appointed executives, Bucky said, "No, I'll stay here with Crissie." When he smiled at her but didn't get the same in return, he added, "If it's okay with her."

Crissie shook her head, no. Smiling at Watson, she said to Bucky, "No, honey. Randy and I here go way back. He's been patient. It's his turn."

"Who the hell's Randy?"

"Major Watson," Crissie and Kaylie replied simultaneously and pointed at the man in question, then eyed each other uncomfortably.

"Besides," Crissie continued, "isn't there some kinda unwritten rule that says whoever kills your man gets to replace him?" She took Watson's arm, copying what Kaylie had done with *her* man.

Watson said to Dobie, "You're not the only babe magnet around here, my brother."

Now the odd man out, Bucky said, "What the hell? Are we back in the Middle Ages or Mongol Horde days where dude here," he pointed at Watson, "rides in and takes our women?"

"Careful," Dobie warned, "I've got some Mongol blood in me."

"Huh?" Bucky was confused

"Yeah, I'm thinking of visiting Lake Baikal someday," Dobie explained. "I know it's in Siberia now, but it used to be Mongol territory."

With everyone now confused, he explained, "I submitted my DNA to one of those genealogy DNA websites? The results came back with Eurasian, European and, somehow, a little bit of African."

Watson smiled. "Maybe we *are* brothers."

"Well, if you go back far enough," Dobie said, "I guess we're all cousins, at least, several hundred times removed. But, no, that African thing was from a DNA company out there spiking Europeans' results with a bit of African, just to freak them out and make them less racist. I'm in favor of being less racist, but you can't lie to people like that. The ends do not justify the means if..."

"Fascinating!" Bucky cut him off, not fascinated, in no mood now for one of Dobie's speeches.

"Can we, um, talk about this later?" Kaylie asked. "There's a dead man on the floor, and I really want to get out of here."

Ignoring her, Crissie felt Bucky deserved an explanation. "You had your turn, Bucky," she said. "And what a turn! Wow!" She gave the thumbs-up sign.

Dobie then realized that his first impression of Crissie was correct: Men lined up, waiting their turn. At least she was honest about it and trying to be nice.

Bucky was still shaking his head at this turn of events when Kaylie asked if he needed a ride. "Drop me at that diner back in town, I guess," he said sadly. "The one with the cute waitress? I've already put a down payment on her."

“Diner? Are they hiring?!” Kaylie feigned interest while seriously wondering about Bucky’s ‘down payment’ comment.

“What do you mean you put a down payment on her?” Dobie asked Bucky.

“I gave her an extra five-dollar tip after breakfast,” he said with a shrug. “I consider that a down payment.”

“Hmm,” said Kaylie. “That *might* be part of your problem with women right there. Just saying.”

“What?” said Bucky. “I only say that in my head. I didn’t say it out loud. I’m just being honest with you all.”

Everyone but Bucky was shaking their head.

~

Back on the mainland, Dobie and Kaylie dropped Bucky at the diner, as requested. They gave each other a look, hesitated a moment, then silently agreed to go inside with him. They were hungry, but also felt an obligation to warn this waitress about Bucky. Luckily for her, she wasn’t there. It was not her shift.

When they offered to give Bucky a ride somewhere else, he declined, saying he needed time alone. He couldn’t bear to ride with them, being the third wheel. He would take a bus home.

“A bus?” Kaylie asked, concerned. “That’s hundreds of miles. Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” said Bucky. “But, hey, Dobie?”

“Yes, my son.”

“‘Son?’ What the...”

“Joking. What’s up?”

“Can you spot me a couple hundred bucks? You know I’m good for it.”

Dobie knew he was *not* good for it, but he did need to be paid for his services. Dobie never promised anything beyond “adventure” when first mentioning “the job” to Bucky. His friend was happy to help, free of charge, no questions asked. “So long as all expenses are paid!”

“Here,” Dobie offered, turning down a side street, “let me find an ATM.”

Eventually finding one, he pulled out \$500. “Here you go,” he handed \$300 of it over his shoulder to Bucky in the back seat.

“Three hundred! Thanks, man!”

“No problem. Keep it. It’s only money. Payment for services rendered. Come to think of it, Crissie probably owes you another couple hundred for stud services!”

Bucky laughed, and kept giggling at the thought as they drove around Saint Ignace looking for the bus station. Kaylie eventually looked it up on her phone and navigated them straight to it.

Bucky climbed out of *Sabina* at the curb and, still giggling, said, “Maybe *that* should be my next career move. Buck Naked: Stud Services! I like the sound of that.”

With one final smile back at their friend, Kaylie and Dobie once again drove off into the sunset.

~

“I never did get to blow anything to Kingdom Come,” Dobie complained a few minutes later. “I’m a little disappointed!”

“Don’t worry, babe,” she patted his arm. “I’m sure we’ll find something along the way for you to blow up. Maybe a corporate headquarters building? Abandoned, of course.”

He laughed – even snorted, which made her laugh – then said, “But seriously, after all the touring, speeches and everything, I still needed Watson and his gun to bail me out. Three times! I don’t think I have made a dent in the battle of good against evil. Charonne’s empire – and others like it – will still continue.

“Speaking of dents,” he changed the subject to something other than his perceived abject failure, “I should find a place to fix that dent in *Sabina*’s rear panel.”

“Maybe the good impression you made on Crissie...” Kaylie began. “I’m assuming you made a good impression. She was on your side back there with Charonne.”

Remembering how he almost had sex with Crissie, then didn’t, Dobie made the waffling “maybe-maybe not” hand gesture.

“Well, I’m sure that good impression will affect how SaynCorp does business from now on with her in charge. Maybe they’ll even start providing employees with free plasticware again!”

“Free plasticware was not really where I was going with all this...”

“Then,” she was not finished, “they’ll start letting everyone have a say in how things are done. Baby steps. Like you always say, it’s not like in the movies. In real life, there is usually no wham-bam climactic finish with the hero saving the day. Things take time. I’m just saying it wasn’t all for nothing. You won the argument. You had everyone, including Charonne’s own employees, on your side. Be happy with that!”

“Maybe,” he appreciated the pep talk but was not convinced.

“Even if you didn’t make a dent, you still ended up with the greatest prize of all! Me!” And she laughed that beautiful laugh.

“Well, yeah. I mean, you’re more than I ever could have hoped for, personally. But, on a global scale, you and I are just two drops in the ocean.”

“I prefer to think of us as two flowers... surrounded by fertilizer. But then, the birds and the bees will pollinate us, spread our seeds and, before you know it, the world will be full of beautiful flowers!”

“Wow, that was good,” he was impressed. “I love a good analogy.”

“I had a great teacher,” she smiled.

“And the student has become the master. But, hey, the Brewers are playing tomorrow. If we hurry, we might make it to Milwaukee in time.”

“Sure! I am willing to go anywhere in the world with you, Dobbie. Even Milwaukee.”

“If you’re game, so am I! Bad pun intended. But, is there such a thing as a good pun? Wait... we can’t go.”

“Can’t go to Milwaukee?!” she was sarcastic. “No!”

“I know, I know, but there’s something I need to do in Muskegon. The pun reminded me. And we can’t do both.”

“Oh, right, your hometown. Are your parents still there?”

“Yep,” he said with a wistful smile, then quickly changed the subject.

“You think Watson knew Charonne’s house was a Faraday Cage all along, and that my pulse capacitor would never work?”

“Probably. You know how he is.”

He nodded his head. “But, hey, uh, were you and Watson... Did you two ever, uh...?”

“No!”

“Oh, thank God,” he was relieved.

“He’s wanted to since we first met.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Something was stopping him,” she continued. “I think out of respect for you, he couldn’t bring himself to steal me away.”

Dobie was unconvinced that such noble sentiments were possible in Watson. “More likely,” he guessed, “he just felt guilty for trying to brainwash you into sleeping with him.”

“How do you figure?”

“Remember, back in Taos? You couldn’t remember why you ran off with him?”

She nodded uncertainly, not liking where this conversation was going. She didn't want to believe she had been – or even could be – brainwashed.

She then smiled, reached over, took his hand, and said, “Well, I never would have let him have me, anyway. I saved myself for you, Dobie!”

“Never once doubted it,” he lied.

“We had sex, of course,” she joked, “but other than that...” When he frowned, she said, “Joking! I *did* have to let him massage my feet, though.”

“What?”

“Yeah, not joking about that. Before he would agree to come back to the States with me, I had to let him massage my feet. I told you, the man has a foot fetish.”

~

Four hours later, they were pulling into Muskegon. As they drove slowly down a narrow street very familiar from Dobie's childhood, he slowed almost to a stop.

“There's my old house up ahead,” he announced. “The green one on the corner. It's pretty faded now. And the trees are huge now!”

When they drove past it, Kaylie gave a confused look. “You just passed it.”

“Yeah, they don't live there anymore.”

“Oh, so where...” She stopped mid-sentence as they pulled into the cemetery across the street.

“Yeah, they’re gone. It’s been about eight years since Dad passed. Thirteen for Mom.”

Pulling to the curb and opening the door, he said, “I’m gonna go visit the grave site. I wish I’d brought flowers.”

At the grave, he knelt and wiped the leaves and pine needles off the joint headstone. The names etched in brass were Walter “Bart” Pokorny Jr. and Lisa L. Riley-Pokorny.

Kaylie was surprised when Dobie crossed himself as she joined him and did the same. “You made the sign of the cross!”

“For them, yeah. They’d appreciate it.” He then self-consciously ran his hands through his hair.

Kaylie smiled. She pictured his mother running her hands through his hair as a child as they got ready for church. He was now on his best behavior for his parents.

“So, your dad was a Junior, huh?”

“Yeah, he never liked that. He thought everyone deserved their own name. That’s why he went by Bart instead of Walter, which was his dad’s name.”

“What does the ‘L’ in your mom’s name stand for?”

“Uh, Lorraine. I had to think for a second. She never liked that, either. They used to laugh about neither of them being particularly fond of their own names. They always said they’d be buried here,”

he continued, wiping away a tear, “since it was ‘just across the street, and all.’ They were no-nonsense kinda people.”

She smiled. He never talked about his parents, but the love was clearly there. She wondered how they died but was not going to ask. They had the rest of their lives for that.

~

Somewhere along the Interstate south of Muskegon and before Indianapolis, they drove past a man and woman sitting on the other side of the highway, in handcuffs. Two Indiana State Police cars, lights flashing, were behind the couple’s car.

“Hey, isn’t that...” Dobie began, looking over.

“JD and my mom,” Kaylie finished for him. “Yep. I recognized JD’s car from a mile away.”

“I’d forgotten all about them. What are they doing up this way? Think they figured out where...?”

“Who knows?” she snapped more angrily than she meant to. “Just keep driving!”

“No problem,” he was surprised by her tone. To lighten the mood as Bucky would have done – and as “the universe” had suggested earlier – he added, “Now might be a good time to slap the dashboard and shout, ‘Go, go, go!’ like you did when we escaped from the Blue Spoon.”

She didn't laugh. It wasn't that funny. Besides, she was sad to leave her mom behind, not that she had a choice with JD there with her.

Then she had an idea. "You have that gun," she asked, "that Bucky had back at Charonne's?"

"No, he kept it. Why?"

Smiling guiltily, she admitted, "I just thought we might turn around and shoot JD while he's sitting there, you know, in handcuffs and all."

He laughed out loud, not expecting such murderous thoughts from Kaylie. "Uh, yeah, I'm pretty sure that's against the law and we'd just end up in prison."

"Fine," she had to laugh at herself. "You're no fun at all!"

"We could stop and tell the cops what he did to you..."

"No!" she was horrified by the thought, "I don't want to deal with that again. Just drive. I have faith that his karma will catch up to him eventually."

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... to find out how it ends!

About William Arthur Holmes

Originally from Sacramento, California, I have been calling Tennessee home for the past 20+ years. I am married, with a young daughter, an old pug and one cat.

Available titles are *Temporary Insanity*, *Lottery President*, *Operation Detour*, *Last Train Out*, and *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo*, which can all be found at williamarthurholmes.com

