

SEARCHING FOR CHRISTINE

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1. FINDING LOVE

Every man needs a woman to tame him
George Gilder (paraphrased)

The week began uneventfully. It was a quiet time of hard work, a week which Matt had to spend by himself, because his beloved Christine had to go the AAMT convention in San Diego. He missed her, of course, but he took advantage of his loneliness to forge ahead on some important research.

The two of them were not living together (yet), but they saw each other nearly daily, and they were deeply committed to each other. By now, early April, they had been dating monogamously for nearly a year. Their relationship, a hit from the start, was getting even better. There was a clear momentum toward marriage. Just before she left for the convention, they agreed that she would move in with him upon her return.

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Matt was twenty-eight years old when he met Christine. They say that you often get the things you wish for only after you stop looking for them. By now, he had recovered from a disastrous divorce, four years earlier. He was no longer on the rebound. He was no longer desperately lonely and in search for a replacement. He dated alright, but he carefully avoided deep entanglements. He was happy by himself. He was independent and productive. He was working on his second book. At one time he had wanted to raise a family, but this was no longer something he worried about a great deal. If it happened, fine, but he was now just as satisfied working on his career.

Curiously, that is precisely when Christine appeared in his life. One of the courses he taught was the core Social Theory class required for all the majors. That class enrolled many mediocre students and a few very bright ones. He had already experienced both types of students when discussing esoteric concepts such as Phenomenology. One of the better students in that class was the beautiful young brunette whose name Matt thought was Christine (which was confirmed when he checked his grade roster).

After receiving an "A" in Matt's Social theory Class, Christine enrolled in his Urban Sociology class the following semester - not because she thought that he was an easy grader (he was not), but because she was, as a sociology major, required to take the course. There were over a hundred students in the class. When Matt arrived in class the first day, he was happy to see Christine's familiar face. She sat in the middle of the front row, wearing a miniskirt and her red boots again. She wore her hair in a semi-long curled fashion.

Her beautiful large brown eyes looked up at him, the professor, full of anticipation and eagerness to learn, not trying to look bored and ‘cool,’ like so many others. Matt smiled at her, indicating that he recognized her, and her smile back made him shiver inside. He told himself to pull himself together.

Throughout that semester, Matt went to that class always looking forward to seeing Christine sitting in the same spot, always focusing attentively with her big beautiful eyes on everything he said, often raising her hand and asking good questions. On the rare occasions that she missed a class, Matt felt badly about himself, believing that she was no longer interested in his course, that she was bored.

Socializing outside of class was out of the question while she was his student, but he had his eyes set on her for after the end of the semester. He invited her out during the early part of Christmas recess. She appeared so vulnerable, so innocent. She had just turned old enough to be allowed in a bar. She laughed a lot and blushed easily. She must have been in awe of her (former) professor.

They dated for a few weeks, saw plays like *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *A Streetcar named Desire* in San Francisco, they skied in Squaw Valley and other Sierra resorts, they spent many fabulous weekends together. Matt truly did not think that much more could come from this relationship. He felt like the big bad wolf going after Little Red Riding Hood. He knew that he was damaged goods - divorced, scarred and cynical. Christine on the other hand was a young, super-straight middle-class American girl who had never even smoked marijuana - unheard of on a college campus. She dressed impeccably and beautifully. She seemed so pure, so lovable, so fragile. Matt realized immediately that she would be the best woman any man could ever marry, once she’d find the right man. But he could not possibly be that man himself. All his life he had been surrounded by scumbags, struggling, getting down into the gutter. She was clean and unspoiled. He felt that she was way too good for him.

After graduation, Christine became certified as a medical transcriptionist and began to work for a major medical group. She rose rapidly, became local chapter head and then statewide president of her professional association - the AAMT.

During that year, they became closer and closer. Both outdoor lovers, they hiked Yosemite, scaled 14,500 foot Mount Whitney, camped in Sequoia National Park. They took wild trips everywhere, criss-crossing California, the Mojave Desert, Death Valley, Nevada, Arizona and Northern Mexico. They had a ball driving to the Grand Canyon and to Las Vegas, camping out in the desert. They went to the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, to jazz giants Cannonball Adderley and Les McCann at LA’s Lighthouse and to operas like *Tosca* and *La Traviata*. They joined a ski club, skied at Mount Baldy and Mammoth, they flew to Sun Valley, Vail, Park City and Snowbird.

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For their trips across the Southwest, they relied on Matt’s antique little Fiat convertible, an unwise decision. FIAT, of course, stands for ‘*Fix It Again, Tony,*’ something both Christine and Matt can attest to. Most mornings, the car wouldn’t start. They referred to it as the ‘bobsled,’ because they had to use a running start just like they do at the winter Olympics - Christine at the wheel and Matt pushing and then jumping in as the car started rolling downhill.

Sometimes the little red two-seater managed to cross a desert or to get to the top of a hill, but it usually failed to do so, especially when it was hot, which is often the case in the Mojave during the summer.

The Town of Baker is close to the epicenter of the Mojave Desert. Interstate Fifteen goes through Baker, on the way to Las Vegas. Immediately to the East of Baker, there is a particularly long and steep incline of about twelve miles.

On their way to Vegas one time, Christine and Matt reached Baker in the early afternoon. They stopped for a quick lunch at Denny's and resumed their trip, hitting the twelve-mile incline at the eastern edge of town during the hottest part of the afternoon. At first the little Fiat did its best, but the further up the hill it got, the slower it went, until it came to a full stop, perhaps only a couple miles before the top.

Matt and Christine decided to try again. After all, they had almost made it to the top on their first attempt. They made a U turn and rolled back down to Baker. This time, they would take a running start. So they waited a while, poured some more water and coolant into the radiator, and then Matt revved up the little high compression engine and attacked the bottom of the hill at 90 miles an hour. Up they went, slower and slower with each passing mile, and just as they could see the top of the hill less than a mile ahead, the car gave up again, coming to a full stop.

The third time they tried this, disaster struck. The fan belt broke, and soon thereafter the radiator began to spew water, a prelude to exploding and burning up the entire engine. They had no choice but to roll back down to Baker.

There, they went to a garage. When the mechanic looked at the Fiat's engine, he began to howl with laughter, asking, "what's that? an outboard motor or a moped? Haha." Matt figured that there were still desert hicks in the 21st century apparently, who hadn't heard that not all cars were Fords and Chevrolets. However, it was Christine who displayed the courage, temper, fierce sense of loyalty and the admirable protective instinct which were among the main reasons why Matt fell so deeply in love with her. She told the mechanic, "what's the matter with you, idiot? Never seen a foreign car? Can you fix it, or are you too damn stupid?"

Whoa! thought Matt, cowering. She's going to get us into trouble! But she didn't. The red neck apologized and said, "sure I kin fix it, but it'll take a couple a days. I gotta get parts from Vegas."

Christine and Matt were stuck in Baker for the next couple of days. They couldn't find a motel room, so they spread their canvas tent out somewhere in the desert sand near the freeway, and they slept under the stars, surrounded by cactuses and listening to howling coyotes in the distance.

That is how Matt and Christine roamed around America shortly after they became serious.. Their hair blew in the hot desert wind, the radio blared music out - oldies like Neil Young's *A Horse with no Name*, which became *their* song, appropriately dealing with the rugged beauty of the desert. They drove, and when it got dark they stopped, and they slept in godforsaken towns like Hawthorne and Tonopah in Nevada, or Kingman in Arizona, or ghost towns like Trona and Cody in California. Sometimes they found a motel, sometimes there weren't any, so they set up their tent, or they just slept sitting in the car, or in the sand under the stars. It was romantic, adventurous, fun and glorious. They didn't care. They were young, they were in love, and they were happy.

* * * * *

Meeting Christine was a watershed in Matt's life. He felt that she had transformed his life from darkness to illumination, that she changed him from a frequent loser to a happy winner, from a flawed person to someone of substance and achievement. She showed him the way and filled his life with happiness. She always stood by him lovingly, loyally and patiently. Her long list of qualities began with her natural innocence, her natural inability to become bitter. From the moment he first met her, Matt knew that she was incapable of meanness, and she assumed that other people were also that way. Matt could see that meanness in people *surprised* her. She did not expect it.

However, what made Christine so attractive was that she combined her natural goodness with the fierce temper of her Italian-American ancestry. Let her become righteously angry, and the offender had better beware!

One time they went to Disneyland and they got stuck on one of the amusement park's dullest rides - the Bank of America's *It's a Small World After All* boat ride. The other riders on the boat were three very small children plus a group of rowdy teenagers, who began to rock the boat dangerously. Christine behaved like a lioness! Fearing for the young children's safety, she grabbed those teenagers by the neck, and she would have tossed them into the water with superhuman strength had they not stopped. Matt, the only man in the group, just sat and watched in awe.

Early in their relationship, Matt wondered where such strength came from. After all, Christine looked like a delicate flower, not a fighter. In time, he came to understand where her amazing toughness came from. As the months went by, she told Matt more and more about herself and her background. He loved to listen to the saga of her youth, which she would recount over dinner or in bed after they made love. That saga was a microcosm of America, the strength, beauty and grandeur of the country of which Matt was a citizen by choice rather than birth.

She told him how she had been raised in the military fashion by parents who were highly disciplinarian and harsh taskmasters. She had to address her father 'Sir' and answer her mother 'yes Mam,' military style. That kind of said it all.

Also, up to the moment she moved out of her parents' house at eighteen, Christine's duties at home had been heavy and non-negotiable. When she arrived home from school in the afternoon, it was her responsibility to set the table, to get dinner ready, and to serve it promptly when her parents arrived home at 6:00 p.m. She was also expected to do the vast majority of household chores, including cleaning, vacuuming and laundry. Saturday inspections of all the rooms were rigorous. Disobedience carried a high price, including physical punishment in the form of belt lashings.

Christine's parents considered compliments and displays of affection sentimental and inappropriate. They came from that tough old breed of Americans who had survived the rigors of the frontier. Her mother's ancestors had moved to America from Wales in the middle of the nineteenth century, trekked westward in covered wagons and settled in Texas. Then, they followed the Oregon trail to California, while Apaches, Comanches and Sioux raided their wagon train. Christine's grand uncle was shot through the heart by an Apache arrow.

However, it was from her father's side that she inherited her delightful Italianness. Her grandfather's name was Christophoro. He came from an ancient family of clockmakers who lived in Italy's Tyrolean Alps and in Venice. The moment Christine showed Matt a photo of the old man, he could think of only one character: Pinocchio's father Geppetto. Christophoro looked exactly like that kind, old, sturdy, bespectacled, Tyrolean watchmaker type. However, Christophoro moved to Rome when he was a young child, and he grew up in the eternal city.

Later, a branch of the family emigrated to New York at the turn of the 20th century, taking along Christophoro and his six brothers. They first settled in New York's *Hell's Kitchen*, and four of Christophoro's brothers died in the 1918 influenza pandemic.

Like Christine's Welsh ancestors on her mother's side, Christophoro also decided to move West. He settled in Colorado, a place that reminded him of the Northern Italian mountains in which he had grown up. And that's where the next three generations of Christine's family built their American dream, and where Christine was born. However, immediately upon high school graduation, she left for the University of California. By the time she and Matt met, her father had been dead for a decade and her mother lived alone as a widow in Colorado. Matt had never met her or any of her other relatives.

As Christine told her life story, she had a special relationship with her grandfather Christophoro. He amply made up for the coldness and asceticism of her parents. It was Christophoro who turned her on to the warmth and the beauty of the Italian spirit, to the music of Verdi and Puccini, to *Madame Butterfly* and to the voice of Mario Lanza, to the fine art of Italian cuisine and to the wisdom and humor of the Italian mind. As Christine's godfather, Christophoro passed on to her much more than just his name.

As a naturalized American, Matt was utterly captivated by Christine's story, because it was the stuff of which America was forged. This was pure American History 101. It represented America's heroic age, the age during which the country was transformed from wilderness to civilization. Christine's family had *been* there, and it was *The Godfather* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, it was John Wayne, it was half of what Hollywood was all about, and it was, above all, *true*. Thus, Matt came to understand Christine's strength and toughness. It was the strength and toughness of the American people.

At the same time, Matt could also see that Christine was the most sensitive person he had ever met - not sensitive in the sense of not being able to withstand pain, but sensitive in the sense of being a true *empath*. He found out that she could respond to whatever message he emitted, verbally or non-verbally. She understood everything. She was unable to *not* respond. However, he had discovered from experiences such as the ones in Disneyland and in the Mojave desert that Christine's kindness was not to be equated with weakness. To the contrary, she was the toughest, bravest fighter he had ever met, when the need arose. In this, too she symbolized America itself.

Both of them had come to California from far away. Both were, like so many other Americans, uprooted newcomers who were re-inventing their lives uncluttered by the past. Their origins and families laid thousands of miles away. They were alone and together, which added to the strength of their bond.

Matt saw Christine as his savior. She was endowed with a superior *social intelligence*, an instinctive wisdom to always make the right judgment, and Matt increasingly relied on her for all his decisions, personal and professional. Before he met her, his life had been chaotic,

frustrating and conflict-ridden. Many of his relationships with women had been dysfunctional, most of all his first marriage. Now he had found someone with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life, and she appeared to share that goal.

2. WHAT HAPPENED TO CHRISTINE?

So Christine went to San Diego as one of the organizers of the national AAMT convention. Matt could hardly wait for her to come back and to move in with him. He had bought his first house when he took the job as a 27-year old assistant professor at the university, two years earlier. It was a fine, fifteen-year old three bedroom house close to campus.

In anticipation of Christine's return and move-in, he worked like the devil during her absence. He began each day with a sturdy ten mile run along the American River. He was training for the Boston Marathon, at the end of April. He had qualified for it by running the Napa Valley Marathon in 2 hrs and 59 minutes. Since then, he kept in shape by running ten miles a day and twenty on Sunday, sometimes doing intervals and gradually increasing his speed to sub-seven minute pace.

The river was brim full, wide as the Mississippi, thanks to the heavy spring Sierra snow melt. The trees were already in bloom, California was at its most beautiful, basking under a cloudless sky in seventy-degree weather. Matt was truly addicted to his daily runs, especially the mid-week ones. He loved the proverbial loneliness of the long-distance runner, rarely encountering anyone else, often seeing deer darting away as he approached, sometimes watching a coyote quickly cross the trail in front of him, occasionally side-stepping a rattler, too.

It was Monday now. One more day and he would drive to the airport to pick up Christine. He finished his run, took a quick shower and began to check his messages - first his voice mail, then his e-mail and then his MSN text messages.

To his delight, there was a voice mail message from Christine, although it was cryptic, saying something like, "I got some terrific news honey, call me A.S.A.P. Love you."

He called her back immediately at the San Diego Marriott, but she wasn't in her room. After playing telephone tag for a while, they finally made contact. Christine had some impressive news indeed: She said that a couple of high-faluting French doctors who were attending the convention from the *Institut Pasteur* were offering her a job!

"What do you mean?" Matt asked, somewhat worried. "A French job?"

"Right!" she replied, excited. "In Paris! But I would do most of the work in my home office, and I would only have to fly there five or six times a year for a few days! They saw my qualifications and they want me to work for them. They said the work will be highly classified. They need someone who understands the legal ramifications. It also helps that I know French. I'm meeting with them again this afternoon to find out more about it, the pay scale and so on."

"Wow!" he said, impressed, but still a bit concerned. "Are you sure you want to do this? Have they made an offer?"

“Well, not quite yet. They want me to fly back to Paris with them tomorrow for the job interview. Of course they are paying for everything. I’ll be staying at the Hotel Georges Cinq. I would come home on Friday instead of tomorrow...”

After expressing some more misgivings, Matt acquiesced to Christine’s changed travel plan. He didn’t have any choice in the matter anyway, it was her decision to make. Plus, he trusted her judgment. If she felt comfortable doing this, it must be alright. He would just have to languish an extra three days before being with his beloved again. He would pick her up on Friday instead of Tuesday, arriving on American flight #24 at nine p.m.

Christine arrived in Paris on Wednesday morning. As soon as she checked into the Hotel Georges Cinq, she called Matt, telling him that everything was fine. She was going to get some sleep and get ready for her job interview the next day.

* * * * *

Friday came. As the day progressed, Matt was increasingly excited. He drove out to the airport nearly an hour prematurely. There are two possibilities, they say: Either ‘out of sight out of mind,’ or ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder.’ In Matt’s case, it was definitely the latter. Her week-long absence had felt like an eternity.

The flight landed, the passengers came out, many dozens of them. Matt kept waiting and looking, to the bitter end, but to his consternation, no Christine! After waiting some more and making sure everyone had deplaned, he went to inquire, somewhat agitated. But he could get no information from the airlines as to her whereabouts, or what flight she might have booked. Privacy blah blah blah.

He drove home, quite despondent. Now what?

He called the San Diego Marriott. They told him that, yes, she had been there (which he already knew) but that she had checked out three days ago already.

Then he tried to remember, where did she say she was staying in Paris? The Saint Georges hotel, or was it the hotel Georges Cinq? He definitely remembered Georges something. ATT information told him that there was indeed a hotel Georges Cinq, so he called them. They said, “*Oui Monsieur, Madame Christine etait ici, mais elle est partie hier deja.*” (Yes Sir, Mrs. Christine was here, but she already checked out yesterday).

Merde! he felt like saying, but he said *merci* instead. He drove to her apartment, rang the bell and knocked on the door so persistently that he attracted the attention of the manager who threatened to call the police if he didn’t leave. It was midnight. Of course Christine wasn’t there.

Back in his own house, he spent the next couple of hours pacing the living room, watching Conan O’Brien and desperately waiting for her to call. But she didn’t. He finally fell asleep at four a.m.

He spent Saturday in a daze, trying to get some work done and performing some errands like an automaton. It was torture not to know where she was. He e-mailed her again, called her apartment and then he drove to it again, just in case.

To his amazement, the area was cordoned off with yellow police tape, indicating that there had been either an accident or a crime. He approached, and was shocked to find out that it was precisely in Christine's apartment where something bad had happened. Neighbors and onlookers were milling around. Matt heard someone say 'burglary.' Through the window he could see that Christine's apartment had been ransacked.

Then, something very annoying happened: The manager walked up to Matt quickly and aggressively, bringing two cops with him and saying, "That's him! This guy was here last night around midnight! He made a ruckus and he was trying to break into the apartment!"

"What?!" Matt exclaimed, "I did no such thing!"

The cops became very inquisitive. They demanded his identification. The more defensive and agitated Matt became, the more trouble he was creating for himself. They finally ordered him into the back of their patrol car and took him to the downtown station for interrogation. Matt kept swearing to his innocence and emphasized his respectable status:

"Why on earth would I commit such a crime?" he asked rhetorically, almost shouting. "That's my girlfriend's apartment. I have everything to lose. I am a university professor, for Christ's sake! I teach criminology!"

"That's neither here nor there," the cops replied. "You admit that you know the apartment's occupant?"

"Yeah, yeah, I 'admit.' And that's just it, she's supposed to have returned from Europe yesterday, but she didn't. I'm getting real worried. THAT's what you guys should be looking into instead of harassing me!"

"Sir," said one of the cops, trying to sound professional, but actually only revealing his low educational level, "if you wish to file a missing person report, you may do so at headquarters. However, being a day late from an alien state such as Europe hardly references a missing person. That individual probably missed her flight."

In the end, they let him go - provisionally. While they had no evidence to charge him with burglary, he remained a prime suspect and they told him that he was not to leave town. They said that they would call him in again for further questioning.

* * * * *

One more night came and went, and still no news from Christine. Matt's nerves were getting the better of him. His girlfriend had disappeared, her apartment had been burglarized, he was a suspect in that crime. What the hell was going on? He took ambien before going to bed because he was becoming dangerously sleep-deprived.

He spent all of Sunday fretting. He came close to resuming smoking, which he had kicked several years ago. He didn't worry much about what the dumb cops believed. He was innocent and they didn't have a leg to stand on. It was Christine's disappearance that tortured him. How could Christine just have up and vanished? Something bad must have happened. He

checked the news and the Internet for air crashes. Nothing. Maybe she got in a terrible accident overseas, or mugged, or sick, or something. He spent Sunday glued to the phone, waiting for a call that never came. He checked his e-mail every hour, called the airlines and checked arrivals. All to no avail.

On Monday, he went to police headquarters to file a missing person report. The response was bureaucratic and utterly unhelpful. After he filled out the form, the clerk gave him a report number and told him that the report would be filed properly.

“Yes, and?” Matt asked.

“Well, sir, that way it’ll be on record,” she said. “However, because the missing individual was last reported in France, we cannot do anything. You must contact the French authorities. Good bye.”

That did a lot of good! Matt thought, as he drove to campus to teach his morning class. His concerns were so visible on his face and in his demeanor that people at work were wondering, asking him if he was alright. But he stayed mum, while looking increasingly glum.

His paranoid mind kicked in. The - hopefully remote - possibility occurred to him that maybe she was swept off her feet by some romantic or successful or rich or macho physician or professional. Maybe she was being bad and unfaithful, maybe she was having a fling in Paris, maybe she was even dumping him. After all, it wouldn’t be the first time a woman behaved duplicitously. Look at his ex-wife! She sure had done a job on him!

But Christine being duplicitous and unfaithful? Very unlikely, he concluded. After all, their nearly year-long relationship and their love had been fantastically real. He couldn’t have been *that* wrong. The love she had shown and given to him had been so profound, so passionate, so sincere and unflinching for all those months - she couldn’t possibility have been a fake - or could she? She would have to be the master faker of all times.

Although, who knows, anything can happen. But if this were the case, why the charade and not just say ‘I want to break up’? And what about the burglary? Surely that couldn’t be a coincidence! It didn’t make sense.

All sorts of other theories ran through his mind, and he began to question the veracity of everything that had happened between him and Christine over the past year. Had she fabricated all those stories about her Italian grandfather, her military family, Colorado? Maybe she was a *Femme Nikita*! Maybe she was running from the law, or from gangsters. Maybe she was in the witness protection program, or she worked for some CIA-like agency? Come to think of it, he had never met any of her friends. He and Christine had been so much in love - or so he thought - that they had spent most of their time as a blissful duo. And whatever sparse social life they had engage in had been spent primarily with Matt’s departmental colleagues and friends.

His mind was running in circles. The questions made him crazier every day. He felt like he was going insane. On Monday evening, he finally broke down. He HAD to talk to someone. He called his best friend Henry, a young assistant professor of history who had come to the university of California a year before Matt. They went out for a beer. He told him everything and concluded,

“I’m afraid something bad has happened to Christine.”

Henry tried to comfort him, saying, “don’t panic. It’s been how long - three or four days?”

“Yes, but she is nowhere to be found, not in her apartment, she doesn’t answer her phone or her e-mail. And I called her hotel in Paris. She WAS there, but she checked out four days ago - last Thursday! Where the hell is she? Maybe she is hurt and God knows where!”

Henry tried to uplift Matt with some bad levity. “Maybe she is having a ball, without you! Maybe she met some fancy doctor in San Diego, then flew to Paris with him, ha!”

“Don’t be an asshole!” Matt retorted. “She would never do that!”

“I was just kidding,” Henry said. “I’m sure she loves you and she’ll be back soon. There must be a logical explanation. Maybe she started on her new job in Paris right away and hasn’t had time to call you or e-mail you.”

“Anyway,” Matt said, “don’t think that I hadn’t thought of that scenario, too. I wasn’t born yesterday. Women can be deceitful. Anything can happen these days. But that’s the least of my concerns. I am much more worried that she is hurt or something.”

He also told Henry that Christine’s apartment had been burglarized, and that the idiot police suspected him and that he wasn’t supposed to leave town. “Her disappearance and the burglary must be connected. Can’t be a coincidence. Her apartment had been ransacked - I could see it from outside. A real mess!”

“No shit?” said Henry. “Someone broke in, and they think it was you? Don’t you have a key to her place?”

“We never bothered. She has the key to my house of course, but we hardly ever spent time in her apartment any more. Anyway, I didn’t break in, that’s for sure.”

Then he made up his mind: he had to go to Paris to find her. He sensed that she was in trouble.

Henry said, “you cant just up and go, man! What about your classes? Your job? It’s the middle of the semester! You can’t go on a wild goose chase! Plus, the cops told you not to leave town. You leave the country and they’ll think it’s a dead give-away. Like O.J. driving his bronco towards the border! Don’t do it man!”

“I’ve made up my mind. I’ll have my Teaching Assistant run my classes for a few days. She is excellent. I’ll be in daily Internet contact with her. I’ll be back real soon. When the police sees that I came back, they’ll know I wasn’t running away...”

On Tuesday, he told the chairman of his department that there was an emergency for which he had to leave campus for a few days, and that everything was under control. His TA was

taking over his classes and he hoped to be back within a week.

He took off the next morning, American Airlines to Charles De Gaulle, connecting in Dallas. This was the same flight he had taken many times in the past, and the one on which Christine was supposed to return, in reverse, the previous week. He would arrive in Paris on Thursday. Christine had been missing for nearly a week.

3. PARIS

The flight provided him with a dozen hours during which he could think through his problem logically and rationally, listing his options and the cards in his hands. All his life he had proceeded in this fashion when confronted with a crisis. First, you sit down and analyze the situation. Then, you opt for the best - or, depending on your options - the least harmful course of action. This was the essence of *Pragmatism*, a philosophy he had learned from the great American psychologist William James, a philosophy which he liked far more than the traditional cause-and-effect way of thinking which most people confuse with “science.”

He believed firmly that most people, especially so-called experts, were far too hung up on “causes” and “explanations.” When a problem occurs, or when someone behaves badly, the first order of business should be to *respond* to the problem at hand - to solve it if possible, or at least to contain and minimize the damage. Often, a search for causes and explanations is merely a distraction and a waste of time, because in real life, causes can rarely be established with scientific certainty. When a real-life problem arises, the response to it is always going to be based on guesswork anyway. The idea is to respond as effectively as possible. While it is important to find out *what* happened, it is rarely necessary to speculate on *why* it happened. That’s where social scientists, criminologists, psychologists and all the other ‘experts’ are wrong. They think they’re doctors curing an illness, but they are not. They waste endless amounts of time and resources looking for the causes of the problem, asking *why* a criminal, or a terrorist, or a crazy person behaves the way he does.

Same with personal issues - divorce, job loss, arguments, etc. *Why* you broke up or *why* you had an argument with your spouse this morning is often less relevant than the fact that it happened, and that you’ve got to move on. In most cases, there is plenty of blame for everybody involved, so further analysis and recrimination are counterproductive. There will always be competing interpretations as to *why* the conflict occurred.

So Matt knew that in the real world, the search for causes behind human actions was often nothing but scholasticism - talking about angels and pinheads. When people do bad things for example, most of the time it isn’t possible to know for sure why they do them, and the reasons are irrelevant anyway. There will always be many competing theories. Psychological theories (“He is crazy”), political theories (“He wants power, or freedom, or equality”), sociological theories (“He grew up poor and oppressed, he was abused as a child”), biological theories (“He was born that way”). Maybe his motive was greed, maybe he just did it for fun, maybe it was the weather, or the full moon, etc. etc.

Now, Matt knew that the important thing for him was to find out *what* had happened, not to speculate about the Christine’s motives or the reasons for her disappearance. There would be plenty of time for that later.

It would take the entire night to cross the Atlantic, but he was far too upset to sleep, something he could never do on an airplane even under the best circumstances. Neither was he interested in watching something called *Fever Pitch*, some base-ball comedy, it seemed. Instead, he turned on his overhead light and started to scribble down some notes - handwriting, the old-fashioned way, even though he had his laptop with him.

Analyzing his problem, he came to the conclusion that he actually had very few options: All he knew was that Christine had stayed at the hotel Georges Cinq, and that she was interviewing at the *Institut Louis Pasteur*. So that's where he would start. And he also planned to contact the French police, hoping that they would be more helpful than their California counterpart.

* * * * *

He landed at De Gaulle a few minutes after ten a.m. With only a carry-on, he cleared customs and passport control in minutes. He was always in awe of the fact that European airports were manned by heavily armed soldiers patrolling and carrying large automatic weapons. America had experimented with this for a few weeks after nine-eleven, but then stopped doing it. On the other hand, the Europeans never made you take off your shoes when going through security. Well, you just go figure. Each society decides how to optimize public safety. Matt wasn't sure who was doing it better - America or Europe.

Jet-lagged and bleary-eyed after a sleepless night, he hurried to the *Eurocar* counter and rented a Peugeot 307. This time, he went for a mid-sized minivan, standard shift of course, like most European rentals. In the past, he had often rented compacts and even economy cars to save money. Funny-looking things with names like Twingo, Bingo, Lupo, Cleo, and Pinto, made by Fiat, Renault, Volkswagen or Citroen. But they were awfully uncomfortable. Some, like the *Smart* and the old Fiat *Cinque Cento*, were cartoon-like half-cars small enough to park in your toilet. Oh well, Matt thought, maybe they were the wave of the future. Maybe the Europeans were smarter than the Americans and better prepared to face the energy crisis.

He got on the A.1 *autoroute* to Paris, about forty kilometers South of the airport. The sky was slightly overcast, even though this was "April in Paris." Which version of the song was he thinking of - Ella Fitzgerald, or was it Louis Armstrong, or Nat King Cole maybe?

He wished that he had been here under better circumstances. After all, this was *his* city. This was where he grew up. This was where he always returned when he wanted to feel home again. He had a love-hate relationship with the Parisians, just like many Americans have with New Yorkers. He was not intimidated by the French. When they were rude, he could give as good as he got, but all in all he loved these people, who were by and large smart, hospitable, funny, magnanimous and great to mingle with. He had many good friends in France.

Neither was he daunted by Parisian drivers. He loved to dart in and out of traffic and to compete with the natives. All you had to do in order to avoid making contact with other cars was to follow a simple principle, one which most American tourists never understood: whoever is even only *slightly* ahead of you - even if your car's nose sticks out only *one inch* ahead of the other guy's - it is your right and your obligation to move ahead of him. And if you don't, all hell breaks loose - honking, cussing, and maybe a fender-bender. Because the word 'patience' is not part of the French lexicon.

Before leaving California, Matt had made sure he knew where the *Institut Louis Pasteur*

was. It was in the *Rue Vaugirard*. He knew where that was. He knew Paris like the palm of his hand. It was a short distance South of the *Gare Montparnasse* - one of Paris' five huge railroad stations. He also remembered, with a smile, that the *Rue Vaugirard* was one of the cheap light blue streets on the Monopoly board, the same one as "Connecticut" in the American game. So much useless knowledge I have, he mused.

So now, he knew exactly where to go. He entered the city via the Northern slums of Saint Denis, drove past Montmartre and the white *Sacre Coeur* basilica towering over the city. He then took the ring westward and got off near the *Etoile*. He circled the great Arch of Triumph, joining the hundreds of other cars that were all behaving as if they were on a circular race track. He knew that he had to drive past five of the twelve majestic avenues fanning out from the star-shaped square, and then take a right towards the Seine on *Avenue Kleber*. One of the avenues he whizzed by was the *Avenue de la Grande Armee*. At the end of it, a couple of kilometers away, Matt could see the hyper-modern complex of skyscrapers called La Defense. That had been one of De Gaulle's projects, to emphasize France's eternal *grandeur*, Matt supposed. Exactly on the opposite side of the "star" was the fabulous *Champs Elysees*, ending at the Concorde square and the Egyptian obelisk in the distance, and the Tuilerie Gardens and the Louvre behind it. All in all, the two great avenues, the two gigantic squares, the gardens and the monuments formed a perfect geometric straight seven-mile long line starting at the Louvre and ending at the Defense. Now THAT was urban planning, Matt thought with admiration.

However, he was far too preoccupied to sightsee. He got off the *Etoile* merry-go-round on *Avenue Kleber*, carefully cutting off a dozen cars as he moved over to exit the race track. From there, it was only a short distance to the Seine, which he crossed driving over the *Alma Marceau* bridge, from where he could admire the Eiffel Tower towering over the plush 7th arrondissement apartments of the *LaMotte Picquet Grenelle* district. On his left, on top of a hill, he could see the Bauhaus-style *Palais de Chaillot* which contained the *Musee de l'Homme*. In front of the huge building was the marble esplanade. Just below the esplanade, a double row of fountains stretched out all the way down to the Seine. The entire complex faced the Eiffel Tower, from which it was separated only by the river.

South of the Eiffel Tower was the majestic *Champs de Mars*, the neat geometric French-style park reminiscent of the Versailles gardens. And at the far South end the park, Matt could see the golden dome of the *Invalides*, Napoleon's gaudy but beautiful tomb.

He drove around the *Invalides* and the *Ecole Militaire*, came by the Montparnasse station, and soon he was at the Institut Louis Pasteur. He admitted to himself that maybe, just maybe, he had taken a slightly roundabout way to reach his destination. Oh well, that's what he did every time he arrived in Paris, even with a crisis on hand. His love affair with the city was life-long.

* * * * *

Despite his fluent French, he experienced nothing but frustration at the Institut Pasteur. The huge hospital was as bureaucratic and unresponsive as its American counterparts. After haggling with receptionists, clerks and secretaries for an hour, he got as high up as a nurse who worked in immunology. Of course, no one had any idea of what he was talking about, or who Christine was. He kept repeating that she was supposed to have had a job interview, presumably in immunology: "*Un job! Elle etait ici pour un job interview! Il y a environ une semaine!*"

(She was here for a job interview about a week ago!)

He got as far as getting an appointment with the head of immunology for the next day. He left, frustrated but hopeful.

His next stop was the Hotel Georges Cinq. Again, he knew exactly where to go. The hotel was one of Paris' poshest, located in the beautiful arcaded *Rue de Rivoli*, adjacent to the *Tuileries Gardens* and the Louvre Museum, near the golden statue of Joan of Arc. He got there in less than half an hour, but then spent the next forty-five minutes looking for, and finally finding, a parking place. Parking in Paris was not as much of a nightmare as in some other European cities, except in areas like around the Louvre and the Left Bank.

The clerk at the ornate, Louis XVI-style, gold-painted hotel desk confirmed what he had already told Matt over the phone a few days before: That Christine had stayed there, but that she had checked out on Thursday.

Matt persisted with his questions: "*Mais ne savez-vous pas ou elle est allée? Elle a du déménager quelque-part, quand-mème! Elle n'a pas dit ou elle allait? Avec qui est-elle partie?*" (Don't you know where she went? She must have moved somewhere! Didn't she tell you where she was going? Who did she leave with?)

"*Je suis désolé Monsieur,*" (I'm sorry sir), the clerk answered. "*Je me souviens seulement qu'elle est partie dans une Peugeot 307 avec deux hommes et qu'elle n'avait pas l'air très contente...Ah oui, je l'ai entendu dire qu'ils allaient dans la rue Brancas, je crois...Et puis les deux types, ils avaient un accent étranger...*" (I only remember that she left in a Peugeot 307 with two men and that she didn't seem very happy...Oh yeah, I also heard her say that they were going to the Rue Brancas, I believe..and the two guys had a foreign accent....)

A Peugeot 307? What a coincidence, Matt thought, that's just what he had rented at the airport that very morning. There were probably no more than hundred thousand other similar cars in the city, so finding her would be a cinch, he thought in bitter sarcasm. Nevertheless, he asked, "*Vous vous rappelez de la couleur de la voiture?*" ("Do you remember the color of the car?")

"*Je crois qu'elle était verte, Monsieur*" (I think that it was green)

"*Merci. Et vous avez bien dit 'Rue Brancard,' ou 'Brancas'? Savez-vous ou c'est?*" ("Thanks. And you said "Rue Brancard," or "Brancas"? Do you know where that is?")

"*Désolé, mais je n'ai aucune idée. Mais voici une carte, Monsieur.*" (Sorry, but I have no idea. But here is a map).

Now what? Let's see if the French police is more helpful than the cops back home, Matt thought. The hotel clerk told him where the nearest police station was. Twenty minutes later, Matt was filing his second missing person report - this time using a French form. He had hoped that by sharing the information he had gathered at the Georges Cinq with the French cops, they would be more helpful, but they were not. The captain said, "*Eh, Monsieur, on ne peut rien faire. Faut aller à l'ambassade Américaine.*" (Sir, we can't do anything. You must go to the American embassy).

Great! Matt thought. Each side is passing the buck - the American cops told me to deal

with the French and now the French tell me to deal with the Americans. I'm on my own.

He went back to his car and started looking at the map the hotel clerk had given him. He perused the accompanying street index but there was no *Rue Brancas* listed within the city. He went to the tourist office and got himself maps of the whole metropolitan region. Searching for a street name in a metropolis of twelve million people was the equivalent of the proverbial needle in the haystack. He was in a rotten mood and he thought, in malevolent humor, "why do these damn Europeans have to name all their streets after famous people? Why can't they use numbers, like Americans and other civilized people do? Imagine being a taxi driver here! Must take a lifetime to learn all those street names!"

He tried to Google it on his laptop, but didn't get anywhere. He had no alternative but to go through every suburb's street index, looking at towns further and further away from Paris. By late afternoon he was about to give up when suddenly, bingo, he saw a *Brancas* listing in one of the suburban street indices. He quickly coordinated on the map and found the street. It was a small serpentine street in a town to the West of Paris named *Sevres*, somewhere between Saint Cloud and Versailles.

He jumped into his car and drove out to Sevres. The *Rue Brancas* zig-zagged its way up the wooded hill surrounding the town. It was flanked by small single-family brick houses with tile roofs.

Most houses had small yards, and they were protected by sharp iron gates or stone walls with jagged pieces of glass sticking out on top, glued into the concrete so as to deter burglars. There were cars parked in front of nearly every house and its wall-protected front yard. Nevertheless, this seemed to be a quiet, rustic, middle-class neighborhood, typical of the dozens of small towns that form Paris' *grande banlieu*. However, the fear of crime seemed palpable. There were the glass-studded walls, and also dogs in nearly every yard, with "*Chien Mechant*" ("Mean Dog") signs posted everywhere.

I'll have to tread carefully when I get out the car, Matt thought, knowing that the French like to walk their dogs and let them defecate freely all over the sidewalks. He had often stepped into it, cussing the French and wondering why the hell they didn't know about pooper-scoopers.

But now he had bigger fish to fry. He was driving slowly uphill, wondering how to proceed. The *Rue Brancas* was only a couple of kilometers long, but he couldn't very well ring every bell or knock on every door, could he? He drove the length of the street back and forth a couple of times, sort of as a recon operation, while wondering what to do. He also looked at the parked cars, searching for a green Peugeot. The sun was just setting.

Suddenly he saw a car that looked just like his, except for the color! It was parked in front of a house that was different from most of the adjacent ones. It was a much larger four-story building, and it looked older and more dilapidated. Could Christine be here?

He began to look for a place to park. He saw no reason why he shouldn't simply ring the bell of the big old house. What did he have to lose? Just then, he saw a couple of men come out of the house and walk toward the green Peugeot. They were somewhat husky, had short blond hair and they wore suits and coats that were out of season. They looked 'serious' - Maybe they were businessmen, or government men, Matt thought, although they didn't look very 'French,' whatever that was...

He wanted to park, get out of his car and approach the two men, but then he noticed something which made him reconsider in a hurry: As they got into the green Peugeot, Matt saw

that they were packing! Both men removed serious-looking automatic weapons from inside their jackets and placed them nonchalantly on one of the car seats.

What the hell? he thought. These are either cops, or criminals. Either way, his instincts kicked in and he just drove on by calmly and inconspicuously.

He drove around the next bend, parked, and considered what to do next. First of all, he didn't even know whether the big old house had anything to do with Christine and what those armed men were about. Maybe they were not nefarious. Maybe his imagination was going to his head again. All he had was wild guesses.

He decided to stake out the house and find out more about it. Leaving his car several blocks away, he waited until dark and then walked back to the house and planted himself behind a tree some thirty meters away on the other side of the street. Things remained quiet for a long time, with no human activity of any sort. Then, the same two men he had seen leaving in the afternoon returned. One of them opened the trunk of the car and pulled out...to Matt's utter shock, the little blue suitcase he had seen Christine travel with so many times! There was no doubt about it, it was her suitcase. It even had that ugly nick on the bottom.

He heard one of the men say, in accented French, "all the way into the city just to get the bitch's suitcase. Shit! She better appreciate it. If it were up to me, I wouldn't take all that crap from the American bitch."

"We've orders to handle her with velvet gloves," his acolyte replied.

"Not for much longer," the first man said. "I heard that things are gonna get rough if she doesn't start cooperating."

"Right," the first man agreed, and then he added, "I know what I would do with the bimbo if it were up to me," whereupon both men exploded in sinister laughter.

Now Matt knew that he had no choice but to break in and try to rescue Christine. These men definitely didn't sound nice.

He waited until everything in and around the house quieted down, hoping that everyone would fall asleep. Then, he climbed over the wall. The top of it was covered with sharp pieces of glass and his hands were now a bloody mess, even though he had tried to cover the glass with his leather jacket, which was now ruined. He crossed the garden and as he approached the house he heard a distant murmur. "Shit," he thought, "they are awake. How am I ever going to find Christine and get her out?"

As he entered the house, he determined that the talk was coming from the basement. He tip-toed down in that direction, hoping to find Christine and planning to set her free as soon as she was alone. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and hid behind a wall separating him from a room where men were shouting and cussing. Matt could hear every word, and he recognized the voice of one of the two men who had just returned from Paris:

"So what the fuck were you doing all that time?"

"I was asleep. I'm sorry man, I hadn't slept in three nights."

“My ass! You were doped up, that’s what you were! I should kill you!”

“Wasn’t my fault, man. It was Gerben’s shift to watch her. He told me to get some sleep.”

“And you trusted that loser? You were in charge, not that Dutch junkie!”

And with that, Matt heard the man deliver a terrible blow to the guy’s head, who fell to the floor cringing in pain and begging for mercy. He screamed, “but I know where they went! I know where you can catch them! I’m sure he took her to his clan in Holland, or that cult, wherever the fuck you guys dredged him up last year.”

“What a genius!” his tormentor said. “Hey Yves, we got ourselves a Sherlock Holmes here! Of course that’s where the asshole is taking the bitch. Where else would he go? He’ll need his fix in the next 24 hours. Okay, let’s go. We’ll be in Edam before they even get there!”

Then, the two husky guys started for the stairs up from the basement, but not before Matt heard a loud gunshot and a terrible scream - apparently the poor slob who had failed on watch duty had just been executed.

Matt hid behind the wall until the two men left the house. Then he went outside, ran to his car and started driving. He knew exactly what to do. He had clearly heard them say Edam, in Holland. That’s where everyone seemed to be going. He remembered that Edam was a small tourist town famous for its cheese. He had been there. But he had to consult the map of Europe that came with the rented Peugeot in order to find out exactly where it was located. He found out that it was about sixty kilometers due North from Amsterdam, on the shore of the IJsselmeer Inland Sea.

He hit the road and revved up his Peugeot to 180 kilometers an hour. He was desperate to get to Edam before the bad guys. He had no idea how he would find Christine once there, but he would think of something, he told himself. Edam was a tiny town.

He drove at breakneck speed, imagining himself doing the 24 hours of Le Mans and thinking to himself, “okay, this is Peugeot against Peugeot. Now let’s see what this baby can do.”

He took the A.1 *Autoroute du Nord* towards Lille, which he reached in under two hours. A few kilometers beyond Lille he crossed into Belgium. It took him no more than an hour to cross that entire country. Three hours after leaving Sevres, he was in Holland. One more hour and he was on the ring road circling Amsterdam. The total trip took him less than five hours.

Every time he was back in Europe, he marveled at their superhighways and their overall infrastructure, which were newer and superior to America’s. They’ve sure come a long way, he thought! Plus, no more border controls, no passport hassles. Neither did it hurt to have a diesel car, like more and more rentals, allowing one to go a thousand kilometers on one tank. And as far as speeding tickets were concerned, he wasn’t worried about that either. No doubt he would get one - or a few - but the Europeans were state-of-the-art in that department, too: Speeders were just caught on camera, and they got their two-hundred euro ticket in the mail six weeks later.

Worrying about Christine made him drive ever faster. “Shit!” he thought, “she has been

in these brutes' hands for almost a week! God only knows what they've done to her. Did they torture her? Rape her? Obviously they want something from her, or else she would be dead already. Ransom? Information? What's it all about?"

He tried to think of what he would do once he was in Edam. How would he find Christine?

The only thing he remembered was that the murdered bad guy back in Sevres had blurted out that she had run away with a fellow named Gerben and that he was probably taking her back to some sort of a cult or clan, whatever that meant, and also that he was a junkie.

Well, that was a start. Of course he would have to make inquiries, and that would take time. He remembered that Edam was a tiny town full of churches and super-straight Protestant Dutchmen, many of them old and retired, many still traditional farmers. It was a town without a speck of dirt, decay or sleaze. So anything having to do with cults, hippies, drugs or criminals would stick out. He would ask around. Maybe someone would be able to tell him something about a "cult," or somebody might have noticed foreign license plates, or foreigners. Was he still on Christine's trail? He sure hoped so...

4. HOLLAND

He circled Amsterdam using the A.7 superhighway. The Eastern sky was just beginning to lighten up. By the time he reached Edam, an hour later, roosters were crowing and farmers were going to their cabbage, salad and collie flower fields, or they were getting ready to milk their cows.

Edam was a small village surrounded by farmland. North Holland was as flat as a table top, with vistas that made the land look much larger than it was. Fields stretched out to the horizon in all directions, with a few church steeples, rows of trees and windmills in the distance. There was a new twist to the traditional Dutch windmill dotted landscape: While there were still many old windmills cropping up near and far, the fields now also featured long rows of brand-new state-of-the-art wind-power mills. For centuries, the Dutch had used their windmills primarily to drain and reclaim the wetlands. Now, the government was investing heavily in wind-power technology, and this gave the landscape a whole new character.

Edam was one of the quaint, small, historical villages dotting the expansive Dutch flatland.

The land was criss-crossed by hundreds of slews, a veritable waterland saturated by water, dozens of feet below sea level and protected by a formidable system of dikes.

The town, famous for its cheese, attracted many tourists in the summer, but it was devoid of visitors during the off season. At this time, the only people found in the local taverns having coffee in the morning and beer and genever in the afternoon were the local farmers. Genever was that potent Dutch gin Matt had learned to like on his previous visits, although others compared its taste to that of gasoline.

He entered a coffee house located on a quaint canal near the town's main intersection. He ordered a cup of coffee at the bar and took it to a table, where he sat down.

The bar was already filled with villagers. Nearly everyone was smoking cigarettes, pipes or cigars. Some of the large, burly, red-faced Nordic-looking men were already drinking beer and genever. The talk was loud and cacophonous and the smoke was almost impenetrable.

Matt planned to approach some of the locals and inquire whether they knew about some sort of "cult" or "clan," in or near Edam, whether they had noticed anything out of the ordinary

recently, for example young people running around, foreigners maybe, foreign license plates, anything.

First he decided to listen to some of the conversations. Having spent time in Flanders and Holland as a child, he understood Dutch well. He noticed right away that several of the conversations seemed to be about the same topic - the rising crime rate, those damn “*alochtones*,” i.e. foreign immigrants coming to Holland and ruining everything, etc. His ears really perked up when he overheard a large matronly woman sitting on a barstool and surrounded by a group of men, complaining about those damn “hippies cultists” who live outside of town and are nothing but trouble. And now this!”

He approached the group and said, “*Pardon, ik hoorde net wat U zei. Mag ik vragen wat voor problemen U het over heeft?*” (“Excuse me, I overheard you. May I ask what problems you were referring to?”

“*Nou, Meneer, Komt U net aan vanuit het buitenland? Heeft U het nog niet gehoord? Er is hier van nacht een schietpartij geweest!*” (“Well, Sir, did you just get here from overseas? You haven’t heard yet? There was a shootout here last night!”).

Matt’s heart skipped a beat. He was immediately certain that the “trouble” had something to do with Christine and the loser who had helped her get away from Paris, and the bad guys chasing them. What else could it be, in this staid little Lutheran town that had probably not experienced a murder in half a century. He asked the matron, frantically, “A shootout? Where? When? Who?”

“Oh, it’s that damn hippie colony again. They call themselves a ‘family’ but they are nothing but a bunch of perverts. They live outside of town. Have been there for years - leftover garbage from the sixties. They’re disgusting - raising their babies in filth, taking drugs, having sex with each other. And then they come here and break in and steal everything. Once in a while the cops raid them and arrest some of them. We’ve petitioned to shut them down many times, but those damn liberals on the city council wont do it...”

“Calm down mother, said a large blond fellow smiling and standing near by with a huge mug of ale in his fist. The way I heard it, it wasn’t even the colony that made trouble last, night. Was a bunch of Frenchmen...”

“No, they weren’t French,” interjected another man, “the car was French, but the guys were Russians, or Serbs, or something. Maarten heard them talk. He says they were from Eastern Europe some place...”

“Well, same difference, if you ask me, ” retorted the matron, who seemed to control the conversation. “That’s the trouble with the world today, you got colonies of junkies living right under our nose, and all the damn foreigners moving in. As far as I am concerned, they should never have torn down the Berlin Wall. Look at things now - Poles, Russians, Rumanians, gypsies, all moving in and ruining the country. They’re all a bunch of criminals and they should all be thrown out...”

“Now wait a minute,” said the large beer-drinking guy, “I have this Polish carpenter who just redid my roof, and he was a damn good worker - clean and honest too. I wish some of the young Dutch punks I hire were as good! Nah, the problem isn’t with the Eastern Europeans. It’s those damn North Africans we should keep out! The Moroccans are nothing but trouble!”

“That’s for sure,” concurred several people, “and don’t forget the gypsies,” said someone. “They’re all a bunch of thieves!”

Interesting, thought Matt. However, he had more pressing matters to tend to than listening to a political debate about immigration policy. He politely re-inserted himself into the conversation, asking, “excuse me, but could you tell me where this ‘cult’ is, and how to get there?”

“It’s about ten kilometers North of Edam, by the IJsselmeer dike, right by the water. It’s called the *Zeevangsdijk*,” replied the matron. But I wouldn’t go there if I were you, the police has cordoned off the area, they are investigating, it’s a mess. You don’t want to be there right now...”

Matt thanked her and the group and extricated himself.

* * * * *

He reached the *Zeevangsdijk* in less than ten minutes. He saw a large farmhouse in the distance, built in typical North Holland fashion. A large brick square topped by a pyramid-shaped thatched roof. The structure stood alone in the middle of a field, but there were several dilapidated circus trailers at the far end of the field, a couple of hundred yards away from the farmhouse. As Matt approached, he saw that there were several cars parked, including a couple of police cars, and quite a few people running around and acting busy.

He decided to park a few hundred yards away and to approach on foot, carefully and inconspicuously. When he got closer, he saw that most of the people were young and ‘artistic’ looking - most of the men wore beards and long hair. He realized, once again, that Europeans were still stuck in the sixties much more than Americans. He noticed this every time he traveled to countries like England and Holland.

Also, many of the hippies of the sixties had mutated into religious freaks. Some were now fundamentalist Christians, some were Moonies, some belonged to more sinister families like the People’s Temple and the Branch Davidians. Europe had its share of such people. Just a few years ago, a group of Swiss cultists had committed mass suicide.

As he got closer, he saw that the circus trailers at the far end of the field were painted colorfully and covered with peace symbols and graffiti. These were apparently living quarters. The field was strewn with junk and there were bicycles everywhere, some presumably operable but many resembling nothing more than pieces of rusted metal. All in all, the camp was a sloppy mess.

A young couple began to leave the grounds, riding their bikes in his direction, probably planning to ride into town for some errand. He flagged them down and asked politely, “excuse me, but could you tell me what happened?”

“Oh, there was trouble last night,” said one of the two bicyclers, a young bearded Dutchman, “The colony was attacked!”

“Attacked?” asked Matt, “by whom?”

“We don’t know,” said the girl, a beautiful tall blonde wearing a long winter dress. Then she went on to explain, almost tearfully, “Well you see, last night Gerben came back. He had this American girl with him...”

Matt could barely control his excitement and apprehension. He asked, “Gerben? And do you know the name of the American girl?”

“No, I don’t,” she replied. “All I know is that he met her in Paris...”

“So where are they now?” Matt asked, wanting to scream but faking calmness.

“Well that’s what we are trying to tell you,” interjected the boy, “later on these dudes came and they had guns, and then shots were fired...”

“No!” screamed Matt, “did people get hurt?”

“Haven’t you heard? Gerben is dead.”

“And the girl?” Matt asked frantically.

“She disappeared.” the boy said. “ They say the bad guys took her away. Apparently that’s why they came. They were looking for her. Poor Gerben! He left us last year, went and got a job in Paris. But he was hooked on horse, he never kicked it. He was a junkie. Was the first thing he asked for when he got in last night. Said he needed a fix real bad, hadn’t had one in two days.”

He went on to explain that the colony always keeps an emergency supply of heroin on hand.

“Prescription, you know; strictly legal. Most of us don’t mainline any more, but some of us have gone cold turkey and when someone really can’t hack it and goes bonkers, we give him some. That’s up to Rob and the Council...”

Matt wasn’t terribly interested in the clan’s drug policies. He asked, “So they took the American girl back to Paris?”

“Well, that’s the odd thing,” the girl interjected, “some people say she got away. You see, after she and Gerben got in from Paris - must have been after midnight - she went to sleep in one of the trailers, the one where Johan and his group live. And then the other guys came a couple of hours later, and they started a ruckus, and they were beating the shit out of Gerben before they shot him, so meanwhile the American girl must have run away or something...”

Jesus! Matt thought. She must still be around somewhere. He asked, “so has anyone seen her since then? You guys have any idea where she could be? What about this Johan in whose trailer she slept? Does he know where she went?”

“Johan?” The young man and woman looked at each other, puzzled, “I guess we haven’t seen him this morning...”

Matt thanked them and started to walk back towards his car, pondering what to do next. It was infuriating to think that Christine might be hiding somewhere nearby, brutalized for the past week and probably penniless, cold, starving, exhausted, terrified. And surely the bad guys knew as much as he did, and they, too, must be in the vicinity, looking for her. He had to be careful and stay on the lookout for everybody.

He stepped into his car and noticed that there was a voice mail message on his cell phone, which he had left in the glove compartment while talking with the two Dutch hippies. Now what? Probably someone calling from California, the university maybe, or Henry...

He listened to the message. It was a surprising and disconcerting one: A male voice with a strong Dutch accent said, “Matt, this is your friend Johan. I just called to say hello and to congratulate you guys. Give our best to Christophoro. We’ll soon be there, all together. Give me a call, ciao!”

What the hell? Matt wondered. He didn’t have any Dutch friend named Johan. Wasn’t that the fellow the two hippies were just talking about? The one in whose trailer Christine had slept? And what was this stuff about Christophoro, and the Italian greeting and all that? He listened to the message again. The only Christophoro he knew was Christine’s long dead grandfather. Who else would know this, besides Christine?

This *had* to be related to Christine. Shit! He should never have left his phone in the car, he should have talked to this bozo! He had missed a crucial call, maybe. The reason he hadn’t bothered to take the phone with him out of the car was that he was sure the bad guys had tapped it. He didn’t expect Christine to call him. She was smart. She knew that the bad guys would hear anything she’d tell Matt over the phone. Those bastards had a lot of resources, whoever they were, that was obvious.

But what could the message mean? What secret signal was she trying to send him? All Matt had at his disposal was the power of reasoning - deductive logic: Fact number one: He didn’t have a Dutch friend named Johan (the guy’s accent was unmistakably Dutch). Fact number two, only Christine and Matt would be able to attach any meaning to the name “Christophoro.” Fact number three, this “Johan” had said “we” in his message - plural. So he was speaking for someone else too, besides himself.

Aha! Matt concluded, like Kohler’s ape who suddenly puts all the pieces of the puzzle together, sees the *Gestalt* and hits upon the solution: Christine had Johan make the phone call for her. She told him exactly what to say. That’s my girl. What a genius!

Sure now that the message was from Christine, Matt’s next task was to decipher the code. Okay, so it’s about her grandfather who was born in Venice and grew up in Rome. And then, ‘Johan’ concludes with ‘ciao.’ Clearly the message has something to do with Italy. What’s Christine trying to tell me?

And then, things clicked into position for a second time. ‘Johan’ had said ‘we’ll soon be

there, all together.’ That’s it! For some reason Christine is running to Italy, and she is desperately trying to communicate that to Matt. Of course she wants Matt to be there!

Why would she go there? he wondered. Is she being taken there against her will, or is she just trying to go as far away as possible from her kidnapers? That would make sense. Assuming that she had gotten away from them, she couldn’t go to the Dutch authorities, or to the American embassy, or try to fly home out of Schiphol. All these things would be too dangerous. The bad guys would surely be on the look-out for her at all those logical places. Yeah, disappearing without a trace to a place two thousand kilometers and three or four countries away, and *then* going to the embassy or to the airport, that was smart. Matt just hoped that she would indeed be able to shake off her pursuers. And also, how the hell could she do all of this by herself? Did she have the means, the ability? Matt fretted terribly.

Still, he was briefly euphoric for having deciphered the code. However, his mood turned into depression as soon as he realized that he was no closer to finding his beloved one. After all, knowing that she was running to Italy was no help at all. Italy is bigger than California. Where on earth would he start looking?

Once again logic was his only friend: Christine’s grandfather’s name “Christophoro” could mean two cities - Venice, where the man was born, and Rome, where he grew up. Where should Matt go look for Christine? Should he flip a coin? (How he would try to zero in on her once he was there was something he delayed worrying about).

He tried to put himself in the mind of his girlfriend. In which city would she feel the safest, which one would provide her with the best chance to escape from her kidnapers and return home safely? It seemed like a toss-up. On the one hand, Rome was larger, it had the American embassy, direct flights to the US, etc. On the other hand, Venice was a lot closer...

And then, he started to worry about something else: If he had managed to decipher her message, shouldn’t the bad guys also be able to do so? The name *Christophoro* might not mean anything to them, but they might still be able to put two and two together and go look for her in Italy. Of course, they were unlikely to boil down the list of possible cities to just two. Still, the big question came down to where, according to Christine, the bad guys were the least likely to search for her. Matt was now trying to imagine Christine’s thinking, and her imagining her captors’ thinking.

This became a very complicated three-step empathic process. Rome, the capital, is the most logical place to go to. She’ll assume that her captors will think that she is heading for Rome, Matt thought. So she’ll think of foiling them by going to Venice instead. But being smart, she’ll realize that the bad guys would anticipate that feint, Matt thought, so she’ll go to Rome and not to Venice - or to any other Italian city where they might come looking for her. Yep, Matt concluded, she’s going to Rome. That’s the smart move.

So he jumped into his car and took off for Rome. He had no idea how he would find her once he got there. We’ll see, he thought. Something might turn up. I’ll look for things called ‘Christophoro’ - maybe a hotel, or a bar, a restaurant, a street, anything. Then too, she has already managed to get in touch with me once, indirectly. Maybe she’ll make contact again. From now on, I’m not letting go of my cell phone, *ever*.

5. TO ITALY

It was early afternoon when Matt started racing South. He had spent the entire morning in

and around Edam, investigating and finding out as much as he could.

He took the A.7 around Amsterdam and then the A.12 Southeast to Arnheim, entering Germany by two 'o clock. He got on the fabled Autobahn and floored the Peugeot, as this was one of the few remaining places on earth without a speed limit. His car was no Porsche of course, but at times, when the slope and the wind were right, his speedometer did hit the 200 kilometer mark. That's why he had decided to go to Italy by way of Germany rather than France - distance wise it was a wash, but driving through Germany was faster. To be sure, a blow-out at 200 kph would mean certain death.

He was wired. He hadn't slept in three nights. He was surviving on coffee and on some powerful pep pills he had bought at a pharmacy. There were a lot more things available over the counter in Europe than in America -from antibiotics to mild forms of amphetamines. He mused about drug policy in some of those countries. In liberal Holland, almost everything was legal, even heroin (although you still needed a prescription for that). Oh well, different strokes for different folks...

His mind was racing as fast his car engine. What if my conjectures are totally wrong? He wondered. For all I know, she may not even be going to Italy. And even if she is, how on earth will I find her? And what if the assholes picked up her message and figured everything out, too? Maybe they are on their way to Rome, too. Maybe they are on this very same road, just a few miles ahead of me.

He started to look out for green Peugeots, cars like his own except for the color. Were he to see them along the way, he would have the advantage because he knew what they looked like, whereas they had never seen him. But what were the chances of that happening?

The trip through Germany was uneventful. He raced through the polluted industrial heartland of the Ruhr area, drove around the mega-cities of Essen, Cologne and Frankfurt and across the rolling wooded hills of Hesse and Bavaria. He stopped at a *Rasthaus* for diesel and to relieve himself of all the coffee he was drinking. He bought a sandwich which he ate at the wheel. Around Frankfurt he hit a monumental traffic jam, with trucks bumper-to-bumper as far as the eye could see. This delayed him a couple of hours. Nevertheless, he reached the outskirts of Munich by nightfall.

He prepared to cross the border into Austria and go over the Alps in the dark. He figured he would reach Italy by early morning, swinging around Innsbruck and going over the Brenner Pass. He heard on the radio that there was a lot of snow and that traffic was heavy and slow due to the threat of avalanches.

First he stopped at a *Rasthaus* again and bought another sandwich, the sauerkraut and knackwurst kind he loved. Of all the ethnic foods, German had always been one of his favorites, unhealthy as it was. When he and Christine went to a restaurant back in California, it was often a gentle tug-of-war between them, because she found sausages and sauerkraut revolting. So they compromised, occasionally going to a German restaurant, but going French or Italian a lot more often. When they went German, Christine ordered things like schnitzel or sauerbraten. Matt almost became teary-eyed thinking that he could be touring and enjoying Europe's sights and culinary delights with his beloved one at this moment, instead of searching for her and desperately trying to save her.

As he stood in line at the cashier to pay for his sandwich, he saw a green Peugeot 307 drive out of the parking lot and hit the Autobahn - South. His heart skipped a beat. Could it be them? Sure enough, the license plate was French, it had to be them!

Shit! They are on Christine's trail, he realized. I've got to get to Christine first! He thought. I'll catch them and pass them. They don't know me or my car, and it's dark so they won't be able to see my face. So they've figured out that she is on her way to Italy. But surely they don't know what city she is going to, or do they? He worried.

The people ahead of him at the cashier were taking their sweet time. He urged them to hurry, saying, "*Machen Sie schnell bitte. Ich bin spat!*" (Hurry up please, I am late!).

He was finally able to run to his car and give chase. He couldn't see the green Peugeot any more, but he was sure they were only a few kilometers ahead. He floored the gas pedal. He occasionally darted in and out of traffic, but stayed mostly in the left lane, as the night traffic was light and no one was going faster than him. He drove by the Zugspitz, Germany's highest mountain, and descended into the Innsbruck basin. The sprawling town sparkled with a thousand lights. Matt had been here several times and he knew that the magnificent city was surrounded by a wall of jagged peaks which were undoubtedly snow capped at this time. He couldn't see any mountains now, in the dark, but there was a beautiful give-away: You could look up - almost vertically - and see small lights which you instinctively took for stars way up in the sky at first, until you realized that those were isolated chalets located at vertiginous heights on the slopes of the gigantic mountains towering above Innsbruck.

Matt was now driving across Tyrol. He was jolted back to his problems by the realization that this was the very region from which Christine's grandfather Christophoro had come, although from the Italian side, a few miles to the South.

Matt ascended the hair-raising Europa bridge leading to the Brenner Pass and to the enormous tunnel you must drive through just before descending into the Po valley, Italy's breadbasket.

The road was clear and dry, but it slithered between two walls of snow at least fifteen feet high, and the steep adjacent slopes were covered with deep powder. Just after the Europa bridge, traffic started to slow down, and then it came to complete halt. Matt stuck his head out into the freezing night air to see what the obstruction might be, but he saw nothing but an endless row of cars stretching out in front of him into the dark. There were also a couple of Austrian highway patrol cars in the distance, conspicuous by their blue flashing lights.

Matt was a nervous wreck. No doubt the green Peugeot he was trying to catch was one of the hundreds of cars stopped in front of him.

He got out of his car, walked up to a driver ahead of him and asked "*Was ist loss? Warum halten wir?*" (What's going on? Why are we stopped?).

Someone said, "*Es war eine Lawine. Es ist yetz zu gefahrlich durch der Tunnel zu fahren. Wir müssen hier warten.*" (There was an avalanche. It's too dangerous to drive through the tunnel now. We must wait here).

After a while, the endless row of cars began to move, at snail's pace. Then it stopped again. This went on for several hours, stop and go, until Matt was near the front of the line, with only a dozen cars in front of him, separating them from an empty Autobahn stretching out into the dark. The tunnel was probably one or two kilometers ahead. The authorities were apparently letting a couple of hundred cars through at a time. They didn't want traffic to clog the tunnel and get stuck in case of an avalanche which might block the exit. They called this "traffic calming."

Shit! Matt thought. The green Peugeot must have gone through hours ago. Now I'll never catch them!

Finally it was his turn to be let through. As he had suspected, the tunnel was only a couple of kilometers ahead. He raced through it. Shortly thereafter, he crossed into Italy and began the descent into the Po Valley. He drove by Bolzano and reached Verona just as it was starting to get light. A few kilometers to his right was Lake Garda, with Sirmione and its hundreds of other exquisite resorts. As a child, he had hitch-hiked there and checked out how the rich folks spent their money.

He hit the *Autostrada del Sol* towards Rome and raced by Bologna, Florence and other fabled cities he had visited in better days. As he cut through the Apennines, he mused about the fact that even now, two thousand years later, the Italians were carrying forth the Romans' unparalleled engineering prowess: The *Autostrada Del Sol*, Matt thought, had to be one the world's premier engineering accomplishments. For a thousand miles, from Turin to Reggio Calabria, the state-of-the art four to six-lane superhighway cuts through mountains and valleys, alternating between hundreds of enormous tunnels and dizzying bridges.

Again, he was full of sadness and rage thinking of the terrible circumstances which prevented him from appreciating the beauty and greatness of this magnificent country, a country as old as Western Civilization and as modern as the 21st century.

6. ROME

He finally reached Rome at about 4 PM on Saturday. The grueling non-stop drive had taken him twenty-eight hours. He was dirty and sweaty. He had descended from the frosty Alps into a warm and sunny subtropical region already in full bloom, covered with palm trees, where people were lounging at side-walk cafes in shorts and sandals.

Now what? He was looking for someone in a metropolis of five million people, not even sure that she was here in the first place.

And there were many other imponderables: Were the bad guys here as well, looking for Christine? Had they beaten Matt to it and found her already, or were they as stymied as he was? He sure hoped that they were.

Matt had driven across many countries in his life, and he had developed some effective survival skills. One of these was, whenever he arrived in an unfamiliar city by car, he made a beeline for the central railroad station. True, foreign railroad stations are often the equivalent of America's Greyhound stations. They are dirty and criminal and they attract vagabonds and pickpockets. However, they are also centers of services and beacons of information. They have tourist information offices, hotel reservation desks, police stations, Internet cafes, city maps and personnel conversant in English, not to mention bathrooms, showers and restaurants. This is what Matt had done in the past whenever he arrived by car in cities whose language he didn't speak - for example Prague, Moscow and Seoul.

This is what he did in Rome now, a city which he had visited in the past, but only superficially.

He drove straight to the Stazione Termini - Rome's central station. Although modern and built in the 1960s, the huge cavernous station was a crowded mess, with thousands of rude people running in all directions and barely avoiding trampling each other. The "diversity" of a 21st century

metropolis was in evidence. What the first Star Wars movie had presented as the future a couple of decades ago was now the present - no longer a freak show, but reality. There were men with dreadlocks, men in dresses, women with crew cuts, people with an infinite variety of body piercings, tattoos and facial hair, people sleeping on benches and on the ground, two men involved in a long passionate French kiss, people drinking, smoking and passing joints around, people picnicking on the ground, a mother breast feeding her two babies simultaneously, one hanging on each breast, gypsies playing the violin, panhandlers nearly assaulting passers by, and so forth.

Matt had managed to park his car in a side street, after a nightmarish half hour spent dodging other drivers, entering one-way streets, making illegal U-turns and going through red lights - like everyone else. He hoped that his car would still be there when he returned, knowing that Italy had such a high rate of car theft that many rental companies refused to insure you.

He entered the station and went straight to the tourist information office. He was helped by a woman who was fairly attractive - Ah, those Italian types! He thought, painfully reminded of Christine - but very rude and insisting on speaking Italian, even though the office advertised itself as English speaking. When asked whether she knew of a Christophoro street, or maybe a Hotel Christophoro, or a Christophoro café, she replied nonchalantly, "*No Io so, signore.*" (I don't know, sir).

Matt insisted, saying, "but you must have some things by that name - wasn't there a Saint Christophoro back in the 13th century? Isn't he the patron saint of automobilists? And what about Christophoro Columbus? Surely you guys have named things after them, no?"

"*Ah si, capisco,*" she replied, warming up a little, and finally switching to English, "you look for first name Christophoro, not family name Christophoro? Here (she showed him a map) is *Autoroute Christophoro Colombo...*"

He realized that he was getting nowhere and that a web search would probably be more productive, so he said "*Molto grazie, signorina, Ciao,*" and left. At least she gave him a good map of Rome.

There was an Internet café right next door. He entered it, plugged in his laptop for a fee and started a Google search. He began by just entering "Christophoro" to see what would happen. That yielded over three hundred thousand entries. When trying all four possible spellings of the word - Christophoro, Cristoforo, Cristoforo and Cristophoro - he got nearly a million. So much for that!

So he began to narrow his search. He tried everything: advanced search, preference, he tried Italian Google, bullean, putting his words between quotes and without, and most importantly, combining words, either separated by a comma, a semi-colon, or neither. He combined "Christophoro" with "Rome," "Roma," "Hotel," "Restaurant," "Ristorante," "Café", "Trattoria," "Via," and "Piazza."

The reward for all his effort was nothing but frustration. He was running out of time. He didn't even know what he was looking for. What had Christine meant by "Christophoro"? The house where her grandfather had grown up as a child? He didn't have any idea where that might be. A hotel or an address where she might have taken refuge? A restaurant or a café where she might desperately be waiting for him?

One hopelessly long shot was the *Via Christophoro* which the woman had mentioned to him at the *Stazione Termini*. He found a link to that street on Google: There was no Hotel

Christophoro there, or anywhere else in Rome, but one noteworthy connection was a hotel called *Aris Garden Hotel* on the Via Christophoro Colombo. Not knowing what else to do, Matt decided to check it out. Long shot indeed!

He ran back to his car which, happily, was still parked where he had left it, and studied the map for a few minutes. This Aris Garden Hotel was far into the Southern suburbs, towards Ostia and the Mediteranean. He began to race in that direction.

From the Termini Station , he drove to the Piazza Venezia, dominated by Mussolini's gigantic Victor Emmanuel monument - the tallest thing in Rome. The huge neo-classic white marble building towered over the busy square, its hundreds of stairs crawling with tourists taking pictures of the columns and of the statue of King Umberto the Second and his horse. This was Rome's most gaudy sight and the natives called it derisively the 'wedding cake.'

As Matt turned left towards the Colosseum, he could see the Corso behind him, Rome's premier shopping street. To his left were Trajan's marketplace and the column celebrating that Emperor's many victories. Far in the distance to his right he could see Saint Peter across the Tiber.

He circled the Forum, the Palatine Hill and the Circus Maximus, turning right in front of the Colosseum. The world's greatest concentration of archeological marvels was basking in that golden afternoon glow unique to the eternal city. He could almost distinguish the reliefs of the magnificent white arches of Titus and Septimus Severus, and those of the Temple of Antoninus. In his mind, he paraphrased Russell Crowe (or was it the fellow Ethiopian gladiator?) thinking "I didn't know men could build such things!"

Oh how much he wished the nightmare into which he and Christine had been whirled was over! When all this is behind us, we're coming back here, he resolved. This is the city of cities!

He stayed on the Eastern side of the Tiber and took the *Via Marconi* towards the E.U.R. complex. This was a set of modern and ugly high-rise offices built some decades ago in connection with some sort of Expo or World Fair, and now unkempt and covered with graffiti. There he picked up the via Christophoro Colombo. The landscape was now becoming rural. He drove through several suburbs and came to one called *Axa*. He found the Aris Garden Hotel immediately. It couldn't be missed, as it was a fifteen-story tower sticking out far above the surrounding single-story residential mansions. It was a five-star hotel.

He walked to the registration desk and began to exercise his defective Italian: "*Buonasera signore, uh... prego, come si dice, Io Cercare una giovane signora Americana,...come si dice... castano; Sua nome e Christina...*" (Good evening mister, please, how you say, I to seek a young American lady, Brunette, her name is Christina).

"I see," replied the young desk clerk in perfect English, "to my knowledge, we do not have anyone registered under that name at the present time. However, the description you render does seem to fit one of our patrons. Would you say that the young lady in question is about one hundred and sixty centimeters in height, with medium long dark hair?"

"Ah thank you!" Matt replied ecstatically. "I would, indeed!"

"You understand of course that we cannot divulge her room to you," the clerk continued in textbook English. "However I will be most happy to notify her that she has a visitor."

Matt sat down in the lobby while the clerk called the room. “The lady will be right down,” he told Matt.

His heart was now beating so fast that he feared a heart attack. He had found her!

A moment later, a gorgeous brunette walked down the spiral staircase and approached Matt, offering him her impeccably manicured hand for a handshake. At first she wore a broad and inviting smile, but seeing Matt’s facial expression turn ashen, she asked, “you expected someone else?”

“Ah, hm,” Matt stumbled on his words, “yes, as a matter of fact I was. I’m sorry, I am desperately trying to locate somebody and somehow the description I gave the hotel clerk seemed to fit you...”

“I understand,” she said calmly and with kindness in her tone.

“Anyway,” Matt continued, clumsily and apologetically, “I’m sorry to have bothered you. It was a misunderstanding...”

“There is no harm done,” she said, with a modest smile, and then adding, “But let me introduce myself, I’m Lauren. You seem to be upset and exhausted, if you don’t mind my saying. Would you like to have some coffee before you continue your search?”

Matt hadn’t slept in three days. He thought, what the hell, yes, I’m due for a short break. I’m going to sit down with this woman, have some coffee and a chat. He also had a desperate need to talk to someone, anyone, about his situation and all the hair-raising things he had just been through.

They went to the hotel coffee shop. There, she said, “you seem to be terribly agitated. You must be dealing with something very bad...I don’t mean to pry...”

“That’s alright,” Matt replied, ready to break down and to spill his entire problem to anyone willing to listen, especially the first American he had met since he left the US, especially a really beautiful, classy-looking and seemingly intelligent girl who reminded him a great deal of Christine.

Still, he hadn’t thrown all caution to the wind, so he began by inquiring about her.

She told him that she was a Fulbright exchange student from UCLA, spending a year at the University of Rome.

“You’re staying in a hotel for an entire year?” Matt asked incredulously.

“This place isn’t just a hotel. It also rents apartments,” she replied with a laugh, adding, “I’m not *that* rich!”

Maybe not *that* rich, Matt thought, but well-healed enough, judging by her clothes and overall appearance. She wore a fashionable pantsuit, still feasible in Rome in mid-April. Her black hair was sleek and long, clearly the recent work of an expensive hairdresser. She wore a diamond-studded gold ring on her right hand.

“I see,” Matt replied, “Small world, I guess. I’m also from California. I teach at the University.”

“Are you here on a holiday, then, or for a conference?” she asked.

“No....” he hesitated. “...It’s something else...I’m not sure I...”

“Right,” she interrupted with a smile, “some sort of trouble you’re in? You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, although you look like you could use help...”

“There is no way you could help me,” he said emphatically, adding cryptically, “I don’t suppose the name Christophoro means anything to you?”

“Christophoro? No it doesn’t. It’s just a fairly common Italian first name - Columbus’ for instance...”

“Right. Well you see, someone very dear to me has disappeared, and I’m trying to find her.”

“And you love her very much, don’t you?” she said perceptively. “What do you mean ‘disappeared’? She ran away?”

“No, I am absolutely sure that she did not,” Matt said vehemently, after which he explained everything to Lauren, telling her what he had done for the past four life-threatening and exhausting days, and explaining that the name ‘Christophoro’ was the only thread - a hopelessly thin thread - to which he was hanging on in his desperate search for Christine.

He described Christine to Lauren, telling her that the two of them were not unlike each other, both beautiful brunettes about five foot six, both California college graduates.

Lauren listened silently and attentively, her eyes expressing empathy, compassion and a desire to help. She commented that she and Christine indeed seemed to have much in common, including their Italian ancestry. “You see,” she explained, “like your girlfriend, I too have Italian grandparents. I speak fluent Italian and I feel just as much at home here as in the US.”

Matt found Lauren’s story interesting, but he was restlessly thinking of pursuing his search, so he said, “Well, you are a kind and attractive and interesting person, but I better go back to Rome and try to find out what Christine’s message meant...”

“I understand,” she said with a warm smile, “At the risk of seeming forward, I’d like to suggest that before you continue your chase, you come up to my apartment, take a shower, eat a bit and unwind for a moment. Don’t worry, this is not a seduction. I just see that you are awfully tired and stressed out...”

And smelly and sweaty and dirty, Matt thought to himself.

“Plus,” she continued, “To tell you the truth, you have no evidence whatsoever that Christine is in Rome, or even in Italy...I’m sorry, but you have to be realistic, not driven by hope alone. Anyway, if we put our heads together, we might decipher Christine’s telephone code. I’d like to try to help.”

Seduction or not, Matt accepted the invitation. Lauren seemed to be a classy young woman with no ulterior motives. A shower, a meal and a sharp mind to help him think more clearly appealed to him a great deal at this time. The Aris Garden Hotel had turned out to be a dead end anyway. He was fresh out of ideas as to how to proceed. Maybe Lauren would be of some help, somehow.

They took the elevator to the tenth floor and entered Lauren’s condo. It was about 7 PM, the sun was setting. He accepted a bottle of *Fanta* from her refrigerator and took a quick shower. Just as he was stepping out, his cell phone rang. He pressed the receive button almost hysterically.

The voice on the phone said, “Hello Matt, this is Johan again. Did you give our love to Christophoro? he sure is an angel, you know. A real angel! Bye.”

“Wait!” Matt shouted, “Who are you? Is Christine with you?” but it was too late. ‘Johan’ had already disconnected.

He screamed at Lauren, who was standing in the middle of the living room, utterly puzzled, “You see! She is here, somewhere in Rome, I’m sure of it! This second message proves it! They’re trying to tell me where they are without alerting the bad guys...”

“Was that Christine?” she asked, confused. “And who are ‘they’?”

Matt explained that Christine was probably with someone - he knew for a fact that she had gone from Paris to Holland with a Dutchman. He suspected that she had gone on to Rome with someone as well, and that she was having that person make these phone calls. He told Lauren the exact wording of the message. It raised nothing but questions in both their minds. What the hell did it mean? Did they call come from somewhere in Rome?

Lauren said, “Okay, let’s assume the message came from Rome and that they are in the city, now what?”

“Right,” Matt answered, “and he mentioned ‘Christophoro’ again, whatever that means. And this time, he said something about an angel. He used the word twice, so there must be some special meaning to it. Hmm...”

Now Lauren came to the rescue. Her expert knowledge of the city was a great help. She said, “There are innumerable angels in Rome. Statues, paintings, monuments, public squares and fountains. Why, the Vatican alone probably has several hundred. Remember Dan Brown’s novel *Angels and Demons*? There is even an entire castle called *Castel San Angelo*. It’s the name they

gave to Hadrian's tomb - the 'Angel's castle.' Let me show you."

With that she grabbed Matt's map and showed him where the castle was located: "You see, right there on the right bank of the Tiber, only six blocks from the Vatican."

"Okay, so?" Matt asked, "and what about Christophoro?"

"I don't know, maybe there is a Christophoro street nearby, or something. Let me look at the map again."

"Don't bother," Matt said dejectedly, "I did a Google search looking for Christophoro street, piazza, boulevard, restaurant, hotel, everything. Took me a couple of hours and I found nothing!"

"Oh, I see...you looked for churches, too?"

"Jesus, I forgot that category! How could I be so stupid! In the city with more churches than any other on earth!"

"Don't berate yourself," she said soothingly, "See, I told you, two heads are better than one. Let's look at the map again."

The map showed the section surrounding *Castel San Angelo* in great detail. To the West of the monument was the broad *Via della Conciliazione* leading to the Vatican, to the South was the huge Gianicolo Park and surrounding the castle was a maze of smaller streets. They both studied the map for a while, concentrating on the neighborhoods surrounding the castle, and suddenly Lauren shouted out with enthusiasm, "Bingo! Look, there is the San Christophoro Church, right at that intersection next the *Castel San Angelo*!"

"Wow!" Matt said, full of admiration. "Okay, so you think Christine is hiding in that church?"

"I don't know, but it's worth checking out, don't you think?"

"Damn right!"

And with that, he stood up, grabbed his belongings and got ready to take off, thanking Lauren profusely for her help.

"Wait a minute!" she objected, "I'm going with you..."

"Don't do that," he countered, "This is way too dangerous... This isn't your problem. And frankly, I'm not sure Christine would love it if I showed up with you, no matter what the circumstances. We have enough problems without getting into jealousies and other imaginary issues..."

"Bullshit. Think practically! I know this city like the palm of my hand, I can get you

there fast and I speak fluent Italian. And frankly, I like adventure. I was beginning to get bored, visiting museums every day. I really want to meet Christine and help you save her. I feel I already know her, like she is a sister to me..."

So they ran to the Hotel parking lot together and decided to use her car. It was an Alpha Romeo 147, faster and more reliable than Matt's Peugeot 307. Unfortunately, evening traffic was nightmarish. It was Saturday night and *Manchester United* was in town, playing *Roma Calcio*. Thousands of British and Scottish soccer fans had descended onto the holy city.

The various European governments did their best to control hooliganism. For example, the British government denied passports to thousands of young men who had a record of soccer violence. And the city of Rome instituted a ban on all alcoholic beverages for the weekend. Restaurants were not even permitted to serve wine to tourists with their meals.

Even so, the rambunctious young fans could be seen everywhere, many of them wearing green plaid kilts, all of them loud and obnoxious, many driving as recklessly as the locals do habitually. Thus, it was nearly eleven p.m. by the time Matt and Lauren crossed the *Umberto One* bridge across the Tiber and circled the *Castel San Angelo*.

They soon found the San Christophoro Church, located at an intersection between the Castle and the Vatican. It was surrounded by a small fenced-in yard. They climbed over the fence and entered through a small side door. They spent the next hour searching the church - all its nooks and crannies, even barging into the sacristy and walking up the tower. However, there was no sign of any human presence. The entire structure was dark and empty.

After exiting the church, shortly before midnight, they noticed a pension half a dozen houses down the block. The atmosphere there was the opposite of the church - the hotel was lit up, crowded and noisy. They sauntered down to it, just to sniff out one more random and remote possibility. As they approached, they could smell the marijuana wafting out of the sleazy little lobby. A dozen young adults were milling around the sidewalk. Some of them were Italians, others were young American college kids with Jansen backpacks on. The place was more like a youth hostel than a regular hotel. Everyone was talking and many of the youngsters seemed agitated, as if some commotion had taken place. Matt overheard an American kid say, "No, he was not from the US, he was German or Dutch or something..."

"Yeah," replied someone, "but the chick was American."

Matt interrupted them without hesitation, asking, "Who are you talking about?"

One of the young Americans turned to him and to Lauren and said, "Oh, you just got here? You really missed something, man. Someone got offed a couple of hours ago. Right here at this youth hostel. And I thought Europe was safe!"

"What do you mean? Who got killed? What happened?" Matt asked apprehensively.

"I'm not sure, man," the kid replied. "All I know is, these guys get here, then after a while they run up to the third floor and bang! somebody up there gets shot..."

"That's right," interjected a young Italian fellow with decent command of English, "They kill a, how you say, a *tedesco* man, and then they go."

“Tedesco?” Lauren asked, “You sure he was German? Not American? Was he alone? Did anyone else get hurt?”

“No, no, he was not Americano, but his girlfriend she was!”

Shit! Matt thought, that could be Christine. “So where is she?” he asked, almost shouting.

“She go with the bad men,” the Italian explained. “Maybe she with them...”

“No way!” interjected a young American girl with her backpack on, “she was screaming bloody murder and kicking and biting. They kidnaped her, that’s for sure. After a while, they muffled her and she went limp. They tossed her into their car and took off...”

“And no one tried to rescue her?” Matt asked angrily.

“Hey man, they were pointing guns at everybody...”

“Uhuh. Did you see what kind of a car they were driving at least?” he continued sternly.

“I don’t know these European brands,” she replied, “was green, I remember that...”

That did it! It had to be Christine, Matt and Lauren concluded. They continued to ask questions, found out that the police had already come and gone, as had the ambulance, which had carried off the dead body. No one knew where the bad guys and their prey had gone.

Dejectedly, they slowly walked away from the youth hostel, wondering what to do next. A couple of hundred meters down the street, they came across a nightclub called *Big Mama*. No doubt the youth hostel provided much of the establishment’s clientele. The club was in the front basement of a building. The entrance was half a dozen steps down from the sidewalk.

Matt was always - pleasantly - amazed by European zoning practices: Here was a neighborhood of the holy city where, *within one and the same block*, you found a church, a hotel and a nightclub, almost side by side! He had seen this sort of “mixed land use” (to put it euphemistically) over and over again, to an even greater extent in liberal northern countries such as Holland and Scandinavia. In cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen, you could sometimes find a church surrounded by a brothel on one side and a police station on the other. As you strolled by at dusk, you would see a sidewalk café where a minister, a police officer and a prostitute would sip coffee and chat together. He would sometimes regale the students in his Urban Sociology class with such anecdotal examples of what he considered wiser urban planning than American zoning practices. He was in full agreement with the late great Jane Jacobs whose classic *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* argued convincingly that mixed-use, vibrant cities with sidewalks crawling with pedestrians at all hours of the day and night are far more viable than the deserted suburban neighborhoods more and more typical of American cities.

Matt and Lauren were now in precisely such a “mixed-use” neighborhood. As such, it was also a sleazy neighborhood. For one thing, the Europeans were totally losing the graffiti

battle. American cities like New York had turned the corner on that during the nineties. However, the situation in the cities of Italy, France, Germany and Eastern Europe was a disaster. The authorities had permitted the proliferation of graffiti on just about every single bus, tram and subway car and on nearly every house, building, wall and monument. The level of vandalism was appalling. While not even the most upscale neighborhoods were exempt from this plague, it was especially virulent in lower-class neighborhoods such as the one where Matt and Lauren were at this moment.

The charm of the street's cobblestones was mitigated by the piles of refuse on the sidewalk and in the gutters.

Several prostitutes in miniskirts were standing and smoking in front of the *Big Mama*. Two of them were chatting with a *carabiniere*. While the smell of marijuana in the air was pungent, Italy had not yet become so liberal as to allow drug deals to go down under the police's very eyes. Those deals were probably happening inside the establishment, not on the sidewalk.

Some people were still discussing the violence that had occurred just a few hours earlier at the youth hostel half a block away.

Because of the soccer match against Manchester United, the *Big Mama* was not allowed to serve any alcoholic drinks. This was probably amply compensated for by the large amount of drug use by everyone.

Matt and Lauren decided to descend into the club for some coffee and see if there was any further information they might stumble upon.

They sat in a booth for a while, drinking their beverage silently. After a moment, they were approached by a tall, good-looking young blond man who addressed them in choppy, accented English. "Excuse me," he began, "I think you look for American girl from youth hostel, yes?"

"Yes," Matt replied, "The one that was kidnaped. You know anything about her?"

"I think maybe." the handsome young man said, addressing Lauren more than Matt, smiling at her flirtatiously. "I think maybe Hungarian men take her ..."

"How do you know that?" Matt asked impatiently. "Nobody can understand Hungarian - it's one of the most obscure languages in the world!"

"Sir," the young man retorted politely, "I am Pal. I am Hungarian. I work in youth hostel - in kitchen. I make food for American woman and her man. I take to their room. After I come back downstairs, bad men arrive and kill man. After, they take away American woman, and I hear they speak Hungarian. They think nobody understand them, but I do..."

"Good, good!" Matt said impatiently, "do you remember what they said?"

"Well, little things. Before they go, they demand some food from me in kitchen. They have gun, you know, so I am afraid. After, one man speaks in Hungarian to his friends, he says he misses good Hungarian food, like *rakott krumpli* and *makos teszta* and *palacsinta*. That mean potato casserole and noodles with poppy seeds and pancakes..."

"That's nice," Matt interrupted rudely, "but I don't really give a damn about that."

Anything else they said to each other in Hungarian - like where they were going? “

”Well, mister, I now tell you something interesting: Other man said ‘yes, his uncle has restaurant in Budapest where he make good *rakott krumpli* and *makos teszta* and *palacsinta*’...”

“Yes, yes!” Matt urges him on, “did he say more, his uncle’s name, where the restaurant is, anything?”

“He say, restaurant is called *Taverna*.”

“Bingo!” interjected Lauren, exulting. “We’ve got a lead! Let’s go.”

“Wait one more minute,” said Matt. “Maybe he knows where this *Taverna* restaurant is...”

“Well, I know there is a place *Taverna* called near the *Varos Liget*,” said Pal.

“What’s that?”

“The big park in the city and how you say, the animals.”

“You mean a zoo?” Lauren interjected.

“Yes, zoo. *Varos Liget*.”

“Okay,” Matt said, standing up. “Write all this down for us. We have to go now. We sure appreciate you talking to us. By the way, what made you decide to give us all this information? You want some cash? Tell you what, here is 25 euros, alright?”

“No, no. Thank you. I go with you.”

“No way pal!” said Matt, smiling as he realized that he had just made a pun - Pal, you know, that was the fellow’s name.

But Pal was insistent, saying, “I go with you to Hungary. I help you. You not speak Hungarian. *Nobody* speak Hungarian except the Hungarian people. Is very, very difficult language. And I know Budapest. I take you to *Taverna* and other places. And I help you fight with the bad men.”

Matt knew that Hungarian was, indeed, one of the world’s most undecipherable languages. It is not part of the Indo-European language family. English is more closely related to Sanskrit than to Hungarian. Hungarian is more closely related to Korean than to English. He realized that he would most definitely need help in Hungary.

He was not happy involving one more person in his quest, but Lauren was sympathetic to Pal’s request, saying, “I think we should take him. He could really help. You and I know nothing about that country. It’s one of the few European countries I have never visited...”

Pal pleaded some more, saying, “I will to go to my home. I hate Italian job here but I have not money to go home. Please you take me with you. You will see, I help you in Budapest.”

Finally, with Lauren’s help, he persuaded Matt to bring him along . So now there would be three of them racing across Europe in the little Alpha Romeo.

7. BUDAPEST

They hurried back to Lauren’s car. She took the wheel and turned on the ignition. Matt said, “Wait a minute. Let me call my department chair before we hit the road. I’ve GOT to let him know what’s up and when he can expect me back, or I’ll lose my job. I’ve already missed a week of classes.”

He called the university on his cell phone. Back in California it was still early Saturday afternoon - nine hours earlier. His chairman wasn’t in of course, but Matt left a voice message: “Hey Jud, this is Matt. Rest assured that I am not taking a holiday. I’m dealing with some serious family issues. and I’ll come back just as soon as I can. Please tell my T.A. Michele to hold down the fort a little while longer. I sure appreciate it. Over and out.”

They started driving, meandering through dark and crooked little streets until they hit the eastern segment of the peripheral freeway that circles Italy’s capital city. They got onto the peripheral northbound to where it intersects with the *Autostrada de Sol*, about fifty kilometers North of Rome. There, they got onto that toll way going North, retracing the steps Matt had just taken the night before. The *Autostrada del Sol* is Italy’s backbone and major transportation artery, connecting many of the country’s major cities. Matt had raced it Southward less than twenty-four hours earlier, but he didn’t have an Alpha Romeo then.

This time, going in the opposite direction, Lauren showed him the power of Italian automotive technology. Not only did she drive the 147 like a man, she drove it like an *Italian* man, i.e. like a maniac. She floored her gas pedal and promptly reached a speed of two hundred kilometers an hour, which she maintained for much of the night, on the magnificent dark and empty superhighway.

Matt could not disagree with this haste. Christine and her abductors may have been Budapest-bound, but who knew what their final destination was? Catching them ASAP was imperative. Time was of the essence - whether the *carabinieri* approved or not and whether their speed was suicidal or not. They circled around the same cities Matt had just whizzed by the previous night - Orvieto, Florence, Bologna. After that, they veered right towards Venice.

They drove by the “Queen of the Adriatic” just as the Eastern sky was beginning to lighten up. Matt was once again painfully reminded of Christine, the predicament they were in and the role her late grandfather was playing in all this. After all, Venice was Christophoro’s birthplace. Matt thought sadly and nostalgically about the better times he had spent in this jewel of a city in the past. Less than a year earlier, he had presented a paper at the annual conference of the World Sociological Congress held in Venice. After finishing his presentation, he had taken a *vaporetti* to the Rialto bridge. There, he had sat down at a sidewalk café with an espresso and sent Christine an e-mail. He had written her that being in the magnificent city

where her ancestors had dwelled made him love and miss her even more acutely and painfully. He vowed that the next time he'd come to this colorful, watery, festive Renaissance land of enchantment, it would be with her.

Instead, they raced by Venice without even seeing it.

Matt was silent, but Lauren and Pal were lively. They talked a great deal, seemed to like each other and acted as if they were on a European vacation. Shortly after circumventing Venice, the autostrada veered Northeast towards Austria. Far to their left, they could now see the jagged peaks of the Dolomites bathing in the magical orange light from the sun rising over the Adriatic sea. Lauren tried to cheer Matt up, saying, "Forget your pain for a moment, Matt. Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?"

Matt admitted that the scenery was awesome, but the beauty made his heart ache more, not less. As the trio continued on its way, he remained mostly silent.

Soon they entered Austria, then they crossed Slovenia and reached Croatia, circling Zagreb - a city Matt had visited before the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The latter part of the itinerary called for entering Hungary from the Southwest, hugging the southern shore of Lake Balaton, and arriving in Budapest by early afternoon.

While Matt remained morose, Lauren and Pal exchanged jokes and anecdotes. Lauren asked Pal to teach her some Hungarian expressions. He started again with all sorts of names of dishes. He had already mentioned such dishes as *rakott krumpli* and *makos teszta*, and he reminded her that this meant potato casserole and noodles with poppy seeds, respectively. He also explained what *lecho* was - a spicy vegetable dish, and he told Lauren that no Hungarian eats without drinking *Barack Palinka*.

"What's that?" she asked playfully.

"*Barack* is peach brandy," he explained. "Is national drink for the *Magyars*. Is only 40% alcohol, but so sweet like fruit juice, so you drink much and don't know before you become drunken."

Matt was irritable. He interrupted Pal gruffly, saying, "Hey man, how come you always talk about dishes and cooking and stuff like that? You gay or something? I mean, I don't give a damn you know, - I'm just wondering, is all..."

Lauren came to Pal's rescue and reprimanded Matt for his rudeness, telling him that Pal's sexual orientation was irrelevant and none of his business. But Pal interrupted her, saying, "You not have to defend me. I not homosexual. I am chef in *trattoria*."

"That's a laugh!" Matt said with a mean smile on his face, "you call that stinking dive you worked for in Rome a *trattoria*? 'Chef' my ass. The airport Pizza Hut probably makes better pepperoni pizza than you!"

"Knock it off, Matt!" Lauren commanded. "What's the matter with you? Asshole."

“Is okay, is okay,” Pal said. “Food at youth hostel was very bad, yes. But not my fault. Ingredients not good, you know. When I go back to Budapest, I will go to Hungarian Culinary Academy in Obuda. I will become great chef. One day I will go to Las Vegas and cook for big hotel and beautiful rich American women.”

Matt was amused and mollified by the young guy’s innocence and positive vibes. He said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. I’m just so fucking tired and tense. I guess you got big plans. I hope you succeed..”

As they continued to race across countries that had been provinces of the former Yugoslavia just a few years ago, Lauren asked Pal all sorts of ‘how-do-you-say-this’ and ‘how-do-you-say-that-in-Hungarian’ questions. After all, they would soon be there, and knowing the rudiments of the language could be of great help.

Pal obliged, explaining that *köszönöm* means thank you, *kérem* means please, *hol van a pályudvar?* Means ‘where is the train station?’ *utca* means street, *Tér* means square, *hid* means bridge, etc.

Lauren responded, giggling, “yes, like in ‘*Váci Utca*’ and *Kalvin Tér* and *Lánchid* right?”

“Yes!” Pal answered enthusiastically. “You know these places much?”

“Well...no,” Lauren answered somewhat nervously, “I don’t know them, a friend told me about them...”

Strange, indeed, Matt thought. She sure seems to know a lot of places in Budapest for someone who has never been there...

* * * * *

They reached Budapest in the early afternoon. Matt had switched seats with Pal in the back of the car and gotten a few hours of sleep - the first time in over three days. Now, Pal directed them straight to the *Varos Liget* park. They entered the city from the Southwest, drove through parts of Buda and crossed the Danube by way of the *Szabadság hid* (the Liberty bridge). Europe’s largest river was huge, rim full and flowing at vertiginous speed, carrying hundreds of millions of gallons of green mountain water all the way from the Carpathians and the Black Forrest to the Back Sea. As they crossed over to the Pest side of the city, which was the center, they could see Mount *Gellért* towering over the river behind them. A little further up on the right bank was the *Var*, i.e. the hill that featured the old fortified castle and the Saint Matthew Cathedral, Budapest’s most magnificent medieval church. At the foot of the *Var*, they could see the *Lánchid*, the beautiful chain bridge rebuilt exactly to its prior specifications after World War Two. Also discernible in the distance, on the other side of the river, was the parliament building, an immense structure built in the 19th century and mimicking the London parliament, except for being vastly larger and more monumental. Matt had heard cynical Hungarians say that it was the largest and most pompous building ever built to represent the smallest country.

They took the riverside highway north, hugging the river’s Left Bank and turned right on

Jozsef Attila Utca, connecting to the famous *Andrássy út*, the *Champs Elysées* of Budapest. The long, majestic, tree-lined boulevard featured one embassy after another. It took them straight to the *Varos Liget* park.

“Okay,” Matt said to Pal, “so you know where this *Taverna* restaurant is? Tell you what: You take us there, and then we drop you off wherever you want in this city, alright?”

“Ahem...” Lauren said, “Listen Matt, Pal actually is prepared to stay with us and help us out...”

“What?” said Matt, not liking this a bit. “We don’t need him along. He has no idea why we are here and he would only be a bother...”

“Well, he does know now,” she said sheepishly. “I told him your whole story while you were asleep. He really wants to help.”

“That’s great!” Matt exploded. “Does the whole world have to know what we are doing? Why don’t you announce it on national television? And what do we know about him anyway? Is he honest, is he reliable?”

“I swear,” Pal interjected, “I will just to help. Lauren telling me about your problem. Maybe I can help you find what is name...Christina. I know Hungary much.”

After a while, Matt relented again, saying, “Alright then. So take us to this *Taverna* place and let’s see if we can find out anything there.”

They drove around the *Varos Liget* Park and turned right onto a small side street just beyond the National Art Gallery, an imposing neo-classical building. Two blocks up they suddenly saw it - *Taverna* restaurant, a small quaint-looking red-brick establishment with decorative ivy surrounding the entrance and Hungary’s flag colors of red white and green painted on top of the door.

They parked a block away and Pal suggested that he go in by himself to reconnoiter, acting as a customer. He would sit down, order a small mid-afternoon libation and keep his ears open, maybe ask a few questions.

“Good idea,” Lauren agreed. “Let’s meet in an hour. How about at the National Art Gallery, it’s only two blocks away.”

“Okay,” said Matt, then asking Pal, “You know the museum? Where is a good place to meet?”

Lauren answered for Pal, saying, “Let’s meet in the Medieval paintings section on the first floor.”

They all agreed. Once again, Matt was puzzled: Lauren sure seems to know a lot about Budapest for someone who has never been here before...

* * * * *

So they got out of the Alpha Romeo and parted ways, Pal walking towards the *Taverna*. As Lauren began to move in the opposite direction, back towards the *Varos Liget* and the museum, Matt said, “Wait a minute. First I want to check something out.”

“What...?”

“Oh nothing, this’ ll just take a second.”

Matt was still suspicious and not altogether at ease with Pal. So after Pal had entered the *Taverna*, Matt walked to the restaurant himself and peeked through the window surreptitiously. He saw Pal sitting at a table. A moment later, a frizzy grey-haired rotund man wearing a white apron walked up to Pal. Then, to Matt’s horror, Pal stood up and the two men gave each other a warm embrace - an obvious sign that they were friends!

What the fuck? Matt thought. I’m being double-crossed! Pal must be with the bad guys, and he is probably leading me straight into their hands!

He ran back to Lauren who was waiting for him by the car and said, “See, I knew it! Pal is a spy. He and the owner are buddies! The moment they met, they hugged like two old friends. Let’s get out of here!”

“Now hold on,” she objected. “You don’t know that! How do you know that was the owner?”

“I don’t give a shit who that was - owner, manager, whatever. All I know is they hugged the moment they met. They knew each other! Pal has been lying to us all along...”

“Maybe not,” she continued. “Maybe it’s their culture, maybe you hug the waiter before you order...”

“Bullshit!”

“Or maybe they know each other for some other reason,” she persisted. “You know, Pal has these culinary ambitions, so maybe they met through work or something...”

“I don’t buy that,” Matt objected.

“Tell you what,” she said, “Instead of jumping to conclusions, let’s keep our appointment with Pal in an hour. It’s safe inside the museum. He doesn’t know that we suspect him, so even if he is a bad guy, he can be helpful to us. He can lead us to Christine. We just have to be alert.”

Matt went along with the plan. They agreed not to confront Pal and ask him how the hell he knew the restaurant manager, or whoever the little rotund guy was. But in his mind, Matt was becoming more and more unsure of everything. Could Lauren even be trusted? Why, maybe she was also in cahoots with the bad guys, who knows? She sure seemed to be siding with Pal

every time. Was Matt surrounded by friends or enemies? Did Lauren and Pal know each other? How could that be? How could they possibly be involved in Christine's kidnaping - after all, he bumped into them, separately and totally accidentally, in a city of five million people thousands of miles from home? Was he being paranoid, or realistic?

* * * * *

The meeting inside the museum an hour later took place as planned. Pal came back from the restaurant and conveyed what he had found out: "Taverna owner told me Christine and bad men were there!" he said excitedly. "Three men with beautiful American woman eat there today. Men speak Hungarian but woman speak English, and he see foreign car from France..."

"Wow!" said Matt with agitation, "So what else did he tell you? Any idea where they went?"

"Owner hear men say they want to go to *Gellért Spa*. They say they tired from trip, want to go to refresh."

"*Gellért Spa*, what's that?" Matt asked.

"Oh, that's the famous sulphuric baths," Lauren interjected. "It's called the *Rudas Medicinal Spa*. One of the town's main attractions. You go back across the Danube and it's right at the bottom of Mount *Gellért*..."

"Yes," confirmed Pal, then asking Lauren with a surprised expression, "You go to *Gellért Spa* before?"

Once again Lauren seemed embarrassed, saying, "Well...no.. It's my friend, she told me about the baths..."

Matt finally asked Lauren what he had wanted to ask her for some time: "Hey, you seem to know a lot about this city! You sound practically like an expert. You sure you've never been here before?"

"I *think* I would remember!" she replied indignantly and defensively "You don't trust me? You think I am lying? As I said before, my friend was here last year and she told me a lot about this country..."

"I see," said Matt, backing off. But inside his mind, he wasn't buying it. Who was this beautiful woman? he wondered. Was she really who she professed to be - a Fulbright scholar and a graduate from UCLA? Why had she volunteered so quickly to join him on his dangerous adventure?

Just for kicks, as she claimed? And what about Pal? Maybe he belonged to Christine's kidnapers, and he had just stayed behind in Rome to lure Matt into their hands? Lauren and Pal sure seemed to like each other a lot. Did they know each other before?

* * * * *

They drove back across the city - down *Andrássy út*, this time crossing the river on the gracious *Széchenyi Lánchíd*, the chain bridge, and then driving up to the *Gellért* baths by following the right bank of the Danube. Although this was not a time for sightseeing, Matt couldn't help but noticing that this was truly one of Europe's most beautiful cities. He had seen pictures of Budapest in 1945, and also after the 1956 uprising against the Soviet occupiers. In 1945, the city was similar to Dresden, Tokyo, Rotterdam and Hiroshima. The six-months long siege and battle of Budapest between the Soviet Red Army and Hitler's Wehrmacht had pulverized most of the city. The six thousand Soviet tanks that rolled in during the month of November 1956 to put down the uprising had caused further damage, at a time when most of the city had not yet been rebuilt. However, by the 21st century, the capital of Hungary had undergone an impressive transformation. Famous monuments and public buildings were everywhere being restored, huge apartment complexes were rising everywhere, the transportation network was being modernized. True, Budapest was suffering from the same graffiti plague as other large European cities. However, on balance, the city was blossoming in a way it had not experienced since 1900. It was on its way to rejoining Vienna, Prague and the other magnificent historical centers of central Europe. Again, Matt was praying that he and Christine would be reunited so that they could return here and enjoy this beautiful metropolis together.

They reached the foot of the *Gellért* Citadel, one of the Buda's posh areas. They got off the main road, which continued as a tunnel underneath Mount *Gellért*. They drove by a couple of five-star hotels and parked a few blocks from the bathhouse. Walking towards the spa's entrance, they eagerly looked for a green Peugeot among the parked cars, but didn't see one.

They entered the spa and got a woman's locker for Lauren and one man's locker for Pal and Matt together. After undressing, they met at one of the pools. To their astonishment, the facility was 'coeducational,' i.e. men and women co-mingled, some of them naked. These Europeans! Matt thought. Their oh-so-progressive policies never ceased to amaze him. Prude Americans as they were, Lauren and Matt wore towels as they prepared to enter one of the sulphuric baths. They were embarrassed and only took their towels off after they jumped into the water. Pal, of course, had no problem. Matt and Lauren were not the only ones wearing towels when out of the water. About half of the customers did so as well, while the other half carried on fully naked nonchalantly.

The place was not unlike a nudist colony, Matt thought. While he had not really been to nudist colonies, he had occasionally stumbled on a nudist beach here and there in California and in Hawaii, plus he had seen enough 'documentaries' on HBO and other cable networks to get an idea of what such places were like. Now, he noted that, just like in nudist colonies, those walking around naked were generally the ones with ugly old bodies. Why, Matt wondered, do men and women with nasty, wrinkled and sagging bodies, people either bony to the skin or fat lard asses, have a compulsion to flaunt themselves? Are they exhibitionists? How come one rarely sees fantastic-looking young girls, people in the spring of life who look like freshly blooming flowers, people like Bo Derek, run around naked at such places? Why are most nudists old and ugly?

The baths were located in a monumental 19th century building with columns and marble floors. Unfortunately, the strong sulphuric smell reminded Matt of rotten eggs. Oh well, they weren't here for their enjoyment. Matt doubted that Christine was in the bathhouse at this moment. In all likelihood, her captors had locked her up somewhere, left one of them to guard

her, while the others were here refreshing themselves.

Matt was the only one who would be able to recognize the men, so he ambulated around the pools as inconspicuously as possible. Even though the abductors had never seen him, he didn't want to arouse their suspicion. The heavy steam reduced visibility and made it more difficult for him to recognize faces. He walked by individuals and small groups of people, wrapped in his towel and looking furtively this way and that way. He didn't care whether some people might take him for a sort of pervert voyeur or something.

Suddenly he thought he recognized someone. Tucked away behind a column, he saw two fellows wrapped in their towels and sitting on the side of a Jacuzzi. One looked a lot like one of the fellows he had seen go in and out of the *Rue Blancas* apartment in Paris. Could it be?

He quickly walked back to Lauren and Pal and told them that they had to get dressed real fast because there was a good chance that he had found the bad guys. They would have to tail them the moment they left the facility.

The three of them agreed to quickly get dressed and to meet outside in front of the building. Lauren would drive up to the entrance and when the two suspicious fellows came out, they would follow them.

After Matt and Pal got dressed, they lingered on in the locker room, acting busy doing this and that with their hair in front of the mirror, waiting for the two suspicious men to return, which happened about ten minutes later.

The men were chatting as they got dressed. Matt couldn't understand them, but Pal could. The two of them exited the facility. Lauren was already waiting for them in the car, engine running. They got in and told her to circle around and park a little ways away from the entrance. Matt asked Pal what the men had been talking about.

“They say their friend stay in apartment to watch American woman, and now they go back to apartment and friend can come to bathhouse his turn.”

Yep, Matt thought. These are the guys, no doubt about it. When the two fellows came out, they followed them to their car at a cautious distance - sure enough, a green Peugeot with a French license.

The men took off, driving up a small serpentine road circling the *Gellért* citadel, and the Alpha Romeo followed them at a safe distance. They descended on the far side of the hill and hit a major thoroughfare called *Attila Utca*. Strange, Matt thought, a couple of hours ago they had already been on an *Attila Utca* on the other side of the Danube, in Pest. Surely that couldn't have been the same street? Then he noticed that this was the *Krisztina Attila* street, whereas the other one had been the *Jozsef Attila* street, named after one of Hungary's great poets. Funny how these Hungarians liked the name Attila, he thought. In the past, he had met several Hungarian academics with that first name. Apparently, these people were proud of their barbarian ancestry.

And now they were following a group of gangsters on *Krisztina Attila* street - hoping to rescue *Christine*! Wasn't life full of coincidences! Or was this a divine sign of some sort, he pondered, superstitiously.

Presently they entered an attractive hilly suburban neighborhood called *Rózsadomb*, or Hill of Roses. Here the mansions were huge. Some were still dilapidated from nearly a century of wars, neglect and communism, but many were already being restored into multi-million dollar luxury homes inhabited by the 'new class' created by 'privatization,' i.e. the free-for-all capitalism that followed the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. This new class consisted

of all the new millionaire entrepreneurs, including criminals.

They followed the green Peugeot around the wooded Hill of Roses until it stopped in front of one of the few apartment buildings in the area, a crumbling three-story structure with peeling yellow paint and a sign saying *Amadeus Apartments*. Next to the ugly complex was a messy vacant lot/construction site with assorted bricks, two-by-fours, piles and other metal objects strewn about. The street, Matt noticed, was called *Bimbo Utca*.

They parked at a safe distance and devised a plan of action. Matt spoke first, saying, “from what we overheard them say at the spa, we can assume that this is where they are holding Christine.

But I don’t see how we can take them all. They are armed and murderous.”

“There may be a way,” Lauren suggested. “How many of them are there, do you think?”

“Well, ever since I have been on their tail since Paris, It’s been the same three guys, and no one else that I know of.”

“So it’s just the three of them, you think?” she asked.

“But maybe more men inside,” Pal interjected. “Maybe this is headquarter of gangsters.”

“I’m sure it isn’t,” Lauren replied. I bet you they’re just taking a pit stop in Budapest before moving on. That’s why they went to the bathhouse and had lunch at the Taverna.”

“Okay,” said Matt, “so let’s assume that we are up against three men. We’ll have to try to get in when they’re asleep and sneak Christine out. Our odds are not good. ”

“Well, the odds may not be as bad as you think,” Lauren said with more optimism. “Pal heard them say that they wanted to take turns at the bathhouse, right? So they’re not going to be here all at once. Maybe two of them will go out again and leave just one man to watch Christine. That gives us our chance.”

“A lot of assumptions,” Matt retorted, amazed at Lauren’s eagerness to undertake this risky and dangerous operation. In fact, he thought, she seemed to be emerging as the trio’s leader, even though this was Matt’s crisis and she was just along for the ride, or was she?

“And what if they all come out with Christine and they all leave together?” He continued.

“Then we have no choice but to continue and follow them,” she said authoritatively.

“Okay, so it’s agreed,” Matt summed up, “ We wait here, hope that one or two of them leave again, and we go in. We’ll have surprise on our side.”

* * * * *

They waited silently as it got dark. Sure enough, after a while two of the men came out and took off in the green Peugeot.

“Now is our chance,” said Lauren.

“Okay,” Matt answered, “but wait just a second. I’ll need a weapon to overpower the guy watching Christine. Pal, come with me to that construction site over there. Let’s look for a metal pipe or a two-by-four or something.”

But Lauren said, “No need for that,” as she produced a .40 Smith and Wesson from her purse.

What the hell? Matt thought. This woman never ceases to amaze me. “You’re a Fulbright student in Europe packing a gun?” he exclaimed.

“Yeah, so what? I feel safer this way.”

“And how the hell did you smuggle it in? You couldn’t possibly have passed through all the airports...”

“Didn’t have to, I bought it here.”

“Sure!” Matt retorted sarcastically. “It’s real easy to buy fire arms in Europe.”

“Don’t be smug,” she replied. “It’s not that hard if you know the black market...” and then she added almost curtly, “so you want to argue or free your sweetheart?”

Lauren seemed to be totally in charge now. “Okay,” she ordered, “Pal, you stay here and keep an eye out in case the two guys come back. Matt and I will go in and locate Christine.”

* * * * *

It didn’t take them long to do so. They entered the building and heard radio music coming from a first-floor apartment (first floor meaning second floor in Europe). They walked up silently, went down a hallway to the music and came to a room with a door ajar. Peeking in, they saw Christine tied down on a chair and a guy lying on a bed reading a magazine.

Lauren moved fast. She entered the room, pointed her .40 Smith and Wesson and told the man to get up and raise his hands.

Matt followed Lauren inside the room and ran to Christine. She was disheveled, terrified, exhausted, jubilant, crying and laughing all at once. He hugged her and covered her face with kisses while she was still tied down.

Lauren, still holding the man at gunpoint, interrupted them and said, “Okay you lovebirds, you can hug later. We have to get out of here before the other two come back. Matt, you untie Christine and tie down this guy.”

Now Christine looked up at Lauren for the first time, and she stared at her for several seconds as if recognizing her...

Matt quickly transferred the ropes from Christine to her captor. They tied him up, gagged him and exited the building. Matt was ecstatic, saying, “Thank God, the nightmare is

over! Let's go home!"

* * * * *

However, a rude shock awaited them outside. When they reached the street, they saw that the two other accomplices had returned and surprised Pal. The three of them were standing on the sidewalk near Lauren's Alpha Romeo. One of them was pointing a 9 mm Beretta at their young Hungarian friend.

Lauren didn't hesitate. She pointed her gun at the armed man and told him to drop his weapon. The man turned his gun towards her but she was faster. He fell to the pavement, mortally wounded. Before his accomplice had a chance to do anything, Lauren pointed her gun at him and told him to freeze.

Matt felt that he was living a nightmare. Who was this woman? She just killed a man, showing herself to be an Olympic-caliber marksman. Some Fulbright scholar! What was going on?

Lauren turned to Pal and told him to disarm and tie up their prisoner.

Pal did so, shaking. "Shit!" He shouted at Lauren, "the guy could've killed me!"

"That's the risk you take, Pal. Comes with the territory," she replied impatiently. "And how come you fucked up? Why did you let them overpower you?"

"Stupid of me," Pal apologized. "I was just peaking inside the apartment for a second to see if you guys were okay. That's when Laszlo and his buddy returned." And then, he turned towards the prisoner, saying, "Okay Laszlo, give me your piece."

As Laszlo handed over his Beretta to Pal, the latter said, "*köszönöm*," and then, switching to English, "I see you still use the same equipment as you did in Italy last year."

What now? Matt thought. When will the surprises end? Not only did Pal suddenly speak accentless English, but he also seemed to know this Hungarian thug.

The next surprise, a minute later, hit him like a bomb: Christine turned to Pal and said, "It's you again? What are you doing here?"

Matt was flabbergasted. "Will someone please tell me what the fuck is going on?" he exclaimed. "Does everybody here know each other except me?"

Christine started to say something, but Lauren interrupted her rudely, saying, "No time for explanations. Let's go! Now! Pal, you hold on to that Beretta, and watch Laszlo like a hawk. Don't fuck up again. Christine, get in the car." And then, turning to Matt, she said, "Professor, it's been a pleasure. This is where we part ways. We get to keep Christine. Take care."

Matt began to shake uncontrollably. He started to utter random words and questions, like "Who are you guys? What are you doing?" But he couldn't do anything, as Lauren kept

pointing her .40 Smith and Wesson at him, and he realized that she was fully capable and willing to kill.

Christine and Laszlo were both ordered into the car at gunpoint and Pal asked Lauren, referring to Matt in flawless colloquial English, “You want me to tie up the dude, so he can’t come after us?”

“Nah, don’t bother. He is on foot, he cant follow us.”

Meanwhile, Christine was crying, begging Lauren to let her go. She turned to Matt and said, “Please, do something! Don’t let them take me!”

“I wont, babe, I swear!” he replied. “I’m coming after you, I’ll chase them to the end of the earth if I have to...”

“Not a good idea,” Lauren said sternly. “But don’t worry, she is safe with us, no harm will come to her.”

Matt had no choice but to let them go. With two pistols pointed at him, any rash action on his part would have meant certain death for both Christine and himself.

8. SOMOGY DÖRÖCSKE

The Alpha Romeo and its four passengers took off. Before the car even turned the corner at the end of *Bimbo Utca*, Matt kneeled down next to the dead man on the sidewalk, frantically searched his pockets and found what he was looking for - the man’s weapon and the keys to the green Peugeot. For good measure he also took the man’s wallet. He jumped into the car and gave chase.

There was practically no traffic in the sedate suburban neighborhood. He saw a set of taillights in the distance and he knew that it was Lauren’s car, recognizing the distinct purplish color of the Alpha Romeo’s lights. He followed them down a steep serpentine street towards the Danube and across the *Margit* bridge to the Pest side of the city. They raced through the deserted streets of Pest and reached the Southeastern outskirts, Matt staying far behind but never losing sight of the Alpha Romeo.

Once outside of Budapest, they took a turnpike southwards which, according to signs, was going to Szeged. However, at an intersection thirty kilometers further, they got off the main highway and turned onto a secondary road eastwards. They were now driving in the direction of Romania, or perhaps Ukraine, Matt guessed.

Already the Eastern sky was getting light blue and Matt could see that as they got further East, conditions were becoming more primitive. The potholes in the road were now large and numerous. This slowed Lauren down and made it easier for Matt to keep up with her - at a safe distance. As the sun rose, they were no longer the only vehicles on the primitive road. They now shared the road with horses and oxen carts, some tractors and trucks, farmers walking to their fields, and a rare passenger car.

They were now crossing part of the great Hungarian/Eastern European plain. The beautiful, sad and impoverished rural landscape reminded Matt of the movie *Fiddler on the*

Roof. Fields of maize and green beans stretched to the horizon in all directions, sometimes separated by a row of poplar trees. He noticed a flock of cranes fly in formation in the cloudless morning sky. He saw distant villages with their Russian orthodox-style onion bulb church steeples on the horizon. Here and there he saw a primitive farmhouse with a thatched roof, and a river was moving lazily alongside the road. Each farm had that unique Eastern European landmark - a well, topped by a long, slanted wooden arm sticking up skywards with a bucket dangling from the top. They were approaching the *Puszta*. This, Matt knew, was a flat and arid region in Eastern Hungary with wide vistas and colorful cowboys roaming on the plain, somewhat of a tourist attraction as of late.

Sightseeing, however, was the last thing on Matt's mind. He was fully concentrating on not losing the Alpha Romeo carrying Christine, and at the same time remaining unnoticed by his enemies.

Presently the road took a more southward direction and the land became more hilly and wooded. Matt guessed that they were approaching the Rumanian border and Transylvania, areas that had been part of Hungary before World War Two. He checked his back pocket to make sure he still had his passport, in case he had to chase them across the border.

However, before reaching the border, the Alpha Romeo got off the main highway and started down an even more primitive road, one that turned out to be paved for only the first few kilometers.

The landscape became more and more desolate. The dirt road led them through a lone village so small, primitive and remote that Matt couldn't even find it on the detailed map of Hungary he found in the glove compartment. A rudimentary sign at its entrance said *Somogy Dorocske*. The village consisted of one dirt street, which was the main road going through the town, flanked by two rows of stone and mud shacks, and a church. There was a big ditch running parallel to the main street through the entire village, which was about 300 meters long. There was not a single car in sight, nor were there any poles or high wires to be seen. The village had apparently neither telephones nor electricity. Behind the two rows of shacks making up the village, the land rose to form two parallel hills, which were covered with withering vineyards.

This reminded Matt that Eastern Hungary was prime wine country. In fact, he realized looking at the map that they couldn't be very far from the Tokaj region, producer of world famous white wines. The proximity between the Tokaj region and this dismal place puzzled Matt, but he didn't have time to ponder this.

He entered the village and followed the Alpha Romeo down main street. The village was practically deserted, except for a few old women wearing black scarves and scurrying along the street like rats, some old geezers sitting and smoking a pipe, and a few young children wearing rags and looking with mesmerized expression at the only cars they had seen in probably several weeks. A ghost town with a standard of living lower than rural Mexico, Matt thought.

Within minutes the Alpha Romeo had driven through the town, and it was now once again driving across a bleak and desolate plain. Where on earth are we going? Matt thought. Is she ever going to stop?

Finally, Matt saw a distant structure beginning to emerge on the Southeastern horizon. As they approached, he began to discern high-rise buildings, water towers, aluminum hangers and, a bit later, a protective fence around the entire complex. The facility looked like a vast camp, or an industrial or government installation. Its appearance was a mix of California's rural

prisons such as Soledad and a military base such as Travis, with a tinge of Buchenwald and Dachau thrown in. The concentration camp flavor was the result of the serious-looking watchtowers rising at the complex's four corners plus, as Matt discovered when he got closer, a double razor wire fence that looked absolutely impenetrable.

Matt wondered whether the lethal fence was meant to keep people in or out. Whatever this facility was, it looked grim, dangerous and secretive. It was utterly isolated, without a single town or farm in sight on the vast empty plain surrounding it. What sort of business could this be? Matt wondered, tucked away like this in the outback of the Northern Balkan? Could it be a secret research facility working on bacteriological warfare or some other weapon of mass destruction? Could it be a secret detention facility? If so, for what population - terrorists? Matt was reminded of the recent allegations about secret CIA detention camps in Eastern Europe.

Whatever its function, someone had spent mucho dinero building this complex. Who could that be? Surely not the Hungarian government, that small and still struggling new democracy. It would have to be one of the big boys - Russia, right next door, or Uncle Sam, or NATO, or a very rich private outfit. The post-communist privatization of the Eastern European economies had produced winners and losers. Since 1990, Russia and its former satellites had seen the rise of hundreds of billionaires, that's *billionaires* with a B. Matt had read about the vicissitudes of men like Mikhail Yukov and his *Gazprom* oil company sitting on the world's largest oil reserves. Some of these Eastern European *nouveau riches* had more money than entire African countries. Were they businessmen or a new mafia? Often both.

Matt's brain was buzzing with theories, hypotheses and questions - the main one, of course, being: What the hell does all of this have to do with Christine?

* * * * *

Matt could see the Alpha Romeo drive slowly alongside the razor wire fence and then come to a stop near a lone tree by a ditch. He stayed as far back as possible and observed. After a moment, he saw Lauren and Pal come out of the car and carry out a body, tied and gagged. It was the body of the fellow who had been guarding Christine in Budapest and who had been captured by Lauren. Matt remembered how she had ordered him into her car when they left the *Amadeus* apartment building in the middle of the night.

Had she killed him, too, while driving? But then, why would she have taken his body along, all this way? And why would he still be tied down and gagged? No, Matt concluded, the man was probably just sedated.

Presently, Lauren and Pal sat the tied-up body down by the tree and leaned him against the trunk. Then they returned to their car and took off, continuing to follow the peripheral fence. Matt followed as soon as they had turned the corner. When he reached the corner himself, he stopped abruptly: Just a couple of hundred meters further, the Alpha Romeo had stopped by an entrance gate. Two men carrying AK 47s were circling the car and asking questions from whoever was at the wheel - no doubt Lauren.

Whatever was being said, the palavers took a considerable amount of time. But in the end, the gate opened and the Alpha Romeo was let through.

* * * * *

Once more, for the umpteenth time during this wild chase across an entire continent, Matt was stuck outside a place knowing that he somehow HAD to get in. This time, the task seemed insurmountable. The razor wire fence was twelve feet high and probably electric. The gate was manned by thugs carrying the best automatic weapon ever built - Mr. Kalashnikov's lasting contribution to world civilization. This time, the fortress seemed impregnable.

He stayed in his car until dusk and rummaged through the glove compartment, the trunk and the car's side pockets for something he might be able to use, anything. The glove compartment contained a couple of sealed manilla envelopes with return addresses which appeared to be medical institutions - one in France and one in Switzerland.

He opened one. It contained a six- or seven-page long medical document with hospital letterhead on top, followed by largely incomprehensible material. There were rows of numerical and alphanumerical codes that meant nothing to Matt. However, he recognized some of the entries as dates. These were in the European fashion, with day first and month second, as when August 25, 2006 is written 25-8-06. Some of the entries consisted of numbers preceded by the symbol €, for 'euro,' so these must clearly be monetary figures, he gathered.

Most of the terms contained in the documents were alien to Matt for two reasons: they were medical lingo, and furthermore *foreign* (French and German) medical lingo. Nevertheless, he did recognize a few of the words, especially in the French document: There was mention of *SIDA*, French for Aids, and *Pneumonie Atypique*, French for SARS - the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome which threatened to become epidemic three years ago. Some of the terms were identical, or nearly so, to their English equivalents, for example virogene, viroplasm, and *epidemie*. Matt also recognized the word *ebola*. If these topics were any indication, then the medical facility where Christine was being held against her will was dealing with very nasty stuff - epidemics of the worst sort.

Continuing to rummage through the glove compartment, he found the wallet which he had 'appropriated' from the man killed by Lauren in Budapest, and he began to look at its contents. One item in particular drew his attention. It seemed to be an I.D. card. The background consisted of a pale picture of the Hippocratic symbol - the traditional staff of Asclepius with a winged snake coiled around it. Superimposed upon this image were a printed name and a nine-digit number not unlike a Social Security number. In one of the corners was a facial photo of the card's dead owner. There was also some small Hungarian print which Matt was unable to decipher.

The card was useless since it had a picture of its owner. But Maybe Matt could use the I.D. number somehow, he thought. He memorized it and decided to take the only course of action he could think of - go to the gate and try to get in by mis-representing himself. A long shot, he knew, but worth a try.

He waited until dusk and drove up to the gate. He introduced himself to the guard who came to his window: "Hi, do you speak English? I am John Smith, I am one of your American representatives in Paris. I bring two important medical documents." And he waved the two manilla envelopes in the guard's face.

"Okay," said the guard. "You leave envelopes with me."

"No, I cannot," Matt objected. "I have strict orders to give them to your boss in person..."

"Must show I.D. then," the guard said.

“Well, that’s the problem.” Matt began to explain. “Some asshole pickpocket got my wallet in Budapest, so I don’t have my papers with me. But my I.D. number is.....” and he recited the 9-digit number he had memorized from the dead man’s card.

“That not good,” the guard said. “Must have I.D. card.”

“I told you mine got ripped off!” Matt said belligerently. “But they’re expecting these two contracts right now, so you better let me through. It’s your ass on the line!”

“Okay,” said the guard. “I telephone office and check your I.D. Write down for me.”

The guard spent the next five minutes talking with someone on the intercom. At one point he came back to Matt’s car, walked around it and inspected it. Then he went back to the phone and Matt heard him say something about ‘*Peugeot*’ and ‘*Francia.*’ He was apparently describing the car to his superior and confirming that it was the car they expected.

While the guard was on the intercom, Matt noticed that the Hippocratic snake symbol which was on the dead man’s card, was also embellishing the door of the guardhouse. Soon the guard returned and said, now smiling for the first time, “Okay, I.D. okay. Next time you more careful. Many thieves in Budapest. Many homeless and beg. Bad people.”

“That’s for sure,” Matt commiserated. “Especially those damn gypsies!”

“Haha! Yes, bad gypsies,” the guard said, elated to have found a fellow racist, and adding, “But here, we take care of all bad people.”

“I’m sure you do,” Matt replied, not clear as to what the guard meant, and then asking, “so you’ll let me through the gate now?”

“First,” the guard said, “Must, how you say, seek you for gun. Cannot bring gun with you.”

Matt let himself be frisked, and he handed over the Beretta he had taken from the dead man in Budapest. The guard said, “This good gun. All men here also have.”

“Right,” Matt said. “Very reliable. But look at you! Now that’s a real gun!”

“Yes,” said the guard, pleased with the flattery. “Mr Kalashnikov was good man!”

“Just out of curiosity,” Matt went on, “How many rounds can you fire?”

“This clip 30 rounds,” the guard said proudly, adding, “and gun very fast - 600 per one minute!”

“Uhuh,” Matt said, hoping never to have to face the AK, and then adding, “Okay buddy. Was nice talking to you. Now, let me through.”

The guard finally opened the gate, saying, "Drive three hundred meters to big house with lights, then go to left."

Matt did just that, turned the corner and then parked. He got out of the car, taking a flashlight he had found in the trunk, and began to nose around the facility. It looked like a college campus, with a variety of one and two-story buildings separated by small lawns and small footpaths. It was dark and deserted.

Matt entered a long one-story building and started to walk down a hallway. Architecturally, the place reminded him of an American hospital, with two rows of rooms separated by a long, linoleum-floored hallway flanked by gurneys, I.V. stands and hospital beds parked along the walls.

Every door he tried to open was locked, but he managed to get peaks through the fortified glass windows.

One room looked like a medical lab, perhaps an O.R. In the middle was an operating table and there were state-of-the-art overhead surgical machinery and lights hanging from the ceiling. Along the walls were glass cabinets that contained medical supplies.

The next room had a more office-like appearance. On top of a large desk were a massive electron microscope, petrie dishes and two computer terminals.

The third glass wall through which he peaked gave him a horrific shock: It was a large dormitory. On each bed laid a patient - or a corpse? None of the bodies was moving. Were they all sound asleep? Most of the bodies were heavily covered and bandaged. The few parts which were visible - some faces and limbs - were covered with sores and blotches. Matt concluded that these people were seriously sick - or dead already. Thank God the door was locked! What an impulsive idiot he was, he thought, trying to barge in and maybe catch a deadly disease!

So what is this place? he kept wondering. A huge medical research facility? A hospital? The secrecy and heavy armed protection were no different from many other such facilities in the world, but Christine's abduction and the other crimes he had witnessed over the past few days were proof that this was not kosher - definitely not kosher.

He thought of an old 1978 movie - *Coma*, with that cute Canadian actress Genevieve Bujold, if he remembered correctly. Wasn't that movie about some criminal traffic in body parts, or something sinister like that?

* * * * *

Before Matt had the opportunity to explore additional areas, he felt a sharp pain in his back and his arms, because someone grabbed him from behind and threw him to the floor. Turning around, he saw nothing but a blinding flashlight shining in his eyes, while a booming voice was shouting unintelligible things. A moment later he began to distinguish the gun pointed at him, and the man's uniform, which was similar to that of the guard he had befriended at the gate, including the Hippocratic insignia on his lapel.

The guard ordered him out of the building. They walked to an office building a couple of hundred yards up the path and entered one of the offices. There, Matt was met by a man he would learn to refer to as the *Big Man*. The individual was indeed large in stature, but more importantly, it soon turned out that he was also the head of the organization. He was well

dressed, wearing a white shirt and grey pants. His hair was short, blond and slightly greying at the temples. He might have been in his mid-fifties. He looked like a successful professional businessman or administrator. He addressed Matt in accented but good English:

“You told the guard at the front gate that your name is John Smith. Why didn’t you choose John Doe? That is the more mellifluous American name usually employed by those seeking anonymity. Let’s see, as the Hungarian generic equivalent, I could call myself *Attila Paprika*? Let me remind you of your true name - Matt Sander. As for me, they call me the Big Man. You were brave to enter our facility and explore it with your flash light. Bravo. You were followed at all times by my surveillance team, of course. Had you made a serious effort to break into one of the hospital rooms, you would have been killed instantaneously. You brought us two documents - one from the *Institut Pasteur* in Paris and one from the *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois* in Lausanne. Good. We were expecting them. How did you get your hands on them - along with one of our Parisian cars?”

Matt was now caught driving the car of a murdered man - murdered by someone else. Realizing that he was in deep trouble, he improvised as quickly as he could, “Okay, I tracked down the Paris office where Christine was being detained, and when I saw them take her away, I stole this Peugeot parked in front, and I followed them.”

“I see,” said Big Man incredulously “And you chased them all the way here? Extraordinary. Maybe Yves will confirm your story when I finally get a hold of him. My communications with Paris have been slow.”

So far so good, Matt thought. He was happy with his lie and also impressed by this gentleman-like Big Man. He decided to cut to the chase and said, “Well sir, I don’t understand any of this, who you are or what you do. It is obviously bad, since I have seen your men murder several people during the past few days. However, where is Christine? She is here, somewhere. Why? I only ask that you let her go home with me. That will be the end of it. We will both go back to California and you will never hear from us again, I swear it.”

“That is silly,” the Big Man responded. “An obvious impossibility.”

“So we are dead, then? Is that it?”

“No, that is not it at all,” said the Big Man in a friendly tone. I invited Christine here because she can be of great service to me, and I wish to hire her. By the same token, I will also offer employment to you - very lucrative employment.”

Caught by this odd turn of events, Matt replied, beginning to mimic Big Man’s style, “This surprises me. Lucrative employment is preferable to death or imprisonment. However, what skills of interest could I possibly have? True, Christine works in the medical field, but I am merely a sociology professor in California...”

“Those characteristics make you an attractive couple,” Big Man continued. “Christine’s knowledge of medical administration will be helpful. Furthermore, you both reside on the West Coast of the United States and your institutional base is the the University of California and

some of the world's major medical facilities. The *quid pro quo* I offer will impress you.”

“This is insane,” replied Matt. I don't even understand you. Where is Christine?”

“Yes,” said the Big Man “Your beloved one first. Let's go to the guest quarters.”

* * * * *

Big Man and an associate walked Matt down the hall to the guest quarters. No sooner had Matt entered that apartment than Christine came running towards him, to hug and kiss him. She thanked him, profusely and emotionally, for having followed her all the way to the enemy's lair, but she also reprimanded him gently for having joined her in captivity.

As the two love-birds were still exchanging kisses, Matt suddenly looked up in astonishment to see Lauren and Pal appear from the back room.

The six people in the room all looked at each other in deadly silence. Big Man was the first to speak: “You know each other?”

“Yes,” Lauren responded, “He's been a pain ever since Rome.”

“You bitch!” Matt answered furiously. “You pretended to help me! I should've guessed that you and your Hungarian *Pal* were working for this...this *Big Man*!”

Big Man interrupted with a soothing smile, saying, “Not only do they work for me, but so will you and Christine soon,” then adding, “Now good night all.”

After Big Man's exit, the door to the guest apartment was locked, and Matt was pretty sure that an armed guard was posted outside.

* * * * *

The discussion that followed was both heated and subdued, in the belief that the apartment was bugged. Lauren started out, whispering, “Dammit Matt, I told you to go home and not to follow us. Now Christine and you are *both* locked up - what good does that do? I told you no harm would come to her. You should've trusted me!”

“No harm?” Matt retorted angrily, “Bullshit! You don't find it harmful to be locked up in this...whatever this place is? Held captive by this Big Man, whoever he is? You know as well as I do that it's gonna be his way or the highway!”

“It's your own damn fault,” Lauren replied vehemently. “You'd make a piss-poor detective! I saw you behind us all the way since we left Budapest. Same car lights following us for hours. You think I'm a moron? I gave you fair warning, but you came to the belly of the beast anyway. Was your decision.”

“I had no choice,” Matt said, “You were kidnaping Christine. Who the hell are you? You work for these guys don’t you? I saw the labs and the hospital with dozens of patients - or were those dead bodies? What is this outfit anyway?”

“It’s a medical facility,” she answered tersely.

“One that murders people - like you did in Budapest?”

“I killed that guy to save your ass,” Lauren replied indignantly.

“You didn’t do it to save me,” Matt retorted. “You did it so you could bring Christine here yourself, instead of those guys. Big Man is probably paying you a big reward. And now he has locked you up with us so you can spy on us.”

“Nonsense!” she said. “In the first place, he doesn’t need me to spy on you - look at the cameras up there in the corners...” and then she asked, “So what about Big Man’s job offers? Are you guys going to accept?”

To Matt, this confirmed Lauren’s duplicity. How did she know that Big Man had offered employment to him and to Christine? He said, “my discussions with Big Man are none of your business,” whereupon he decided to retire, disgusted and exhausted.

* * * * *

Matt and Christine had one room to themselves, Lauren and Pal took the other. Pal hadn’t said one word during the conversation. Matt was baffled. Nothing made sense any more. Who was with whom? Who was working for whom? His paranoia was peaking again. He wasn’t even sure about Christine any more. After all, she had admitted to knowing Pal, and for a fleeting moment in Budapest she even seemed to recognize Lauren.

Once they were in the privacy of their bedroom, he asked Christine point blank, “Did you know Lauren and Pal?”

“Only since yesterday,” she answered.

“You’re lying!” he said angrily. “You recognized them in Budapest already.”

“Well, that’s true,” she said haltingly, then adding with hesitation, “but it’s the oddest thing. I *thought* I had seen Pal at the San Diego convention...I’m not sure. And as to Lauren, well, she just *seemed* familiar...”

“Oh?” said Matt, wondering whether Christine was spinning a tale, wondering whether everyone in the world was a liar. Then, he asked the sixty four thousand dollar question: “So why are we here? Why are *you* here? Why did I chase you halfway around the world?”

Christine began her answer slowly. “Well, it’s a long story. I am still not exactly sure what they want from me, but I have a general idea. You see, my work has inadvertently made me

privity to sensitive information. So that's one reason why I am in danger and why they might prefer me dead. But on the other hand, I know things that are valuable to them, so that makes me valuable too."

"I see," Matt said, in fact seeing nothing. He asked, "What have they been doing to you all this time? Did they hurt you? What were those mysterious telephone messages? I don't understand any of this!"

"Look honey," Christine said, "It would take me all night to tell you what's happened to me since I left home. It's been rough, believe me. Through some miracle you found me. Apparently my messages worked. Let's first try to get out of here and then I'll tell you all about it, okay?"

"Absolutely," Matt concurred. "But Big Man isn't just going to let us go, you know. He offered to hire me. You too?"

"Yes," she replied. "It started in San Diego, remember? Except that back then I thought the job was legit. Now we know that they are killers. I haven't found out what they do. It could be some criminal racket. Or it could be some secret government project."

"And they approached you because of your knowledge of what?"

"I'm not sure. It's probably those tapes I have been doing for the UC Medical schools."

"No wonder," Matt mused...

"No wonder what?"

"No wonder they trashed your apartment ten days ago. I went there looking for you. The police had cordoned it off. Was a mess."

"Great," she said facetiously. "But I'm sure they didn't find anything. I don't keep any of my files on my home computer. All the sensitive information is on my office hard drive and on back-up discs at work."

"So what are we going to say to Big Man tomorrow?" Matt wanted to know.

"Well, we can't work for a gang of murderers," she said without hesitation.

"True, but we can *say* that we will."

"And then what? Just stall them? What's your plan? To join the Eastern European Mafia?"

"Hear me out," Matt began to explain. "First of all, we have to accept his job offer to stay alive. Secondly, you don't know that they are the Eastern European Mafia. Maybe they are the

CIA or something like it. The CIA also abducts and assassinates people...”

“I see,” she said indignantly, “and that makes it right?”

“Well, actually, sometimes, yes.” he replied defensively. “Wouldn’t it be good if they could find Bin Laden and kill him? Anyway, we don’t know whether this facility is evil or not. We know it’s medical, and it’s research. What if someone had asked you to join the Manhattan project? Or the Lawrence Livermore Lab? Wouldn’t you accept?”

“The Lawrence Livermore Lab and Los Alamos don’t kidnap and kill people!”

“I know, honey, I know,” Matt said soothingly. “But let’s keep an open mind for a moment. Let’s hear what Big Man has to offer - how much \$\$\$. I bet you it’s more than an Assistant Professor of Sociology’s salary.”

“Is your name Faust?” she asked rhetorically. “You would sell your soul to murderers?”

“Well spoken,” Matt replied lovingly. Then, he grabbed Christine’s hands and peering deeply into her beautiful big brown eyes, he said in a slow and pregnant voice, “Now I want you to listen very carefully to what I am going to say: We are going to accept Big Man’s job offer. We must. What we do after we get home is something we cannot think about now. It is something we must put out of our mind completely. When we accept the jobs, we will *truly* accept, do you understand? Have you ever taken a lie detector test? This facility has truth serums hundred times more reliable than that. Have you heard of Sodium Pentothal? They can get inside your brain like the Manchurian candidate. You must do as I say and do as I do.”

After Matt finished his statement, the atmosphere between them was solemn and frightening. Christine was silent and disoriented. Matt knew exactly what he wanted. Once again, the pragmatist in him triumphed over the moralist. Anticipating what could become the most important day of their lives, they both went to sleep without uttering one more word.

* * * * *

The next morning, they told Big Man that they accepted his job offer. The remuneration was impressive. Six figures to start. Euros too, not dollars! Big Man said, “You accept without equivocation? This does not surprise me. I know you both to be intelligent and academic. That is why I want to add you to my staff. You will find the work exhilarating.”

“Do you have assignments for us?” Matt inquired.

“I will momentarily,” Big Man replied. “Now, you must each take this pill, and I will see you in one hour.”

* * * * *

An hour later, the meeting resumed. Big Man asked again, “You accept my terms without

reservations? I want each of you to answer me individually. First Matt and then Christine.”

Matt’s response was automatic: “I look forward to working for you. I am capable of it.”

Big Man asked, “How do you feel about it?”

“I have no emotions.” Matt responded, robotlike. Where his emotions were, he did not know. He had either successfully repressed them, or they were permanently deleted.

“Now you, Christine,” Big Man said, turning to her, “let me hear you.”

“I accept,” she said tersely.

“How do you feel?” Big Man asked.

“Confused,” she replied.

“And slightly depressed?” Big Man asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“And disoriented?” Big Man added.

“That also,” she confirmed.

“Very well,” Big Man concluded. “Your answers are correct. You are ready. Matt, you will return to California tomorrow morning. You will receive instructions in a moment.”

“And Christine?” Matt asked.

“She will work in our lab. She will await your return to us - next week.”

“I see,” Matt concluded. Christine was safe. She was a hostage, she was an employee and she was safe.

* * * * *

Before Matt left the following day, he conversed with Lauren. He told her, and to Pal who was listening silently, that he and Christine were now working for Big Man.

“Welcome to the family,” she said in a congratulatory tone, and then she asked, “You are going to California today?”

“Yes. I will be back next week,” he replied mechanically. “Christine stays here.”

“Yes, I know,” Lauren said. “Everything is working according to plan.”

“Yes,” Matt acknowledged, then turned around and walked away without a word.

Next, he walked into the guest room he shared with Christine and took his departure from her. They kissed. He said, “I’ll be back no later than April 28. Do not call me. I know what to do. Everything is working according to plan. I love you.”

“I love you,” she repeated after him.

9. CALIFORNIA

Matt left early the next morning, driving the green Peugeot he had stolen from the dead man in Budapest. Big Man had told him to drop the car off in a parking lot at Budapest’s International *Ferihegy* Airport, where one of his men would retrieve it. The boss was still puzzled by Yves’ failure to respond from Paris to his repeated messages, but he had other men available in Budapest.

At the exit gate the guard, who now considered himself a friend of Matt, wanted to chat about America, asking, “You go to America now? You please bring back American CD for me. I like Country Rock. You like Country Rock? You please bring *The Eagles* CD for me, or *The Band*, yes?”

“No problem, I bring back good American music,” Matt lied, before taking off like a rocket ship. His way back to Budapest took him, first, through the desolate village of Somogy Döröcske again. The lone dirt main street was totally deserted. The place was as ghostly as yesterday. He spent the next four hours crossing the dusty Hungarian plain at maximum speed, avoiding potholes, ox carts, horses, bicyclists and an occasional truck or car as best as he could.

At the airport, he left the car as he had been instructed and hurried to the Malev counter, where he presented his e-ticket. Fortunately, the Europeans had not mimicked the Americans’ post-9/11 overkill of requiring passengers to show up three hours in advance for international flights. The rule in Hungary was a more reasonable two hours, and if you showed up one hour before departure, you still had a good chance of making it.

Matt’s instructions were to fly to San Francisco and to meet with Dr. Ernő Fejtő, head of immunology research at the University of California. He was to introduce himself as Big Man’s new West Coast representative and to pick up a pouch which he was to bring back within a week, in effect functioning as a high-level courier.

Since Malev Airlines didn’t fly directly to San Francisco, Matt had to connect to a United flight at Kennedy. The Malev flight across the Atlantic was a good experience, because they served fine Hungarian goulash accompanied by a premium Tokaj wine. The United flight from New York to SFO was less enjoyable. By then, he had been traveling for fourteen hours on one of those interminable days of thirty five-hours when the sun refuses to go down because you and it are moving in the same direction. He landed in San Francisco at dusk, with a headache, a neck cramp, a stuffy nose, aching legs, an aching butt, bad breath and a sore throat.

He picked up a Chrysler Sebring from Avis and hit the Bayshore Freeway north towards the City by the Bay - his favorite American city. Traffic on highway 101 was smooth and swift.

Whenever Matt had received foreign friends and relatives in the past, he always enjoyed

witnessing their first exposure to America through this port of entry: As the freeway curves around San Bruno Mountain, crosses Daily City and passes by the Giants' PacBell baseball park, the newcomer suddenly faces the awesome hilly San Francisco skyline. In the distance on the right, he sees the gigantic Oakland Bay Bridge and the immense Bay surrounded by Oakland, Berkeley, Hayward and the myriad other communities making up this world city. Towering over San Francisco straight ahead are the Bank of America building, the Transamerica pyramid, Russian Hill, Telegraph Hill and Coit Tower. The Golden Gate Bridge is still hiding in the distance, but it is dusk and the city is a sparkling, tinseling, undulating subtropical mix of skyscrapers, white, pink and yellow single-family residential houses and apartments, palm trees, parks and gardens.

The jewel of the Pacific! Matt realized once again. To be back home in the best part of the world - but without Christine!

Instead of the usual euphoria he felt when returning home, Matt now felt a cold emptiness inside, a void in his heart, and an icy determination to remedy the situation.

It was very wrong for him to be returning to his beloved city without Christine - she was a child of San Francisco, born in the Presidio Military Hospital, raised only blocks from Fisherman's Wharf, doing cartwheels as a little girl in Washington Square. Matt remembered the many times he and Christine had eaten Chinese food in one of Jackson street's innumerable restaurants, where the food is delicious and the service is so rude that you can only laugh about it. Only two months ago, they had eaten at North Beach's Stinking Rose, and on Sunday they had picnicked in Washington Square, having bought their prosciutto *Paninis* at Molinari's on Columbus Avenue, the best Italian delicatessen shop outside of Italy. They had sat on a bench at the foot of the Saint Peter and Paul Church, and then gone inside, jokingly wondering whether they could get married there in the near future.

When will Big Man let her come home? Matt wondered. When will he trust them both enough to let them leave *Somogy Döröcske* together? Probably never, he realized. Yet he had accepted his new job in the desperate hope that this would save him and free Christine.

But now was not the time to think about his dilemma. Plan A was still in effect. There was the UC San Francisco job to do. It was Wednesday night. Too late to start on his assignment, but not too late to rush home to his house. There was a desperate need to pick up all the pieces he had dropped when he went chasing after Christine to the other side of the world. His entire life had been on hold for two weeks. His university job, for one, was in grave jeopardy. Plus there were bills, mail, e-mail, text messages, voice-mail, friends, memos, missed meetings, and the mountain of other things which pile up on your desk when you are gone, and which confront you as a nightmare when you have neglected your responsibilities for a while.

He figured that he had one day available to salvage his old life. He would spend all of Thursday weeding, hacking, slashing away, deleting and addressing all the problems and issues that had accumulated during his absence. He would extinguish as many brush fires as possible - overdue bills, late replies to publishers, student requests, you name it. Most importantly, he would rush into his chairman's office to announce that he would soon, *real soon*, be able to resume teaching and his other university duties.

Of course, his life was in flux. His *two* lives were in flux. He now worked for Big Man. Maybe he was in the midst of a major career shift. Maybe he didn't need to hold on to his university job. Did he?

One thing was clear: By Saturday, he had to leave again. Friday was the only day left to complete Big Man's assignment. On that day, he would resume his second life.

* * * * *

So first he drove to his East Bay house. He took Interstate 80 across the Bay Bridge, passed by the Berkeley campus and reached his home in less than an hour. He spent the evening going through his mail, phone messages, e-mail and all the other ways in which the world harasses and tortures people.

He estimated that eighty five percent of his mail was junk, seventy percent of his e-mail was spam and fifty percent of his voice mail were telemarketers. He made a mental note to make some changes in his life, i.e. to build better fire walls against *both* electronic and paper harassment.

But there were important messages as well. Jud, his chairman, had left several messages both on the phone and on his computer, asking him with increasing vehemence to respond. He would take care of that first thing tomorrow morning.

He collected the pile of newspapers left on his porch and paid his bills online. There was one extremely disturbing item: On the monthly statement for his Visa credit card, he was being charged for an *entire* Peugeot 307 by Avis - Almost forty thousand dollars, which was just about the limit of his credit card.

My God! He realized. The rental is still parked at the Iris Garden Hotel in Rome. They think I lost it or stole it!

He called Avis immediately and told them where the car was. They said that they would go look for it, and *if* they found it, and *if* the car was still intact, they would only charge him two thousand dollars for the entire snafu. That'll work, he said, crossing his fingers.

* * * * *

Jet lagged as he was, Matt slept from about midnight to four a.m. It was still dark when he got up. He took a quick shower and had an early breakfast at Lyon's - the only place open at that time. Then he drove to his office on campus and waded through the tons of mail which had also piled up there, while waiting for his chairman to arrive, which happened shortly before nine.

They met immediately. Jud was friendly, concerned, and above all totally curious about Matt's mysterious disappearance. Matt spun a story which his boss swallowed without hesitation:

"I'm so sorry, Jud, but I suddenly got this e-mail a couple of weeks ago that my mother was deathly ill - possibly a stroke. You know, she lives in Europe all by herself and she is past seventy. I'm the only family she has left, so I had to jump on an airplane and go see her. Then, when I got there, I found that when the ambulance took her to the hospital, she left the gas stove on and burnt down half her apartment. So after she got released from the hospital, I had to find her a temporary place, move her there, deal with her insurance, her apartment and a whole lot of other shit."

“Well, I’m sorry about your troubles,” Jud said sympathetically. “Thank God you’re back...”

“Uh...I’m afraid I have some more bad news - I’ve to go back to Europe tomorrow...”

“You’re not serious!” said Jud, now becoming more uneasy, “I don’t know that I can cover for you much longer. As you know, this department has always been very collegial, we’re one happy family and we’re here to help each other, but you’re pushing it.”

“I know, I know,” Matt said like a supplicant, “I swear to God, I’ll be back within *days*. But it’s absolutely essential that I be there to help my mother settle in, sign papers and so on...”

“I don’t know,” Jud mumbled. “Michelle has done a good job taking over your undergrad class. I’ve also instructed her to meet with your graduate students and monitor their thesis work. But she can’t do it alone. Finals week is coming up and your graduate advisees need you.”

“I’m sure grateful to both of you...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jud said dismissively. “I’ll tell you what: You meet with Michelle today *at length*, and also with some of your graduate advisees. Make damn sure that everything is under control, the undergraduate finals, the thesis work, etc... And by the way, how is that NIMH grant coming? I thought you would’ve heard by now.”

“Oh, right,” Matt replied. “It’s going well. They asked me to make some changes in the research design, but they’re very positive. I’ll make the changes the moment I get back...”

“And when the f..... might that be?” The chairman asked, more jokingly than angrily.

“Like I said, it shouldn’t be more than a few days.” Matt repeated, then adding, “But hey, aren’t you impressed that I flew back just to touch base with you, to show you how deeply conscientious I am about my work here?”

“Yeah, yeah...”

* * * * *

So Matt complied with bureaucracy’s first and cardinal rule: He covered his *derriere*. When he left his chairman’s office, the latter was not too pleased, but neither was Matt’s job in jeopardy. He spent the remainder of the day meeting with his T.A. and his graduate students, calling the National Institute of Mental Health and taking care of some of the other urgent items in his desk.

Then, he got ready for his *other* job - the one that could make him rich and could make him walk away from the university laughing. Did it really matter, whether he helped his graduate students complete their theses on such topics as *The Effect of School-based Mentoring and Perceived Parental Involvement on Academic Cultural Capital and Role-specific Self-esteem of the Student-based Identity*, or *Any Progress on the Cultural Front?: How to Pass between the*

Scylla of Cultural Elitism and the Charybdis of Know-nothing Populism? Would the world truly miss such contributions to the science of Sociology? More importantly, would he, Matt himself, miss it?

His new job, now that was something else! Not only was it ten times more lucrative, it was also exciting, it involved fast-paced adventure, international travel, mystery and cloak-and-dagger intrigue. Its ramifications were not yet clear to Matt, but he intended to find out what he had gotten involved with. Maybe it was one of those criminal syndicates that had been mushrooming in Eastern Europe since the fall of the Soviet Union. Maybe it was a secret government branch tied to a powerful country, maybe even the US, whose National Security Agency was known to often operate in the shadow, at the edge of the law. Maybe it was one of those NGOs - the non-governmental organizations that had been proliferating all over the world since the 1990s. It certainly *seemed* to be a highly advanced scientific research facility - not unlike CERN for example, the *Centre European de la Recherche Nucleaire* in Geneva. The only thing that was clear to Matt at this time was that the organization was powerful, that it had tentacles reaching across the globe, and that his job with them was a far cry from his underpaid armchair academic work.

Matt's rental car didn't have GPS, but he checked out Maps.com and printed his itinerary before leaving his office for San Francisco. He had never been at UCSF - the University of California's San Francisco Medical School. According to a recent ranking by the American Medical Association, this was *the* top medical school in the United States, and therefore probably in the entire world.

The main campus was just South of Golden Gate Park, on Parnassus Avenue, while its affiliate San Francisco General Hospital was on Potrero Avenue. Matt went to the main campus. On his way, he drove through the nearby Haight-Ashbury district, now no longer populated by hippie-junkies, but still somewhat run down. How convenient, he thought, for all the downtrodden people with AIDS and other viruses, to be so near the world's best medical facility.

It was late morning when Matt walked up to the front desk of the administration building of UCSF and asked to see Dr. Ernő Fejtő, head of Immunology research. The receptionist's first reaction was the usual attitude of *who-the-hell-are-you-to-think-you-can-walk-in-and-ask-to-see-such-an-important-man-on-the-spur-of-the-moment*. But after she called Fejtő's department and announced Matt, she turned into a pussy cat. Ten minutes later, Matt was shaking hands with Dr. Fejtő in his office.

"So you are Big Man's new West Coast representative?" the doctor asked, with a Hungarian accent reminiscent of Bela Lugosi.

"That's right," Matt answered. "I'm here to pick up a package."

"Yes, here it is," said the doctor, handing over a pouch. "You are to hand this to Big Man in person no later than Tuesday. The contents are highly classified. Under no circumstances are you to open or tamper with the package. The envelope has been chemically treated, making it impossible to open it undetected."

"That's fine," Matt replied. "It's your business, not mine."

“True,” said the doctor with a smile, then adding, “but remember: you are now working for an organization which is more than the sum total of its component parts.”

“I understand,” Matt said, in fact *not* understanding why the doctor said that.

“The main concept of our organization,” the doctor continued mysteriously, “is that of *synergy*, or *emergence*. Only in its totality does it solve the problem at hand. In time, you will see this. We are working on a new medical paradigm which will transcend scientific *reductionism* and the phenomenal distinctions made by the moral order. You see?”

“I believe I do,” Matt replied politely.

“Good.” the doctor went on. “Our work serves a post-modern world in which the Hippocratic principle merges with the demands of a complex international social structure - a quantum symmetrical departure into the organic and the social.”

“Of course,” Matt acquiesced, wondering whether the man was a genius, an obfuscator, or kookoo.

* * * * *

So strange, Matt thought after he left Dr. Fejto. While in the doctor’s office, he had felt suffocated. The more the doctor talked, the more Matt felt that he was in the presence of insanity.

Once outside, he took a deep breath and proceeded with Plan B. It was early afternoon. His return flight to Europe was scheduled for the following day, Saturday morning. This gave him some time to decompress. He did this by walking down to Golden Gate Park, where he took his first run in two weeks. He ran to the Great Highway and back to his car, parked at great cost in a garage on Fulton street.

Then, it was time to act. He now had to move very carefully. He drove to the airport, returned the rental and walked up to the United desk. Making sure that nobody was paying any suspicious attention to him, he exchanged his ticket to Budapest for a flight to France instead. This cost him a very reasonable \$300. There was a direct flight to Paris leaving the following morning, but Lyon was where he wanted to go. For that, he had to purchase a separate connection with Air France - another \$300. He paid cash for all his transactions.

He went to bed early at the San Francisco Airport Holiday Inn, which he had to reach by shuttle now that he no longer had a car.

10. LYON

The return flight to Europe was slightly less annoying than the outgoing flight, because it was direct all the way to Paris. However, it was no bed of roses. Once again Matt had to take Ambien - the only way he could get some sleep on an airplane. He worried about the addictive

power of Ambien.

Big Man had sprung for business class, which was better than economy but not as nice as first class. The fellow sitting next to Matt was an asshole who kept shoving Matt's elbow from their joint armrest and kept tapping his feet to the rhythm of the music to which he was listening.

Since 9/11, the airlines no longer permitted passengers to stand and congregate near the bathrooms, which Matt had always liked to do so as to stretch his legs and not feel utterly paralyzed on long, intercontinental flights. Now everyone had to stay strapped in his seat like a Russian babushka baby.

As always, the eastward flight across the Atlantic took the entire (shortened) night, arriving at Charles de Gaulle on Sunday morning. Bleary-eyed, Matt took advantage of a three-hour overlay to shave and shower. The connection to Lyon was simple, but Matt kept looking over his shoulder wherever he went throughout the airport. It was imperative that he cover his tracks. By three in the afternoon he was in the city known as the greatest gastronomical town on earth.

He could do nothing until offices opened the next day, Monday morning, so he decided to test the accuracy of that claim. Once again he had to rent a car and check into a hotel. He chose a *Sofitel* near the airport - one of those boxlike places found in every French city and alongside all the *autoroutes*. He paid cash for everything. No one was to know where he was, least of all Big Man and his organization.

He asked the clerk at the front desk of the *Sofitel* where he might find a good and reasonable place to eat.

"*Eh bien Monsieur,*" answered the clerk, exuding healthy local chauvinism, "*Il n'y a pas de mauvais restaurants a Lyon.*" (Well Sir, there are no bad restaurants in Lyon).

"*Oui, oui,*" said Matt laughing, "*Je sais bien, mais malgre tout, il y en a qui sont meilleurs que les autres, non? Et puis, je ne veux quand-meme pas aller chez Maxime, je ne veux pas faire faillite.*" (Yes, yes, I know, but aren't some better than others? Also, I can't go to Maxim's, I don't want to go bankrupt).

The two of them bantered for a few more minutes. Because of his flawless accent, Frenchmen usually took Matt for a native, and whenever he announced that he was an American, they were flabbergasted. Still, they usually remained enormously friendly. Matt had long been extremely angry at the bum rap France got in the US, only because they did not support President Bush's foreign policy. He loved this country and its people - fastidious, intelligent, sometimes stickery, but generally friendly and hospitable. The epitome of a civilized people. And it was simply not true that the French hated Americans. Of all foreigners, they were among the least anti-American. Most Frenchmen still admired America. Whenever Matt told Frenchmen that he lived in California, far from turning their back on him, they were full of avid inquiry and wanted to come and visit him there.

Matt was always happy to be back in the country in which he had spent most of his childhood, and he knew that the alleged hostility between the French and the Americans was a pseudo-issue, because the two countries had always stood side by side, and would always do so in the future.

The hotel clerk once again confirmed all of this, as he treated Matt almost like a personal friend only minutes after they met. He recommended a place called *Chez Gaston* in *Vieux Lyon* - the city's old medieval core.

* * * * *

Matt left the hotel and hopped into his rental car, making sure nobody was paying undue attention to him. This time he had a Renault Laguna - the best car he had rented yet. It was a Diesel car, had five-speed manual transmission and GPS covering all of France. It was brand new, too. Matt wondered how much it would go for - certainly no less than 40,000 euros, i.e. well over \$50,000 at the increasingly unfavorable exchange rate. Better not charge this one to my credit car, he thought.

Lyon's Saint-Éxupéry International airport is about twenty five miles south of the city. Matt drove due north to the center, following the Rhone. The river was green, strong and turbulent, carrying the abundant spring snow melt from the Alps, only an hour away. To his right Matt could see the jagged snow caps culminating in France's highest peak, the nearly sixteen thousand feet high Mont Blanc that straddles France, Italy and Switzerland.

After reaching the city center, he took the *Pont La Fayette* across the Rhone, parked his car by the river and walked across a second bridge - this one over the Saone, Lyon's other major river. He entered the city's picturesque medieval quarter and had no difficulty finding *Chez Gaston*.

He sat down for a meal which he intended to be memorable and exceptional - exceptional in the sense of a death row inmate's last meal, or Jesus' last supper. Tomorrow, Matt would do something from which there was no turning back. With an uncertain future, this was therefore an excellent time to go all out and order an extravagant meal.

For an entree Matt began with a *Paté de Lapin* (rabbit paté). Paté had always been one of his great weaknesses - something in which he indulged as rarely as possible since it was as bad for his cholesterol as it was delicious to his palate.

Matt was served by Gaston himself. The man was a spitting image of W.C. Fields. His nose was huge, red and knotty, no doubt from a lifetime of imbibing the great local wines. Trusting him to be a connoisseur, Matt ordered the regional wine recommended by Gaston. It was a full bodied red Cotes du Rhone from a winery in Hermitage.

Before ordering the main course, they bantered for a moment about terminology. Gaston asked Matt why Americans referred to the main course as the "entree." Don't they know that the word means 'entry,' and therefore signifies hors d'oeuvre or appetizer?

True, Matt acknowledged, then adding, "but we Americans do not possess the logical Cartesian mind of the French. You must forgive us this flaw."

After a good laugh, Matt proceeded to order the 'entree'... oops, the *piece de resistance*, the main course, which was a *Filet Mignon aux Oignons Gratin Dauphinois* (Pork Filet Mignon with onions with baked potatoes), and for desert he had *poire Belle Helene*.

The meal was so exquisite that he almost forgot his troubles for a moment. Lyon had lived up to its reputation. While German food remained Matt's favorite ethnicity, the quality of the food and of the sauces he tasted on this occasion was unparalleled. The cost was immaterial, since Big Man was paying.

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The following day, Monday morning, Matt made his move. Once again he followed the Rhone north from his airport hotel to the city center. This time, he traversed most of Lyon to reach the

Villeurbanne district. His GPS guided him to his destination, which was *200 Quai Charles de Gaulle*.

This was the address of a massive, modern, white, ten-story building located in a park on the left bank of the Rhone. Matt parked his car by the river front and approached the main entrance of the building. It was heavily guarded and the building's name was posted in massive letters above the entry: INTERPOL.

Matt looked over his shoulder one more time to make sure he had not been followed, and he entered. He had crossed the Rubicon. He had double-crossed his new employer. If Big Man found out, he and Christine were history.

Matt's decision to go to Interpol had been immediate, the moment Big Man had offered him a job. However, it had been a subconscious decision - relegated to Plan B. In order to convince Big Man that he was not faking his job acceptance, he also had to convince himself. Had he not, the truth pill Big Man gave him would have betrayed him.

So for a few days, Matt's personality was split. He knew that the clinical term for this condition is *Dissociative Identity Disorder*. This was nothing like Schizophrenia. Matt was merely suffering from a temporary and situational case of split or dual personalities - both under his control. Part of him truly believed that he was now in the employ of a huge and mysterious organization, a sort of CIA undercover courier. Meanwhile, his other persona - the one that remained on auto-pilot - had pursued all the steps necessary for what he was doing at this moment: While in California three days ago, he had completed a quick Internet search and learned the location of Interpol's international headquarters in Lyon. He had identified the heads of each of the International Police's five priority crime areas and decided to contact the *Trafficking in Human Beings* section.

In order for Matt's plan to succeed, he had needed to convince Christine to also accept Big Man's job offer - Plan A. However, her response to Big Man had been more confused than Matt's. So Matt was not entirely sure as to what was going on inside Christine's head. The potential damage to her mind was now added to his list of worries.

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Matt had to act quickly. He went through the obligatory metal detectors, was frisked, and walked by several French soldiers toting machine guns, on his way to the reception desk in the cavernous entry hall. There, he demanded an immediate meeting with the *Human Trafficking* section, stressing that he wished to report a major crime and that the matter was of the greatest urgency. Because he was an American who also spoke fluent French, the receptionist did not *totally* take him for a kook - although she looked upon him with a great deal of suspicion.

"*Il s'agit de citoyens Americains?*" she asked (It concerns American citizens?)

"*Oui, oui,*" Matt answered impatiently, "*mais des tas d'autres aussi*" (but also lots of others).

“In that case,” she suggested, “it is preferable that you see our FBI-liaison. What is your name, Sir?”

Matt showed his passport to the receptionist and she called his name upstairs. Whatever the response was over the phone, the change in the receptionist’s behavior was miraculous and instantaneous. Matt was immediately accompanied by a clerk to the elevator and to the Interpol-FBI liaison office. When he entered, he experienced one more of the many shocks that had hit him with such sickening frequency over the past couple of weeks:

It was Lauren who came out from behind a large desk and walked to him with a broad smile and her hand stretched out for a warm and affectionate shake, saying, “Hello Matt, I am *soooo* happy to see you. Of course, I was expecting you, but I didn’t know when that might be.”

Matt was stunned and angry: “What the hell?...”

“Calm down,” said Lauren soothingly. “I’m going to explain things to you as best as I can.”

But Matt’s anger went unabated. He said, “Who *are* you finally? I bump into you wherever I go. For two weeks you have been deceiving me, pointing guns at me, kidnaping Christine, risking innocent lives...What the fuck is going on?”

“I’m sorry for all the problems we have caused you,” she replied, “But the greater good required it.”

“What greater good?” Matt asked rudely. “I came to Interpol to turn in that...that Big Man and his criminal outfit there in Eastern Hungary and to ask for help to free Christine. I thought you were in cahoots with them. Who are you?”

“I’m an agent with the FBI’s international division - liaison with Interpol,” she divulged with a smile, then continued to explain: “I had to go undercover to penetrate the *Somogy Döröcske* facility. I had to pretend to be a physician.” and then she added: “Let me show you something,” and opening a folder of photos on her desk she explained: “I just took these in *Somogy Döröcske*.”

The photos showed the various aspects of the medical facility run by Big Man. Some were pictures of labs and operating rooms like the ones Matt had broken into. Other ones were more shocking. They displayed very sick looking people lying in hospital beds, emaciated, covered with blotches and sores. Some photos showed gurneys with dead bodies on them.

Matt couldn’t hold himself anymore. “Okay, so will someone finally tell me what kind of a place this *Somogy Döröcske* facility is? Is it a concentration camp? A medical research facility? Is it a government agency, or a private criminal outfit? Who built it? Who runs it? Who owns it?”

“I’ll explain that later,” Lauren said.

“So now you guys are ready to arrest Big Man and bust up his operation - and rescue Christine in the process, I hope?”

“It’s not that simple,” she said hesitantly. “The *Somogy Döröcske* facility is an internationally funded NGO sanctioned by the U.N’s World Health Organization. It enjoys diplomatic immunity. Big Man got his Ph.D. in epidemiology from Harvard’s School of Public Health. He is a genius and his intimate friends include Vladimir Putin, Presidents Bush and Clinton and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. *Somogy Döröcske* is backed up by some very, very powerful supporters. It’s a little bit like the Oil for Food Program, which was a UN racket that benefitted many of the world’s major governments and corporations. So we can’t just shut it down. Plus, some people say that it’s literally mankind’s last hope.”

“Why?” asked Matt. “What is it that those guys do, anyway?”

“Well,” she continued, professorially, “As you know, there are more and more new viral outbreaks, like SARS, Avian flu, AIDS of course, etc. and medicine has more and more difficulty staying ahead of mutations. Even old viruses which we thought we had defeated for good are coming back. We may yet lose the war against viruses. And it is this war that they’re fighting at *Somogy Döröcske*.”

“You mean they’re doing viral research?” Matt asked, trying to cut through the crap, and then adding: “But why all the secrecy, and why are people getting killed and kidnaped?”

“Well,” she explained, “Sometimes, medical research and ethics are incompatible. In the West, we protect human subjects above all else. Some scientists feel that this is paralyzing research. They say that it’s time to return to some degree of expediency and to cut corners, because mankind’s survival is at stake.”

“What corners?” Matt asked suspiciously, beginning to get the drift of Lauren’s explanation, and putting his next question succinctly: “You mean, Big Man is sort of a Dr. Mengele? He injects subjects with deadly mutant viruses to see what happens?”

“No,” Lauren replied with a smile.

“So maybe not Auschwitz,” Matt said sardonically, “but only a Tuskegee Institute?”

“Maybe.” she said. “You’re referring to the experiment in which researchers let patients die from syphilis, withholding penicillin, just so as to better study the progression of the disease.”

“So where do all those dozens of bodies come from?” Matt asked, agitated, “The ones we saw on gurneys and in hospital beds...”

“Well,” Lauren explained. “Do you remember the hapless little town of *Somogy Döröcske* through which you have to drive when you go to the facility? Well, three years ago, it was hit by an unknown new strain of ebola. It attacked 90% of the villagers. Luckily, the place was very isolated in the backwaters of one of Hungary’s most primitive and underpopulated regions. The strangest thing about this strain is that it attacks those with the *strongest* immune system, in other words able-bodied adults. It tends to leave children and the elderly alone. It is also slow-acting. It takes on average four months for it to kill the host. The

experts believe that its goal is not to kill, but to establish a symbiotic relationship with the host. However, the virus obviously fucked up, because so far every one of the hosts has died. The people you saw in the hospital were collected by the Institute in the adjacent village of *Somogy Döröcske* while still alive. The institute's goal is to discover paths to virus-human symbiosis."

Then, switching topics, she said with emphasis: "It's imperative that you go back to *Somogy Döröcske* tomorrow and hand in the pouch to Big Man. You have no choice, do you understand?"

"Why is it so *imperative*?" Matt asked with some hostility. "Would Christine be harmed if I didn't return?"

"Frankly, I don't really know what Big Man would do if you didn't complete your assignment for him," she answered, "But he thinks that both you and I are working for him, and he must continue to believe this if we are to avoid a major international crisis."

"I'll do it, of course," Matt said gruffly, "but how the hell did Christine and I get involved in this mess?"

"Her misfortune," Lauren explained patiently, "was that she had done work for the University of California's various medical branches. She worked on some very sensitive files, and she is still in possession of them. The files contain information which should under no circumstances be made public. As I told you, the research is not exactly by the book. It doesn't quite live up to AMA, FDA and CDC standards. You just met Dr. Fejtö, the head of Immunology at UC San Francisco, right? Well, there are dozens of others like him, at Johns Hopkins, the Mayo Clinic, the Institute Pasteur, in Basel, you name it. Some are physicians, some are hospital administrators, some are politicians, some are the CEOs of major pharmaceutical companies already licking their chops at the prospect of future profits. They all work with the *Somogy Döröcske* Institute. It would be a catastrophe if those names became public."

"I see," Matt said. "So Christine's job put her in danger without her realizing it."

"I suppose so," she agreed, whereupon she asked in a friendly tone of voice, "Have I answered all your questions to your satisfaction?"

"No, not quite," Matt replied. "For one thing, how the hell did I manage to bump into you at the *Iris Garden* Hotel in Rome? No one on earth knew that I was going there?"

"Aha!" Lauren said, laughing. "That was a beaut, wasn't it? Here is what happened: First, the FBI sent me to the San Diego AAMT convention, where Big Man also had his people. My assignment was to tail his men, to monitor everything they did both in the US and overseas and to follow them to their home base, to Big Man himself. Then I noticed that Christine went to Paris with them. We first thought that she was one of them. One time she stared at me for a few seconds, which nearly blew my cover.

The FBI did a deep background check on Christine and found out everything about her, even the fact that her grandfather Christophoro came to America around 1900 from Rome. We

also found out that she was dating you,” to which she added, mischievously, “The FBI knows everything. We know at what age you had your first kiss and who Christine’s kindergarten teacher was. Then I lost their trail. So I decided to follow you instead, hoping that you would lead me back to Christine and to her abductors. We tapped your cell phone. Then, bingo, when she called you and left a cryptic message about “Christophoro,” I guessed - as you did - that she was signaling you to come to Italy, to something called Christophoro. So I flew to Rome and checked into the Iris Garden Hotel, the only hotel in Rome near a street by the name of Christophoro, hoping, just like you, to find Christine there. But she wasn’t there.

However, I lucked out because *you* showed up. From then on, I only had to wait for Christine to contact you again. You see, you were of no interest to me or to the FBI - only Christine was.” (The latter was said with a sardonic smile).

Thanks a lot, Matt thought, as Lauren continued: “And sure as hell, Christine contacted you again just as you were taking a shower in my apartment. I wonder what would have happened if she hadn’t called at that moment,” she said with a sly smile, after which she continued: “That mysterious call about ‘Angels.’ put us back on her track!”

“Wow!” Matt conceded, full of admiration as well as bitterness. “You are a formidable woman - a total manipulator, and also a killer!”

“Now Matt!” she objected, looking sad. “Don’t you remember what happened in Budapest? That s.o.b was about to shoot me! And had he succeeded, your lives - yours, Pal’s and Christine’s wouldn’t have been worth much either! I had no choice! Cops kill people in the line of duty all the time - it’s one of the sad facts of life.”

Alright,” he admitted grudgingly, “But then you threatened to shoot me, and you kidnaped Christine. What the fuck was that all about? Had you shot me, that would have been murder one!”

“I can assure you that I wouldn’t have shot you,” she said vehemently. “Had you resisted, Pal and I would have knocked you out and left you there.”

“Nice,” Matt growled. “And kidnaping Christine? You did that out of kindness too, I suppose?”

“I had no choice,” she said coldly. “The mission required it. Without her, I couldn’t have gotten inside *Somogy Döröcske*. I had to be the one who brought Christine to Big Man. Now he believes that I work for him and that Pal is my assistant. I also had to bring along one of the thugs from Budapest, as a guide and for the passwords. He was quite cooperative.”

“I bet,” Matt said indignantly, adding, “And you used Christine as bait!”

“She’ll be okay,” Lauren said in a calming voice. “As long as Big Man thinks that you are both working for him.”

11. BACK IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

The next day Matt flew back to Budapest and from there he took the dreary road trip back

to *Somogy Döröcske*. There, he handed over the pouch to Big Man.

Matt had now passed the baptism of loyalty. By accomplishing his first mission without a hitch and returning to the lion's den, he earned himself Big Man's conditional trust. That was the big pay-off. Plus there was a pleasant bonus - Matt's first payment in the amount of 30,000 euros.

Between the generous payment and Big Man's affable demeanor, Matt thought that his and Christine's ordeal was now at an end. He said, "Okay, I have been a good boy. Now take me to Christine..."

However, his face dropped when Big Man replied that "unfortunately Christine isn't here at the moment."

Devastated, Matt asked, "Where the hell is she? Is she alright? You promised that as your employees we would no longer be your prisoners!"

"Prisoners?" Big Man asked with a hurt look on his face. "Hardly an applicable word. Christine is fine, I assure you. She is outside the country on assignment, just as you were. She will return in a few days."

"Where is she?"

"That is classified."

"Classified schmassified," Matt growled in anger. "You are still holding her hostage. Nothing has changed!"

"You are getting overheated," Big Man cautioned. "'Prisoner,' 'hostage,' such inflammatory language. You both work for me now, but you do not yet have tenure, as you do in California. First you must complete a second assignment. When you return in four days, Christine will be here waiting for you. Here is a pouch which you must take to Dr. Helmut Kohlsinger at the Novartis Pharmaceutical Company in Basel," and noticing Matt's barely controlled rage, he added: "And here is a second payment for your troubles - paid in advance."

Matt opened the envelope and noticed that his second payment was also for 30,000 euros. This did not appease him. Obviously Big Man still had him on a leash, holding Christine hostage. That is why the man felt that it was safe to pay Matt in advance - to mollify him - and that Matt would once again be as obedient as a well-trained dog.

So Matt left *Somogy Döröcske* with a great deal of cash. In addition to the 60,000 euros he had earned, Big Man handed him another 10,000 euros for expenses associated with his mission to Switzerland. He was painfully aware of the prevalence of theft and robbery in Europe, most of it by petty criminals and derelicts. The situation called for greater vigilance than ever. Before even leaving the *Somogy Döröcske* Institute's grounds, he stuffed most of the money and Big Man's pouch into a bag kept flush against his chest, keeping a thousand euros in his wallet. Also, Big Man had returned the Beretta to him. The little .32 caliber pistol and the seven rounds in its magazine gave him at least a slight sense of psychological security. He did

not yet have any idea of how enormously attractive a target he truly was.

12. SWITZERLAND

Matt left the *Somogy Döröcske* facility on Wednesday morning. He was waved through the exit gate by the guard who considered himself his friend, even though Matt had failed to bring him back country rock CDs from America. He promised that he would do it next time.

Once again he raced across the desolate and dusty Hungarian plain towards Budapest's Ferihegy International Airport. He put the rental car into high gear, even though the road was bumpy, full of potholes and only partially paved. Such is the fate of all rental cars, he mused.

He had a drive of several hours during which to mull things over and decide what to do. He felt terrible. For three weeks he had been strong, cunning and brave, yet he was no closer to rescuing Christine than at the beginning of the crisis. His body was beginning to give. He had not slept normally in weeks, he had raced across continents, dodged bullets, popped sleeping pills and stimulants. The psychological anxiety alone was severe enough to endanger his mental health. He wondered, despairingly, whether he would ever be reunited with Christine, whether the nightmare would ever end.

There was no question as to what he had to do. Lauren, at the Lyon Interpol, was his only lifeline. He had to return to her immediately and demand her help. With the vast resources of the International Police and the FBI, she might be able to track down Christine. He desperately hoped that this would be the case, that he could hand Big Man's pouch over to the authorities and not have to deliver it to the doctor in Basel, and that he would never have to return to *Somogy Döröcske*. However, if he and Lauren were unable to track down Christine within the next three days, Matt would have no choice but to complete his second mission for Big Man and return to *Somogy Döröcske* once again, hoping to find Christine there.

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On the way to Budapest's Ferihegy International Airport, Matt made a mistake: As one approaches the capital city from the Southeast, one comes upon one of Hungary's four super highways - the M5. When Matt finally hit the M5, he really revved up his engine, reaching 180 kilometers an hour. Despite his great speed, he suddenly noticed a dark blue sedan behind him, flashing its lights to indicate that it wished to pass him.

Matt moved over to the right hand lane to let someone even crazier than him pass. However, the blue sedan pulled up beside him and, as both cars careened forward at 180 klicks, the guy in the rider's seat gave Matt some manual signals.

Thinking that he was being given the finger, Matt reciprocated. At that point, the driver of the other car rolled down his window and put a blue flashing light on the roof of his car.

"Fuck!" Matt realized. "An unmarked cop car! They still have those here in Europe. Shit!"

So Matt pulled over and stopped, as did the police car, and the harassment began.

"*Nem értek magyarul,*" Matt said (I don't understand Hungarian).

“Okay,” one of the cops said, “You English speak?”

“Yes, Thank you. What’s the problem?” Matt asked, knowing fully well what the problem was.

“You too fast. Must pay punishment.”

Aha, Matt realized. This is like Mexico. When cops stop you, they don’t give you a ticket and a court date, but instead extort money out of you on the spot. He replied: “Why don’t you give me a ticket, and when I get the fine in the mail I’ll send you the amount due.” (Hoping that by then he would be back in California and that the Hungarians wouldn’t be able to collect).

“No, no,” replied the policeman sternly. “You pay now, or you must come to police bureau.” As he spoke, he produced a pair of handcuffs and moved threateningly towards Matt.

This changed the situation dramatically. Of course Matt was flush with cash. He also had an illegal weapon in his glove compartment. The last thing he needed was police trouble, a search of his car and of his body, with all the cash. They surely would detain him. Then what? He could call Big Man of course, who no doubt had the clout to bail him out. But what a mess that would be!

“Okay,” he said. “*Hány pénz?*” (How much money?), using his meager Hungarian in the hope that this might appease the officers. As he did, he flashed a 100 euro bill.

“That not enough,” said the policeman.

Matt pulled a second 100 euro bill from his wallet. But the two cops were still not satisfied. One of them asked, “How much money you have?”

Matt showed them his wallet, with the thousand euros in it, pleading, “Don’t take everything! This is all I have. I got to eat and travel back home, please...”

“Okay,” one of them said with a sardonic smile. “You keep 100 euros. That enough for much goulash.”

“You are taking 900 euros from me for speeding?!” Matt asked, outraged and astounded. “That’s highway robbery - literally!” But in the end, he had no choice. The alternative was being hauled in and detained. That would have been catastrophic. He had Christine to think about, Big Man, Lauren, the whole crisis he was desperately trying to solve....He handed over the nine 100 euro bills in disgust, mumbling to the smiling cops, “What you’re doing isn’t nice, you know. I thought Hungarians were nice people...”

“You rich American. No problem,” they said, as they took off laughing.

Yeah, if you only knew how much more there is where this came from, Matt thought, relieved and thinking of the 69,000 euros left in his chest pouch.

* * * * *

After this unpleasant mishap, Matt drove slowly to Ferihegy Airport, returned the rental car and walked to the Malev counter to buy a ticket to Lyon, France. To his disappointment, there was no way for him to fly there until the following morning. Therefore, he took a shuttle to the Marriott Hotel in central Budapest. There he took a room for the night, a magnificent tenth-floor room overlooking the Danube. At dusk he gazed over the majestic old city. Less than a kilometer to his right he could see the beautiful chain bridge, and a little further up the river he saw the dome of the immense parliament building sticking up above the 19th century Parisian-style apartment and office buildings surrounding it. To his left was the more modern looking Elizabeth bridge. Kitty corner across the huge river on the Buda side, he saw Castle Hill in the distance, with the golden dome of Saint Matthew Cathedral glowing in the April sunset. Once again, such beauty brought tears to his eyes. Once again he resolved that when he and Christine were out of the woods, they would come back here for an idyllic and romantic holiday.

Matt's night was restless, despite taking another Ambien - to which he was surely addicted by now. He amplified the pill's effect by raiding the mini bar in the room's refrigerator. He knew that these things were rip-offs. One little bottle of Remy-Martin, barely enough for one drink, would probably cost him fifty dollars. What the hell, it was Big Man's money.

Considering the weeks of stress, adventure, risk, anxiety, pill popping mixed with booze, he was holding up pretty well. He knew that the crash would come later, if and when the crisis came to an end. Then, his excruciating migraine headaches would start again, as they had often done in the past, for example after his disastrous divorce.

He spent much of the night pacing the hotel room and watching boring European television.

He also kept staring at Big Man's pouch which he had placed on his night table, the one he was supposed to deliver to the people at Novartis in Basel. It was a large and solid envelope, weighing about as much as a paperback book. What the hell was in it, he wondered? After his second cognac from the refrigerator, he grabbed the pouch and began feeling of it, trying to guess what was inside.

What would happen if I opened it, he wondered? I'm sure it's been treated, and they'd find out. But hey, I plan to hand it over to Lauren and to the authorities anyway, so what difference does it make if I open it?

His curiosity got the best of him. He decided to open the envelope carefully over steam, then seal it again. That would look better, at least, even though it would be clear that it had been tampered with.

After carefully opening the envelope, he extracted its contents. To his astonishment, the envelope contained money - a very large sum of money, all of it in cash, all of it in 1000 euro bills.

Holy shit! he exclaimed to himself. There are thousands - no, *hundreds* of thousands of euros here!

He quickly ran to the door to make sure it was locked, and began to count the bills. The total turned out to be exactly six hundred.

Matt did a quick calculation in his mind: He concluded that the 669,000 euros in his possession were the equivalent of nearly a million dollars, depending on the exchange rate! He realized now that he was a far juicier target for bad guys than he had previously thought, not to

mention what could have happened if the cops had found out what he was carrying.

Next, he divided the 600 one-thousand euro bills in two equal piles. One of these, 300,000 euros, he re-inserted into Big Man's pouch, which he sealed carefully. The other half of the money, he put in with the 69,000 euros he was carrying in his chest bag, except for a thousand euros which he put in his wallet.

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The next morning he flew to Lyon. There was no direct flight and he had to connect in Geneva. Therefore, he got to Lyon after the Interpol offices closed and he had to wait one more day before connecting with Lauren. He had her cell phone, but didn't dare call her. No doubt Big Man had him (and her) bugged.

When he finally entered her office on Thursday, he told her immediately that Christine had disappeared once again, and he also showed her Big Man's pouch, saying, "My assignment is to deliver this to a Dr. Kohlsinger in Basel."

"What is it?" Lauren asked.

"I don't know," Matt lied. "But it's yours if you can help me find Christine before I am expected back in *Somogy Döröcske*, i.e. within three days."

She took the pouch and said, "Well, maybe we can find her again, like we did before. What did Big Man say was happening with her?"

"Well that's just it. The s.o.b. told me that she was on assignment in another country, but of course he wouldn't tell me where."

Meanwhile Lauren was tearing open the pouch, to which Matt objected, saying, "Wait! What if I have to deliver the pouch to Dr. Kohlsinger?"

"Don't worry," she replied, we'll make an exact replica of the envelope, if we have to..." and then, seeing the contents of the pouch, she exclaimed, "Wow, did you know you were carrying nearly half a million dollars in cash?"

"No shit?" Matt said, acting surprised.

Lauren looked him straight in the eyes for several seconds, silently. But he remained poker faced, and she went on with the business at hand, saying, "alright, let's see if we can deduce again where your girlfriend might be. I'll be Sherlock Holmes and you're Watson, okay? .Maybe you won't have to deliver this money and go back to Big Man. First of all, let me ask you this: Did Big Man ever indicate to you or to Christine in what capacity he planned to employ her? What were the skills for which he wanted her in the first place?"

“Well,” Matt replied, pausing and thinking at first, “much of her work over the past year has been in hospital administration, especially in university medical schools...”

“But why did they lure her to Paris?” she asked.

“Because she is fluent in French and in French medical terminology.”

“Well, that narrows things down a bit,” Lauren suggested optimistically. “He may have sent her on an assignment to a French university or medical school.”

“Great,” Matt replied with sarcasm. “And even if your assumption is correct - which is highly speculative - how many such institutions are there, in France, and in other Francophone parts of the world? Hundreds?”

“Hold on,” she said. “I believe that we can exclude France altogether. We already know from Interpol’s extensive file on Big Man that he has an associate, a second in command, for all his business dealings with France and French medical institutions. The associate’s name is Yves Lafitte. The French part of the organization has been up and running for three years. No, Big Man is more likely to use Christine as he expands into additional Francophone areas - for example Quebec, Southern Belgium, part of Switzerland...”

“That still leaves a lot of possibilities,” Matt replied, discouraged. “Even if you are right, how do we know where Christine is? She could be in Montreal, or in Bruxelles, or in Geneva or Lausanne, or anywhere else, really...”

“I doubt that Big Man would send her across the Atlantic right away. Also, our files indicate that he is not yet active in Canada. No, I think that we can narrow down the list to a small number of university medical schools where Big Man might want to plant Christine: The two major institutions in Wallonia - that’s French Belgium, in case you didn’t know - are the *Universite Catholique de Louvain*, and the *Universite de Liege*. But I don’t think that a Catholic University would want to do business with Big Man, so we can cross off Louvain. And as far as the French Switzerland is concerned, the two prominent ones are the *Universite de Geneve* and the *Universite de Lausanne*. The latter is also called CHUV - which stands for *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois*. So...”

Before Lauren had a chance to continue, Matt interrupted her, exclaiming, “Wait! That acronym - CHUV. It rings a bell... I remember: It was the return address on one of the envelopes I found in the car when I chased you to *Somogy Döröcske!*”

“Bravo!” Lauren replied. “That may be it. Big Man is now apparently in business with CHUV in Lausanne. I bet you that’s where he sent Christine.”

“You don’t know that,” Matt said, still skeptical. “Your conclusion is a huge stretch, and it’s entirely speculative.”

“I’m just trying to help you find your girlfriend,” she countered. “You have a better idea?” I suggest that we go to Lausanne immediately and find out whether Christine is there or

not. And by the way, I'm sure that she is still being "escorted" by one of Big Man's armed goons. So we'll have to be prudent."

As she spoke, she grabbed her .40 Smith and Wesson from her drawer and put it into her purse. Matt felt good about that, because he was no longer armed himself. Back in Budapest, he had tossed his Beretta into the Danube, since there was no way for him to take it with him on the plane.

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They drove to Lausanne the next morning. They covered the 350 kilometers in Lauren's Alpha Romeo in four hours, including a short stop for lunch and a slightly annoying border crossing.

They were harassed for a moment by the Swiss border guards, who confirmed Matt's perception of that privileged and slightly haughty country.

Switzerland has been the richest and most peaceful country in the world for the past two centuries, the beauty of its natural landscape and of its cities is unparalleled, and its economy, policies, and social safety nets provide its people with the highest quality of life on the planet. They can be forgiven for believing that they are the closest thing to Shangri La. However, it was Matt's experience that the country's blessings had made it slightly arrogant and xenophobic. While Switzerland finally deigned to join the United Nations in the beginning of the 21st century, it still felt too good to join the European Union - probably not wishing to be contaminated by the countries surrounding it. Thus, the Swiss border remained one of the very few crossings in Europe where guards and customs officers could still give you a hard time

Lauren and Matt approached the border at Saint Julien, stopped the car and stuck their passports out the window to a border guard, engine still running, thinking that the routine ritual would take no more than a couple of minutes.

However, the guard must have had a burr up his anus, because he ordered Lauren and Matt to park the car, turn off the engine and get out, and then demanded to know the purpose of their visit.

Matt replied that they were on a short holiday, planning to ski and eat some great fondue and raclette.

The guard examined his passport with suspicion and said, "*Vous etes Americain, mais vous n'etes pas né aux Etats Unis. Alors qu'est-ce-que c'est comme drole de nom ca? Vous etes Juif?*" (You are an American, but you weren't born in the United States. So what kind of weird name is this? Are you a Jew?)

Matt was stunned, and getting upset. He asked angrily, "What kind of question is that?"

Lauren jumped into the fray to diffuse the situation before it could deteriorate, saying, "Sir, we are pressed for time. Is there anything else you require before we continue our journey?"

As she said this, she flashed her Interpol badge.

This made a big difference. Nevertheless, the guard wasn't going to back down entirely without a small show of force. So, just out of spite, he ransacked through Lauren's small

suitcase. But the search was perfunctory. The guard wasn't really looking for anything, he just wanted to show who was boss, while at the same time wanting to get rid of a potentially troublesome Interpol agent.

"Thank God the asshole didn't do his job," Lauren exclaimed after they drove off. "It would have been a real hassle if he'd found the Smith and Wesson in my purse, even though it's entirely legal..."

"That's for sure," said Matt, thinking to himself 'if you only knew what I am carrying under my sweater, now *that* would have gotten us in some *real* trouble!'

* * * * *

The border incident was soon forgotten. Twenty minutes later, they were entering the suburbs of the great city of Geneva and driving towards the huge and magnificent lake of that name. Once again, tourism was the last thing on Matt's mind, even as he was crossing some of the world's choice tourist spots. They bypassed downtown Geneva, turning left on autoroute A1 and crossing the Rhone. Here, the river was even more torrential than in Lyon, its green turbulent water streaming fresh out of Lake Geneva and the glaciers of the Jungfrau. The sky was a deep, cloudless blue. As they circled around the western tip of the lake, they faced the immense white dome of the Mont Blanc, its 16,000 foot wedding cake-like top rising on the far side of the lake. Even though Europe's tallest mountain was a hundred kilometers away, it dominated the landscape like no other feature.

Soon they were racing along the lakeshore towards Lausanne, less than a hundred kilometers to the Northeast. The lake's North shore consists of steep vignard-covered slopes. Matt had sampled the region's wines in the past - some of the world's best but most expensive whites.

They reached Lausanne around noon - another delightful, impeccably clean, medieval, lakefront jewel of a city. International agencies know how to pick their sites, Matt mused. Geneva is home to the original League of Nations and a host of international bodies ever since, and Lausanne is the headquarters of the International Olympic Committee. No wonder. These are rich, crime-free, immaculate towns where Ferraris, Bentleys and privilege abound.

Aided by the GPS in Lauren's Alpha Romeo, they had no difficulty finding CHUV - the *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois*, the premier university hospital and research center for Lausanne and for the entire Canton, located a couple of kilometers uphill from the lakefront and the central railroad station, where they had entered the city.

Now came the hard part. Even if Lauren's deductions had miraculously been correct and Christine had indeed been sent to this institution, finding her now was the equivalent of the proverbial needle in a haystack. How were they going to find an individual in a billion-dollar medical facility that employs seven thousand people?

Once again, deductive reasoning was the only tool at their disposal. They knew two things: (1) the focus of the medical research at the *Somogy Döröcske* Institute, and (2) the competencies for which Christine was most likely to be hired. Big Man's work in Hungary was in the realm of virology, and he wanted Christine to work for him in an administrative capacity.

Matt and Lauren examined the list of departments posted on the wall of the Hospital's entry lobby. The specialties relevant to their search included such things as virology, immunology, infectious diseases, epidemiology, community health and a dozen other ones. Checking all of these would be a time-consuming wild-goose chase.

On the other hand, the list also included an employment office. They agreed that this was the better way to go. They took the elevator up to that office and approached a receptionist who passed them on to an office manager, a middle-aged braided blonde who looked like a character out of Wagner, yet was totally Francophone. Matt asked her whether she remembered any recent hires.

"*Eh bien, Monsieur,*" Brunhilde answered, "*nous avons des tas de nouveaux employes claqué jour! Comment elle s'appelle votre amie? Quand a-t-elle commence?*" (Well, Sir, we hire lots of people every day! What's your friend's name? When did she start?)"

"Well, that's just it," Lauren, chimed in, "we are not sure of her exact beginning payroll date. But you might remember her. Her first name is Christine, and she is an American. Surely you don't hire Americans ever day?"

"*Ah, la nouvelle Americaine. Oui*" Gretchen answered, her face lighting up. "*Maintenant je me souviens. Je crois qu'elle travaille pour l'administration, section epidemilgy...*" (Ah, the new American, yes. Now I remember. I believe that she is working in administration, epidemiology section).

Wow! Matt thought. Lauren is brilliant! She was actually right and managed to *guess* where Big Man sent Christine - purely based on conjecture.

They thanked the French speaking *Fraulein* profusely and hurried to the relevant office. Time was of the essence. It was Friday afternoon and most departments were getting ready to close for the weekend. Luckily, Epidemiology was still open. Here, the young female receptionist remembered Christine as soon as they described her. However, there was a major disappointment: She told them that Christine had just left this morning for an extended weekend.

"So she wont be back until Monday?" Matt asked, frantically.

"Yes," the receptionist answered. "You see that whole pile of files on that desk? That's her work..."

"I don't suppose you know where she went?" Lauren interjected.

"Sure I do," replied the young girl. "She and her boyfriend went skiing in Zermatt. I heard them talk about it when he came to fetch her..."

"Her boyfriend?" Matt asked, barely in control of his rage. "I see. That would be..."

"Akos," the young receptionist said. "That's what she called him, anyway..."

"Right," Lauren said, "Good old Akos. Does he still have his moustache?"

“Not that I noticed,” the girl replied with a giggle. “I wish I had a boyfriend who looks that good. I’ve always liked blondes. But I sure don’t like his accent. He doesn’t sound like an American at all.”

Matt and Lauren extricated themselves. Matt was deeply disappointed. Would the chase ever end? But at least they had a substantial amount of unexpected information: Christine was skiing in Zermatt and she was accompanied by a good-looking blond guy - probably her Hungarian watchdog.

* * * * *

They jumped back into the Alpha Romeo and started racing towards Zermatt, one of the world’s premier ski resorts. How they’d find Christine on the giant slopes of the Matterhorn, especially on a busy weekend, was something they’d worry about later.

Zermatt is tucked away high in the Alps, near Switzerland’s southern border with Italy. It took Matt and Lauren five hours of intense Alpine driving to get there.

From Lausanne, they took the lakeshore autoroute A9 to the end of Lake Geneva, following it as it curves South towards Martigny, shortly after which it becomes a two-lane road going East. With each passing mile, the snow-capped peaks around them got higher, as did the walls of snow on the roadside. As the highway reached higher altitudes, it displayed treacherous icy patches, which slowed them down.

At the town of Visp, they turned right on the small dead-end secondary road which serpentine up to Tasch, where it ends. The climb was vertiginous and the scenery was spectacular. They finally reached Tasch in late afternoon. There, they had to put the car in a large public parking, like everyone else, and proceed to Zermatt by funicular. The world famous resort cannot be reached by car.

They got on the funicular - a quaint little cogwheel-driven train - surrounded by skiers from every part of Switzerland and the rest of the world. The picturesque train moved up the steep snow-filled valley, slowly and strenuously, like the little locomotive that (barely) could. Suddenly, just as they came out of a tunnel to negotiate a terrifying bend at the edge of a precipice, the Matterhorn finally appeared high above them - the massive, unmistakable, awe inspiring, jagged, pointed, partially glacier-covered fifteen thousand foot peak which overlooks Zermatt and separates Switzerland from Italy.

At dusk the funicular reached its destination - the picture perfect, postcard-like town of Zermatt, an agglomeration of wooden chalets with geranium covered balconies, church steeples, pensions, shops and cafes, its streets teeming with skiers and tourists wearing fur coats and riding horse sleighs, looking like Audrey Hepburn and Sean Connery.

As they stepped out of the tiny but very busy railroad station, Lauren said, “We can’t do much tonight. The skiing has stopped. Let’s get a room and look for them on the slopes tomorrow...”

They spotted an inexpensive place right across the street from the station, called *Bahnhof Hotel*. As they entered it to rent a room, Matt was muttering about their dire prospects, wondering how on earth they could possibly find Christine on a giant mountain with thousands

of skiers.

After a quick bite, they returned to their room and continued to discuss their plans and their chances of finding Christine tomorrow.

Matt said, pessimistically, “You realize how vast this place is? They have *eighty-five* chairlifts! That’s monstrous. Squaw Valley is the biggest California resort, and it got about thirty! I don’t even know where to begin looking for them!”

Lauren, always the resourceful one, asked, “How is your skiing? Did you and Christine do a lot skiing in California?”

“Nah,” he replied. “We did some, but we aren’t very good. I only picked up skiing when I moved to California, and she isn’t very good either. Why?”

“Well, that narrows down the number of slopes we’ve to check,” she explained, and then, producing a map of the area, she said, “Look: the resort straddles the border. Here is the Swiss side, with most of the advanced runs, and over there is the Italian side. See those long runs going down to Cervinia? They’re real gentle, and there are chalets and restaurants all along the way, for leisurely stops. They serve Italian food that’s to die for. Isn’t that something Christine would go for? I bet you anything that’s where she’ll want to ski with her guard.”

“You never cease to amaze me,” Matt acknowledged with a smile. “I should call you detective Arsene Lupin or something. I sure hope your deductive logic works again...”

“It hasn’t failed us yet,” she replied, laughing, then adding, “Well, I can’t think of anything else to do tonight, can you?”

“I guess I can’t either.” Matt agreed. “I suppose we should call it a day. I’ll take the couch.”

Lauren began to undress with utter casualness, and Matt almost felt insulted, thinking, couldn’t she at least show some modesty and acknowledge my presence - after all, I’m still a man...

That acknowledgment came sooner than he had hoped, as she turned to him, wearing nothing but her bra and a pair of lacy Victoria Secret panties, saying, “You don’t need to sleep on the couch. The bed is large enough for both of us.”

She approached him, grabbed his hand and continued, “You look tired, but tense. Are you sure there is nothing else for us to do tonight?” As she spoke, her big brown eyes gazed deeply into his, and she joined her full lips with his, filling his mouth with her voluptuous tongue while she pushed herself against his body as if she wanted to drown in him.

His erection was instantaneous. This magnificent amazon of a woman could have driven any man crazy at any time, but in addition, Matt had been abstinent for over a month.

Nevertheless, he pulled back, saying, “Damn this is tough! You know how *incredibly* much I want you right now? But I ain’t gonna do it. I’ve been trying to rescue Christine all over

the world for a month, and I'm not going to do this now..."

"I see," she said, nonchalantly. "No problem. This was my gift to you. But I understand."

They both lied down to go to sleep, Matt wishing he could take an ice bath or something to reduce his libido. Before dropping off, he mumbled to Lauren in the dark, "you're one hell of a terrific woman..."

"I know," she whispered back gently.

* * * * *

They got up at the crack of dawn and hurried to a ski shop. He rented a pair of short 160s to make it easier on himself, especially if they had to do moguls.

They hopped on to a chair as soon as the first lift opened. The sun was still low in the Eastern sky. The top of the Matterhorn already bathed in a brilliant golden glow, but the valley was still dark; in fact, many of the chalets still had their lights on, way below them in the little town of Tasch where they had parked their car. There was not a cloud in the sky and it was bitterly cold on the chairlift. Having decided to go over to the Italian side right away, they had to first ascend the Swiss side all the way to the top, which took an eternity.

They finally reached the ridge, near the *Kleine Matterhorn*, almost fourteen thousand feet high, and they started skiing down the other side towards Cervinia immediately upon getting off the lift, feeling as if their ears, noses, toes and fingers were about to fall off.

Lauren promptly left Matt in the dust - or snow. Was there anything this woman couldn't do to perfection? He wondered. She had rented a pair of long but light parabolic K2s and there was no way Matt could keep up with her. Of course, she only went ahead for about a kilometer, and waited for him under a couple of pine trees around a bend.

The slopes were still practically empty at this time. Lauren suggested that they separate. There were several long runs going down to Cervinia, and she told Matt to ski down the intermediate ones while she would take the advanced runs. They would do this repeatedly, meeting every hour on the hour at the Cervinia lodge.

They spent the next two hours skiing down the Matterhorn's Cervinia side and taking the lift back up to the top, each of them using a different trail every time. They were especially attentive while riding up the chairlifts, looking down at the growing number of skiers in a desperate effort to identify Christine and her captor, focusing on the clumsier skiers. By eleven, Matt had gone up and down three times - each run was about ten miles long - and his search had not been successful. Discouraged, he entered the lodge again and walked to the bar, where he saw Lauren wave at him from the distance, in agitated fashion. "I think I saw them!" She said excitedly.

"Are you sure?" Matt asked incredulously. "How did you recognize them?"

"No, I'm not sure," she admitted, "It's difficult, with hats, goggles, ski suits and everything. But the last time I rode up, I saw this pretty brunette wearing a small furry ski hat and wavy brown hair underneath it. She was skiing cautiously, slowly paralleling downhill. And there was this beefy blond guy sticking with her all the way, a rather clumsy skier from what I

saw. But she totally ignored him, and he never came close to her. He just made sure that he never lost sight of her. It looked weird...”

“Is this all?” Matt asked, not very impressed.

“Look,” she said impatiently. “I ‘ve been in this business for years. We’re trained to tail and make people under the most adverse conditions. We develop a sense about these things. We see details you wouldn’t even notice. For instance, this chick’s make-up was distinctly *American*. You know, I can spot them a mile away - European women put a lot more heavy shit on their eyes and their lips. Things like that...” and then she added, tersely, “Now, you want to find Christine or not?”

“I’m sorry.” he said, “You’re right. Could be her. And the asshole, what’s his name, Akos. So if they just came down, they could be here somewhere inside the lodge, don’t you think?”

“I just walked around a little; didn’t see them,” she replied. “I think they went back up for another run. Let’s go back up and catch them on the way down.”

“Then what?” Matt asked.

“Then we take Christine back from him.”

“Oh yeah? Just like that? How do you figure we do it? For one thing, he is probably armed.”

“So am I,” she reminded him, “plus, he is a bad skier. We’ll have the advantage. Just follow my instructions when we get to them. Now let’s go.”

“Yes Sir!” Matt mimicked militarily, as they started to side-step up towards the lift.

* * * * *

As soon as they got off the chairlift on top, they started schussing down as fast as Matt could. While he concentrated on not crashing, Lauren looked at the skiers they were approaching and shooting by.

About midway down the mountain, near a junction called *Lago Goillet*, the slope becomes a steep mogul-covered run that can be a challenge to the best of skiers. Lauren let Matt ski ahead so she could bail him out in case he fell. This is where he spotted the couple they were looking for. About hundred meters below him, there was a girl with a grey fur hat, and she was carefully negotiating the jagged moguls with stem christies, while a big blond fellow was traversing the slope clumsily back and forth, making sure he stayed as close to the girl as possible.

Could it truly be Christine? Matt wondered as he descended towards her, heart pounding. Suddenly, after completing a turn, the girl looked up in his direction to make sure they wouldn’t collide, and sure enough, he recognized his sweetheart! Throwing all caution to the wind, he

screamed, “Christine!”

Astonished, she shouted back, “Oh my God! This is a miracle! You found me!”

Meanwhile, the ‘bodyguard’ managed to make a turn and ski back to Christine. Looking up at Matt sternly, he asked, “Who are you? What is your business with Christine?”

At that moment, Lauren arrived and made a spectacularly abrupt stop that covered everyone with snow powder. She answered for Matt, saying, “Christine is coming with us.”

Christine didn’t understand Lauren’s presence, remembering her only as one of Big Man’s acolytes. But there was no time for explanations. Akos - that was his name, if they recalled - grabbed his Beretta from his ski jacket and pointed it at Matt, saying, “Get back, mister. Miss Christine is with me.” Then he turned to Christine, pointed the gun at her and barked, “We go now. Must return to Lausanne. Come, fast!”

Christine had no choice but to obey, and she and Akos started negotiating the steep bumpy slope again. Akos had his hands full, though, barely able to stay on his skis and threaten Christine with his gun at the same time. He kept shouting at her that she should go faster, and soon they were descending at breakneck speed, utterly out of control, occasionally passing another skier.

Lauren and Matt gave chase. A short distance further, the ski run flattens out and narrows to a trail as it enters a forest, where it becomes sort of a roundabout hugging the side of the mountain. The left side of the trail is a steep snow-covered wall, while on the right hand side the skier looks down into a rocky precipice. Here, those who are so inclined can now shuss straight down and pick up even more speed. This is exactly what Akos forced Christine to do.

Nevertheless, Lauren and Matt were gaining ground on them. Matt shouted at Christine to slow down, warning her that she was going to break her neck. Hearing his pursuers gaining on him, Akos looked back and fired a shot at Matt, missing widely. Lauren took her Smith and Wesson out of her pocket and shot back, aiming for the fellow’s boots. She missed too, but not by much. Akos was now contorting himself in all sorts of ways, still looking back - both to avoid Lauren’s shots and to try to shoot back.

Suddenly, the trail veered off sharply to the left. Christine managed to make the turn, but Akos didn’t. Instead, he continued straight ahead, up into the air. Then, he vanished. Lauren and Matt stopped at the edge of the trail, overlooking the ravine into which Akos had just disappeared. Christine had stopped fifty meters further down the trail, just around the bend.

Looking into the ravine, Matt and Lauren saw Akos - more likely Akos’ lifeless body. He had fallen at least one hundred meters and landed on a jagged rock. His skis were in pieces and he lay motionless. From the distance, they weren’t able to see whether there was blood. There probably was plenty.

Lauren took her cell phone out of her pocket, dialed emergency and said, without identifying herself, “*Es war ein Ungl(ck. Kommen Sie bitte sofort zu Hilfe....Rund zwei kilometer unter Lago Goillet...Danke.*” (There was an accident. Please come to the rescue right away...About two kilometers below *Lago Goillet*). Then she disconnected and said to Matt and

Christine, "Let's go. We must not be here when the ski patrol arrives."

13. CHRISTINE'S SIDE OF THE STORY

Matt and Christine were in a daze. Was this the end of the ordeal? Christine had no idea why Lauren had just helped Matt free her. All she understood was that at last, they were reunited, and there was no one to separate or to threaten them any more. There was only one thing on her and Matt's mind - home, please, let us go home! Everything they had gone through over the past month, and all the unanswered questions, none of that mattered now. It all seemed unreal.

Matt was unequivocal, as he announced to Lauren, immediately and almost brutally, "Okay Lauren, thanks for everything. Now please take us to the nearest international airport, so we can go home and forget the nightmare."

Lauren understood his feelings, and promised that he and Christine would be back in California within a few days, as soon as "the last few loose ends were tied."

"No more bullshit, then?" Matt asked, suspiciously. "We're done, right? We're going home?"

"That's right." she reiterated. "There will be no danger or threat to your lives anymore. You have my word. Now let's get out of here. I suggest that you two first come back with me to Interpol Headquarters in Lyon."

Just getting out of the huge resort was a complex and time-consuming endeavor, requiring them to take the chairlift back up to the *Kleine Matterhorn* and to Switzerland, ski down to Zermatt, return their skis, grab their bags at the hotel, take the funicular down to Tasch and finally pick up their car in the Tasch parking lot. It was nearly ten 'o clock at night by the time they started to drive. Once again they would race through the Alps in the middle of the night, hoping to arrive in Lyon early in the morning.

Lauren drove and Matt and Christine sat in the back of the Alpha Romeo. They spent much of the night telling and explaining to each other what had happened to each of them. The first thing Christine had asked from Matt, even before they had taken off their skis, was whether he had truly become one of Big Man's loyal employees. She reminded him that back in *Somogy Döröcske*, he had persuaded her to become a collaborator to the murderer.

Matt assured her that this had merely been a survival tactic at the time, saying, "Look honey, do you really think that I considered, even for a moment, joining that evil, murderous man? You and I did what we had to do to gain our freedom. I went to Interpol the first chance I got, where I was as surprised as you to find out that Lauren, this wonder woman (he gently patted Lauren on the shoulder as he said that), was our savior and not our enemy."

"Hmm..." Christine replied, "so you two have been running around from hotel to hotel all over Europe the last few days?"

Lauren turned around and said to Christine with a smile, “Don’t worry honey, you have a hell of a righteous boyfriend. Marry him before it’s too late. There aren’t many like him left.”

“Thanks,” Matt said, laughing and hugging Christine, then adding, “but listen babe, I really want to know what’s happened to you over the past month. Did they hurt you? How did you survive? How did you manage to always leave a trail for me to follow? I want to know everything.”

“Okay,” Christine replied. “It’s a long story.”

“No problem,” Matt said, “we’ve got all night before we get to Lyon.”

“Well,” she began, “it all started in San Diego a month ago, when they offered me the job in Paris.”

“Yes, of course,” Matt acknowledge, “but what made you so special to them that they had to kidnap you?”

“Well,” Christine continued, “Unbeknownst to me, many of the files I had been transcribing for a couple of years contained enormously sensitive materials, including the names of people all over the world who were associated with Big Man’s ‘research institute’, as well as the kind of research they were doing...”

“I know about that research,” Matt said. “Scary stuff.”

“What made me both vulnerable and desirable,” Christine continued, “was that I always keep back-ups of all those files. I’m sure that’s why they ransacked my apartment. On the other hand, they looked at my experience, the work I did for places like the University of California medical schools and my French, and they figured they might be better off hiring me instead of killing me.”

“Thank God,” Matt said, “Okay, so when did you find out that they were bad guys?”

“Well, everything still looked real good when they took me to the Hotel *Georges Cinq* in the *Rue de Rivoli*. You should see that place!”

“I know, honey,” he said gently. “I was there, looking for you.”

“I suppose you were,” she acknowledged. “I was hoping you’d come... Anyway, at first everything seemed legit. But I became suspicious the following day, because instead of taking me to the *Institut Pasteur*, they drove me to some godforsaken place way out in the suburbs. When we got there, I was introduced to someone everyone called the ‘Director.’ Later I found out that his name was Yves. He claimed to be an Interpol officer. He showed me his badge and said that Interpol needed information from me for a major sting operation conducted in collaboration with the FBI. He also asked for my passport, which he put in a drawer. I was deeply disappointed but I agreed to cooperate - reluctantly - hoping that they would send me

home immediately after the interview.

Then this guy Yves - the 'Director' - said that I had to relocate to his suburban house in the *Rue Blancas*. He said it was for my own protection, just for a couple of days. He told his men to drive me back to the Hotel *Georges Cinq* to pick up my baggage.

I was shocked and suspicious and I told him that I had to call you, but he took my cell phone, saying, 'Your phone is probably bugged, so we'll call your boyfriend for you.'

Now I was *really* beginning to worry. No one in the world knew where I was being moved to. I was beginning to wonder whether these guys were truly the police. So when they drove me back to pick up my baggage at the Hotel *Georges Cinq*, I made a desperate attempt to leave at least some semblance of a trail. I had had the presence of mind to memorize the name *Rue Blancas*, and when we were exiting the hotel lobby to go back, with the two goons practically pushing me out, I said as loudly as possible, so the desk clerks and the concierge would hear me, 'so this place where we are going is located in the *Rue Blancas*, right?'. "

"And it worked!" Matt said jubilantly. "It's the only reason I was able to pick up your trail. Brilliant!"

"What happened when we got back to the *Rue Blancas* was the final straw. Yves walked me to a comfortable room and said that I would only have to stay there for a couple of days - until I was fully 'debriefed.' Then he left, locked the door and posted a guard outside. That's when I finally realized that I had been kidnaped and that I was a prisoner.

I went bonkers. I screamed, I kicked the door, I started to cry. Finally the 'guard' posted outside opened and came in, telling me to calm down. He was a tall, disheveled, young, blond guy with a beard and a pony tail. He looked more like a hippie or a heroin junkie than an Interpol agent.

At first, I cussed him, but then I settled down and realized that tantrums wouldn't get me anywhere. Instead, I might be able to charm my way out. Over the next week, I befriended my pony-tailed guard. He was a Dutchman, his name was Gerben.

Manipulating Gerben turned out easier than I anticipated, because he was at the bottom of the totem pole. The other men often treated him disrespectfully. And my hunch was right - he was a heroin junkie. Sometimes the other guys would give him a joint, saying, 'here, take this. It'll tide you over till your next fix.' Then Gerben would whine and say something like 'I need horse, man,' and the other guys would laugh and say things like 'Gerben hasn't had his fix; he's gonna shit in his pants, or 'Hey Gerben, why don't you try some Omo laundry soap instead, haha,' or one guy would suggest that he satisfy his lust on me,' to which someone else would say 'Nah, he couldn't get it on. His dick's fallen off, with all the junk, haha...' And once Yves slapped him around because he had lost a key or something...

So sometimes when we were alone, like when he brought me my meals, I asked him things, like where he was from, why he was doing heroin, etc. I tried to befriend him.

"And did it work?" Matt asked with intense curiosity.

"I'll answer that in a minute," Christine replied, "but first, I've got to tell you what else was going on at the *Rue Blancas* in the meantime. You see, I spent a total of a week locked up in that goddam house! At first, I had no idea what they wanted from me. I was wondering, if they wanted to kill me, why hadn't they done so already? But Yves kept coming to my room every

day to talk. It turned out that they actually *did* want me to work for them. Except that they weren't the *Institut Pasteur*, or Interpol or anything like that, but they were working for Big Man and the *Somogy Döröcske* Institute. He kept saying that they had great need of someone with my skills, especially someone who could function as a California liaison. And he dangled pretty fat payments in front of me. I stalled. I was desperately hoping that you'd find out where I was and that you and the French police would come and rescue me.

Then, Yves didn't show up for three days. Maybe he was traveling. Actually, that made things even worse. I was climbing up the wall, locked up and not knowing what was going to happen to me. But this also gave me time to perfect my escape plan. I continued to work on Gerben, trying to win him to my side. I asked him why he took so much crap from everyone. He said 'they give me free horse. That's why I put up with it. If it weren't for that I'd leave. I hate them. I could kill them all!'

I asked him where he would go. 'I'd go back to my family in Holland,' he said. First I thought he meant his parents, but he explained that his 'family' was a commune just North of Amsterdam, outside of Edam. They had ostracized him a year earlier because he had 'done' an eleven-year old girl, which went too far even in that sexually permissive subculture. So he hitch-hiked to Paris and somehow got mixed up with Yves and his outfit, which supports his habit in exchange for his services.

So I suggested that he and I make a run for it. I told him that his 'family' would surely forgive him if he made amends. 'Wouldn't it be great to be back with your people, instead of these creeps here?' I asked, and then I said, 'why don't you and I get out of here today and drive up to Holland?'

And you know what? he went for it! This was a Stockholm syndrome in reverse: instead of the hostage falling in love with her kidnaper, it went the other way around! So it was a lazy Thursday afternoon, Yves was still out of town and nearly everyone else had gone downtown Paris. There was just me, Gerben and one other guard at the *Rue Brancas* house. The other guy had been watching TV in the living room and then he had fallen asleep. This was our moment. I ran into Yves' office and opened the drawer where I had seen him put my passport a week earlier. I grabbed it, along with my cell phone, and we slipped out the back door and hopped into the lone car parked by the house - a Smart..."

"I love it!" Matt said mesmerized by Christine's story. "So you took off in that miniature car. But why didn't you just tell Gerben to take you to Charles De Gaulle, or Orly, or the US Embassy? Why go all the way to Holland with the creep?"

"I felt safer that way," she explained. "The moment Yves' gang noticed our escape, they'd come looking for us at those obvious places. I thought flying out of Schiphol in Holland would be smarter."

"True," Matt admitted, and then asked, "So why didn't you call me right away?"

"I wanted to," she explained, "but Gerben was watching me, and he was still armed. Now he thought I was his girlfriend. Anyway, we didn't get to his 'family' in Holland until eleven at night - nine hours later. Have you ever sat in a Smart car for nine hours, doing a maximum of 45 ks per hour?"

"Then what happened?" Matt asked, laughing.

“Well, it was too late to try to run away and go to Schiphol. So I decided to sleep at the commune. They were all quite nice actually, fed me and everything. Was a dirty mess, but nice. I went to sleep in one of their trailers, belonged to a guy named Johan. Gerben was told to sleep in the commune’s farmhouse. And a few hours later, all hell broke loose. I heard shots and I knew they were coming for me. I grabbed my purse, ran out of Johan’s trailer and started crossing the wet, soggy field in the dark, trying to get as far away from the commune as possible. As I was running toward distant lights, someone caught up with me, and I thought that I was going to be killed. But it was Johan, who had also run out of his trailer. He helped me find my way across the muddy field and the many ditches criss-crossing it. He told me that Gerben had just been killed.

We finally reached a road and followed it to the nearest town. As we walked in the dark of night, I told my story to Johan. He offered to help me. He said that he had joined the commune a year earlier, that his father was the billionaire CEO of the Albert Heijn grocery chain, and that they were no longer on speaking terms after the old man had kicked him out of the five-million dollar family mansion in the nearby town of Bergen.

Johan wasn’t stupid. He said that the bad guys would surely look for me at the Schiphol airport and at the American embassy in The Hague, and that the safest thing for me was to leave Holland immediately and go as far as possible.

We took the bus to his parents’ house in Bergen. It was getting light. The house was a palatial three-story residence with a thatched roof and at least a dozen bedrooms. Johan snuck into his parents’ house, careful not to wake them up, or the maids and the butlers. He returned with a wad of hundred euro bills and the key to one of his father’s Porsche Carreras. ‘A pre-payment on my inheritance,’ he said as he waived the money and car keys at me. Then he announced that we were driving to Italy. I didn’t protest much. The plan was to drive to Rome. Flying home from there would be safer. Meanwhile, I also wanted to leave a trail for you, just in case.”

“And what did Johan expect in return for such magnanimity?” Matt asked, a bit worried.

“Don’t fret,” Christine said, smiling. “I told him that I couldn’t give him anything in return, and he was cool with that. He said he just wanted to help someone who was in a jam, someone he liked. Plus he said that it would be fun to drive his dad’s Carrera at two hundred ks per hour for a couple of thousand kilometers.”

“Right, and he paid for this with his life,” Matt commented sadly, then adding, “So this is the fellow who called me with your cryptic messages about ‘Christophoro’ and about ‘angels’?”

“Cryptic?” She asked. “It worked, didn’t it? You found me. It was Johan who advised me not to call you myself, never to use my cell phone, and to always use some code. So that’s what we did. I gave him the messages and he called you.”

“Brilliant,” Matt admitted, and then summarizing, “So you drove to Rome - as I did, just a few hours behind you. But what happened once you got there? Obviously Big Man’s goons found you before I did, because when I got to the pension near the Christophoro Church, they had already

nabbed you again and you were on your way to Budapest. What happened?"

"I'll tell you what happened," she said, feistily, "but first, you tell me how *you* two got hooked up," as she touched Lauren's shoulder.

Lauren had been silent all this time, negotiating the dark and snow-covered roads of the Bernese Alps, but now she interjected, "Let me assure you that Matt had very little choice in the matter. We at Interpol had been chasing you too, dearie. We intercepted your phone calls and followed the same trail as Matt. We were bound to cross paths..."

"I guess so," Christine admitted. "Anyway, after we got to Rome, I looked for anything named Christophoro, hoping that you would find it - and me. The best I could do was that church, and the little sleazy pension next to it. I figured if you didn't show up by the next day, Johan would drive me to Fumicino Airport and I'd fly back home by myself. I didn't know whether you were even in Europe looking for me. Just as a wild stab in the dark, I asked Johan to call you once more and give you another cue - something cryptic about 'Angels,' alluding to *Castel San Angelo*. And it worked! You know what I dreamed when I went to sleep at the pension? You came to rescue me, flying down from the ramparts of Hadrian's Tomb like an avenging angel. But instead, I had the rude awakening of Big Man's murderers barging into the room, killing Johan and kidnaping me to Hungary."

"Yep. I know all about that part," Matt said pensively, then adding, "Thank God the nightmare is over. Tomorrow, we go home!"

There was silence in the car for a while. Then Lauren broke it by saying, "And what about Big Man and his operation?"

"What about him?" Matt replied. "Fuck him. That's all I got to say."

"Really?" Lauren pressed on. "Is that all? I suggest that before you go back to California, we pay him one more visit. But this time, we go in with the cavalry. What do you say?"

They discussed it for a while. Matt and Christine were reluctant at first, but under Lauren's strong assurance that there would be no risk to this final visit to *Somogy Döröcske*, they finally accepted. After all, they had witnessed much evil over the past month, innocent people had died. They still didn't have a clear fix on what sort of outfit the *Somogy Döröcske* Institute was. Was it in bed with governmental authorities, or was it a purely criminal racket? Maybe the two are not necessarily antithetical. Maybe they overlap. Maybe the many medical institutions with which *Somogy Döröcske* does business are all like that - legit as well as shady? Could Matt and Christine ever get some closure on all these questions?

14. THE LAST MEETING

Thus, after they reached Lyon, refreshed themselves and got some sleep, Matt and

Christine flew back to Budapest with Lauren, once more delaying their return to home sweet home. At *Ferihegy* airport, they took a taxi which drove them directly to the headquarters of the Hungarian National Police, up on the hills of Buda overlooking the city.

As they entered the multi-story office building, Lauren seemed to know precisely what she was doing. She walked rapidly through the front door and showed her badge to the armed security guards, who let all three of them through immediately. She went straight to the elevators without talking to or asking anything from anyone, and pressed the button for one of the upper floors without hesitation. Now Matt understood that Lauren was thoroughly familiar with Budapest. This explained why she had seemed to know so much about the city on their first visit here together, two weeks earlier.

On the ninth floor, she rushed down the hall, forcing Matt and Christine to practically run after her. She reached an opaque glass door which she opened, barging into the office. A sign on the door said *rendőrfelügyelő* in large letters and *police commissioner* below it in smaller script. Lauren showed her badge to the secretary and barked, "We're here to see Mr. Laszlo Garamvolgyi."

Before the secretary had time to alert her boss, he came out the back room himself and, recognizing Lauren, quickly walked to her with a big smile, hand stretched out. Introductions were made. Upon learning who Matt was, Inspector Garamvolgyi said, "Ah, Dr. Sander. Pleasure to meet you. I read your paper on the rise of crime in post-communist Eastern Europe. Excellent."

Matt thanked him and they all chatted for a moment. Matt learned that Lauren and Garamvolgyi knew each other well. They had been on the joint Hungarian-American task force created during the Bosnian war of the nineties to deal with the crime explosion in Eastern Europe. Due to its central location, Budapest had become a major transit point for all the nefarious activities emanating from Russia, the Balkan and points East, including drugs, theft, trade in sex slaves, murder and all the other ventures of the numerous Mafias mushrooming in post-Communism.

Then, Lauren got down to business, saying, "Listen Laszlo. We need your help with the *Somogy Döröcske* business. Big Man is getting out of control..."

"I know," the police commissioner replied. "Before we start, let me go get someone else who should be in on the conversation."

He left his office and returned a moment later accompanied by....Pal! Matt and Christine were flabbergasted. Before they could express their surprise or ask questions, Garamvolgyi said, "Let me introduce you to our special agent Pal, of the Hungarian State Agency for the Control of Organized Crime."

Seeing Matt's and Christine's utter astonishment on their faces, Pal interjected with a smile, "It's nice to see you two again, both safe and sound. I'll explain later what my role was during our previous encounters," and turning to his boss, he added, "We've met before."

Finally Lauren began to explain the purpose of their visit to Garamvolgyi: First she

reminded everyone that Big Man's *Somogy Döröcske* Institute could, at best, be described as an NGO with widespread links to major medical institutions all over the world. She pointed out that it enjoyed the support and the funding of many very powerful world bodies and world leaders, including officials at the U.N., the W.H.O., and in many major countries, and that even though its activities may be useful, its methods were generally illegal. As with the Oil for Food Program and other programs that are flawed and corrupt, but accomplish some good, the American government had long looked the other way - as one often must, in an imperfect world. However, Big Man's people were becoming increasingly reckless. The FBI and the Interpol had completed an undercover investigation of the Institute, and the U.S. State Department was considering pushing for closure of the *Somogy Döröcske* Institute.

"Reckless?" Garamvolgyi interrupted, "in what ways?"

"Simple," Lauren replied. "They are now kidnaping and murdering people..."

"Is there proof of this?" The police chief asked, incredulously.

"Exhibit One," Matt chimed in. "My beloved Christine, right here, was kidnaped by Big Man's goons a month ago. She was their captive for weeks, bound and gagged repeatedly and threatened at gun point. She witnessed several cold-blooded murders while in captivity."

"Hmm..." Garamvolgyi ruminated, "so what is it that you want me to do? I can't simply shut down the Institute. Do you know what proportion of our national budget this facility accounts for? We are a small and poor country..."

"Here is what we want you to do," Lauren continued. "We want you to accompany us to *Somogy Döröcske* in full force. We have the following list of demands for Big Man (she produced a document which she handed to the police chief). The first demand is that he hand over the murderers. The list is non-negotiable. If he refuses or reneges, we will insist that you shut him down permanently. This is your jurisdiction."

"I see," Garamvolgyi said pensively. "Fair enough. We can go tomorrow morning. We'll borrow four Apaches from the Air Force and stuff them with twenty men. Hungary just bought them from your country - as if we could afford it!" he mused. And then he asked rhetorically, "is that 'full force' enough for you?"

"That should do it," Lauren admitted with a smile.

Then Garamvolgyi picked up his phone and dialed *Somogy Döröcske*. It didn't take long for Big Man to come to the phone. The Police Chief said, "Hi George, how have you been, old man?" How is Dorothy? How are the children?"

After some more bantering, he continued, saying, "Listen old man. I got these people here, and we want to pay you a visit tomorrow. You know them - Lauren who is with the FBI, and a young professor by the name of Matt and his fiancée Christine..."

"Why that's great!" Big Man replied, jocular and affable and utterly insincere. "You're

all welcome, my friends!”

Then the police commissioner added: “So your people won’t shoot us down when we get there, Old Man? Tell you what, just to play it safe, we’ll be arriving in four Apaches - you know the ones with the AGM-114 Hellfire and the AIM92 Stinger missiles. And we’ll have twenty army rangers with us...”

“All that?” Big Man asked, stunned but trying not to show it. “Okay, whatever. If you think it’s necessary. See you tomorrow,” whereupon he disconnected so as to conceal his rage.

Once again, Matt was aghast. Does everybody know everybody in this world? he wondered. What’s going on? Which side is everyone on anyway? Is Garamvolgyi a friend of Big Man? Is he crooked, too?

* * * * *

Early the next morning, everyone flew out of Budapest’s *Ferihegy* airport, but this time not on a commercial jet. This time, Garamvolgyi had assembled a small military flotilla in one of the airport’s far corner, away from commercial traffic. The four attack helicopters were loaded with personnel, including twenty heavily armed army rangers.

While waiting to take off, Matt and Christine had asked Pal to explain himself. What was his connection with Lauren, and with Big Man? Pal obliged. He began by apologizing about his duplicity and saying that he did, indeed, owe them an explanation.

“As the police commissioner told you,” he continued in fluent English, “I work for the Hungarian State Agency for the Control of Organized Crime. I was trained at the John Jay School of Criminal Justice in New York.”

“Okay,” Matt acknowledged. “That explains your fluent American. But how on earth did you just ‘happen’ upon Christine and me, at the sleazy Roman youth hostel?”

“Well, I was working in tandem with Lauren,” the young agent explained. “The Hungarian government also had an interest in Big Man and his Institute. I was sent to San Diego to tail his men there. From there on, I followed Christine too, and I intercepted her phone messages to you...”

“Ha!” Christine jumped in. “I knew I had seen you somewhere. You looked familiar. I must have noticed you at the San Diego convention...”

“Wow,” added Matt in amazement. “The whole world seemed to be chasing after us!”

* * * * *

The flight to *Somogy Döröcske* took less than an hour. A hell of a lot more convenient than the half-day ride on the bumpy back roads of the puzsta! Matt thought.

The choppers landed in a huge cloud of dust inside the Institute’s grounds. Everyone

jumped out, including the twenty threatening-looking troopers, who immediately took up defensive positions. However, Big Man was there to welcome the visitors and to diffuse the situation. He was suave and smiling, and offered the visitors the red carpet treatment. Food and drinks were served. He and Garamvolgyi joked, bantered and exchanged platitudes.

“Did you really have to bring practically an entire army division, Laszlo? You don’t trust me any more?” Big Man asked, laughing.

“Just playing it safe, old boy,” the police commissioner replied, laughing as well. Then he continued: “Let me get to the point George: As you know, the Hungarian government has bent over backwards to accommodate you and the *Somogy Döröcske* Institute. You have powerful friends, and you make a significant contribution to our nation’s economy. However, it has now come to our attention that some of your people are breaking all the rules. People have been killed. And Christine, here, was kidnaped and detained against her will. The Americans are getting pissed off. You’ve got to keep your goons on a tighter leash, or else I won’t be able to protect you.”

The two men argued for a while. Big Man spoke soothing words to the police chief, promising that he would punish the men who had committed those crimes. However, he claimed that he had no control over what happened outside of Hungary.

Lauren jumped into the conversation, saying, “Interpol demands that you hand over the murderers who work for you.” Then she added, as she handed over a document to Big Man, “in addition, we have the following list of demands.”

Big Man admitted that his organization had made mistakes, and he apologized to Matt and Christine, saying, “I’m sorry for the way some of my people treated you. However, I hope you realize how important our work is. Some say that we are mankind’s last hope.”

The police commissioner interrupted him: “The main issue now is, what’s to be done. First, I must arrest those of your men who have committed murders. As to what happened to Christine, it is up to her to press charges - or not. Finally, there is the list of demands just given to you. What is your response?”

“No problem,” replied Big Man, as he started scribbling down information, which he then handed to Lauren. “Here are the names and addresses of the men who kidnaped Christine and committed the crimes she witnessed in Western Europe. You will find them at their Budapest homes this weekend. However, I have no control over Yves in Paris, or anyone else outside the country.”

Lauren accepted Big Man’s notes and said, “the U.S. State Department is very unhappy and the FBI will continue its investigation. We may yet shut you down, at least in the United States.”

“That would be unfortunate,” Big Man replied. “But not decisive. The American medical community makes an important contribution to our work, but the United Nations and the World

Health Organization have another one hundred and ninety one members...”

* * * * *

The wheeling and dealing went on for a while, after which the visitors flew out of *Somogy Döröcske* while a smiling Big Man waived them off.

Matt and Christine were both wiser and more confused than they had ever been. Two days later, they were on their way home to California. They spent the fourteen hour trip sleeping and talking about - what else? - their incredible adventure and the even more incredible outcome. Christine asked Matt, “So what’s going to happen to Big Man and his Institute?”

“Nothing,” said Matt, cynically. “There are plenty of fall guys available. Some of his men will take the rap.”

“So there will be arrests and convictions?” she asked.

“Yes,” Matt assured her, “the men who brutalized you will be arrested and condemned. There is even a good chance that Yves will be picked up - Lauren may make sure of that.”

“And Big Man? He stays in business? That’s appalling,” she said angrily.

“That’s the way the world works,” Matt said, then adding: “I don’t really care, as long as he leaves us alone.”

15. HAPPY END IN CALIFORNIA?

The airport shuttle dropped them off in front of Matt’s house late Friday night. Christine had been gone over a month, Matt nearly two weeks since his quick trip back home working for Big Man.

The house was warm and smelled musty. They unpacked their few belongings and looked for something to eat in the pantry. They had to settle for a can of Hormel chilli beans.

They went to the bedroom and began to undress. Matt took off his sweater and his shirt and said, “I have a surprise for you.”

After he spoke, he took off the pouch he had been wearing on his chest for over a week, tossed it to Christine and said, “open it, carefully.”

When she saw the contents, she looked up at Matt with an astonished look on her face and said, “that’s money.”

“Right,” Matt confirmed, “a lot of it. Worth nearly half a million dollars, I’d say.”

“Who does it belong to?” she asked nervously.

“To us, now,” he replied with a smile.

A brief discussion ensued, with Christine expressing some misgivings and Matt assuring her that the money came from Big Man and that it would be neither missed nor traced.

Then, Christine took off her shirt and said, with a mischievous smile, "I have a surprise for you too," whereupon she tossed a wad of euros to Matt. She added, "Here is another 70,000 euros. That's what Big Man paid me when he sent me to Switzerland."

The two of them started giggling, jumping up and down on the bed and throwing thousand euro bills at each other. Then they fell silent and looked at each other passionately. After a moment, Matt said, "this calls for a celebration."

"Hmm," Christine replied, "Any idea how we can celebrate?"

Without uttering one more word, Matt lunged at her and nailed her to the soft mattress, showering her with kisses, ripping off her panties and grabbing every part of her beautiful and voluptuous body, the delights of which he had almost forgotten during their long and tortuous saga. Despite their fatigue, stress and jet lag, they spent the next two hours making torrid love - passionately, repeatedly, endlessly, as if never having enough, until exhaustion finally overcame them and they fell asleep in each other's arms.

* * * * *

During the following two weeks, life resumed its normal course. Matt had returned just in time to take the reigns back from his teaching assistant and to conclude his Spring semester classes himself, including final exams for his undergraduate students and shepherding his graduate students through the final stages of their dissertations.

In June, after the end of the academic year, Matt and Christine finally had some time to kick back. They took a camping trip to Mount Shasta, that magnificent, mysterious and sacred fourteen-thousand foot high snow-capped peak in the Cascade Range of Northern California. They walked through the forests and hiked up to the glaciers below the summit. They swam in isolated coves of Lake Shasta.

This is where Matt proposed to Christine. He did it mimicking the way Sylvester Stalone proposed to Talia Shire in Rocky I, saying, "I was wondering if maybe, if you wouldn't mind marrying me very much..."

To add weight to his proposal, he presented her with an half carat solitaire diamond set in platinum. He also explained that the moment was opportune, since they would be able to move into more comfortable living quarters - thanks to Big Man.

Christine thought that the proposal was funny enough, and she replied that a wedding could be arranged. After they returned home from the camping trip, they began serious preparations for a late Fall wedding.

* * * * *

The summer moved along relatively lazily. For Matt, it was a time to catch up on

research, household chores and neglected friendships. There were also professional and media involvements - a conference or symposium here and there, an occasion interview with a local radio or TV station about some current issue he was deemed to be an “expert” on, and also invitations to academic and political events - most of which he turned down.

However, in late August he received one such invitation which he was not able to pass up. It was a personal letter from Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, inviting him and his significant other to a reception at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, and there to meet with a group of international scientists in the forefront of 21st century research. The list of invitees included Nobel laureates from a variety of disciplines, not merely nuclear physics, as might be expected given the event’s venue. Matt noticed that the program included such fields as microbiology, genetics, epidemiology and even a sprinkling of behavioral scientists - no doubt the reason for his invitation.

The event occurred on a weekend. Therefore, the usually nightmarish Bay Area traffic was moderate and it took Christine and Matt less than an hour to cover the fifty miles to Lawrence Livermore. By then, they were driving a BMW X5, one they had bought and paid for in full, a well spent \$50,000.

As they approached the perimeter of the largest nuclear research facility on earth, they mused about the uncanny similarities between it and the *Somogy Döröcske* Institute - including the maximum security features.

Once inside, they spent a pleasant morning mingling with eminent individuals - Nobel Prize winners from some of the world’s greatest universities, United Nations ambassadors, former U.S. cabinet members and so forth. For lunch, Matt and Christine shared a round table with former Secretary of State George Schultz, former Mongolian Prime Minister Renchinnyam Amarjargal, Secretary General of the World NGO Association Taj Hamad, California Chamber of Commerce President Allan Zaremberg and several other luminaries.

Lunch was winding down. Dessert - a French Caramel Chocolate Mousse - was being served. That is when the Governor of California walked up to the podium to announce the afternoon activities and to introduce the next speaker.

“Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,” Schwarzenegger began, “I am honored to present to you a great man, a gut friend who koms from the country nehxt to my behloved Austriah, a fantastik puhrrson who is revolutionizing medezin tohday, and who is wizz uhs today in Kaliforniah, the fifth largest political entity in ze world, zo as to estabhlish a close scientific, medical and bizness relationship. Please give a warm welkom to our next illustrious speaker!”

As Schwarzenegger completed the introduction, the eminent speaker he was introducing began to cross the stage towards the lectern to shake the Governor’s hand and to begin his speech.

He was accompanied by a smaller and younger man who seemed to be his assistant, as he was carrying his briefcase and his laptop and getting ready to set up a power point presentation. The older and larger fellow, Matt saw to his horror, was... Big Man, while his assistant was...Pal.

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