Alliance Federal Bank

Dalton, Georgia

Now that the sun was finally obscured by the haze of high humidity, today was the day. Sounds muffled and the air heavy with moisture, the town was as surreal as a watercolor rendition. It was 4:37 on a Thursday afternoon when he parked the newly detailed FedEx delivery van in the rear parking area. He was supposed to be at the bank no later than 3:30 but had decided to change a few things before committing the robbery. Walking around the three-building block towards the front entrance, he caught his reflection in the tall glass window of an apparel shop. Pausing to inspect his image, he grunted at his taller, rounder reflectionand that was good. In the foam body mold, FedEx uniform, and raised boots, Andrew barely recognized himself. More excited than nervous, he knew that doing the unexpected gave him his best chance of success.

Two months earlier, life for him was pretty much a statement of destitution. His girlfriend, a hotty of a bartender and fairly prodigious partier, had run off with another guy taking the last of his stash and cash. He didn’t really blame her, though—the warning signs were all there. Did he try his best to get close to her? He wasn’t sure if it was a trust issue. The deepening of the relationship may have been too soon or not soon enough—he just wasn’t sure—but after moving into her place, well . . . it just all got kinda messy. He wasn’t a total idiot, though. He did hang on to his old basement apartment, just in case.

When he got to his job at the auto body shop, there was a message from some law firm down South. Apparently, step-smother number three had died, leaving him something in her will. If true, it would be the first *good thing* that ever came outta his asshole father’s existence. Do I call or not? That’s the question. If I call back, that bastard’ll know where I’m at and trap me into going to the funeral. Besides, if one of the step-martyrs did leave me something, can’t they just mail it? As he finished the last air-brush touch-up on the 77’ Thunderbird’s American Eagle, he looked at the reality of his existence. I’m screwed, man—goin’ nowhere on a rented mule, as Sandy always reminds me when I ain’t got the rent. Shit, it’s only a ton-fifty a month for that basement pad, and most times, I can’t even scratch that up. The only reason she lets me stay there is cause I’m nice to her kid, little Brian, let him take my ride out and shit. He laughed, bikes in the kid’s name anyway. Well, like the man says: *When you ain’t got nothing, you got, nothing to lose.* He made the call.

Citing privacy conditions and all, the lawyer was purposely vague. He’d have to speak with the executor directly. When he asked if the executor could call him back at this number, the lawyer declined due to availability problems and reiterated he should call the executor at his earliest convenience. Which seemed odd. When he got to the apartment, he jumped online and back-traced the number. A little surprised it was a Federal Bank in Dalton, GA, he checked the time before dialing. The executor turned out to be his step-sister—shit, he didn’t even know he had one. After some odd pleasantries, she got right down to it.

“I have a little business proposition for you if you are willing to hear me out.” She offered, not even bothering to ask his name.

A little taken aback by this new front, he got up. “Look, lady . . . ”

“Kara . . . ”

“Look, Miss Kara . . . ”

“It’s my first name, and yes, you know nothing of me, but I know something of you, Andrew Connally. We’ve been searching for you for over two weeks. I could easily have waited out the statutory time limit and then, as sole executor, filed a Benjamin Order writing you off completely, but I did not. In fact, I have been paying the expense of that search out of pocket. Since we are the only beneficiaries listed . . . well, needless to say, I don’t really need you.”

Andrew was skeptical. “Then why the effort? What’s in it for you?”

“Well, Andrew, let’s just say I would like to honor my mother’s commitment to her faith.”

Shit, one of those, he thought. But his interest peeked out. Maybe there's something in this. It couldn’t come at a better time. His excitement got the better of him: “Ok, what do you do next? I mean, what next do I need to do for . . . what for do you—what do you want me to do?” Nice, he sighed, rolling his eyes. That sure sounded intelligent, you idiot.

“You will have to come down here. The property needs to be assessed and sold before dispersing any proceeds. Of course, if it’s priced correctly, I believe it will sell quickly in this market. In fact, I may have a line on some investors who are in a position to take possession immediately.”

“Really? That would be cool. Just out of curiosity, how much here are we talking?”

“I’m afraid it’s not much.” Kara’s tone was flat. “My mother did not believe in the pursuit of wealth.”

“Okay, but you must have some idea . . . ”

“Well, as a matter of course, it will need a professional appraisal, but I would venture around 125-130K.”

“So, we’re talking 75 each?”

“Not really. There will be legal fees, we’ll have to pay off a 10k LOC, and there’ll be survey fees, taxes, closing fees on the sale and such, so . . . closer to 62k each.”

Andrew grinned. I’m out of a jamb. I still owe Brian for the stash that bitch stole—my car's toast, bikes barely up—however, I can buy some proper gear, get into the high-detail work, and score some real scratch. He didn’t know what to think other than holy effing shit. He wanted to shout for joy, but he knew how to play it cool at twenty-five. “Doesn’t sound like much.” He said, trying to keep his voice even. “Hardly worth the trip, I’d say.”

“I agree. I do, however, have that proposition I mentioned earlier . . . it has a chance to substantially increase our little egg over ten-fold.”

He let the idea run out in his head. After years of dealing with bad hands dealt by bad people in bad games, is it possible that finally, I can get on the legitimate side of business? I know that buying the gear and hard work would eventually get me there, but that takes years. And then more years to let *that* money grow. Shit, everybody knows that it takes money to make money. His mind wandered, thinking about what he could do with a bit of scratch.

“Andrew? Are you still there?”

“I guess I’d be interested in hearing what you got. Here’s my cell phone number. Text me the address and give me until Saturday to get down to you.”

“Sounds great. I’m anxious to finally meet.”

Andrew's excitement about the venture was quickly curtailed by reality. Great, now I gotta buy more cell minutes, and wherein the hell am I going to get the green for that? He mused as his boss entered the building. Watching the man’s deliberate, purposeful stride gave Andrew an idea. After sketching out the situation to his boss, he managed to get 2k from his boss, who *was* kind enough to only hit him up for 18 on the VIG—but what the hell, Andrew thought. It’s just a 60 dayer anyway. So, it’s off to Georgia I go.

He decided not to take his Harley on a good chance it might not make it. After searching the net for deals, he bit on one of those travel specials that included a room and a car. Even though his land-lady Sandy would disapprove, he used her kid’s federal ID to check-in. She had caught him once before using the kid’s ID to get a credit card. In no uncertain terms, she made clear that her wrath would rain down on him for eternity he ever used it again. Not that her shit scared him, for she’d been like a mother to him. After all, she did take him in after his prison stint, so he didn't want to disappoint her, but this *was* a business deal. He promised himself to give her at least half, no, a quarter . . . well, at least 20% of whatever he scored from the inheritance. He searched Google for the address Kara had given him and was surprised that it was a bar.

The roughness of the bar was all too familiar, and after scanning the place, it occurred to him that he didn’t know what she looked like. As he approached the u-shaped bar, this chic, who must be her, waved him over to a corner booth. He was surprised to see that she looked more biker than a banker. Decked out in black leather and lace, she sure looked the part with her dark-red streaked hair and goth makeup, right down to the red skull tat over an ample breast. She was not particularly attractive, and though slightly overweight, she had nice facial lines, but the mouth was not quite right. Kara explained that she would be both author and financier of their little caper, and he would be the builder. She sketched the plan out over a few beers.

“We’re going to hit this place using what’s referred to as a ‘Morning Glory’ robbery. As the weekday manager, I work Monday through Thursday, so on Thursday afternoon, with the disguised van, you will park behind the bank at precisely 3:30, wearing a FedEx uniform. You’ll then be taken to the kitchenette and hid in a special corner base cabinet. The next morning, when the weekend manager arrives at 7:30am, you will force her to key the right sequence, which I will provide, to the vault gate. After about a two-minute delay, the vault will go into its maintenance cycle and automatically open. You will have exactly seven minutes to move about twenty bundles of 100-dollar bills before the vault resets and closes.”

“That’s not a lot of time. How far away is the van? What about security?”

“Don’t worry about the security—I have that handled. As far as moving the money . . . well, it doesn’t matter, the van’s a ruse.”

“Come again?”

“The van will only have staging boxes with a couple of loose hundred-dollar bills inside.” She stared at him for a few moments. “Look, we don’t have the time or the inclination to risk this on some valorous bystander screwing it up. You will move the bundles into the storage room off the rear entrance.”

He didn’t understand her plan or her word choices. “What, like, you have some secret hiding place or something?”

“No, it doesn’t have to be that complicated. A simple tarp will do nicely. I will move the bundles on Sunday to a secure place in the basement.”

“Won’t they . . . ”

“No. The last place they will search is the bank itself. You just have to make sure the exit cameras are sprayed out, but leave them on. If just one of them is disconnected or loses power, the alarm will sound.”

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Kara watched his gaze shift past her. The kid Andrew, distracted by some cool bikes that just roared up, was oblivious. He’s not getting the gist, so I’d better spell it out. She sighed. “Look, the van will be there, and the money won’t.” Kara leaned back. “The authorities will put it all together on their own.” Just as I’m sure you won’t, my little stud muffin. He sure is damn attractive. I’ve always liked the bad boys and not the smart boys. If intelligence is the new sexy, I’m out. Never went for all that talking anyway. She smiled, draining a shot of Jack.

“What’s so funny?” Andrew looked like a lost puppy.

“Your hide-out.” She grinned mischievously.

“My what?”

“Look, you're going to have a problem with your facial ID. Since *you are* posing as a FedEx employee, you can’t really wear a mask, can you?” You’ll have to keep the rim of your cap in line with the security camera. I’ll show you this later, but eventually, they *will* ID you. I’m counting on the fact that they will waste a lot of time trying to track you—like I did. With no traceable background since your juvee prison stint, you're perfect for the part. We just need to put you to a place where you can ride this out for about six months. Then, when the pressure lessens, we split the green and the scene—each with at least 850K or more. You can do the van makeover, right?”

“Sure, no problem. I’ve been doin’ shit like that all my life.”

“I thought so,” Kara ordered a couple more shots.

“So, like ah . . . where’s this cool place you want me to hold up in?”

“I’ve prepaid a six-month stay in this retirement community in Bay Village, Ohio.” She watched the idea dawn across his face before it settled back into a stupid grin. He has *no* idea, she thought. Men are such simple creatures. She smiled back at him, throwing in her Southern charm as a kicker. “Let's get a couple more beers and catch up. I don’t know *anything* about your side of the family.”

The Bank she’d selected was a sub-collecting center for banks in the Atlanta district. Every quarter, or three months, the other banks would transfer their worn notes to this facility to be accounted for and moved to the Feds. The Bank used the high-speed BPS 3000— Banknote Processing System. Invented by a German firm, the BPS 3000 was equipped with sophisticated sensors that rapidly scan bills for common defects like soiling, graffiti, rents or mutualizations, limpness, and authenticity. Most of the smaller notes, cycled more frequently because they are used more regularly, go to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The Franklins get cycled to the Federal Reserve. There are usually 17-20 1000 c-note bundles equating about 1.7 to 2 million in cash. The week they planned, this week should have slightly over 35 wrapped bundles—around 3.5 million.

Over the next three weeks, Kara and Andrew had meticulously worked over the plan’s details. After Andrew had completed his retirement disguise and the detailing of the van, they toured the Babbling Brooks retirement community’s facilities.

It was all going to work beautifully for Andrew, and that was cool, but what was even more remarkable was Kara’s new look. Playing the part of his daughter, she wore a red and black checkered conservative business suit. Now a light reddish-blond, her hair was pulled back, setting off tastefully sparse burnt amber makeup and red lipstick. Somehow her lips were thinner than before. No longer sporting a fat crooked mouth, he thought her quite attractive with the subtle wire-framed rectangle glasses. Pointing out the mannerisms of the residents, she had Andrew read up on the psychological traits of people in assisted living. The problems retirement workers had in dealing with them, and why.

After days of constant interaction with his education, Kara grew to respect the agility of his mind. With only a little internet searching, and her applied logic, it seemed there was little he could not comprehend. Andrew was, by some measure, the quickest mind she had ever encountered. That said, he remained vastly naïve to the workings of the world. His questions often amazed her that someone could live in this world yet be so disconnected. For all his quick study, it was apparent that he was just a twenty-five-year-old ignorant child—and that child was almost an hour late.

“Hi Kara, darling,” he smiled, strolling through her open office door.

“You're late. I was supposed to close everything up by 3:30.” She busied herself before

looking up. “Nice disguise.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Setting a FedEx package on her desk, he plopped into a chair. “I just thought you should know that plans have changed.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m taking out the withdrawal tonight, well . . . now in fact.”

“Of all the stupid . . . ” Kara began to stand, then slowly sat back down when she saw the knife.

Andrew grinned under the rim of his downturned hat. “Yeah, I got to thinking about your plan to leave the money here while making off like I got it. It kinda leaves me in a spot where I have to trust you.” When he sat, he kept his face obscured from the camera’s viewing line by the brim of his hat—just like she had taught him. “So I was a-thinkin’, what’s to prevent you from fingering me and keeping all the Franklins. Four-point-seven’s a lot of scratch, and . . . well, you’d be holdin’ all the cards and such.”

Kara leaned back in her chair. I took an effort to keep the shock off her face. “How are you gonna stash it, boy? Like you said, it’s a lot of bills.”

“I’m not that stupid, ya know. Like the ones in the vault, a stack of one thousand c-notes is 4.3 inches tall and weighs 1000 grams or 2.2 pounds. I figure one 2-mil cube is roughly 1’ x 1’ x 3.5’ tall and weighs about 44 lbs. That’s about 6 min to move ‘em out, shrink-wrap & haul them to the van.

“What do you mean we?” For the camera, she pretended to write something down. “I hope you’re not so stupid as to bring in help.”

“Nah, don’t have to. I’ll use your staff, of course. Figure four people cause I gotta leave one strapped to the bomb. I brought a hand-cart, so two minutes a trip, and plenty of time cause. . .”

“What bomb?” Kara interrupted, turning slightly away from the camera.

“ . . . truck’s in place, and I’ll be sprayin’ out the exit cameras on the way, so we’ll just move it tonight instead of tomorrow. Of course, that means you’ll spend the night here instead of me. I think that kitchen cabinet you rigged is a great place for you to hold out. Of course, you’ll have to come up with some reason for everybody to stay until morning. I suppose you could say there’s some kind of trigger thingy on the bomb or something.”

“You're risking everything. What makes you think I’ll cooperate?” Kara was having trouble staying calm. Then she exploded. *“What bomb?”*

“Watch your temper, darling.” Andrew pulled a metal box out of the FedEx box with two straps attached. “You’ll need to put this on.”

“Why are you doing this? What did I do to you?” Kara instinctively stalled for time. She knew she was screwed. There’s no option left but to cooperate. He still needs me to get away with this. Besides, I can always deal with this idiot later.

“After seeing you all dolled up in Ohio, I got to thinkin’, that’s your real persona, not the biker one.” He pointed at her. “Which means either you’re conning me or just cleverly cautious.” He shrugged, “Either way, I can’t trust you. ” Without looking up, his eyes indicated to the camera behind him. “If we talk anymore. It’ll look suspicious.”

Kara knew the truth of that. “I agree. I was only playing it tight.” She picked up the bomb box. “So, what’s next?”

“Now, after you put that on, you can do some more of that great acting you do. It’s your bomb alibi, so do it with some meaning. Now get these people organized. I gotta be out of here before rush hour.” He stood, heading for the door. “Oh, and I almost forgot,” He turned back to her. “Don’t jar the box. There’s a real bomb in there.”

Kara didn’t move.

“What?” He looked at her quizzically, shielding his mouth. “You know we’re still on camera.” He reminded her for emphasis.

“How do I get mine?”

“Oh, right. I will leave exactly 1.685 mil, in a warehousing locker by the Akron-Canton Airport. Just like before, you contact me when it’s clear, then I’ll give you the name of the package carrier and the pick-up codes.”

“We agreed to half. There are 43-10k bundles.”

“Ok, fine. 4.3-mil less 65k—my half from the house sale—and remember, you offered to pay all expenses if I agreed to this. So I’ll leave you ah . . . . 2-mil, 85k.” He smiled at the easy math.

“So, not so stupid after all,” Kara stood. “You cross me, and I’ll burn you.”

“No need for threats, darling. We both have skin in this game. It’s just that now, I’m the one dealing. So, let’s be a good girl and look terrified for our future critics.” He stepped slowly back to let her pass before grabbing her arm, slicing the knifepoint on the side of her neck just hard enough to draw a little blood. “You know, it’s for effect.”

Wincing in pain, Kara’s fear was suddenly quite genuine.

A Babbling Brooks transport mini-bus pulled up to the community's main entrance four days later, and along with three others, Andrew had to wait for a wheelchair to be off-loaded. It was just after 3:20pm, and his check-in was scheduled at 4:00.

Andrew needed to call his boss’s cell and let him know he wouldn’t be coming back. His boss was a low-level crook who did stolen auto cut-up jobs for some local carjacks. Using some of the money from the job, he had wired the 2k he owed plus the VIG, adding another two-large because he needed some things cleaned up. It would be safe to have him scrub the few trace elements of his past. He didn’t have his cell phone because he knew they could be traced, so he used the communities outside line.

“Yeah, Harvey? It's Drew. How're things hanging?”

“Thick and low. How your gig goin’ man, you almost done? Did you get the pay?” Harvey was not known for his subtilities.

“Yeah, it’s all good. Look, man, I wired you the loan plus the VIG. I also sent yah another two-large. I need you to do me some favors.”

“Another 2K, huh? Who do I gotta kill?” Harvey *was* known for his dark humor.

“You know Sandy, right. The chick from Benny’s? I owe her three-small for back-rent. Tell her she can keep or sell my stuff—I don’t care. Also, tell her that she can keep the car and give her boy, little Brian, my bike. I forged his name on the title anyway.” Andrew also wired 443k—less a small 3% transaction fee—for Sandy through an untraceable laundering connection of Harvey’s. It was a ridiculous amount of money, but it *wa*s the 20% he decided upon that was her worth—now that he was in a position to act honorably. Funny what a little money can do to people.

“Sure,” Harvey laughed, “What’s up, you not comin’ back? Don’t like us no more?” eH He was a little surprised, and not much surprised him.

“Na, I got enough from the old lady’s will to start over. Thinkin’ on getting me some schoolin’ at this place out East. Ran into an old relative at the funeral who says I can bunk with ‘em if I go to school.”

“Sounds cool. I always figgered you to be a smart one. So good tides, and uh . . . where’s the cash at?”

“I’ll send it through Google Wallet,” Andrew joked. “Don’t worry, I got all the info you gave me. ”

Hanging up the phone, he felt oddly relieved now that weight was off. Maybe things really are on the up, he thought. Harvey would keep his end up ‘cause he’s not the type that messes around. Everybody knows Harvey always sees the job through. Head down, he headed over to registration, consciously slipping into the persona he would have to play for the next six months.

“It is good to finally have you with us, Mr. Featherstone. I am happy to report that we can make the room change your daughter suggested and furnish it per her request. I believe she has scheduled your cable and internet for tomorrow. Unfortunately, the refrigerator will not be delivered until Thursday.”

“Room changes?” Andrew canted his head with a practiced movement. He wanted the motion to appear as a habit from years of only being able to afford one hearing aid. “I didn’t ask for no damn changes. I hate changes.” His eyes glared out from under thick white bushy brows.

“It was requested by her because, on your last visit, she felt that you were having trouble with the elevator.” She patiently replied. “We had a cancellation, and a first-floor room became available. Now, if you prefer, you can change rooms later, but this one is closer to the dining hall, and faces west, so the morning sun should not bother you.”

“I don’t like the morning sun. Like I told that other girl, whats-her-name, the first time.” Andrew sulked as if no one really cared.

“Yes, you did.” She cheerily responded. “This one does not have the morning sun.”

“It doesn’t?” He perked up, straining at the harness hidden underneath his clothes. It restricted his movements while keeping his back slightly bent. “Well, I guess it will be ok then.”

“Well, great. This nice young man is Johnny. He will assist you to your room,” She motioned for Johnny to take his baggage. “Johnny has been here for many years and can help you get acquainted with the grounds. This is your residence phone. Just press the number four, and Johnny will answer.”

“Ok, but I probably won’t remember that.” He smiled, “Most people I remember are from their faces, especially the cute ones.” He winked.

“Yes, sir, if I may please?” Johnny took the residence phone from his hand. “Just press any number, and a picture of that person shows up.” He pressed 0, and the receptionist’s face appeared with her name under it. “Then just tap the picture and . . . ” The receptionist’s phone buzzed, “That person is called.”

“What if it's at night? Do you answer at night?”

Johnny smiled, “That’s a good question, sir, and the answer is yes, up until ten o’clock. After ten o’clock, the call is routed to the nighttime emergency dispatch, and her name is Melissa. The daytime assistant for your section is Paul, he comes on at seven o’clock, so in the morning after seven o’clock, his face will be shown.”

“Sounds pretty confusing, I don’t know how you expect me to remember all this, but I’ll give it the old college try.” He winced as he swung his right fist. Already chaffing, the harness was rubbing painfully.

The receptionist helpfully offered. “The instructions are posted in your room, Mr. Featherstone, and Johnny here will help you familiarize yourself with all of our amenities.”

“Well, Ok. Just as long as the guy remembers that . . . that I’m not a morning person, and I don’t want to be disturbed before ten a.m.”

“Yes, sir.” Johnny began to place the baggage on the cart, “Please, if you will follow me.” He headed off, eager to get moving but patient with the fact that the one hundred and twenty-five-foot walk would take a while—it always did.

After they had rounded a couple of bends, Andrew allowed himself a smile. Well, so far, so good, he thought. Then another thought occurred to him. I wonder why Kara called for the room change without telling me. I don’t think she’s that clever to do it just for the sake of the ruse. Authority. She wants to establish her authority here. I’ll bet she’s left special instructions to be notified if anything changes. Ok, I guess *that’s* clever. They will keep tabs on me for her. I wonder if I can find out who her spies are? He passed by a book room with a couple of tables where some bored people worked at a puzzle. Another potential aspect of this new reality suddenly solidified. Shit, now comes the hard part, I have to live here for six months, no riding, no smoking, no binging, *no women*. But I am getting what, around 370K a month? Tax-free? I can live with that, but how in the hell will I live with this? The harness straps were rubbing his skin raw. I'm sure there's plenty of talcum powder in this place.

Johnny glanced back to check on Andrew’s progress. Andrew met his gaze with a look of irritation. Johnny turned to face him and walked backward. “Tonight, the weekly announcements for your section are in the Hamilton room. It would be good for you to meet some of the other residents in your living section.” Johnny informed him, stealing a glance forward. “There’s a couple of former engineers you could talk with. They’ve both had very successful careers. The one guy Fred, he’s from Illinois—a top guy at GE for forty-six years, and this other guy was some big cheese for NASA.”

“Yes, that’s nice,” Andrew replied, the skin irritation adding a touch of reality to his cranky tone. “But I was a civil engineer; there’s a big difference there, sonny. Hey, look out there.” He pointed ahead as a gurney had just turned a corner further up.

They politely stopped along the sidewall of the four-foot carpeted corridor to make a passing lane. Sitting slightly upright on the gurney was an elderly woman with black hair streaked with light blue. She was being pushed by a young red-headed medical attendant who paused to talk with Johnny.

Andrew was taken aback by the intensity of the young girl’s eyes. They seemed to glow with a greenish-grey hue he’d never seen before. Then the old woman muttered.

 “Excuse me?” He looked down at the elderly woman, quickly glancing back at the medical attendant, who had her own conversation going.

Again, the elderly woman spoke, the tone scarcely audible. Her eyes were closed, and there was little movement in her lips. They trembled with faint unintelligible utterances.

Johnny had noticed Andrew bending over the elderly woman. “This is Mrs. Connelly. She’s your new next-door neighbor.”

“Good to meet you, Mrs. Connelly. My name is Andy. I hope to see you later at the meeting.” He extended his hand palm down in an old-fashion way emulating the movies Kara had him watch. On his second look, she didn’t seem so old. There was something quite enchanting about her—just like the old movies.

“Oh, she can’t hear you.” The attendant replied with a matter-of-fact tone. “This woman’s care status is being upgraded from OB-3 to OB-2, which will require remote nighttime observation.” The attendant addressed Johnny. “She’s on some strong medication for pain. Unfortunately, she has a condition that requires her to use it more frequently these days.”

“I’ll see to it,” Johnny winked, catching her look.

“But I heard her say something.” Andrew persisted, immediately regretting it. He needed to avoid unnecessary communication while he was here to keep his cover from getting too much attention.

“Maybe you heard another resident. These bare walls can sometimes play tricks with some hearing aids. We are in the process of installing spot acoustic panels throughout the facility.” Johnny offered politely.

“Yes, yes, that must be it. I’ve had that same problem in hospital corridors.” Andrew agreed, absently touching the device on the back of his ear. I heard the old woman alright, WTF. Sleeping beauty must be dreaming, Andrew thought, quickly changing the subject.

“And what is this pretty woman’s name? Klo?” He read off her tag. “Well, it's nice meetin’ you Klo.” He took her hand with both of his, gently raising them twice. “Do you also work here?” His eyes were down, careful to never make direct contact for long.

“No, I work for a hospice company over in Westlake,” she smiled. Her freckled face radiant. She seemed to glow from the attention. Almost all the older men played the suave gentleman game with her, which was one of the reasons she loved her job.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to have such a pretty girl walk these dreary halls. Irish, are you not?”

“No. I’m Welsh, or at least my grandparents were. I’m an American . . . I guess.” She blushed.

“You guess?” Johnny repeated playfully.

“Okay*, I know*.” She glanced at him happily before returning her shining eyes to Andrew. “My name is pronounced Klo-ee.”

“Oh, please forgive me, Chloe—that’s a beautiful name.”

“It was my Grandmother’s.” She beamed.

“I’ll bet she wasn’t as beautiful as you.” Releasing her hand, he turned to Johnny. “Well, Johnny, is it far? I’m afraid with all the excitement I’ve grown a little tired.”

“Not far. See yah, Chloe.” Johnny resumed his previous pace.

After arriving at the room, Johnny mechanically went through the new resident routine, as he had done many times before. Then, Andrew was finally alone. Before addressing the harness burns, he needed to check all three apartment rooms for possible cameras or monitors. There were no lenses or transparent strips anywhere, no electronics. The bathroom search ended with Johnny staring in the mirror. Man, I look old . . . snap out of it, boy you’ve work to do, he chided. Well, he thought, stripping off his shirt, Kara said it’s against the law for them to use audio devices without consent. And what about Kara? She could have hired anyone to rig the room. No, she didn’t have the time, but tomorrow I’ll cancel whoever she called for the internet install— just in case. Removing the Phonak hearing aid, he took off the harness to stretch out his cramping back—the skin was raw on his right shoulder. This is gonna suck, but I’ll have to get used to it. Actors wear this shit all the time, and they say you get used to it after a while. He walked into the kitchen, checking out the stove and microwave. These were the appliances that came with the place, so he collapsed onto the couch after checking them out for electronic devices. Huh, only one chair. Well, I guess there’s no need for more since I won’t be having many guests. He stretched out his legs, placing his hands behind his head. What the hell was that business with sleeping beauty? I know what I heard. Shit, they should have heard it, too. My earpiece wasn’t turned up that loud. Hearing aids were terribly expensive, so he had experimented with a fake one, but he couldn’t hear shit with it in, so he bought the real deal.

Later that evening, after a surprisingly good dinner, he had made sure to make it to the floor meeting—every agonizingly stupid moment of it. Entering the meeting room, he scanned for a good group to join. Not knowing where to start, he looked for people who might know how to have fun. After looking over the room twice, he was surprised at the grouchy attitude that permeated the room. A sudden burst of laughter caught his attention from a group of four men gathered at a long table in the back.

“Hi guys,” He greeted them as he walked up. “I’m Andrew.” He held out his hand. He felt awkward when the closest man, right shoulder clearly atrophied, had to shake it backward with his left.

“Hi Andrew, I’m Fred. This is Mike, Carl, and Robert—or Ro’bear,” he rolled the r's sound. “With I think in French means robber.” He deadpanned.

“Hi.” He forced a smile, the reference catching him off-guard.

“Knock it off, you clown,” Mike offered his hand. “Good to meet you, and sorry about Fred here. He’s a Republican, so all he understands is hick-speak. We try to keep the conversation within two syllables.”

“Okay,” Andrew's smile livened up. “I’m in.” Liking them immediately, Andrew appreciated the instant camaraderie.

“I’m Carl.” The man offered a short salute. “I don’t really know these guys. I’ve only been here two years.”

“Faites confiance au vent,” Robert stated, taking his hand, “ça vous tient régulier.” He finished with a playful sparkle.

“Sure,” Andrew looked over to Fred, eager to join in the bantering. “He sounds like some longwinded Frenchman to me.”

They all laughed uproariously.

Andrew's smile began to wane. It was not *that* funny. “I’m not sure if I should laugh with you or myself.”

Fred’s tone was reassuring. “No offense, we just haven’t heard that response yet—it was a good one.” He started to giggle.

 Andrew looked quizzically at Robert, who was wiping his eyes.

“What I said . . . ” Robert began, trying to restrain giggles, “What I said was: Trust in the wind, it means you’re regular.”

Andrew's smile returned as he nodded perceptively. He did not get the contextual use of the word regular, but he did understand the reference to wind. “You guys seem to be a sunny island in a very stormy sea.” He indicated the somberness of the rest of the room. “Is there some issue that needs to be dealt with? These people do not seem happy.”

“Welcome to the Twilight Zone.” Carl conceded.

Fred quipped. “You oughta know . . . ” He playfully punched him.

“If only Rod *were here*,” Robert added thoughtfully. “At least he could shed some light on the reason for this episode.” Mike and Fred both shook their heads in somber resignation.

Having never heard of The Twilight Zone, Andrew had no idea what they were talking about. Apparently, some guy Rod has passed away, but I better not ask. I’m sure they will tell me if there’s anything to it.e decided t”“””’’’’

“So, from whence do you hail, fair squire?” Carl asked while flourishing a courtly bow.

Recognizing the slight hesitation in Andrew, Fred quickly added, “I’m from Aurora, Illinois—an engineer by trade.”

“Oh, I’m from Indy, Civil Engineering was my trade, but after I retired, I worked in my son’s auto-body shop.”

“Well, that explains it: I wondered where your vernacular fostered.” Robert looked away.

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t mind Robert . . . he fancies himself as a linguist. He was in speech therapy before they realized his speeches weren’t all that therapeutically sound.” Carl explained with a deadpan that could only be pulled off by an engineer. Andrew just nodded. He didn’t get the joke.

“All seriousness aside,” Mike waved his arm at Robert, “complicated terms often confuse him. He once thought that learning a machine language would help him understand his car better.” They laughed together without Andrew joining in.

So,” Fred took over, noticing Andrews's discomfort, he stopped the playful mood. “What did you do in your son’s garage: bodywork, framework, painting, that sort of thing?”

“Well, I suppose all of it at one time or another, but I specialized in detailing. You know, giving cars a tat-job.”

“Tat-job?” Fred was confused with the term.

“Yeah, uh . . . like, tattoos. Detailing images.” Andrew was relieved to see someone approach the podium—he was on the verge of faking his own death to get out of the conversation.

“So, an artist then?” Fred pressed.

“Yes, of a sort. We use a computer imaging device that creates decals. But I also do—have done—free-hand airbrush work. But today, with dynamic auto-painting, you can take any photograph and have it rendered in one of the World Master’s styles . . . like ah, Van Gogh, Monet, or Rembrandt.”

“Really?” Carl was surprised, “We had imaging software at NASA, but nothing that sophisticated.”

“Yeah, it’s like down to the brush style, even copying the Master’s use of shading and such. It’s pretty trick,” Andrew looked down, “as the kids would say.”

They all laughed.

Andrew noted that the person at the podium must have forgotten something and left the room. *Shit!* Now Andrew had to shift the attention paid to him. “So, what did you do for NASA, Carl? I mean before . . . ”

“Oh, nothing as interesting as that.” Carl looked down.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Robert interjected, “This guy here pretty much wrote the book on orbital mechanics.”

“Oh, hell. That’s all been vastly improved upon,” Carl immediately deflected the statement, “they’ve gone light years beyond my work.”

“Nice pun.” Robert countered, “You gotta watch this guy . . . he’s as subtle as a meteor shower. The work he so quickly discounts only happens to be the computational basis for *all* of NASA’s orbital computer models.”

Noticing Carl’s discomfort, Andrew politely switched the conversational focus.

“So, what area did you work in, Robert?”

“Equity finance and some acquisition stuff. Mostly working with commercial real estate.”

“Yes,” Carl charged back in. “One could say he wrote the book on equity finance.”

“Well, that’s certainly an exaggeration.” Robert’s gaze was oddly blank as he explained the reason behind the comment. “In the 70s, traditional lending practices were quite challenging due to the high-interest rates. Back then, stock values were the primary factor in determining company equity.” He couched the statement to keep it simple. “Besides making many other people rich, I didn’t do anything different from the people do today. Just adapt to the reality of the markets and from a realistic basis of market value.”

“Like what?” Andrew didn’t understand it, nor did he care to. He just wanted someone else to do the talking

“Well . . . ” Robert shrugged, not wanting the attention, but appreciating the opportunity to use knowledge. “Basically, market valuations of capital reflect inflows and outflows of debt and equity finance. Changes in the valuations of existing capital assets are dependent on current information. Meaning they must constantly update the value. At the time, most companies were still valued in terms of net finance, not their aggregate worth . . . ” He looked off for a moment, “value being in terms of perceived value, not actual.” Robert’s gaze returned for a brief moment before shifting to the podium. “This caused a lot of problems in unrealistic valuation . . .” His stoic expression suddenly broke into a smile. “Hey, I think they are finally ready, gentlemen. We should take our seats.”

Andrew was puzzled. It was as though these men were embarrassed to talk up their shit. It was like they no longer mattered.

The speaker began to drone on about upcoming events, past winners of some dumb-ass games, and the next concert featuring a tuba soloist. A fricking tuba soloist? Andrew smiled. What in the hell did I step into? Keeping his head down, he dispassionately took in the surroundings. This is gonna kill me, but remember, ole boy, you’re free six months, he reminded himself for like, the third time that evening. Free with a new life, new ID, new everything, *and* enough money to get really rich. Hey, I wonder if I could pump that wet noodle Robert for some investment advice?

The rest of the meeting was excruciatingly dull. The four men he initially met were apparently monitors of some sort because they were now walking around the room talking to the separate groups. He politely acknowledged other members for the rest of the hour, limiting conversations to name, former occupation, and birth state. He was shocked at how long an hour could last. It’s like pulling teeth around here. No, it’s worse, he thought dejectedly. It’s more like sitting around waiting for your teeth to fall out. Afterward, Mike and Carl discussed the evening on their way back to the residence. The four men Andrew thought were monitors were actually Stewards, voted in by either popularity or ability—but oddly never both. The number of stewards varied from a minimum of four to six, depending on the stewards themselves. If another was needed, the four stewards would nominate a candidate for Section to confirm.

“That Andrew guy seem okay to you?” Carl opened up what they both were thinking about.

“I guess so. Why?” Mike expected this from his NASA friend, who was overly observant.

“Well, you’re the shrink, you tell me?”

“You mean his reaction to the robber quip?”

“No, I didn’t catch that. I was talking about the deflections. After talking with us, little was said to anyone else. Even Pat said something about it to me.”

“Yeah, Pat also talked to me. I told him it’s not unusual for someone to be guarded in a new environment. Maybe he’s just overly cautious.”

“He didn’t seem all that cautious with us. He seemed eager.” A shadow passed over Mike’s face. “I can see you’re bothered as well.”

“And maybe your reading too much into it, again.” Mike looked away.

“Bull, what’s on your mind boy? Out with it.” Carl pressed.

“Well, I was just surprised by his mannerisms. They belie his age.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t know . . . he just seems a lot younger than he appears. Call it an aura.”

“Ha, you don’t go it for *that* crap,”

“There are more things under the sun, dear fellow. Besides, you engineers are all the same: if you can’t break it into smaller pieces, it doesn’t exist.”

“As we’ve discussed, it’s not how excited the particle is but the size of your atom, dear boy.” They both laughed, continuing down the hall.

Safely back in his room, Andrew sat down at the kitchen counter to chill when his father suddenly popped into his mind. Before I met these guys, he was like the oldest person I knew. I didn’t know my grandparents—but who gives a shit about that. It’s like what that guy Robert said: ya gotta adapt to the time you’re in. Who your parents were or theirs don’ matter. It’s what you are born into that matters—anybody who says different is selling somethin’. It’s like those genetic history scams, he laughed. Like your life is gonna somehow change because you find out there was some distant relative who were smarter or some kinda important back then? It’s stupid. Shit, I wish I had a beer. He began to pace, stewing in the past because there were no distractions.

Genetics *are* stupid. Just because my father’s an idiot, don’ make me one. I know he gamed people—mostly women—‘cause love only makes you silly. That idiot always got busted, though, lying his ass off. What did step-martyr two call it? Featherbedding? Yeah, I like that. The toad was a useless gamester. Step-martyr three called him a misguided saint, but she was the one misguided. One of those stupid religious types who always think they can help you. Ha, she couldn’t help herself, even when she saw the answer right in the mirror—she’s her own worst problem. Every miserable day of her feeble existence, there she was, trying to save everybody. What a dolt. Honey, if you want to save a drowning man, ya gotta make sure your own head stays above water, or you’ll go down too. Why do that? He argued. We only have so much time on this earth, so why anyone would want to expend effort on some useless turd like him is beyond me. He smirked, singing part of the Journey classic. “*Gotta be love*.”

A sound he could not make out from the next room snapped him from his angry revelry. It sounded like some type of alarm that rose in intensity before dissipating. Walking over to the wall, he listened intently to chanting or singing. It’s like Spanish or French, he mused. Sounds like sleeping beauty must have her TV setting wrong. Five minutes later, it started again, repeating three times. Curious, he decided to track it with the wall clock. A countdown?. Yeah, it repeats like a chant or something. He waited. There it is again. It’s got to be some kind of prayer because she sure didn’t look like one of those Swamis.

He closed his eyes, mentally timing the pace. Almost thirty seconds now. There, it repeats again—right on the mark. What the hell? How can I . . . ? Damn, use the hearing aids, you idiot. They’re the canal type with the external sensor. Grateful for the distraction, he held the hearing aid to the wall. It didn’t do much.

Shit.

He put it on like it was designed and held his ear against the wall. The words finally came through clear enough. The woman was singing a song he’d never heard in a mournful tone: “The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”

He quickly pulled back, ashamed by his intrusion. It was obviously some prayer.

Treasury Department Offices

Washington DC

Secret Service agent James Caperneski felt frayed, like a flag that had suffered from little too much buffeting. Feeling all of thirty-six going on fifty, he had less than three months left before he was rotated out either to the FBI or Home Land Security. He hadn't decided yet. All he knew was the fieldwork was coming to an end because theTreasury Dept didn’t let you stay out past thirty-seven. It was something to do with risk-taking.

Just off a one-year counterfeiting investigation, his primary concern was finishing this new case. Time had chased him on the last one, and the anxiety of not finishing had driven him down. It also had made him a bear to be around. Still, as always, the metrics of hard work, and some dumb luck, had carried the day. So, after a solid year of intense fieldwork, his team finally wrapped up a significant counterfeiting organization that spanned three states. Just six days ago, when he was seriously looking to blow some vay-cay on much-needed rest, his boss reeled him back in.

“Don’t worry, JC, this is the FBI’s gig. But I do need my most experienced officer there on the preliminaries.” His boss had explained. “At worst, you may wind up consulting in a joint departmental effort. Besides, it’ll be a good change from the shit you just came through. I want you to just get ‘em organized and pointed in the right direction. That’s all you really need to do, then you can blow off ‘til it’s time for your transfer.”

“Preliminaries, that’s all you got to do—maybe some light consulting . . .,” Agent JC angrily parroted, taking the stairs down three at a time. I should have known better—it’s government, he fumed. ‘I need my most experienced agent,’ he mocked. I can’t believe I fell for that soft-peddle crap—the most gullible agent is more like it.

*Shit.* He swerved, almost knocking some poor lady down the stairs. When she gave him the finger, all he could do was smile. What a world . . .

Nor clear on who had jurisdiction, the preliminary meeting had lasted for three straight hours. After deciding on a technicality, it landed in the lap of the Treasury Dept. From the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, right on down to the freaking delivery contractor. Defining the team’s role took the rest of the day. He knew that the internal investigation would drag on with everybody protecting their ass whenever a bank got hit. His boss was nowhere near sympathetic. After JC had phoned in the sit-rep, he got formally assigned to the job.

 “What? Am I the only asshole who works here?” He bitched on the way to his car. Now, I gotta set up a freaking command center—in frickin’ Dalton of all places. At least I’ll have the freedom of the field again. That last week of desk time was like being sentenced to Statesville. For a short-timer, how in the hell did this shit fall in my lap? Prelim my ass. Those FBI guys sure know how to skate. With his sandy locks blowing in the wind, Greg, his younger partner, waited by the car. Greg's fresh collegiate-like vogue contrasted with his conservative “agent man” dress of a dark high-cut suit and grey-streaked dark hair. No wonder the chicks all called him pops. “Right time in the wrong fricking place.” He snarled, yanking up hard on the door lever. It was still locked. “Shit,” He hit the unlock, glaring at his partner of three years. “Don’t you say a fricking thing.”

Greg just laughed. “What the hell happened in there? I mean, what took so long?” He took off his dun-colored standard-issue trench coat before getting in. “You said you’d be done after lunch. That was three hours ago.”

JC vented as he got in the car. “In the old days,” he air quoted, “they would just cite the law and be done with it. But today, everybody’s either too concerned to step on someone's dick or, Heaven forbid, take some frickin’ responsibility. My guess? It’s the latter.”

“I thought this the Bureau’s turf? What the hell is going on?” Greg knew they’d been assigned when he saw JC enter the garage.

“Because technically, the money was out of circulation after the voucher was released.” Moments after the engine caught, they were racing out of the lot while still strapping in. “Prematurely, mind you, but released all the same. The pick-up was scheduled for last Friday—same day the bank got hit. But the driver got routed to a different bank by mistake. He calls in a pick-up of some other notes, and the first bank’s voucher gets released. So, once the vouchers are released, money’s technically out of circulation and becomes Treasury property—our property. Oddly enough, that makes the notes now counterfeit.”

“Then what’s our opening move?” Greg just shrugged. With JC, he knew better than to presume anything.

“I need you in Georgia tonight. I will join you on Wednesday. There’s already a third-party investigation team on-site, and I don’t want them stomping all over the traces. I want to see if I can get that data-whiz chick—whats-her-name—Sherri? You know, the one who rooted out that distribution network in Florida last month.”

“It’s Terri, and yeah, she sure was a sharp one—cute too,” Greg glanced at his partner, who was already divorced when he met him. In three years, JC was yet to take any serious date. He gave his boss a look.

“Really . . . ” JC caught it. “She could be my daughter, fer heavens sake. Besides anyone under thirty speaks a different language, I’m just too far out on the establishment side.”

JC was second-generation Ukrainian and not known for giving allegiances lightly. Born in the US, the country not only saved his family from an oppressive regime but afforded them every opportunity to live free. As far as governments go, JC saw little difference between an oppressive one and a criminal—both robbed people of their dignity. He liked this job because he got to catch some of the oppressors. Ultimately, he felt he owed something back—that’s what patriotism was all about.

“Look, JC, people can always be moved with the right lever,” Greg rubbed his forehead with a gesture of futility. When it came to dating, he considered himself something of a matchmaker. “Isn’t that what you’re constantly preaching? Maybe someday you might—just might—meet someone silly enough to lighten that iron load you carry around called purpose.” He sighed. It was always a trial to budge JC; he was just too damn stubborn.

 “It’s not like I’ve had a lot of time for meaningful romance, whatever the hell that is.” JC countered somewhat defensively. “Besides, we got some work to do. I’ll need you to set up an investigation center in Dalton,” JC’s look ended all argument. “I know we could do it remotely, but I want to start this one in-field. The locals have been on this case for two days, so we’ll need to play in *their* backyard. We need to get tight with them.”

Greg was surprised. “You want to use the local police facility?”

“No, too distracting. We will need a high-speed data-comm for the biometric scans, so set it up in a hotel room. See if there’s an Embassy chain nearby. They usually have the fastest wi-fi. Setup two tracings teams because this has all the markings of an inside job from the prelim info.”

“Anybody you want checked first?”

“Not really. Set the usual data search rankings on employees, and look for any sudden life changes from a year prior. Let’s include all branches, in-state or not. ”

Two days later, JC pulled into the Sherriff’s Office investigation center in Whitfield County, GA. He was impressed by the classic southern architecture of the place. It looked hopeful.

“Sheriff Parker, Deputies, this is special agent Caperneski.” Deputy Jennings introduced the team of deputies who would be assisting in the investigation.

“What do we all need to do to assist you, Mister?” The sheriff’s paunch and drawl reminded JC of that character in a Bond movie.

“Well, first off, I’d like to thank you for all the cooperation. You people have been great so far. I also must remind you . . . ”

The Sheriff interrupted. “This happened on *my* watch, and we’ll be the ones spearheading this thing here. Now I know how you Bureau boys like to keep things close, but this is my turf.”

“Uh, Sheriff Nichols,” Deputy Jennings gently addressed his boss. “Mr. Caperneski here is with the Treasury Dept. not the FBI.”

“Well, wherever he’s . . . ”

“Thanks,” JC held up his hand. “I’ll handle this, son.” JC faced the man down. “Sheriff Nichols, as a member of the Secret Service, I work directly for the President, and during the course of my interactions with Administration Branch of our government, even *they* have the God-given sense not to interfere with *any* of my team’s investigations. That said, as to being kept informed, you will be informed as to when assistance will be needed. My data tech will be contacting your office for information on all the Bank’s employees.” He turned to address the Sheriff’s team. “Gentlemen—lady—please begin compiling a listing containing all contact information on this bank’s employees, including all branches. At this point, I’m only interested in people involved in the note transfer loop. We don’t wish to make anyone nervous or feel they are being singled out, so you are not, I repeat, not to contact any of them on your own. My section will handle all the other details.” He carefully looked over each deputy. “Any questions?”

Silence.

“Good. Now let’s see what you got.”

Leading him into a conference room set up for the investigation, they showed him all the evidence collected to date. They had a widescreen LED set up to view the bank and surrounding business’s security cameras.

 “And as you can see here, ” A female deputy pointed to the screen. “The FedEx van is headed south, but you can’t really make out the driver.” She looked up as Greg entered the room.

“Why are the street cams so blurry.” Greg nodded at JC. “Sorry, I got hung up.”

“It’s from the humidity.” She replied.

“Bummer. Well, anyway, it appears our perp’s alone.” Greg said as he took a seat next to JC.

“How do you know that?” A lanky deputy named Hill turned to Greg with the skeletal look of a fitness junkie. “You can’t see into the van.”

“For one: we know just one guy was in the bank, and two: the proximity of the rear tires to the wheel well didn’t change when it was first parked behind the bank.”

“What about the money?” “Are you suggesting it was still empty after it left the bank? Because that makes no sense.” Deputy Jennings offered he was the lead on the sheriff’s team.

“No, not empty. The money is paper, so it doesn’t weigh much.” Greg kept his tone neutral. “If there were another person in the van, we would see the additional weight.”

“Greg, they think this van was disguised as a FedEx, not one jacked,” JC nodded at the female deputy.” Right, Miss ah . . . ?”

“Lynn, Kathy Lynn.” She reflectively touched her name tag, “and yes, all FedEx vehicles in the area are accounted for—so it’s a remarkable duplication.”

JC now addressed Deputy Jennings. “Then, who’s to say he couldn’t do it twice?”

“What do you mean, disguise the van again? Why would he take the time to do that?”

Greg responded. “Because a stolen one would draw attention immediately, unlike stolen plates which, unless reported or run by an officer, can go unnoticed for days. I’ll get on it, JC.”

“No.” JC interrupted, pointing at Deputy Jennings, “Could you please get some of your people on it? My guess is that he did the change immediately.” Use the Dalton police force to search for detailing shops, especially ones that do vinyl decals. Then explore the surrounding area for a shop or garage within a five-minute drive of the bank.

“Oh, I see,” Kathy connected. “That would explain how the van just disappeared from Dalton’s traffic cameras.”

“Yes,” JC gave her a kind look, “gold star for the Miss.”

“Right.” Deputy Jennings chuckled, “I’ll get right on it.”

“And I’ll change the search criteria to scan for all van’s of this type leaving the area.” Deputy Lynn offered. “Regardless of markings.” She flashed JC a slight smile to say, *‘I’m not that stupid.’*

JC ignored her completely. “Greg, how long would it take our boy to make the change?”

“I’ll answer that in a second. Miss ah . . . Kathy, could you please get a close-in image of the FedEx van. Pick one that will show us the side door from an angle.”

After a few moments, an image appeared on the widescreen. “It’s the best one I could find.”

“Yeah, it’s a bit grainy . . . but, see the ripples at this door opening? It’s most likely a skin.”

“What? Can they do that?” Are you suggesting the entire van’s a wrap?” Deputy Hill, Trying to understand, got close to the monitor.

“No, not a large decal but a removable latex paint. The decals and paint job were probably peeled off, with the next disguise hard-coated underneath.”

“Right,” JC agreed, “and he’d have to do it fairly quickly because higher traffic speeds would unravel the outer coating. Something they couldn't risk,” He turned to Deputy Hill. “Have Dalton’s forces check the southern routes from the garage, only check residential routes. There’s no street cameras for them to avoid.”

“So, you’re thinking it’s another delivery van disguise,” Hill connected.

“Yep, who else travels everywhere unnoticed.” JC set down his coffee. “Greg, let’s tighten this up before we get too spread out.”

“Right,” Greg grinned as he stood up. “Rules time, people.”

“If I may have your attention, please.” JC raised his voice. “This is Agent Greg Aston. He is responsible for all press relations relating to this case. Since all releases will be generated through this office, there will be no interviews, statements, or even remarks made to the public without his approval. I must be clear on this.” JC motioned for Greg to take over as he stepped away from the large LED screen.

 “Thanks, JC. We will need someone to do interviews with the public. I will provide you with a press release asking for any information the public may have on the events of last Friday. Now people, there will be some different . . . ah, personality types who, for reasons known only to them, may give erroneous information. I caution you not to take any info lightly—all data should be nonetheless followed up.” He looked over at JC. “I’m done for now.”

 “Ok, people. Our perps have a 48-hour head start on us. Let’s get with the other package delivery companies and check these three airports’ warehousing logs—I also want the freight trains checked. Likely, the driver is still in the delivery truck, headed for a bolt hole. From the size and quantity of bundles, I don’t think he’d try to mail them somewhere else, but it is a possibility.”

At the Babbling Brooks Retirement Community, Andrew had enough of sleeping beauty’s chants—they were registering in his dreams. Every time he saw her, he thought he could read her lips. It was driving him nuts.

“I’m sorry your room is not satisfactory, sir. But nothing else is available.”

“How about one of these?” Andrew pointed to a map of the compound. “I saw some empty rooms over there.”

“That section is for our memory-impaired patients. You would have to have a Doctor certify you as such to move there. Besides, you’ve only been in your section for a little over a week. It may grow on you yet.” She smiled patiently.

Andrew smirked. The only thing growing on me, you bitch, is my impatience. He thought irritably. “You’re right, of course. Please forgive my impatience. The woman next to me, is she ok? I don’t see much of her these days.”

“She is involved in an ongoing treatment regimen that she has been through before.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Not at this time, but I will let her know your concern. She will be happy to hear of it.”

“Yes . . . well, thank you.”

Patience, huh? Andrew fumed. Is that all they do around here? Wait patiently to die? Maybe that’s why they call them . . . never mind that thought, he scolded himself. You’ve got to keep your focus. She’s right, of course. It’s not even been two weeks yet. I’ve got to find something to do, or I’ll lose my mind. Maybe after lunch, I’ll try the game room again. Boy, I wish they had a bar. What am I saying? No drinks, you idiot, that’s the quickest way to get busted.

Andrew had filled much of his first week playing HALO on his computer and watching movies to increase his vocabulary. But he needed to interact a little more with the community. Yesterday, on separate occasions, two employees had asked if he would like to talk to someone about his loneliness. One even went so far as to offer help by introducing him to a social group—like he couldn’t do it himself. It was oddly insulting. He knew he had to interact, but it would be on his own terms. He had, after all, committed Rex Harrison’s words to memory: “If you’re prepared to adapt, you can transform.”

A few days later, after lunch, he was strolling aimlessly around the grounds when one of the physical therapy ladies approached him.

“Mr. Featherstone?”

“Yes, how may I be of service, young lady.” Andrew gallantly bowed. “I must say, you make this day seem all the more lovelier.”

“Yes,” she blushed slightly at the extravagance he afforded. “Yes, it is a lovely day. I see you out here a lot at this time. Do you walk every day?”

“It’s the sun's position, I don’t like to be in it, and these buildings provide adequate shade.” He noticed a change in her. “It’s my medication . . . the ah, the sun has an adverse effect upon my skin.” He covered, misreading her.

“Yes, of course. There are a few residents who also share that issue.”

She seems undecided about something, he thought, correcting a prior read. Turning his head to the north, he smiled. “Will it rain this afternoon?”

“No, those clouds are over the lake.”

“Ah, yes. Lake Erie. I saw the same thing over Lake Michigan in Indiana. My wife and I used to walk the Dunes this time of year. Then, after she needed a wheelchair, we had to stay on the boardwalk, but it was still very nice.”

At this, she appeared to have made up her mind. “Mr. Featherstone, you once asked if there was anything you could do to help Mrs. Keppel. Do you still want to help?”

“Mrs. Keppel? I’m not familiar with . . . oh, my neighbor? That’s Mrs. Keppel?”

“Yes,” she grinned sheepishly. “That’s her.”

“Why my help? Did someone hit her car?”

“No, nothing like that.” Her look suddenly quizzical.

“Never mind,” Andrew fidgeted. “Old joke.”

“Well, I was wondering if she could accompany you on one of your walks.”

“You’re not trying to set us up, are you?” He grinned. “Have you been talking to that annoying girl from the counseling center?”

“Who,” she colored again, “Stacy? She’s only looking out for you. She really does care.”

“I’m sure she does.” He panned, looking off to the horizon.

“Besides, it was the receptionist Carmella who told me that . . . that you wanted to help.”

“Ok. What do I do? Get her from her room? How is this thing going to go?”

“Going to go, sir?”

He cursed himself for the slip. “How am I to proceed?”

“Well, I’ll have to clear it with the community manager,” She touched his forearm as a familiar. “Of course, I needed to ask you first, and I think with Stacy’s input, we will most likely. . . I mean, of course, *you* will most likely start when she clears it, I mean Candice, ah . . . Mrs. Keppel clears it—with her doctor.”

He shook his head as though to scatter dense fog. “And that would be . . . ?”

“Tomorrow, I think.” She giggled.

At the Embassy Suites office in Dalton, GA., Greg had just entered the room from the adjoining suite. “Whadda ya got Terri, I rushed over as soon as possible.”

“I got the guy,” she said proudly, “Six days . . . man, that’s got to be some kind of new record.”

“That’s great! You call JC yet?”

“No, he’s been out dealing with that dumbass Sheriff. I can't believe the guy could be so stupid sayin’ that shit to the press of all people.”

“Well, he’s one of those Sheriff’s that a politician first, you know.” Greg couldn’t help but laugh about Terri. One moment she’s an excited kitten, next, an outraged lioness. “They’re not often known for thinking in front of a camera.”

“Yeah? Well, anyway, I bagged me some perp ass.”

“Do tell . . . ” Greg, still amused by her excitement, noted her return to kitten mode. He took a seat.

“By combining our best six camera angles to construct the face, I washed it through an imaging program and had it converted it to a biometrics facial grid. Next, I searched the criminal database and bingo.” She proudly turned the monitor out. “Say hello to one Andrew Connally of Beloit, Illinois.”

“Who?” Greg looked at the arrest photo on the screen. This guy’s like fifteen.”

“Seventeen—eight years ago, twenty-five now. It’s from Andrew’s transfer out of the juvenile system into prison just before his release.”

“You got his Juvee records?” Greg was amazed.

“No way.” She gave him a look. “Those are still locked. When he transferred out of system, thee file was updated per SOP requirement.”

“Got an address?” Greg was hopeful.

“No, dude’s been off-grid since his release. Mother’s dead. Father remarried—three times, but he’s dead too. But here’s something interesting about dada. Seems wifey number three was from little old Georgia, I do declare.” She turned to face him, her excitement contagious.

“And . . . ?”

“And, she just died.”

“Leave a will?”

“I’m sure she did. I’ll get a judge to order it pulled. Mom had a house just outside of Dalton that recently sold for 180k.”

“Well, that’s hot.”

“Yes-it-is.” She confirmed the obvious. “The sale, however, was executed through a trust, so I don’t have the seller’s name.”

“We can get a judge to break that.” He stood, pulling out his phone. “I gotta call JC. He’s gonna *love* this.”

“Don’t bother,” JC entered the room. He looked exhausted. “What’s up with you two? You look like you just swallowed the canary.”

“And you look like hell.” Terri frowned, losing some of her steam, “Sheriff givin’ you a tough time, huh.”

“Not anymore. I told our friend the Sheriff that I'd throw him into his own jail if he doesn’t keep his mouth shut.”

Greg laughed, “Boy, I wish I were there to see that.”

“Yeah,” JC laughed with him. You could hear the tension release. “I didn’t know the human complexion could get that shade of purple.” He shook his head. “What’s up here? You got something good?”

“We got something good.” Terri beamed. She related all that she had told Greg.

“We got a name for this dead stepmother?”

Terri nodded. “Yes, and I already cross-referenced it with the Bank employees. No hits.”

“What about auto body shops around Beloit?”

“With the Rockford speedway nearby, hundreds of them are in the surrounding area.” Terri handed JC her search data.

“Apparently, Andrew is very good at what he does, so let’s break this list down to the top shops and send in tracking teams.” He pointed at Greg, “I want this launched tomorrow. You’ll lead it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One more thing. Terri, how long would it take to get a picture of the mother and run a face comparison analysis on all the bank employees?”

“Couple days, I’d guess . . . you know this is not a perfected tech, right?”

 “Have someone get on it anyway. I have a feeling we’ll get something positive from this.”

“Okay, but I . . . ” Terri trailed off.

“Greg, did anyone at the bank take a funeral leave around the time of the stepmother’s death?”

“No, only two vacations were reported, both from one of the outer branches in the last year, ‘bout uh . . . eight months ago.”

“Ok, last thing. I want the other tracking team out to the stepmother’s old house. Have them do a chem-scan for latex residue.”

“Uh, JC, you have that team currently tracking the shipping companies.” Greg reminded him.

“Pull them. I can’t use the locals anymore without some major leadership changes, and I really don’t want to do that.”

“Understood.” Greg nodded once.

“Questions.”

“I have one,” Terri raised her hand.

“Yes, dear?” Greg answered.

“Which one of you fine gentleman is gonna take me out for dinner? Cause if I have to eat in this damn room one more time, I’m gonna puke all over my keyboard.”

Greg just raised his eyebrows at JC, then waved goodbye to Terri. “See ya, kids. I’m off to the shipping yards, so . . . don’t stay out too late.”

At the Babbling Brooks Retirement Community. Mike was heading to the library with Carl.

“Hi Mike, you got a minute?” They waited for Andrew.

“I’ll catch you in the library, man.” Carl flashed a peace sign and kept on walking.

Mike chuckled at Andrews's expression. “Yeah . . . his Berkley days still define him. What’s up?”

“Fred was sayin’ you were in psychology for many years and that you might help me with an issue.”

“I don’t treat patients anymore, and I have been out of the industry for over ten years. I would not even . . . ”

“Hold, sir,” Andrew held one palm out, “it is not your services I require, merely your opinion.”

Mike chuckled again. “You have an odd speech about you. Are you studying theater?”

Andrew let out a sheepish grin. “Kind of. I’ve been studying film, looking at different speech types.”

“Types of speech . . . ” Mike corrected him out of reflex, regretting it immediately. “Sorry.”

“No, man, it’s all good. I mean . . . do not trouble yourself, I will take all the help I can get.”

“Then Robert is your man for that.”

“Yes, I was going to have words, uh, *converse* with him as well. There is much about him that lies beneath.” Andrew smiled.

“What can I help you with?” Mike laughed again, suddenly liking the quirky Andrew, who, he reminded himself, is much younger than he appears.

“Well, I was wondering about this lady who I’ve . . . ”

“Mrs. Keppel.”

“Yes, how did you . . . ”

“It’s a small place, Andrew, and you’re the talk of it.”

“I am?” Andrew looked off. “Why do you say that?” Mike could see this bothered him.

“Mrs. Keppel has been through a lot. She’s had two surgeries for advanced osteoporosis. Which is very painful. She has been on a pain treatment regimen that has left her fairly despondent. Now, this is all private stuff, mind you, but I feel you should be aware of it. Since you began your walks with her, everybody has been amazed by her changes after only a few days. The fact that she is no longer using her wheelchair when she is with you is remarkable in itself. She may appear old to you, but she’s only in her early thirties.”

“Seriously? I would never have guessed. Why does she look so old.”

“It’s a genetic disorder of which the cure can be worse than the disease. They have been able to arrest the aging, but the gene therapy process kills off the old cells. It’s like chemo where they have to destroy cells so the new can form.”

“Well, that’s kinda what I wanted to rap with you about. When Candice er, Mrs. Kepple, was under the medication, she kept repeating that she wanted to die. But now . . . well, all she talks about is the wonder of life. Could the pain medication cause her to be, well, suicidal?”

Mike stopped, giving Andrew an odd look. “I don’t think she would have come this far if that were a possibility.”

“Hey, I’m just sayin’. Maybe I should get a counselor involved.”

“She already sees one.”

“What about the meds? Could they be affecting her?”

“Pain medication *can* lead to suicidal thoughts, but typically, the real culprit is the depression brought on by chronic pain.”

“Yeah, I guess I can see that. What’s the best counter for depression?”

“Joy, I’d say. But that’s a very complicated question that can have various issues from case to case. What do you think is causing hers?” He watched Andrew closely for a few moments.

Andrew just shrugged.

Mike was impressed that there was no ill-informed knee-jerk response. “Andrew, to give a simple answer about countering depression, acts of compassion can lead to gratitude. Joy follows when it’s wholly accepted.” Mike could see Andrew turning that over. There’s something very odd about this guy. He reminds me more like one of my students. It’s his eagerness to learn.

 “Gratitude, you say?” Andrew’s eyes narrowed as he nodded slowly. “Well, thanks for the chat.”

Andrew spent considerable time researching gratitude, and over the next few days, he began to experiment with the community. One night after dinner, while Carl and Mike went to the library for their evening chess match, they saw a scene that shocked them.

“What in the hell is that noise?” Carl stopped, looking behind them.

Mike nudged him with his elbow. “It’s coming from over there,” As they walked over to the board game room, they saw the noise source. “It’s Mr. Gessledorf. He’s actually laughing.”

“Is that Andrew with him?”

“Yep.”

 “What the hell is with that guy?” Carl stood looking at the two men in wonderment. “First, it’s Mrs. Keppel, then he actually got Mrs. Saunders to dance . . . ”

“Yeah, I heard about that.” Mike laughed. “To some hip-hop piece, or so I understand. He was teaching her moves.”

“Now he’s got Gessledorf laughing—old stone-face himself.”

“Perhaps he knows some good German jokes.” Mike grinned.

“I don’t know where he finds all that energy. What did you say to him last week?”

“Not much. I just told him about Mrs. Keppel’s situation. Why?”

“Well, he also came to Robert last Tuesday looking for some investment advice. And did you know Robert’s now giving him elocution lessons?”

“Yes, well . . . he’s certainly a sponge for knowledge.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little odd? I mean for a guy who claims to be sixty-seven and has all that energy?” They resumed their walk to the library. “Ever notice his eyes? He makes a point to never hold eye contact, but I see a young man when I look behind his eyes.” He held up his hand. “I’ve heard you defend him before, and I tell you it’s more than just your so-called second life wind—or whatever the hell you said.”

“Second wind in life.” Mike put his hand on Carl’s shoulder. “It’s a proven fact that men become more adventurous after fifty-six. I don’t think it's an age thing. It’s just a period in life where they're not worried about the kids, job, or pressures modern-day living brings. People like him are just taking advantage of the opportunities that are now available. I find his energy infectious, and I ‘m not the only one. I mean, we had to spend hours researching in libraries or combing over periodicals to keep current in our field. Today, it’s all at the touch of your fingertips, literally. The three computers in the day-room are almost always in use now.”

“Yeah, that’s another thing. Fred tells me that Andrew showed him how to use social media and do wildcard searches for data. How does an ex-Civil Engineer from the seventies learn all that stuff?”

“His kids, his son’s shop, an online class . . . there are many ways to do it. What are you driving at?”

“I don’t know. I like the guy and all, but there’s something not right. Idon’t trust him.”

Carl was scratching at an itch, an itch Mike had also felt. He frowned. He’s too polite to bring up Andrews's makeup, even though we all see it. “In what way could your trust in him fail you?”

 “Point.” Carl grinned at his old friend, then dropped it. “Let’s go. I want time for a rematch.”

“Plan on losing, are you?” Mike followed his friend down the hall. I will find out who this guy really is, he promised.

Two days later, after dinner, Mike waited for Andrew to speak with him. Watching Andrew leave the hall, he observed that somebody would acknowledge him from almost every table he passed. Twice Andrew stopped and talked at length: the first time, was with two ladies, where his mood was somber and reflective; the next, it was with the Bennings, and it was all playful banter. In both instances, he could see a marked effect on people after his involvement.

“Hey Andrew, you got a minute?” Mike called out.

“Sure, Mike. I intended on speaking with you as well.” Reminded of Andrews's efforts towards proper speech, Mike could not help but grin. “Let’s go have a chat in the library. I may need your help.”

“Sure.” Andrew followed him like an eager puppy.

After taking seats in the library’s common area, Mike began. “Some of the stewards would like you to join our ranks,” He glanced over and waved at the eighty-year-old Ms. Cauld, straining to read the computer monitor. “They’ve asked me to approach you.”

“A steward? I know of the word but not your context.”

“Well, a steward in this capacity is like being an overseer. We help with the other residents’ social integrations on a day-to-day aspect. We also help organize people for events, foster group interaction, and primarily try to be a good listener. The management has correctly learned that day-to-day living aspects are best facilitated by those within the community. I cannot help but notice that you have become very involved over these last few weeks. That reality has not been lost on my fellow stewards.”

“Steward, I like the word choice—someone who takes responsibility and looks after things.” Andrew nodded reflectively. “Yeah, good word.”

Mike laughed. “So, if I may ask, what’s been the big change in you? The first week, you interact with nobody, secluding yourself almost to the point of intervention, then the dam bursts, and your everywhere.”

“I don’t know about everywhere . . . ” Andrew shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He didn’t want the attention, so he deflected. “Remember when I asked you how to counter depression?”

Mike just nodded.

“Well, it got me thinking. You said to do something . . . ah, help someone without being asked, and they will appreciate it all the more. They’ll be thankful you did it even though they didn’t ask for help, or maybe didn’t want you to help, but they are thankful you did it anyway. It kinda tells ‘em that someone is paying attention*,* acknowledging them in a way they think they don’t need, or maybe not want to admit the need for it, but they are gratified someone did. Does that make any sense?”

“Sure,” Mike smiled. “I just said that compassion leads to gratitude.”

“Right, so I checked it out. Turns out that gratitude is one of the five elements for transcendence from the VIA on character strengths, which I see as basically being content with the hand your dealt. The other ones: appreciation of beauty & excellence, hope, humor, and meaning for life, or of life, are all connected.”

“Mike laughed. “What in the hell got you to read bout the VIA Institute?”

“I Googled it, and they're right here in Cincinnati. Why?”

“It’s nothing. So, you were talking about the transcendent virtues of character.”

“Yes, virtue was a tough one for me. When I looked it up, I found different approaches to, and I quote: ‘act with a high moral standard’.”

“Yes, It’s been said to be one with the heart and one with the head.” Mike offered.

Andrew lit up like a kid. “Yeah. Like in one way, you can be virtuous because you see it’s the right thing to do. In another, you’re virtuous because you actually give a shit.”

“Yes, you have read Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas?”

“Not really,” Andrew frowned, “but I have read other people who’ve read them. And like you said, it seems like that Aristotle guy argues it’s reasonable to act with virtue because it keeps societies from tearing each other apart. Aquinas seems to argue that virtue is an act of love, that we act virtuous not ‘cause we think its right, but because we give a shit about others.”

“What do you think?”

“Well, I think it’s a bit of both. For me, thinkin’ gets me to a place, and if I like it there I . . . I don’t know—it kinda grows on me.”

Mike was quick to detect the change in Andrew. He was not acting here. “Of what importance do you see the transcendence virtues in this place? I mean . . . would not the virtues of courage, as in perseverance, bravery, honesty, and zest for life, be more prevalent here? Should not characteristics of courage be more positively accentuated?”

“Why not both?”

“Okay, why not accentuate all of VIA’s twenty-four-character strength virtues?”

Andrew considered this for a moment. “I see your point. It’s because of that stage of life thing, that people here . . .” He stopped short.

Mike read him. “Yes, most of us here come already equipped with strong character strengths from dealing with life’s issues. Many of those strengths are not challenged here, so they are not . . . exercised, and so the perspective can get a little muddled.”

“I see that. You could be surrounded by people who love you yet not see that love. Your sayin’ not to think of depression as a lack of positive or negative reinforcement. I just see it as a lack of perspective.”

“True, I heard people say that their family only visits them here because they feel they have to, not because they love them. Are they ungracious? If so, then is gratitude just a state of mind or a perspective?”

“I see more into it than just that. Leaning more toward that Aristotle guy, I see gratitude as an expression of understanding.”

“Explain.” Mike let out a slight smile. “I’m grateful for this conversation.”

Andrew laughed. “Okay, but I’m just working this out, mind you. Like depression, gratitude can be expressed through a series of emotions that perhaps change in intensity but are emotions just the same. Gratitude can be a gateway to expressing good thoughts, like feeling good ‘cause I’m riding my Harley on an autumn day. Mrs. Keppel pointed out something like this to me. The budding trees give her the hope that new beginnings can carry on. It made me think about how gratitude can be expressed. So, I looked it up. They,” he made air quotes, “break gratefulness down to: verbal, concrete, connective, and I ferget the last one, but it deals with stayin’ true to your dreams. Like when someone is grateful to have kids, they show it by doin’ everything for the kid regardless of whether what they do helps the kid in the long run or not.” He finished with a wave of his hand. “Aquinas says that. ”

“Yes, that’s called final or finalistic gratefulness.” Mike was glad that after all these years, he could still remember. “And yes, it’s not all about duty.”

“Right.” Andrew pointed at him. “The thing is, a grateful person is always gonna be taking action towards somethin’ positive. See, it’s more than just being human or havin’ money. Ya gotta give a shit.”

“Hence the transcending nature of gratitude. Okay, connect the dots for me.”

“I’ll try, but it’s like I said—I’m still working all this stuff out.”

“Alright, let's start with the idea of transcendence. You seem to be pivoting around it.”

“I don’t know about that, but transcendence is all about taking wherever we’re at and stretching it into the world around us. Moving out from the me to the . . . the herd, or the group, community or whatever. It’s like, looking at the universe in terms of where it’s at—instead of the other way around. Transcendence moves us outta ourselves, which also means whatever happens next, however bad, can’t take away all the good that’s happened already. We can still be grateful for something that was. The convenience of happy memories.

“It’s like I was tryin’ to explain this to that Mr. Gessledorf. He was going on about the wife, how he’d be a different man without her. ‘Cause without her, he’d never woulda known how to trust people. Without her, his life would be full of loneliness—like it is now. So, I asked him. I said: ‘how can you be grateful for her and yet be like this.’ I said, ‘that sounds to me like you’re more grateful she’s dead so you can get back to being the real you.’”

Mike sat back, stunned. “You didn’t really say that . . . that he’s grateful she’s dead, did you?”

“Not exactly in those terms, but yeah, that was its gist.”

Mike whistled aloud. “Well, it must have struck a chord. He actually said hi the other day in the hall—before I said anything—and *that’s* never happened.”

“Well, that’s cool. I’m glad to hear it.” Andrew nodded, still looking down.

Mike considered Carl’s hypothesis. Who is this guy? He reads this stuff and then acts on it—apparently with great success. Mike shifted tack. “What was so funny the other day?”

“Excuse me?” Andrew looked up reflexively.

“The other day, when we passed the game-board room, it sounded like a loaded gravel truck spinning in a cement mixer.”

“What . . . ? Oh right, Mr. Gessledorf.” Andrew nodded, smiling, “Well . . . to me, it sounded like years of crustiness falling off and shattering.”

“What the hell was so funny?”

“I told him he should date.” Andrew looked up at Mike. There was a youthful playfulness to his eyes. “I said he should regain the life that he shoved away. He said that he can’t ever have a relationship as things are. So, I told him I understood and stuck out my belly, patting it like this. Then I told him it’s a known fact a German can only make love in uniform and that he’d have to get into one before he could talk a girl out of hers.”

“*No shit*.” Mike sat back. “That’s hilarious.”

Andrew grinned again. “Yeah, we’re buds now. When he lightens up, Mr. Gessledorf actually has a good sense of humor.”

“Yet you still refer to him in the formal.”

Andrew shrugged. “Respect, I guess. Did you know he fought in the six-day war?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, a sergeant—tank gunner. His parents moved to pre-state Palestine in ’33. And when the family returned to Germany’s reunification call, he stayed behind with his Aunt. He wound up knocking out one of Syria’s Panzers of all things. Kind of ironic the way he tells it. Hell, I didn’t even know there was . . .” He trailed off.

Mike waited a few moments. “Didn’t know what?”

“Oh, nothing.” Andrew fiddled with his glasses, “It’s just . . . I had no idea that there’s so much fascinating information locked up in these people. They’re like walking encyclopedias.”

Another piece fell into place. Mike took a gamble. “How old are you, Andrew?”

“What do you mean? I told you I’m sixty-seven. Why are you asking that again?”

“Because nothing about you, other than your clever disguise and makeup, tells me you’re anywhere near that old.”

Andrew’s mind was clearly racing. He seemed ready to bolt. Then suddenly, his entire demeanor changed. “What a nice thing to say.” Andrew rose from his seat. “You look young for your age as well, Mike, and thanks for the Stewardship offer, but I really must decline at this time. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a therapy session in fifteen minutes.”

As Andrew slowly walked off, Mike grinned at the prominent old man’s gait. “I guess I got some research to do myself.”

“What up, JC?” Greg answered. In JC’s room at the Embassy Suites, he was losing patience. He turned on the phone’s speaker. “So . . . whatcha got, Greg?” It had been a week since he commissioned the tracking team to Beloit. When they first came up empty, he doubled Greg’s team four days ago.

“Zilch.” Greg did not bother to elaborate. JC looked at the phone expectantly. “Nothing?” Okay, Greg’s pissed.

More silence.

“Are you meeting resistance?

“No, I wish we were. At least that would be something.”

“Talk to me, Greg. We got a face, a name, and a starting point. There’s got to be something.”

“Look, JC, I’ve cross-tracked this thing six ways from Sunday. The trail’s cold and closed. I got nothing from the hospitals, no PO boxes, no banking, nothing on grid. Checked with the DMV. His license expired while he was in the Juvee system. He never bothered to renew it after the prison release. No registered vehicles.”

“So, he’s a walker. He must have got help.” JC was reaching. “An alias, perhaps?”

“Impossible to tell. An alias? WTF, how in the hell am I supposed to track that?” JC shook his head at that. “All we know was that there is no record of further police involvement.”

“What about the auto-body angle and the detailing?”

“Talked with a couple of the bigger shops, they said they stopped making custom decals two years ago, can’t compete with the online shops. I asked about the process of making latex skin. Apparently, it’s so easy, you can use a roller and a brush to apply it. Don’t even need a sprayer or any specialized equip—so that’s out.”

“Old prison associates?” JC was pushing.

“From seven years ago? What leverage are you thinking of using?”

“Yeah, right. Sorry.” JC could feel Greg’s eye roll.

“I get it, man. I even tried hanging 10k reward signs. Nothing—not even a call. It’s like this guy never existed.”

“But he did, and we gotta bring him in. Okay, if it’s a dead-end, then it’s a dead-end. Get back here, and we will run the other side—use the Step-mother lead. I want you back here tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” JC heard Greg throw his phone. “It’s already after nine.” Greg's voice echoed from afar.

JC’s problem was that he had a terrible night’s sleep. His date with Terri had left his mind moving in all sorts of directions, and he really didn’t need that kind of distraction. The lack of leads on the case was troublesome, to say the least, and to top it off, his mandatory transfer was now only seven days off.

“Is that what’s bothering you?” He asked the bathroom mirror.

He couldn’t sleep. Usually, he would just compartmentalize the issues and draw up a plan. It didn’t make sense that Greg’s team had drawn a complete blank in Illinois, which bothered him. You’re getting old, he challenged. You think things should just fall in place because you want them to. Maybe I need to retire. Glancing at the clock, it was already 11:30 pm. He’d been at it since he left the restaurant and had little to show for it. “You’re tired. Knock it off.” His sonorous voice echoed in the sparsely furnished room. Shutting down the laptop, he went through his sleep process to little avail. He thought of his ex-wife and all the issues he could have handled better. Then he was sifting through past cases, unfairly pointing out his missteps. Drifting in and out, he finally fell asleep at two am. He was surprised when he awoke at 10 am.

“Shit,” He rubbed his disheveled hair in front of the mirror, “The last time you slept this late was in college.” His reflection stared back at him. “So, what about Terri? We’re what, seven or eight years apart?” He laughed. I guess in college, that would have been a problem, but not now. He finished his morning routine and tried to clear his head for the case. I guess that Terri *is* a good distraction—for now. Help clear the other issues.

Taking in a casual lunch, he looked around the Chinese restaurant. It was the same one he had taken Terri to a few nights back, but it looked different in the daytime—a little seedier. Terri had been recalled to DC for some international web thing that required her hands-on. So much the better. I don’t need female commotion right now. As he ate, his mind wandered back, replaying the previous night’s dinner. At moments Terri seemed a bit more responsive to his stories, warmer, playing the perfect date. If he didn’t know better, she seemed to be flirting with him. He shook his head.

“Like you’d know the difference.” He said to the table. Ever since he had split with Katy, he had poured himself into the job. It’s what his wife had accused him of anyway. “It’s his mistress,” she would often tell his family in front of him. She never could understand it. He knew he didn’t want to date because of the finality it would bring to his divorce. As if over three years of little contact with Katy wasn’t enough. Mercilessly tenacious, he reminded himself she was still unmarried. It wasn’t healthy. So why not remarry? He shrugged. Why not Terri? He laughed. This is useless conjecture, he thought, mindlessly scanning the room. His eyes fell on a security camera behind the bar. Suddenly it all clicked into place. *You idiot.* He was so excited he almost left without paying.

He returned to the suite and spun up the bank's video cameras. He heard the outer-room door open. “Greg,” JC called out. Damn, if it wasn’t right in front of me the whole time. He heard his partner grumble in the connecting room. Greg was not in a good mood. He had just arrived on the small company plane. The kind that allowed for only short naps that always left you with a dull headache. After dumping his dirty clothes on the bed, he headed for a long-anticipated shower.

“Dude. You gotta check this out.” JC called said from the connecting doorway.

 “Aww, leave me alone,” Greg shouted from the bathroom. “Whatever you got, it can at least wait for me to get clean.”

“Alright,” JC laughed, “Then, meet me in the lounge bar when you're up to it. I’m buying.”

Mike was early to the retirement community’s weekly section meeting. He had been in the library doing some follow-up research on trait perspectives and state of mind. It was refreshing. He found a lot of new research and clinical trials that confirmed some of Andrew’s ideas. He wanted to discuss some points with him. Stopping at the doorway of the meeting room, he thought he might have had the wrong date.

Not only was the room in full attendance, but there was also a distinct air about the room Mike could not place, it seemed almost to possess . . . harmony. He could not help but notice some tables were pulled closer together, and the usual stand-off cliques were actually engaged in crosstalk. Amazed with this exchange, he headed towards the steward's table along the back of the room. Three unlikely people stopped him and expressed their thanks for his stewardship on his way there. He didn’t know how to take it. A somewhat bewildered Mike sat down with the stewards.

“What’s happening?”

“Haven’t you heard? Andrew is going to make a presentation to the section.” Carl stated with a skeptical edge.

“On what?”

Fred scoffed. “Who knows, perhaps the fountain of youth. But I’ll tell you, I’ve not seen people this excited since all the kids were smoking Obama’s hopium.”

Robert scoffed. “From what I hear, after he cures cancer, he’s headed to the Governor's mansion,”

“Knock it off.” Carl frowned. “I was told just before the meeting that he really *was* leaving.”

“What? Says who?” Mike was concerned. Did I push Andrew too far? As he considered the situation, an idea suddenly occurred to him.

Carl filled was filling them in. “I overheard heard Johnny talking about it with the receptionist Stacy. She told him about Andrew's social involvement and how dramatically he’d changed over the last few weeks. Then Johnny tells her how Andrew had requested a room change to a new section and that it just came through.”

Robert frowned. “What’s the matter, Mike? You look like someone’s just walked across your grave.”

Mike held up his hand as the section’s coordinator stepped up to the podium to detail the week’s coming events. Mike looked around to see if anyone was in earshot. He drew the stewards in. “Yesterday, I broached the subject with Andrew that has been on all of our minds.”

“Whether or not he supported Trump?” Fred asked a bit too seriously for comfort.

 They all looked at him.

“Hey, I’m just kidding . . . ”

“You asked him his real age,” Carl’s excitement was infectious. “What did he say?”

“I did not ask. I merely suggested he was not honest with his appearance.” Mike couched the words carefully.

Robert seemed upset with this. “Why would you say such a thing? What facts do you possess that would justify such a challenge to his integrity?”

“Now wait a minute, Robert,” Carl defended his friend. “You said we should not offer a steward position until we found the truth of his age. Mike here was the only one with enough guts to challenge him.”

Fred barked out. “Truth of his age? Who gives a shit about that? What’s the truth behind him being here? I think that’s the real issue. What in the hell is he doing here?”

“Shhhh.” The group said as one.

Robert looked defensive. “I said challenge his integrity Carl, there’s a big difference in . . . ” As the stewards bickered on, the tangle of voices blurred as Mike withdrew from the discussion.

 Challenge his integrity? Mike considered the ramifications of the words. We are the ones challenged. It had never occurred to him that a unifying influence would challenge their authority as stewards. As he watched his friends' argue, he realized that it didn’t matter. If the steward’s primary objective was to unify the community into a fluid social group, who the hell cares where it comes from? Should I care? We have always considered that accentuating courage in the residents was the best approach. Give them the courage to interact.

Yesterday, Andrew had made a good argument about transcendence. What’s the underlying difference? I guess courage pits our emotional strengths against adversity. It allows us to stay in the fight and not give up. But transcendence . . . that’s reaching out, and to reach out, there must be some hope of acceptance—we need to feel accepted. Is not love the ultimate act of acceptance? We have been asking people to accept their current situation—be content with it. Be grateful you’re here and not in some trash heap. Andrew argues that gratitude is a state of mind. Perspective. Be glad for what you have, don’t dwell on what you think you deserve. Don’t rage at was has been lost. Light a candle for the future. Then, an old aphorism suddenly struck him: Wisdom is proved right by all her children.

Wisdom is perspective. Mike considered this before rejoining the group.

“Look, it's our job to help ensure these people are content.” Carl’s words pierced Mike’s revelry.

“No, it’s not,” Mike looked off. “Is the group more important than the individual?” His tone silenced them.

“What does that have to . . . ” Robert began.

“So, what’s Andrew about?” Mike poised the rhetorical. “Is he not just a reminder of our lifelong obligation to others? In this world, we have been commissioned that we must love one another as we would love ourselves. So, where inlies the truth if we don’t have compassion for ourselves? How can we talk to people about the future if they are not grateful for the world they find themselves living in?” This statement was a high pop-up to left field, and while everybody was waiting for the ball to come down, Andrew approached the podium.

The room quieted. Andrew began to speak.

“To prosper under the sun, a sapling needs soil to grow. It absorbs opportunity from the soil to enrich its life and produce good fruit. It cannot create, yet life springs from it. Bitter soil brings forth nothing but choking dust. Not even the water of life can take hold. But the tree of life needs good soil, which can only come from the selfless contributions of the many lives that precede it.”

 Andrew was delighted to see so many smiles everywhere—except the steward’s table.

Embassy Lounge

Dalton, GA

“So, what’s the occasion?” Greg noticed the telltale pint of black and tan. “Did the dinner go well?”

JC laughed, “Somehow, I knew that would be your opening salvo.” JC looked off. “Well, we came, we ate, we left. Now, to the business at hand.”

“Come on, give. I know back in your day, before the automobile, it was considered unmanly to discuss women in pubs, but seein’ how this is the 21st century . . . ” Greg shrugged.

“Alright, though I find the usefulness of such information questionable. We had a nice time.”

“Wow, that musta’ been tough.”

“More than you can imagine. Now, on to more prevalent matters, I think I’ve discovered our insider at the bank.”

“Describe nice . . . ”

“What?” JC sat back, eyeing his friend. “I don’t really want to expend time on . . .”

“How much time do you want to waste before I get my answer?”

“Okay, Greg. Look, I’m no expert, but it was nice. She was more attentive than at work. How’s that?”

“Well, I guess that’s something when we’re talking about Terri.” Greg teased him with a raised eyebrow, “Just dinner, I take it?”

JC gave him a look. “You know better than to ask that.”

“True. And with an open book like you, I don’t have to” Greg laughed. “We sure could have used her instincts in Beloit. She might have come up with something we missed. She’s pretty clever like that.”

“Yes, I thought her combining the camera angles into a bio-grid was inspired,” JC signaled the waitress with a wave of his near-empty glass. “Another of these and a Bud for my bud, please.” The young waitress grinned at the old cliché.

“Yeah, speaking of which, she never did send us the biometrics on possible family connections.” Greg reminded him.

“I don’t think we’ll need it.”

“Yes, you said you got something hot.”

“Yeah, it’s in the cameras.”

“Really. What did we miss?

“Not what we missed.” JC held up a finger. “Why was every camera sprayed out except the two interior ones?”

“Because . . . it’s not possible to enter without being filmed. Once inside, the egress cams were sprayed from behind—as the tapes showed.”

“Yes, but why leave the two cameras open to record more evidence? Record the events of the robbery in its entirety?”

“What are you driving at?”

“Theater. They wanted us to see everything that happened. Hide it in the open. Spray out the egress routes to add confusion—misdirect.”

“Yeah, but wait a minute. Didn’t we ID the guy because they weren’t sprayed out?”

“Yes, which led to a dead alley costing us what, almost two weeks? They blocked the exit cams to stall for more time. It was the camera evidence that led us on a goose hunt.

“You speak in the plural as though he had an accomplice. From all the evidence, we’ve pretty much ruled that out.”

“Yes, and that’s the last chain of reasoning. What made us rule out an accomplice?”

“The evidence from the cameras. Ah, from the ones that weren’t sprayed out.”

“Exactly. Remember the time sequence when the manager gets threatened. It’s a lot of time to explain the rules, but ok—human emotion is involved. Now check the time when the rest of the employees are involved. It’s almost immediate. They’re not hesitant as though following the demands of a stranger, they responded to authority.”

“The manager.”

“Yes, the manager.” JC sat back and let Greg’s mind sift through this new line of reasoning.

 “So, you’re sayin’ she *is* complicit. Her fear did not seem staged. Then why the long talk in the office? I think I would have caught that.”

“I don’t know.” JC accepted another beer. “Unless, unless something went wrong. Remember, they triggered the vault’s maintenance cycle. They have all the time needed until the code got entered. Then . . .”

“Yeah, seven minutes. More than enough time for four compliant employees to move the cash.”

“Remember, the manager *was* found in the kitchenette. With the bomb still strapped to her back.”

“Yes, and she was the only one to hear instructions about the bomb.” Greg pointed out. “And it was a bomb.”

“Yeah. It would have to be. I think we bring ole Kara back in.”

“What are you going to use as a lever?”

“My theory.”

“It’s pretty thin. You won’t be able to hold her long.” Greg looked off.

“Did we ever get her maiden name from the trust sale?”

“Sure, it was on the old recorded Deed.”

“Then we can match to a local resident. That’s the connection. So, let’s dig deep on this manager—there’s gotta be something there. I’ll handle the judge.” JC drained his beer. “Bring her in, Greg.”

Greg was happy they finally had some movement. Until he noticed JC left without paying the bill again.

Back at the Babbling Brooks Retirement Community, Andrew felt like skipping. He was happy, happier than he ever could have imagined possible. He was in a stable environment, room and board paid for, three squares of reasonably good food, and safe from any potential danger. Then, the irony hit him like a summons—any prison will offer the same amenities. The most remarkable thing about his current situation was discovering he had talent, a talent that gave him power over others. No, that’s not right—the ability to affect others. Is that what you’re doing with Candice? The thought struck him oddly. Andrew had trapped himself into taking walks with Candice. Then she told him her story. And he thought *his* life was effed up.

She had just turned twenty-five when she got hit with a rare aging disorder out of nowhere. She told the story on their second walk together. Well, she was still in a chair.

‘After the initial shock, I knew I had to get over the “why me” shit and take up the fight.’ She’d told him. ‘ The first year was the roughest, and it all looked so hopeless many a time. But the dreams we make when we’re young are real to us, and I clung to mine. Then my husband left me. He wanted to divorce himself from all the problems the illness was causing in our lives. You see, Andrew, I made a mistake. I was shallow and married him because he looked good on my arm—and in other places.’ She then smiled that mischievous smile that had ensnared Andrew since day one.

‘What did your family do?’

‘Oh, I don’t really have a family. It was the weirdest feeling to be in a room full of people talking like you’re already dead. Well, anyway, his family insisted we divide the estate while I was still alive.’ Andrew thought about this. It’s really the injustice of those cold-hearted bastards that got me so pissed. I’ve stolen shit before, but not like this. This is like robbing someone you just saw get hit by a car.

‘So, what did you do?’ He had asked.

‘I told him that fate was a harder mistress than the one he was dating.’

When Candice looked up, her expression of cold resolve had bothered him. He'd never seen such depth of sorrow, even after the bullying of State homes, Juvenile prison, and a half year on the street. It tore into him.

‘He was cheating on you when . . .?’

She reached up a held his wrist. ‘I was the one cheating. All my life has been a cheat. Since I was a little girl, I've always been insulated from reality.’ She looked up and managed a small smile. ‘I’m sorry, I’ve made you uncomfortable.’

Andrew laughed aloud at the memory. At first, when she was still in the chair, Andrew thought he could actually help Candice. Tell her to dwell on the positives of life, things that keep a body going—shit like that. But his life was nowhere near as tough as hers. Hard luck had befallen her, but fate had nothing to do with *his* life’s problems. “And I was going to give *her* advice?” He spoke to his own conscience, something that had never been a good conversationalist. When I think of Candice and the internal power *she* had to muster up, money doesn’t seem all that important. He was having a hard time believing some chic could affect him so. We really have no choice when we die, just like we had no choice when we were born. So who’s all this gratitude crap for? God? Why would God, even if he does exist, need gratitude?

Movement caught his eye. Marching down the corridor, the four stewards were heading for his room. Showdown, he thought, steeling himself for the confrontation. There is no way to dodge this reality, and don’t kid yourself, you idiot—the money *is* everything. That gratitude BS you’ve been shoveling is for the game, and don’t be a fool. You’re not like these people. Yeah, but soon I’ll be a rich fool—nothin’ wrong with that. He grinned at the thought as Mike waved, entering the side door.

“Hi guys, you lookin’ fer me?”

Face stern, Robert nodded once. “Andrew, can we have a moment?”

“*I thought* you guys were having a moment back there.” Andrew quipped, referring to the meeting room.

“In a way, I guess we were.” Mike calmly smiled. “Can we talk?”

“Sure.” Andrew resisted the urge to punch the smug bastard. “Where to then?”

“Why don’t we use the library?” Carl suggested. “The internet is temporarily down, so it should be pretty much empty.”

Taking control, Andrew selected a table in the back, but he was slow to realize the mistake. The four men surrounded him with chairs, and his back was to the wall.

“Andrew, your speech in there was enlightening. The effect on the residents was nothing short of amazing. I have been here for eight years, and I’ve never seen so much blending in the community.” Fred began.

“Agreed.” Robert said, “The reference to the healthy garden I thought was inspiring.”. “Where did you get that idea?”

Andrew just shrugged. This was not what he expected.

Carl placed a hand on Andrew’s shoulder. “Your comments on the soil cycle reminded me of an old adage: To conquer, first, you must divide. In our attempt to unite, we split the community into action groups that actually *divided* the people.

“Yeah,” Robert nodded, “Like Wolfgang von Goethe once said: Divide and rule, a sound motto. Unite and lead, a better one.”

In the awkward silence that followed, Mike elucidated the issue at hand. “Andrew, you possess a special talent rarely seen . . . ”

“Not really. The residents I talked to? Their problems were easily solved. I just showed them what they already knew.”

“Maybe to you, Andrew, Though your solutions may seem topical to you, your insights, how you understood the underlying issue is something quite rare.”

Andrew laughed. It was ludicrous. “Guy’s,” he looked down. “I hate to tell you this, but any two-bit con could have come up with the shit I’ve been shoveling.”

“I disagree. You have a keen ability to strike at the root of a problem, so the person does not feel threatened by the ax.” Mike elaborated. “What you said to Gessledorf was what he needed to hear. I couldn’t have said it. But you presented it in such a manner he was not only receptive to but willing to incorporate it into his perspective reasoning. That is not an easy thing to do. I thought the idea of gratitude is something we have all lost.”

“I agree.” Carl offered. “We’re not saying you should be a counselor or some kind of country therapist. Your ideas are excepted primarily by people who need a perspective check. You know, some introspection.”

“Yes,” Mike continued. “One of the difficulties in dealing with the sadness and feelings of loss is the unwillingness to self-actualize—to do something about it. But if we look at the community as the soil in which others are nurtured, well . . .” He sat back.

Fred joined. “That is where social groups play their greatest role. They help people with gauging. There is little need for rules without social standards. Without rules—it’s anybody’s game. Unwillingness to listen to another’s opinion is typically generated by fear. Either fear of one’s position in society, or the fear self-ignorance.”

Andrew didn’t know what to say, so he spoke the obvious. “It’s apparent you guys have thought this shit through and all of that. So, what do you want?”

“Drop the charade and come work here,” Mike stated flatly.

“Excuse me?” Andrew’s smile hardened. “What do you mean by ‘drop the charade’.”

“I looked you up.” Carl declared, “You don’t exist. Neither does your daughter. The credit card you used to pay for enrollment was opened and closed in the same month. There are no traces of either of you on the net.”

Fred nodded. “And the medication you claim to need, there’re sugar pills. I stole some from your tray.” He grinned like a little kid.

“You were clever not to walk in the sun, but the sun is not the only light that penetrates clothing. But the biggest tell is this.” Fred shined a high-lumen penlight, and Andrew’s harness was shown on the wall.

“So, where do we go from here?” Andrew looked at the ceiling, somewhat relieved. He was tired of the game.

“Well, that depends.” Mike sat back, also relieved, “Why are you here?”

Deputy Katy Lynn sat across from the person of interest at the sheriff's office and opened her notebook lid. “Hi Kara, thanks for taking the time to come here.”

“No problem. But I’m curious deputy Lynn . . . ”

“Katy . . . ”

“Katy, why was I asked to come all the way over here from Dalton?” Kara’s attitude matched her professional attire.

“Well, we are doing some follow-up questions on the robbery. It’s standard procedure. Surely you can see the necessity of that.”

“I do, but why was I ordered here when the other employees were interviewed by phone?”

“First off, you weren’t ordered, and secondly, as a participant, we have the right to ask you questions. Your offices have guaranteed their full cooperation.” Katy sat back.“Is there a problem I need to be aware of?”

“No,” Kara forced herself to calm down. “It’s just been a long couple of weeks.”

“Couple of months, I guess, would be more accurate. With your mother passing away and all.”

“Excuse me?” Kara was now fully alert.

“Your mother, she passed away on July 12th. Funny you didn’t recall that when deputy Jennings asked that question during your second interview—why was that?”

“It’s really not anyone’s business. I’m not in the habit of airing out my family’s laundry in public.”

“I totally agree with that—I’m the same way—but it must have been a total shocker to find out you have a step-brother.” Katy turned the tablet. It had Andrews prison picture on it. “Handsome man, don’t you think? Of course, he’s much older now. Funny you didn’t recognize him at the bank.”

Shit. That idiot got himself caught. Kara shifted in her seat. Why else the ‘much older’ quip? “I think I’d like an attorney present.” She said a little more forcibly than she intended. It was time for plan B. Kara was prepared to explain the actual circumstances behind the robbery when a gruff dark-haired man, wearing a grey trenchcoat, entered. He didn’t look happy. The agent-man dress is an obvious ploy to intimidate me, she surmised. Dramatics, and that means they don’t have anything concrete yet.

“Well, Miss Kara, seems we have a bit of a problem here.” The man calmly sipped coffee, “You have obstructed a police officer during an ongoing felony investigation and have been fingered as an accomplice to a bank robbery. Do you know what the charge of obstruction of justice in a felony investigation carries?”

“I want my attorney. I have rights.”

“We haven’t charged you with anything yet.” He sat next to deputy Lynn. “It’s possible we can help each other, Kara. Would you be amenable to that?”

“Who are you? And could somebody get me a tissue, please?” She needed to stall for time. It wasn’t a good sign when another man, also in a trench coat, brought in a tissue box without anyone asking. So maybe they didn’t catch him, She thought quickly, calculating the possibilities. “What do you want, agent man?”

“Where’s the money?”

“How the hell should I know,” Kara pointed at the picture on the notebook, “didn’t he tell you?”

“You seem like a smart girl, well educated, highly regarded by your superiors. I’m sure you grasp the position we’re all in. I’m sure a deal can be struck if you lead us to the money. My name is Agent Kaperniski.” He flashed his ID. “Now, if you want to play it by the book, get your attorney involved—which is certainly your right, but know this: when I walk out of that door, all deals walk out with me.” JC stood to go. “I will waste no further time on this.”

Kara watched him turn to the door. His motions seemed to slow as sequences of options sped through her mind. As the door began to close, a sudden panic gripped her.

“Wait!” She heard herself cry out. The door clicked shut. Composing herself, she waited a few moments. “Is that it?” She asked Deputy Lynn.

“You will be led to a temporary holding cell while the charges against you are drafted. After that, you will be allowed to contact anyone you need. Then you will be turned over for processing at the County jail until a bond hearing can be arranged.” Deputy Lynn took a laminated card from her top pocket. “You have the right to remain silent . . . ”

Two hours later, Deputy Lynn visited Kara in her holding cell. “Here are some things to help you clean up.” Kara cleaned her smeared mascara in the cell’s sink.

“Where to now?”

“This way.” She led her back to the interview room. Only this time, there was another officer present.

“These are the charges against you.” The officer slid an E-pad across the table. “Please read them and initial that you have been made aware of the charges.”

Kara did not glance at the pad. “Is that other guy still here?” She looked up at Deputy Lynn.

“You mean Agent Caperneski? I think so. Why?”

“I’d like to see him before I sign this.”

The officer grunted. “Ma’am, your signature is only a formality, I really don’t . . . ”

“Please . . . ” Kara did not like pleading like some child, but what else could she do. “I’d think he’d want to know the truth, or are you guy’s not interested in that?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

JC was waiting when Deputy Lynn entered the kitchenette. She smiled at him. “You were right. I’d say she’s *very* ready to cooperate. She didn’t even look at the charges. She’d know that accessory to grand theft was not one of them if she had.” She tilted her head, questioning. “How did you know?”

“If there’s something they can cling to, most people fight to the last.” JC noticed something behind the Deputy's eyes. “You ok with this case, Katy?”

“I’m okay, sir. I was just . . . was all that ‘let’s do a deal’ stuff real? Would you really have given her a break?”

“No.” He got up to refill his coffee. She could not read him. “It’s not up to me, but *I can* let the prosecutor know about her cooperation. Sometimes it helps with sentencing, but that’s entirely up to the Judge.” JC looked at her kindly. “Sorry if it seems unfair, but that’s how it works. You ready?” He headed out. “I think she’s marinated enough, so this shouldn't take long.”

This guy’s a cold one. Katy shivered as she followed him out. Thank God my husband never became a detective.

Kara looked up as they entered the interview room. JC noted her eyes were not yet cowed.

“You have something to say to me?” he kept a noncommittal demeanor.

“What are you offering for my cooperation.”

“Nothing.” JC stood to leave. “The charges are all drawn up.”

“You said that if I led you to the money, a deal could be struck.”

“That was then, this is now—no deals.” He saw the change in her. The eyes never lie.

“Then you’ll do nothing if I cooperate?”

“I will note the level of your assistance in the file. If it’s good, I will talk with the prosecutor—personally if necessary. That's all I’m willing to do at this time.” He looked at Deputy Lynn. “Katy, I can assume she’s been read her rights?”

“That correct, sir.”

“And you understand those rights?”

Kara nodded.

“Okay,” JC sat down. “What can you do to help us.”

“I can’t lead you to the money, but I can lead you to the guy who knows where it is.”

After hearing Andrew’s entire story about the bank robbery, Robert, the head of the stewards, was the first to speak.

“It’s a remarkable tale, young man. I don’t really know what to say. You must turn yourself in—that would be the first order of business.”

Andrew nodded, “Well, I haven’t been caught yet, and it’s been almost three months now.” He coldly looked around to read the other men.

“Have you considered that we are guilty of aiding and abetting this just by this knowledge?” Fred’s heels pushed his chair back slowly. It wasn’t all that subtle.

Carl actually stood to get more space. “We also have the *community* to think of. How do we explain his sudden absence? The circumstances will come out eventually, and all credibility will be shot if we don’t come forward right away. I mean, what would be their response? Shit, what will the owners do? Nobody’s thought of that yet.”

“The authorities know nothing.” Andrew expected this reaction. “There’s no way they can link me to this place.”

 “I don’t think that’s the point.” Robert leaned back. “You have to turn yourself in.”

“I don’t,” Andrew said with some force. “I can leave right now, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” In their presence, Andrew drew himself up to full height for the first time. When trapped, violence is a useful tool.

Carl was shocked. “Are you willing to use force against us?” He stepped back.

“Hey,” Mike held up a hand. “Let's slow this down a minute.” He pointed for Carl to sit. “There’s no reason this needs to be reduced to rash decision. What we know today we had little inkling of yesterday. A decision does not need to be made right now.”

Andrew looked at Mike in a new light. This man has taught me to reason before taking action. I actually think he can be trusted. He looked around at the scared faces of once-proud men. He turned to Mike. “What do you think I should do?” Waiting was the right thing to do with the power he now felt—power these helpless old men lacked. Well, except maybe Mike. Andrew studied him for his reaction.

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 Mike saw it—he saw the tipping point in Andrew. He’s waiting, waiting to find out who he’s becoming. For all the things I’ve seen in this boy, I’ve never seen the danger of him. But he’s no fool, and he will protect his interests. If I’ve learned one thing about him over the last three months, he won’t act impulsively. So, let us find out where those interests truly lie. Mike sat forward. “If I were in your place, I would consider the effects of my actions on the people I love.

The look Mike got told him everything he needed to know.

Robert’s anxiety got the better of him. “I think the broader considerations need to be addressed first.”

Andrew’s face darkened. “We all have choices here, dear Rober’. Do we not?”

Robert paled from the look. “Yes. I was just . . . ” He trailed off.

“Just what are you proposing, Mike.” Carl knew his friend well and trusted the situation would remain in hand.

“I propose that in twenty-four hours, we meet back here.” Mike saw the assent in Andrew’s eyes, “If Andrew is still here, we’ll take the next step.”

 “Does he speak for the stewards?” Andrew glared at Robert, the supposed chief steward.

“Twenty-four hours is nothing,” Fred nervously glanced at Mike. “I vote yes.”

“Okay by me,” Carl agreed, “But this vote must be unanimous.” They all turned to Robert.

“I don’t appreciate your threats.” Robert looked down before adding quickly.“But I agree.”

Andrew spent the rest of the evening walking the grounds. The place had been just that—a place to hide. He never had a home, well, not like those on TV where people built families and got back from work to somebody happy to see them. You needed money for that shit. Pay a mortgage and utilities and buy shit like nice furniture and drapes. He laughed; that’s one thing about this place—it’s the first time I ever had drapes. But isn't a home pointless without family? And what about pets? People put animals in their houses. I guess they're for the kids. He stopped to look at his reflection. I’m not smart enough to have kids and raise them right. I won’t do what my dad did. I guess that’s one thing I learned here: to live, you gotta commit.

Assured that no one was following, he wanted to head into town to check on the car in storage. The one he bought only three months ago that now seemed like a lifetime. I’m a different man now. The thought made him laugh. Man, huh. I wonder what Sandy would say about that. He thought about the money he’d sent her and how it would help little Brian go to school. I guess that’s what I should do, get some real schoolin’. As his musings consumed the hours, the moon suddenly burst through, casting long shadows with its eerie glow. Andrew suddenly realized that he was on the same path he and Candice walked. What will she think about all this? It’s best she don’t know about all this other stuff. Another thought struck him. To protect his weak ass, that little bastard Robert will tell everybody. In fact, I’ll bet no matter what’s decided tomorrow, he’s gonna to make sure everybody knows who I really am. Is that fair to her? Aren’t I abandoning her just like her family did? Just like mine did?

He stopped at one of her favorite places to rest on their walks. It was by a cheesy waterfall made up of fake rocks and azure underwater lighting. What’s it to me anyway? I got the money. That thought only carried him for three more determined paces before he faltered. And then what? Is that all that’s important? I may be ignorant, but I’m not stupid. I can start anywhere with anyone I choose. He reflexively moved out of the moonlight. I can’t leave without talking to Candice. I’ll have to wear the disguise and tell her—what? That I have to go, because of some family thing or whatever, but I’ll stay in touch? I’ll let that weasel Robert know that I’ll keep in touch too. Yeah, he grinned coldly.

The next day was one of the best days of his life. He woke up somehow assured things were actually turning out like they were supposed to. His morning breakfast was engaging, with many people talking about his speech. He was the toast of the place. Passing the library, he was pleased to see many people reading and working on the internet, which was barely used before he got there. The lunch crew surprised him by serving one of his favorite meals: Macaroni and cheese with tomato soup. It felt like the time when his Dad, actually fulfilling a promise, took him to a ball game. The stadium was filled with the expectation of success—that’s what made the game so cool. He had that feeling now. Then it was time to meet Candice, and he felt as though all the cool things that happened that morning really meant nothing.

During their walks, Candice patiently let him talk about his past. He made most of it all up. Andrew spoke about what he thought was important, what wisdom he passed on to his imaginary children, and how he handled tense situations with his imaginary wife. It was all a lie, but his budding essence was within those lies.

“So, what are you going to do next after you get out?” Candice asked without looking at him. It was one of her little idiosyncrasies. She would appear to focus intently on something in the distance when her focus was actually on you.

“After I get out of where dear?” Andrew was confused by the question.

“After you leave here.”

“Who . . . ” Reaching out, Candice placed a finger on his lips to stay them.

“It was our friend Andrew, the man whom you trust the most.” When she looked up at him, he could see tears brimming. “So many good things come from the most unexpected places, don’t you think?”

“I . . . I don’t understand how . . . ” Andrew stammered when the realization hit him.

“Yes,” She acknowledged his look and embraced him like a lost child. “Mike explained the situation to me, and I agree that you must be yourself. And that means its time for you to live truly, transcend all your make-believe worlds, and you will find yourself. I found you in them, and what I found I love.”

Andrew knew his time here would change him forever. All of the former selves he had created came out of him in a torrent of sobs. All injustices suffered, selfish isolation, and the loneliness of living behind a shield was washed away. It was quite some time before his mind could put an end to it.

“I don’t know what I will do next. I mean, I know what to do, I mean after.” Andrew faced reality now without fear of consequence.

Candice looked intently at the phony waterfall they were standing at: “Remember when I told you my family placed me here, then left me? He nodded, “Well, that’s only partly true. I have no family. My husband was my estate, my children—they were my companies. They abandoned me because they were nothing. You’ve taught me that. I had wrapped a world of selfish pity around me because of this wasting disease. I came here to live in obscurity because of my pride. I did not want any of the circuses my wealth brings. I’m the heiress to a shipping empire, a fickle empire that consumed me. Somehow, you actually made me feel grateful for this disease.”

“That’s absurd.” Andrew didn’t understand.

She pulled on his jaw to face her. “Your stories of your children, your perfect marriage, your loving and caring family, these are the things that are important to you even though they didn’t exist. You’ve never talked about owning a great house or having great wealth. All you talked about was having these people around you that love you. You’ve taught me about real treasure Andrew, the treasure that we keep in our heart where it cannot tarnish or grow cold with apathy.”

Slowly nodding, he took a last look down the road to freedom.

She sighed, recognizing Andrew's look as he turned away. “I will be waiting for you.” She called out to Andrew as he walked away.