

Operation Detour

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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."

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?"

"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.

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.

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.

"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?

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!

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.

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."

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.

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!"

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."

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."

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

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

Operation Detour by William Arthur Holmes

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."

"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 multinational 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.

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.

