

# **Operation Detour**

William Arthur Holmes

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## **Riva**

Riva's gray eyes reach out and grab anyone careless enough to look directly at her. Her flawless skin almost glows in contrast to her luxurious black hair. Her striking beauty has a hypnotic effect on most men. She knows it, and is perfectly happy using it to her advantage most days.

Today will not be one of those days. Her hair is a tangled mess, her eyes are bloodshot, and her skin has a sickly pallor from whatever ailment has befallen her.

She is holed up in an over-priced high-rise hotel on LA's west side awaiting the arrival of Serge, her boss. She hates waiting. On anyone or anything. The fact that she might be coming down with something only makes it worse.

She is passing the time with her evening yoga, in the "downward-facing dog" position, when she gets the distinct feeling that she is not alone. Someone is in the room with her, she is sure of it.

She cuts the session short with a quick *namasté*, picks up the small-caliber pistol she always keeps within reach, and digs into her purse, looking for that magical little device that was given to her at training. The thing detects electronic bugs and heat signatures, all in one. She is not typically impressed with gadgetry but has to admit this thing is pretty cool.

"*There* you are," she coos upon finding what the uninitiated might mistake for a cell phone. Clipping it to

her waistband now to leave one hand free, she flips the thing on and begins her inspection of the hotel suite.

She finds nothing behind the couch, and so moves to the kitchenette. Opening every cabinet and drawer, she is finding no bugs or bad guys. She edges down the narrow hallway and past the front door, but her device detects nothing there, either.

*This thing also believes I am crazy*, she laughs silently, knowing that she is anything *but* crazy. People have been saying she is for most of her life, but she keeps proving them wrong.

She takes a peek out the peephole. If there is anyone out there, they are not generating any body heat. There is no one in the bathroom, shower or cabinets, either.

*Maybe this place is haunted?* she wonders.

As she enters the bedroom, the "bug detector" starts vibrating furiously. A deep-voiced chortle then emanates from the back of the room, and she flips on the ceiling light.

There, on her bed, propped up against the headboard with his hands tucked behind his head, sits Serge. He is wearing his signature black thick-rimmed eyeglasses, a smile, and absolutely nothing else. His chortle turns to roaring laughter now that he's been discovered.

"Oh, dear God," she gasps at the site of his naked, middle-aged corpulence. "Put some clothes on! Nobody wants to see that."

"You look like hell," he manages between laughs, running a hand through his hair.

Riva is fluent in several languages and now uses one of her all-time favorite phrases, "Bite me."

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Unlike Riva, Serge is the opposite of beautiful, with or without clothes, healthy or not. With his bulging, narrowly-set eyes, bulldog jowls and just a hint of a chin that only serves to accentuate his oversized nose, he is not what anyone in any culture would consider attractive.

He is fully aware of this, of course, and as a counter-measure will often adopt a jovial air. He knows people are more inclined to trust a happy person. Gaining their ill-advised trust is the only reason he cares what anyone might think of him.

"You couldn't text first?" she complains.

"I have to keep you on your toes," he speaks with an accent that is vaguely foreign to anyone listening, no matter what the native language of that listener might be. Born Sergiusz Kolza, he anglicized it to Serge Coleman upon migrating from Bulgaria to England as a teen-aged illegal alien.

"Are you sick?" he asks while sliding off the bed to pull his pants back on.

"Yes, and I hope it's contagious. Here, give me a kiss," she jokes. When he pulls his pants back down to give her something to kiss, she vomits onto the bed sheet, barely missing him. She then shouts, "I was just kidding, you old perv!"

Laughing, he says, "Seriously, Riva, you are sloppy. Do not let people surprise you like this. It will get you killed."

"It will get *you* killed!" She is in no mood for his cheerful insults. "You must stop sneaking up on me. And stop with the non-stop lessons and 'helpful' hints! I am

twenty-six years old and fully trained. That is why I am here!"

"My apologies," he says, coming toward her. "But you are *not* quite fully trained. No one is *ever* fully trained. Did I not see you looking out the peephole just now? We trained you better than that!"

She gives him a dirty look. "Forever correcting me!" she is still shouting. "Criticizing, finding fault, nitpicking! It is maddening!" He has struck a nerve again, and she hates that he gets under her skin so easily.

Laughing and shrugging his shoulders, he says, "That is my role, *mon fleur*. What would you have me do?"

"I never hear a 'Well done' or 'Nice job,'" she says, now holding her pounding head. "'Nice ass' doesn't count."

And with that, she adjourns to the living room. She considers dropping the handgun onto the end table, but decides against it. She and Serge are *not* friends. It is best to be armed at all times in his presence. The bug detector, she does set down.

Their relationship has followed an evolution of prisoner-emancipator, then student-teacher, and now agent-handler. It was during their "prisoner-emancipator" phase – when he took great pains to be kind and considerate while grooming her – that they became lovers. It was during their "student-teacher" phase that he raped her... twice. He claimed innocence at the time, "You cannot rape someone you are already sleeping with!"

He, like so many men, failed to understand that sex was, is, and always will be okay *only* when it is between two consenting adults. She has hated him ever since the rape, not only for his brutality, but also sheer stupidity in

not understanding that it was in fact rape. She is stuck with him for now, unfortunately, but it helps knowing that she *will* get even someday. She just hasn't quite decided *how* yet.

If she is never given the chance to kill him herself, she takes comfort in the thought that he *will* meet his end – violently – at the hands of one of his many sexual conquests, gambling victims, or countless other enemies.

Noticing the over-sized towel that she had left draped over the back of the couch, she now wraps it around her shoulders like a shawl. Moving to the window, she studies the shadowy figures on the street below, memorizing their shapes and movements.

From his position behind her, Serge smiles lasciviously while focusing on her perfect, heart-shaped ass.

Catching this in the window's reflection, Riva rolls her eyes. She turns and says, "I am amazed – as old and horny as you are – you have never been caught in a 'honey trap.' So many men simply cannot control their zippers!"

And she returns her gaze to something, anything somewhere outside.

Moving in from behind as she stares out the window, Serge raises his arms as if about to massage her shoulders... or strangle her.

"*Es-tu prêt?*" he asks.

"*Je ne parle pas Français,*" she says, turning back around. French is not one of her languages. Unsmiling, focused on his hands, she asks, "Why are we speaking French? '*Mon fleur*' and now '*es-tu*' something?"

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"Are you ready?" he translates his own question while ignoring hers and carefully placing his hands upon her shoulders.

Her eyes flash at his touch, but she maintains control. Exhaling, she says, "Yes, I am ready."

"Say it like you mean it!" he grabs her firmly.

Despite her nasal congestion, she can smell the onion garlic bread on his breath. She cringes and turns away, deliberately showing as much contempt as her pounding head will allow. He despises the slightest perceived disrespect from women, especially younger women, and she knows it. Worst of all, he simply cannot tolerate disrespect from those who *work* for him. Numerous women – and men – showing such disrespect have wound up dead.

She also knows that Serge can't kill her. He has spent too much time and effort and, other than those times he forced himself upon her, she has not yet served her purpose.

He is still up in her face, holding her arms, when she decides against antagonizing him any further. She decides to play along, humor him. And so, smiling and shouting like a new recruit, she shouts, "I am ready, *moy kapetan!*"

"Much better," he oozes. His hands slide down her arms to her hips, pausing a moment before firmly grabbing her buttocks. Looking deep into her eyes, he awaits her reaction.

Other than a sudden, cold stillness, she has none. Even her pulse is now barely perceptible as she awaits her next move.

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For Riva, this is *déjà vu* of the final moments of her adoptive father's life. Her *second* adoptive father. The one she killed. They had been in this exact position. She had been giggling happily about something one moment – being a silly little girl, trying to enjoy what little childhood life had allowed her – only to turn cold and quiet when *he* had grabbed her with that familiar, disgusting look in his eyes. And now, as then – and for similar reasons – she is seriously considering killing the man standing in front of her.

The only thing stopping her is the knowledge that Serge's people would hunt her down and kill her. It is not the fear of death that is stopping her now so much as it is her unwillingness to allow Serge or his people the pleasure of killing her.

Perversely aroused by Riva's stillness, unaware of the murderous thoughts running through her head, Serge hisses like a snake, "Yessss! Very nice!" He slides in behind her, pressing himself against her as he moves. "Tell me again what your assignment is."

Riva drones robotically, "I must find someone... and..."

Something inside her then snaps. At the depths of cold-blooded murderous thoughts one moment, the next moment finds her giggling then bursting out laughing, unable to control herself. She is laughing hysterically now.

Serge does not know what to make of it. All he can do is step back, adjust his crotch, and wait for her to get over it. For a moment, he worries she might be having a mental breakdown.

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His concern is then replaced by sexual arousal when he realizes that he is responsible for this emotional outburst of hers. He is the one causing distress so extreme it has sent her "round the bend." For a man like Serge, there are very few things more satisfying than that.

Riva tries to regain control. She tries to recite her lines, but she finds it difficult. *Get a hold of yourself*, she scolds herself.

She eventually does manage to marshal her emotions and reduce her laughter to a stifled giggle. She then picks up where she left off. "I must find someone and... make him my bitch!"

"Not your 'bitch,'" Serge corrects her with an uneasy laugh, still not sure what got into her. "Your *asset*. Your pawn. We are chess players, you and I. We must be cold. Calculating. Like you did when I put my hands on your ass. That was very good! Judging by your reaction, it was good for *you*, too!" He tries to be funny. "You see there? I can give compliments. But this... laughing fit of yours... this was bad. *Very* bad."

Again, she rolls her eyes.

He adds, "We must be in control at all times."

"Are you finished?" she asks, then turns and points her ass at him. "I shall make him my *asset*."

"Good," he gives an awkward chuckle. "But tell me again why we are ruining this stupid git's life?"

She recites from memory one of the many lines drilled into her during training, usually by Serge himself: "Sacrifice of the one, for the good of the many!"

"Yes!"

"Anyone in particular you want sacrificed?" she asks.

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"To keep it interesting for you, I have procured someone entirely clean – no criminal past whatever – and have prepared him specially for you, my dear Riva."

"What do you mean 'prepared?' "

Not answering the question, he says, "I have recently returned from Palm Springs. Lovely this time of year! Warm, but not too hot. A few trees, but not too many. I do not like a lot of trees."

Riva gives him a look. "Who does not like trees?"

"I like trees just fine, just not too many! But, I met a beautiful young man there. A male model named Christian, ironically."

"How is that ironic?" she asks, but there is no answer. "So, a young man, you say? Don't ask, don't tell?" When he stares at her coldly as if considering snapping her neck, she changes the subject. "This 'beautiful young man' is my target?"

"No! God, no! It is his best friend that I have chosen for you."

"Why him?"

"He insulted me," Serge replies petulantly.

"That's it?" she asks. "He insulted you, so now we ruin his life?"

"And why not?" he replies with a laugh.

Riva shrugs, reminding herself that it should not matter to her, either way. That was the deal: Serge gets her out of prison, she does whatever he asks.

"And now," he continues, "we... or, rather, *you* turn him into your own little patsy. But remember, we will be expecting results. Failure is not an option."

## **They're out to get me**

### **Two weeks later**

Have you ever felt like someone was out to get you? I'm not talking paranoia. I'm talking about a real, live person deliberately trying to ruin your life. Neither had I, until now.

Hello. Alex Pannas here. Sorry we're not meeting under better circumstances. I could be philosophical about it all, but don't see the point. Yes, I'm bitter, but I'll get through this! They say attitude is everything. We don't have "problems," we're given "opportunities!"

I'm usually pretty good at keeping it light, keeping it positive. Not today. I was fired today. But wait, there's more!

Coming home early, I caught my girlfriend Cheryl and now-former best friend Christian cheating on me... and filming it... in *my* bed. Turns out, they've been doing this for a while. Yeah.

I almost missed my doctor's appointment because of it. Actually, I kind of wish I *had* missed that appointment. Then I never would have known about this incurable new disease I seem to have.

How is it even possible for so many things to go wrong in one day? I thought it was all just a series of unfortunate events. I mean, a healthy person doesn't go around assuming there's a conspiracy against him, right?

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Turns out, in my case, there is. If I seem flippant, that's just how I cope. You either laugh or you cry. You apparently start referring to yourself in the second person, too.

Anyway, to answer the obvious question: No, I don't know which disease I am the not-so-proud owner of now. Whatever it is, there aren't any symptoms. If I had stopped to think about that, I would have asked "How do you know *anything* is wrong, if there are no symptoms?" But I didn't do that. I'm a trusting person. I just took my doctor's word for it.

I *do* know it's *not* sexually-transmitted. I asked that much. But when the doctor tried to tell me the rest, I freaked out and bolted out the door before he could finish. I didn't want to hear it. Could not take any more bad news at that point, though I did slow down on my way out, enough to grab the prescription in the doctor's hand. He probably said something, but I wasn't listening.

Sorry if I'm depressing you. Things can only improve from here, right? I'll call the doctor back when I'm ready.

I'm at the pharmacy now, trying to get that prescription filled. It's just before noon, and I haven't made it to the unemployment office yet... if I ever do.

The pharmacist appears to be a transvestite. I try to be cool. I now know something about being an outsider. Nothing like what s/he must feel, but I can commiserate.

Yesterday, I would have considered her a freak and had no sympathy. Today, I almost feel like we're in the same boat. Almost.

See that? I'm already growing as a person, and not even halfway through the day! It's amazing what a change of circumstances can do to one's perspective.

The pharmacist is shaking her head, having trouble reading the doctor's scribbled prescription. "What is this?" she says. "I can't read it."

I had apparently crumpled the paper into a little ball, unconsciously. I give the universal "no idea" gesture: elbows bent, palms up and out. I wonder how anyone *ever* gets the right prescription. I can never read them even when I know what it says.

"I don't know, dude..." I begin, immediately regretting my choice of words.

"What do you mean, 'dude'?"

"Oh... no, no," I try to recover. "I'm sorry. I call everyone 'dude!' Friends, girlfriends, male, female. I mean my girlfriends are always female, but... not that there's anything wrong... I've been calling everyone 'dude' my entire life."

I don't think she believes me, but she has also stopped caring and returned her attention to the prescription. "What is the prescription for?" she sighs deeply. "What is it supposed to *do*?"

I shrug. "I was hoping *you* could tell *me*. The doctor just handed it to me. He never said what it was." I realize that last part is probably a lie, but that's my story.

Again, shaking her head, then nodding, she says, "Wait here while I find out."

But I don't wait there. That's not my style. I begin perusing the aisles. Before I know it, I'm talking to this 40-

something gentleman, a complete stranger. He is about my height and build. Same skin color: not quite lily white, not quite tan. Nicely dressed. Professional.

"Nice suit," I say.

He tilts his head back, flares his nostrils, narrows his eyes, but says nothing. Not the talkative type.

"Am I in the middle of a bad dream or something?" I persist.

"Probably," he says, looking me up and down before walking away.

*Smart-ass.*

I follow him, talking to his backside now. "I mean, life could not *possibly* get this screwed up, this fast. Could it?"

I don't normally harass complete strangers, let alone pour my heart out to them. Yes, he is a smart-ass, but I like to think of myself as one, too, and usually just let that slide. I'm probably still in shock. Not responsible for my actions, and all that.

Earlier, at work, I had been sprayed in the eyes by a wall-mounted air freshener that I never noticed before. Yeah. Strangest thing. I'm starting to think there were mind-altering chemicals in it to make me act like this. Knowing my former employer – one of those "shop from home" TV channels – it would not surprise me one bit.

*Paranoid? Probably.*

I start rubbing my eyes. The 40-something gentleman takes the opportunity to escape, but I find him again in the refrigerated aisle. Smiling at him now, just to be annoying, I yank a root beer out of the display case and take a swig.

"Yesterday, I would have grabbed a *real* beer," I explain. "But, I quit drinking today." Laughing, I add, "I

sound like that guy in *Airplane!* Remember? ‘I picked a bad day to quit drinking! I picked a bad day to quit sniffing glue!’

I laugh again.

"Good for you," the man replies, annoyed.

I'm just trying to have some fun, looking for an excuse to laugh, but this guy is no fun at all.

A much younger man – I'm guessing store clerk, based on the uniform and over-all perkiness – comes around the corner. For a second, I think I'll have better luck with him. Younger people are not so jaded and bitter.

I'm wrong. He sees me drinking the soda and barks out, "Hey, you gonna pay for that?!"

"Yes, I am," I say, offended. "Do I *look* like a shoplifter?"

"Kinda. Yeah."

I take another gulp while looking directly at the young clerk, daring him to stop me. He does nothing, so I go in search of "40-something guy."

Spotting him, I sneak up and lean on the display case right behind him. Mere inches away, I continue my sob story. "I'm still trying to process it all."

The guy lurches forward, startled, crying out, "Do you mind?!" Apparently, being mere inches from a stranger's ear is too close? I know, I'm a jerk. He started it.

Suddenly, there is a man's voice booming through the overhead speakers. "Mr. Pannas? Alex Pannas!"

In a flash of inspiration – psychotic break, temporary dissociative identity disorder, whatever you want to call it – I say to my 40-something acquaintance, "I should change my name. From now on, call me Alex... no... Axel. Yeah,

Axel McLean. I like the sound of that. How about Axel Winchester McLean? Ooh, good one."

"You sound like a car wash for heavy machinery," my new "friend" quips.

I'm looking up at the ceiling now, trying to find a good comeback, when he disappears. Like a shapeshifter.

Switching back to her feminine voice as I approach the counter, the pharmacist says, "Your prescription is ready, Mr. Pannas."

"Please, call me McLean. Axel McLean."

Luckily, she doesn't care that I'm using one name to have my prescription filled, and an entirely different one to pick it up. "Whatever," she snaps. "That'll be \$87.44."

"How much?!"

"Eighty-seven dollars and forty-four cents," she takes care to enunciate.

"Damn!"

Smiling, she explains, "Yes, your health insurance has expired. It would have been thirteen dollars. But without insurance, it's eighty..."

"... seven forty-four," I finish for her. "Okay."

The young store clerk from earlier skulks up from behind and asks, "Did you include the root beer?"

"Oops," she amends the total. "That'll be \$88.91."

On my way out, I spot my 40-something shopper friend checking out at the other register. I wave goodbye. He flips me off. I nod and smile. It's good to make friends, meet new people.

With my can of root beer and expensive new mystery prescription in hand, I leave the pharmacy.

## **Operation underway**

Riva has returned to her own car in the pharmacy parking lot by the time Alex returns to his. She is close enough to watch him read his new prescription bottle label. He is now shaking his head. The listening device she planted while he was in the store allows her to hear everything.

"Whatever," he says as he washes a couple of pills down with a swig of root beer. "These better be good."

Squealing his tires out of the parking space, he barely misses another car just entering the lot.

"They call me Axel," he says to himself. "Axel McLean!" In his best James Bond voice, he then says, "McLean. Axel McLean at Your Majesty's service."

Riva is not sure what to make of this. She has never seen a Bond film. Multiple personality syndrome? Harmless role playing? All she knows is that five minutes later, she is following him down the L.A. freeway system, with his radio blaring "gangsta" rap. Riva never would have pegged him as a fan. Maybe *this* particular personality has always been a fan of rap?

She never liked that style of music, but now catches herself involuntarily nodding to the beat as it comes through her own speakers. She is not tuned to the same station that he is. She is hearing it through her own listening device now broadcasting everything from Alex's vehicle into a receiver on her end tuned to that device's signal. Pirate radio for an audience of one.

She notices a small pickup truck up ahead in traffic, loaded down with lumber, crawling at 40 miles per hour. Alex swerves to avoid it, cutting off several other cars in the process.

"His reflexes are... OK," Riva dictates into yet another recording device, this one a lapel pin. "Judgment, however... questionable."

He is now traveling 55 mph in the fast line. Fifty-five *is* the local speed limit, but no one obeys that in California – or anywhere else – unless they've got a cop right behind them, especially in the fast lane.

If Alex notices the two men standing outside of their along the right shoulder, he has given no indication. Riva does notice. How can she not? They are between their cars, one of them pointing a gun at the other who is raising his hands over his head. She keeps a close eye until safely out of range.

Riva has rigged not just Alex's vehicle but her own car with cameras and microphones to record everything for this, her first solo operation. She makes a mental note to try to save for the local police whatever footage she might have captured of that highway robbery.

She knows that Serge would have kept that footage for himself, hunted down the gunman, shown him the video, and used it to blackmail him. It would not matter *what* was extorted, just so long as *something* was extorted. "Always take advantage!" she had heard him say on more than one occasion. "*That's* how it's done!"

She would give the video to the local cops, not out of respect for the law or sense of civic duty, but out of... Now that she thinks about it, she is not sure why she would

bother. Why should she care? *Someone is being robbed. So what?* She reminds herself to keep this civic-mindedness under control if she is ever going to complete her assignment.

Speaking of which, she decides this thing needs a name. All the great military operations had memorable names: "Charge of the Light Brigade"; "Operation Overlord"; and who could forget "Operation Flash" by the Croats against the Serbs in the 1990s? She, personally, would never forget. Her assignment is not military, of course, but still needs a great name.

"Operation Make Him Your Bitch," she says aloud with a laugh. "How about Operation Stupid Git? No, Operation Dimwit." *Ha! Funny, but no.*

She passes by an off-ramp to her right. It is blocked with barriers and flashing lights. A slowly-evolving smile crosses her lips as she says, "Operation Detour!" It is the perfect metaphor for what's about to happen to this Alex or Axel or whatever he's calling himself at the moment.

## **Hummer**

I'm busy staring into the abyss – or whatever people stare into when in shock and consumed with self-loathing – when I fail to notice that traffic has slowed to a crawl. I slam into the back end of a candy-apple red Hummer, putting a slight smudge on its bumper. My car is now even more compact than before, radiator spewing steam.

The Hummer driver jumps out, screaming, "What the hell is wrong with you?!"

I untangle myself from the steering wheel and sit in shock for a moment while the very large Hummer driver approaches, still screaming, "Are you blind or something?! Did you not *see* my extra-large vehicle!?"

He actually says "extra-large vehicle," pronouncing the "h" in "vehicle," which always makes me laugh. I roll down my window.

"Smorgasbord," I say to him. I don't know why. The word comes out of nowhere. This happens to me sometimes. I should probably see someone about that. It doesn't occur to me to stop popping these new pills like M&M's. I've lost track of how many I've had.

Hummer Man says, "Huh?"

With a more fanatical look, I explain to my new friend, "Life! It's a smorgasbord! It's all there for the taking!"

Hummer Man stops screaming and starts nodding, either in agreement or confusion. I never understood why people nod in confusion. I mean, if you're confused, stop nodding!

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Anyway, seeing its effect on the man, I am now repeating "smorgasbord" as a sort of mantra. Chanting softly, getting out of the car, I say, "Smorgasbord. Smorgasbord. Smorgasbord."

I walk blithely past him. He's looking at me as if I'm insane... because I am. But it's the *fun, temporary* kind of insane, I tell myself.

Still staring at the Hummer, I repeat softly, "It's all there for the taking."

Hummer Man follows my eyes and says, "Oh, no. You're not..."

Too late! I win the three-yard dash to his vehicle, jump in and lock the door. As hoped, the keys are in it. The man furiously bangs on the window, but careful not to damage his "baby."

*It is a swap, really*, I tell myself, *not a theft*. I have simply traded my car for his. Is it my fault his car is so much better than mine?

Through the closed window, laughing hysterically now, I say, "You can take *my* car. No, really. The keys are in it. Go ahead!"

To his horror, I grind the gears – his gears – as I merge back out into traffic. Adding injury to insult, I then run over his expensive shoes.

Punching the accelerator, I zip past dozens of cars, leaving Now-Screaming Hummer Man in my rearview mirror. After a moment, I squeeze back in among the line of cars trying to take this exit to the airport, where I am once again confronted with gridlock.

"I have no time for this!" I yell at the cars and, once again, grind the gears as I pull off onto the grassy median.

"Let's see what this puppy can do!" I circle the other cars and crash through a chain link fence. I have just created a more convenient and direct route to the parking garage! A public service, if you will.

I squeal the tires, causing echoes throughout the garage, before finding a spot in front of a fire hydrant. I jump out and leave it there with the keys in it. I am sure it will be towed... or stolen. It might even cause a complete shutdown of the airport by hyper-vigilant security officers, but hopefully not until after I am long gone.

I walk slowly and calmly through the airport terminal, pretending to be normal. I know that anyone's review of the security tapes will reveal my identity, but I will be out of the country by then... hopefully. I have no idea where. Timbuktu? Kathmandu? One of those, but I'm not sure I could find either one of those on a map. Things just aren't working out for me in this country. It's time for some new scenery.

Better yet, I think, maybe I should visit the southern hemisphere? I've been told that a toilet flushes in the opposite direction in Australia. My luck will be the exact opposite there to what it has been here! Brilliant! I love it when I'm brilliant.

Maybe my life can reverse course and go down the drain in the opposite direction! Oops. Staying positive, staying positive.

## **The airport terminal**

I come across a gift shop selling hats, among other vastly over-priced items. I find a nice fedora, try it on, check my look in the mirror, and buy it from the smiling woman behind the counter. I'm smiling now, too. The world is a beautiful place, I tell myself, especially me in my new hat! Just so you know, this is not normal, even for me.

I spot a travel poster depicting a beautiful smiling woman in a pink bikini immersed in a collage of beaches, islands, palm trees, and Malaysia's iconic conjoined twin skyscrapers, the Petronas Towers. Everyone's smiling. *It's going to be a great day!* I can just feel it.

Moving toward the poster, I reach out. Running my hand over the frame, still smiling, I caress the poster. There's just something irresistible about pink bikinis.

Realizing that people are now staring at me, I clear my throat, remind myself that I'm trying to look normal, then move quickly to the nearest ticket counter. Adjusting my new fedora and anything else on my person that is askew, I ask the man, "Do you fly to Malaysia?"

As soon as I say it, I regret that I didn't use some sort of foreign accent. Foreign accents are the coolest.

"No," the agent deadpans, "but *Malaysian* Air at the next window does."

I slide over to the female ticket agent behind that counter and doff my hat. She's a lady, after all, and I'm pretending to be a gentleman, hoping for maximum coolness.

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Having overheard my conversation with her ticket counter neighbor, she asks helpfully, "Where in Malaysia would you like to go, sir?"

*She called me 'sir'! This 'gentleman' scam is working!*

"What would you suggest for an available young, fun-loving *single* guy like me?"

Almost falling over with laughter, the agent next door shouts, "Do you like under-aged boys or girls?"

"What is he talking about?" I cringe.

"Never mind him," she shakes her head. "If you want nightlife, I suggest Kuala Lumpur."

"Kuala Lumpur?!" I say it a little too excitedly.

She steps back, startled.

In a normal voice, I say, "I've heard of it. I've always loved that name. It just sounds so exotic, sexy, and so... foreign."

The woman cannot tell if I'm trying to be funny. She replies cautiously, "Yes, it is foreign."

"Are there a lot of koala bears?" I ask.

Stifling a laugh, the woman shakes her head no.

"I would like a one-way ticket, please."

"One way?"

"Yes," I say, hoping I sound tragic. "I'm dying. No point buying a return flight."

I then hang my head in what I hope conveys despair.

"I am so sorry," she says. "You look... healthy."

"Yes, but I have the cancer." I have never referred to it as "the cancer" before. I have no idea why I am starting now. "I don't have much time left. Don't worry. It's not contagious."

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She does not look concerned. "I cannot sell you a one-way flight, sir," she explains. "It is against the law."

"What? Against the law? Really? Why?"

"Too many tourists visit Malaysia then never want to leave."

"Wow, it's *that* nice?"

"Yes, it is," she says proudly. "But you cannot stay," she makes it clear.

In a stage whisper, the other agent says, "Actually, it's not that they don't *want* to leave. They are arrested for crimes they did not commit then thrown in prison so they *can't* leave."

"Just because that happened to you..." the female agent snaps.

"And my roommate!"

"Your roommate is a drug-dealing gay gigolo!" the woman retorts. "What did you expect?"

"Don't worry," she assures me. "You will be fine if you stay away from brothels and drugs."

"Oh, I never do drugs," I assure her, conveniently forgetting that I am, as we speak, under their influence. "But... brothels, you say?"

She does not respond.

I drop the subject and charge the trip to my credit card with the ridiculously high limit. The one I have every intention of maxing out and never paying back.

It's all part of my new outlook on life: *Screw everyone!* They never should have given me such a high limit. If governments can do it, why can't I?

Walking away from the counter, I catch sight of a ridiculously attractive black-haired woman coming toward me. She has a phone to her ear with one hand and pulling a wheeled-suitcase with the other. She smiles directly at me.

She looks familiar, but I turn to look around to see who she's *really* smiling at. I check my fedora, make sure it's on my head at the proper angle.

~

On the phone with Serge, Riva says, "I am looking right at him. I will let you know how it goes. Gotta go!" She hangs up as she reaches Alex.

~

"Alex? Is that you?" the ridiculously attractive woman asks.

With enthusiasm that surprises even me, I say, "Hey! Small world! How's it going... uhhhhh?"

"Riva," she helps.

"No, that's not it," I try to keep a straight face. She does not laugh. "Aren't you one of Christian's girlfriends?" I ask. "You look different somehow. New haircut? Gain weight?"

Her jaw drops at the "weight" comment, but she lets it go. Finally, she says, "I am not wearing my colored lenses. And Christian and I are not together anymore, not that we ever really were."

"Colored lenses?" I ask, looking into her captivating eyes. "And you say you're not with Christian, eh?"

"Contact lenses," she explains. "I sometimes wear the green ones." Flirting now, she adds, "That's right, I am single."

"Me, too!" I say.

"You are not with Cheryl anymore?" she asks, not surprised or interested, but pretending otherwise. "Interesting!"

"That's right," I announce happily, then direct the conversation away from my ex-, Cheryl, for fear that it will ruin this awesome buzz I've got going. "How've you been?"

"Great! You?" A guilty look flashes across her face, but I am not the suspicious type. More of the gullible type, remember, for which I might someday forgive myself. Either way, I don't know what to make of her.

"I couldn't possibly be better," I lie, and, thanks to the drugs, actually believe it.

"Are you waiting on someone?" Riva asks, looking around.

"Aren't we all?" I joke. She looks confused. More seriously, I add, "No, just standing here waiting for my muse. I was hoping you were it."

"I'm sorry. Did you say your 'muse?'"

"Never mind," I change the subject. That was a bit too forward, even considering my current "throwing it all away" mood. "You coming or going?"

"Going," she says with a half-smile. "You?"

"Going," I say. "Definitely going places."

"Oh? Where to?"

I don't answer. I just stare at her, then start smiling as I look into her eyes.

"Yo, dude," she breaks the spell, "you're creeping me out."

"Oh sorry, I spaced out for a second." Digging into my pocket, I then ask, "Wanna see something?"

"Not especially, no," she giggles, afraid of what I might whip out.

I pull out my bottle of pills and ask, "Want some of this?"

"No!" she responds immediately, then says, "Wait, yes, let me see." She reads the label aloud: "Triphenocyclizine." Handing it back unopened, she asks, "How many have you taken?"

I start counting on my fingers. I get up to almost ten before very confidently saying, "No idea."

"OK, well, it was good seeing you again, Alex. See you 'round."

Confused, I say, "Yeah, okay. See ya." I give her a semi-salute and, trying not to stare at her ass as she leaves, I say aloud to no one, "Soon, I will be dead and will never have sex again."

Feeling the weight of my stare, she turns, smirks and again waves goodbye. I raise my chin in response, then stare off into space.

I have been popping pills all day. I refuse to be held responsible for my actions. That's the good thing about drugs. What comes next was absolutely *not* my fault.

~

Back on the phone with Serge as she walks away, Riva says, "His prescription is for something called

'triphenocyclizine.' I have never heard of it, but it must be psychotropic."

"It is," Serge replies. "I did that."

"How...?"

"I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve," he laughs. "And you're welcome!"

"For what? I was not prepared to deal with a man on drugs!"

"It's a very *mild* psychotropic."

"Not when he's taking them by the handful!"

"Oh," Serge sounds genuinely surprised. "I assumed he would be a good little boy and follow the instructions on the bottle. He seemed the type."

"This is difficult enough, Serge!" she complains. "He is a genuinely nice guy – a nutcase now, thanks to you – but not a bad guy. Why couldn't you give me someone who was *already* a terrorist? I know how to deal with those assholes."

"Too easy," he counters. "You're more talented than that. We have high hopes for you, and this is your test. Don't fuck it up." He laughs again and hangs up.

"*Fut pe...*" she starts to curse in Moldovan, but stops herself. No point getting angry. People like Serge feed off the anger they inspire in others.

## **Airport security**

Moments later, it is time to pass through the airport terminal security. I hate security checkpoints. I never have anything to hide, I just hate them. Who are these people to presume I'm guilty until proven innocent? I dig into my pocket for another pill.

At the checkpoint, the line is long. A few minutes into the wait, I entertain myself by joking with anyone who will listen.

"These guys would crap their pants," I say to no one in particular, "if they had an actual terrorist to deal with."

The look on the faces of everyone around me says, "Uh oh." The man directly in front of me creates as much distance between himself and me as he can. It's futile. We are next to each other in line. How far can he go?

*Holy crap, it can't be!* It is. The man is my old "40-something shopper" friend from the pharmacy this morning! What are the odds?

"Hey, man, how's it going?!" I ask cheerfully.

He drops out of line altogether to get away from me. Chicken. He is walking very fast, looking over his shoulder.

Now he is running. And now he is being tackled by security guards. Poor guy. I should look him up when I return... *if* I return.

Returning my attention to the line in front of me, I notice a young, pre-teen girl eyeing me, probably hoping *I'll* be arrested, too.

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Her father gives me a dirty look, then smirks. Pointing at me, he tells his daughter, "He's gonna get his ass kicked."

Surprised by such language in front of his own child, I say loudly, "I doubt any of these idiots can even draw their weapon without shooting themselves in the foot! Bunch of Barney Fifes. They're probably only given one bullet each. God help us if any real terrorists come through here."

I am laughing now. No one else is.

Two security officers – one husky blonde male, the other a slim brunette female – nod to each other and start toward me.

Three feet away, the male officer barks, "Sir! Please step out of line and come with me."

"Why are you yelling?" I ask with an irreverent smile. "You're three feet away. Besides, I thought the whole idea here was for people like you to keep people like me *in* line."

Again, I laugh... alone.

The female officer is not amused. "Sir, please."

I do not move. The male officer, still barking as if from across a great distance, says, "Sir, if you do not come with us immediately, you will be forcibly removed."

"No!" I reply, now matching his volume and drawing the attention of everyone around us. "You work for the government, which means you work for me. *You* come *here!*"

The sneering father still nearby – only because he has no choice – says, "Good luck with that."

He's right. I probably shouldn't have taken this path. I probably *am* going to get my ass kicked now. Pointing at

the female officer, I say in a more normal voice, "Or just send *her* over here. We'll frisk each other!"

Looking around at my "audience," I say, "You kids will need to cover your eyes."

Several people laugh. Finally! Tough crowd!

Next thing I know, I am being handcuffed by the woman officer.

"Ooh, handcuffs," I joke. "Kinky! You will have to excuse us, folks. We're gonna need some privacy."

More people finally join in the laughter.

Pointing at a sign on the wall, the male officer reads aloud, "Security is not a joke!" I look to where he is pointing. I can't believe it. There really is a sign saying exactly that.

Those who were laughing stop, afraid they might be handcuffed next. Cowards.

"I'm sorry, officer," I say. "I didn't see that sign. And here I thought airport security *was* a joke. A bad joke. Is there another sign anywhere," I look around, "saying anything like, '*Born in the wrong decade? Missed your chance to be a Nazi? No worries! Join the TSA. It's the next best thing! And you get to grope people! Not of the opposite sex, but still, great for those of a certain persuasion!*' "

I see a younger man nearby, cracking up. "Holy shit," he says to his friends, "listen to this dude!"

"Where's *that* sign, hmm?" I finish my rant.

As they drag me to the front of the line, still performing for my audience, I say, "And *that*, folks, is all you have to do to get to the front of the line!"

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With the guards dragging me away, people decide it is now safe for them to laugh. They shake their heads and talk about me as I am taken to a room just around the corner.

Inside the interrogation room, I am tossed roughly into a chair. It groans as I sink into it. The male officer says, "Okay, funny man. What the hell was that all about?"

"Exercising my freedom of speech," I say. "Good exercise! Quite a workout! I have that right, you know."

The female officer snarls at me, "You want to know about rights? You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney...."

The phone on the wall rings. The woman stops Mirandizing me. The male officer glares at me before answering it.

"That must be my attorney now!" I joke.

Speaking obediently into the phone, the male officer says, "Yes. Uh-huh. Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am."

What a suck-up. Typical. He hangs up and whispers into his partner's ear. The woman is visibly deflated. She moves in behind me. I'm a little worried – and slightly aroused – wondering what she might do.

She only sighs, removes my handcuffs, and says, "You are free to go."

The man explains, "You have friends in high places."

"Since when?" I ask. Neither one of them answers.

Escorting me out the door, the woman says, "Now, get on your flight and shut the hell up."

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Unaware I am using Riva's favorite expression, I say, "Bite me."

When the officer moves toward me, I wag my finger at her, "Unh, unh uh! I've got friends in high places, remember?"

Turning to leave, I hear her say to her partner, "God, I could beat the crap out of that asshole. I could, too. I'm working on my brown belt."

"Or, just shoot him," her partner adds, giving them both a laugh.

But I've already stopped caring about those two. *Who is this "friend in high places?"* I wonder. I can guarantee you, there is no one like that in my life.

Maybe my guardian angels have been on vacation the past couple weeks, felt guilty about what's happened to me, and now they're redoubling their efforts to get me back on the right track?

Maybe.

## **Kuala Lumpur**

It is after midnight, local time, when I arrive in Kuala Lumpur. I walk through the terminal and catch a cab to my hotel. I check in and take the elevator up to my room. I seem to be recovering from one hell of a hangover, but don't remember drinking anything.

~

Riva enters the same hotel lobby seconds later. The door attendant is smiling at her, almost drooling. The front desk clerk is also very friendly, eager to please. She's used to that.

Taking it all in stride, she checks in, asking that her bags be taken to her room. She keeps her purse with her as she retreats to the hotel bar. Feeling the weight of every man's eyes upon her, she finds a table with an unobstructed view of the front door. There, she settles in to await her target, Alex's, next move.

Not even five minutes have passed before a fat, sweaty, middle-aged man sits down at her table. He is literally dripping. She glares at him.

"Serge sent me," he explains before she can object.

"And why is that?" she asks, sniffing the air. The man has a horrible body odor like she has never smelled before.

"Serge says, 'Armin' – that's me – 'You will meet a beautiful, black-haired young European woman in the next couple of days. She's mine, but you can borrow her, if you know what I mean.'"

In her best Scarlett O'Hara impression, batting her eyelashes, Riva replies, "Whatever do you mean, sir?"

As if on cue, her phone rings. It's Serge.

"Riva, I forgot to mention. There is a fat horny toad of a man named Armin who might look you up while you are there."

"He has already left a slime trail leading up to me," she says, smiling.

"Ha!" Serge laughs. She hates that laugh, but lets it go as he continues, "You need to be nice to him. He's a powerful local politico, and we owe him a few favors. He is going to want to have sex with you."

"Who doesn't?"

"That is not going to be a problem, is it?" he asks.

"Funny man!" Riva fakes a laugh. More seriously, she adds, "I will deal with it," and she hangs up.

Armin says, "Was that Serge?"

"It was."

He slides in a little closer. "Did he *explain* things to you?"

"He did."

When he inserts his sweaty hand between her thighs, her response is immediate. Using her left hand, she grabs and twists his left ear and gets right up into his sweaty face.

In a low growl, she says, "You do that again, sunshine, and I will leave you dead on the floor. Remember who you're dealing with. I was trained by Serge himself. Understood?"

He nods vigorously. She lets go of him and smoothes out her blouse. She then forces a smile and says, "We will

pretend that never happened, and act like civilized adults, yes?"

Big smile, nodding, he says, "Yes."

Narrowing her eyes, she asks, "You enjoyed that, didn't you?" He smiles and nods. She rolls her eyes. "It is gonna be a long night."

"God, I hope so!" says Armin.

~

I walk into my room, collapse onto the bed, and stare at the ceiling. After twenty minutes, I give up, enter the bathroom and splash water on my face. Not liking the reflection in the mirror, I escape into the Kuala Lumpur night.

~

Distracted by Armin, Riva almost doesn't see Alex as he walks through the lobby out to the street. "We will have to continue this later," she excuses herself, and leaps out of her seat to give chase.

Latching onto her, Armin says, "Please, what could be so important? I will take care of it for you! We need to spend more time together!"

"Sorry, must go!" she says. "*Jumpa lagi.*" She extricates herself and hurries to catch up with Alex.

Disappointed, Armin lets go of her and orders another drink for himself. Seconds later, one of the local prostitutes, always lurking nearby, slides in next to him and offers herself up as a substitute. Armin reluctantly accepts her offer.

## **Chinatown**

The streets are bursting with life, even this late, as I set out on foot. I breathe in deeply a couple times, hoping it will relieve my headache. Bad idea. What I thought might be refreshing, clear night air is in fact thick with exhaust, sewer gases and a sort of dull combination of every spice I've ever smelled before. I keep my breathing brief and as shallow as possible from that point onward.

A few blocks later, I find the source of the smell: Chinatown. An endless stream of vendors are selling every sort of cheap imitation merchandise anyone could ever want.

I find a decent looking little restaurant along the way, and take a seat. Looking over the menu, entirely in Chinese, I choose an item at random and ask the waitress for a translation.

She doesn't speak English, but she sees where I am pointing. She nods and disappears into the kitchen.

"Maybe I can help," says a familiar woman's voice from behind me.

I turn to see Riva standing there, smiling. "All right, this is..." I begin. "What are the odds of running into you here on the other side of the world?"

Feigning innocence, she says, "I know, right? What are the odds?!"

I surprise myself and ask her to join me. As she sits down, I ask, "So, who are you with? CIA? NSA?"

"Seriously?" she deadpans. "You think you rate a visit from one of them?"

"IRS? TSA? NBA?" I press onward.

"Does it matter?" she asks, laughing.

"I'm just curious why you're so interested in me, enough to follow me all the way to Kuala Lumpur."

"I'm with a reality TV show," she offers. "We follow random people. Make a show out of it, like *Punk'd*?"

It is obvious that I don't believe her, so she jokes, "Would you believe...?"

"Ah, a *Get Smart* fan!"

"Big fan," she admits. "I love Anne Hathaway!"

"Who?"

"Agent 99. Anne Hathaway."

"Oh, the movie."

"Yes," she says, "what were *you* talking about?"

"The old TV show from the 60s."

"How old *are* you?" she asks.

"You've never heard of reruns?" I am properly offended.

There is an awkward silence. When I catch myself looking deep into her eyes, being pulled in like a magnet, I break the spell by asking, "So, who are you with, really?"

"Persistent," she says. "I will give you that. Here's the deal: You do this one thing for me, and I am out of your life. Forever."

"Deal! Why didn't you say so earlier? Who do I have to kill?"

"You think you're joking," a thin smile crosses her lips.

"No way," my jaw drops. "I don't kill people."

"Let me put it this way," she explains, "either you do me this *one* favor or I have you arrested for grand theft auto."

"Grand theft...? Oh, the Hummer."

She nods.

"Wow," I cannot believe this is happening to me. "One minute you're all friendly, joking about *Get Smart*, then – bam! – you're threatening me with grand theft auto. How'd you know about the Hummer, anyway?"

"You said it yourself, I have been following you for quite a while now. Deal?"

"Why would anyone be following me?" I ask, still trying to wrap my head around the situation. "Did Cheryl and Christian put you up to this?"

"No," she laughs again. "They have no idea where we are. Besides, you think they have that kind of money?"

"I don't know. I hear there's good money in porn. How much would it cost to hire you to follow someone halfway around the world?"

"Even if they had the money," she says, "trust me, they wouldn't spend it on *you*. Let me tell you about your old buddy Christian. Do you know what he was doing for extra cash?"

"You mean, besides the home-made porn? No."

"He would drive out to Palm Springs and have sex with older men for money. Rich men. Big money."

I recoil, but say nothing.

"Yeah," she says, "and you are lucky to be rid of your old girlfriend Cheryl, as well. She never stopped seeing Christian, even after she moved in with *you*. Have you been tested lately?"

"I don't believe you! Cheryl swore up and down after we got together that she and Christian were just friends."

"It does not matter if you believe me or not. It's true. Now, will you go with *me* or will you go to *prison*? Your choice."

"I'm not helping you with anything," I say. "Why should I? You're probably the one who got me fired." I speak the words before fully realizing what I just said. "That's it! That's why I lost my job. You had me fired... somehow. They loved me over there, until all of a sudden..."

Riva is shaking her head.

"What about the cancer? Was that you, too? I'm not really dying, am I? Please tell me I'm not dying!"

"You have quite an imagination there, Alex. You think I'm capable of all that?" Shaking her head, she continues, "I am afraid you lost your job and girlfriend all by yourself. As to the cancer, well, if you say you have it, I have to take your word for it. You still owe me."

"Owe you!? For what?"

"That little incident with airport security back at LAX?"

Nothing is coming to my mind.

"My little phone call? The one that got you released?"

"Oh, yeah! How could I forget? That was you?"

"Who did you think it was? Your fairy godmother?"

I had, actually, but what I say aloud is, "I never really thought about it. What about the drugs? The *hallucinogenic* drugs that I couldn't stop taking? I'm sure *you're* responsible for those, too, somehow."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," it is her turn to lie. "Anyway, if you don't do this thing for me now, I will have you arrested."

"We're in Kuala Lumpur! You have no jurisdiction."

"No," she admits, "but all I have to do is call a local politico I just met – Armin, lovely man – and, to use your word – bam! – you are in prison in a very foreign country where they have perfected the art of torture."

"Not a pretty picture, Alex. So, what do you say? Are you in? I would rather work *with* you than *against* you, but either way I'll get what I want. I always do."

"I guess I have no choice," I finally agree. Sarcastic again, I ask, "So, what is this little project? Drugs? Guns? Credit default swaps?"

"Very simple," she says. "You need to put this cell phone in a factory."

"What? Oh, it's a detonator! You think I'm stupid?"

"Not so loud!" she hisses.

"Why?"

"The factory owners are very bad people," she explains. "One of their spies might be listening."

"Factories have spies?" As soon as I say it, I realize how naïve that sounds.

"You think your life is bad now?" she says. "Either you do this or you become someone's prison bitch. And, yes, factories have spies. And yes, I think you are stupid."

"I'm a computer programmer! I'm not stupid."

"You *were* a programmer," she says, "back in the States. Now you are just another stupid American tourist. And, you might be smart with computers, but in real life, you are a complete idiot."

Serge's term "stupid git" came to mind, but she did not want to use his words.

"All large, multi-national corporations have their own off-the-books spies like me. Never heard of corporate espionage?"

"You've got a funny way of influencing people," I say. "Threats and insults. Does that work for you? Maybe they should send you to charm school, or at least salesmanship 101."

"Did I mention the part about becoming someone's prison bitch? You are not bad looking. Not *good* looking, either. Definitely not. But not bad. Relatively young, but still too old for me. Soft white skin. Virgin."

"I'm no virgin!" I protest. "And I'm only two years older than your old boyfriend Christian!"

"Really? You look a lot older. I mean, like ten *years* older."

I scowl, which doesn't make me look any younger.

"And I assume your asshole is virgin?" she adds. "You will be very popular in prison."

I cringe at the thought. She has me convinced.

"At least tell me who I'm blowing up."

"Very bad people," she repeats. "They use slave labor. Child labor."

"So we blow up their factory? How does that help?" When she gives no answer, I ask, "Can I at least tell the factory workers to get out first?"

"Does a bank robber tell everyone to get out of the bank first?" Riva counters.

"I've seen that happen, yes."

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"On television," she counters. "This is not television!  
See what I mean about stupid?"

"I am really starting to dislike you," I say.

She just smiles and says, "I know."

## **The factory**

That night we board a small plane and fly somewhere. I don't know where. It's completely dark out. We're only in the air a few minutes, so it can't be far. My internal compass tells me we're flying west, so we're probably flying east.

Upon landing, there is a black – Hang on, is that a Hummer, an H3? Yes it is! – waiting for us on the tarmac. A small, dark Malaysian man standing next to the H3 tosses Riva the keys then disappears into the night.

Climbing into the "*vehicle*" – riding shotgun this time – I am reminded of Screaming Hummer Man and can't help but smile. I wonder how he's doing. Were he and his beloved car ever reunited?

Riva puts it into gear, without grinding them, I notice. And, through the jungle and into a driving rainstorm we go! Where she stops, nobody knows!

After several minutes, she stops and points through the windshield. "There it is."

"There *what* is?" I ask. The rain is so heavy I can barely make out the large red letters on a wall – presumably the side of a building, but I hate to assume *anything* at this point – a hundred feet in front of us. It is only when the rain lets up momentarily that I recognize the letters "MCK." It appears to be an industrial building, a factory, just ahead in the clearing.

Riva parks the H3 behind a rocky outcropping in between us and the factory. She then casually pulls out a

vest wired with explosives and, turning toward me, says, "Here, put this on."

"No way! Just shoot me now. I am not a suicide bomber."

Pulling out one of its wires, Riva explains with a laugh, "I am pulling out this wire. With this disconnected, there is no way it can blow up. When you get down there, just put the wire – *this* wire – back in and hang the vest on something – a chair, maybe – and I blow up the building remotely from here. But, only after you have signaled me or have come back to me."

"No," I try to be strong. "As soon as I put that wire back in, *that's* when it blows up."

"It won't blow up on its own," Riva is growing impatient. "It needs to be detonated with a remote. I don't know all the science behind it, but I do know *that* much."

"Prove it," I say. "Put that wire back in right now. If we're not blown to smithereens, I will believe you. And if we are, well, it has been a pain in the ass knowing you."

She laughs and puts the wire back in place. I squeeze my eyes shut, only to see her smirking as I peek out. When the wire is back in and we are still in one piece, I resume breathing.

*It's nice to be breathing*, I think to myself. "Where's the remote?"

She holds it up.

"Wait, I thought I was supposed to plant *that*."

"Changed my mind," she says.

"Wait," I stall again. "Don't I at least get a gun?"

"So you can shoot me? No."

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"I won't shoot you, I promise!" I sound like a little kid begging to play with a BB gun.

"Just go," she says, shaking her head and rolling her eyes, "before I shoot *you!*"

There is a rocky, unpaved trail leading down to the factory buildings. Wearing night-vision goggles, with my "cool" new vest under a dark green rain slicker, I walk slowly down toward my target.

It's a surreal experience; like one of those dreams where everything is juxtaposed, out of place. As I am hopping down the bunny trail, convinced that I will soon be meeting my Maker, the old Hall & Oates song *Man-Eater* comes to mind.

I start singing.

*Oh-oh here she comes  
Watch out boy, she'll blow you up  
Oh-oh here she comes  
She's a man-eater*

~

The man-eater watches from afar through her own pair of night-vision binoculars as Alex enters the factory through its unguarded and apparently unlocked front door. When he does not reappear within two minutes – the amount of time she figured it should take the average person to plug in a wire and hang a vest on a chair – she shakes her head. "Stupid."

~

Inside the building now and out of Riva's sight, I find a row of gym lockers. I choose the most personalized locker, the one with all the stickers on it. I don't know why. Because it stands out, I guess. "That's what you get for standing out," I say softly, then instantly regret my own cold-bloodedness.

I gingerly hang the vest on a hook inside the locker and close its door. Literally tip-toeing away now, I shake my head in disbelief at the entire experience.

Turning a corner, I come upon a man, some sort of supervisor, behind his desk. *Shit!* From there, the man can oversee his entire staff as they assemble what looks like some sort of electronic components. At the moment, however, he is focused on paperwork on his desk.

I do not see any child laborers among his workers, slave or otherwise, as Riva had promised. I consider sneaking back to the locker, disabling the bomb vest, and running as fast as I can, out the opposite end of the building and away from Riva.

But she would probably anticipate that and be waiting for me on the other side. I'm not sure she would really shoot me. She doesn't seem like the type, but I'm not willing to take that chance.

If I can get *everyone* to run screaming from the building, however, I can use them as cover as we all get to safety.

"You need to get your people out of here now!" I shout at this manager, desk-jockey, whatever he is.

The man looks up slowly, not the least bit startled. He very calmly pulls a gun from a desk drawer and points it at me with one hand while picking up the phone with the other.

"Crap," I say, unconsciously raising my hands in the air in surrender. "If you're calling the police, it won't help. The people I'm with *own* the police."

At that, the man hangs up. Keeping the gun trained on me, he says in perfect English with an American accent, "*Why* do I need to get out of here? Who are you? What is this all about?"

"I've been asking that question myself, actually," I say, speaking rapidly, nervously. "I can tell you one thing: The people making me do this are *not* anyone you want to mess with."

"*I am not anyone you want to mess with!*" the man shouts back. A couple of his workers look up from their work. "There is nothing to stop me from shooting you," he continues. "Dead. Right now. You are trespassing on private property and interrupting factory production, two very serious crimes here. I would be completely within my rights."

"At least get your people out," I say, now bargaining, "to be safe. You can stay here with your gun, acting all tough. Call the police. Get blown to bits. I don't care. At least your people will be safe. Sound good?"

"Blown to bits?" the man asks. "You've planted a bomb?"

"Oh, yeah, did I not mention that?"

"No, you did not," he says, now stalling. "Alternatively, I shoot you, find and defuse your bomb, and

leave my happy little workers undisturbed and none the wiser. How does that sound?"

"If you can *find* the bomb," I say, "sure. Shoot me, though, and you will never find it. Even if you did, you'd still need to know how to disarm it. You any good at stuff like that?"

"I *am* good at stuff like that. I graduated from UCLA with a degree in electrical engineering."

"You did *not*," I cannot believe it.

He points at the degree hanging on his wall.

"Sonofabitch," I say. "UCLA, huh? I drive by there all the time! Small world! Anyway, even if you are an engineering genius, you won't necessarily know how to disable *this* bomb. This isn't like television where they show a computer programmer like me hacking into anything computer-related within seconds. I'm good, but I can't do that. Neither can you. That's just not reality."

"You are a computer programmer?" he seems genuinely interested.

"Yes..."

"Maybe you can help me."

I laugh in surprise. "Am I being Punk'd?"

Confused, the man says, "I don't know what 'punk'd' means. I have been away from America for too long, I suppose."

I can't tell if he's being sarcastic or not.

"But," he continues, "I need to automate my payroll, sending it to the corporate office in Belgium. I have been praying to Allah for guidance. And, now, He has sent me a computer programmer! *Allahu akbar!*"

Hearing that phrase in the context of our current predicament, I feel triggered. It sends a chill up my back. Then I remember that I am the one with the suicide vest threatening to blow things up.

*How ironic!* I can't help but think. Changing tack, I say, "So, I'm like your savior, or something?"

I'm hoping he will be dissuaded from killing me. I'm wrong.

"How dare you!?" he shrieks and grips the gun a little tighter.

"What?" I continue, shaking my head, clueless to how deeply I have insulted him.

He eventually gets over it, though, luckily – after a moment of silent outrage – and literally shrugs it off.

"*Punk'd* is a TV show," I explain, moving the conversation along before his rage returns, "where they play a trick on you, put it on television for all the world to see, laughing at you the whole time. The people who get 'punk'd' pretend at the end to not be pissed off."

"Then, no," he says. "I do not think you are being 'punk'd.' I do not watch such silly shows, even when I lived in America."

"Okay, so," I get back on-point, "you're part of a multi-national corporation, but you don't have a payroll system?"

"Yes, we are *now* part of a multinational corporation but have not yet been integrated into the payroll system. Frankly, I doubt our being paid is of much concern to our new bosses."

Extending his hand, he adds, "But, I have said too much, and my manners have abandoned me, but I get angry

when I think about how we are treated here. Your blasphemy does not help. But, please, I am Merican."

"I'm an American, too!" I say with a sudden flush of pride. I am not usually one of those "proud to be an American" types, but I am learning that being scared to death in a foreign country affects one's national pride.

Laughing, the man explains, "No, my *name* is Merican. Without the leading "A."

"Oh. OK. My name's Al... um... Axel McClean. Nice to meet you."

"And you as well, Alumaxel," he says, now very friendly.

"No, it's..." I start to correct him, then change the subject. "So, what do you make here in this factory?"

"Hard drives. For computers."

I nod.

"I took a few computer programming courses," he continues, "but am an electrical engineer, not a programmer. An electrical engineer," he laughs, "doing *this*." He gestures around his office space, shaking his head in disappointment. "But, if you could fix my payroll problem, I will evacuate my people. You will need to tell me where the bomb is, of course."

"Oh, no, the bomb has to go off," I say. "Sorry. If I don't blow this place up, they'll send me to prison... where, I'm told, I will very quickly become someone's bitch."

"Yes, that often happens," Merican says very matter-of-fact. "But if I let you blow up the factory, there is no point in sending my payroll to Corporate, is there?"

"Good point," I admit. "There must be some sort of middle ground." Merican shrugs, and I have no idea what that middle ground might be.

~

The rain has stopped, and Riva takes the opportunity to relocate to the other side of the factory. Once there, she has a nice overview of the building from the bluff above. She sees the evacuation now underway down below, with everyone moving to a safe distance away from the building. She curses and searches the crowd for Alex.

She spots him through the binoculars as he walks to the far edge of the property. She can guess he is doing this in order to be seen from where she used to be.

He gives thumbs-up and, as promised, Riva then presses the detonator to blow up the factory. There is no explosion.

Alex gives the thumbs-up again. She presses the detonator again. Still no explosion.

"Stupid," she says aloud, knowing he cannot hear her. "Did you insert the wire?"

~

I did not insert the wire as Riva had instructed. My new friend Merican and I came up with a Plan B.

"I was able to rig an old hot water heater to explode," he explains. "It will take a few minutes for the water to reach the correct temperature, then... boom! It will destroy the room, but *just* the room. It should cause sufficient damage, a big enough explosion to satisfy your people, I think. And so, in return..."

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"...your payroll. I know," I finish his sentence. "Let's just hope this does appease my... people." Shaking my head, I add, "I can't believe I'm doing this."

~

When the delayed explosion finally comes, Riva is very disappointed. "You call *that* an explosion?!"

She waits for the police to show up. And she waits, and waits. After five minutes, she calls them herself. They arrive within minutes... with a TV news crew. Seeing the cameraman and reporter, she is confused, and cannot help but wonder if Serge has something to do with it.

~

"You said you wouldn't call the police!" I complain to Merican.

"I didn't!" he assures me.

~

Standing next to her car, on the bluff above it all while the police surround Alex down below, Riva enjoys the relatively cool night air now that the rain has stopped. As they handcuff her partner in crime, however, her mood falters. Watching him being thrown roughly into the back of the squad car, her mood descends into darkness. A very painful memory has gurgled up from the depths and now demands her attention. Her mind lurches back to when *she* was thrown in prison.

## Three years ago

Not quite seventeen yet, Riva is in Belgrade, Serbia, standing trial for the murder of Dragomir Petkovic. The victim's former bookie is on the stand, testifying posthumously as a character witness for the prosecution. "For five years," the bookie says, "Dragomir supported that poor girl." He then adds in a hushed voice, "She was his 'love child.' He did not have to – most men would not have – but he took *good* care of her."

After an endless string of lies, the bookie finally steps down and it is Riva's turn in the witness box. Speaking fluent Serbian, she says, "It is true that I killed Dragomir Petkovic. He deserved it! Since I was twelve – twelve years old! – when he *bought* me, Drago has been fucking me. Him, too!" she points at the bookie, now seated.

"Everyone thought I was his daughter," she adds, crying, "but I was his *konkubina!*"

Whispers buzz throughout the courtroom. Security guards keep their eyes on the bookie, awaiting orders to arrest him, but those orders never come. Riva glares at the judge as he smiles at her in a way that she finds disturbing.

Twenty minutes later the jurors have completed their deliberations, and the bailiff leads them back into the courtroom. The jury foreman hands the hand-written verdicts to the bailiff who, in turn, hands them to the judge. The judge then reads the verdicts aloud.

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"On the charge of murder in the first degree, the jury finds the defendant, Riva Petkovic... not guilty."

Riva breathes a sigh of relief.

"On the charge of murder with special circumstance," the judge continues, "the jury finds the defendant, Riva Petkovic... guilty."

He then turns to Riva and says, softly, "I am sorry, dear, but you must serve just a little bit of time in prison. I am confident, however, that if you cooperate and behave yourself, you will be out in no time."

He then winks and gives her his business card.

She is afraid to ask what his idea of "cooperating" is, though she can guess it would involve the same sort of "cooperation" she performed with the man she murdered. Absently, doubting what good it will do her in prison, she takes his business card.

## Two years in

Serge maintains a relationship with prisons all over the world. "Treasure troves of free labor, among other things," he says. And this is how he finds Riva.

He is sitting in the reception area of *Centralni Zatvor* prison, awaiting invitation into the warden's office. Once beckoned within, Serge drops a stack of *dinars*, the local currency, in front of the old woman.

"*Da!*" she says, licking her lips as she picks up the money.

Three guards are then summoned before the warden before being sent to retrieve Riva.

"*Three guards?*" Serge asks.

The warden looks up, nods, and counts her money again.

Riva is curled up on her cell bed like a little girl, napping. One of the guards reaches through the bars, taking her by surprise, and secures handcuffs on her. They are thankful to have caught her napping. Otherwise, it might have taken all three of them to subdue her.

Seeing this as his last chance to have some fun with her, one of the guards now in the cell with her unzips his pants and forces his penis into her mouth.

Riva bites into it, and he shrieks as he falls to the cell floor, writhing in agony.

"What did you expect!?" she shouts in Serbian.

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She looks back at her attacker and smirks as she is dragged off to see the warden.

An angry, disheveled and handcuffed Riva is then brought into the warden's office, where she is dumped in front of Serge and the warden.

"You woke me from my nap!" Riva growls in Serbian. To Serge, she asks, "Are you my new master?"

When he nods yes, she spits on him. The warden pretends to be shocked and offended. "I am so sorry, Mr. Kolza. Are you sure you want this one? We have many more compliant candidates available, though she is the prettiest one."

Serge wipes off the spittle, laughing. In perfect Serbian, he says, "Not at all! I like this one's attitude!"

"Did you get a receipt?" Riva asks.

Still laughing, Serge says, "Wouldn't help. They have a no-return policy here."

"Fuck you," says Riva.

Looking her up and down, he replies, "Later. Madame Warden is right, you are quite pretty."

"I know," she says.

"Humble, too!" Serge says, shaking his head and laughing.

## **Back at the factory**

### **Present day**

Riva vomits at the thought of prison. Or, maybe it was the thought of Serge. She is reaching into her car for a tissue to wipe her mouth when her cell phone rings. Climbing in and sinking into the front seat, she answers the call.

"Congratulations!" It is Serge, and he is shouting.

Not recognizing his voice immediately, she says, "Excuse me?"

"Your first 'kill,' as we say. I am told your man has been apprehended?"

"Yes," she says, not excited about it.

"Are you alright?" he asks. "You sound like your dog has died."

"Funny you should say that, because that's how it feels." She has never owned a dog, but can guess what it might feel like. Unlike Serge, she has not lost all vestige of empathy.

"Are you kidding me?" Serge is yelling again. "This is how the world works. You are in the big leagues now. Has he become your lover?"

"Oh, God no," she says quickly. "Not at all."

"Then let him rot in jail! You will get over it by your next assignment, trust me. I speak from experience. You get used to it. My first assignment was similar to yours."

She rolls her eyes, feeling one of Serge's stories coming on.

"All of the technical preparations had gone well," he continues, "as they have for you. Look at you. You got your man fired! Ruined his life! Made him go off the deep end! You have done very well."

Riva smirks. "Can you hear yourself? Do you know how that sounds?"

"You are not going soft on me, are you?" Serge counters. "This is not a business for the faint of heart. You are not in love with this Albert person, are you?"

"I already said no!" she snaps. "But his name is Alex... or Axel, depending on his mood. He is a strange one. But, no, he is fat, old, ugly. Arrogant. He thinks he is a comedian and that everything he says is funny. He slurps his food. Unattractive in every possible way. No, I am most *definitely* not in love."

"Good, don't be," Serge does not believe her. "You will get through this. You are almost there. Finish him off. Put this thing to bed. Sure, fuck him once before you go, as I always do. Something to remember me by."

Riva sneers.

"But then get on with your life," he continues. "You will have a great future with us."

"Let him rot," she pretends to agree.

That night in her hotel room, Riva is on the couch with a glass of wine, watching the local news report about the explosion and arrest. The anchorwoman is doing all the talking. Her male co-anchor is shaking his head.

In Malay, the woman says, "There was a massive explosion with twelve workers dead at the MCK hard drive factory nearby. Authorities blame terrorism."

There is footage of Alex at the factory, being thrown into the police car, and another shot of him entering the police station.

The anchorwoman continues, "This man has been identified as an unknown Muslim terrorist with no previously-known ties to local terror groups."

Her co-anchor quips, "Did you just say 'identified as unknown?'"

His partner shoots him a dirty look.

"He doesn't look Muslim to me," the man adds.

Riva shouts at the television, "Twelve dead?! Nobody died! And he's not Muslim."

That night, Riva dreams that she and Alex are in jail together, sharing a bunk. There is a struggle. Alex is at her throat with a knife.

She wakes up in a sweat. It was just a dream. A moment later she is laughing at her own vivid imagination. "As if..."

She cannot get back to sleep the rest of the night, she feels so guilty about what she did to Alex. At the first sign of daylight, she calls and awakens Armin, the slimy politico. By the end of the conversation, she is saying, "The pleasure will be all yours, I am sure."

He laughs as they hang up, then calls the jail to fulfill his part of the bargain. In Malay, he gives the order, "Release the American!"

"Which one?"

"The patsy."

"Which one?"

"The 'terrorist' from last night!" he finally screams at the impertinent jailer.

The jailer slowly stands and stretches, hits his sleeping fellow jailer's boot with his baton, and strolls toward Alex's cell. At the cell, with a wicked smile at his partner, the jailer pulls out his belt, reaches into the cell, and slaps Alex across the face with it.

In Malay, laughing with his partner, the jailer says, "They said release him, but no one said we had to be nice to him."

He opens the door and, as Alex staggers toward him the jailer announces in Malay, "Anyone want to fuck the American before he goes? It's a freebie!" One of them starts moving toward Alex, but Alex recognizes that word and is out the door before anyone can get to him.

Riva is outside the jail waiting in her black H3 when Alex emerges. He smiles, but it is obvious he has been roughed up and has barely slept, if at all.

"He's happy to see me," Riva has Serge on the phone.

"Your own little catch and release program?" Serge says sarcastically. "Of course he is happy to see you. He would be happy to see the devil himself at this point. You ever spent a night in a Malaysian jail?"

Tears come to her eyes, again surprising herself with this rush of emotions. Angrily wiping away her tears, she says, "Not a Malaysian jail, no."

"I forgot who I was talking to," he almost apologizes.

Steeling herself against those bad memories, she says, "I'm *telling* you, Serge, he loves me now. I just gave him a new lease on life."

"You gave him a new lease after you *ruined* his life."

"He doesn't know that," she says. "This is all part of the plan, Serge. Trust me. He should be putty in my hands."

"He probably knows by now that you're responsible for all of this," he says, "unless he's a complete idiot. Hasn't he at least figured out that you've been following him?"

"Well, yes. I could not hide that."

"Then he can guess the rest," Serge says, "and that means he knows too much."

"I am telling you," she insists, "we're golden as far as he's concerned. He does not know anything significant."

"The more you try to convince me, the less convinced I become," he says. "You have to put him back. We are finished with him. We got the media attention we wanted. Not much. I would have preferred a bigger blast, much bigger. But, it will have to do."

"That would be cruel," she says, "to let him out for five minutes, only to put him right back in."

"Cruel? So what? What is he, a puppy? Who the fuck cares?!"

"But..."

"Look, Riva, I am perfectly willing to declare you a rogue agent. Neither one of us wants that, but I will put you and your boyfriend on The List if need be. Either you kill him or lock him up forever, or I send in someone else who *can*. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

~

As I get into her car, Riva begins, "Okay, here's the deal..."

Moaning, I interrupt, "Oh God, not another one of your deals!"

Angrily, she says, "Shut up and listen! I need you to get out of here."

I re-open my door.

"Not now," she snaps, "you idiot!"

I give her a disgusted look, but say nothing. She has, after all, just gotten me out of jail. I know, or can guess, that she is the one who *put* me there in the first place, but right now it is so *good* to be out, I am not going to quibble.

She puts the car in gear and starts driving. I don't know where we're going, and don't really care, but we're going there fast.

She notices two cars now following.

"I hope you appreciate this," she says.

"Oh, I do, I do."

"It is like when *I* was let out of prison..." she begins.

"You were in prison?"

Ignoring me, she finishes her sentence, "... with one huge difference!" She looks as if she expect me to guess what the difference is.

"Okay, what..."

"The difference this time is that there are no strings attached!"

I'm afraid to ask. Besides, she would probably just cut me off again. *Maybe if I wait, she'll explain further?* She never does.

Instead, she hands me a credit card and passport, and says, "Take this."

I grab it as I search for my seat belt. "What is it?"

"A new identity," she explains, "and an unlimited credit card. Consider it your own personal government bailout!" she adds with a laugh, then takes a sudden left turn into heavy traffic to lose their followers.

"I did ask for one of those," I joke, "back when Congress seemed to be just handing them out."

"Well, there you go," she laughs again.

I get the impression she is trying to be funny for my sake, but she is not very good at it. Either way, we are both now in a good mood. For me, it's because I am out of jail. For her, I guess, it's because she has sprung me.

She then swerves to miss two monkeys running across the road.

"There are an awful lot of monkeys around here," I state the obvious. It then occurs to me, "Hey, I can pay off my own credit card with this one."

We come to a red light and stop. Riva asks, "What? Why?"

"I'll need good credit if I want to, you know, return to society."

"But it is a credit card company," she says. "Fuck them!" The light turns green. "Besides, you just don't get it. It is cute... and pathetic. Alex, you have an entirely new identity! You are not Alex Pannas anymore. Your name is..."

She reaches over and takes the passport back and looks at it again. She cannot help but laugh. "Your name is now, oh yeah, Axel Winchester McLean."

"How could you have possibly known about that name?" I ask as I snatch the passport back.

"I've had you bugged since you picked up your prescription at the pharmacy back in the States," she shrugs as if it is not even worth mentioning. "*Everyone* is almost constantly under surveillance one way or another. No big deal."

I shake my head. She's right. I then fiddle with the radio buttons while trying to think of a clever comeback. One never comes.

Radio around here consists of Indian, Chinese, Persian and English stations. I settle on something Hindi-sounding, but with electric bass and electric guitar accompaniment. Not something you would hear back home.

"You're just setting me up again," I say after a moment.

"You have to trust me," she shouts to be heard over the radio before turning it off. In a normal voice, she adds, "You have no choice."

I know she is right, but it pisses me off. "So, you get away with it?"

"Get away with what?"

"What do you mean, 'what?' Ruining my life, remember?"

Sighing, she says, "Yes, I get away with it. We always do. It is how the world works. Do not blow this, Alex. Just let it go. You cannot win. Consider yourself lucky that I am doing this much for you."

I sit glowering for a moment, hoping she feels my contempt and indignation.

"Oh come on," she defends herself. "I actually did you a favor."

"Come again?!"

"I got you out of your humdrum life," she explains. "You were hanging out with Christian, taking his leftover women, working as a data entry clerk."

"I never took his leftover women. I had Cheryl. We were..." I don't finish that thought because of course she was right. "I am *not* a data entry clerk!"

"Programmer, data entry clerk, whatever. Both jobs have you staring at a computer all day. How have you *not* gone insane already!?"

"I was doing just fine until you showed up!"

"But, was it emotionally fulfilling for you?"

"Well, no, but..."

"You are better off, trust me."

I laugh out loud. "Good one!"

Losing patience, she asks, "Have you ever wondered *why* you were chosen for this? Have you ever asked yourself, 'Why me?'"

That surprised me. "Now that you mention it, no, I never did ask 'why me?' I'm not the type. I just figured shit happens. Just having a run of bad luck. Funny."

"Just so you know, you were chosen because you somehow managed to insult my boss."

"Who's your boss again?"

"Serge Coleman."

"Never met the man."

"You must have, and then somehow offended him enough that he wanted to ruin your life."

"Lucky me," I offer. "I am not worried at this point *why* all this happened. It doesn't matter, does it? There is one thing I would like to know, though." Almost afraid to

speak, I take a deep breath and just say it. "I'm still not buying your story, but what about the cancer? You never answered that. Is it real?"

"Fake test results," she explains. When it's obvious that I am about to explode with rage, she quickly adds, "That was Serge! I had no idea. I'm not *that* cruel!"

One of our pursuers then blows out our rear window with a shotgun blast. Riva swerves. We bounce off a couple cars, veer off the road, and land in the jungle with the H3 wedged in between two trees. It looks intact, but with its left-side wheels off the ground, there's no way we could ever extract it.

I tumble out then circle around to pull Riva out. She is already out and pointing a gun at me.

"Alex, I am sorry..." she begins.

"You're going to shoot me now!?"

"It would make things a lot easier," she nods her head.

"It was not a suggestion!"

Shaking her head, she lowers the gun and says, "I am sorry for everything I did to you, Alex." She then turns in the direction from which we came and spots one of our pursuers' cars weaving its way toward us.

No time for talk. She steps out into traffic and pulls a gun on the first car she sees stopped at the light.

In Malay, she barks at the unlucky man, "Out!" The man jumps out. To me, she orders, "In!"

I have to think about it a second, but then reluctantly climb into the yellow Perodua Myvi sedan that we have just carjacked. "Sorry!" I yell at our victim, not knowing if he understands me or not.

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Taking off quickly, Riva drives like a maniac through traffic, once again eluding the bad guys. As we drive, we are both quiet for a moment before her eyes well up with tears.

"I am from Moldova," she explains herself. "I was an orphan."

Having trouble believing anything she says or does, I simply listen, though I do think it is a strange time for her to be telling me her life story. Then again, what *hasn't* been strange that involved her?

"I was pretty," she continues.

I nod. *Duh.*

"I was sold into sex slavery when I was ten."

"Ten?!" I am aghast. "Who could...?"

"Your naïveté would be cute... if it were not so infuriating. Grow up!"

"Hey..." I start to protest.

"Anyway," she continues, "It was some rich bastard in England. I was told his wife and daughter had died in an automobile accident. He bought me as a replacement daughter. Literally. It's amazing what money can do.

"Things were wonderful for the first few months, and might have worked out well if not for the bastard's son, Colin. God, to this day I hate that name. He was fourteen, just entering puberty, and on the night of my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, he started using me as his sex toy. He said he'd kill me if I told anyone. Great birthday gift, huh?

"When our father found out, he panicked and sent me back to the broker."

"Broker?"

"Slave trader, whatever you want to call those people," she spits. "The broker informed me that my father used to film me and Colin having sex, then sell the videos to child pornographers. Videos of his own children! I refused to believe it until..."

When she doesn't continue quickly enough, like a child being told a horror story, I ask, "...until what?"

"A couple of months before my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday," she continues, "I was sold again, to a 'businessman' from Serbia. He fucked me for the next four and a half years while telling everyone I was his daughter from a previous marriage. The story was that I had been returned to him after his ex-wife was declared an unfit mother. Even though the woman was fictional, I can still remember hating the thought that everyone would think my mother was unfit.

"During one of our... 'father-daughter times' as he called them... he had child porn playing in front of us. Can you guess who was *in* that video?"

I could guess, but didn't dare speak.

"Yes, I was forced to watch an old video of my former step-brother fucking *me* while my *current* adoptive father..."

"He was the first man I ever killed. My only regret is that I did not kill my *English* father and step-brother, as well!"

"I am so sorry..." I apologize on behalf of all men, but she is now oblivious to me and everything else around her.

"In prison," she continues, "I was recruited by Serge, on behalf of 'the agency' he works for. And here I am today!" She says that last part with a yawn, stretch and smile, as if

waking from a nightmare, only to find that it is a beautiful new day.

I remain silent, looking at her with an entirely new appreciation. I'm not sure what's more impressive, surviving the life she was forced to live, or getting over it with a yawn, stretch and a smile.

"You are right, though," she picks up on an earlier conversation. "I had no right doing what I did to you. The only problem now is how do I quit this job? I have been thinking about quitting, well, ever since I began, if it makes you feel any better."

She casually swerves to avoid pedestrians and more monkeys in the road.

"It doesn't make me feel any better, no."

"*Should* I quit?" she is asking herself.

"I think so, yes," I nod vigorously.

She turns down an alleyway, dodging people, monkeys, dogs, cats and trash cans. "Seeing you thrown in jail," she says, "that's when I decided I just can't do this anymore. I cannot do that to another human being."

I nod again in appreciation.

"But these people I work for, Alex... You cannot simply quit a job like this. No one gets out alive."

"Oh, come on," I try to stay positive. "We'll think of something."

Looking over in surprise, she says, "We?"

"Despite everything..." I surprise myself by saying, "sure. Why not? Yes, you ruined my life. Yes, I should probably get a few thousand miles away from you. But, the damage is done. No point crying over spilt milk. Or, in my case, a lost job, girlfriend and fake cancer."

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"Wow," Riva is amazed. "You are quite forgiving, aren't you?"

"Don't get me wrong," I clarify. "I am incredibly pissed at you. I am just dealing with it. 'Move on, don't look back,' and all that, you know. Besides, I don't want you to take away my unlimited credit card!"

She smiles. I think she is starting to like me... a little bit.

"I might still have to kill you, of course," she says, joking. I hope. "But I will *try* not to."

"Well, that's all a guy can ask for. I'll try and do the same."

She looks at me, also not sure if I am joking.

## **The next day**

Just as I am picking up my carry-on bags to board the plane, a small European man with thick, curly brown hair approaches me. It is almost a pompadour, his hair is so tall, but he simply has a lot of it.

"You are American, yes?" the man speaks in a Germanic accent.

"How'd you know!?" I am sarcastic.

"Anyone can spot an American a mile away."

"Congratulations," I continue the sarcasm.

Riva is watching from a nearby bar. Trying to, at least. It is difficult with men constantly offering her drinks. She is dressed casually, trying to blend in with her Capri pants, a simple knit shirt, cricket cap with a local team logo she found in the airport, and her hair pulled back into a ponytail. It does not help. She is still an attractive female alone in a bar.

"I've got a two hour layover, honey," one man says boldly as he approaches her table. "I could lay you over for most that time. Whaddaya say?"

"Not the *entire* time?" she sneers. "No thanks."

Not taking the hint, he sits down next to her. "I have always wanted to have sex in public. How about it? Right here, right now in front of everybody!"

Without missing a beat, she says, "Go ahead... with yourself."

"I meant with you."

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"I know what you meant, jack-ass," she replies. "But seriously, fuck off." He has no idea how lucky he is that she has no time for this. She might otherwise have caused him serious bodily harm. The man walks dejectedly toward the men's room to, presumably, do exactly what she suggested.

Returning her attention to the short man with tall hair now speaking with Alex, she thinks she knows him, but he is too far away to be sure. She leaves her table and closes the distance between them while, hopefully, not drawing attention to herself.

An electric cart ferrying anyone who might need a lift comes up from behind her. On her right, a maintenance man exits a storage room. She removes her cap and props the storage room door open with it before it shuts. The man never notices her as he hops onto the passing cart.

~

"I'm about to board," I tell the annoying man. "What do you want?"

"I want *you*."

"Hey, I'm flattered, but..."

The man pulls my hands behind my back and, in one fluid motion, handcuffs me.

"Hey, what the...?!"

"You are under arrest, Mr. Pannas."

"On whose authority? I've got friends in high places."

"Not anymore," he informs me happily. "Your charmed life is, well, no longer charmed."

"Charmed life? Are you kidding me?! And how did you know my name?"

~

Creeping closer, Riva finally recognizes the man with the big hair. It is Ludwig, of all people, her trainer from the agency. She half-expected Serge himself to show up. *But, no*, she corrects herself, *that would require effort*.

Seeing Ludwig now reminds her of the most useful advice he ever gave her: "Your target will be at his most vulnerable while busy subduing *his* target."

And so, as instructed, Riva trips Ludwig from behind just as the handcuffs go on Alex. She then grabs the latter by the shirt and pulls him on top of her former trainer. She is using Alex's weight to hold Ludwig down while she "calf-ropes" him with plastic tie-wrap-style handcuffs.

Smiling through heavy breaths, she says, "Lulu! Small world!"

~

To me, she explains, "We used to call him Lulu because his name is Ludwig and he's from Luxembourg. Get it? Right, Lulu?"

Ludwig has no response. While frisking him, she finds and pockets his plastic gun and knife – both fully functional and quite deadly – then places a chloroform-soaked rag over his nose and mouth.

She drags him, unconscious, to the storage room. People notice, but none dare say anything.

I am still in handcuffs and looking like a criminal, I'm sure, but I follow them. In the storage room, I protest. "Hey, can you uncuff me? These hurt."

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"There might be more on their way," she says. "I need to deal with them. No offense, but you would just get in the way. This storage room is a good hiding place. Just stay here!"

She props the unconscious Ludwig against the shelves and ties him to it with more plastic tie-wraps. On her way out, she says to me, "Wait here."

"I'm handcuffed," I snap at her. "Where *else* can I go?"

"Sorry!" she says as the door closes behind her. Nodding at Ludwig, she says to me, "At least *you* can move around."

First thing I do after she leaves is to try and open the door. It's locked. There's a badge-swipe device next to the knob, but I have no badge. Who makes a storage room lock from the inside?

A moment later, Ludwig awakens and immediately realizes his situation. He struggles to free himself, barely noticing me, until accepting that he will not break loose on his own. At that point, he gives me with a hopeful look.

"Don't look at me," I say. "I'm handcuffed and locked in here, too."

"Yes, but at least you can move around."

That was the same thing Riva said. I'm so paranoid at this point, I wonder if they are in this together somehow. Not that it makes any sense. It just makes me wonder.

I'm busy looking for a security badge, or at least something to cut these handcuffs with, when he starts telling me a story. I don't know why.

"This Riva girl," he explains, "is what we call a 'retribution specialist.'"

I have no response, but I'm listening, wondering what this has to do with me. As far as I know, I've never done anything to deserve "retribution."

"Her assignment," he continues, "was to take an 'average Joe' – you – ruin his life and turn him into a terrorist, or whatever we found useful, just to see if she could do it. It was a test. If successful, she could progress to ruining the lives of rival business leaders, local authorities and politicians. From there, maybe national leaders, even entire countries. Standard training."

I'm rummaging around, looking for something sharp, when I ask, "So, I'm like her little lab rat? Nice! But, why did she want that particular factory blown up?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. To give one of our clients a competitive edge, possibly. Pretty standard stuff. Besides, it's just good for business."

"Good, how?"

"Violence, terrorism, chaos, mayhem. It's what we do!" Ludwig sounds like a salesman. An evil salesman. "Of course, officially, we 'protect' our clients and count entire countries among our clientele.

"The old protection racket!"

"Yes," he agrees. "But more sophisticated. We are world leaders!"

"That might explain what's wrong with the world."

Laughing, he adds, "We ensure that the 'military-security industry' has enemies to fight."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"You are going to die, anyway. The least I can do is tell you why."

"Oh, that," I say, laughing. "It turns out I don't really have cancer, after all. Yeah, it was just a joke. Riva is such a kidder."

"Cancer?" He stares at me. "I don't know about any cancer, but you should know that Riva *will* kill you. I cannot blame her. She is desperate.

"She went from 'star agent-in-training' to 'rogue agent,' all in one week. It happens. Sad, really. She was such a nice piece of ass.

"But, do not worry. I am going to take you back to the States where you will stand trial for grand theft auto, and whatever else we have on you. With me, you will live. With Riva, make no mistake, she will kill us both if possible. So, could you please cut these handcuffs off me so that I might break us out of here?"

"The door is key-card secured," I tell him. "How will you open it?"

"With a credit card between the door jamb and the dead bolt," he says with a smile.

"Really?" I can hardly believe it, now kicking myself for not thinking of it.

When I start moving back toward the front of the room, he says, "Please hurry! Riva is likely..."

Before he can finish, Riva returns and closes the door behind her.

"Speak of the devil!" says Ludwig.

"'Riva is likely...' *what*, Ludwig?" she asks as she draws her weapon.

"I was just telling Al here..." says Ludwig, "may I call you Al?"

"No."

"I was telling Albert here..."

"Alex," Riva corrects him.

"I was just telling whatshisname what a lovely, sensible girl you are, and that you will likely demonstrate that fact by releasing me and coming back home."

By this time, I have returned to the front of the room. The way things are arranged, however, I am forced to stand closer to Ludwig – on his right – than I am to Riva.

"Not gonna happen, Ludwig," Riva says, aiming her gun between the two of us. "I cannot decide which one of you to shoot, though."

"I was just telling Alouicius here," Ludwig giggles nervously, "that you would kill him. So, go ahead. I gave him ample time to make peace with that."

I give him a look and say, "What crack in the Earth's crust did you crawl out from, anyway?"

~

Without further hesitation, Riva then shoots him, two shots in the chest. Dead. Simple as that. Situation taken care of. She would have shot him in the head, but always liked his face and did not want to ruin it. Silly, she knows, but the end result is the same.

~

I am speechless. This woman is a cold-blooded killer. I already knew that, of course, but now it is just so much more... real.

She holsters her gun, pulls a knife, and comes toward me. There is nothing to stop her from killing me next.

And, for some reason, she wants to end me with a knife, not a gun. *Well, I'm dead!*

She takes hold of my arm with one hand while cutting through the zip-ties with the other. To my great relief, I am free again, though my heart does not stop racing for the next several minutes.

Seeing the blood spatter on my clothes, she says in an almost motherly tone, "We must get you out of those clothes!"

"I thought you'd never ask," I joke.

"I've got a knife in my hand," she deadpans, "and I just killed a man in front of you, and you are thinking about sex?"

"I'm a guy," I shrug. "You're right, though, I *will* need a new shirt. I think I saw something earlier in the back of the room. Some sort of maintenance uniform." I go back there, rummage around some more, and shout out, "Found something!"

"Is it clean?" she asks as she makes her way toward me.

"Looks like it." I hold up a jumpsuit. "Might be a little small, though." It *is* several sizes too small, but there is nothing else. "I guess I can just cut it in half and make a shirt out of it."

As she joins me in back, I remove my shirt and give her what I hope is my best shirtless, male model pose. She smirks and returns to the front of the room.

I squeeze into my new "shirt," looking like a complete moron, and follow her out of the storage room. We leave Ludwig's body for the next *actual* maintenance person to discover.

## **That night**

As Alex sleeps in his room, Riva takes a quick shower, gets dressed, and slips out into the night.

Halfway around the world, somewhere in Europe, Serge's scantily-clad young male assistant drops papers onto Serge's desk and pronounces with dramatic flair, "Ludwig is dead!"

When Serge fails to respond immediately, the assistant asks, "Did you hear me?" When there is still no response, the assistant asks, "Should we send out another agent?"

Sighing deeply, taking a moment to think, Serge shakes his head. "No. Put Riva and her new boyfriend on the Terror Watch List and leave the rest to the authorities. If they are apprehended by airport security, great. Otherwise, we just let them go... for now."

He turns his chair toward the window and, with another deep sigh, gazes outside. "It is a big world out there. She will make a mistake soon enough, especially if she keeps that idiot American with her. We will bide our time."

Turning and picking up the documents concerning Ludwig's death, he says, "Revenge, as they say... Oh, who cares what they say. We will get her eventually."

~

Walking the streets of late-night Kuala Lumpur, Riva is watchful for anyone coming out of the shadows, but no one ever comes. On the phone, she says to the woman on the other end, "Get me on the first private jet to Bangkok."

~

The next morning, I am on the beach early, just out of reach of the waves. With one hand, I absently attempt a sandcastle, if it can be called that. It is just a mound of sand, really. Nothing like what the determined young boy several yards away is constructing. I do a double-take and laugh as I appraise the kid's vastly superior sandcastle-building skills.

"No way," I marvel at his work. He appears to be working on his alone. I laugh again when a man, presumably the boy's father, appears from behind the castle to admire their masterpiece.

Returning to my own thoughts, I watch as the waves roll onto the beach, crawling toward me just shy of my little fortress, only to then be pulled back out to sea.

"You coming, or what?" Riva asks. She has approached me from behind.

"Just waiting for you," I smile and turn toward her. Just to poke fun, I then add, "I think maybe my entire life, I've been waiting for you."

"Oh, please!" she is genuinely embarrassed.

I stand and dust myself off while she sniffs the air around me.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Just wondering what you've been smoking," she laughs. In her deepest voice she quotes me, "I think maybe all my life I've been waiting for you!" Give me a break!"

"Some people just can't take a compliment," I shake my head.

An hour later, we are on a remote private landing strip, riding a golf cart across the tarmac to our waiting plane.

"This is all you have to do to avoid airport security?" I ask, incredulous. "Rent a private plane at a private airport?"

"Pretty much, yeah," she says. "Makes you wonder why they have all that security at the major airports, doesn't it? Real terrorists with bombs can simply do what we're doing now."

"That's what I was trying to say back at LAX!" I half-shout. "I *think*. I was on drugs. I *guess* I was saying that. No, yeah, I said that. Anyway, wait, you're not saying that we are..."

"No," she assures me, "we're not carrying any bombs... that you know of! Just kidding! We're clean, for a change. Feels good, no?"

We board our plane and settle into our seats for the relatively short flight to Bangkok.

With a charming smile, she asks, "So, where will it be? Where have you always wanted to go but never had the right girl to go with?"

"I don't speak anything but English," I say, smiling, "so I probably need to go someplace where that's the language."

Nodding, she says, "I wouldn't recommend England, but I am prejudiced."

"I'm not sure I'd like it, anyway," I agree. "Wherever we go, I assume my unlimited credit card was canceled by your people. I'll need to work for a living again."

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"The credit card doesn't work like that," she says. "Again, I don't know the details, but from what I am told, all it does is fool the credit systems into thinking it is approved, no matter what the amount, no matter which system is verifying it. There is not an actual account attached to it. It might not work forever, but it is impossible to track... by anyone."

"I know where to go," I exclaim, rather proud of myself.

"Where?"

"The way, I figure it," I keep her in suspense, "Serge and company will be expecting us to travel as far from here as possible, right?"

"Probably."

"So, let's do the opposite of that."

"Okay, where?"

"I hope you like umbrella drinks! Turn this plane around, we're going to Phuket!"

She is suddenly very sad.

"What?" I ask. "You don't like umbrella drinks?"

"Not really, no," she says with a slight laugh. "But that's not the problem."

"So, what's the problem?"

"Well... I cannot help but get the impression you are falling in love with me." She says this very matter-of-fact, as if it happens all the time... because it does. I normally find such presumption and vanity unattractive but, in her case, I let it slide. You can't fault a person for knowing the truth.

"And," she continues, "you seem to think you and I are on some grand adventure and we're going to live happily ever after."

"Don't be ridiculous," I say, having difficulty hiding the fact that she has hit the nail on the head. That's exactly what I was thinking. "I mean, yeah sure, that would be nice, and all, but you're not really my type."

It is a complete lie, of course, but the funny thing is that she says the exact same thing at the same time: "You're not really my type."

Talk about being in sync! The problem is that we're only in sync on the subject of *not* being in sync.

She surprises me by taking the time to expound upon her last comment. "Even if we did get together at some point... in some very *distant* future... I just don't think it would last. We are so different, you and I."

I can't believe she's giving it any consideration at all, but I pretend to take it in stride.

"So, we play it by ear," I say. "See how it goes. This is just a fling. If I've learned anything through all of this, it's that you never know *what* might happen. Things don't always go as planned."

"Tell me about it!" she laughs a heart-felt laugh.

"Two weeks ago," I continue, "my life was completely different. Has it only been two weeks? Wow. Anyway, you came along and... oh wait, you screwed up everything, didn't you? I'm still not sure if I should kill you or kiss you."

"We might have a future, after all," suddenly hopeful, she gives another happy laugh. "I was wondering the very same thing!"

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"What!?" I feign hurt feelings. "What did I ever do to you?"

"Just shut up and kiss me!" she says. A moment later, after easily the best kiss of my life, she adds, "Oh, and, um, we don't need to turn the plane around, *drăguț*. Phuket is still ahead of us, and it's pronounced 'poo-GET' not 'fuck it.'"

"Ah, well..." I stammer. To the pilot, I then say, "Carry on, Mr. Pilot!"

He rolls his eyes at me. People do that a lot.

## **Change of heart**

When he first said it, Serge fully intended to let Riva go. He didn't have the heart to chase after her. Always had a soft spot for her. For a moment there – and this is *very* rare for him – he is happy to let her live her life however she chooses.

He then smiles as he pictures her on a beach somewhere, happy. Then he imagines the swimsuit she must be wearing. A thong bikini, knowing her. Or, better yet, on a nude beach wearing nothing at all! Yessss!

That's when he realizes how much he misses their little trysts, as he sardonically refers to the times he raped her. She has always believed it was “only” twice, but she has no recollection of the times she was so high on drugs that it left a blank spot in her memory. In his line of work, he has to know exactly what to use, and in what doses, to get the desired effect, and he has often happily practiced this dark art upon her.

A twinkle now comes to his eye, a surge in his loins, at the thought of raping her again. Raping anyone, really. A heterosexual man is best, of course. The sheer *violation* of it – on several levels – is exquisite. A woman – especially a rare beauty like Riva who always assumes she has the upper hand in all matters sexual – well, that has a special appeal all its own.

"Rupert!" he calls his barely-dressed, obsequious young assistant into his office.

"Yes, my lord," the man addresses Serge as instructed.

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"Change of plans. I shall need you to bathe and dress me. Something suitable for a ball."

"What *sort* of ball, my lord?" Rupert asks with a hungry smile.

"Rupert, you naughty boy! Not *that* sort. Well, maybe *after*, but this will be serious, yet tropical. Something black, perhaps, but not morbid. You decide. You have quite the knack for such things, but hurry up! I have wasted too much time already!"

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## 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](http://williamarthurholmes.com)

