

It's 4:26 AM when Laura's dreams are rudely interrupted by the bedside telephone ringing in her ear. She looks over at Dion, who is sleeping very soundly, and picks up the phone. "Hello?" she whispers groggily.

"Laura—Albert. There's—"

Laura sighs deeply. "Albert, look, can this wait until morning? I mean, I'll be seeing you in a couple hours." She closes her eyes and lies back.

"No. Listen to me. This is important. There's—"

"If you absolutely have to talk to me now, let me pick up the phone in the kitchen so I don't wake everyone else up," she sputters angrily. "*Some* of us are sleeping. Or trying to. You must be the most inconsiderate person I've ever met." Laura hits the hold button and deliberately puts the receiver in its cradle. Upon getting out of bed, she fishes around for her robe and wraps it around herself in silence.

She tiptoes to the kitchen, where she picks up the phone and says, "Go ahead, if it's so damn important." She leans back against the wall and nudges the fridge open with her toes, searching for something to gnaw on while Albert is gnawing on her nerves.

"Someone's broken into the lab."

Laura jumps to attention and the fridge door slams. "What?"

"There are files all over the place. I haven't even looked at the computers yet...but our hard files are a mess. I can't begin to tell what might be missing. You'd better get over here ASAP."

Laura, numb with shock (there were so many files! how many years of work? how could they be recovered?), hears herself whisper, "I'll be right there," and she slowly hangs up the phone.



"*All* the files?" Dion asks. He's awake by now, sitting up in bed and yawning.

"I think so. I don't know. God, Dion...do you know how much work has gone into those? Those are the records of at least ten years of the Bureau's pathology work—if not more!" Laura hops around the room with only one foot in her nylons. "And if our computers are missing any files...I hope the head of office has the backups...I feel so stupid for not safeguarding them better."

"It's not your fault. I mean, you can only do so much. Whoever did this had to get past a lot of security...I wonder. This is weird."

Laura has finished dressing—in a natty dress suit, stylish and professional. She briskly walks to the mirror and begins to put in her earrings. "Dion, could you give me a cigarette?"

"I thought you were trying to quit."

"I am, but...well, one cigarette doesn't mean I'm not *trying*, does it?" She whirls around to face her husband, and gives him one of her endearing smiles.

Dion is enraptured. He leans over to her bedside table, picks up her pack of smokes, and hands it to her.

"Thanks, sweetie. Hey, about Emily. I don't think it's fair to take her to David's, seeing that it's so early."

"And we *know* he's not awake. And won't be until at least noon." He smiles wryly.

"Dion, that's not fair. He's a fine babysitter, and a great uncle. Anyway," she continues, lighting up, "I can't take her in. How about you? You're working today, right?"

"Yeah. In fact, I suppose I could go in early and do some paperwork. I hate paperwork."

Laura smiles. "Don't we all. Em should be sleeping...and she sleeps long and hard—like her uncle—so she shouldn't be a problem at the Bureau. Besides, once she wakes up and gets rambunctious, you can take her to David's. I'm sure he'll be awake by then." She takes a deep breath and checks herself out in the mirror. "Too bad you're not that adept at fatherhood," she says, pseudo-playfully.

Dion stiffens. "I think I'm a damn fine father," he says, hurt.

“Oh, Dion, you are. I was just kidding.” She turns around and plants a chaste kiss on his cheek. “I’m going now, sweetie, so take care. And beep me if you need anything.”



“Good morning, Laura. Great to see you,” Albert smiles sarcastically, stirring his cup of steaming hot java. “Coffee?” he asks, holding the mug out to Laura.

“By name if not by nature,” she remarks. “So where’s the mess?”

“I couldn’t stand the chaos, so I cleaned most of it up.”

“Did you—”

“No,” Albert interrupts, and sips his tainted coffee. “I figured anyone who would go to these extremes to take hard files and screw with the database—which they did—would have the foresight to prevent any fingerprints from showing up. I called in the loss to HQ before I so unkindly woke you up.” He smirks.

Laura considers this for a moment. “So there are files missing? Do we know how many?”

“Like I said, I asked the computer geeks at HQ to do a comparison. Apparently the backup database was untouched. They ought to be getting back to us pretty soon, unless they’re wasting our time playing Solitaire or something.” He compulsively stirs his coffee.

As if on cue, the phone rings. “I’ll get it—it’s still my lab,” Albert snaps as he bats Laura’s hand away from the phone and grabs the receiver.

“Rosenfield, Pathology. Yeah, the missing files...What? Two? Okay, which ones?... All right. Okay.”

He hangs up, and shakes his head. “Bad connection. Can you believe it? The place is within walking distance, and they can’t even get the connection right.”

Laura looks desperately at Albert. “Two files. Which? Did they know?”

“Calm down, Spencer—you’re making me nervous. It’s just two John Does, apparently, two murder cases, unrelated. No sweat. We can obviously recover the data.”

“Great.” Laura heaves a huge sigh of relief. The phone rings again, and she picks up even before Albert realizes it.

“Laura Spencer, Pathology...Dion? What’s up?”

The hollow connection seems to echo. “Laura, I just got here and heard about the files. Seems we have three files missing here at the Bureau.”

“Two John Doe murders? Same here.”

“Yeah, two John Does...and a comprehensive case history going back almost twenty years.”

“On whom?”

“Looks like Windom Earle.”



A Telephone Conversation between Two Unidentified Persons:

- 1: Yes?
 2: Uh, yeah...hi. I have the files.
 1: Excellent. And the databanks?
 2: As requested. (Pause.) Everything’s a mess over here. They couldn’t find their asses with both hands and a detailed map. (Laughs.) It’ll be a while before they get it together again.
 1: Good job. I must admit, I’m quite impressed.
 2: I guess I’m just very good at following orders, hey. (Laughs.)
 1: Do they suspect anyone?

2: Doubt it...they haven't even gotten that far. They're still running around like chickens, you know, with their heads cut off. "What's missing?" and "Where's the file?" and "Don't blame me!" You know...the standard government excuses. (Silence.)

1: (After a pause:) Can you get those files to me?

2: Oh, yeah, sure, no problem, I can do it. Hey, hold on a sec, will ya? (Sound of receiver being put down on a hard surface. Faint whistling sound. After about a minute:) Okay. Now, where were we?

1: A drop-off.

2: Oh, yeah.

1: I'll let you know.

2: No, look, I'm sorry, but I can't hold onto these things for too long. Can I dump 'em somewhere?

1: You have to be patient if you want to get anywhere in this world.

2: (Pause. Then meekly:) Yeah, okay.

1: After a week—

2: A week? I can't wait a whole goddam week, for Chrissakes!

1: Your attitude is getting you nowhere.

2: Yeah, okay, I'm sorry. A week. Okay, after a week, what?

1: After a week, take them to—wait.

2: What? Is someone listening?

1: I'll see you soon.

2: Wait! What about the drop-off?

1: I expect we'll run into each other sooner or later. At which point I'll be sure to procure the required reading from you. Be prepared.

2: Dammit, don't leave me hanging! Don't goddam *do* this to me!

1: Take care, my friend.

END OF TAPE



"No...Oh my God, Albert...What do you think this means, exactly?"
 // don't scream. don't. be rational, rational, rational, detached...jesus, what if he comes here? is he *already* here? dear god, please let this be another terrible dream, that's all... //

Laura takes out a cigarette and fumbles for her lighter. "Albert, what does this mean?"
 "I thought you were trying to quit that trash," he says with no kindness or sympathy.
 "How much did Dion pay you to hassle me? Albert, do you think Earle is close by? Do you have any idea where this file might be?" she asks desperately as she lights up.
 Albert politely excuses this. "Nothing. I don't know. And I have no idea, respectively. We have to come up with some ideas awfully damn fast, though. This is an embarrassment to the Bureau. You stay here and finish your coffee and that bad habit and I'll be back in a few." He gets up and walks out the door.
 // alone at last...alone? alone. //

She stands and walks around the room, looking at Albert's various wall-mounted degrees, certificates, pictures of dead Presidents, and mutters, "Oh, Albert, you're soooo impressive." She puts out her cigarette and sits again.
 // alone. //

** A sharp, vivid image of Windom Earle's face shoots into her mind. He says, "Alone." **
 When Albert returns, he finds Laura passed out in the chair.

Misirlou



Striding into the lab my eyes catch Laura slumped in a chair—

“Christ, she starts smoking again and this is what I have to look forward to.” Part of me is disgusted with people who cannot handle their vices...ironically, my coffee cup, bearing a slight dusting of white on the edge of the cup, sits on the desk nearby.

I go to Laura, check her pulse and find signs of an elevated heart rhythm. Her respiration seems normal. I gently raise her head and support it with my hand behind her neck to cradle her head. I open her right eye, then her left. The pupils are dilated, but react normally to the light in the room. It could be stress or exhaustion.

“Laura, Laura, can you hear me?”

She stirs, regaining her senses.

I continue, “You were out. You know, you really should stay away from cigarettes.” My voice carries that typical caustic edge. “Seems that you can’t handle them anymore. You check out fine, except for the slightly elevated heart rate possibly resulting from a mild stimulant such as caffeine”—my left eyebrow arches—“or nicotine. Do you wish to obtain another medical opinion for this episode? Will this be a regular occurrence?”

Genuine concern fills my voice as I continue on in a softer tone. “Do you remember anything before you lost consciousness? Anything unusual?”

// unusual, hell, the whole damn day has been one fun-filled jam-packed carnival ride, admission—free! //

As I wait for Laura’s reply both she and I become aware of the small blinking red light on the phone.

“Voice mail,” I mutter, picking up the receiver and punching the button. An obviously altered electronic voice—

*Drivin’ that train
High on cocaine
Albert you’d better
watch your speed
Trouble ahead—
you’re no match for me
better pay me my fee.*

“It’s personal,” I say, as I hang up the phone.

Carlotta



umm...trouble...”I want you to kidnap her...use this gun...this warehouse... rewarded...”... “He’s dangerous!”...Then, from a song: “This man is utterly mad—you’re playing a lunatic!” “That’s the problem: He’s a brilliant lunatic, and you can’t tell which way he’ll jump. Like his game, he’s impossible to analyze. You can’t dissect him, predict him...which of course means he’s not a lunatic at all.”...David, it’s just a dream...David, wake up...David...David!

David blears awake to find himself on the couch, Meg shaking him gently yet firmly.

“David, wake up!” She looks honestly concerned.

He smiles sleepily. “My angel...What time is it?”

“Seven. Please, David, wake up. I have to go to work. Dion is here with Emily.”

“I won’t be, much longer,” Dion says from the foyer. “You’re not exactly instilling me with confidence, David.”

“No, no, I’m awake,” David says, and sits up clumsily. “Really. What’s going on?”

“Something came up at the Bureau. It’s confidential,” he adds, when Meg looks at him questioningly.

David smiles, and reaches out to take Emily. “I know. It’s Windom Earle.”

Both Meg and Dion stare at David in absolute disbelief.

“How...how did you know?” Dion manages.

“So I was right. Chalk one up for the bad old big brother,” David says softly. “Never mind how I know. I know.” He turns his attention to his niece. “Hey, sweetie, how’s my little bunny? How’s my honey pie?” Emily squeals with delight.

Dion watches them enviously for a moment, then clears his throat and turns to Meg. “Anyway, like I said, it’s confidential. I don’t even want to *know* how *he* found out about it. But don’t tell anyone else. I have to get back to the office. There’s a lot of work that needs to be done. Take care.” With an obligatory nod to his brother, Dion is out the door.

* * *

“So how did you know?” Meg asks, as she prepares herbal tea for the two of them and pours dry Cheerios for Emily.

“Lucky guess. No, really,” David says, “I was just dreaming about him, about the time I kidnapped Laura for him. I don’t think I dream...I think I have visions...divine inspiration...and you—you’re my angel!” He smiles shyly and looks right into Meg’s eyes.

She blushes. “Oh...you’re just silly.” She giggles, embarrassed.

“No, I’m not silly,” he insists. “I’m...I’m...it’s the heroin.” He falls silent and stares into his teacup.

Meg takes his hand. “Every day, David, I try to understand a little more about you. I think I know a lot right now. But that’s one big thing I don’t think I’ll ever understand.” She sighs. “I’m here for you. Don’t forget that.” He closes his eyes, squeezes her hand, and heaves a shuddery sigh. They kiss.

“Um, um, um!” Emily cries, and waves her spoon around happily. David smiles at Meg, and they all laugh.

❧

The engine cranked to a noisy stop and I just sat in the lot of the Bureau office for a moment, fresh from David’s “prescient” vision. A car ride’s worth of time to think had left me with some nasty thoughts in my head. Was Earle using David to get back into both the Bureau and our lives? I kept flashing back to the hell of the warehouse, tied to a chair and high beyond comprehension on Earle’s coke. Now was he back? Or was the missing file indicative of someone just looking for Earle? Regardless, the demon of our pasts has once again insinuated himself into the present. And through that damned brother of mine!

I slammed closed the car door and went up to see Laura and Albert, letting them know of the potential nastiness of the situation.

“Morning, Dion—your wife’s whacked again,” barked Albert, in his ever-happy greeting tone. I saw an obviously worn Laura slumped just awake in a chair.

“Hold a second, I got some more bad news.”

“Just what I need,” groaned Laura, grabbing for the nicotine once again. This time I was almost tempted to join her.

“It’s David—I think he might be working with Earle. He knows Earle is involved with the case, he told me so. I didn’t even have time to think about it when I was dropping Emily off, but in the car...Oh God, and I left Emily with that bastard!”

“I wouldn’t worry about David much; he’s harmless,” sighed Laura, remembering his kidnapping attempt.

“I don’t care, Earle might be back—and if it’s David that let him back in, there’s gonna be hell to pay!”

A brief silence engulfed the room as we all contemplated the return of Windom.

“Hey, Albert, make me one of your cups of coffee, will ya? I *really* need one today...”

JArgent



Dion’s request takes Albert by surprise. He surreptitiously catches the young agent’s eye and raises an eyebrow. Dion looks at him impatiently.

The phone rings in Laura’s observation–room–turned–office. “Just what we need—more bad news,” she groans, and picks herself up off her chair, grabs her cigarettes, and walks briskly to her office.

Albert pours coffee for Dion, and looks at him archly. “Are you *sure* you want *my* coffee?” he asks carefully. “This is so unlike you, Spencer. Remember when—”

“Look, I asked for it, didn’t I?” Dion interrupts. He nervously bites a fingernail. “Just *do* it, okay? Don’t worry about me.”

“Hey, I’m not worried about you. Please. You and your health and well–being happen to be the furthest things from my mind,” Albert adds sardonically, as he opens a small Ziploc bag of cocaine into Dion’s coffee cup. “Laura will be extraordinarily pissed.”

“So now all of a sudden you’re worried about my *wife’s* reaction?” Dion snaps. “Is *everyone* out to get me?”

Albert puts down the mug and folds his arms across his chest. “Look, I don’t think you *need* this. You’re paranoid enough as it is.”

Dion glares at Albert. “I never said I *needed* it.” He begins to pace around the lab area.

“You quit, didn’t you? After the ‘incident’?” Albert asks.

“Well, yeah...for a while...Look, this isn’t any of your business,” Dion says furiously.

“You think your brother had something to do with the break–in?” Albert pours a huge amount of sugar into Dion’s cup and stirs the concoction thoroughly.

“Hey, he knew about it before I said a word.” He takes his coffee from Albert. “Goddam junkie.” He takes a sip. Albert can’t help but smile.

* * *

Laura returns to find Dion, flushed and a little manic, examining the rat and mouse cages lining one wall of the lab. Albert looks up at Laura from his seat and says, “He’s had a hard day.”

“Well, I just got some more news. That was Meg. David’s file at the hospital is incomplete—as though someone had erased half of it. I don’t know—”

“Ha!” Dion cries, and spins around to point a finger at his wife. “I knew he had something to do with this! God, I knew it!”

Laura looks shocked. “Dion, nobody said he had anything to do with anything. That’s like saying these two John Does we lost were the ones who stole the files.”

Albert smiles to himself. “Laura,” he points out, “they’re dead.”

“Yes, I *know* they’re dead,” she says, exasperated. “But David is a victim here just as much as the John Does are, and as much as we are, and...”

“But what about Windom Earle? Huh?” Dion smiles a bit crazily. Albert makes a mental note to tone down the java next time. “Is he a victim, too? No way, Laura, I still say David is in cahoots with Earle. Give me a few days to prove it.”

Laura regards him curiously. “Anyway, as I was about to say, she’s missing another file, too, but she doesn’t know whose it is yet. She thinks it’s a cocaine abuser”—pointed look at Albert, and, incredibly, straight at Dion—“although it could very well be a heroin addict”—Dion smiles defiantly at Laura and Albert—“and that he or she may be the key to this case. We might have to do a search.”

“David is mine,” Dion grins.

“And I’ll talk to *you* later,” Laura adds.



David caps the needle, pops it off the syringe, and throws both away. He absentmindedly massages the inside of his left elbow and sighs. He closes his eyes and lets the familiar tide overcome him, then turns to his computer. He turns it on and loads up his word processor. After staring blankly at the screen for a few seconds, he begins to type:

It's like this: When you live your entire
life under a storm cloud, eventually you
stop hearing the rain.

David lights a cigarette while he searches for whatever comes next:

But when it's quiet, and you're alone, you
realize it had never stopped raining, and it
never will.

He frowns. The phone rings and he picks up. "Hello?"

"David, hi, it's Meg. How's work? I'm sorry I'm disturbing you."

"No, I needed some disturbance." He laughs ruefully. "I decided to forego the manuscript today and start something new. It sucks, I think."

"Give yourself some credit. You're a very famous author."

"Mmm-hmm...well, not right now, I'm not." He smokes his cigarette and stares at the screen again. "So what's up?"

"Well...I feel I have to tell you. Your file here is incomplete. Like someone wanted to steal it, but decided to corrupt it instead, you know?"

David swivels around. "Très bizarre. But why are you telling me? All is not lost. I can certainly update it for you."

Meg hesitates. "I think Dion is very, very suspicious of you. He thinks you were working with Mr. Earle on this file fraud. Laura doesn't agree...but I wanted to warn you to be careful."

"Okay. I will...thank you. I don't know why he has such a vendetta for me lately."

A pregnant pause. "David...did you do it?"

"No! Of course I didn't!" he answers hotly. "I can't believe you would think I would!"

"No, I didn't, David, honestly," Meg says hastily. "But I wanted to make sure."

"I believe you, angel," he says softly. "I should get back to work. Thank you again. I love you."

"Love you too," Meg answers, and she hangs up.



"He sounded serious—I really don't think he did it..."

"Thanks, Meg, I'll get back to you later."

"Goodbye, Dion. I'm sure I'll see you tonight."

"Okay, I'll be over to David's apartment to pick up Em in a few hours."

"Do you want me to meet you somewhere?" Meg's voice had a very pleading tone to it.

"Are you kidding? In public? On today, of all days?"

"I'm sorry, Dion." She really sounded like she was, too. "I'll call you later."

I just hung up. I didn't feel like I needed any *more* anxiety to add to this day. Time to evaluate.

"What's up, champ?" Albert walked in, on his third cup of coffee.

"I just talked to Meg. David told her he had nothing to do with it."

"And let me guess: You doubt his integrity?"

"Oh, not me!" Brief laughs were exchanged before the overall gravity of the situation came back down on the room.

"So what's our course of action, Dion? There's nothing we can legally do with David, even if you're sure beyond a reasonable doubt—"

"I *am*."

“Okay, fine, but that still doesn’t change the fact that we’ve got jack on the elder Mr. Spencer and anything we do to his ass will get yours thrown in the gutter.”

“God, I know you’re right, but there has to be something we can do...”

A brief moment of silence. There was a warm breeze from somewhere that was oddly distracting in our current states.

“Okay, Albert, we’ll drop this for now. Any word on the two John Does?”

“None yet; the Records department is too busy picking bugs out of each others’ fur to get anything done for us.”

“Okay. Any thoughts on David’s corrupted file?”

“Well, sounds like stock Earle. Do some minor thing somewhere to throw us off. Hold a minute. Think about that for a second.”

“Wait, I hadn’t even considered that.”

“Stay on track, laughing boy. David is the perfect red herring here. We know he and Earle have worked together before, and however he does, I’m sure Earle knows that David is now a big part of your married life. I wouldn’t be surprised if he knew about Meg, too.”

That stung. I didn’t think even Albert knew about Meg. I’ll deal with that later. Still, the coffee mix helped me keep a poker face.

“Wait, Albert, I don’t want to make any damn conjectures about David’s guilt, innocence or whatever until we know who the hell those two John Does are.”

“Fine. I’ll be downstairs badgering Records.” He chugged his coffee and stared at me for a split second, just enough to show his smug little feeling of power over me. I knew that to a degree, I was his whipping boy now, but a quick gulp from the mug on the desk made it all go away...

JArgent



Anders is staring out the window at the falling snow.

“You know what would be a great murder weapon?”

“What?” Rebekka asks, slightly startled, and looks up from the hearty breakfast she’s preparing.

“I’m not saying it hasn’t been done before...but how about a sharp piece of ice? You could cut someone’s throat with that, and it would melt, so there’d be no murder weapon. Also, icicles. You could stab someone with that, and it would be very, very nasty, don’t you think?” He traces circles on the table.

“Anders,” Rebekka says carefully, “why are we talking about killing people?”

He turns around to look at her. “We’re not. We’re just talking about great murder weapons. *Hypothetically*,” he adds, and rolls his eyes.

“Okay,” Rebekka replies, and puts a big plate of eggs, sausages, and pancakes on the table. “Will you eat some breakfast?”

Anders stands up and begins to pace nervously. “I’m not hungry.”

“Are you sure? I made sausages, and eggs, and...”

“I said I’m not hungry, dammit.”

Hurt, Rebekka sits down to the breakfast she had slaved over. Somehow Anders has taken the wind out of her sails, however, and now the meal looks utterly unappetizing. She sighs and moves the eggs around unhappily.

“Have you heard of a David Spencer?” Anders asks.

“He’s an author, fairly famous, from what I’ve heard. Why?”

Anders ignores her question. “How about an Albert Rosenfield?”

“Um, yes, I recognize the name,” Rebekka answers hesitantly. “I believe he’s a pathologist, and an FBI agent.”

“Hmm. A doctor...There could be some money in this, dear sister. How do you recognize the name?”

Rebekka brightens. “Oh, he works with Thomas. He—”

Anders swiftly approaches her and gives her a slap that makes her eyes tear up. “I don’t want you to ever, EVER say that name in my presence again. Do you hear me?”

Rebekka’s cheek burns with pain, embarrassment, and the feeling that somehow she deserved it. “Yes, Anders...”

“Are you still...seeing him?”

Rebekka chokes back tears. “Yes...”

Anders regards her expectantly, and returns to his pacing only after she begins to cry.

“An author and a doctor, eh?” Anders continues, as if he had never laid a hand on her. “Very interesting. Do me a favor and finish your breakfast before we make our visits, will you?”

Rebekka wipes her eyes on her sweater sleeve and silently begins to eat her breakfast.



Laura finishes up another cup of coffee and stares at the phone, pleading silently with it not to ring. She then lights a cigarette and inhales deeply, savoring it, allowing herself to calm down as much as possible. Dion then walks in and looks at her very disapprovingly.

“Laura, what the hell are you doing? Now honey, you know how hard it was for me to quit, but I did it and it was only by a strong will that I did. Honestly, you women always have to have something to run to when things get tough.”

“Mmmmm...you’re so right, sweetheart. Thank *God* I have you to keep me grounded. Maybe it’s not all women, Dion. Maybe it’s just your wife who’s weak. Maybe I’m just no good under pressure. Jesus, Dion, you’re a damn mess! *I’m weak?* How much coke did you have with your coffee this morning?”

“*You* are paranoid, my dear,” he laughs condescendingly. “Honestly, Laura, where do you get your ideas? Did David tell you that? There’s a good reference point! he junkie tells the ex-whore something and you believe him.”

// don’t even flinch. don’t even acknowledge it. no...get him later. you know how to make him crumble. it will be so much sweeter later. //

She smiles wholeheartedly hatefully and giggles at him, then speaks in a calm and chocolatey voice in between puffs.

“You’re so predictable, Dion. I mean, really. I barely ever speak to David. You know that.” She gets up and stands next to him, stroking his arm. “You sound jealous, lover. Why don’t you be a good boy and go help Albert, okay? I’m sure he could use you to take some notes for him or something. I need my office to myself and you look like you need another pick-me-up. I have work to do,” she says, opening the door, scooting the transfixed Dion out. “I’ll make us a very special dinner and we can talk after I put Em to bed.” She waves as though to a little kid: “Bye-bye, Dion. Bye-bye!”

She shuts the door.

Misirlou



INT DARK ROOM – Night

A man is sitting at a chair in front of a roaring log cabin fireplace. His back is to us and the fire creates a silhouette of his body. The window to his left is open, and tall green trees are swaying in the dim moonlight. Several birds can be heard chirping, and ironically there are no owls tonight. There is an immense scraping sound that is growing louder by the minute.

ECU [Extreme Close-Up]

The glint of metal on a small silhouette white object. The metal, now recognized as a small pocketknife, strikes the object. Back and forth. The fire continues to roar, the trees continue to sway. A pile of shavings is slowly collecting on the floor. The man stands up and kicks the shavings into the fire-

place where they melt. He slowly turns around and we begin to recognize his hair...then his eyes...then his teeth... and his face.

ECU

Windom Earle places the knife and lump object, now shaped like a potato, on the table.

WINDOM: The night is long and dreams are calling.

Windom turns his back to us once again and exits to the right. A fierce wind rips through the trees and the curtains, flickering in the firelight, blow wildly through the room as we FADE TO BLACK.

MikeLOGtp



“Albert, go get some take-out, will ya?”

“Thought Laura was making a big ‘family bonding’ dinner tonight.”

“Yeah, but I want some Chinese now.”

“Pushing the boundaries of a healthy relationship all the time, eh, Spencer?” Albert looked way too cocky for his own good. “But seriously, we gotta finish wrapping up whatever loose ends we can about this morning’s fiasco. I’ve already been here twelve hours and it looks like I’ll be here another eight analyzing whatever forensic clues will give us any info.”

“Okay, where do we start now?”

“How did the burglar gain access?”

“I have no clue, Albert.”

“Nor do I; there are no traces of picked locks, broken windows, anything. This is one of the cleanest break-ins I’ve ever witnessed in my career.”

“Who’s good enough to get in without a trace?”

“Only a handful of the world’s best, especially in this place. Christ, this is the FBI—we don’t leave the doors unlocked too often! The only way to comfortably get the kind of access that was offered here would be to have your own set of keys.”

“David...”

“That’s my guess offhand, but we shouldn’t rule anything else out either. Anyone could have gotten a key off of anyone who works in this section.”

“How many people is that?”

“Twenty, maybe thirty. I’m never sure who the front desk is giving keys nowadays—some of the temps even get them.”

“It is thoroughly conceivable that David could have taken my keys for an hour, copied the ones that looked official, then slipped them back to me. I don’t think he has enough gall to pull off the break-in, though.”

“David’s not that good, either, Dion. There wasn’t a fingerprint in this place. Also, whoever did the job hit the files with surgical precision. The rest of the chaos was smokescreen.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Why would someone break into an FBI office with unclassified files and take only two? There’s a lot juicier stuff right down the hall. Whoever came in here did so with a definite intent.”

“What?”

“I don’t have a clue. But there’s got to be some connection between those John Does. And where Windom Earle fits into this, I don’t know. But it makes my skin crawl more than just a bit when I think what he might be up to.”

“Want me to bug David’s phone?”

“Get a warrant.”

“No prob—I’ll do that tomorrow. And I’ll tell Meg to keep an ear out for anything odd. Meanwhile, I’m gonna go home and eat. Not Chinese, but hell, I’ll live.”

“I’ll call there if anything turns up.”

“Goodbye, Albert.”

The engine revved after a long day of stress, crime, intrigue, adultery and cocaine. Today has seen many vices I wish it didn't have to. For now off to a night of relative peace which will surely be punctuated by the fights with Laura, bouts of her nicotine and my coke. Ah, one happy family again...

JArgent



Albert has returned to his office at the Bureau; most of the others have gone home. He sits at his desk and pulls out a legal pad to make notes on the case. After pouring himself a cup of coffee, he scribbles:

John Does: unidentified--correlation?

Albert buzzes his secretary on the intercom. "Hey, is there anything on those John Does I told you to look up?"

She replies, "Not yet, sir. We know they're murder victims, but they were never identified." He notes this. "Anything else?" she asks.

"Yeah. How about some food in here?"

"Yes, sir." The intercom goes silent.

He continues to jot down notes.

Windem working alone? Not likely; who is agent?

David Spencer, Dion Spencer, Laura Spencer possible?

Motivation: David--drugs, Dion--money? drugs?, Laura--??

He leans back in his chair and takes a good, strong gulp of coffee. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a young man and woman, the man apparently grasping the woman's wrist, walk quickly past the open office door. Albert frowns, and gets on the intercom again.

"Hey, who was that? Hello?" He taps the TALK button repeatedly, much as someone would flick a burnt light bulb on and off in the hopes of regenerating the filament. "She's getting my dinner," he mutters. "She's actually getting my dinner. Hot damn. Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner."

Albert writes some more, continuously watching his door. Sure enough, the young couple breezes by again, this time in the opposite direction.

Albert slams the pencil and pad down on his desk and jogs to the door. He sticks his head out after the two and says, irritably, "Hey! Where do you think you're going? This is federal government property, you know. You can't just run up and down these hallowed halls as if it were a track course, for God's sake!"

The two immediately stop and turn around, as if drawn by Albert's voice. An extraordinarily attractive young man with a Nordic air about him approaches Albert's door with a sense of purpose, more or less dragging the young woman with him. She is extraordinarily attractive as well, and one can see the family resemblance.

"Doctor Agent Albert Rosenfield," the man says with a smile. "How nice to see you. May we come in?"

Albert doesn't recognize either of them, and eyes the young man warily. "Do you have a pass?"

"Certainly." The man produces one from the breast pocket of his down jacket and shows it to Albert, who nods his approval and grudgingly beckons the two inside.



“May we take a seat?” the young man smiles.

“Sure, go ahead,” Albert says, indicating a couple of utilitarian chairs in the corner. The male visitor drags them in front of Albert’s desk, turns to the woman, and says, “Business time, dear. Please busy yourself for a while. I’ll be out shortly, I hope.” He kisses her cheek, whispers something into her ear, and leads her pointedly to the door. She obediently exits into the hallway, and the young man closes the door behind her.

Albert is very suspicious. “What’s going on? Do I know you?”

The man doesn’t answer immediately. He moves one of the chairs back to the corner, saying, “We don’t need that anymore.” Then he turns to Albert. “Yes, I believe you do know me. I doubt we’ve ever really officially met, however. I’m Anders Nilsson—a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.” He holds his hand out to shake.

Albert doesn’t reciprocate the action. “What the hell are you doing here? Get out immediately.” He springs from his seat and begins to move toward the door.

Anders heads him off at the pass and forcibly restrains him with strong hands on Albert’s shoulders. “Relax, Doctor Agent Rosenfield, you’re in no danger. Please, have a seat.” He gestures toward Albert’s plush office chair, and Albert carefully sits down.

“May I call you Albert?” Anders asks with an ever-so-subtle tilt of the head.

“I suppose it would save time,” Albert replies sarcastically.

“Very well. I suppose you know why I’m here. It concerns your...your account, let’s call it.” He pulls a scrap of paper from his pocket and writes a number on it. He folds this scrap in two and carefully places it on Albert’s desk, sliding it toward the agent as he does so.

Albert looks at Anders, then at the paper. He picks up the paper and unfolds it. His eyes go wide. “What the hell is this? Is this how much I owe you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s quite a bit of money, isn’t it?”

Anders laughs softly. “Well, you use quite a bit of cocaine.”

Albert glares at him, seething. “What about this?” he asks, indicating some miscellaneous charges.

Anders cranes his neck to see what Albert is pointing at. “Oh, I’m so sorry—did you want itemized billing?” he remarks dryly. He snatches the paper from Albert’s hands and fills in descriptions of the charges, then hands it back to Albert, who examines it critically.

“Labor? Travel expenses? What the hell...?”

“It’s a pity you didn’t pay your bill earlier. I had a very hard time trying to track you down; of course, I had to tack onto your bill the expenses incurred during said tracking down. It’s only fair.”

“I can’t pay this.” Albert nervously gulps his coffee, his eyes on the slip of paper.

“Then you’d better start taking very, very small sips of coffee,” Anders says quietly. “You’ll get no more cocaine until you pay. It’s in the rules. And being the shrewd businessman I am, well...money and the prompt delivery of it is quite important to me—I believe you have this same feeling toward cocaine; am I correct?”

Albert looks panicked. “Let me get back to you. Will you give me a week?”

“Tell you what,” Anders suggests, leaning across the desk, “I’ll visit you again within a week or two. I strongly recommend having the money by then, Albert. I can’t overemphasize that point. Meanwhile...take your time. Your supply can’t last forever; we both know that.”

He stands up. “It was nice speaking to you, Albert. I have faith in our business relationship.” Anders smiles a smile that somehow strikes terror into Albert’s heart. “See you later, then?”

“Yeah, later,” Albert mutters, and clenches the paper in his hand as Anders saunters out the door.

It's 8:00 PM, and David lays Emily down to sleep. He smiles at her angelic expression, and returns to the computer. He runs his fingers through his hair, stares at the screen, and begins to write some more.

There's a knock at the door. David immediately looks at Emily to make sure she's asleep; she is. He opens the door a hand's width to find Anders on his stoop.

"Mr. Spencer. Good evening. May I come in?" he smiles.

"Um...I really wish you wouldn't. My niece is asleep, and I'd hate to wake her."

Anders grins. "Oh, I *love* babies!" he gushes, with a hint of sarcasm. "May I see her?" He edges in the door, past David, who watches him helplessly. As David closes the door, he sees Anders's red Miata in the driveway; in the passenger's seat is a woman who must surely be a model. She takes a drink from an Evian bottle, then catches David's eye.

help me

David is startled, and looks around to see who might have spoken. There is no one. He shakes his head and closes the door.

* * *

Anders is looking Emily over critically. "She's a very beautiful baby. Your niece, you say?"

David gently picks Em up. "Yes—my brother's daughter."

Anders nods. "I see. You're not married, are you?"

"No...no, I'm not."

"Yes, well, we're young; there's still time for marriage, right?" Anders sits down and lights a cigarette. David frowns and shifts Emily to his other shoulder.

"Let's cut to the chase, shall we?" Anders says. "I'm sure you know why I'm here." He blows a perfect smoke ring straight up into the air.

"Yes, yes, I do," David replies. "Let me get your money."

"I'd appreciate it."

David takes Emily to his bedroom. He opens the drawer containing his drug supply and paraphernalia, and scans it for money. There is none. David begins to sweat.

"How about a check?" David asks as he walks back into the living room where Anders is making himself comfortable.

"Ooh...bit sticky, aren't they? Eminently traceable. I'd rather not."

"I have no cash...please, I can pay you. Let me make it out to Cash. And if you come into any trouble because of it, I'll take the blame." He bites his lip and waits for a response.

Anders considers this offer. "Yes...okay. I suppose that's fair."

David whips out his checkbook and makes out a check for the amount Anders dictates. He rips it out of the book.

"Here you go. Thanks for being so understanding."

"Oh, no problem," Anders replies, taking the check. "Pleased to have done business with you." He smiles. "And you have a wonderful niece." He pinches her foot, not too hard, but enough to wake her up.

Emily whines, then turns to look at Anders. She begins to bawl.

"Hmm...maybe I take that back," Anders laughs. "Later, Mr. Spencer." He backs out the door. A moment later, the Miata fires up and tears away.

David carefully bounces his niece and whispers, "Shh, baby, it's okay...Emmie, your daddy's gonna come for you soon..."

Emily cries even louder. David sighs.



The Miata speeds into the darkness of the night. Rebekka finally gets up the courage to speak: "Anders, where are we going?"

Anders replies, his eyes on the road as they go ever faster, “Lydia’s hotel.” He glances at his sister. “New girl.”

“Oh,” Rebekka says simply, and looks out her window.

* * *

They pull into the parking lot of a midclass hotel. Anders turns off the car, gets out, and slams the door. He heads for the hotel entryway without even waiting for his sister to catch up—which she eventually does, choking for breath.

The twins breeze into the lobby. A short-haired brunette is at the front desk, and she looks up as they enter. “Anders,” she says. “I’ve been waiting for you.” She stands up and walks languorously toward him.

“Lydia,” Anders smiles almost sincerely, and wraps his arm lithely around her waist as she cozies up to him. “I’ve been waiting for you.” They kiss. Rebekka shifts uncomfortably and scans the pictures on the walls.

“Lyds,” Anders continues, “book.”

“Excuse me?” she says. “Book?”

“Yeah,” he says sarcastically, “one of those squarish things, you know, with these really thin papers all piled up between a couple heavy sheets of cardboard? A book.”

“I know what a book is, asshole,” Lydia replies. “There’re some in the little library area off to the side there.”

“Fan-damn-tastic,” Anders mutters, and walks swiftly to the library. Lydia and Rebekka follow him.

Once in the library, Anders carefully selects a hardbound book, one with no jacket. He puts it flat on a writing desk in the corner, and pulls out a small Ziploc bag of cocaine, which he proceeds to empty onto the book’s cover. Lydia turns to Rebekka. “So,” she asks, “how’ve you been?”

“Oh, fine, thank you,” she lies. “And you?”

“Not bad...the hotel business is going pretty well,” Lydia replies. She turns to Anders, who is carefully cutting the cocaine into lines with a razor blade. “You’re here to speak with the new girl?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Anders says, distracted. “An interview, of sorts.” He begins to snort his neat lines with a tightly-rolled bill.

“I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised,” Lydia adds. She turns to Rebekka. “He always uses a book? Not a mirror? How strange.”

“Well, he doesn’t like the sound...you know, the sound of a blade on glass.” Rebekka bites her lip nervously. “May we talk about something else?”

Lydia smiles. “There’s really not that much to talk about, sweetie. Just relax.”

Anders picks his head up, sniffs a couple times, and carefully wipes any residue off his nose. “Bekkers, you stay down here. I’m going up to see her.” He stands up. “Lydia, you can clean up.” He gestures vaguely toward the desk.

“Clean up after your own damn self. I’m not a maid,” Lydia says biting.

“I’ll do it,” Rebekka interjects. Anders glances at her. “Fine, fine, great, super. I’ll see both of you later.” He heads for the elevator.

“I’ll be at the front desk if you need me, Bekkers,” Lydia offers, and puts an almost reassuring hand on Rebekka’s shoulder. She heads off to the lobby, leaving Rebekka to tidy up after her brother.

As she dutifully dusts off the book and replaces it in its slot on the shelf, pockets the tiny bag and finally runs her hand over the surface of the desk, she thinks, My God, look at me, look what I’ve become. She falls into the desk chair and begins to weep.



Anders knocks confidently on the door to room 233. After a couple seconds, a youngish girl, perhaps 26, opens it. She has almost shoulder-length wavy dark brown hair and is dressed in a sensual gown; she looks tired and lost. Anders smiles and walks in.

“Hello again,” he says. “How are you tonight?”

“I’m okay, I guess,” the girl answers nervously. She’s still standing by the door, not quite sure what to do with herself.

Anders gestures toward the bed. “Please, sit down. Would you like some ice water?” He walks over to the cold, sweating carafe of water on the dresser. The girl nods, and Anders pours a glass for her.

As he hands it to her, he says, “I can tell you’re a little nervous. There’s no reason for that. Relax. This is just a little interview.” He smiles and picks up a clipboard from the dresser. “Are we ready?” he asks, and pulls up a chair across from her. He sits in it backwards and looks at her expectantly. She takes a sip from her glass and nods, unsure.

“Well, then—let’s get started. You’re from where, now?” Anders asks.

“Washington state. Twin Peaks.”

He notes this. “Can’t say I’ve ever heard of it.”

“It’s kind of a small town...that’s partly why I left.”

“Understandable.” He writes down a few more things, then looks up from the clipboard. “Why are you doing this?” he asks.

“I...I need the money.” She swallows hard.

“But surely there are other means of making money,” Anders points out.

The girl smiles wryly. “Not this kind of money.”

Anders nods. “Good point. Okay, now, have you done this kind of thing before?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“One-Eyed Jack’s. It’s in Canada.”

“I see.” He sniffs and writes this down. “You were a ‘hostess’?”

“Yes.”

Anders smiles softly to himself. “Would you...” He leans in to whisper in the girl’s ear, a lewd half-smile on his face. The girl blushes and says, “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Really? Hmm. Good.” He makes a few more notes, examines the sum total of his interview notes, then writes down three figures and shows them to the girl. “This,” he says, indicating the first number, “is what you could charge. This,” pointing to the second, “is what I’d receive. “And *this* is your share.” He circles the final number and hands the clipboard to the girl.

Her eyes go wide. Anders smiles and takes back the notes. “So, do we have a deal?” he asks.

“Yeah, I think we do.” The girl looks up at him happily.

“Great. We won’t regret this,” Anders promises. He stands up to leave. At the door he turns around and says, “Oh, one more thing. What was your name again?”

“Oh,” the girl says, “it’s Ronette. Just Ronette.”

“Ronette,” Anders repeats. “I’ll be seeing you later, Ronette.” He leaves the room, closing the door behind him.



Anders bounds out of the elevator and over to Lydia. “Hey, where’s Bekkers?” he asks.

“She’s outside—said she needed some air,” Lydia replies. “So when are we going to have another date?” She bats her eyelashes at Anders.

He laughs, stoned. “One of these days, Lyds. I promise.” He puts on his lecherous smile again and leans in for a kiss.

Lydia forcibly pushes him away. “Get away from me, Nilsson, you libidinous jerk,” she says half-jokingly. Anders backs off and laughs, running his hand through his hair. “I’ll see you later, Lyds—and that’s a promise. Or a threat.” He bows extravagantly and giggles, hysterical, as he heads out the front door to his sister.

* * *

Rebekka is shivering on the front step, hugging herself for warmth. She's smoking a cigarette, which Anders pulls from her lips and throws to the pavement. "Nasty habit, Bekkers," he chides, tsking her.

She turns to face him and looks straight into his eyes. "Why did you drag me along with you tonight?" she demands. "Did you think I would be even remotely interested in the next whore for your collection? Or did you want me around just to clean up after your 'nasty habit'?" Her blue eyes flash with the anger she's never expressed. "Lydia's not exactly my friend, either," she continues, "and I was forced to make small talk with her for ages while you pulled in yet another unsuspecting girl, am I right? And you're so stoned—"

Anders nonchalantly produces a handgun from his pocket. Rebekka immediately focuses on it and puts up her hands as if to shield herself. "No, no, Anders," she whimpers. "Don't hurt me. Don't shoot me, Anders. No, please...don't kill me..." She backs up against the wall and closes her eyes.

He puts the gun against her heart. "Open your eyes, you silly bitch," he says. Rebekka takes one look at the gun and begins to sob. "Oh, relax, I'm not going to kill you," Anders says, exasperated. He watches her cry for a few seconds, then grabs her hair and pulls her head back. He whispers violently into her ear: "I don't care if you're my family. I don't care if you're my sister—my *twin* sister. It all boils down to the fact that I *own* you, just like I own all the other girls. Remember that. Never forget it."

He lets go of her long hair and slowly puts the gun away. Rebekka slides down the wall, heaving huge, wrenching sobs. Anders regards her curiously, then pulls her up by her already-bruised wrist and walks calmly to the car. He throws his sister into her seat and drives home.



Why does he always take so damned long to get to the door? I rang the bell for the fifth time, and finally I could hear a response other than Emily crying in the kitchen. A toilet flushed and David stumpled out into the hall, or so it sounded from outside. "David, open the door, will ya?"

The lock clicked swiftly and David hunched back away from the door. I waited a second and then entered. Emily's bawling was amplified by the acoustics inside. My entrance failed to soothe her. She could always smell the stuff on me. David had hunched into a corner, looking pretty sick. From the smell of it, he'd just vomited all over the bathroom. "What happened to you?"

"Just go away, take Em and go home."

"No—what the hell happened here?" I looked down at his inner elbow and saw what I didn't want to see, a fresh track mark. "Jesus, David, with Emily *in the room!*?! My God..."

"You don't understand, I—"

"The hell I don't. I leave my daughter with you and you go shoot up in front of her? Really damn slick." David just slumped down in the corner. He had no explanation and offered none. His checkbook was lying out beneath the lamp and it looked freshly written in. Next to it was a crumpled-up check. No amount had been written, but the name read "Anders Nil—" and then was crossed out. For some unknown reason this rang a bell, but I wasn't sure why. David had by now officially passed out in the corner, an impressive feat with young Em crying in the corner. Thinking that if nothing else, now would be a good time to check and see if David was involved with Windom Earle at all, I began quickly searching through whatever papers and notes were lying around. David wasn't exactly the filing cabinet type, and it was not unlikely that I would find something incriminating lying on the coffee table.

A moment of searching revealed nothing, and from behind me, Meg let herself in. "Hi. David's passed out on smack over there if you want to check him out." She gasped and ran to his side. I think she dialed 911, but I was too far away to tell and too close to Em to hear. Deciding that there wasn't much more I could accomplish here, and realizing that tonight was probably not the best of nights to be late for dinner with Laura, I grabbed Em, much to her displeasure, and bolted out the door.

JArgent



// he's only 20 minutes late. don't get mad. it's been worse. it'll get worse. it's okay now. //

Laura turns the oven off completely, hoping the chicken will stay warm but not dry out. She checks the place settings again, uncorks the wine, and pours herself a glass. She then goes out on the porch, lights a cigarette, and has a drink.

// wine is nothing without a good smoke. if i quit, i'd only be a bitch and dion certainly wouldn't want that. //

A car winds its way down the road and Laura looks expectantly...but it's not Dion. Neighbor.

// damn you, laura, why did you do this to yourself? married? a baby? thank god for em. if it weren't for you, em, i'd be certifiable by now. //

Dion's car pulls into the driveway and he carries Emily up to the porch, looking at Laura disgustingly.

"What's the problem, Dion?"

"You're smoking again."

"At least I'm killing myself slowly, darlin'. How is she?"

"What do you mean?! *Who?!?*"

"I mean Emily, sweetheart. Were you doting on another 'she' tonight?"

"That's it, Laura. I'm putting her to bed and then you better say what it is you want to say!"

Dion does so while Laura finishes her cigarette and wine outside. Then Dion comes down and sits on the floor at her feet. "Can we talk after dinner, Laura? I'm starving."

"Why, Dion," Laura says in a mock southern-belle voice, "I do believe you are humbled. What on earth for?"

"Look, I had a scare tonight. David had overdosed and thrown up when I went to pick her up. We can't have her around that anymore. It's going too far now. He booted up right in front of my little girl!"

"Oh, and where was *my* little girl? Huh?"

"You know what I mean."

"All right. We'll find a drug-free babysitter. But I'm going to call David later and tell him he's lost the babysitting gig. Bastard. I had to give up all that stuff. Why shouldn't he have to? What are we gonna do about work tomorrow? Neither of us can afford to not go. It's not like that place is any more straight-edge than David's house."

"Laura, where do you get these ideas?"

"I don't know, honey. Guess I'm just bein' *silly*," she giggles through her anger and hugs Dion's neck.

// i can't talk to him right now. i'm so tired i might lose control. i don't want em to wake up because we're screaming at each other. //

They proceed into the dining room and Laura serves the dinner. They eat silently, cautiously, and decide they'll talk "another time."

Misirlou



That night...

A Telephone Conversation Between Laura and Ronette

Laura: Hello?

Ronette: Yes—Laura?

Laura: Speaking.. How may I help you?

Ronette: (Pause.) Laura, it's Ronnie.

Laura: (Shocked silence. Then:) Ronette? Is it you?

Ronette: Yeah...

Laura: Oh, my God, I haven't seen you since—

Ronette: The wedding.

Laura: The wedding? Wow.

Ronette: I miss you, Laura.
 Laura: Where are you, Ronnie?
 Ronette: In town.
 Laura: You left TP?
 Ronette: Well, after you moved out, the town kinda died. It was empty without you. I had like no friends...I wanted to start over, like you did. I figured we both had a chance, you know?
 Laura: Hell of a place to start over. (They laugh.) Do you have a job?
 Ronette: Well, yeah, sort of.
 Laura: You have to tell me all about it, all about everything. We have some catching up to do. Where are you staying?
 Ronette: Oh, this little hotel. Pretty nice—not as nice as the Great Northern, but hey, I’m not complaining.
 Laura: You always were a trooper.
 Ronette: (Long pause.) Can I meet you for lunch sometime?
 Laura: Yeah. Lemme check my schedule, and I’ll get back to you, okay?
 Ronette: That’s right...you’re the career woman now.
 Laura: (Laughs.) I guess so. And I’m a mom, too—you knew that, right?
 Ronette: No, you never told me.
 Laura: Well, we have a *lot* of catching up to do, then. Can I pick you up sometime?
 Ronette: Let me meet you.
 Laura: Yeah. Soon, I promise.
 Ronette: (Pause.) Love you, Laura.
 Laura: You too, Ronnie. Bye.
 Ronette: Bye.



Rebekka stands at a pay phone with a handful of change. It’s past midnight and more than a little freaky out on the street, but Anders left to do God-knows-what and this is the only time she has to call Thomas.

Damn, she thinks to herself, this would be a great time to have a calling card. The phone rings at the other end—a voice tells her to deposit the precise amount of coinage for the calling area. She shoves the quarters in the phone, dropping two of them in her haste. When she’s nervous she gets clumsy...Anders always told her she couldn’t do anything right...

Thomas picks up the phone at his apartment. “Hello?”

“Thomas, it’s me. I need a place to stay. I can’t take Anders anymore.”

“You can always stay here. You know that.”

“Thanks, Thomas—you’re the one good thing I can depend on in my life.”

“Are you at the hotel? I can come and pick you up nearby...”

“No—wait, I’m at a gas station a few blocks away. Anders is gone right now; running an errand for a client, I suppose...I didn’t want a record of our call on the bill at the hotel...Anders keeps track of stuff like that. I’ll be at your place in a half-hour. I didn’t take anything with me...didn’t want Anders to know I’m leaving.”

“Okay, Rebekka, see you soon.” He adds in a softer tone, “You still have stuff at my apartment from the last time you were here.”

“Bye.”

She hangs up, looks around to see if Anders could be anywhere watching her; satisfied that he isn’t, she takes off down the block and hails a cab—no small feat during the transit strike in Philadelphia.

As she reaches for the handle of the cab, a guy near her tries for the same car.

“Hey, how much for a date?” the nondescript “suit” asks.

“Get lost!” Bekkers sneers at him as she dives into the vehicle and gives the driver Thomas’s address. God, she thinks to herself, I hope Thomas has the money to pay the cabbie. She counts the few meager bills that she managed to take with her. She didn’t dare rip off any of Anders’s cash. If she had done that, she would really be dead.

As the cab pulls away from the curb, the “suit” watches it leave, then walks over to the same phone that Rebekka had just used a few minutes ago.

He punches the numbers on the phone. Not reaching the person he wants, he leaves a message.

“Hey, what gives? I just saw your girl tonight and she was none too friendly.”

Carlotta



Thomas is standing outside in the apartment complex parking lot, settling the bill with the cab driver. Rebekka has already gone inside and has curled up on the sofa, just happy to be somewhere safe, someplace normal. This is what life should be. She should be in a nice little place with nice furniture, with someone who cared about her. Lots of laughter—good stuff. Warm fuzzy stuff. Not this whacked-out life Anders has dragged her into.

She sighs and pulls a pillow towards her and cuddles it like a stuffed animal.

“Rebekka, is there anything you need? You look exhausted.” Thomas locks the deadbolt behind him now that he’s back in his place.

“God, you wouldn’t believe it...he pulled a damn gun on me. Said he wouldn’t use it, but I don’t trust him right now...”

“I believe it, ‘Bekka.” He sits down next to her on the sofa. “You have got to get away from him. He’s draggin’ you down with him. You deserve to be treated better than this.”

“But, Thomas, he is my brother and my only family here. I can’t leave him...He wasn’t always like this. It can be good again.”

Thomas sighs, and puts his arm around her. “Rebekka, I can never change your mind about your brother. But you can start a life of your own. I love you.”

The two settle in for the night. Thomas puts Rebekka in his bedroom and he sleeps on the sofa, a ritual they follow every time she comes to his place to seek refuge. He checks the clock on the wall before turning in. It’s 2:20 am...tomorrow is another workday. Lights off...

His sleep is shattered by pounding on his apartment door.

“BEKKERS, BEKKERS, I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE! YOU THINK YOU’RE SO DAMN CUTE RUNNING AWAY TO YOUR LITTLE HERO.”

The pounding continues as Anders raves like a madman in the hallway. “DIDN’T THINK I’D FIND YA, HUH? BUT I GOT FRIENDS, YOU KNOW—THEY TELL ME STUFF. I CAN FIND YOU ANYTIME I WANT. REMEMBER THAT, BEKKERS...”

Rebekka cowers under the covers in the bedroom, too frightened to move. If only he’d just go away, she prays.

Thomas, in the living room, makes no move to the door, just stays quiet. The noise stops and the silence is almost as scary to Rebekka as the violence that preceded it.

In the night Thomas and Rebekka hear the crack and retort of three rounds of gunfire. In the morning Thomas will find the windshield of his car cracked and shattered where the bullets entered.

Carlotta



Anders peels off a hundred-dollar bill and gives it to the cabbie.

“I told you that if the information you gave me was good—that you would be rewarded with more money...the good shall always be rewarded,” he laughs.

If it hadn't been for that call he got from one of his regulars, he wouldn't have known that Bekkers got into a cab around here. Finding the cab wasn't that hard. He smiles; this was the first time he ever got a handle on where Bekkers would disappear at times. Now he felt smug. He was in control again...to some extent. At least he knew where to find his little sister when he needed her. Bet he rattled her chains with his little act at the apartment complex...

Morning in Thomas's apartment finds Rebekka pouring a cup of coffee into a mug. Neither she nor Thomas got much sleep. Thomas has just left to go to work so she's pretty much on her own right now...She hears the tumblers of the deadbolt click and holds her breath as the door opens.

"God! Thomas, you gave me a scare. I thought you left!"

"Yeah, well, I thought I'd be merrily fighting the traffic on the highway too—but I found out what that noise was last night. You oughta see my car."

"What happened?" Rebekka puts her coffee down on the table.

"Looks like Anders took his frustration out on my windshield."

"Oh. Thomas, I'm sorry—I shouldn't have gotten you into this. He's never found me here before. I'm sorry, really, this is terrible."

"Hey, Anders is nothing—the scary part comes now. I gotta talk to the claims department of my insurance company," he quips with a half-hearted smile on his face.

He picks up the phone and dials a number. Looks like I'm gonna be late for work today, he thinks as he listens to the ringing at the other end...

Carlotta



After a very long day, Albert arrives at his spacious townhouse apartment and slams the door behind him. He shrugs off his trench coat and drapes it over the back of a chair; he's too tired to be neat. He heads straight to his bedroom where he removes his tie and unbuttons the first two buttons of his shirt, then collapses onto his plush bed and sleeps. His mind and body are exhausted from being denied rest for nearly 24 hours; he does not dream.

Meanwhile...

In the back of the ambulance, Meg holds David's hand and gently brushes the thick black hair back from his forehead. Damn, David, she thinks, not again. I've done this so often for you that it's almost rote. But it still hurts, every time. She looks up at the technicians, trying not to cry. "I'm Doctor Wilson, the chief pharmacologist at the hospital. This is my patient," she says. "I can take care of him." The medics shrug, having stabilized David for the ride. "Okay, Doctor," one of them nods.

"We're going to need naloxone IV stat, and epinephrine on standby if he goes into arrest," Meg dictates, and one of the medics immediately injects David with a healthy dose of naloxone, a strong antidote for narcotic overdose.

Meg takes a deep breath. "David, can you hear me?"

David stirs; his eyes open slightly. "My angel..."

"David," Meg says sternly, "David, hang on—we need you!"

He takes a difficult breath. "I didn't do it in front of her. Tell him that," he manages.

She looks at him curiously. "Tell who, David?" she prods, trying to keep him conscious.

"Dion. Tell Dion I never, ever did." He sighs. "Anders."

The name rings a bell; Meg's eyes narrow. "Anders...Anders *Nilsson*?" she asks. "Did he do this to you?"

"Too strong, maybe," he mutters. "Did he *mean* to...? I didn't do this...I didn't want to die..."

"You won't die," Meg says firmly. Anders Nilsson, she thinks. Isn't he a patient of mine? Yes, that smooth-talking Jekyll-and-Hyde Swede with the severe cocaine addiction and, I see now, a penchant

for sadism. His poor, poor sister. “And I’ll be speaking personally to Mr. Nilsson,” she adds under her breath, and squeezes David’s hand reassuringly as the ambulance speeds in to the hospital. He’s taken out on a stretcher, bound for the ER.



Thomas stops at the grocery store on the way home from work. He picks up food from the deli section for supper, and then some flowers at a kiosk—an odd assortment of tulips, daisies, a couple of roses and static. Kind of a country garden thing, he thinks as he heads for the check-out line in the store.

As he leaves he has to remind himself to look for the loaner car he’s driving while his car is getting fixed. It’s a damn good thing his policy covers the expense of getting the loaner; at least it’s decent. Right now if he had to rent a car on his own it’d probably come from Rent-A-Wreck. Not that he doesn’t make a decent paycheck, but, hey, a guy’s got expenses...

Fifteen minutes later he arrives at his apartment and unlocks the door. Rebekka is still there. He calls out, “Oh, June—I’m home!”

“Is that you, Ward? You need to have a talk with the Beaver.”

Out of character, he replies, “Boy, would I like to ever!”

Bekkers, smiling, swats him. “Get your mind outta the gutter! Boy, have *you* been watching too much Nick At Nite kinda stuff.”

Thomas hands her the bouquet. “For you...”

“Gee, thanks.”

Rebekka pads over to the kitchen and rummages through the cabinets to find an oversized glass to put the flowers in water. Tom follows with the bags of food. She takes them and checks the contents of the deli cartons. “Hmmm, looks like a little veggie lasagna, and some salad. How thoughtful.”

“Yeah, I spare no expense.”

He watches her get out the plates. She’s wearing one of his white shirts, a pair of jeans, and is barefoot. He finds it tempting, but tonight he is too exhausted to even try anything.

Grabbing a plate of food, he heads toward the living room, plops down on the sofa, and flings one leg easily up on the coffee table. His foot taps against an open book on the table...*Clinical Laboratory Tests: Values and Implications*.

“Geez, Rebekka, what are you doing reading this stuff? Some light entertainment?”

“Uh—you forget—I *did* have aspirations of being a doctor at one time, remember?” She avoids his eyes when she talks.

Thomas, changing the subject: “Work has been a bear lately.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

Thomas sighs, “You know I can’t tell you much...but the place is a real disaster. Albert, you know, my boss, Albert Rosenfield; he’s been worse than normal. He’s usually acerbic, but now he’s reaching for new heights in office etiquette. Seems like his outside life is really starting to creep into the office. Someone mentioned that some strange people came to pay him a call about some personal business...glad I was occupied elsewhere in the building. Got a lot of reports to catch up on...”

Rebekka concentrates very hard on dishing out food for herself and takes a deep breath. She remembers. She remembers the nameplate on the desk when she accompanied Anders on a business visit the other day. Anders made her wait outside the office while he talked to the “client”. Albert, Albert Rosenfield. Oh shit...

Carlotta



Rebekka answers the phone while Thomas is out of the apartment.

Rebekka: Hello?

Anders: Yes, hello to you, my loving sister.

Rebekka: What do you want, Anders?

Anders: I'm just calling to check on you, love.

Rebekka: [groans]

Anders: Don't worry, I have no intention of disturbing your home away from home. I must say I am feeling refreshed and that I am on a much more even temperament today. Hope I didn't disturb you on my visit the other night.

Rebekka: [quietly] What do you want, Anders?

Anders: [smiling] Why, Bekkers, I don't want anything *now*. You should have told me about your boyfriend—and who he works for.

Rebekka: I didn't think it was important...

Anders: *Au contraire* [he snaps]. Take your time playing house for now. I am occupied with new business interests at the present. But come home soon or I'll come and get you. Are you sleeping with him? Are you?

Rebekka: No! No...not yet, it's just—

Anders: Listen to me carefully, now: I want any handy information about his boss or his work that you come across. It may be *useful* to me one day. Bye, Bekkers, for now.

Tears well in Rebekka's eyes.

Carlotta



It sounds like Thomas is at the door. Rebekka arranges herself on the couch and brushes the tears from her eyes. She takes a few deep breaths, blinks a few times, and smiles, just as the door opens and Thomas walks in.

“Hey, Bekka. Sorry about that,” he says as he closes and locks the door behind him.

“Oh, no problem,” she assures him. He sits down next to her and puts his arm around her. “Say, Thomas,” Rebekka begins, snuggling closer to him, “I want to know more about this Albert. Maybe I can help you make your office situation a bit more bearable if I can get inside this guy's head, you know?” She laughs; inside she is berating herself for being Anders's puppet. So willing to be used.

“Well, it's really hard to get into his head,” Thomas says. “He's really talented, I mean, he's the best there is. Me, I don't work with him much, because I'm still low man on the totem pole, you know?” Rebekka smiles. “I know we have this other pathologist on staff, Sam Stanley...I haven't seen him around much either. I hear he cracked some big cases some years back. Anyway, somehow I suspect Albert's relegated him to tests and stuff, you know, nothing too complex. And that's a shame.” He shifts a little to get more comfortable. “And Doctor Spencer, same thing. And she's really good.” Rebekka thinks, Spencer. David Spencer, right? Oh, God...

Thomas continues, “Albert *knows* he's the best, and I think he thrives on that. He doesn't like to give the rest of us a chance. Hey, do you want some wine?” He stands up and heads for the kitchen area.

“Um, sure, but only one glass, okay?” Rebekka smiles. She tries to collect her thoughts as Thomas pours two glasses of wine. “Does he have any family?” she asks.

“He's an only child, I've heard,” Thomas replies, as he hands a glass to Rebekka. “And his parents are still around somewhere, but I don't think he's very close with them. He's definitely single,” he smiles. “And no significant other, either. Too bad, eh?”

Rebekka takes a sip of wine. “Yeah, too bad,” she echoes.

Thomas appears to be on a roll, happy to get out his frustrations. “He drinks coffee constantly—I mean, we all live on caffeine, but he's a little different...I don't know.” He drinks his wine thoughtfully.

“I don’t know enough about him to postulate on that particular habit.” He turns to Rebekka and smiles, truly happy.

Rebekka returns the smile, slightly less genuine, and is sick to her stomach at her false shows of affection. “Thanks, Thomas; I think that by telling me all of this, you’re a lot more secure in your professional relationship with Albert, right?” She grins.

He laughs. “You know, you’re right! I guess I just needed to get all that out. Thanks, Bekka.” He kisses her gently. Rebekka smiles mournfully and puts down her wineglass.

“I have to go, Thomas.” She stands up slowly; Thomas rises as well. “Anders’ll kill me if I don’t get home soon...I’m sorry. I wish I could stay here forever. I feel safe and...and normal here.” She puts her arms around him and buries her face in his neck. “I don’t want to leave; I don’t ever want to leave here!” she whispers.

“So don’t leave. You can stay here.”

Rebekka shakes her head violently. “No, no, no, I can’t, I can’t! I have to go home.” She cries, helpless.

Thomas holds her reassuringly. “Hey, sweetie,” he says softly and takes a step back. He wipes the tears from Rebekka’s face and smiles. “It’ll be okay. You’re strong. You can make it. And I’m always, always here for you. Now go on home, because I know you have to. Let me drive you,” he offers.

“Oh, no, no—I couldn’t ask you to do that. It’s...too dangerous. I can walk, I guess. It’s not too far, and it’s a nice day. And, look, I’d even left some good walking shoes here from last time.” She smiles, trying to cheer herself up.

“I’m keeping an eye on your brother. If he so much as looks at you funny, I swear, I’ll—”

Bekkers puts a finger on his lips. “Don’t swear anything, Thomas. You can’t plan anything with my brother. He’s very volatile. You have to take him one day at a time.” She gazes into his eyes, then turns to go. “I think I’m all set...Oh, your shirt,” she realizes. “I’m wearing your shirt...” She fingers the collar nervously, silently wondering what Anders would do to her if he saw her wearing Thomas’s shirt.

“It’s okay, Bekka. You can keep it. I want you to have it,” Thomas manages. “Or you can use it as an excuse to see me again—you know, like, ‘But I have to return this shirt, Anders!’” He smiles brightly.

Rebekka laughs despite herself. “Okay. I will.” What the hell, she rationalizes. If he would kill me for being here in the first place, what could possibly be the punishment for wearing a shirt? She picks up her purse and her bag of clothes and slides into her shoes. She kisses Thomas. “Bye,” she whispers, and slips out the door.



Meg sneaks into David’s room, where he’s staying overnight. She has put on her lab coat and tries to be professional. She picks up his chart and looks it over. David wakes from a light sleep.

“Hello, David,” Meg manages. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay, I guess,” David answers. He regards his IV absurdly. “What’s this for?”

“Just glucose. You were a little hypoglycemic—nothing to worry about,” Meg assures him.

“Why am I still here?”

“It’s procedure.”

“No, it’s not.”

“You know, that worries me, David,” Meg says carefully, replacing David’s chart on the end of his bed. She pulls up a chair at his bedside. “The very fact that you know this...this ‘ritual’ by heart is unnerving. That’s not normal...it’s not normal for someone to have gone through this so many times. I—”

“Margaret, when will you learn? When will you goddam *let me go*?” He sinks back onto his pillow and closes his eyes.

Meg is startled. “You said you didn’t want to die.”

“No...I didn’t. But since I’ve been holed up here, stone cold sober and drifting in and out of consciousness, I’ve been doing some thinking. My life is shit. It *is*,” he insists, before Meg can contradict

him. “I write worthless books, I teach a bunch of no-good, ambitionless jerks, I can’t commit to a relationship, the only family ties I had going for me were severed today by a misunderstanding, and I’ve more or less sold my soul to heroin. What do I have left?”

“You...you have me,” Meg chokes.

“You want to change me. And I *can’t change*.”

Meg considers this. “David, you don’t believe those things you said. I know you don’t. Your books have won awards. You love teaching. You...we have a good relationship. I’ve never made you feel like you have to commit, have I?”

“No,” he admits. “*You* haven’t.”

“There you go. As for family...well, if it was a misunderstanding, I’m sure you can patch it up. And I can put you on detox.”

“Again? Meg, it doesn’t work. It’s never worked for longer than a week at most. I hate it.”

“David, this isn’t you. You’re never so bitter. I don’t like this.”

David sighs. “Meg, please go away. I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

Meg stands up slowly and silently leaves the room.



Rebekka lets herself in once at her and her brother’s largish apartment. “Anders,” she calls out. “I’m—”

She stops abruptly when she hears the strains of serious fluting from the bedroom. Rebekka recognizes the piece Anders is playing as a particularly intricate Mozart sonata, one of which he is very proud. To disturb him now would mean trouble later. She opts instead to remain silent. She carefully puts her bag of effects on the kitchen table and, grabbing a magazine, heads for the couch. This isn’t so bad after all, she thinks. I like it when he’s involved in his music—that means he’s not involved with me. I wish I could change out of this shirt before he sees me in it, though, and he’s in the bedroom, so I can’t. She frowns and flips through the magazine aimlessly.

After all five movements, the music stops. Rebekka is leaning back on the couch with her eyes closed, relishing the relative normalcy of life at the Nilsson household at the moment. “Anders?” she calls, lifting up her head and looking down the hallway to the bedroom.

There is no response. Rebekka peels herself lazily from the couch and ambles to the bedroom. Anders is putting away his flute and music. He doesn’t look up at his sister, who has wrapped one arm around the doorframe. “Anders? Did you hear me?” He continues to tidy up. “I’m home. Are you hungry? I could make something—” Anders stands up and looks at her coldly for a split second as he heads past her out the bedroom door. Rebekka follows, ready to offer a few choice words. Anders slouches into a chair and grabs a catalog. His sheer indifference somehow ruins the effect, and Rebekka loses her nerve.

Defeated, she sinks into a chair across from her brother. “I have some information for you, Anders,” she whispers. “Do you want to hear it now?”

Anders does not respond. He continues to leisurely glance through the catalog.

Bekkers looks at him desperately. “Anders, do you want to hear what I learned today?” Again, no response. “Is this my punishment? That you won’t speak to me?” she cries. “I don’t understand. I came home...I came home to you. I did exactly what you told me to do. I don’t understand! *Why* won’t you speak to me?” She is confused and upset, and beginning to become very, very afraid.

Anders simply says, “Nice shirt, Rebekka,” then stands up, tosses the catalog onto the chair, and heads out the door. Rebekka runs to the door and yells after her brother, “Where are you going?”

“Out,” he replies, gets into his Miata, and speeds off. Rebekka stands at the door, dumbfounded. It dawns on her: He’s probably going to Thomas’s place! She retreats into the apartment and slams the door so hard that the glasses rattle in the cupboards. She throws herself back onto the sofa, folds her arms across her chest, and seethes.

I can’t control him, she thinks. But I’m sick of him controlling me. *I* wanted to get angry, *I* wanted to have an argument—but he wouldn’t let me. She pushes herself deeper into the soft plush of the

couch and halfheartedly plots a kind of revenge. Eventually the rage evaporates, and she falls asleep on the sofa.



INTERIOR LOG CABIN – Night

The room is lit with candles. WINDOM EARLE is seated at an oak desk with a quill pen. He is writing on a piece of lined paper and the pen tip is making incredible scratching sounds. There is a pile of white shavings on the ground near the floor. Some near-recognizable white lumps lay casually on top of the edge of the table. Windom's eyes gleam in the fire.

WINDOM (reading from the middle of the note):

Always give your best, never get discouraged, never be petty; always remember, others may hate you. Those who hate you don't win unless you hate them. And then you destroy yourself.

WINDOM chuckles to himself and picks up the pen tip briefly. He puts the pen tip back to the paper and finishes scrawling on the paper. He folds the paper in half and places it in a plain white envelope.

Windom gets up and admires his handiwork while walking about the room and begins to talk, almost as if an unseen force were in there with him.

WINDOM:

We are torn by divisions, wanting unity. We are.

(after a pause)

And now all we need...(snapping his fingers) is a stamp.

Fade to Black

MikeLOGtp



"Well, if nothing else, maybe today will be the calm after the storm."

I couldn't tell whether she meant the office or home. Last night had ended in a subdued conversation and evening of lovemaking that basically served to let off steam on both our parts. "I hope so." That applied to both cases. It's never nice to be fighting with the wife. I'll try to keep off the coke today; that's probably why I was so jumpy last night. Oh well...

"Oh, honey, have you talked to Meg? How's David doing?"

"Not sure yet, and I'm having trouble motivating myself to give a damn." We both sensed a fight arising, and shut up for a moment. "Em still asleep?"

"Yeah. What are we going to do with her? David's 'under the weather' and it's pretty hard to get a sitter at 7:30 AM on a weekday."

"I'll take her. I'm going to leave in a few minutes—can you go wake her up and get her dressed? I'll get a bottle or something."

"Sure, I'll be down in a few."

I finished my coffee and the phone rang. Of all people, it was Albert. Wanted to make sure I was up and coming into work on time. He knew I'd been out late. He seemed awful perky, and unfortunately, I knew why. Maybe bringing in Em isn't such a good idea. Unfortunately, there's not much recourse. I threw some formula in a bottle just in time for Laura to bring the little angel down.

"Here she is! Isn't she cute! Gagaga!"

Laura was one of the few people I knew who could speak babytalk without looking asinine. "I got her. When will I see you at work?"

"Not much longer. I have a little bit to take care of."

"Okay. I'll probably be in the lab, doing more analysis of what the hell happened yesterday."

"See you soon, honey." A light kiss on the cheek and I was off into the wacky world of Federal Law Enforcement.

In the car, seeing Em sleep again, I was reminded of last night, most specifically the crumpled check. “Anders Nil—...” Where do I know that name? I’ll ask Meg if she knows it; she’ll probably stop by to inform me of David’s condition. And she’ll probably want to “do lunch”. Well, all will be dealt with in time. For now, one step at a time is good enough...

JArgent



Laura arrives at the lab to find Dion and Albert engaged in a healthy argument. Rather, Dion seems to be doing most of the arguing—Albert is surprisingly cool and collected.

“Let me see the body, Albert!” Dion says.

“I’ve already told you: no,” Albert replies, and sips his coffee.

Laura approaches the two. “Hey, you guys—fill me in. We have a body?”

“Albert won’t tell me anything about it. It’s my case, too. And as far as I’m concerned, you’re obstructing my investigation. I’ll call in Gordon,” he threatens.

Albert laughs cynically. “Yeah, sure you will, you little punk. We have no evidence that this is even related. Dead bodies are not your area of expertise. I was waiting to tell Laura. My *partner*,” he emphasizes. “Calm down, for God’s sake. Have some coffee.” He gestures toward the coffeepot at the end of the worktable. Dion considers it for a moment, then catches Laura’s pointed look and mutters, “I’m not thirsty.” He sits down unhappily, massaging his temples. A headache, already.

Albert turns to Laura. “Thirty-five-year-old white male. We’re waiting on an ID. Turned up in some agent’s office. Scary, eh?” Laura nods, spooked. “Strange thing is,” he continues, “the man’s been embalmed. Perfectly embalmed. A refugee from a funeral parlor.” He smiles. “I’ve done some basic examinations, but nothing invasive. As I’ve said, I was waiting for you. Your husband was just excited that he might actually have some work to do.”

Dion fumes, speechless. Laura, trying to change the subject, asks, “Honey, where’s Emily?”

“As soon as I saw we both had some work to do, I asked Albert if he knew someone *responsible* who could watch her until we got off work. So I took her to this guy Thomas’s office before I came here.”

Albert adds, “He’s not working too hard today—just a little paperwork—and he said he’d be happy to take care of her.”

“Do you know a Thomas?” Dion asks.

“Yeah, he’s a pathologist,” Laura says. “He’s a good guy. I trust him completely.” She smiles, trying to convince her husband.

“Anyway, Laura, let’s go to work. Dion, you can get started on some leads. You wanted to look up David,” Albert points out.

Laura actually agrees. “It might be worth it, Dion. He *has* been acting kind of strange, even before the...’incident’.”

“Not before I see that body.”

“Oh, fer Chrissakes. Of all the juvenile, bull-headed...Fine.” Albert stomps off into the lab’s morgue/exam room, the Spencers trailing behind him.



Albert pulls the body onto an examination table. It *is* in wonderfully good condition—the embalmer was obviously very talented. Laura marvels at the skill with which they did their work.

“The bad thing—or good thing, depending on whose side you’re on—about a really good embalming job is that it’s often pretty difficult to see any wounds, especially any glaringly obvious fatal wounds. If this guy had a hole in his forehead, we might not notice it too easily. Seriously,” Albert says, seeing Dion roll his eyes. “The embalmer’s job is to cover that kind of thing up. And if whoever pickled him also killed him, it would be really easy to disguise a fatal gash as a routine incision for drainage of body fluids. Do you understand?”

Laura nods, intrigued. She indicates the corpse's eyes and mouth. "They're sewn together. Standard?"

"Yes," Albert replies, "but under the circumstances, we might as well cut the stitches and start our more in-depth investigation." He walks over to the head of the body. "Laura, give me a pair of sharp-sharp scissors."

Laura locates the sharp-sharp scissors (so named because both blades end in a point) on the instrument tray and hands them to Albert, who expertly snips the sutures on the left eyelid without touching the eye itself. "Aha. Laura, tweezers." Laura obediently hands him the tweezers. She's aware that she's become the assistant on this body, but somehow she doesn't mind too much. It's fun to sit back once in a while and watch while someone else does all the dirty work.

Albert carefully extracts a tiny strip of thin paper from under the eyelid. He spreads it open on the specimen tray. Dion leans over to read it. "'See no evil,'" he reads aloud.

Laura frowns. "Open the mouth, Albert."

He cuts the stitches very skillfully, and Dion begins to wonder whether Albert may be involved in this case. He's just too perfect, too precise, too good at what he does.

Albert picks up a pair of forceps and pulls another slip of paper and a gold coin from the mouth. He deposits them on the specimen tray. "Under the tongue," he says, tapping the coin with the forceps. "Ancient Greeks put gold coins under the tongues of their dead as fare for Charon, boatman on the river Styx. If the souls couldn't pay the fare, they would haunt the living. The practice continues today in many cultures." He flattens out the second paper. "'Speak no evil,'" Laura reads.

Albert crouches down to the level of the body and searches in its left ear. He stands up and circles to the other side, then crouches again. He carefully inserts the forceps and pulls out a third piece of paper, rolled up tightly. He unrolls it and reads, "'Hear no evil'. Well."

He tosses it with the others and puts the forceps back in their place. "Looks like we have some more work to do before we actually cut into this guy. We need to analyze the papers thoroughly. Type of paper, brand of ink. And the coin." He picks it up and squints at it. "It's not any kind of American coin." Albert puts it back on the specimen tray and shrugs. "We have a lot of work to do. Excuse me." He abruptly heads for his private office in the lab and closes the door behind him.

Dion's eyes follow him. "That was weird."

"Yeah—whoever did this was really good. He had a reason for it. Otherwise, he wouldn't have put those papers where they are. He has a message for us. The ID on this body would really help us, I think."

"Oh. Yeah. But I was talking about Albert. How he just kind of ran out of steam at the end there. I thought he'd be even more interested in the case, and he shrugged and said, 'We have a lot of work to do'." You don't think that's weird?"

Laura sighs. "Unfortunately, no. He's in his office injecting himself with cocaine. He does it less every day; he's either getting stronger stuff or he's running out." She turns to the specimen tray and begins putting each piece of evidence into its own bag. "Why don't you get to work, Dion? ID this guy for us."

"Okay," Dion says slowly, even more suspicious. "See you later." He kisses her and heads out the door.



Albert closes the door to his office and settles in at his desk. He indulges himself in his habit to fine-tune his skills; he leans back in his chair...his mind going through past events.

He's seen it before...the bodies, the pithy little messages left for them to find; you think that at least with all the trouble that this killer went to that he—"Could you be a little too sure of yourself here, Albert?" he considers this thought in his mind; "No, no self doubt here..."

It had all the earmarkings of their old friend Windom. But he did have to admit the embalming was a nice touch. It wasn't in Earle's repertory of known skills; however, Windom was always given to the bizarre. He could learn. But could he learn so well what it took others so long to perfect...?

A cynical grin crept across Albert's face.

If it was Windom, he knew that when they caught Earle the FBI would never make the mistake of letting him loose again. They'd probably keep him locked up under security with lots of wires attached to him to find out what the hell makes him tick. They would dissect his brain while he was still alive...and as vile as this thought was, Albert felt no remorse in the pain that would be involved.

Albert just smiled.

Reaching across the desk, he picked up the phone receiver and dialed an interdepartmental extension. "Yes, this is Dr. Albert Rosenfield. I want to initiate a wiretap..."

A few minutes later he was satisfied with the course of action he had decided upon. Perhaps now it was time for him to get out of the office.

Carlotta



Albert, having left the office, is now in his BMW, sunglasses on, heading out into the traffic. As he negotiates a turn not far away from work he clips the fender of Meg's Camry as she is driving to the hospital. He doesn't stop.

Meg recognizes Albert, and is furious. No matter how great this guy is—The—Oh—So—Brilliant—Dr.—Albert—Rosenfield—the time has come for him to face reprisals due to his actions. How can the authorities continue to overlook his...his problem? He seems more unglued lately.

The BMW prowls the city streets of Philadelphia until Albert guides the car into a space in front of Anders's hotel. He cuts the engine, gets out of the vehicle; the door of the car closes with the rich, low, soft sound of an expensive road car.

Albert's timing is perfect. Anders has just arrived at the hotel himself and has yet to enter. He is not far from his own precious car, the Miata on which he lavishes more attention than on his sister, Bekkers, or his girlfriend, Lydia.

Anders feels a hand on his shoulder that roughly spins him around to bring him face to face with Albert.

"Hey! Watch the stormtrooper tactics—"

"Listen, and listen well, my little fair-haired land-of-the-midnight-sun lemming: I don't take kindly to your latest demands for payment. Now I have an ultimatum for you—you will supply me the commodities that I demand on a prompt schedule. Otherwise the DEA is going to make it very difficult for you to maintain your style of living. Think of this as a simple business expense."

"Oh, c'mon..." Anders shakes off Albert's grip angrily. "I'll just be in and out of the system..."

Albert leans against Anders's Miata casually. He can see the reaction in Anders's eyes when he touches the car. This is it...this is the bargaining tool. Albert pats the finish of the highly polished car.

"Nice machine here...I can see you wouldn't want anything to happen to it." Albert moves his hand across the car turning his wrist so that the bezel of his Rolex scratches the paint off with a small harsh accompanying sound.

"What are you doing!?!?" Anders screams, his face turning red in anger.

"Remember...a business deal. You keep me supplied and nothing happens—to this fine vehicle." Albert smiles, turns, and leaves, getting into his own car; he is gone in minutes, leaving Anders looking at a small, rude scratch on the once perfect little Miata.

Carlotta



[VANDAL, n. One who willfully or ignorantly destroys or disfigures, especially that which is beautiful or artistic.]

Lydia comes running out of the hotel. Anders is in shock; he compulsively traces the nasty scrape in the finish of his beautiful car.

“Anders?” She puts her arms playfully around his neck. “What was all that about?”

“My car...” he murmurs, taking no notice of her. His finger follows the scar along its length, almost caressing it. Lydia peers at the finish, but it doesn’t take her long to notice the gash; she disentangles herself and inhales sharply.

“My God. Who...who did this?”

Anders doesn’t answer. He stares blankly at the blemish for what seems like ages, then snaps out of it. “Bastard,” he hisses. His hand forms a fist over the scratch. “*Bastard.*” He whirls around. “Where’s your car?”

“In back. Why?”

“Give me the keys.”

“*What?*”

“I said, give me the goddam *keys!* I’m going after that son of a bitch!” He licks his lips; there is fire in his eyes.

“Take your car.”

“I can’t. I...I can’t. Just give me the keys, will ya?”

Lydia digs in her pockets for her keys and holds them out to Anders, who snatches them out of the air and heads for the back. Lydia follows, angry.

“Who was it? Anders, where the hell do you think you’re going?”

Without a word, Anders slides into the driver’s seat of Lydia’s sporty, unharmed coupe, slams the door, and puts the key into the ignition. He fishes out his handgun, checks it for ammunition, and casually tosses it onto the passenger seat. He rolls down the window. “Our date will commence when I return. I shouldn’t be too late,” he says. “Have a book ready for me when I get back.”

Lydia doesn’t have time to reply as Anders lays on the accelerator and screeches off in pursuit of his vandal.



Anders tears through the streets.

“Freakin A! Freakin A!” he yells as he grips the steering wheel. His mind is working in overtime as he drives; he devises the perfect revenge. He cuts the wheel sharply and heads the car back to the hotel.

Lydia is still outside.

“Get in,” he barks to her.

“But I thought you wanted me to get a book ready for you.”

“Get the hell in the car *now!*”

She hops in the car and barely gets the door shut as Anders speeds off again.

* * *

Albert, being a bachelor, follows a pattern of habits. He frequents the same few places in his neighborhood for dining. Anders is aware of where Albert resides; after all, the guy owes him a massive debt now and he has made it his business to be *able* to find him anytime, anywhere, to collect. Anders cruises Albert’s neighborhood until he spots the car at a quiet bistro. He pulls into the lot.

He turns to Lydia. “You stay here and wait until I come out. You’ll know what to do then.” Lydia slouches down in the seat, crossing her arms over her chest.

Going into the restaurant, he sees Albert, and with all his power controls the urge to blow Albert’s head off right there. He has a better plan. Anders slides into the seat across the table from Albert. “Okay, Rosenfield, you have a deal. I have a delivery. Can we do the transfer out in your car now...I don’t want to pass the stuff here. You never know who’s around.”

Albert's face radiates satisfaction. His visit must have worked on Anders. They adjourn to the parking lot, which is dimly lit, and get into Albert's BMW. Anders puts the bag of cocaine on the dashboard of the car. As Albert reaches for it, Anders pulls out his Beretta 84 semi-automatic [with the warm, polished wood inlaid grip, 13 rounds in the clip—one in the chamber] and puts the muzzle up against Albert's temple.

"My turn now, Rosenfield, I have a deal for you..." He has Albert keep both hands in view on the dash, while he reaches into Albert's suit coat and relieves him of his ID and weapon. Albert is forced to get out of the car as Anders informs him that he is taking possession of the BMW, in replacement for his damaged Miata...and of course Albert's debt.

Albert is stunned that he has been outmaneuvered by Anders and is left standing in the parking lot as Anders takes off in the black Beemer. Lydia sees what's going down and it doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out she's suppose to get out of here. She follows in the other car.

Anders loves the feeling of power that the luxurious car offers. He could get used to this real easy. Heading back to the hotel, he enters an alley that leads to an old garage behind the building. "Home again," he thinks quite pleasantly to himself. Lydia pulls in behind him and sees Anders now walking towards her with a look of fulfilled satisfaction on his face. She sighs with relief.

Carlotta



"We'll go in my car," Anders grins from the driver's seat of his new—well, kind of new—BMW. "Get in."

Lydia hops into the passenger seat. "Mmm. Pretty cushy." She runs her hands over the dash.

"Hey, let's see what's in the glovebox." Anders leans over and releases the catch gently. The glovebox opens smoothly and silently. "Gloves," Anders says, a little disappointed. "How unimaginative." He smiles wryly. "Perhaps I should return those. They don't look my size." He looks around. "This car has a lot of little hiding places, doesn't it? But there'll be time enough for archaeological digs later. Isn't that right, my sweet?" He laughs, dizzy, the adrenaline rush almost compensating for the lack of cocaine in his system.

"Sure, Anders." Lydia rolls her eyes.

"Anyway...we're off!" Anders puts the car into gear and starts it; they enter the night as quickly and noiselessly as a panther on the prowl.

* * *

The phone rings insistently. Rebekka's eyes flutter open; she reconnoiters her surroundings—the apartment—and frowns as she identifies the obnoxious sound. She leans over and picks up the phone.

"Hello?" she says cautiously, the word pendulous with sleep.

"Rebekka, hi. It's Thomas."

"Oh! Oh, hi yourself." She smiles and stretches.

"I was just calling to check up on you. After...you know...you were called home."

"No, no, I'm fine."

"He didn't do anything to you, did he?" Thomas asks, suspicious.

Rebekka stands up and pads around, trying to wake her body up. "He didn't lay a finger on me, Thomas...honest. I swear."

"Good. So...what are you doing?"

"Nothing much. I just woke up from a long winter's nap."

"Do you wanna go out somewhere?"

Rebekka thinks about this. "I don't know," she says finally. "Anders isn't home right now, so—"

"You don't have to ask his permission, Rebekka," Thomas reminds her.

"Well...that's a long story."

"Tell me over coffee?" Thomas counters hopefully.

She thinks fast and formulates a plan—an excuse, something to get Anders off her case, should he give her the third degree. “Okay,” she says thoughtfully. “Where shall we meet?”

“No, no—I’ll pick you up. Remember, though, I’m in the rental car. But you’ll know it’s me.”

“Okay. Thanks, Thomas. See you soon.” She hangs up. Better go change, she thinks. I should give back his shirt.

She heads into the bedroom, strips off Thomas’s shirt, and selects an intricately woven sweater—warm and fuzzy, her favorite. She pulls it on over her head and peers into the closet. Finally she sees what she’s looking for; she reaches deep into the pocket of a rarely used wool jacket of hers and pulls out a small box. She opens it and removes a wad of bills—saved for just such an occasion—which she shoves deep into her jeans pocket. After carefully replacing the box, Rebekka closes the closet door, picks up Thomas’s shirt, and heads back out into the living room to wait.



Anders and Lydia arrive at a rather trendy coffeehouse. After Anders snorts several chubby lines of cocaine in the BMW, they walk in, go up to the counter, and order.

“A double mocha latte for me,” Lydia says.

Anders scans the menu. “You don’t have Turkish coffee?”

“Um, no,” the teenager behind the counter says.

“Well, I’m sure you can make it for me. Ask your boss for the recipe. I want it done right.”

“Yessir.” The kid passes Lydia’s latte request to someone else, and scuttles off in search of his boss. The two find a small table smack in the middle of the place. Anders starts complaining almost immediately.

“Lydia, I can’t sit here. It’s too...obvious. Everyone’ll be looking at me.”

“Oh, I think they’d rather look at *me*,” she smiles, and strikes several model-esque poses.

Anders is not amused. “Let’s just move over there, to the corner,” he indicates.

“Fair enough.”

They walk over to the corner booth. Lydia opts to look onto the whole of the room while Anders faces the wall; everyone’s eyes on his back? the better to rile up his paranoia, my dear. The kid comes by with Lydia’s latte and something resembling coffee pudding for Anders, who tastes it cautiously. “Not bad. Thank your manager for me. Oh, and keep a tab for us, would ya?”

“Yessir.” The kid heads back to his sanctuary behind the counter.

Lydia sips her latte. “How can you drink that sewer sludge?” she asks.

“Easy. The same way *you* can drink that thin milk concoction and call it coffee.” He smiles.

Lydia leans in and puts her hand on Anders’s. “It’s called ‘skim’ milk, dear,” she whispers.

“I *meant* to say ‘thin’,” he says airily. “Anyway, so how’s life?”

“Not bad,” Lydia admits. “Looks like it’s on the up—and—up for you, eh? New girl, new car.”

“Oh, *yeah*,” Anders says enthusiastically. “It’s gonna be *great*.” He grins and takes a good gulp of coffee.

“How’s your sister?” Lydia delicately sips at her oversized latte mug.

Anders concentrates on his coffee cup and runs his fingers around the handle. “All of a sudden, *my* place isn’t good enough...*I’m* not good enough...*I* don’t *provide* enough for her...or whatever. She’s running away to that pathologist bastard, Thomas something. But now I know where he lives.” He smiles craftily.

Lydia frowns. “Anders, relax. She’s allowed to have friends, you know.”

“They’re not just friends!” Anders exclaims, and pounds the table hard enough to make the spoons tink against each other. “She was wearing *his* shirt! Damn him! Damn her!”

Lydia grabs Anders’s shirtfront. “Get a grip, Nilsson. You want people to look at you? You’re doing a great job of getting their attention. Now shut up and eat your coffee.”

Anders sits back, sullen. He chews on a fingernail, then leans across the table. “I’m so glad I have you, Lyds,” he simpers, saccharine-sweet.

Lydia sees right through it. “Knock it off, Anders.”

“Oh, come on—let’s kiss.” He leans in farther, eyes closed.

Suddenly Lydia sees something, and she pushes Anders away. “Hey, your new girl’s here—and she’s with someone.”

“Great, great...getting started right away, I see.” He makes a second attempt at a passionate kiss.

Lydia pushes him away yet again. “No, she’s with another girl.”

“Fine, whatever. Let’s *kiss*, dammit.” He reaches across the table and grabs Lydia’s shoulders forcefully.

Lydia pushes him back into his chair, hard. “Nilsson, you ass. Don’t you *ever* hurt me. Save that for your sister.” She stands up. “I’m going home. Thanks for the date,” she says colorlessly.

He looks up at her in disbelief for a moment, thrown off-balance by the way she so explicitly hit the OFF switch for the evening, then stands up as well. “Yeah, I gotta visit someone at the hospital anyway.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“Lucky me—my business *is* my pleasure.” He smiles faintly and fishes a bill from his wallet to throw on the table, covering the check and a light tip. “Can I drive you somewhere?”

“I’ll walk, thank you. And I think a walk in the cool night air would do you some good too, Nilsson. Raging hormones and all. Good night.” She walks out briskly, casting a glance toward the new girl and her “date” as she goes. Anders looks blankly at the door for a split second, then heads out to his car, not paying heed to anyone on the way.



At a table on the other side of the coffeehouse, Rebekka is trembling with a combination of relief and the remnants of fear. “He saw us...he heard us,” she whispers, eyes wide.

Thomas takes her hand reassuringly. “I’m sure he didn’t, Bekka. He seemed preoccupied. He didn’t even look our way.”

Rebekka says nothing and tries to breathe deeply. She closes her eyes and squeezes Thomas’s hand desperately. “What’s he gonna do to me?” she whimpers in spite of herself.

“If I have anything to say about it, nothing,” Thomas guarantees. “Come on. Let’s go.” They leave silently, Rebekka barely holding back tears.

Once outside in the chill wind of December, Thomas enfolds Rebekka into his arms and holds her tightly. “I love you, and I don’t want you to be hurt again. Stay with me tonight.”

Rebekka embraces Thomas just as firmly, then rests her head on his shoulder and begins to weep. “I can’t. I want to, but...I can’t. Why won’t you understand?”

“I can’t believe you would choose to go back to someone who treats you like so much chattel, to be used and abused...”

Rebekka closes her eyes tightly. “I can’t explain, Thomas...I just—just—” She sighs.

Thomas takes a step back and looks deeply into her eyes. He gently wipes the tears from her cheek, then tilts her head up gingerly and kisses her, a sweetly romantic (and serious) kiss that is a promise of better things to come. A small group of teenagers traipses by and gawks at the two.

Thomas takes Rebekka’s hands. “Will you come back with me?”

Rebekka is overwhelmed. “What—what time is it?” she asks, a little dazed.

“A little after eleven.”

“Yes,” she smiles.

Thomas returns the gesture and walks her to the car.



“And that’s just about it,” Ronette finishes, and sips her soda. “I decided to come out here mostly because you were here, and I knew you made it kind of big.”

“Mmm–hmm,” Laura nods, stirring her hot chocolate lazily. “Really big.” She smiles. “I do have a good job, though. And a...husband—”

“Do I detect some problems in this marriage?” Ronette asks innocently.

Laura sighs. “Sometimes he’s just such a jerk. Emily hates him. She really does. He’s been doing coke off and on for a while, and I hate that. What a coward.” She samples her steaming cup of cocoa. “I guess I don’t regret marrying him, though.”

“You never wish you were...available?”

“No, not really. Well, once, maybe. See, Dion’s got this brother—” Ronette leans in, interested. Laura looks up at her and laughs. “That was a long time ago, when I *was* available. Before we were even married.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “What about you? Do you have a ‘significant other’?”

Ronette’s eyes drop to the cocktail napkin under her soda. “No...but...I met someone a while ago that I’d really like to get to know better.”

“Oh yeah? Do I know him? I can set you two up.”

“Oh, I don’t think you know him. He’s...oh, maybe you’d call him ‘dangerous’, I don’t know.” She smiles wistfully. “But I think I’m in a position to become...closer.” She looks up and winks at Laura, who giggles with her hand over her mouth.

“God, Ronnie, it’s just like old times. Well, not *just*, I suppose. But I feel like a kid again. You know—”

She’s cut off when Ronette suddenly looks up at a leaving customer, her eyes following him out the door. Laura turns around to catch a glimpse, but only notices his height and build in the split second before he’s out on the street. She turns back to Ronette, who is simply captivated.

“Was that...him?” she asks.

“Uh–huh,” Ronette breathes. “God, he’s *gorgeous!* You should see his car. It’s this cherry red Miata...I wouldn’t mind being taken for a ride in that baby.”

“Ronnie, sweetie, he was with someone,” Laura says carefully.

“Yeah, I figured as much,” Ronette admits, crestfallen. “He’s gotta be real popular with the girls, looking the way he does.”

“Where did you meet him?”

Ronnie becomes very shy. “Oh, you know...wherever you meet people,” she shrugs, blushing. “It doesn’t matter.” She looks at her watch. “Oh, look at the time. We have work to do in the morning, don’t we?”

Laura nods enthusiastically with the last gulp of cocoa in her mouth. She swallows and says, “We should do this again. Maybe next time we can bring *dates*.” She grins, giddy. Ronette laughs. They hug, then exit to their respective vehicles and drive home.



David glances at his IV drip, then stares blankly at the institutional–white ceiling for a while and closes his eyes. He’s scheduled to go home soon; it’s the waiting that’s the worst. And the pain...the aching pain of something missing. Something vital.

“Well, at least I could get some writing done,” he mutters. He looks down at the legal pad—a while–you’re–here–you–might–as–well–work gift from Meg—at his left hand, and half–heartedly picks up the pen at his right. He sits, pen poised over pad, but his muses appear to be just as ill as he is. David digs around, searching for even the slightest hint of an idea. Nothing. Frustrated, he leans over to place the pad on his bedside table, and the pen rolls off his lap onto the elaborately tiled floor. He sighs and closes his eyes again, utterly uninterested.

The door opens. Anders slides in without a sound. “David. I’m so sorry to see you... under the weather. How are you feeling?” He sidles up to David’s bedside and pulls up a chair.

David is speechless with a kind of confused rage. “Wh–what are you doing here?” he manages. “You have some nerve! You almost killed me, you son of a bitch,” he accuses hotly.

Anders looks surprised. “Really? *I* did? How?”

“The stuff...was too strong. It put me here...again. And I wasn’t even trying this time.” He looks away. “You screwed up my life. Now I won’t ever see my niece again. Or my brother. Or, possibly, my sister-in-law. Or even my girlfriend. Shit.” His eyes begin to tear up.

Anders smiles sadly, almost condescendingly. “I didn’t do any of that to you. Apparently you were unused to the strength of my supply, am I correct? You should have cut it, David.”

“I never do. It’s never that strong.”

“Excuse me for appreciating quality goods. I’ll try harder to do worse next time,” Anders says icily.

David is silent. Then: “No...no...I learned my lesson. Let’s...let’s just put all this behind us.”

Anders shrugs. “Fair enough.” He stands up. “You’re in pain.”

“Yes,” David winces. “And Meg’ll make me quit. I’ve been clean for, oh, about twelve hours or so, and I already feel as though I’m being slowly torn apart...can’t wait to see what I feel like in a week.”

“I’ve brought something for you.”

“Oh yeah? If it’s not a noose, I’m not interested.”

“You will be.” Anders produces a hypodermic syringe from his jacket pocket. “And I’ve cut it.” He grins.

David is stunned. “How the hell did you get in here with that?” he asks wonderingly. “You’re a goddam angel.”

Anders laughs. “An angel? Two minutes ago you thought I was Satan himself. I guess I know now exactly how important this is to you.” He uncaps the needle and flicks the syringe. “I think I should inject this carefully into your IV bag. That way, you’d get a slow stream of it in your system along with the glucose. And no one the wiser—no new tracks. What do you think?”

“Sure. Makes sense.”

“Now. Are you sure you want this? I mean, twelve hours.” He holds his hands out expansively. “You’re *well* on your way to kicking your—what is it, ten-year addiction?” He smirks.

“Yes, of course I do—of course I want it,” David whispers.

“Very well.” Anders slowly inserts the needle, bevel side out, into the IV bag, right above the level of glucose solution. He presses the plunger expertly and removes the syringe. “Done,” he says simply, and recaps the hypodermic. “You should be feeling it soon.”

“Thank you...thank you so much,” David says.

“Don’t mention it. It’s better than flowers, eh?” Anders smiles knowingly, and picks up the pen from the floor. “You, ah, you might be wanting this.” He puts it on the bedside table. “Later, Spencer,” he whispers as he backs out the door.



Anders closes David’s door behind him and, after looking furtively down the hallway in both directions, heads out toward the lobby of the hospital. On the way, he passes an orderly wheeling a cart of biohazardous materials in the other direction—presumably down to the incinerator—and offhandedly deposits the syringe in the box emblazoned with !CAUTION! !BIOHAZARD!. The orderly does not notice. Satisfied, Anders continues to the front of the building.

“Mr. Nilsson.” Anders looks up, startled, to see Meg, who has apparently just stepped out of her office and into Anders’s path. “What a surprise to see you here, of all places.”

Anders recovers quickly. “Doctor Wilson. And how are you doing this fine evening? Rather late to be working, isn’t it? You should go home to...what’s your sweetheart’s name? David.”

“David is not at home, Anders. He’s here, in the hospital. And he says you put him here.” Her eyes narrow. “Come into my office.”

The two enter Meg’s neat office. Meg sits down and gestures for Anders to make himself equally comfortable. “I prefer to stand, thank you,” he answers.

“That’s fine. But we need to talk.” She settles into her chair. “First of all, Anders, you haven’t been coming to rehab.”

“Smart girl.”

“May I ask why?”

“I’ve quit.” He grins imperiously.

“No, you haven’t.” She sighs. “Look, your sister signed you up here out of a sincere desire to help you, and—”

Anders approaches Meg’s desk, and with both hands on the edge nearest him, he leans across vehemently, his face inches from the doctor. “I do *not* want to talk about my sister. She does *not* want to help me. She is worthless and useless and certainly of no concern to you,” he snarls.

Meg stands up, furious. “Then we won’t talk about her. We’ll talk about *you*, Anders.” She circles around to the other side of the desk and approaches him with no fear. “What did you do to David?” she demands.

“Nothing. I did nothing to him.”

“Why are you here?”

“I was visiting a friend.”

“Who?”

“Doctor, that is not your business.”

“Anders, you are absolutely hopeless. How do you live with being what you are?”

He laughs. “And just what *am* I, Doctor?” he challenges.

Realizing that they are dangerously close to blows, Meg stops and steps back. Anders looks at her expectantly; she takes a deep breath. “Maybe...maybe you’d better leave now, Mr. Nilsson. I have other, more *worthwhile* patients to tend to.” She slowly walks back to her chair and sits down, picking up some records.

Anders shrugs, then bows. “As you wish, milady,” he proclaims ostentatiously, then ambles out the door. His journey to the parking structure is henceforth unobstructed.



After putting Emily to bed and making sure she was asleep—finally—Dion settles down at the kitchen table with a cup of strong coffee and the case files. He opens one manila envelope to a bevy of lab tests, technical stuff that is not exactly his area of expertise. Dion sighs. He takes a sip of coffee and prepares to get to work.

The phone rings. Dion grabs the receiver before Emily wakes up. God, she’s been touchy lately, he thinks. “Spencer,” he says flatly. You know, Dion, a nice cheery hello would’ve been nice. You’re not at the office, he reminds himself.

“Hello, Dion. It’s Meg. Sorry I’m calling so late. Is Laura there?”

“Hey, Meg. She’s not home yet. Went out for coffee with an old friend.”

“How are you?”

“I’m stressed. I’m really, really stressed,” Dion asserts. “What do you prescribe, Doctor?”

“Abstention from certain illegal and possibly job-endangering substances,” Meg replies. She sounds tired—no, *weary*.

Dion sits up. “How did you know about that?”

“I was told.”

“By whom?”

“I’m sorry, Agent Spencer—that information is classified.”

“Meg—”

“Don’t even start with me, Dion. Don’t tell me how stressed you are. This is my day: Albert clips the fender on my new car; David refuses to speak to me; I find out about your...lapse; I nearly come to blows with an uncooperative patient of mine; said patient proceeds to give David heroin, practically killing him again and forcing me to keep him in the hospital for *another* night; and finally, I call you and get a big ol’ sob story about how goddam stressed you are.”

Dion frowns. “I’m sorry, really I am...What can I do?”

“Nothing,” Meg grumbles. “I called for a reason, and it was important, too. Now I don’t remember. If it comes to me, I may call back. But don’t count on it.” She hangs up.

Dion stares at the phone for a second, surprised. He hangs it up and gets back to work. Funny thing, he thinks, I bet I could use a certain illegal and possibly job–endangering substance right now. He picks up a pencil and taps it aimlessly on the table.

The phone rings again, and Dion picks it up. “Hello?”

There is a longish silence on the other end. “Dion? It’s...it’s David.”

Dion says nothing.

“Don’t hang up, please, please don’t hang up,” David pleads. “Just...just listen to what I have, uh, what I have to say.” His words sound ponderous and deliberate, as though he’s thinking carefully about each and every syllable. Probably the heroin, Dion reasons. That patient of Meg’s must’ve given him quite the dose. Despite whatever feelings he has for his brother, Dion stays on the line.

David takes a deep breath. “I...just wanted to, uh, say, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry for the, uh, the mis...understanding.” He sounds a little choked up. “I love Emily...I would never, uh, never...do anything like, like, like what you thought I did with her, uh, in the room. Never. I don’t even like people to smoke around her. She’s...too precious. Very, uh, sensitive, you know, like when you...um...”

Dion clears his throat. David senses his impatience and attempts to tie up his weepy apology. “Anyway...as family, you, uh, you’re *all* p–precious to me and I don’t want to...to...lose that bond, or whatever. I would, uh, understand, of, of course, if you...didn’t want me to, uh, watch her for a while or...or something...but please don’t, like, forbid me from...from seeing her. It would kill me to be without her, Dion... really...I’d, uh—”

There is a loud *clunk* on the other end which makes Dion jump. “Are you okay, David? David?” he asks urgently.

A flurry of muffled activity greets him on David’s end. “I’m okay, Dion...just, uh, dropped the phone,” David replies. Dion rolls his eyes. “Well, uh, Dion...I gotta, um...I gotta go, but I’ll, I’ll...I gotta go,” he whispers, and hangs up.

Dion replaces the receiver in its cradle. Boy, sure did get a lot of work done, he thinks, looking at the clock. Hope Laura comes home soon. After a few minutes of blankly staring at the file, which has lost any meaning it may have had before the telephonic ordeal, he decides to call it a night. He slumps off to the master bedroom and falls onto their bed. He’s asleep almost before his head hits the pillow; Laura comes home a little later and joins him, quietly.



Albert stands in the parking lot of the restaurant, his hand still clutching the plastic bag containing the cocaine. “Damn,” he thinks, “goddam bastard.” At least he had enough stuff to make it through a few more days, but what a price he paid for it, he fumes to himself.

Going back to the restaurant, he enters through the bar and heads to the pay phones. Cab rides weren’t his style, but under the circumstances—and the last thing he wanted to do was call an acquaintance. Too many questions to answer. He sure the hell had no intention of calling the local cops to report a carjacking. Albert gets the taxi dispatcher on the phone. “Yeah, I need a pick–up at...”

A half–hour later, back at his place, he’s on the phone again. This time to check in with the wireheads operating the tap he requested.

Albert: What have you got so far?

Wirehead: Usual personal stuff, boring as hell. There was a mention of illegal drug activity.

Albert: I need a transcript by tomorrow morning. No one else is to receive a copy. This is imperative.

Wirehead: You want us to keep up the surveillance?

Albert: Yes—

Wirehead: How long are we going to keep this operation up?

Albert: Until I give you the order to cease. Is that beyond your comprehension?

Wirehead: Well, it *is* tying up a whole team. Would you mind letting us know what we are looking for?
 Albert: That would be a security breach...just send the information and all the tapes to my care...and only my care.
 Wirehead: [emits a faint whistle under his breath] Yes, sir.

Albert hangs up; thoughts of possible collusion against the Bureau run through his head...no one is to be trusted.

Carlotta



The next morning finds Albert on the highway driving into work a couple of hours late. The smell of new leather envelops him even though he has the windows down. He desperately wants the feeling of fresh air hitting him in the face as he drives. The hell with the air-conditioning...That little s.o.b. of a drug dealer isn't going to get the better of him, he tells himself.

The people at the Lexus dealership were oh-so-happy to help him out. They even sent someone to his place to pick him up so that he could sign the lease papers for the new black Lexus. You know, they really *are* first in customer satisfaction, he muses. The two-year lease was quite reasonable and he figured he could break it when he gets his car back...

He guides the car into his usual space at work, gets out and locks the car door. He enters the building like any other day.

Carlotta



"I'll pamper you like a princess tonight," Thomas promises as he leads Rebekka into his apartment. "Wait here a sec." He leaves Bekkers in the front room as he bustles around back by the bed and bath area. She hears water running and, curious, heads back to investigate.

Thomas pops out of the bathroom and smiles. "No, Bekka—back to the living room!" He gently pushes her back out. "But, Thomas!" she protests, laughing. A while later the water stops running. Thomas comes back to Rebekka and takes her arm.

"Thomas, what's up?"

"I told you—I'm gonna baby you like you've never been babied before, Rebekka." He ushers her into the bathroom where a steaming bath awaits, crested with lavish bubbles and faintly scented with wildflowers. There is a thick white (expensive) terry robe hanging on the door, and dainty rose slippers beside the sink. Apparently he had bought both—and perhaps the bubble bath, too—with Rebekka in mind. A plush towel is folded on the sink.

She is stunned. "Oh, wait!" Thomas exclaims. "Almost forgot!" He dashes back out into the kitchen and returns with a flute of champagne on a silver salver, adorned with red rose petals. This he places gingerly on the edge of the tub.

Rebekka laughs and claps her hands, delighted. "Oh, Thomas! This is fantastic!" She throws her arms about his neck. Thomas grins and blushes. "It's nothing, really. Just thought you needed to be spoiled a little," he explains. "Now you take your time and enjoy yourself. Come on out front when you're done." He kisses her shyly and closes the door behind him.

Rebekka grins from ear to ear, truly flattered and thrilled that anyone would go to these lengths just to make her happy. It's so rare that someone considers my feelings, she muses as she disrobes, neatly folding her clothes. Good thing I put my hair up today, she thinks, patting her 'do.

She finally eases into the bath and relaxes. It is bliss—huge, frothy bubbles surround her, floating in a mist of heavenly perfume. She takes a careful sip of the excellently chilled champagne and revels in the perfection of the moment.

* * *

Some time later, Rebekka emerges from the bathroom flushed and happy, wrapped in the robe which smells deliciously clean. The slippers suit her just as well. “Hi,” she says, beaming.

“Hi,” Thomas answers. “Are you relaxed?”

“Yes, oh, yes,” she replies. “Thank you so much.”

Thomas escorts her to the couch. There are candles lit throughout the living room, and a platter of sweet grapes and various cheeses sits on the coffeetable, accompanied by two more flutes of fine champagne. Rebekka takes a place on the sofa; Thomas sits on the other end.

He clears his throat nervously and picks up a book from the table. “Comfortable, Bekka?” he asks.

“Yes, Thomas...I’m absolutely contented,” she assures him.

Thomas seems heartened. He opens the book and begins to read her line after line, page after page of love poems—some naïve, some saccharine, some passionate, most sweetly romantic. His voice is strong and pure; he molds each verse into something living.

As Rebekka lazily listens to Thomas’s rhymes and snacks timidly on grapes, her troubles seem to evaporate. She finds herself almost transported, to a place where time means nothing, where she is safe from all who would wish her harm, where she is in love. This is what my life should be, she reflects. Cherished and secure, being read poetry and not the Riot Act. She sighs and closes her eyes.

Thomas finishes with an appropriate stanza from Edward Fitzgerald’s “The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam”:

*Ah Love! could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart’s Desire!*

He closes the book carefully, then leans over and replaces it on the table. Both are silent for a moment. Rebekka turns to Thomas and falls into his arms. “Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you for everything tonight. I love you so much.” She holds him tightly.

I love you, too,” Thomas returns. “I really love you, Rebekka.” They hold each other for what seems like ages. Rebekka finally disentangles herself and reddens a little, almost bashful. “Tonight was perfect. I’ve never been treated so well. I can’t thank you enough.” She kisses him chastely, and notices the clock. “I’d...better go.” She stands up; Thomas does the same. “I’m going to change...be right out.” Bekka heads into the bathroom, leaving Thomas to wonder: Did she really like it? I think she did, he affirms, happy with himself.

Rebekka comes back from the bathroom in her jeans and sweater. “So I’ll see you... sometime?”

“Yes! Yes, definitely,” Thomas replies. “Let me drive you home.”

“Okay,” Rebekka nods. “I’d like that.”

They get into Thomas’s rental car and drive to the apartment. Before Rebekka gets out, she leans over to Thomas and they kiss. (If they were teenagers, her dad would probably be blinking the porchlight at them.) Exhilarated and out of breath, Rebekka says, “Thank you again, Thomas. I love you.” She opens the car door and hurries to the apartment, stopping once at the door to turn and wave at Thomas, who waves back and pulls out of the driveway, equally satisfied. Turned out to be a good night after all, he admits as he drives back home.



Rebekka lets herself into the apartment and carefully closes the door behind her so as not to wake her brother. The lamp on the livingroom endtable is on. She frowns and walks over to turn it off.

“Where were you?” Anders asks suddenly from his place on the sofa.

Rebekka jumps, startled. “God, Anders! Don’t *do* that!” She peers down at her brother, who is laying on the couch and staring blankly at the ceiling, quite still. “Still up?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

She scans the coffeetable and notices a book with a razor blade resting on its cover. “Did you just...?”

“Yeah,” Anders replies without much feeling. “I forgot.”

“Forgot what?”

“Forgot not to.” His eyes focus on his sister. “So where were you?”

“Out.”

“Out where?”

“You know, I could ask the same question. You kind of ran out on me, remember?”

“Just answer me.”

“Out on business.”

“Yeah, right.” Anders turns over on his side.

“No, really—here.” Rebekka digs out some bills from the wad in her pocket and hands them to Anders, who eyes them suspiciously for a moment, then takes them and tosses them on the coffeetable. “Thanks.”

Rebekka nods. I’m in too good of a mood to let his weirdness bring me down, she promises herself. “Anyway, I’m going to bed. Will you stay out here?”

“Yeah, until I feel sleepy...I might just sleep out here tonight, just for the hell of it.”

“Okay. See you in the morning, Anders.”

“Yeah.”

Rebekka pads into the bedroom, changes clothes, and promptly falls asleep.

* * *

“I hate to say it, but I think it’s time we put Em in daycare,” Dion says as he straightens his tie.

“Really? I don’t want to, but...you’re right.” Laura sighs. “Where else can she go?”

“Exactly.” Dion backs away from the mirror and stretches. “There’ve got to be plenty of good daycare out there somewhere. I mean, we’re not the only working parents in Philadelphia.”

Laura cranes her neck and applies lipstick. “Well, we can sign her up at the little daycare facility at HQ until we find a place. Let’s ask around.”

Dion nods. “Sounds fair. Let me take her to HQ today.”

“Okay.” Laura puts her arms around her husband and rests her head on his shoulder. “I love you, Dion.”

“I love you too. Say, how was your friend?”

Laura takes a step back. “Ronnie was fine. We had a lot to talk about.” She walks out of the bedroom and stops just outside the open door. “You remember Ronnie. She was at the wedding.”

Dion pauses. “Oh, yeah—she was one of your, uh, bridesmaids, right?”

“Yep. That’s Ronette.” Laura smiles. “I’m gonna go say goodbye to Em, and then I’ll see you at work. Bye!”

“Bye!” Dion responds, and walks over to kiss her. Laura heads into the nursery, then leaves for the lab. Dion checks his suit, picks up Emily and all her baggage, then takes off for FBI regional headquarters—his office.

❧

The phone rings, and David leans over in his computer chair to pick it up, still a little fuzzy from last night. “Hello?”

“David, it’s Martin. Remember me?”

“Martin, yeah, hi. Of course I remember you.”

“That was a joke. I haven’t had any manuscripts from you in a while. What good is an editor with nothing to edit?”

David laughs softly. “I know. I’m working on a couple things now that may cheer you up.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to seeing them.”

“So am I.”

“You know you’re in the papers, David?”

“What?” David looks panicked. “Oh, *no!*”

“Yep. ‘Author Spencer ODs, in ICU’.”

“*Shit!*” David says with feeling, then heads out of his makeshift office to the kitchen table, where he picks up the morning edition and leafs through it frantically until he finds the article. Short but to the point, with a stock photo from the cover of one of his earliest works.

David doesn’t say anything. After a few moments of silence, Martin points out, “At least it’s a nice photo.”

“Yeah, well...I wonder if they meant to leave in that comma in the headline...” He bites his lip and puts down the paper.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Martin, but...”

“Yeah, this kind of screws up your market.”

“No, no, not at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve been pretty upfront about all that, and...”

“Wouldn’t this garner some sympathy? It happens all the time. Some artist gets totally screwed up and the public laps up their work like a starving stray. All in all, it was probably not a bad move.”

David manages a sarcastic laugh. “It wasn’t a *move*, Martin! My God!” He shakes his head. “I can’t believe I know someone who actually thinks like you.”

“Call it a gift.” Martin chuckles. “Anyway, take care, and I’ll be talking to you later, unless of course you call me first...?”

“I’ll try. Thanks for calling.” David hangs up.

* * *

When Laura enters the lab, Albert rushes up to her with a sly look on his face. “We got an ID on the body,” he grins, holding up a FAX sheet. Laura takes it as Albert steps back and folds his arms across his chest, smug.

“Robert Emilio,” she reads. “DOB 29 April 1958.” She looks up at Albert. “He was an Agent? My God.” Her face freezes in an expression of helplessness and shock.

“Yeah...worked in Ballistics,” Albert reveals grimly. “Can’t say either of us ever worked with him, though. We gave our evidence to his boss. Emilio was a gofer, and, well, you know how I run this place. Nothing but the best.” He walks down the central counter. “The FBI connection is worrisome, I admit. Earle—I mean, if it *was* Earle, which it probably was—seems to be hitting close to home, most likely on purpose. You know, him and his messages.”

Laura continues to stare at the report. “Robert...Robert...” She turns to Albert. “That’s a message,” she says in a very shaky voice. “That name is most certainly a message.”

Albert walks back to Laura and plucks the sheet from her hand. “Robert...yeah,” he says softly. “Yeah, that is. Hmm.” He puts the paper on the counter. “Well, I’m still waiting on a couple tests. Meanwhile, have some coffee and try to relax. You’re not his target, Laura,” he assures her as he pulls up a stool and picks up his coffee cup.

“Who *is*?” she mutters. “I’m going into my office. I’ll be out after I’ve calmed down. Thanks, Albert,” she says faintly, then walks into her office as if in a trance and locks the door behind her.



After her morning shower, Rebekka wanders out into the kitchen area of the apartment in a robe, rubbing her damp hair with a towel. “I’ve gained some weight, Anders,” she says, trying to sound casual.

Anders is seated at the kitchen table. “Mmm,” he replies, and takes a pull off the cigarette in his right hand as he turns over the newspaper with his left.

“I mean, I’m not *that* worried about it...it’s not a lot, but it *does* register on the scale. I should try to take it off.”

“If you didn’t eat like a goddam pig, you would never have gained the weight in the first place,” Anders notes.

Rebekka begins to nod in blind agreement. “You’re right. If I didn’t...” She realizes what she’s saying and her tone turns to pure indignation. “Wait a minute. I don’t eat like a pig. I barely eat at all.” She slides into the chair across from her brother. “I’m probably just saving up fat for the winter.” She smiles cheerily, happy to have been able to convince herself of such an easy explanation.

“Mmm.” Anders peers intently at the paper. Suddenly, his right arm begins to shake, almost as though it had been tensed for too long and its muscles were releasing their pent-up energy. Ashes flake off the tip of his cigarette and float to the table. Rebekka is astonished; Anders calmly straightens his right arm with his left, and the arm stops shivering.

“What the hell was *that*?” Rebekka asks, bewildered and more than a little apprehensive.

“A nervous tic or something. It happens once in a while. Nothing big. Anyway, it doesn’t interfere with anything. Lucky I’m left-handed. Writing with this hand would be interesting,” he remarks as grinds the cigarette into an ashtray. He stands up, flexing his right wrist back and forth absentmindedly. “So what will you do today, my darling, darling sister?”

“I’ll probably go to the bookstore,” she replies. “And you?”

“Oh, you know—I have some business to take care of,” he says breezily. “Places to go, people to see, things to do.” He picks up his ski jacket from the back of the couch and carefully fits himself into it. “We may be going south soon.”

“Really?” Rebekka is disappointed. “But it’s December. Don’t we usually go west in winter?”

“Yes, we do,” Anders explains patiently, as to a child, “but this year I want to go south. I love South Miami. I haven’t been in ages. And besides, there are plenty of tourists there who would surely find my services beneficial.” He heads for the door. “So I’ll see you later.”

“Sure,” Rebekka says, trailing her brother to the front door. “Take care.”

“Of course.” Anders kisses Rebekka and leaves the apartment. Rebekka closes the door behind him.

Well, she thinks. Wasn’t *he* in a good mood this morning? Must be his night on the couch. After a few moments of reflection upon the events of the morning—especially the strange arm tic (and what was *that* all about? she wonders)—Rebekka returns to the bedroom, puts on comfortable jeans and a deep fuschia sweater, then exits to her part-time job at the bookstore.



Laura sits at her desk, dazed and shaky. She takes a few deep breaths and closes her eyes. “BOB?” she whispers. “I thought you were through with me. I was certainly through with you...Why now? Why are you back?” She puts her head down on her desk, not out of despair, but out of a desire to pull herself together.

There’s a tentative knock on the door, and Laura jumps out of her seat. “Y–yes?” she asks, sitting up straight in her chair.

“Spencer, your, uh, brother-in-law is here,” Albert says through the frosted glass of the office door. “Says he wants to apologize.” Then, his voice turned away from the door, plausibly toward David: “*Again?*”

“Okay,” Laura replies, and gets up to unlock the door. She opens it to a gloomy David.

“Good morning, Laura. May I come in?” he asks.

“Sure,” Laura responds coolly, trying to regain her composure. She moves away from the door and allows him to enter the observation room *cum* office.

“How are you?” he begins carefully.

“Not too good, David,” Laura sighs. “We have a body, and we think Earle killed the guy, and the man was an Agent—the dead man, not Earle, but Earle was an Agent, too—and his name was *Robert*.” The words come out in a rush. She stops to catch her breath. “And I’ve probably told you too much. I’m so scared...I don’t know what to do.”

David gently puts his arms around his sister-in-law, and Laura accepts his comfort. He holds her as he holds Emily: sweetly and without words, reassuring. Eventually Laura calms down, and extricates herself from David's arms. He smiles and heads to the back of the room.

"I just wanted to apologize for the recent...incident," he says. "It was really all a big misunderstanding, Laura. You know I would never...Anyway, I already apologized to Dion—not that he accepted my apology; nothing new there—and I felt I should try to make amends to you." He clears his throat and looks down at his shoes.

Laura can't help but smile. He looks exactly like a boy who's being forced to apologize for breaking the neighbor's window, she thinks. He almost reminds me of Bobby...so cute. "I accept your apology, David. I don't know why...but I know you're sincere."

David brightens a bit. "Thank you, Laura. I really appreciate it." He walks over to Laura's desk and leans on it. "Where will Emily be going now?"

"Daycare, I'm afraid. I'm so sorry we have to do this to you, David...but you understand why."

"Yeah, I guess I do," he admits glumly. "Promise me I'll still be able to see her?"

"I promise," Laura assures him. "Now go on back home and do some work, okay?"

"Okay. And thanks again." He walks over to the door. "See you later."

"Take care of yourself, David," Laura reminds him. She stands on tiptoe and kisses David on the cheek. He smiles and leaves the office.

Laura stands at the open door, contented. Amazing how David can cheer you up, she muses. He just has a way, sometimes, of comforting you when you need it most. Even when he's the one you need comforting *about*.

Albert walks by. "What the hell was *he* doing here? Looking for a handout or what?"

"He was here to apologize, just like he said. Stop worrying about *my* life and get on with the pitiful thing you call *yours*," she smirks.

"Touché," Albert admits.

"That reminds me. Where's your beloved BMW?" Laura asks.

"Oh, I got tired of it. Bought a Lexus. Best thing I ever did," Albert explains hurriedly. "Are we going to work, or are we going to talk about the wonderful world of auto sales?"

"Work, I guess," Laura frowns. They meander over to the lab counter, pick up some paperwork, and begin reviewing the case files.



Anders is at the local health club, doing a little working out just to keep in shape. While doing a few reps for his back muscles, he spots Lydia, who enters the large gym all decked out in a Spandex leotard with a cropped tee-shirt cover-up. She's obviously looking for Anders, and once her searching eyes train on him, she makes a beeline straight for the guy. Anders smiles.

"So," she begins cheerily. "What are you doing here?"

"Janitorial services," he quips. "What does it look like?"

"Don't get smart with me. You don't want to work too hard," she warns him in a playful tone. "Wouldn't want to strain your heart."

"Now, who told you I have a heart?" he asks in all seriousness. He disengages himself from the machine and wipes his face with a towel. "What do you want?"

"You're going south soon."

Anders looks up, suspicious. "Who told you?"

"No one. I kinda figured it out, all on my own."

"Rebekka told you."

Lydia laughs derisively. "When the hell could I have talked to her, Anders? I'm telling you: I just figured as much. Anyway," she continues, trying to get his mind off of his sister, "you're taking me."

"What? Oh, no, I'm not," Anders says, shaking his head vehemently. "You are *not* coming with me *anywhere*. Period," he emphasizes.

“Yes, I am,” Lydia insists. “You will take me to Florida. We’ll have a simply lovely time.”

“Lydia,” Anders whines, “you are *not* invited. Not to be rude, but you just wouldn’t work out.”

“I wouldn’t work *out*?” Lydia repeats, enraged. “I wouldn’t work *OUT*? Give me a freakin’ *break*, Anders! You will *do* what I *say* and *take* me to *FLORIDA*!” She glares at him and practically stamps her foot like a spoiled child.

Anders eyes her cautiously. “Fine,” he allows quietly.

“So! You’ll let me know when you’re ready to leave?” Lydia asks brightly.

“Yeah,” Anders mumbles, amazed at his powerlessness. His beeper, placed under his seat, goes off. He fishes around for it, checks the number, and looks up at Lydia. “I gotta call on this. I’ll see you later.” He stands up and kisses her, then goes off in search of a telephone. Having got exactly what she wanted—again—Lydia grins like a Cheshire cat and bounces off, out of the gym.



On his way back from leaving Emily at the Bureau’s child care facility, Dion stops by his secretary’s desk. “Hey, Sandra. Could you ask around and get a few names of daycares? Laura and I have to find a permanent daytime place for Em, and pronto.”

“Sure, Agent Spencer. I’ll get right on it,” she nods, and heads out of the office. Dion gets into his trench coat and leaves the building.

A short and uneventful drive later, he pulls up across the street from David’s place, intent on getting information that could seriously incapacitate his brother. It doesn’t look like David’s car is around, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Dion runs through his excuse if David *is* home: “Just thought I should check up on you. I’ve been worried.” He says it a few times to make sure it sounds convincing. Dion approaches the front door warily and rings the doorbell. After a few jabs at the button, he calls, “David?” No answer. He pulls his keyring from his pocket, locates David’s key, and lets himself in. Nice to have a brother that’s so trusting, Dion smiles.

A quick look around affirms that David is, indeed, out of the building. “Good thing, too—I don’t think I could have reeled off that excuse with a straight face,” Dion mutters to the empty room. He ambles into the bedroom and goes straight to the top dresser drawer, grasping the wooden drawer knob and pulling it slowly. Amid a shambles of heroin and various paraphernalia, he spies a slip of paper bearing the name “Nilsson” and a phone number. Jackpot. He grins and carefully extracts the small creased paper, then slides the drawer shut.

Dion walks back out to the kitchen and picks up the phone. He punches in the digits on the paper and gets a standard beeper message. Leaving David’s number, he pulls up a chair and waits for the call-back, which arrives only a few minutes later.

“You rang?” the voice on the other end says, bored.

“Is this Mr. Nilsson?” Dion asks.

“Yes...why are you even asking?” Anders responds a little testily. “This isn’t David.”

“No. This is Dion. I’d like to set up a meeting.”

Anders laughs. “Um, okaay...Dion, huh? Emily’s daddy. David’s little brother.”

“‘Little’ is relative. I’m only five years younger than he is,” Dion says defensively.

“Making you...twenty-four. Not so young after all. I’m only twenty-three, myself.”

Dion feels a tiny surge of power. I’m older than this guy, he thinks. He therefore comes to this grade-schooler conclusion: I can kick his ass. He clears his throat. “Enough small talk. When can we meet?”

“Well, I’m awfully busy, Dion. Is there some incentive for me to shove you into my hectic schedule?”

“There may be,” Dion says enticingly. “I *could* become your newest—and best—customer.”

“Hmm. How about...look, I’ll call you when I’m available for a—a ‘meeting’, okay? What’s your number?”

Dion gives Anders his beeper number. “I’ll be hearing from you soon?” he asks.

“Soon. I promise. Later.” Anders hangs up.

Dion replaces the phone on the hook and smiles to himself. This is going better than I had planned, he thinks, and leaves David’s apartment to go back to the office.



“Anything come up?” Albert asks, taking a sip of coffee.

Laura shakes her head. “Nothing important, I don’t think. I’ve analyzed the paper. Acid-free Hammermill Bond. Pretty high quality, but nothing out of the ordinary. You can do the ink.” She holds out the three evidence bags, each containing one of the three messages left on the body of Robert Emilio. Albert disdainfully takes the bags and heads over to his microscope across the room from Laura.

Laura jots down a few notes on the report, then picks up the bag with the gold coin. She carefully opens the bag and shakes the coin out onto the counter. So far, this coin simply could not be identified; it provided no clues. God, this job sucks sometimes, she sighs. I hate when nothing gives anything away.

She tilts her head and absently taps her finger on the coin. She examines her fingertip out of sheer boredom and, to her surprise, notices a tiny fleck of gold. “Albert!” she calls. “This coin is plated.”

“Plated?” he asks, turning from his ink analysis. He approaches Laura’s working space. “It was originally...?”

“Looks like silver,” she remarks, examining it closer. “We have a bath that’ll take this off, right?”

“Try that,” he suggests, pointing to a flask on a shelf behind Laura. Laura promptly brings down the flask and prepares a bath for the coin, dropping it into a glass beaker of solution. The gold plating dissolves, leaving only the original silver coin beneath. She fishes out the coin, blots it carefully with a thick wad of paper towels, and places it underneath a magnifying lens.

“Konungariket SVERIGE. Krona,” she reads haltingly, sounding out the unfamiliar words. “Krona,” she repeats. “Krona. Isn’t that like Norwegian or something?”

“No, that’s the *kroner*,” Albert corrects. “‘Sverige’, eh? Sounds like this is a Swedish coin. Earle probably gold-plated it in keeping with the gold-coin-under-the-tongue tradition.”

“So the fact that this coin is from Sweden must mean something, or he would have used just any old gold coin,” Laura continues.

“That’s my guess.” Albert picks up the report and scribbles a few notes regarding the coin. “Good work.”

“Thanks, Albert,” Laura smiles. “But shouldn’t you be doing your ink analysis?”

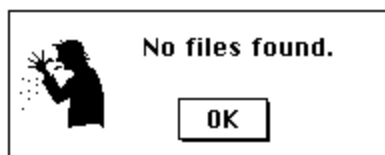
“Don’t remind me,” Albert groans, and returns to his microscope. A *Swedish* coin, he realizes as he sits at the counter. Something big may come of this. Something very big.



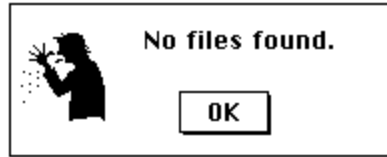
Meg sits down at her computer and shuffles a few files around. Time for some updating, she decides. She pulls up David’s file for modification, adding a record of his latest visit, checking his charts thoroughly and including the whole Anders incident. She sighs as she clicks on the Save button. Everything’s gone from bad to worse, she thinks. Might as well work on Anders’s file while I’m at it.

She moves out to the main menu and scrolls up to NILSSON, A., then clicks on it. The file unfolds itself below his name; Meg clicks on the COMMENT section and begins to fill it out carefully.

Suddenly, the lights dim and brighten, as if a huge bolt of lightning was coursing through the power lines, and the computer winks out. Baffled, Meg stares at the dead screen for a moment before snapping out of her daze and hitting the ON button again. She goes through the whole rigmarole of login, passwords, and authentication—all of the hospital’s files are very well safeguarded—and pulls up her database program. She clicks on “Open File” and silently prays the program did a backup of the two files she had modified. The computer blows a raspberry and this message pops up on the screen:



Meg stares at the announcement, not comprehending, not *wanting* to comprehend. She clicks “OK” and tries it again.



Panicked, she does a quick search for her database file; it comes up empty-handed. She grabs the phone and dials the hospital pharmacy.

“Steve, hi, it’s Margaret. Could you check your database files for me? Something’s wrong with my computer.” She stands up and begins to pace a tiny path by her desk, waiting for Steve’s news.

“Well, Doctor Wilson...my files seem to be kaput,” he informs her. “Joan down in Accounting is having the same problem. Musta been that surge.”

“Great. Thanks, Steve. I’ll call Data Management and let them know.” She presses the FLASH button on the phone and dials up the hospital department responsible for the computers and files.

“What’s going on down there?” she asks. “The computers are completely wiped of data!”

An equally panicked voice responds. “I’m sure we don’t know, Doctor. There was a power surge or something, and everything was lost. Everything,” he gibbers. “I don’t know how we’re gonna piece this together from paper files. What a mess.”

“You’re telling me,” Meg says dryly, and presses the FLASH button once more, cutting off the connection to Data Management. She’s in the midst of dialing Dion when she reconsiders...biting the bullet, she dials Albert at the lab.

“Rosenfield.”

“Albert, it’s Doctor Wilson.”

“God, you must be bored to be calling here. What’s the matter, no patients?”

“Actually, yes. Our computers have lost all data. We’re screwed.”

Albert sounds interested. “So now *your* computers went down?”

“Yes. And we’ll have a really hard time restoring everything. I think this is the same person who did a number on your files.”

“Do you want me to *do* something about it?”

“I just thought you should know,” Meg replies, and hangs up. That just takes the biscuit, she thinks. She turns off her computer—fairly useless now—gathers her things, puts on her coat, and goes home.



“Any luck?” Dion asks his secretary as he returns from his solo outing at David’s.

“Actually, yes. I found a fantastic little daycare-slash-nursery school that would simply love to have Emily,” Sandra replies proudly.

Dion nods. “Tell me more.”

“It’s called ‘Forest Friends Nursery School’, it’s got a great location, caring staff, and one of the best pre-primary education systems in the state.”

“Wow,” Dion murmurs.

“And it’s not even that expensive. I’ve spoken to a few people around here who use Forest Friends and they’ve said it’s quite the bargain, considering the extent of the services offered. I mean, you are paying for daycare *and* some actual education, so—”

“Great. Sounds great,” Dion interrupts. “When can I sign her up?”

Sandra smiles awkwardly. “Well, that’s the only problem. This place is so popular that there’s a waiting list to get in, especially at your daughter’s age level. I can make a few calls and get her on the list, though. The sooner, the better, after all.” Sandra reaches for the phone.

“No, that’s okay—I’ll take care of it,” Dion says, and takes down the school’s phone number. “You’ve been a great help, Sandra. I mean it. Thanks a lot.” He forces a smile and walks past her into his office.

“Oh, no problem, Agent Spencer! Any time...” Sandra calls after him.

* * *

I just need to get her somewhere, Dion tells himself as he pours himself a cup of coffee. Anywhere. Just...out of here. This Forest Friends place sounds pretty good. And won’t Laura be proud of me, of the way I’m taking care of business. He smiles to himself as he remembers the standing appointment he has with Anders. Taking care of business in more ways than one, I guess, he admits. He picks up the phone and dials Forest Friends Nursery School.

“Forest Friends Nursery School—how may I help you?”

Dion cringes at the bouncy voice assaulting him over the phone lines. “I’d like to register my daughter, please.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but our enrollment is full. There is no way we can accept new charges at this time. We can place you on a waiting list, though.”

“All right. If that’s the only choice I have.”

“I’m afraid it is, sir. Your daughter’s name and age?”

“Emily Spencer, seven months.”

“My, that’s young. She’ll be very hard to enroll, indeed. We accept only a very few children under one year of age.” The woman takes down this information and asks, “What is your name, sir?”

“Special Agent Dion Spencer, FBI,” Dion replies, with as much emphasis as he can muster.

There is a pause on the other end. “You’re with the FBI, Agent Spencer?”

Dion rolls his eyes. “Yes, I am.”

Another long pause. “Let me take down your phone number, Agent Spencer, and I’ll get back to you as soon as a space is made available.”

Dion gives her his office number and hangs up. “Cross your fingers,” he says aloud.

☞

Dion barely has time to relax when the phone rings. “Agent Spencer,” he says as he cradles the receiver against his shoulder.

“Yes, Agent Spencer, this is Stacy at Forest Friends. It so happens that we’ve had a sudden cancellation, and we’d love to have Emily here.”

“Oh. Oh, really?” Dion is taken by surprise. “Oh. Oh, that’s great.” I sound like an idiot, he realizes, and shuts up.

“You may bring her in right now, and we’ll take care of the paperwork,” Stacy continues cheerily.

Dion checks the clock on the wall: 11:16 AM. “Yeah, I’ll be right there.”

“We’re looking forward to having Emily join our group,” Stacy bubbles. “See you soon, Agent Spencer!”

Dion grins. There are times when being in the FBI has certain merits. He heads down to the Bureau’s facility to collect his daughter and escort her to Forest Friends.

* * *

The phone at the lab rings, making Albert jump. Laura peers at him curiously. “I’ll get it,” she says, peeling off her gloves to pick up the receiver. “Agent Laura Spencer. How may I help you?...who may I say is calling?”

“One moment, please.” Laura looks over at Albert. “An Anders?”

“Give me that,” Albert snaps, and grabs the phone from Laura, without stopping to take off his rubber gloves. “Hold on,” he barks at the phone, then presses the HOLD button and slams the receiver into its cradle. “I’m picking this up in your office,” he says over his shoulder as he briskly walks to Laura’s room.

Laura shrugs. “Okay, whatever.”

Once in Laura’s office, Albert takes a deep breath and picks up the phone. “What do you want, you brazen little punk?”

Anders laughs softly. “Relax. I’m calling to—”

“Apologize for commandeering my vehicle? I swear I’ll—”

“—to invite you to a party.”

“—I’ll—what? A party?”

“Yes. You’ve...been to a party before? Or am I assuming too much?”

“Of course. I don’t like them. I won’t come.”

“Oh, cheer up. If you come to this gathering—tonight, in a magnificent penthouse, formal dress, bring a date if you can—I promise you you’ll get what you need.”

“What I *want*.”

“What you *need*. So: What do you say?”

Albert considers it for a moment. This could be the perfect opportunity to check out Anders’s operation, to find his fatal flaw, to *bring him down*. I have that tuxedo from Laura’s wedding, and I don’t need a date, so...why not? Besides, I *definitely* have something to gain. “Fine,” he replies at last.

“Wonderful. Let me give you the specifics.” Albert studiously takes down the info for the get-together. “See you tonight, Agent Rosenfield,” Anders says, and hangs up.



“So what’s the definition of ‘literature’?” David asks, tossing a piece of chalk into the air. He replaces the chalk in its tray and turns toward his class of eleven students, leaning lazily on the back of his desk chair. “The dictionary defines it as ‘writings in prose or verse, especially writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest’.”

He leans more heavily on the chair and checks his watch. A few of his students glance at each other. “So, uh, so the author has to strive to create not only excellent work, but work that’s eternal. Of, of course, the dictionary also says that, uh, that basically *all* ‘writings in prose or verse’ are literature. That’s debatable.”

He scans the room. Silence. “And that’s what you’re going to do now. Debate.” His students groan slightly and David smiles. “Oh, quit yer whining. Get in, in groups, or...whatever...”—he gestures vaguely—and discuss. Is Austen literature? Is King? Is your average romance novel literature? How about Sandburg? How about the verses you’ve read scrawled on the bathroom wall? Talk about permanence.” He grins. “I’ll be back in a bit,” he adds, and heads out into the hall.

David checks his watch nervously as he heads into his tiny makeshift office. He slides into his chair, picks up the phone, and dials Meg’s number at work. After a few minutes, a voice comes over the line:

“Hello, you’ve reached the office of Doctor Margaret Wilson. If you’d like to leave a me—”

David bites his lip and depresses the receiver button before replacing the handset. “Damn,” he whispers, head in his hands. “She’s ignoring me.” He sits at his desk, profoundly alone; his head and arms slowly slide down to his blotter.

He’s nearly asleep in this comfortable position when the phone rings right next to his head, jerking him out of his stupor. He fumbles with the receiver as he brings it to his ear. “Hello?”

“Ah, David. Good morning. Sorry to call you at work,” Anders says brightly.

“S no problem, really,” David manages.

“Anyway, I’m having a get-together tonight and was wondering if you could make it. Are you free?”

“Yeah, um, sure,” David answers. “Can I come stag?”

“Oh, you won’t be bringing Dr. Wilson, then? Too bad. Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know. Probably,” David sighs.

“Well, you might meet someone new there. Anyway, it’s formal dress. Take this down, would you?” He proceeds to read David directions to the penthouse, which David scrawls down onto a Post-It note on his desk. “Gotcha. I’ll be there,” he affirms.

“Looking forward to seeing you there,” Anders replies, and hangs up.

David hangs up as well, and checks his watch. He hurriedly grabs the note from its pad and practically runs down the hall to his class, where he closes the door behind him.

* * *

Rebekka closes the door behind her. “Anders?” she calls out. “I’m home.” She steps in a few feet and stops as though she had reached an invisible barrier. Anders is sitting at the kitchen table, doing some paperwork. Rebekka sees his face in profile.

“Mmm,” he replies, and taps the end of his pencil pensively on his lower lip. Rebekka shrugs her purse off her shoulder, down her arm, and into her hand, then hangs it on the chair near the entry. She then stands stock still, like a maid on inspection day. Occasionally, she finds herself holding her breath.

“I’m having a party tonight,” Anders says.

“Oh?”

“Yes, oh. I assume you have something appropriate to wear.”

“I’ll find something.” She shifts her weight to one foot. “Why are we having a party?”

“*We’re* not. *I* am,” he replies. “I fell into a bit of money and decided to have a little mid-winter get-together before we went South.”

“How did you get this money—or should I even ask?”

Anders writes a few more figures. “You’re a nosy one. I sold the Miata.”

“Oh, Anders, no! Why? It could have been fixed! It could have been repainted, or buffed, or—”

“No. It wasn’t perfect anymore. I didn’t want it. And I was just sick of it,” Anders interrupts.

“Anything like me?” Rebekka shoots back. “I’ve gained a little weight. Now *I’m* not perfect anymore. Will you get sick of me? Will you get rid of me? Am I just another object, a plaything?” As soon as the words spill out of her mouth, Rebekka thinks, Oh, God. That’s it. He’ll kill me for sure this time. He’s right—I’m so damn stupid.

Surprisingly, Anders doesn’t even look up from his papers. “Who said you were *ever* perfect? And who says I’m not sick of you already?”

Rebekka’s eyes grow wide; she’s unable to speak without squeaking in rage. Two minutes pass, a short interval which seems eternal, Rebekka shifting from one foot to the other, Anders’s pencil scribbling across a worksheet.

Rebekka breaks the silence first. “Your nose is bleeding,” she points out.

Alarmed, Anders touches his upper lip. His finger comes away bloody. “Aw, shit.” Anders jumps up from the table and runs to the bathroom for some Kleenex. As he returns, tightly pinching his nose, he sees his sister for the first time.

Her hair.

Her long, beautiful blond hair that reached almost to her waist is gone.

Rebekka is sporting a stylish ‘do that, while not as short as it conceivably *could* be, is still above her shoulders—the shortest it’s been in five years.

Anders runs into the same invisible barrier Rebekka had, and stares at his sister, absolutely not believing what he sees. “Whad the FUG did you do do your HAIR?” he screams, nose still firmly pinched to staunch the bleeding.

She takes a step back. “I got it cut.”

“Why the FUG did you ged id cud? Whad is WRONG with you?”

A few more steps back. “I felt like it. I felt like a change.”

“DJEZUS!” Anders is incomprehensible with rage. He stands right where he is, clenching and unclenching the hand not pinching his nose, breathing heavily through his mouth. After a few moments of

this, he twirls around on one heel and stomps into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him and making the plates clink in their cupboards.

Trembling, Rebekka makes her way to the couch and gingerly sits down on the edge of the cushion. “No way,” she breathes. “No way he’ll let me get away with this. I’ve gone too far this time.” She buries her face in her hands and waits for her punishment.



“God, I’m terrified,” Rebekka breathes as she clutches Anders’s arm.

“Why?” Anders snorts. “We’re the ones throwing the party. What have we to worry about?”

“You know I hate crowds.” Rebekka closes her eyes tightly for a moment, then smoothes out her dress. “And they don’t *like* me, Anders.”

Anders just rolls his eyes. They approach the door and stand there for a moment, taking the last deep breath before swimming across the pool. Anders opens the door and the two take one step inside the lavish penthouse.

All conversation stops; everyone immediately fixes their eyes on their host and his sister.

The women gape at Anders, slim and debonair in his sharply-creased tuxedo, grinning magnanimously through a haze of cocaine. He exudes an air of wealth, elegance and power, and acknowledges the attention he receives with the slightest smile.

The men gaze at Rebekka, still holding on to Anders for dear life, stunning in her bottle-green, crushed velvet gown—long-sleeved, high-necked, almost floor-length—hiding more than it shows and yet still insanely seductive. The way the fabric caresses her curves and twirls softly around her long legs makes every male in the room long to be a size 8, bottle-green Galliano original.

While the men remain fixated on Rebekka, the women eventually turn their attention in that direction as well. They all, as if by some unspoken signal, take one step away from their escorts and toward each other, and begin whispering amongst themselves. The murmur, full of “did you hear?”s and “isn’t she?”s, winds through the room like a wisp of smoke.

Rebekka gulps. Anders leans over to whisper in her ear. “They *love* us. They can’t help but talk about us.” He kisses her gently and adds, “Why did you have to be the only woman here to wear a floor-length gown, for Chrissakes?” He looks her over critically and adds, “And your *hair*. Jesus.” He frowns. “I’ll never understand your sense of style.”

Rebekka just sighs and shakes her head. Anders leads her into the suite.

* * *

David takes a sip of punch and looks out over the crowd.

“Lot of beautiful women here tonight,” Albert notes for David’s sake.

“Prostitutes,” David answers. “All of them.”

“What?”

“That’s right. All except...that one,” he says, indicating Rebekka with a nod of his head. She’s never more than two steps away from her brother as he makes the rounds, glad-handing the crowd.

“Anders’s girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend? Are you sure? I thought she was his sister. They look an awful lot alike to not be related, Albert.”

“They seemed pretty damn friendly to me, last I saw them together.”

“Mmm,” David answers, in hopes of ending the conversation. It works. Albert says nothing, just glares at the throng with his arms crossed over his chest. He glances over at David. “Better take it easy with that punch. This party is bad already without me having to drag your dead, overdosed ass out of here.”

“Thanks for your concern, Albert.”

“Don’t get sentimental.”

The two watch Anders have an earnest, animated conversation with a rather portly older man. Anders looks up and around the room as if to ascertain someone's location, and smiles as his eyes lock on Albert and David by the back wall.

Albert turns to David again. "Why did you come here?"

"Me?" David shrugs. "Something to do. I haven't been to a party in a while. What about you? You're definitely the last person I'd expect to see at a place like this."

Albert scowls. "I have my reasons for being here. I only wish Nilsson would get his act together." He faces the room. "I mean, let's go! Why am I even here if he's not going to follow through? Why?" he asks, gesticulating grandly.

Anders comes breezing up with Rebekka in hand and older man close behind. He deftly places an oversized mug of sweet, hot, milky coffee into Albert's outstretched hand and smiles. "Albert. How are we enjoying the evening?"

The agent stares at the steaming cup in his hand, then at Anders. "Doing well," he mutters, and takes a sip.

Anders grins. "Let me introduce you to an important person." David and Albert both smile awkwardly at Rebekka, awaiting the formal introduction. Instead, Anders turns toward the older man as Rebekka automatically takes a few steps back, removing herself from the circle. David glances at her and offers a tiny, friendly smile. Rebekka returns it, shy, then scans the room nervously, waiting for Anders to finish his introductions.

"This," Anders begins, arm around the portly man, "is Dr. Petrov. We're in his penthouse now, can you believe it?"

"Nice to meet you," Petrov says with a grin and a slight bow. He's rather short and wears glasses over his piercing eyes.

"Really beautiful place you have here, Doctor," David remarks.

"Yeah, uh, really nice," Albert adds as he turns his attention back toward his coffee.

"We met in university, in New York. He was the faculty moderator of the Chess Club. Now, I wasn't in the Chess Club, but I had played a bit, and when I heard this guy was a real wizard or something, I decided to give it a go and play a game or two against him." He pauses and watches the Doctor as he readies his next remark. "Checkmate in five moves."

Albert suddenly looks up at Anders. "Isn't that the smallest number—"

"Yes," Petrov says. "The first time—and only time—I was ever defeated," he admits with an uncomfortable laugh.

"Wow," Albert nods.

"Yeah," David echoes. Anders grins, absorbing the adulation as if he were a cat soaking up the sun.

"Well," Petrov interrupts, "I'll leave you young people to your party. I'll just collect my little girl and be on my way."

"Sure thing, Doctor. Thanks again for letting us use the place," Anders replies.

"No problem," Petrov calls back as he makes his way through the crowd to the other side of the room.

Anders shakes his head in amazement. "What a guy. Well, we'll be off now. Enjoy your evening." He collects Rebekka and begins to move back off into the crowd.

"Wait!" David exclaims. Anders turns back around. "Um...I don't believe we've met," he says, indicating Rebekka.

"Oh." Anders sniffs. He brings Rebekka around next to him. "Gentlemen, this is Rebekka. Rebekka, this is Albert and David. I believe you've seen Albert before," he remarks.

Rebekka nods and smiles demurely. David smiles. His eye suddenly catches Doctor Petrov carefully carrying a baby out of the suite. He blinks, and turns back to Rebekka.

"It's nice to meet you both," she says. The two men nod and mutter similar phrases.

"We have to get back to our guests. Have a great evening, and, Albert? Enjoy your coffee. If you'd like a fill-up, just see me." He grins and leads Rebekka away from the two.

“She got a haircut,” Albert notices. “She’s really beautiful.”
 “Mmm,” David replies.



Halfway across the room, Anders stops and turns to his sister. “I have some stuff to do. Be a dear darling and mingle.” He gives her a quick kiss and a condescending pat on the rear, then fairly shoves her toward the center of the room before he heads off toward the back rooms.

Rebekka throws a slightly dirty look over her shoulder, and makes her way to the edge of the crowd. She spots a lonely-looking waif of a young woman perched delicately on the edge of an expensive sofa against the far wall, and approaches her, hoping against hope that she may actually be able to make a friend of her own.

“Hi,” Rebekka begins, and holds out her hand. The girl on the couch looks up, startled, and shakes it shyly. Rebekka smiles. “I’m Rebekka. You look like you could use a friend.”

The girl finally returns Rebekka’s gentle expression, and begins to introduce herself, but her words rasp in her throat. She coughs discreetly, swallows, and begins again: “I’m Ronette. Hi.” She scoots over to make room for Bekkers, who sits down beside her. Her skimpy, sexy red minidress slides up a couple of inches on the way to the other side of the couch, and she carefully pulls the hem down again when she reaches her destination.

Ronette has her mouth open to speak when Anders, on his way past the sofa, stops abruptly before the two of them and says, “There you are. Rebekka, Ronette. Ronette, Rebekka. Rebekka, this is the new girl. Have a good conversation.” He nods and continues briskly on his way.

Rebekka closes her eyes and takes a deep breath before turning to Ronnie again. Ronette is spellbound by the brief, almost illusory appearance of her crush, and Rebekka breaks the spell by asking, “You’re the new girl?”

“Yes, hello. I’m the new girl, yes,” Ronnie replies, still dazed.

“Oh, I see.” Rebekka politely nods.

Ronette gapes for a second longer, then laughs lightly. “I’m sorry. It’s not very polite of me to be so obviously in lust with your boyfriend. You two seem so special to each other, so close. I mean, you’re always together, arms around each other...you must have a great relationship. I don’t have a chance, right?”

Now it’s Rebekka’s turn to be speechless. Her mouth hangs open for a split second, then closes with an audible *snap*. “He’s my *brother*,” she says, the words tinged with disgust.

Ronette stares for a moment, then laughs nervously. “Oh, God, I’m sorry! It’s just that you two are always so...so...affectionate...” She swallows, noticing the rather ill look on Rebekka’s face. “Uh...does this mean I can go out with him?” she asks hopefully.

Rebekka nods, her face ashen. Ronette regards her curiously, then stands up. “It was nice meeting you, Rebekka. Let’s talk again.” She grins, waves, and wends her way through the crowd in search of her blond dreamboat.



“You are not gonna *believe* what I got done today,” Dion exclaims as he returns home and throws his briefcase on the couch. “You’re gonna be so proud of me,” he adds as he approaches Laura, who’s just begun cooking hamburgers, and gives her a luscious kiss.

Laura smiles. “Hey, baby,” she replies, and pokes a burger with her spatula.

Dion frowns. “Here, sweetie, let me do that,” he insists, and carefully unties the apron from around her waist and transfers it to his own. He eases the spatula from her hand and scoots her away from the stove with the slightest nudge to her hip. He shoots a smile her way as he flips a sizzling burger.

“God, Dion,” Laura remarks. “What’s got into you?” She sits down at the table and watches him wonderingly. “And where’s Emily?”

“Actually, that’s one of the things I did today. I found this fabulous daycare–preschool–type place not far from work, and they managed to squeeze our little angel into their class list. Ain’t it grand?”

“Yeah, but...shouldn’t you have brought her home?”

Dion nods. “That’s the cool part. I didn’t know this until I dropped her off, but they’re having a sleepover tonight! She’s all set, don’t worry,” he adds, seeing Laura’s worried look. “She has all the stuff she’ll need. I can pick her up tomorrow after work, no problem.” He grins and flips another burger. “So we have the place to ourselves,” he reminds her with a wink.

Laura laughs. “Jesus, Dion...let me tell you about *my* day.” She proceeds to fill him in about the silver Swedish coin found under the dead Emilio’s tongue, the fact that the hospital files were zapped, and, briefly, David’s visiting her at the lab.

“He was so sweet, and apologetic. I wish you’d stop being so damn nasty to him, Dion.” She unfolds her napkin onto her lap. “But you said the daycare thing was just one of the things you took care of,” she reminds him. “What else did you do? Exciting, dashing, heroic things?” Laura smiles.

Dion grins and serves up the burgers on buns and too–fancy plates, placing Laura’s in front of her with a flourish. He pauses as though considering his response. “No,” he finally answers, thinking of his sneak job at David’s, “actually nothing.” He leans down and kisses his wife, then sits in the chair across from her. “*Bon appétit*, mon angel sweet.”

Laura laughs, the happiest she’s been in years.



David closes his blue eyes slowly, then opens them again as if a weight were attached to each. One could hardly call it a blink. He glances around the room uneasily and tries to do a few deep breaths.

He’s had too much punch, and while he’s not exactly dizzy, the world around him seems to be a half–second late in catching up with each languorous turn of his head. It’s all slipping away.

This has never happened before, and he’s scared.

David looks over at Albert, who’s discussing a certain messy lab procedure with a nerdy scientifico in owlsh glasses. Imagine, David muses, there’s two people who even care. “Albert,” he says softly. “What?” Albert responds, looking peeved. He turns around with a “*now* look what I have to deal with” expression, which changes to one of incredulity and concern. “What the hell?”

“I, uh, I screwed up. I’m going to, to sit down for a bit and try to...come back,” David mumbles.

“I *told* you to keep off the punch!” Albert growls. He holds out his mug of Colombian blend. “Drink this.”

David utters a tiny half–laugh. “No, thanks. I don’t think that would help. I’ll just...sit down...thanks.”

He makes his way across the room. Albert calls out after him, but David doesn’t hear.

David eases himself onto a couch next to a sexy young woman in a red dress, involved with a skinny line of cocaine. He doesn’t notice her, but puts his head in his hands and focuses on his breathing, focuses on deepening it a bit so he doesn’t pass out.

The girl looks up from her project and sniffs, satisfied. She turns her attention to the sick guy next to her and regards him with interest. “Hey,” she blurts out, “are you okay?”

Oh, no, David thinks. Please don’t. “No,” he mutters.

Ronette’s interest wavers between concern for his well–being and just plain ol’ curiosity; the latter is what eventually reigns. “I’m Ronette. What’s your name?”

Please, please, just leave me alone...”David.”

“David? David what?”

“Spencerrr,” he replies, lingering on the final consonant. He slides his hands up through his hair and folds them under his chin, closing his eyes.

“Ooh! Are you related to Laura?”

Go *away*! he shrieks in his mind. “She’s my...sister–in–law.”

“OH! Cool!” Ronette giggles, please to have found him out. “Hey...are you with anyone tonight?”

Leave me alone leave me alone, he chants to himself. “You know what...Ronette? See that...guy over there talking...to the...geek?”

Ronette’s eyes follow the tilt of David’s head toward Albert. “Oh, the guy in the glasses?”

Deep inside, David laughs. “No, no...the *other* one,” he clarifies with a slight smile. “That’s Albert. He’s...really famous. And rich. He’s a doctor.”

“Ooooh,” Ronette breathes.

“Why don’t you go chat him up? I bet he’d love to meet you,” David adds.

Ronette takes the bait. She springs up and across the room, and sidles up to Albert, pulling him away from his intense scientific conversation in spite of his protesting.

David sighs and silently tries to pull himself together.



Rebekka sits alone on a matching sofa across the room from David. Though several women float by on the arms of their escorts and exchange a word or two with her, the conversations don’t go beyond five sentences, and each couple eventually moves off into the crowd, leaving Rebekka alone once more.

After a particularly stylish couple reenters the throng, Rebekka looks off, unfocused, across the room, thinking of a hundred places she’d rather be. Through the smoky haze, her eyes light on David, looking positively miserable. She scans the room thoroughly to ascertain Anders’s position—he has his coat on and is escorting a woman out of the apartment—and once she feels absolutely certain she’s safe, she picks up her evening bag and steals across the room to David’s side.

She whispers, “You look so ill. How can I help you?”

David looks up out of his hands. “Ms. Nilsson,” he murmurs.

“Yes, Mr. Spencer...please, what can I get for you?” she asks urgently, keeping one eye on the door.

“David, please,” he mumbles. “The only person who...who calls me ‘Mr. Spencer’ is your, your brother.”

And what’s wrong with that? Rebekka thinks. “Here, maybe some ginger ale will help?” She folds her almost-full glass into David’s hand. “I’m sorry it’s diet—the sugar would have done you good. But I think the bubbles could help?”

David sips the soda and manages a weak smile. “Thank you so much. I...I think they will.” He takes a deep breath and Rebekka relaxes.

“I thought this was a—a drink, an alcol-alcoholic drink,” David says as he studies the cut crystal tumbler.

“I don’t really drink,” Rebekka confesses.

“Me neither.” He smiles wryly.

“So why tonight?”

David shrugs. “To escape. I haven’t taken a drink in ten years, something like that. But I did it tonight, purposely.” He turns more toward Rebekka. “I know you need to escape. How do you do it?”

She blushes for a moment, then regains her composure. “Oh, I, I don’t want to escape any more than the average person does,” she laughs.

“But how do you?” David persists. “You, uh, you don’t drink, you don’t do any other drugs—”

“No,” Rebekka interrupts in a hushed tone, stealing a glance at the coke on the table.

“—so how do you escape?”

“Who would I be escaping?” she asks, smiling and trying to be cavalier.

David hmms. “‘Who’?” he echoes, sitting up. “Not ‘what’?”

She colors as she realizes her mistake. “It’s okay, it’s okay...I know who,” David whispers. “Don’t worry.”

Rebekka clears her throat and says nothing. A moment of awkward silence descends like a bubble around the two. David breaks it: “I, uh, I can’t drive home like this, Ms. Nilsson. I wonder if you, if you could—”

“Yes, yes, certainly. We’ll drive you home,” she assures him. “Just let us know when you need to leave.” She smiles and pats his hand.

“What about Anders? Can he drive?” David asks.

Rebekka smiles uncomfortably. “He probably thinks he could, but I doubt he can. He probably *thinks* he could *fly*,” she adds, under her breath. “It doesn’t much matter; we came in a limo. But he’s never been this—”

She stops abruptly and looks up with a gasp. Anders stands there, cheeks reddened by the wind outside and a bit of snow on the shoulders of his black wool coat and melting in his hair.

He offers a tight little smile. “Enjoying the party, Mr. Spencer?” he asks David, who hasn’t looked up.

“Yes,” David murmurs, still not facing him.

Anders reaches down and pulls Rebekka up from the couch. “If you ever talk to my sister again,” he continues in a conversational tone, “I’ll kill you.”

He turns with Rebekka and begins walking back across the room. Rebekka turns her head back toward David with a desperate look and mouths *I’m sorry*. David waves as if to say it’s okay, then sits back on the couch with a sigh.

“You didn’t have to threaten him,” Rebekka protests as they stop in the kitchen. “I began the conversation. You told me to mingle,” she reminds her brother.

Anders extricates himself from his coat and hands it to a valet. “Shut up,” he says in reply to his sister. “I’m not in the mood.”

Rebekka seethes. “We have to take him home tonight.”

“We’ll drop him off at Lydia’s hotel. He can spend the night there.”

“That reminds me,” she says, “who was that woman you took out earlier?”

“Who, who, who,” Anders mimics. “You sound like an owl. Don’t be foolish.” He picks up a glass of red wine and brings it to his lips. After a sip, he answers, “Lydia.”

“You invited her?”

“What do you care? No, she just showed up. She’s gone back to the hotel. Have some wine,” he says, offering her the goblet.

“I’m not thirsty. What’s wrong with you tonight?” Rebekka asks with a worried/angry expression.

Anders shrugs. “Nothing. Try this wine.” He gently touches the glass to his sister’s lips; she backs away.

“I don’t want to drink anything tonight!” she exclaims, taking a step backwards. “I told you!” She pauses. “Can you imagine the chaos if both of us were as smashed as you are?”

Anders slams the glass down on the counter hard enough to slosh a bit of wine over the rim. “You *are* stubborn,” he says quietly, then grabs her by the wrist (again; Rebekka winces in pain) and fairly drags her into the area being used as a dance floor.

A beautiful slow tune is playing. “Let’s dance,” he murmurs.

Rebekka closes her eyes. “Please, Anders...I’m so sore, everywhere. Please don’t hurt me any more.”

He places a hand around her shapely waist and carefully holds her hand with his other, yet the two do not yet begin to dance. “You’re sore?” he asks.

“Yes, I am. From earlier today,” she whispers, cheeks burning.

Anders looks concerned. “Where does it hurt, angel mine?”

Rebekka is surprised, and quite naturally circumspect of this part of Anders that so very rarely surfaces. “Well...my wrist is sore,” she admits.

“Which one?” he asks, and after she indicates it’s the one attached to the hand he’s holding, kisses it solemnly.

Oh, shit, Rebekka thinks. This is not good.

“Where else?” Anders persists.

“You, uh...my ears were boxed, hard,” she whispers.

“Your ears,” he repeats, drawing out the sibilance of the final ‘s’. He takes Rebekka’s face in both of his hands, and she closes her eyes in anticipation of a sharp slap. Instead, he turns her head ever so gently and, incredibly, gives each of Rebekka’s perfect ears a soft kiss.

“Anders...” she begins.

“Shh,” he answers, and holds her close. Rebekka does the same, incredulous yet happy that her brother is apparently back to “normal”. She feels so close to him right now, right here, and everyone else in the room is nobody, nothing, doesn’t exist. No matter how fleeting these moments of tenderness may be, she’ll take what she can get. It may be creepy, but now they’re the loving brother and sister they should be...right?

“I like your cologne,” she offers.

“You smell a little like soap.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“No, I like it. It’s so clean,” Anders replies, and the two fall silent again.

She runs her hands lightly down his back as they embrace on the dance floor, savoring the cool whisper of the fabric under her fingers, when her hands touch on the butt of his Beretta, tucked into his waistband at the small of his back and hidden by his jacket. “Anders,” she says urgently. “You brought your—”

Rebekka doesn’t have a chance to finish—in fine Shakespearean fashion, Anders stops her mouth with a kiss. She flutters her eyelashes in surprise. Once, then again, then she feels his tongue in her mouth and her heart skips a beat.

She breaks away and takes a step back, head down. Anders bows his head as well, eyes closed, and pulls in sharp, ragged breaths. They stand like that for a moment, then he steps forward and takes her hands, head still bowed.

“Anders,” Rebekka whispers. Their foreheads almost touch.

“Shh.” They remain in that position for a few breaths, standing in the midst of everyone (Albert and David among the guests surreptitiously staring from the sidelines, Ronette standing by the punchbowl with a broken heart), when Anders finally whispers, “Let’s go.”

He takes her hand. The two are hushed as they help David up from the couch, nod to their guests, don their coats, and head to their limo, waiting outside.



“Okay, Albert, let’s have the next one,” Laura says as she ties her hair back and adjusts her rubber gloves. The morgue is cold and blue, and she shivers. Albert slides a tiny body onto the table in front of her without a word.

“Oh, it’s a baby,” Laura gasps. “How terrible...I don’t want to do this,” she sighs. Yet she unzips the petite bag from around the body.

The chilled and still face of her daughter Emily looks up at her, frozen in terror. Laura turns, horrified, to Albert.

In place of her partner in pathology stands BOB, and he holds a scalpel. “WE HAVE YOUR DAUGHTER,” he informs her with obvious glee, then raises the scalpel above Emily like an icepick. Laura screams. He brings the cutting tool down with a whistle through the air, and—

Laura awakens in bed, curled up like a stickybun and drenched in sweat. She sits up, heart pounding as if it wanted to escape, and starts to hyperventilate.

She stumbles out of bed, tripping on the bedclothes and waking Dion. “Laura?” he calls, still half-asleep.

“I-I-I h-had a-a—” she gasps, grabbing her robe and pulling it around her as she stands up from her awkward fall. She stops for a second, trembling, and melts back to the floor with a heartbreaking sob.

Dion’s out of bed and at her side in a second. “Laura, darling, it was a dream, just a dream. Hush now,” he whispers, rubbing her back as she rocks back and forth on the parquetry.

Eventually she calms down enough for Dion to help her back up onto the bed. “Better?” he asks. Laura nods and hiccups. “Can—can I have a cigarette?” she asks. Dion fishes around for her pack and lights one for her. “What time is it?” she asks after a few drags.

“Nine.”

“You’re not going to work?”

“It’s Saturday, and there’s nothing there that can’t wait. Laura, what was it about?”

She shakes her head miserably. “I can’t talk about it. You have to go get Emily *right now*, Dion. I mean it.” She starts crying again.

“But I don’t want to leave you.”

“I’ll, I’ll come with you,” she says. “Just—I gotta get ready,” she adds on the way to the bathroom for a shower.

“Good morning, Agent Spencer,” the young woman at Forest Friends says.

“Good morning, uh, Stacy,” Dion answers, checking her nametag. “We—my wife and I—are here to pick up Emily.” Laura swallows and tries to look pleasant.

Stacy is puzzled. “I’m afraid Emily’s no longer with us,” she explains.

Laura sobs once. “Laura, that’s not what she—excuse me?” Dion asks angrily.

“Well, your brother picked her up last night,” Stacy continues. “He assured me he had your okay.”

Laura sighs. “He did *not* have my okay,” Dion shouts. “What kind of place are you running here? Do you at least have some record of him picking her up?”

“Yes, he signed this release slip,” she says, sliding the piece of paper across the desk to Dion.

Sure enough, it all checks out. Complete with David’s pitiful drugged-out scrawl of a signature. “Do you have a phone?” Dion asks, barely containing his fury.

Stacy offers him the use of her desk phone. Dion punches in David’s number and waits. And waits. He finally slams the phone down. “Nothing. Nothing! He *took our daughter* and is *nowhere to be found!*”

“Dion, it’s okay,” Laura manages. “He’s probably sleeping.”

“Goddammit, Laura! Stop making excuses for him! Don’t you care that that...screwed-up addict *loser* has *stolen* our *baby*? And that *these* people just *let* him?”

“But I thought—” Stacy begins.

“Oh, I don’t want to hear what you *thought*,” Dion interrupts. “You are in *deep* shit. We are with the *FBI*, girly. This is *far* from over,” he promises, and, leaving Stacy near tears, stomps out the door with Laura a step behind.



Meg checks her pager. Nothing. She picks up the nearest phone and checks her voice mail. No messages. She calls her answering machine at home, but there’s nothing for her there, either. Her secretary has nothing to tell her. No one does.

She looks at her watch; it’s lunch time on this lovely chill Saturday. David should be awake by now, at least, she figures; why haven’t I heard from him in so long? Two days, is it?

Grabbing her purse, she starts down the hall, pulling her interning assistant aside for a moment. “Hi there, Beth. I’m going to lunch, and to run a few errands. It seems pretty slow now—knock on wood—but if something should happen that you can’t handle, just page me and I’ll be here in a flash, okay? Same thing with the patients we already have—they’re pretty much taken care of, but just in case...you know.”

“Sure thing, Doctor Wilson,” Beth answers with a smile. “Have a good lunch.”

“I’ll try,” Meg replies, and is out the door.

She drives her Camry down to David's, biting her lip nervously. She jabs at the buttons on the radio; frustrated at finding nothing she wants to hear, she turns the radio knob so violently that it pops off in her hand. "Great," she mutters, and tosses it into the passenger's seat.

Meg pulls in front of David's place and sees another car there—Dion's car. She braces herself for a confrontation with him—their relationship had been souring lately, after all—locks up the car, and heads up to the porch.

Dion and Laura are both there, looking incredibly worn. "Di-Dion," Meg begins. "And Laura. Wh—why are you here?"

"Oh, Meg," Laura breathes. "It's just—"

"David stole our baby," Dion sputters. "He actually *took* her! And he's disappeared!"

"He's gone?" Meg asks.

"We've been ringing his doorbell for at least fifteen minutes," a tired Laura explains. "Though I guess it's entirely possible that he's still sleeping."

"At noon?" Dion snorts. "Jesus Christ."

"You—you really think he just...*took* Emily?" Meg asks, perplexed. "I don't think he'd ever—"

"Look, the last thing he said to me was please not to forbid him from seeing her and that it would kill him to be without her. We tell him he's lost the babysitting job and poof, he *and* our daughter are nowhere to be found," Dion retorts.

"He made me promise that we'd still let him see her, Dion," Laura points out. "I just don't think he'd do something this rash."

"He's desperate. A desperate man'll do anything," Dion replies. He shuffles his feet a little and shoots a dirty look toward Meg. "Why are *you* here?"

"Well, ah, I haven't heard from David in a few days, and I was getting worried about him," Meg says.

"You haven't heard from him because he's skipped town with our daughter," Dion mutters.

"Stop it," Laura exclaims. "That's conjecture."

"Fine. You want cold, hard facts?" Dion shoots back. "Let's go in." He produces David's house key from his pocket and lets everyone inside.

"David?" Laura calls. "David, wake up...it's us. It's Laura and Meg and...and Dion," she finishes. There's no response except an echo from the cathedral ceiling. Peter, David's cat, peeks around a corner and mews. Meg walks up to her, squats down, and absentmindedly scratches under her chin. "Good kitty," she murmurs. "Is your daddy here?"

Dion looks around the living room and kitchenette. "Nothing. Laura?"

Laura returns from the back bedrooms. "Nothing. The bed's not slept in, even. There's a dry-cleaning bag on the bed, but other than that, nothing. He's really gone. I still can't believe it, though."

"You remember how you met David? Huh, sweetie? He was holding a goddam gun to your head," Dion reminds Laura.

Meg stands up. "But wasn't he working for Mr. Earle then? Because you know full well he'd not do that of his own accord." Peter mews again and rubs against Meg's ankles.

The two agents think about this for a moment. "It could be Earle," Laura admits finally. "But, God, I don't want to think about that. I just...I can't handle it right now." She turns to Dion. "What if *Earle* has our baby, Dion? Then what?"

Dion is still silent. He walks over to the phone and dials. "I'm going to talk to Gordon about this. Something's not right."

Laura sighs. "*Nothing's* right."

"YOUR BLOTTER IS GAUNT? SPENCER, ARE YOU PULLING MY LEG?"

"My *daughter* is gone, Gordon!" Dion hollers.

"YOUR DAUGHTER? THAT'S A SHAME! WHERE'D SHE GO?"

"We don't know! We think my brother took her!"

"YOUR LOVER? SPENCER, DOES YOUR WIFE KNOW?"

Meg blushes crimson for a moment. Laura does not notice.

“My *brother!* We think he’s working for *Earle!*” Dion replies.

“OH. EARLE, YOU SAY? NASTY PIECE OF WORK!”

“Yes, yes, we know! Could you please put out an APB on Emily...Clair...Spencer?”

“AN APB! GOTCHA! DON’T YOU WORRY ABOUT A THING—WE’VE GOT THE BEST MINDS ON THIS ONE, SPENCER. HANG TIGHT AND WE’LL KEEP IN TOUCH!”

“Right, Gordon! Thanks a lot!” Dion shouts. “Yell at you later,” he adds under his breath, and hangs up the receiver.

“So what now?” Meg asks.

“Now we go home and wait,” Laura answers miserably. “If you find David, Meg, please, please let us know. I’m so worried. I almost hope David has her...I know he won’t hurt her.”

Meg manages a smile. “You’re right. He’d never hurt her. Don’t worry. I’m sure Emily is fine. You go home and take care of yourselves, okay?” Laura nods.

“Please, tell us if you hear from him, Margaret,” Dion reminds her.

“I will.” Meg takes one last look around the room and heads out to an uneasy lunch.



Closing the door carefully behind her, Rebekka walks out into the front of the apartment and tucks a lock of hair behind her ear as she glances through the newspaper and mail on the kitchen table.

Anders stirs on the couch behind her. His arm is over his face, moved there in his sleep, but conveying the absurd impression that he’s shielding his eyes from something. Face still nestled in the crook of his arm, he asks in a muffled voice, “Time is it?”

“You’re awake,” Rebekka answers. “It’s nearly noon.”

“Noon?” Anders sits up and looks at his sister over the back of the couch. “Noon?” he repeats incredulously. “Man, oh, man,” he groans, and sinks back down to the couch. He idly runs his hand across his chest and realizes he’s still wearing his pleated tuxedo shirt—and the accompanying pants, it turns out. “Gotta change,” he mutters, and lunges across the room, into the hallway, and into the bedroom, his untied silken bowtie fluttering out along the way.

Rebekka sits down and picks up an airmail envelope, frowning as she turns it over and over in her hands. Anders shuffles in from the back wearing gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt and flings himself back onto the couch. “God, I feel like shit. Where’re you going?” he asks.

“Work,” she replies, and after another quick glance at the envelope, slides it into her purse. “The bookstore. They needed some backup today since it’s getting closer to the holidays.” Anders grunts in reply. “Do you have any plans for today?” Rebekka asks with only the slightest edge of irony.

“Dunno. Sleep,” Anders mumbles. “Before you go, Bekkers...could you do me a big favor? Please?” He picks himself up and peeks over the back of the couch again. “Can you make me lunch? I’m starving. Please.”

Rebekka tilts her head. “When’s the last time you ate? And I don’t mean caviar and crudités, either.”

Her brother shrugs, arm along the back top of the couch. “Dinner a few days ago?” he hazards.

She tsks him. “I wish I *could* make you a nice big lunch, but I really have to be going. They’re really busy, and I—”

“Then could you give me the phone?” Anders interrupts. “I have to call Lydia.”

Rebekka nods and hands the phone over. Anders sinks back down onto the couch, and a few bips and boops later has his girlfriend on the phone. Rebekka stands in front of the hall mirror and adjusts her earrings.

“Lyds...morning, sunshine. Okay, afternoon. No, I just woke up. Feel like shit, too. A ha ha. Cute...why, you think I deserve it?” He rolls onto his side. “Don’t be that way...you know I do. I know. I know. I’m sorry. Um, say, how’s our boy doing? Still? I envy him. Do take care of him once he wakes up. Yeah, just a little. And the note. I know exactly how he feels, poor thing.”

He reaches out to the small occasional table nearby to snag his cigarettes, but the pack falls to the floor. He raises his arm above the top of the sofa and snaps his fingers until Rebekka notices and comes over. “Yes?”

Anders points to the pack of cigarettes, which she dutifully retrieves for him. He sits up, moves the phone to his other ear, and mouths *thank you* as he fishes out a cigarette and lights it. His sister nods, walks over to the closet, and begins fishing around for an appropriate coat.

“So, um...can you come over? No, nothing like that, but I—yeah. No. I need sleep, Lyds. And food. I could eat a horse, seriously. I was wondering...could you, uh...”

After taking one pull off of his cigarette, he holds it up for his becloakèd sister, who walks by and takes one as well; he then puts it out in a nearby ashtray. “Heh. No. Now, don’t be silly; no. Could you cook for me? Okay! Okay! I’m sorry I asked. Jesus.” He lies back down. “Then stop at that Chinese place. Jade Emperor or whatever the hell it’s called. I’m freakin’ starving here...screw it; I’m not gonna argue...if you feel like coming by, I’ll be here. Let yourself in, ‘cause I’ll be crashing on the couch, okay, luv? Uh–huh.”

He presses the OFF button on the phone and rolls onto his side. “Bye, Anders,” Rebekka calls from the door. “With luck I’ll be home for dinner. If not, please eat something, okay?”

“You bet,” Anders replies thickly. “Good luck be careful have fun,” he adds, and rolls over to face the back of the couch.

“I’ll see you,” Rebekka finishes plainly, and is out the door.



Bed, David thinks. His eyelids flutter; he sighs and shifts his position under the goosedown comforter. *Warm. Not...*

His eyes open promptly and focus on the lamp on the bedside table. A green band goes around the shade; *like malachite*, David thinks out of nowhere, *or jade*.

He turns over onto his back and takes in more of his surroundings. Chest of drawers, small table, two matching chairs, rich bedstead, dark wallpaper and heavy curtains. David catches his reflection in the mirror across from his bed and groans. His head falls back onto his pillow and he closes his eyes again.

Last night...what...?

He gathers up his strength and sits up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, then winces and brings his hand to his head with a sharp intake of breath.

A knock comes at the door. “Who...who is it?” he manages.

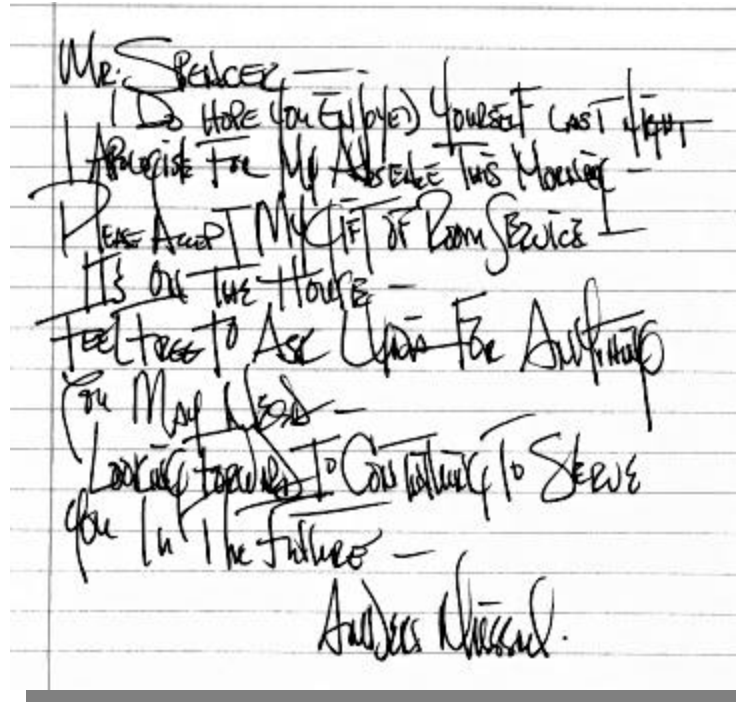
“Mr. Spencer, it’s Rebekka. May I come in?”

David looks up and spots a thick terry robe hanging on the bedpost, which he hastily throws over his spare frame and ties tightly above the waistline of his boxers. “Yes, uh, one second,” he calls, and clumsily runs to the door, nearly tripping on his shoes, which had been placed next to the bed.

He opens the door to a weakly–smiling Rebekka. “Good afternoon, Mr. Spencer. Lydia asked me to deliver this to you when you awoke.” She holds a serving tray out to David and waits.

David blinks at the offering: two pieces of dry toast on a china plate; a matching china teapot with a black tea tag–label dangling from beneath its lid; a green pear cut into eighths, smelling lightly of lemon and drizzled with honey; a covered butter dish; a small piece of paper folded in half. All on a fine linen placemat with a matching napkin wrapped around a complement of silverware.

“Thank you,” he says finally, and takes the tray from Rebekka, carefully putting it down on the small table in the corner. He tweezes the note up off the tray and begins reading it. It’s an effort: the handwriting makes David’s eyes water.



“Hmm,” he says, and places the note back on the tray. “I wonder if there’re any aspirin here...I could use some.” David peeks under the napkin and shifts a couple plates around.

Rebekka clears her throat gently. “Enjoy, Mr. Spencer,” she says. “You can stay here as long as you need to. Just ask at the front desk and someone will drive you to your car. Your tuxedo is hanging in the closet”—she indicates it with a gently pointing hand—“and there’s a sweater and pair of jeans in your size in the chest of drawers. Call me if you need anything,” she finishes, and turns to go.

“Wait, please,” David says.

She turns back around and looks at him expectantly. “Yes?”

“I wanted to thank you for taking care of me,” David explains.

“It’s nothing, really,” she insists.

“No, I mean...I must have been a handful last night, and you really were a lifesaver. Then to bring me this room service—”

“That wasn’t me—that was Anders and Lydia. She was going to bring it in herself, but she got called away, so I volunteered.”

David smiles. “I’m glad you did. Thank you.”

Rebekka blushes. “Did...did you want anything else?”

“Actually, could I get some aspirin? I think—oh, wait.” David lifts the cover off the butter dish, revealing a full, capped syringe.

“I guess you don’t need that aspirin after all,” Rebekka says quietly from over David’s shoulder.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. After a moment, he carefully replaces the cover and turns to Rebekka. “If it’s not a problem,” he says with a hesitant half-smile, “would you make it extra-strength, please?”

❧

Damn, thinks Albert, *now I know why I don’t go to parties*. He stands half-awake over the lab table, stirring his coffee almost unconsciously. After what seems an eternity, he tinks the spoon on the rim of the mug and places it in the lab sink.

What a hangover. He stifles a yawn and takes a sip of the scalding java. It's too hot to drink, and Albert's eyes open wide as he fights the instinct to spit it out all over the table.

At this exact moment, Thomas walks in—actually bounces in, with a friendly smile plastered across his face. “Hey, Dr. Rosenfield! Good morning! How are you doing today?”

Albert nods, gulping his hot mouthful and glaring at the young doctor.

Thomas, oblivious, chatters on. “Sorry I'm late. I just got the call and got here as soon as I could. So what's on the schedule for today?”

“You're not supposed to be here at all,” Albert finally manages. “Where's Laura?”

“You didn't hear? Her daughter was kidnapped—or is missing, at least—so she and Dion are taking the day off and waiting for word on her. I'm here to take her place.”

Albert looks up at him, disbelief dancing across his features. “You're shitting me,” he says carefully as he puts his mug on the table in front of him. “Emily Spencer? *The* Emily Spencer?”

“Yeah.”

“Little kid, about yay big?” Albert asks with raised eyebrows, indicating her size with two outstretched hands.

Thomas tilts his head and peers at the measurement. “Well, if she were a fish, I guess that would be about appropriate,” he remarks. “But she's about eight, nine months old, so, yeah, around there. Anyway, she's missing,” he reiterates, and grabs for a file folder on the corner of the table. “Is this our current case?”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Albert interrupts. “Are you sure we're not supposed to be working on her case?”

Thomas laughs. “I'm pretty sure. Gordon has a handle on it, from what I hear, and I guess we have work to do down here. Right?” He gently waves the manila folder back and forth. “Is this the case, Doctor?” he asks again.

Albert puts his face in his hands and mumbles something. Thomas looks mildly concerned. “Are you okay? You really seem upset about this. If you don't mind my saying so, it's a bit...uncharacteristic for you. What can I—”

“No, forget it. It's nothing,” Albert replies, picking up his mug of coffee again and taking bigger sips. “And, yes, that's the current casefile. Robert Emilio.”

“I was just about to ask again,” Thomas admits with a slightly embarrassed smile.

“And I would have been just about to twist your head off,” Albert informs him as he makes his way to his office in the back. “I'll be in my office if you need me. And you won't need me for some time, will you, *Doctor Warren?*”

“No, sir,” Thomas confirms, chastened, as he begins reviewing the file.

“Good,” Albert mutters, hand on the doorknob. He's just about to enter when Thomas calls out, “One sec, Alb—Doctor Rosenfield. There's something I'd like to point out here.”

Albert turns away from his door with a scowl and folds his arms across his chest as Thomas meanders over to him with the file open in his hands. “See here, where it says the coins in the decedent's eyes, ears, and mouth were Swedish?”

“Yeah...” Albert says. “What's your point?”

Thomas hesitates. “My girlfriend's Swedish.”

Of course she is, Albert realizes. *And so is her brother.* The cogs in his muzzy head start to turn, and he throws out a glib response as cover. “So did she kill him or what?”

Thomas is visibly startled, then laughs nervously. “No, no, of course not.” *But Anders,* he thinks. *If I could get him away from Bekka...*

There is a moment of silence as both doctors think the same thing but are afraid to vocalize it. Finally Thomas speaks: “I, uh, I have my suspicions about her brother, though. I think we should contact him, maybe bring him in—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down there, cowboy.” Albert shakes his head. “We need evidence. The coins...the coins are...are *probably* not good enough. Besides—”

“But if he did it,” Thomas interrupts, “wouldn’t you want to get him off the streets? Especially if he has some sort of connection to this Windom Earle guy?”

Albert frowns. *All I want to do is take a catnap. My head is killing me and we have some piss-ant vigilante here with blood on his mind.* “Look, leave the legwork to the boys upstairs, okay? Will you go back to work on this body if I give Gordon a call? Maybe get this ball rolling?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Thomas answers, visibly dejected. “I’ll just, uh, get back to the body, then, shall I.” He turns and walks back into the main room, leaving Albert to scoot into his office.

I will call on this, Albert tells himself as he locks the door behind him and settles into his chair, *only let me rest a while first.* He puts his feet up on his desk and leans back, lazily formulating plots of revenge and retribution as he drifts off to a shallow and uneasy sleep.



Rebekka walks carefully down the street from the hotel to the nearest bus stop, and stands there shivering, both from cold and the realization that if Anders found out she had been speaking with David, her life would become very difficult indeed.

She sighs, and suddenly remembers a dream she had early this morning: an unsettling one where she was a flightless owl (*because Anders called me that*, she rationalizes), surrounded by strangers chucking rocks at her. She had awakened from this dream gasping for breath, and when she stood unsteady at bedside with plans to sip a glass of warm milk, she was overcome by nausea and just made it to the bathroom in time.

Another chill dances through Rebekka’s slender frame as she remembers how damned careful she had to be not to wake her brother. Her fears turned out to be unfounded, though, since he was nearly comatose—the Philadelphia Philharmonic couldn’t wake him if they were playing in front of his face.

I must be coming down with something, Rebekka thinks miserably. *Or maybe it was aftereffects from the party. The air was pretty blue. But I feel fine now.*

She hooks her thumb under her pursestrap and pulls it more fully onto her shoulder. As she does, she notices the airmail envelope pertly peeking out—the one she had snagged off the kitchen table—and fingers it, curious.

Just then, the bus pulls up, forcing Rebekka to put aside the envelope for the moment and do battle with the hordes of holiday shoppers that have turned a simple busride to work into a standing-room-only event.

It’s not a very long ride to the bookstore, but a total of four seated passengers over the course of the journey glance only briefly at Rebekka before offering her their seats. She smiles, bemused, and shakes her head, thanking them for their kindness as she remains standing.



::knock–knock–knock::

Anders, still sprawled out on the sofa, shifts his position slightly and sighs in his rapidly dissolving sleep.

::knocka–knocka–knock–knocka–knock::

He turns face up and, eyes still closed, calls out, “Yeah?” This voice is severely sleep-distorted, making him sound unusually breathy and weak. “Who is it?”

Lydia’s voice rings out from beyond the door. “It’s me–ee!”

“Come in,” Anders responds, not moving from his makeshift bed.

“Can you open the door for me?”

Anders groans quietly, then sits up as something dawns on him. “Did you bring food? Hang on—I’ll be right there,” he tells her, and gathers all his strength to pull himself off the couch and onto unsteady feet. He sways through a sudden headrush and stumbles to the door. “Coming, coming,” he mutters.

Although none of the myriad locks and latches are fastened, Anders touches each one in turn, going through the motions and reassuring himself that they're unlocked. He finally manages to throw the door open. Lydia smiles up at him, fresh as a daisy and conspicuously empty-handed.

"Thank you," she trills, and slides sideways past Anders into the apartment as he looks on with a sort of dumbfounded disbelief.

"You didn't bring lunch?" he asks, closing the door. "I asked you specifically to bring food. I'm starving." He runs a hand through his tousled hair, then rubs his neck absentmindedly.

"Oh, you were serious?" Lydia asks innocently. She sashays through the living room and throws herself backward onto the charmingly overstuffed armchair in the corner.

Exchanging his grogginess for his usual selfish petulance, Anders scowls and replies, "Yes, I was serious. And I *told* you, let yourself in. I mean, if you had your hands full with the food you were *supposed* to bring me, then, yeah, okay, I could see—"

"Look at me," Lydia interrupts. "What do I look like?"

Anders just waves his hand dismissively and lies back down. "Never mind," he replies. "I don't want to get into any of this right now."

Lydia scowls, and, not wanting to quit without having the last word, adds, "You know how I feel about being bossed around. I'm no maid, and I'm not your sister."

Anders explodes. "Never *mind*, I said!" he shouts, then immediately retreats into a broody silence. Seeing she'd touched a nerve, Lydia smirks, then asks, "Is she still coming with us to Miami tonight?" Each word drips with mild revulsion, as though Rebekka were an embarrassingly incontinent two-year-old with sugar-sticky hands and Lydia the Queen of England.

"No, *you're* coming with us, remember? The third wheel," he answers tartly, and rolls over 'til his face is buried in the couch's back cushion.

Lydia raises an eyebrow. "I thought it was the dope that made you such a bastard, but I guess that particular feature was factory-installed." She waits for a retort, but, receiving none, changes the subject. "Now how are you feeling?"

"Now?" Anders mumbles into the upholstery.

"Yeah, now that I'm here."

He turns toward her again. "Extra shitty, thanks." He offers a tight little smile before turning back around.

"Oh, go to hell. That reminds me: If I ever look as awful as you do right now, do me a favor and just kill me. Put me out of my misery."

Anders sits up suddenly. "An excuse! I've been waiting for one of those. What a perfect Christmas present." He clasps his hands casually behind his head and leans back, gazing into the middle distance and smiling faintly.

Lydia is appalled. "God, you sick sonofabitch, you're playing it out right now in your head, aren't you?"

"It won't be pretty," Anders admits.

She lunges forward and smacks his face, hard, then goes into the kitchen to begin making coffee. Anders is stunned speechless, and touches his reddening cheek as if to convince himself of what actually happened. It always surprises him into inaction.

Neither speaks as the coffeemaker burbles and spits and sends the aroma of a fine Sumatra through the apartment. Eventually Lydia emerges from the kitchen with two steaming mugs and walks one over to Anders before sitting down.

Anders acknowledges her with a cautious nod and sips carefully. "I do for you what I want to do and when I want to do it," Lydia murmurs in a low and quiet voice. "Do you see?"

"Yeah," Anders answers. "Yeah, I see."

The two are quiet again as they drink their java.

Lydia breaks the silence: "You really overdid it last night, didn't you? I would never let myself get as bad as this."

Anders rolls his eyes. "Because you're just *such* a good girl."

“No, I didn’t say that. Only that I wouldn’t want to overdo it.”

“Sometimes people get carried away,” Anders admits. “Anyway, it was fun while it lasted. Eat, drink, and beat Mary, that’s what I always say.” He smiles.

Lydia points at him accusingly as she takes another sip, then swallows and says, “I heard that, mister.”

“Good. You know it’s partly your fault with that damn wine of yours, Vin Mariani or whatever it was called.”

Lydia nearly chokes on her coffee over his pronunciation. “Not ‘Vin Mary–Annie’, you fool,” she snickers, then says it in flawless French. “I thought you knew French,” she adds.

“I didn’t know *you* did, but anyway. Good wine. *Good* wine.”

Lydia smiles. “I thought you’d like it. Red wine and cocaine makes a fine cocktail.”

“It makes my head pound is what it does, thank you very much.”

“Don’t pin this all on me. You were more than three-quarters there before I even came on the scene, and we’re not even going to mention your gross negligence in not inviting me.” She empties her mug and places it on the table beside her. “How about a hair of the dog that bit you? Or that tore you to shreds, rather?”

Anders shakes his head. “It doesn’t work that way. It’s like...” He pauses to think of an apt metaphor. “Okay, you run a coffeehouse. You can brew up a hundred cups at a time for your customers, and usually that’ll last you the whole day—sometimes longer.”

He sips from his mug, collects his thoughts, and continues. “But then one day there’s a...a convention in town—stop laughing!” he chides Lydia, who’s trying not to giggle. “A convention or whatever, I don’t care; anyway, a lot of people—and they all come to your shop in a short period of time demanding coffee. So you get rid of the hundred cups a lot more quickly.

“The problem is that you have some really old slow-ass coffeemaker that takes forever to brew. Up to a day sometimes. So even though customers keep coming with their empty mugs, they aren’t getting filled and the store has to shut down until the coffee is brewed again.” He nods to himself, satisfied with his explanation, and drinks the last from his cup.

Lydia stares blankly. “And this has what to do with hair-of-the-dog?” she asks.

“Coffeeshop, that’s me,” Anders replies, ticking it off on his finger. “Coffeemaker, my brain. No comments. The coffee is this chemical called dopamine.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Lydia interrupts.

“Good for you. Now, cocaine is the conventioners. All those empty cups at once. It used up all my dopamine and now coke won’t do a thing until my brain makes more, which could take a while. Got it?”

“Wow, I’m impressed,” Lydia exclaims, applauding heartily. “Where’d you get all this?”

Anders makes a face. “Bekkers. One of her little lectures, only she didn’t put it in metaphors. God, she pisses me off.”

Lydia begins to say something when the phone rings. “You get it,” Anders says urgently. “I think I’m not home.”

She picks up the phone and uses her most dulcet tones. “Good afternoon! May I help you? ...One moment, please, and I’ll see if he’s in. Your name? Dion Spencer?”