PART ONE

Tuesday, October 11, 1977

(Documents One to Seven)

Friday, October 14, 1977

I've made a big mistake.

Get up. Get up.

Undone. By simple pieces of paper. I'll never find her now. Never. She's dead. I know it. What I wouldn't give for one more minute.

You're having a heart attack, Karl. The big one.

Get up, you fucker, get up.

It's over. The peninsula, the gap. All those messed up cars. My messed up year, my messed up life. Ending in this. A goddamn heart attack and then some.

Karl, you're through. You are, you know it. First health, then marriage, house, business. Everything and everyone. Ava. Lazlo. Where's the kid now? Jumped in the river, most likely. Ava. And me.

This. Trapped.

If a heart attack was the only thing, I may make it through. Days and days of frustrating misery and now they've got me where they want me.

I'm not perfect.

Why do they want me dead?

There's nothing wrong with me.

Except this heart.

Why won't they just let me find her?

FIRST DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

Mr. Rabassa, seated opposite, opened his hands. "Does this delay the process? Most certainly. Not a doubt about it." The lawyer leaned his elbows on the blotter. "Your wife fails to appear, thus the court cannot proceed. Her signature is required. Technically," Mr. Rabassa said in his faint Old World accent and with added dramatic sigh, "you are *still* married."

After this pronouncement, his client did the opposite of what was expected.

Karl smiled, just briefly.

After nine months, Mr. Rabassa continued to struggle to know his client. He was used to clients feeling angry, betrayed, lost, or conciliatory. These things he could handle. Emotional subtly was something altogether more difficult. But still, he liked him; Karl had been polite and patient, affable, even when delivering his usual short, sharp responses. Never had the man asked to speak with his wife. To fight. To repair. That was all over. He appeared to just want to survive it and move on quickly. Until now.

Mr. Rabassa shifted uncomfortably in his olive leather chair. The wide desk put the men at a strained distance.

Careful of the red envelope, Karl withdrew a half-spent pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his tweed jacket. He shook a smoke from the pack's foil and lifted it into his mouth with clenched teeth. Mr. Rabassa had seen him do this a million times. It made him sad – watching a man wreck himself. The lawyer pushed the ashtray from the middle of the desk to the edge, within Karl's reach.

"Anyone phoned to say why she wasn't there?"

"No," fanned Mr. Rabassa with his fingers. "Her lawyer was so embarrassed in front of the judge. Did you see? He was as surprised as we were that she had failed to appear. His careful

strategy – his piles of notes requesting your holdings, a share of your business, your property – all had to stay buried in his briefcase." Mr. Rabassa fell back into his chair and stretched his arms, adjusting the white shirtsleeves beneath his blue suit-jacket. After a few seconds of gloating, the man frowned, leaving creases in his fifty-eight-year-old face. "Aren't you going to open it?"

Karl studied the red envelope, cigarette pointing straight down.

"It could be from her," continued the lawyer, "your soon-to-be-ex-wife." Mr. Rabassa was optimistic, but not for the same reasons as Karl. "A few concessions or confessions may be to our advantage on a rescheduled date."

"You got this from the judge?" Karl raised the envelope into better view.

"Yes, as I said."

"And you don't know what's inside?"

"I have no idea. I've never been handed anything so mysterious by a judge. Not during session." Mr. Rabassa underlined his point with two flat hands in parallel stab. "But that letter is for *you*. Yes. Judge Cole said, 'For Mr. Banswick. Your client.'"

Karl fingered the edges – an ordinary weight, containing one or two sheets of paper at the most. No printing, no postage, completely sealed, and colored deep red – the waxen red of a custom color from a specialty paper shop.

"*Open it*, Karl," coerced Mr. Rabassa.

"Maybe later."

Karl scooted from his hard chair.

"Karl, don't leave me like this." Mr. Rabassa stood in anticipation, wagging a finger. "I do not like suspense."

Karl drew his chair inward, to touch the rose-printed wallpaper. He gave a final appraisal of Mr. Rabassa's frustrated face – the man's drooping cheeks and combed black hair, thick eyebrows and hunched shoulders. Karl hid the red envelope inside his jacket where the lawyer could no longer see it.

"I'll open it later. I'll call you if it's as you said: to our advantage. Those were your words, right?"

Karl let the corner of his mouth move up; he knew his lawyer's tactics. He had gotten a good man for his dollar, but it hardly mattered. Karl protected very little in these proceedings – a failing business, a town-home of sour memories, and the remaining fragments of a childless marriage to his wife of thirteen years. His instincts were one of surrender – had been for a year now. There wasn't much worth holding onto. He had started strong, but had grown tired of resisting the inevitable.

"Goodbye," Karl concluded with a nod. "Let me know if you hear from the other camp."

Outside the door to Mr. Rabassa's office, Karl's shoe-steps softened with the lobby carpet. He tucked his shirt to hide his belly. His trim figure was no more – had vanished with his good fortune. Forty-two years on his frame – on his shoulders, his legs, and his heart – grew more and more difficult to cover.

He gave a passing wave to the receptionist – a young brunette who disappeared behind her eyeglasses and said goodbye in a voice like cold milk. It wasn't until the elevator dinged closed, and Karl was alone, that he withdrew the red envelope and gave it another look.

The seal was perfect, as if done by a machine.

Karl shook the contents to one side and creased where he might tear the paper.

The elevator stopped at the third floor and an Asian man in a crème-colored suit entered. Karl suspected the man was staring at the envelope, and this made him immediately nervous. *Why would he want to see this,* he wondered. He dropped the envelope down to his waist and covered it with his palm. Both men exited at the ground floor, going off in separate directions to opposite doors.

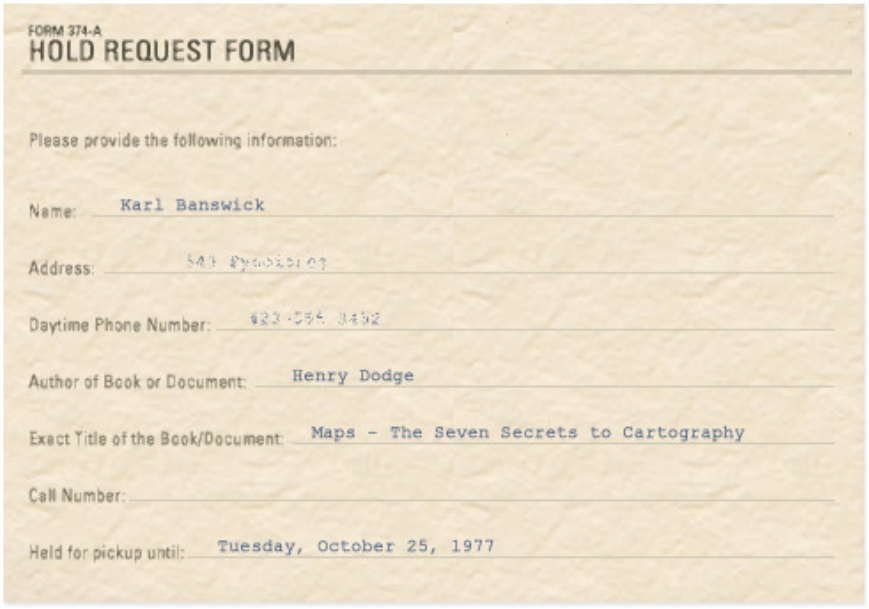
The afternoon's October air took Karl's jacket and blew it to his body. Karl stubbed out his cigarette in one of the city's beautification flowerpots and, with his freed hand, ripped the end of the envelope with his fingernails. He dropped two loose pages from inside and shook them in the shifting breeze.

A passerby jostled his shoulder.

He caught three words typed on the first page:

WELCOME
KARL BANSWICK

Karl kept the empty red envelope, saving it from the trashcan by stuffing it into his pocket, and re-ordered the pages to view the second enclosed item.



FORM 374-A
HOLD REQUEST FORM

Please provide the following information:

Name: Karl Banswick

Address: [illegible]

Daytime Phone Number: [illegible]

Author of Book or Document: Henry Dodge

Exact Title of the Book/Document: Maps - The Seven Secrets to Cartography

Call Number:

Held for pickup until: Tuesday, October 25, 1977

It was a notice from the city's public library – typed, on a typewriter. The book he had ordered had arrived and was being held for pickup through Tuesday, October 25th, 1977, fourteen days forward. "Maps – The Seven Secrets To Cartography" by Henry Dodge.

Karl had never heard of such a book.

An obvious mistake had been made.

The library had taken rather elaborate means to inform him of the book's existence, passing it to a judge then a lawyer.

Karl checked his wristwatch, his nickel-plated old-fashioned with extra-fat numbers. It was half-past eleven in the morning. He had left Mr. Rabassa's office much earlier than anticipated, being that the divorce hearing, scheduled to last sixty long minutes, ended up being only ten short ones. He wasn't expected at work until 1:30 that afternoon.

He had settled into a comfortable groove of indifference. The fighting passion of his days had drained, until he had become what he had always feared: a man of great, callused hurt. To follow one path seemed as good as any other.

The indicated branch of the city library, which he had not visited in over two years, was only a few blocks. His physician had recently cautioned him against exertion but implored him to exercise. *What kind of advice was that*, he mused. He folded the notice into his pants pocket and vanished around a corner, the autumn breeze at his back.

Once at the library – an old, converted armory with intimidating pillars and fierce, stone tigers – Karl dashed out his latest half-spent cigarette and went inside.

Low voices sounded against the marble.

To his right, a short line of customers waited to check out books; to his left, an Information desk manned by a gruff-looking retiree, who wore severe glasses and a wool pullover sweater; ahead, the stairs leading to the main library floor and, behind, the men's and women's toilets.

Karl chose Information.

"Excuse me," he began, withdrawing the library notice and flattening it on the desk. "I've received something. It's a mistake."

The retiree adjusted his nametag ("Sam / Volunteer") and rested his heavy arm just inches from the paper. He tipped his eyeglasses. "A mistake?"

"I didn't order this book."

"'Maps," the old man read, deliberately forcing the word across his tongue. "The Seven Secrets To Car-*tography*.'" He bent at the hips and swept a hand underneath the desk. He rose for another glance at the notice. "Bans-wick." He pronounced Karl's last name harshly then disappeared below the brace.

"Yes, but I think it's a mist—"

Karl's words did not touch the old man's dull ears.

When Sam / Volunteer came back up, he held a very small book with a heavy paper cover. An index card with Karl's name was clipped to the binding by a rubber band. Four letters jumped

out: M-A-P-S. The font was thirty years out of style, as was the picture of a woman, dressed in a high-shouldered, 1940s gown, hair tightly curled to her scalp. The illustrated woman stood atop a fuzzy map drawn edge-to-edge on the book's cover.

Karl gave a point, landing on the letter 'P' in the title. "I didn't order this," he said in plain English. "It was meant for someone else."

"What book did you order then?"

"None. No book. I didn't put a hold on any books."

The old man scrunched his nose as if smelling something other than the mix of library disinfectant, the rotting books, and his own moth-eaten sweater. "Do you want me to re-shelve it?" he asked.

"I suppose so."

"You came to the library just to tell us about a mistake?"

"I guess so."

Sam blinked at the library notice and gave it a quick poke with his finger. "Why didn't you just wait? We woulda put it back on the shelf in two weeks."

Karl stung at the question; he shouldn't have gotten involved – so many other things were more important right now. He looked behind him. A small line of fresh customers had formed.

"Seems odd that a man's name could get on a book without him ordering anything at all," said the retiree. "I can understand two books getting mixed up, but a single one by itself? That's bad practice."

"Yep," agreed Karl, firm. "But I really didn't order any book."

"Maybe there's another Karl Banswick and they sent the notice to the wrong guy." The man slid the book from the desk and placed it upright on a re-shelving cart. The book appeared miniscule next to the dozen other, larger volumes.

"I suppose that's possible," smiled Karl, done with his duty. "Well, good luck with it." Karl made room for the college student at his heels and passed a full minute in the lobby. He again checked his watch. He wasn't hungry yet.

Going up the escalator, he entered the main floor of the library and wandered the aisles.

He located the section on DIVORCE and read the titles on spines. It was a larger-than-expected collection – three full shelves packed with helpful books on the subject – from the brass knuckles of handling a legal battle, to the divisions of children and property. A smaller sub-section dealt with the emotional failings, boasting titles such as "It's Not Your Fault" and "Bouncing Back: From Divorce To Rebirth In Eight Weeks!" Karl lifted one from the shelf, but scurried from the aisle when a woman turned the corner. He abandoned the book in a cart by the windows.

Back to the escalators, he could breathe again.

What would I have done with a book, he wondered. It was a little late for self-reflection. The court date would be rescheduled and the papers would be finalized. No doubt about it. His new mission was to dive into business and start to make money. And take care of his health, for once. Focus on Karl Banswick. Focus on life. Become his old tough self. Not this pining ghost. She was a tender and beautiful creature, his wife, and he was a faithful and loving husband. Where had they both gone so wrong?

He noticed Sam the Volunteer staring at him as he descended on the escalator. As Karl's toes touched the bottom, he had an impulsive urge to read that "Maps" book after all. It had probably not been checked out of the library in ten years. For its 1940's typeface and design, it was in remarkable condition. Karl felt a sudden affection for that lonely little book.

"Have you sent that book back?" he asked when he arrived at the desk.

The retiree looked at Karl as if he was insane.

Karl spotted the book on the re-shelving cart, untouched. "I've changed my mind. That book might be for me after all."

Sam gave a tilt to his head and a broad, knowing smile. "Your wife reserved it, didn't she? She forgot to tell you."

"Yes, that's it." Though this was not the truth, the mention of his wife warmed his face and straightened his spine. He remembered her in bed, under heavy covers, in her reading glasses, smiling at the pages of books and magazines. An avid

lover of history and culture, she stored facts like a camel and would constantly surprise her husband with knowing the world.

In the checkout line, he flipped through the pages.

The book didn't actually have any maps in it, despite the one on the front cover. Instead, it appeared to be a series of essays, one for each "secret." Karl caught a chapter title: "Finding That Which Is Not There." Metaphysics, he suspected. Dull reading. He never cared for the fantastic – science fiction, ghosts. His beliefs were centered in the realities that surrounded him, though he had to acknowledge possibilities.

He noted the picture of the author, Henry Dodge, in monochrome on the rear flap of the book. The man was square-jawed with wavy black hair, wearing suit and tie and thick-rimmed glasses. No biography. The copyright confirmed the year of publication as 1947.

Karl's library card had expired and he had to register for a new one. But he left with the book. He did not know exactly why.

While eating a turkey sandwich in a crowded deli, Karl read the first essay in Henry Dodge's book, blasphemously entitled "Draw Everything in Pencil." The essay was a manifesto full of post-war paranoia about travel. At certain points, Dodge seemed downright *angry* at the inaccuracies in current maps – from the complex maps of typography to the less scientific maps of land plots and country borders. Dodge had issues with the entire cartographic community. After this short rant, he went further into more revolutionary territory, a conscious choice by the author to bully governments and banks for their inaccurate depictions of the land. Dodge attributed this sloppiness to mankind's unwillingness to cement their ideas, instead preferring a constant, quiet shift in ownership and importance for the purpose of unduly influencing perceptions. For example, early American maps of the Soviet Union made that bit of Asia dwarfed by the United States – a blatant disregard for the facts. Then, after World War II, the Soviet Union was instead drawn as if gigantic to raise the threat of Socialism.

Washing his hands in the deli's bathroom, Karl decided he wouldn't read any more of Henry Dodge's rants. They were 'of

their times.' The 1970s mapmakers had figured out all those problems. Get a rocket into space and it puts things into perspective. Maps were no longer manipulation; they were inarguable. He didn't even think his wife would have liked the book – the content being so revolutionary. She was a bit more conservative than Henry Dodge.

Karl tucked the small book into his jacket pocket, left the deli, and returned to the city street. From a cart seller, he bought five dollars worth of roses, in case. In case. *Do you really think flowers will help* asked that cynical voice in his head. *Shut up, shut up.*

From a garage near Mr. Rabassa's office, he retrieved his parked car. He traded six dollars and a punched ticket for a '75 Ford Granada. A drive through lemming traffic and Karl arrived at his destination – Banswick Motors – just after 1:30 PM.

The dealership was built on the south point of a well-trafficked intersection. The location hardly mattered – the used cars didn't attract attention, no matter how many balloons Arturo tied to their windshields.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Banswick," said Arturo, his office manager, as he finished washing the front windows for the second time in seven days – an unnecessary chore. The short man's eyes followed the roses in Karl's hand.

Darnell and Franklin, Karl's two salesmen, paced aimlessly along the building's rear wall, pretending to read vehicle brochures. Their bright colored ties matched with the pastel happiness of the soft rock music, piped over the cheap AM radio in the ceiling.

Looking past his boss and to the front lot, Arturo asked, "Did you bring back the Granada, Mr. Banswick?"

"Why?" Karl asked with sarcasm, "someone wanna buy it?"

Arturo turned sheepish. "Uh, no."

The showroom was empty of customers. A 1976 white Buick Riviera and a 1975 black Mercedes-Benz – the best cars out of the twenty-eight for sale – sat clean and waxed, waiting.

Karl traveled past the counter and through the swinging gate to the rear offices. Arturo's metal desk, alongside an old

brown file cabinet, made a path leading to the shared toilet and Karl's enclosed tiny office, where he did not want to go. The dungeon, he called it. He had played there as a kid, at his father's feet, games of knights in shining armor. *You're no knight,* said that voice again, *you run a used car lot in America. There's nothing lower. Getting flabby. Poor health. Misunderstood. Any day now, a divorced man.* He gave an audible sigh, feeling beat up on from the moment he woke up that morning. He needed a cigarette. "Any customers today, Arturo?" he said over his shoulder.

"No. But you have a visitor."

Karl turned. "A visitor?" He waited for Arturo to drop his sponge in his bucket and meet Karl at the counter. "Is it my wife?" Karl's fingers tightened on the moist stems of the roses. He saw the look in Arturo's eyes.

"Mr. Banswick..." Arturo started, slow and quiet, an awkward strain in his face muscles. "You know, maybe you should stop, well, thinkin' she's gonna..."

"Don't lecture me. Please." Karl laid the flowers on the countertop. So it wasn't his wife in his office; it was someone else. A sweep of disappointment came into his body.

Arturo leaned forward. "Court is done?"

"She didn't show."

"You are kidding."

"Nope. I thought...well, that she might turn up at the lot. Maybe change her mind about the whole thing." Karl couldn't make his voice sound anything but doubtful. He didn't believe for a second she'd changed her mind.

Arturo pulled around the end of the counter and gazed directly in Karl's eyes. He was this way when he wanted attention paid. "Mr. Banswick, I don't like you like this," announced Arturo with bite. "I remember you, with your father, years ago. You were more fun, more—"

A sharp pain bit into Karl's arm. He leaned against Arturo's desk and the office manager's hand went out to steady him. The pain quickly subsided. "I'm okay. It's nothing." Slowly, Arturo loosened his fingers. "Let me tell you something, my friend: you

get kicked around enough, you start to believe it's for a reason." Karl nodded to the dungeon, "Who's my guest?"

Arturo covered part of his moustache with his right hand as he spoke. "It's a big fat man. I think he is with the police." Franklin and Darnell pretended not to be listening and casually rolled their eyes to other parts of the office.

"Police? What makes you think that?"

"He's wearing a gun." Arturo tucked a flat hand underneath his armpit. "I can see it in his coat."

Karl smiled. "He might be a robber."

Arturo shook his head. "Only police have guns here – in the arm. Thieves have it in the belt." He moved his hand to demonstrate.

"All right. Thanks. I'll see what he wants."

Behind the door of Karl's small office sat a large man in a raincoat. His brown hair was blown dry and his shirt bloomed from his belt. The man's necktie was too small for his wide neck and his sideburns were too bushy for his oval face. He had plopped down in the office's second chair, a card table throwaway. Though probably younger than Karl, his scruffy looks made him seem older by half-a-decade.

Karl took off his jacket and hooked it over a nail in the office wall. "Are you with the police?" Karl asked, straight-out over the bleed of the showroom's piped music. He grabbed a pack of fresh cigarettes from his drawer and offered one to the fat man.

The stranger waved away the offer. "I'm a detective," he said. "Are you Karl Banswick?"

Karl nodded. "Can I see your badge?" Karl wanted to see the man's gun, too, but couldn't from the angle and thought it rude to ask. So he sat in his chair and put one foot up on his low desk. He stripped the plastic off the pack of cigarettes as he listened.

"I don't have a badge," the man answered. "But I have a card." With ease, the fat man slid a business card at Karl. The man didn't even need to reach into his overcoat pocket; he had the card waiting. "We find cards to be less intimidating. Also easier to leave behind if you want to call me later."

Karl picked up the detective's card and read the name.

"Detective Brody Easter. Sounds made up."

"Maybe," agreed the detective, "but it's my name."

Karl placed the card back on top of the desk.

Brody Easter took a small note pad from his shirt pocket and a yellow pencil from the pad's spiral rings. "You are forty-one. Correct?"

"Forty-two. Just had a birthday."

"Graying hair, five-ten, and..." The detective leaned in and appraised Karl's physique. "One-hundred ninety pounds."

"Do you want to see my driver's license?"

The detective waved him off. "Not necessary."

"How about my license plate number? Need that? 'Cos if you do, I don't have one. I don't own a car."

"Oh, a joker. What kind of a fellow runs a car lot and doesn't own a car?"

"Me. My kind. My wife got our car when we separated."

The detective jotted a note. "Do you hold the papers on the lot? Or are you just the manager?"

Karl clawed open the foil of the cigarette pack. "I inherited the dealership from my father. He died two years ago. I'm just trying to break even so I can sell it."

"The cause of death?"

"A heart attack. The Banswicks have a history of it. I've already had one bypass. Eleven months ago. Wanna see my zipper?" Karl lit his cigarette and took a welcome drag.

Easter slowed, put his pad in his lap, and appeared contemplative. "What's your religion, Mr. Banswick?" he asked lightly.

"What kind of question is that?"

"Standard kind."

Karl considered before answering. "I believe that I know nothing, but not that there *is* nothing. Is that a religion?"

"If it isn't, you should coin that phrase and start one," championed the detective.

Karl rolled his eyes, "Yeah, the world needs a few more religions." Easter became quiet while he wrote more notes on his

pad. Karl, impatient, tapped the desk with a finger. "I've given you a whole bunch of tidbits, Detective. Not that it matters, but I want you to see that I'm not hiding anything. I've always had a good relationship with the law. Sold a few cars to policemen in my day. So I like to make it easy on you when I'm being asked a bunch of questions."

"Your cooperation is appreciated."

"Good. Now. Tell me. Why is there a detective in my office?"

Easter shifted in his chair and the metal legs made a harsh squeak on the tile. "I'm here about your wife, Mr. Banswick. Do you know where she might be?"

"No. Did someone call you about what happened?"

"And what exactly...happened?" Easter cocked his head like a quizzical dog.

"Two hours ago she missed an appointment at the county courthouse. They couldn't have sent the dogs out for her yet." Paleness came into Karl's face as he said this. A realization. Dogs equal trouble. *Was she in trouble?* It hadn't occurred to him until now that this detective in his office could be connected to his wife's missed court date. "Wait a minute – you aren't here to deliver bad news, are you?" Easter said nothing. "All right, I guess I need some catching up. What's this about? Has – has something happened to my wife?"

"She hasn't telephoned you?"

"No, but we're getting divorced. I doubt I'm her first choice in an emergency. Probably has a lover somewhere."

"Do you *really* think that, Mr. Banswick?"

"I've haven't seen her much these past few months. She wants emancipation and I'm giving it to her. I haven't argued one bit. It's plain that she's got a problem with me. She can take everything, far as I care. Whatever she wants. Hell, she can even have Banswick Motors, if she's a sucker. Did you see that ghost-town out there?" Karl flicked his ash into the tin tray on his desk and hitched a thumb back towards the showroom. His hands, though, began to shake. "You're serious, aren't you? My wife's missing?"

"We think so, yes."

"What, did a neighbor call it in?"

"Sure."

Karl, bravado seeping, was flummoxed. He slid his feet from his desk and sat upright. "Seriously?"

"Serious as *stone*, Mr. Banswick." Easter let his big arms fall to each side. "Your wife is missing. I'm on the case to find her. It's a perfectly legitimate enterprise."

"Have you checked our house?" asked Karl.

"*Our* house?"

Karl snapped, "Yeah, my name's on the title, too, you know. She wasn't at the courthouse today so everything's still split down the middle – fifty-fifty."

"Do you stay at the house?"

"No. I sleep at an apartment on the north side."

"Sleep? Or rent?"

"Sleep. It's my father's old place. Though it could use some renovation. Rickety stairs, old fixtures, rot." Easter jotted a few notes. "Well? There's more, isn't there? Don't you have a list of better questions for me? Do you think I'm covering for her or something?" Paranoia leaked into Karl's mind. He had colliding goals – self-preservation, an immediate declaration of innocence and, underneath, a desire to help. If trouble had come to his wife, he wanted to know.

"I'm not at liberty to say, Mr. Banswick. But you've been very forthcoming, and I will make a note of that." Easter rose from the chair and began to dust his clothes, patting out the smell of cigarette smoke. "I only wanted to confirm your description—"

"Description! Someone gave you a *description* of me—"

"And to tell you not to leave town. We'll make time for a proper interview later. There's paperwork to get in order. These things happen slower in real life than they do in the movies. Call the number on that card if you need anything."

"Wait, wait." Karl stopped the detective at the office door. "You say she's missing?"

"Yes. That's what I said."

"That's... That's nuts. I don't even know how to react to that."

Easter became mollifying. "I'm sure she's fine. It's just procedure. We're just checking things out. No need to worry, Mr. Banswick. She's in good hands."

With those words, the detective was gone from the dealership, leaving Karl by the windows, cigarette in hand, arms crossed, watching him get into a muddy brown station wagon and drive off with the change of traffic light.

Arturo stood at Karl's elbow.

"I don't think he's very good at his job, Arturo," remarked Karl with a tilt of his head. "He never asked my whereabouts or gave me any indication of what I can do to help. I wonder if he's even a real policeman."

Arturo lowered his voice to nothing. "Why was he here? Is something wrong, Mr. Banswick?"

"He didn't tell you?" Karl had assumed Arturo was questioned, along with Franklin and Darnell, before Karl had returned from this long lunch. But he was mistaken. Detective Brody Easter had told them nothing and had asked them nothing.

"It's my wife," explained Karl, as if the words were from a distant language. "She's missing."

Arturo's mouth opened and shut, shock and concern on his face. "Oh, Mr. Banswick," he said sadly. "That's bad news. Do the police have any idea where she is?"

"If they do, Arturo...they're not tellin' me." Karl stepped from the window. He gave Arturo a reassuring pat on the shoulder. Without looking back, Karl pushed his way into the back offices. He swept his bundle of cheap roses into the small trashcan beside Arturo's desk.

There, nearby: a red envelope sat teetering on top of a pile of industry magazines.

Karl looked back to the window. Arturo remained in the showroom, speaking with Darnell, the black man a good foot taller than the shorter office manager. Karl's fix returned to the red envelope. The deepness of the color, the refined quality of the

paper, all made the object a magnet. Karl called into the showroom. "Arturo!"

"Yes, Mr. Banswick?" Arturo jumped from his conversation.

"Where'd this red letter come from?" Karl lifted the envelope so Arturo could see it over the counter.

"Oh, that came while you were speaking with the policeman."

"Someone dropped it off?"

"Yes. Dolores."

Karl was confused. "You say it's *from* Dolores?"

Arturo shrugged. "I don't know, Mr. Banswick. She just dropped it off."

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

SECOND DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

He hopped inside his office and snatched his tweed jacket from the nail. "I'll be back in five minutes," he told his three employees.

Outside, the temperature had dropped. Karl passed through the wide lot between used cars with his jacket around his ears. Traffic sounds zoomed, horns and exhaust crowding the street. He crossed to the opposite corner, where a low-rent donut shop hugged the curb. THE COFFEE POT – pulsed the blue neon sign in the dust-covered window. The name described its awkward shape. Six steps led up to a false façade – a giant coffee pot with stem made out of plaster, stucco, wood, and overblown imagination. Karl entered to a ringing bell. Two customers – both old men – looked up from their sports pages then drifted back to the Wins and Losses.

Orange and black paper lanterns hung from hooks along the shop's crown molding. Karl bumped his head on one as he went forward to the service counter.

"Watch yourself," came a friendly woman's voice. Dolores stood between the six stools, twirling her mousy brown hair. She wore a white apron spotted with coffee stains. Though she was Karl's age, she appeared younger – long arms, delicate features, and no makeup. She took a coffee flask in one hand, a washrag in the other. "I'm gonna have to raise those paper lanterns a touch. My sister and I made those over the weekend. For Halloween. Do you like 'em?"

Karl looked back at the row of lanterns. "Yeah. Sure."

"To spruce up the place. Kind of an expensive hobby, though," she explained. "My sister didn't warn me the paper costs so much. She can get particular about supplies. We went to this cute little shop and the prices were just–"

"I need to talk with you." Karl flashed Dolores the red envelope. "Did you drop this off at the dealership?"

"Yes," she started, as though she wanted to say more, but did not.

"What's inside?"

"Open it and see."

"Is it from you, Dolores?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

"Who gave it to you?"

"A customer. He had a cruller and two coffees."

"What's the name?"

"Don't know. Just some guy from the neighborhood. Does he want to buy a car?" Dolores leaned into Karl as if they were conspiring over pirate treasure. "Is that a down-payment?"

"I doubt it." Karl slid onto a stool. "Sales are in the toilet. Can't you tell me any more about the guy?"

Dolores poured Karl a cup of coffee. "It was just *a guy*, Karl. About an hour ago. Curly gave my customer that letter and the customer gave it to *me*. When I saw you drive onto the lot, we were empty. I locked up and I walked it over."

"A hand off? Why give it to you? I'm right across the street. The sign – it says BANSWICK MOTORS. Hell, Curly knows who I am." Karl jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the spot on the street where Curly sold newspapers each morning. This late in the day, the spot was vacant.

"That's a good question, Karl," nodded Dolores, thinking on it. Nothing came to her. She shrugged. "This fella said give it to you and I did." She looked deeply into Karl's face. "Is everything okay, Karl?"

"No," he said. "I think I need more sleep. My nights have been shit. I need a good kick in the pants."

"Yes, you do." Dolores dusted his hair and tapped the counter in front of the untouched cup of coffee.

Karl laid his head down on the counter. "Coffee won't cure me. Tell me, Dolores, am I un-likeable?"

"Sometimes."

Karl lifted off the counter. She had a wink in her eye. Reaching forward, Dolores placed both hands on his unshaven cheeks and gave him a big squeeze. "I like you, Karl. I know you're a grump lately. But I just *like you*." She let her hands drop. "And your guys like you. They tell me that all the time. Banswick Motors is the best place to work in this whole miserable city."

"Now you're exaggerating." He sipped the coffee. Lips still to the rim, he got out, "My wife is missing." Karl hung on the words. Spoken first to Arturo and now to Dolores, the sentence had grown exponentially sadder. 'Missing' tore his throat like a poorly swallowed pill.

"Missing?" she echoed.

"It's true. Missing. That guy in my office was a police detective. Told me the news."

"Oh, Karl..." Dolores had put her hand to her chest. He raised his eyebrows and nodded – and expression of regret, of inevitability. They passed these same looks the day Karl told Dolores his wife had suddenly asked for a divorce. Dolores had seen Karl together with his wife many times. They held hands, they kissed in public, there seemed to be genuine affection. When it went wrong, she was as surprised as anyone. "Well...what happens next? What are you gonna do about it?"

Karl shook his head. "I'm not sure. Find her?" Red envelope in hand, Karl stood up. "I better get back." He dropped fifty cents on the counter for the barely-touched coffee. She pushed it back to him.

"Aren't you gonna open that letter?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Karl returned across the street and stood among his unsold cars. *Why didn't I open it and show it to Dolores? Why didn't I tell her about that stupid book?* Some tick inside told him to keep it a secret. This was between he and his wife. They were messages meant only for him. He liked that there was still a thread that was only theirs. A single connection.

He shook the contents to one side of the red envelope and tore at the side, bringing air into the seal. He almost didn't notice the two-inch by three-inch sales receipt as it fluttered from the red

interior. He snatched it out of the air and swept it to the side of his body.

He unfolded the white 8 ½ x 11 page.

OUR INTERESTS ARE YOURS

...said the sentence – plain white paper with harsh, black Royal Sabre letters. He moved his eyes to the receipt...

Faded. Dated the day before – Monday October 10th. The store was called Jogger's Den, on Fryer Street. A sports store, Karl assumed. The receipt read simply "sale item" and was a cost of $24.95, plus tax. Karl gathered up the three items – red envelope, paper, receipt – and headed inside the dealership. "I'm going on an errand," he announced to his idle staff. "I'll be back before close. Hold down the fort, will you, Arturo?" Before the office manager could ask any questions, he snagged a set of Beetle keys from the master ring and was out the door. It was wrong of him to take cars off the lot. It brought down their value – not that that mattered. Karl was sometimes embarrassed about it, but it was necessary from time to time. Like now. *Find her.* That cynical voice was now bossing him around.

Riding in the gray '68 Volkswagen, Karl checked the receipt's banner. *Why am I doing this,* he asked himself. *It's just a piece of paper. It means nothing. It has no danger, no connection. Someone else's discarded receipt. Any other day and I would ignore it.*

OUR INTERESTS ARE YOURS

His wife. Did she have a lover? It was something he long suspected. ("Do you *really* think that, Mr. Banswick?" that Detective Easter had asked.) Why else would she have grown so suddenly cold, then ask for the divorce? Maybe this Mystery Man had swept her away for an impromptu vacation. A big misunderstanding. For a moment, he had trouble deciding which made him feel worse – her gone forever or her on a beach with another man.

Or maybe he's killed her.

OUR INTERESTS ARE YOURS

He parked two blocks from Fryer Street, with its slim alleys and claustrophobic sidewalks. Jogger's Den was two stories tall and built between an Irish pub and a failing movie theater. A painted board with a cartoon running shoe swung on bolts in the breeze. A smiling couple wearing sweat-clothes stepped out of the front door. It didn't take long for Karl to realize he had been mistaken: Jogger's Den was not a sports store – it was a gymnasium.

Entering through the double doors, Karl's ears were struck by sounds of pounding feet and the smells of perspiration, mold, and plastic. An oval running track went deep into the building. Twenty runners – all shapes and sizes – circled. Self-consciously, Karl sucked in his gut. In his tweed, he felt overdressed.

A young bottle-blonde by the door immediately noticed him. "May I help you, sir?" she asked, giving the 'sir' a spin that made Karl feel even older.

He gave the girl a quick up and down. "How much is a membership?" he asked quickly before getting out of the way of the front door traffic.

"$19.99 a month," said the blonde, drawing a brochure from a slot behind her on the wall. "Here – our membership guidelines."

Karl took hold of the brochure and gave it a quick flip. It was not a fancy advertisement – as simple as the rules to a public swimming pool.

The young woman could tell he was disappointed. "We have more than the jogging track," she started. "Upstairs there's a weight room. In the basement, there's a spa. But, to be honest, the spa's not very relaxing because you can hear all those footsteps." She gestured to the track, its runners, and their shoes. "Do you want a tour?" She flashed a healthy smile and gave his arm another pat. She led him along the path that lined the right wall, where runners could do their laces. "I'm Darcy," she said.

"Karl."

"Nice to meet you, Karl." In her accent was a bit of the South – the woman had a relocation story, but Karl didn't ask it. "Jogger's Den has been in business for eight years. We have over six hundred members, but don't let that scare you. There are rarely more than seventy-five in the building at one time. Fire code is for two hundred. Only on Saturdays do we come close to that."

Karl didn't believe her. "I would think you'd need more than six hundred people at twenty dollars a pop to keep this place open."

"Oh, we sell other things, too. There's a store." Darcy pointed to a tunnel on the far side of the jogging track. "If you come from the back street, you don't even see the gym. Just like here you don't see the store."

Darcy detoured to the tunnel. She was a fit young woman. Karl could see the muscles in her back through her tight t-shirt. Probably a cyclist rather than a runner. She had the build. His wife had been a jogger – long lean legs and perfect grace; these things attracted him to her, Karl's lustful thoughts from early in their courtship staying with him until the end of things. And now, in his memory. He missed her body. It had been a long time without the touch. Physical fitness, though, was not Karl's game. He hadn't played a sport since high school baseball, and in that he was not particularly good. He would no more join a gymnasium

than quit smoking. "Do you have a smoking room?" he asked Darcy.

She gave him a distrusting look. "This is a non-smoking building. I hope that's not a deal-breaker."

His tobacco fingers betrayed that it was.

Leaving behind the loudness of the jogging track, the two walked into a connected room. Disco music pumped at top volume. A dozen customers roamed tight racks of clothes. Along the walls were sneakers of all styles and colors. "See anything you like?" asked Darcy with a wave to the store's goods.

"Do you have anything for $24.95?"

"What an odd question. Is that the amount of money in your wallet?"

Karl pulled the receipt from his pocket and handed it to Darcy. "I have this receipt. But I can't for the life of me remember what my wife purchased. I have to note it as a business expense."

Darcy looked intently at the receipt. "This is from just yesterday. Have ya got a *memory* problem?" She gave him a good-natured slap.

"Maybe. What do you have for $24.95?" He gave a sweep to the bins of merchandise in front of him. By his reckoning, it could be anything for that price. He had no idea the cost of running socks, sweatbands, or wristbands.

"We have only *one* thing for that price," said Darcy. "This." She tugged forward a display stand – a half-stack that rested on top of the sales counter. Only one of the items remained; the rest had been plucked from their fasteners. The top of the display read the name of the manufacturer: a Japanese electronics company. And beneath that, the name of the item, with advertising line.

THE SUPREME RUNNING WATCH

A JOGGER'S BEST FRIEND

"A wristwatch?" asked Karl, confused.

Darcy stripped the last box from its hold, opened it, and held the watch close for Karl to examine. "This is no ordinary watch," she clarified. "You can drop it, stomp on it, get it wet, it still works. Tough stuff. Really good for joggers who like foul weather. You know it rains more than it's sunny in this city."

"Believe me, I know," sighed Karl.

"You should buy it," she encouraged.

"I think I already have one somewhere." Karl took his receipt back. He inspected the Supreme Running Watch one more time before putting down a twenty, a five, and some change. He ended as he began, with small talk at the opposite side of the gym, his new jogging watch in a bag. Darcy welcomed him to join at any time. Karl knew that would never happen.

He returned to the car dealership shortly after six in the evening. The sun was setting and the white fluorescents were on in the showroom. He liked this time of night –when the dealership would be the busiest. Darnell talked up the merits of a used Ford to a young father and his ten-year-old son. Franklin, older and more experienced than Darnell, charmed a racecar enthusiast, not more than twenty, who wore a leather jacket and talked in car parts.

Karl acknowledged Arturo with a nod and moved as quickly as he could past him, in the direction of his office. "Any word about your wife?" Arturo asked, stopping him at the swing gate.

All Karl could muster was a quick shake of the head.

He went around Arturo to his office and shut the door.

On the desk lay Detective Brody Easter's business card. Karl unloaded his pockets – the first note, the second note, the receipt and the library hold notice, the book, the watch, and two torn red envelopes. He spun the phone around, took a breath, and called the detective's number on his rotary.

"I think someone's giving me clues," he said.

The detective was over in no time, as if he had been waiting blocks away for just such a telephone call.

Standing over Karl's desk, Easter poked each of the items with the tip of a pencil.

"Tomorrow we'll question that Curly fellow, that newspaper seller you mentioned." Easter appeared proud of this course of action; he gave the sentence a period by grunting. "There's obviously some sort of transfer going on, but the train has to start somewhere, doesn't it? You say this Curly fellow shows up around seven o'clock in the morning? On that corner outside?"

Karl nodded. "We don't open until nine, but I'm usually here an hour or so before to the do the paperwork. Curly always beats me. I'm actually not here much during the day. I leave the selling to the salesmen."

"Oh, what's your line, then?"

"No line. I mean, I'm educated in business, but this is the only one I've ever tried to run."

"You mean to tell me you're a forty-two-year-old businessman who's never owned a business?"

Karl looked to his shoes. "That's right. I dabbled in this and that, though, so I'm not a novice. And I managed my wife's affairs. She's a—"

Easter cut him off. "I know what she is. I'm on the case, remember? Don't think I haven't been by the mayor's office." The detective rested his eyes on Henry Dodge's book. He opened it with his pencil and turned a few pages. "Know anything about maps?" he asked Karl.

"Not really. But that book doesn't seem to really be about maps. It's more about the influence mapmakers have on—" He stopped himself. "Never mind."

The detective bent closer to the second sheet of white paper, reading the sentence again, his lips moving but without speaking.

"What do you think that means, Detective? OUR INTERESTS ARE YOURS. Does that mean they've kidnapped my wife?"

"Yes," Easter agreed, "it does sound vaguely threatening." He returned to the book and did another round of pencil inspection. "At the end of the day, Mr. Banswick, they're just harmless pieces of paper, aren't they? Nothing very scary here. Letters, papers, ink. It's not like you open one and it explodes in your face."

Karl didn't agree. He had felt strong emotion at seeing that second envelope, waiting for him by his discarded roses. He knew it was trouble. The Dodge book had been nothing, so had the receipt, but those red letters did something to his brain. He didn't like it. When he'd have nightmares, it usually was about something insignificant, taunting him – a high school exam, or

endless rows of numbers. "Scariest things I ever got in my life came in the mail," he explained. "Tax notices, separation papers, death certificates, love letters, hate mail. It doesn't have to blow up in your face to blow up your world."

Easter nodded. "I guess you're right. But these are death notices, are they? A sales receipt and a form."

"Maybe they don't seem that awful yet because we don't know exactly what they mean. It's their goddamn ambiguity that frightens me most."

The detective stabbed a finger at the pile. "Let me see that watch."

The watch had been encapsulated in a cheap, protective box and wired to a baseboard. Karl broke open the packaging with a tug, spilling the watch onto the desk in a hard fall. Easter snatched it. Karl got a glimpse of the gun under the detective's coat. "Hey!" exclaimed Easter with delight, inspecting the watch. "No damage! Truth in advertising. For once."

Both men, for a long moment, observed the ticking hand.

"Seems like an ordinary watch to me," concluded the detective.

"My thought exactly."

Taken separately, all of the items on his desk were horribly ordinary.

"Aren't you going to...well, dust them for prints?"

The detective looked around the small office. "You got a file cabinet?"

"Out front beside Arturo's desk."

"Does it lock?"

"Yes."

"Put these things in a drawer and lock it."

"But—"

"Do as I say, Mr. Banswick. I'll be back tomorrow, early morning. I'll talk with Curly. I'll trace a few other leads and report back. I think it's best that you sit tight. More of these clues might come your way. When you get them, lock them into the cabinet. Let me do your legwork. Consider me your man in the field."

Karl didn't think this was a very good plan. If these were indeed clues, wouldn't they be safer at police headquarters? Weren't sturdier and more qualified file cabinets in the evidence storage room? He was on the brink of asking these questions when Detective Easter spoke.

"Do you trust your people? Those salesmen and that Mexican?"

"Arturo is Argentinean. And yes. I do. They've worked here a long time. They all have keys to this place."

"Do they have the keys to the file cabinet?"

"Only Arturo. I can get them from him, though."

"Do that. I want these things stored and locked. Any objections?"

Karl considered. "No. I suppose not."

Plan in place, Detective Easter left with a wave. To see the fat man's lumbering walk, his blown brown hair covering a bald patch, made Karl slightly sad. He supposed Brody Easter was likeable. He seemed decent. An ally was sorely needed. *I'm sure he knows what he's doing,* guessed Karl. *But what do I know of detectives*.

"Arturo, give me your keys."

"What for?"

"Not the front door, just the files."

"What for?"

"Please."

"Am I being fired?"

"*God* no. Give me the keys, Arturo, and don't ask any more questions."

Arturo tossed his ring of keys to Karl, who unhooked the cabinet key and returned the remaining. In an hour, the dealership would be closed and the mysterious items locked safely away. The racecar enthusiast and the young father were not in a buying mood. Karl borrowed a '72 Impala and headed out.

Back at his father's apartment, Karl settled into his bedclothes and switched on his black and white television. A Halloween special was on. The blanket on his short couch still

smelled of his father, even after all this time – a combination of the man's pipe smoke, dermis, and old man cologne.

He had not stopped thinking of his wife since the moment he awoke. Usually during the day, he had some relief. Work, or his wanderings around the city in borrowed cars, proved distracting. But today, she was at the forefront and her face would not leave. *Is she okay? Shouldn't I be doing something to find her?* He felt powerless. Thank God for Brody Easter. Someone he could depend on for help. But if there wasn't anything positive tomorrow, he'd... he'd... he'd do what? Being sued for divorce, Karl was front and center as a primary suspect. *Why hadn't Easter ever asked the reason for my divorce*, he wondered. It was probably in the already-filed papers. And the grounds weren't cruelty or infidelity or any of the usual, nefarious causes. Is there a legal word for sudden disinterest? Is the case filed under a misunderstanding? Or, instead under some more official pronouncement: irreconcilable differences. The catchall. He would phone Rabassa tomorrow and ask. It had been nine months. He had completely forgotten the paperwork.

Karl slept on his couch until dawn. It was his usual fitful half-sleep – exactly what he had complained to Dolores about. The television had played the National Anthem and had gone to snow, returning to life with the local morning show.

Seven o'clock in the morning hit him in the face hard. He had forgotten to close the drapes against the bright sun. His first thought: of her. The way she brushed her teeth, side-to-side, exact, smiling.

Arriving at the dealership at 7:55, Karl noticed Curly and his newspapers in the crosshairs of the intersection. The man was over sixty years and wore a tattered denim jacket, seller's apron, and ball-cap, each stitched with the logo of the city paper. Under his left arm, he held a fat bundle of morning newspapers that must have weighed twenty pounds. The man had gotten used to it over the decades, his arms thick from the work.

Karl approached the corner. No sign of Brody Easter.

Coming closer, he signaled to Curly. The man stepped between a line of cars and pulled the top newspaper from his reserves. "'Morning, Mr. Banswick!"

Fishing into his pocket, Karl found a quarter and dropped it into the news-seller's palm. "Thanks, Curly," he said as he took the paper. "Say, did a man come and talk to you this morning? A fat guy?"

"Talk to me about what?"

"That letter you passed to Dolores yesterday."

"The red one?"

"Yeah, that one."

Curly shook his head and the street dust came with it. "No, nobody come talk to me. Anything else I can do for you, Mr. Banswick?"

Karl stuttered, "N-no, that's fine. Have a good day."

"You too, Mr. Banswick."

No interview? No interrogation? Karl was honestly surprised. *Don't tell me that detective's gone missing, too.*

Key in the dealership door, Karl entered and relocked. He left the lights off except for the lamp on Arturo's desk. He found the small key for the cabinet and opened it to a loud grind of metal. There, in the heart of the drawer, were the red envelopes and their associated treasure. Nothing had been touched. He closed and bolted the drawer. He found Brody Easter's card, now buried underneath the closing night's paperwork. Karl dialed the printed number.

A standard phone company message came on.

"You have reached a non-working telephone number—"

He redialed.

"You have reached a non-working telephone number. Please check the number and try again."

He dialed a third time. Same dead end.

From the lower right drawer of his desk, Karl found a telephone directory, then the main line of the nearest police precinct. He was transferred to a rough-sounding man named Smarks who, with feigned understanding and finite patience, searched the city's detective roster for Brody Easter's new

telephone number. "No Brody Easter exists," Smarks said with a bite. "You musta been lied to. If he shows up again, call us. We'll arrest him for impersonatin' a detective."

Listening to the hum of the disconnected line, Karl's eyes drilled into the "detective's" business card.

No badge. Just a business card.

"Sonofabitch."

He had been fairly easily duped. He should have thought to consult with the police five *minutes* after the fat man left his dealership. Every word out of the man's mouth was now suspect.

Karl held down the cancel button then dialed his wife's home. *His* home. Missing? Perhaps not. Safe, most likely. Paranoia. Paranoia mixed with anger. Karl wondered if the whole thing was an elaborate prank to throw him off guard, protect his wife's delicate business affairs on these last few days before the finalization of the divorce. Some trick of the trade. The mayor. A nasty lawyer from the other camp. The red envelopes, the strange excursions. *$24.95 for a goddamn watch.* It was making him angrier at each subsequent ring of her telephone. *His* telephone. *She'd never be this devious. Not over a house and a stupid divorce. Never. Right?*

No answer.

Karl checked his wrist for the time.

Quarter past 8.

He hung up and called Mr. Rabassa.

"Legal advice so early in the morning, Karl?"

"Have you heard from my wife?" he asked quickly.

"No. And neither has her lawyer. I phoned him late yesterday."

"I'm beginning to think something's happened." There was a long pause on the line. "That she's been kidnapped or something," Karl clarified. "What are the steps for that?"

He could hear Rabassa's breathing. After a time, the lawyer answered. "I suppose we should start by contacting the police. Have you been to the house?"

"No. I plan on going there as soon as my employees arrive."

"Do you still have your house key?"

"Yes."

"Well don't use it. You're not allowed in that house anymore. Remember, Karl? You don't want to jeopardize our settlement." ('*Our* settlement.' The phrase stuck like gum to Karl's shoe.) "Get a neighbor to let you in. Or, better yet, have the neighbor look around on your behalf. Conduct your due diligence then call me back. If she's not to be found, I'll phone the police and make the report. Then you get to my office and give me a statement of your whereabouts over the last week."

"What?"

"If she's missing, Karl, think about how that might look. Final stages of a *deee-vorce*." Mr. Rabassa spoke with disgust, an inflection he had never used before.

I'm a suspect. I'm a suspect. I'm a suspect. Karl's sweat glands started pumping. Fear for his wife was being replaced by a survival instinct, something he had not felt in a long time. *Oh fucking great, I'm going to go to jail. What a capper that would be to my last two years! Mother dies, father dies, heart bypass, divorce, business in the toilet. I'm dead. I'm dead.*

"Now are my instructions perfectly clear, Karl?"

"Yes."

Back at the intersection, Curly continued to move papers easily through car windows, collecting quarters and filling his apron until he jangled when he walked. Karl clapped his hands twice over his head to get the man's attention. "Another paper, Mr. Banswick?" This was unprecedented in their relationship. It was Arturo who always bought the papers for the showroom's news rack.

Karl shouted over the blast of a car horn. "I meant to ask... Where did you get that letter?"

"The red one?"

"Yes, the *red* one."

"From Mr. Peterson."

"Who's Mr. Peterson?"

"He bought a car from you last summer. Drives by here every day."

"Peterson come by yet?"

"Not yet."

"When you see him, send him into the lot."

It took another fifteen for Mr. Peterson to drive over the curb of the dealership and park his used Japanese car in one of the spaces. Peterson entered the dealership with a cool, confident strut. His suit was well cut, but an off color. He appeared to be having a great, happy day, as his smile was ear to ear.

Arturo arrived at the same moment. "Good morning, Mr. Peterson," Arturo said, friendly. "How's the car treating you?"

"Right as rain," beamed Mr. Peterson as he crossed to where Karl stood, leaned against the windows. "Hello, Karl," he said, and gave a firm salesman-like handshake.

Karl waved off Arturo. "Give us a minute alone. Please." Softly, he spoke to Peterson. "That red envelope you passed to Curly yesterday," asked Karl, "where did you get it?"

"From my wife."

"And who gave it to your wife?"

"Our neighbor."

"Do you have your neighbor's telephone number?"

"Yes. She baby-sits my daughter."

"Can we call her?"

"What for?"

"I need to find out where the envelope came from."

"Why? What was in it?"

Karl considered. "I'd rather not say." Mr. Peterson face changed into a one-eyed squint. He was judging Karl and Karl knew it. "My wife. We're getting divorced. I think the envelopes may have something to do with that."

Peterson's smile, at last, dimmed. "Been divorced a few times myself. Anything I can do to help a man in that position, I'm game."

They placed seven phone calls from Karl's office telephone. Peterson's neighbor had gotten the envelope from her lawn service. The lawn service had gotten the envelope from another customer. That customer had gotten the envelope from his brother. His brother had gotten it from a man at the bank. The man at the bank had gotten it from a co-worker. The co-worker

had gotten it from a Brink's driver. And the driver...no one could remember his name. All this relay of a single red envelope had happened in less than twenty-four hours.

"Thank you, Mr. Peterson. But I'm giving up."

When they emerged from the office, Franklin and Darnell were eating donuts and smudging the polish of the showroom Buick with their butts. Both stood at attention when Karl came around the corner.

After shaking hands in the dealership lot, Mr. Peterson said languidly, "You know, Banswick, any one of those people could be lying. You can't trust the human species. I have learned that in my trade. I wish you luck."

It was nearly 10:30 in the morning. Peterson had been very patient. He had missed two meetings. As he pulled away in his Japanese car after a final salesman handshake, Karl wondered what the man had to be so happy about. Divorced and distrusting. How could you smile?

Without even returning to tell Arturo, Franklin, or Darnell his plans, Karl raided the key box, started up the engine of the Impala, and drove south in the direction of her place.

Her place. Again, the qualifier, spoken only inside his head, struck him. For a month now, Karl had begun to subtly change his language to accommodate the growing divisions. Possessions and places and friends had not been *ours* for a long time, but it was a difficult adjustment for the tongue. Only when he was angry could he hold on to his deed, as he had shown the day before to that fake detective.

This was my road home, he remembered with regret. He had taken the boulevard to his street for seven years. He used to enjoy the drive to and from the dealership, even in the days before he owned it outright, when just helping his father, who had grown frail since the death of Karl's mother. Both of his parents' slides from fragile to incapable went lightning-quick. Strange to feel needed, especially in business, something he had studied more as a sociologist than an entrepreneur.

He sat in the street for ten solid minutes, eyes on the windows of the town-home.

No movement. No lights.

Their car – a fancy European his wife had picked out when she received her latest promotion from the mayor – was in parked the street. He looked through the rolled windows at the clean and perfect interior.

Ignoring Mr. Rabassa's advice, Karl climbed the stone steps to the landing and leaned into the door. *I don't need a neighbor to do my dirty work. I can find her myself.* He rang the doorbell. Six times. No movement. No answer. He banged on a window, its ledge hanging over the sad-looking flowers in their flower boxes. After several more rings of the doorbell, he took out his house key.

Don't do it. Don't do it, Karl. You're in enough trouble already.

At last, he pocketed them. Giving up.

He drove to a nearby convenience store. With a dime from his pocket, he again phoned his wife. Twenty-eight rings and nothing. He placed the receiver back onto the hook.

The police. The real *police. I'm going to go there and tell them everything. Yes. That's it. They can help. I shouldn't have waited so long.*

His old neighborhood police station was busier than he remembered. He had once been there to report a fender bender years back, and it had been dead empty. Crime was on the rise in his old haunt. Through a throng of blue uniforms, Karl made his way to the main desk of the station. "I think my wife is missing," he said plainly to an attending duty clerk.

"Right this way." A short policeman led Karl down a corridor to an interrogation room no bigger than a broom closet. "If you'd would wait here, I'll fetch a detective to take the details."

A detective, yeah right. Karl had to trust that it would work out. It had to. He may as well just have a cigarette and follow the instructions.

Ten minutes passed on his watch. He had plenty of time to think. He mulled over his story – what he had come to tell the police. He would offer to help in any way he could in the search for his wife. A reward could be offered. His bank account wouldn't support more than a few grand, but it may be enough for a tip. Would he mention the red envelopes – those clues

locked in his dealership's file cabinet? *No*, he thought, *I'll leave those out of it for now. Terrible idea, but feels right.* He thought about Mr. Rabassa, and how angry he would be if he knew Karl had gone to the police without a lawyer by his side.

At minute eighteen, just as he wished for something, anything to read, maybe even Henry Dodge's "Maps – Seven Secrets Of Cartography," a small, bearded man wearing the standard blue police uniform poked his head inside the door. "Karl Banswick?" he asked, for confirmation.

"That's me." Karl sat up straight, ready to tell his story.

"Here you go," said the officer. He dropped an item into Karl's lap and left as fast as he entered.

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

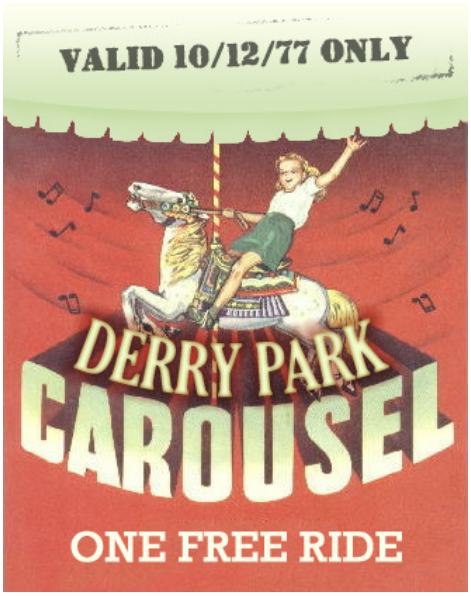
THIRD DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

This time, without delay, he tore one end and took a strip of the contents with the tear. Red paper littered his shoes. He dumped the document onto his lap. Unfolding the white page, a smaller sheet, no bigger than his palm and of slightly thicker stock, floated onto his shut knees. Gently, he turned the white page and read the single, typed sentence...

LEAVE NOW IF YOU WANT TO SEE HER

Karl felt dizzy. The walls of the police interrogation room closed around him. Momentarily, he had tunnel vision. Karl refolded the single white page and slid it back inside the torn red envelope. In a pinch of two fingers, he snared the smaller square from his knee, turned it over, and read the printing.



A coupon for a free ride on the Derry Park Carousel. Valid today and today only. Karl knew the spot. He had passed the carousel many times, holding hands with his wife, in their early

years of courting. The carousel was a working landmark in one of the downtown parks.

LEAVE NOW IF YOU WANT TO SEE HER

Not, Leave Now If You Want To See Me.

So it wasn't *from* her, but it was *about* her.

The warnings of Mr. Rabassa, the evidence in the file cabinet, the unusual wait to report his wife as missing, mixed in Karl's head. His breathing became labored. He doubted everything about the station house – from the look on the duty clerk's face to the very chair he sat in. He wouldn't have been surprised if the walls pulled back and he was in a giant film soundstage, under lights and surrounded by actors. Nothing felt real anymore. He may as well have been in another galaxy. *They know I'm here, they know I'm with the police, they're threatening me.* These fears grew as sharp as pins. Shooting from his chair, envelope, page, and carousel ticket in his grip, Karl fled the room.

In the corridor, he slinked towards the lobby, ashamed and heart pounding. He checked left and right for the young courier who had given him this latest message. No sign of him. He could track him to the source of the message, but what would be the point? His experience with Peterson proved it was a waste of time.

Karl found his way to the lobby. The duty clerk was busy consoling an old woman about her stolen purse. Hiding his face, Karl disappeared from the station, unnoticed.

Quickly, he found his car, started the ignition, and zoomed in the direction of Derry Park. *Derry Park. Why is she at Derry Park? But she's okay. She is. The note proves it. And I did as instructed. I left. So she'll be there. I'll ask what's this is all about. I'll ask why I've been followed for two days by goddamn red messages and a fake detective.* He found a parallel spot along the street and pumped two dimes into the meter.

The first thing to hit Karl's ears was the distant calliope chorus of "Daisy." Karl slowed just over the hill of the well-groomed park. Trellises of autumn ivy made him think of his wife, her handiwork, her occupation, and her abilities to make

things beautiful. He steered from the shaded trees to the brighter side of the hill, beginning his descent to the carousel.

Derry Park was crowded with families. The plaza was full of life. Automobiles whizzed along the inner drive without minding the speed limit while children's voices, combined with the carousel music, made it difficult to hear with any clarity. Mothers and children played on swings and monkey bars as older boys rolled down the embankment, coming to rest near the foot of the concrete, where the carousel's fencing started.

The Derry Carousel was a dollar-a-ride affair – a piece of city history encumbered by rules. If you were taller than 48 inches, you were not allowed past the wobbling gate; if you wanted off, you had to wait for the turning to stop; if you cut in line, you were barred from the premises. The carousel's wooden animals were dreamy, unreal, hardly the scale and exactness of nature. To Karl, there was something frightening in their wild expressions.

At the stop of the ride, the children were let loose through a gate and the carousel operator readied for another round. The man, strong with kinky hair and a pinstriped shirt, noticed Karl holding the envelope and its contents.

"That a coupon?" he asked as he tore a young boy's ticket in two and dropped the halves into a slot box hanging from the gate.

Instinctively, Karl held out the coupon to be taken.

The operator lifted the coupon and gave it a glance. "Where's your kid?"

"It's just me," answered Karl.

The operator pointed to the sign at his knee. THIS RIDE FOR CHILDREN ONLY. The operator handed the coupon back to Karl.

Karl spun around, looking for signs of his wife among the crowd. He saw no one he recognized. "Where do people buy these?" asked Karl, turning back to the operator. "From you?"

"Me or at the park office."

"Did you sell this one here?"

"I've sold a few today. Coulda sold that one. I don't remember."

"Would the park office remember?"

The operator shook his head. "Probably not. Those aren't numbered. Mostly for birthday parties. You can buy a strip of 'em. Office sells a hundred a day. Ride's only a dollar." He shrugged then moved away to start the motor. Gripping a bronze lever in both hands, he squeezed the release and threw the switch. Slowly, the carousel began to turn, and the nine children on board gripped tight.

Karl turned again to face the plaza.

Behind him, stood a small boy.

"Are you going to use that, mister?"

"Use what?"

Said the boy sadly, "I don't have any money."

Karl inspected his coupon a final time then handed it over. "Here. Take it."

The boy lit up considerably. "Thanks mister!" he said and placed himself first in line for the next go.

Karl sensed her before she hit.

She raced at him.

He braced his legs for impact.

The boy's mother?

"Oh my God, oh God, what, what—"

She sputtered, a machine; she grabbed at Karl as if his jacket were on fire. Karl forgot all about the carousel and raised his hands to protect his face.

This woman was wild, fierce, screaming at Karl, "Where did you get that? Where? Who gave that to you! Where did you get that!" She clawed Karl's hands and was desperate to free the red envelope.

But Karl held tight. He ducked and broke free, racing backwards.

Jet-black hair,

a foot shorter than him,

a decade younger,

wearing stylish coat, skirt, and shoes.

Her pale face had deep-set eyes marred by redness, sleeplessness – the after-affects of crying.

"The envelope, the *envelope*," she repeated until Karl had forfeited it. Quickly, she tore it to pieces and ripped loose the single white page. She read the sentence aloud: "LEAVE NOW IF YOU WANT TO SEE HER." She crumpled the page into a tight wad. "What *else* was in here? What *else*!"

"A coupon," Karl pointed, "for the carousel."

She spun to see the slowing of the mechanism, the deflated children, the dull professionalism of the operator as he unlocked the exit.

"Where did you get this?" she asked again, flushed with tears. She flapped the white page as she spoke.

"It was given to me."

"By who?"

"A policeman."

"A policeman?"

"Yes, about an hour ago. Across town."

"Have you got any others?"

"Not with me."

"But you've been given others."

"Yes. Two."

She broke from him. She twirled in the plaza – not in delight, but in frustration. She bent at the waist and covered her face. She let out a small moan that caught the attention of two mothers, who steered their children's faces away from the scene.

The woman came at Karl again, and he retreated, self-protective. "What's your name!" she asked harshly, as if any answer he gave would be a lie.

"Karl Banswick."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-two."

"Are you married?"

He hesitated.

"Are you *married*!" she asked again.

"Yes."

"Children?"

"No."

"Who's missing?"

"What?"

"Who's *missing*!"

Karl realized just in time that he was backing off the plaza, into traffic. "Who are *you,* then?" Karl put his brakes on and puffed up with confidence. Over the woman's shoulder, he could see the torn fragments of his envelope – *his* envelope – blowing in the wind.

"I'm not going to tell you my name," she said rebelliously.

"Are *you* married?"

"No."

"Children?"

Her face melted. She put her chin down to her chest and covered her eyes with her sleeve.

In the sunlight, Karl could see the perfect strands of her black hair. He followed the strands from the crown of her head to the touch of her coat – a woolly blue fabric cut smart and stopping just above her knees. When she again lifted to meet Karl's face, he noticed her eyes matched the coat's color perfectly. And that she was beautiful.

"Yes," she said with profound sadness, "I have a son." From her pocket, she took out her own red envelope. "I've been receiving these since Saturday afternoon. Four so far."

Karl wanted to snatch hers from her hand – as she had done with his – and read the contents. But he noticed her fingers – shaking from how tightly she held on. "I'm Ava," she said softly. "My son is Noah Moon."

The fall day, the calliope, the sounds of happiness and the smells of dying season, hit Karl's senses like a punch to the stomach. He sucked air into his lungs and let out a long breath. The angry energy between them slowly dissipated.

Ava handed her envelope to Karl, still holding on.

"My wife is missing," declared Karl.

Ava nodded and let go of her grip.

Karl inspected the red envelope. She had opened hers with a letter opener – he could tell by the perfect slit along the top. The envelope was most certainly from the same source – that blood red

coloring and the remarkable quality of the paper would have been difficult to duplicate.

With the tops of his fingers, Karl took out the message and slowly opened it. "DON'T STOP," it read. There was no second page. "What else was inside?"

"A newspaper article on depression." She shyly shuffled her feet. "I haven't been myself lately." She met Karl's stare. "But do you blame me?" she said, with wryness. "My son's been missing for five days! I can't eat, I can't drink, I can't sleep, I have no one, I just—" She swallowed and wiped her eyes.

Karl repeated the mysterious message. "DON'T STOP." Karl refolded the white paper, placed it back inside Ava's red envelope. He returned it to her.

Their eyes went to the carousel.

"Noah used to play at this park," she explained weakly. "I've been here every afternoon hoping he'll be here."

"I'm waiting for my wife," he said. "You saw my note. It said she would be here." He handed her the page and she read it again, this time in silence.

LEAVE NOW IF YOU WANT TO SEE HER

"Maybe they meant me," she said at last.

Karl looked past her to the crowds of mothers, the women, for a sign of his wife. He came up empty. "You're right," he said with a bite at the truth. "It's you."

They were back to the opposite edge of the park when he thought to ask her if she had a car. She did not. Her condominium was just a few streets over. "Come home with me," she said, "I'll show you his picture."

At Ava's high-rise, she fixed Karl a pot of coffee and told him the details of her last five days. And she talked without stopping about her son Noah. The boy was nine and his parents had been divorced for two years. He was intelligent and polite and well behaved – the perfect child. She showed Karl a photograph – Mother and Son in front of a Christmas tree the year before, a shot taken by the boy's grandmother, now deceased, whom Noah had loved very much. "He used to tell me he'd seen Grandma walking around the house...after she died. It creeped

me out. You can see how it would. I loved my mom very much. She's all we had for a family. But I never saw her ghost. I would have liked to. I would have wanted to know she was doing okay. When someone goes like that...fast like she did...it hurts. It's like being on the other end of a disconnected phone. You just want them to call you back."

Ava's place was as chic as her clothing. Tasteful paintings hung in the main room and the hallway, leading to the two back bedrooms – the master and Noah's. Her kitchen had exposed, hanging crockery that looked like it had never been used. The oriental rugs beneath Karl's feet had been rare and hard to find, as she had told him in a moment of distracted silence. A full set of tracks, a dozen railway cars, and an electric engine had been erected on the corner carpet of the main room. Noah's.

Karl felt surprisingly at home, though this place was the antithesis of his father's cramped apartment. For some reason, he badly wanted to see Noah's bedroom; Ava had alluded to it several times (the toys, the bed, the curtains.) It would have been rude to ask – invasive – so he stayed mum and drank his coffee.

Several times, she touched him. On the shoulder. On the arm. Once on the cheek. Her fingertips were soft and warm. She was not sexual, but she was very sexy. Her eyes, just like his wife's, could cut through a man. He had to keep looking away.

At last, she showed him her first three documents:

A blank student application for a university program on 'Human Geography.'

A local magazine article about the work of a famous Dutch sculptor, who had arrived in America for his debut at the city art museum.

And a pamphlet from a fashion company about their new line of skirts, and the woman who designed them.

The accompanying messages were, respectively,

WELCOME AVA MOON

ENJOY THE ARTS

And

DRESS FOR SUCCESS AND BE SUCCESSFUL

"Fortune cookie wisdom," Karl dismissed, dropping all the clues onto the glass coffee table in front of Ava's leather couch. He told her of his own red envelopes, their contents, and their messages. WELCOME KARL BANSWICK. WELCOME AVA MOON. "At least we both had a welcome to the party," he joked. "Did you go to that art exhibit?"

"Yes. I wandered around for an hour before I saw it. There was the statue of a little boy. He looked exactly like Noah. That must have been what they wanted me to see."

"How about that university?"

"No, I didn't go."

"Hmmm."

"Do you think I missed something important?"

"My first clue wasn't important." Karl thought a moment more about the Henry Dodge book then waved his hand. "Nah, nothing."

"You said a policeman gave you that last red envelope. Had you gone to the police?"

Karl told Ava of Brody Easter, the trip to the police station, and his quick exit. "They were obviously trying to shut me up. That Easter guy was an imposter, sent to mislead me. Delay me. Then, the moment I'm about to report my wife missing, I get a message telling me to race out of the building."

"Not necessarily," she said, "You could have still turned everything over as evidence. Even right now. Why not go now? It was only a temporary delay, I suppose."

"Oh really? Turn everything into the police. Why haven't *you*?" Karl gave her a doubtful glare and gestured to the items on the table in front of them.

Ava fidgeted on the sofa. "I don't know. I feel like...like if I said everything...that something might happen."

"Something bad?"

"No. Maybe. I'm not sure."

Standing, Karl checked his watch. It had been several hours. People would start to think he had gone missing himself. "I have to get back to my job."

"Take me with you." She snagged his arm in both her hands, holding on for dear life.

Karl cocked an eye. Her fancy apartment. Her desperation. She loved her child, that was clear, but to have her by his side – he didn't see how that would help. Suddenly, he felt tied with bricks. Calculations his head – endless threads of obligation intertwined with doubts, not seeds, but full-grown flowers. Paranoia was returning sharp and strong. *What if she's not real,* returned that cynical voice, his old nemesis, now a bit wiser from the Brody Easter experience. "Look," he said, "I don't think we should be with each other all the time. I'll give you my telephone number, though, if anything turns up you can just—"

"They meant for us to meet. We should stay together."

He jumped back. "Hey, I don't even know if my wife is actually missing. I just can't...I just can't find her right now, that's all. And...you're a complete stranger to me. Do you understand? I'm slow to trust people these days. For all I know, there isn't even a Noah Moon." Immediately, he regretted saying this. If the boy was a phantom, it was the best acting job Karl had ever seen. Ava's face crumbled into a desperate hurt. She began to weep uncontrollably. He may as well have murdered her, right there, as one puts down a wounded animal. "I'm sorry," he said softly and left before doing any more damage.

By the time he crossed Derry Park and located his Impala, it was nearly three o'clock. The ticking of his watch was loud in his ears, trumpeting the pressing nature of the day, the situation. Immense guilt for abandoning Ava Moon stayed with him. He

tried to out-drive it. He sped to the other side of the city, arriving at Banswick Motors with a thump of tires on the parking lot curbstone.

Karl saluted Darnell, who wandered the sidewalk trying to drum up business. Entering the showroom, Karl removed his jacket just as Arturo looked up from the office counter. "Hello, Mr. Banswick."

Karl hooked the Impala's keys on the master ring, where they belonged. "Where's Frank?" he asked, severe, putting on the airs of an irritated man of business to cover his preoccupations.

"Drinking his afternoon coffee. He was just here a minute ago. I told him he could take a break."

Karl, not satisfied, grunted then disappeared to his office. He was winded and there was a tingle in his arm. He felt under his shirt at the zipper in his skin. *Go away,* he told the ache, *not today, you hear, not today.*

He was halfway to his chair when he noticed it.

Another red envelope.

Centered on his desk, symmetrical with the other objects on top.

Karl came forward and placed his hands on his hips. He gritted his teeth and prayed that it would just vanish. *Go back, go back to where you came from.* The ringing telephone shook him out of his paralysis.

He picked it up on the first ring.

"Hello," he said in a jump.

"Karl!" It was Mr. Rabassa. "Where the hell have you been, Karl? I thought you were going to telephone me this morning. I've called three times. Doesn't anyone ever answer the phone at that dealership of yours?"

"I got busy," he replied.

"Your wife. What's happening? Was she at the house?"

"My wife?" Karl echoed, buying a few seconds of debate. He lifted the red envelope. Same paper stock, same approximate weight. "She's fine," he lied to Mr. Rabassa. "Yes, not missing. She's down with a cold. What's that? Yeah, don't do that. No, don't call her lawyer. She'll be in touch with him soon, I'm sure.

She'll be better soon. Sure, sure. I'll do that. Let me know if anything comes up on the hearing. A rescheduled date. Thank you. Call you soon."

He cradled the phone.

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

FOURTH DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

It was wrong to lie to Mr. Rabassa, but that man was the last person on earth he wanted involved. Karl would take care of things himself. *If I find her,* he considered, *maybe she will love me again. I'm overdue for a little redemption. If I find her, things will be all right.*

Knocks came at his office door.

Arturo poked his face in the crack of the frame. Sheepishly, he announced, "Frank's back. He wanted to tell you something." Arturo's eyes went to the red envelope, but Karl pocketed it quickly and without attaching importance.

Not speaking, Karl followed Arturo out onto the floor. Franklin stood innocently in the center of the showroom, sipping his coffee. He caught sight of his boss moving his direction and changed his expression two or three times before Karl was toe-to-toe.

"Yeah, Frank?" started Karl.

The showroom door opened. Over his shoulder, Karl heard the jingle of the bell.

"Customer," Karl said, without looking to the doors. He drifted to the office counter. He would talk to Franklin later, after the man had tried to sell a car to a fresh face. And fresh it was. After years at his father's old dealership, he could tell just by the sound of the footsteps that it was a new customer – someone who had never before walked on the lot.

He was almost to the countertop when he heard her soft voice. "I followed you." On the Banswick Motors showroom floor was Ava Moon, wearing her blue perfect coat, with her jet-black hair and her soft face, marred by fatigue and tears and disillusion.

As Karl turned to face her, Franklin and Arturo exchanged suspicious glances. Franklin put his lips together to whistle, but

Arturo clasped a hand over Franklin's mouth. It was as if a filmstar had entered their drab little world.

Their boss moved slowly to meet Ava by the door.

She whispered. "I...I took a taxi after you left. I had him circle the park. I saw you get into your car and I had the driver follow you."

"What for?" he asked in a scratchy low voice.

"You have to help me."

"I've got my own troubles." Karl lit up a cigarette and gave a cough that shook him terribly.

"Please." Ava's sad eyes drilled into him. "If we work together, maybe we can find both your wife and *my* son."

"I don't even really know if my wife is missing. I just haven't seen her." Karl noted the narrowing of Ava's expression, hesitant. "We're getting a divorce, if you must know. It's almost final. She might be hiding from me. I just think – and I can't even say why – that it's best that we're separate now. I don't want anything interfering with—"

"But *something's* going on, isn't it? We should go to the police, tell them that you've been getting these, too, and—"

Darnell entered the showroom from the door behind Ava, startling her and forcing her forward into Karl's space. The two touched. Karl put out his hands and took hold of Ava's elbows. Her sweet breath moved across his face and he could smell her perfume. Instinctively, Karl pulled her closer into him – so Darnell could get past the door, but for other, more animal reasons as well. Arturo, a voyeur, noticed this and looked away. Karl blushed. She was not his wife. She was a different woman.

"Across the street," offered Karl, pointing. "To that donut shop. We'll talk there. Not here. I just have one question for my office manager. Go and wait for me." She turned, but stopped. She wasn't going anywhere without him. He let out a breath and approached the counter, where Arturo feigned distractions. "Arturo," he said, tugging the top of the red envelope over his pocket so that Ava could not see it. "Where did this letter come from?"

"Isn't it the one you had yesterday?"

"No."

"Oh. Then it must be the one Frank had."

"Franklin? Our Franklin?" Karl gestured the nearby salesman over. Again, he flashed the red envelope, this time to Franklin. "See this, Frank? Where did it come from?"

"That's what I was gonna mention to you, boss." Franklin cleared his throat. "It's from this guy in the donut shop. Says you'd be expectin' it."

"What guy?"

"That fat guy from yesterday."

Karl faced the windows. He squinted, for distance, and tried to telescope across the street and into The Coffee Pot. "Sonofabitch. He came back."

"I think he's probably still there," Franklin added. "He was having a coupla donuts."

"Son of a *bitch*," he said again, and began a gallop across the showroom floor.

Karl burst out the front doors – past his employees, past Ava, who called after him, a buzz in his eardrum. He quickly ran the lot and slammed on his brakes at the busy intersection. Nearing rush hour and not having the light, cars flew past Karl's nose – impossible to cross. The sun off the donut shop windows blinded him. He put a foot into the street as the light changed to from green to yellow. A city electric truck slowed and Karl took another step onto the pavement. Just then, the truck hit the gas; the driver was trying to make the light. Rather than retreat, Karl lunged forward. He could make it across; he knew it.

The truck accelerated.

The light changed to red.

The truck slammed on its brakes, narrowly missing Karl's hip. The driver leaned into his horn, giving a long, angry blast.

Over his shoulder, Karl saw Ava cover her mouth. Arturo's face was pressed to the windows and, Karl assumed, Darnell and Franklin weren't far back in the ranks, though he could not see them.

Returning eyes to the donut shop, there—

in the window

the fat man

Brody Easter.

The loud horn from the street caught Easter's attention. Karl and Easter locked eyes.

Not much further to go – another curbstone, another ten yards to The Coffee Pot's door. It didn't matter. Not close enough. Easter slipped out of the shop and dodged down the side alley. Instead of his frumpy topcoat and his blown dry hair, he wore a nicely cut black suit and necktie, white shirt underneath. Nice clothes made all the difference. He looked fit, not gluttonous, despite dropping a donut on the stoop as he fled.

Karl gained on him, shoes splashing the pools of muck leaking from the dumpsters. He called out, "Stop! Wait!" But Easter didn't heed.

The red envelope slipped out of Karl's hand and onto the rough pavement, landing in a crook against a fire escape. Karl didn't stop to collect it.

Before he turned the corner, he knew he was in trouble. He could hear an engine starting. That fat man was fast on his feet. On a dusty service road behind the donut shop, he saw Easter's paneled station wagon.

"Stop!" Karl called a last time in vain.

Easter spun his tires and threw up dust, heat, and the smell of rubber as he zoomed away from Karl, disappearing with a right turn north.

It hit Karl's chest like a bullet. His heart. Darts twisted in his arm and immediately, as if injected, his body flooded with agony. He collapsed onto the service road in one hard, unbroken crumble.

His wristwatch clipped the pavement and smashed, shattering the glass and the timepiece's two hands.

Karl shut his eyes against the pain. Sweat poured off of him, though his shirt and into his jacket. He couldn't feel his arm.

A long moment passed.

I'm having a heart attack. You've really done it now, Karl. Shutting his eyes, he saw stars. And, for a flash, the face of his wife. *Fuck,* he swore, and could feel himself lift out of his body

while the pain subsided. In seconds, though, he dropped back in like a gunshot to his chest. The ache returned. Double. Triple. He gritted his teeth until, slowly, the fire receded.

Without even knowing how and when it happened, Karl's head was supported and his body was righted on the curb.

"Mr. Banswick! Mr. Banswick! Are you okay?" Arturo brushed the sweat and dust from Karl's eyes. "Call an ambulance!" he shouted over his shoulder. Franklin and Darnell, both against the exit of the alleyway, ran in the direction of the donut shop.

Karl followed all this with his eyes, unable to speak. He saw Ava. She stood near him with her hands folded, her fingertips touching the bottom of her chin. "I have a heart condition," Karl finally got out in explanation. He tried to force an embarrassed smile, but it didn't come.

"You'll be okay, Mr. Banswick, you'll be just fine." Arturo took off his jacket and draped it over his boss. He cradled him, as if Karl were a child.

Ava's face was pure panic.

The ambulance arrived five minutes later. Karl was loaded onto a gurney and placed in the rear. Ava pulled herself onto the bumper. "You can't ride with us, miss," said one of the two paramedics. Karl waved him down as an oxygen mask was placed over his face. "Fine, get in," surrendered the medic, too rushed to argue.

Arturo spoke as they shut the doors. "I'll follow you there."

Karl spent three hours in intensive care, though his symptoms had long ago subsided. A rotation of doctors checked on the patient and took vital signs. Through this, Karl was alone. Ava was not permitted to enter. At one point, Karl asked if "the woman in the blue coat" was around. According to a nurse, Ava had not once left the waiting room. She kept vigil, not moving an inch.

At the parting of two doctors, Arturo snuck through the curtains and found his boss's bedside. Karl never asked how he got back into the unit, as he was too grateful to see him. He thanked Arturo for getting him to the hospital. The two spoke for

five minutes about Karl's recovery, the prognosis, and the plan for treatment. "Mr. Banswick," Arturo asked in a whisper when there was a pause between them. "What is going on with those red envelopes? Why did you chase that policeman?"

Karl shook his head side to side, denting the pillow. His voice was weak. "He's not the police. He's a fake."

"A fake?" Arturo digested the information and touched his boss's arm. "Your wife. Is she missing or not?"

"No, she's fine, Arturo."

Arturo breathed heavy. "That's good news. She's okay, then?" He had doubt written across his face.

"Yeah, yeah, she's golden." Karl reached out and touched his employee's shoulder, reassuringly.

Arturo tilted his head. "Who's that woman?"

"Her name's Ava. I met her through a friend."

"What friend?" Arturo was digging.

"Don't you worry about it."

But Arturo clearly had been worrying. "Mr. Banswick, I knew your father a long, long time. Fifteen years I worked at Banswick Motors. I owe you *everything*." He pushed hard on the last word. "I have a good job and my family can eat and stay here. If you're in some sort of trouble...I can help. I can. You just have to trust me."

Arturo's words hung ten seconds before Karl answered. With another simple touch on Arturo's sleeve, Karl said, "I trust you." *But you can't help me, Arturo, no one can.*

Nine o'clock that night, Karl was released with a prescription for nitroglycerin tablets. He had had an angina attack – just short of a heart attack, but damage nonetheless. A tiny nitro pill under his tongue would help stop future trouble before the pain spun out of control. He was glad to be out of the white halls and the antiseptic clothes so he could have a cigarette. He badly needed one.

After a smoke, he felt nearly perfect again. He checked his smashed watch. Disappointed, he unbuckled it from his wrist and dropped it in the nearest trash. Forbidden from driving for twenty-four hours, Karl waved Arturo away and signaled a cab.

"You live the opposite direction. I'll be fine." Ava, saying nothing, had followed the two men out of the hospital. Karl gave her a nod. "You're in my direction. Wanna share a taxi?"

Arturo added up the looks between the two. He shuffled his feet, stood silent, felt awkward. At last, he wished them both goodnight and shook Karl's hand. "I'll see you, Mr. Banswick.

As Karl and Ava were whisked away east in a yellow city cab, Karl finished his cigarette in silence and tapped it out in the rear door ashtray.

"Where do you live?" Ava asked from her side of the rear seat. He gave her his address. "That's quite far from where I live. And that's not the address you gave the driver. You gave him something different. And you lied to your employee."

"I did."

"Why?"

"We're going back to the dealership."

"What for?"

"A red envelope. I got one just before you stepped in my door. I dropped it in the alley chasing down that fat man. Haven't even opened it."

Ava's eyes widened. To her, this was the best news she'd had in days. "What do you think it says? Will it help us?"

"Let's find out. Hopefully it will be something we can work with."

"We?" Color came back into Ava's cheeks.

"Yeah. Safety in numbers. But no one else, you hear? I don't want Arturo or miscellaneous people getting involved – if anyone, it would be the officials. Otherwise, just you and me. And, to be straight with you, I have no idea if I can trust you one little bit. I've already been burned once. But you just waited three hours for me in a hospital, so I owe you something. My wife stopped doing that after my surgery – stopped making sure I was all right. I was never good at following doctor's orders, and she got sick of reminding me. I know hospitals aren't fun to hang around. But you stayed."

"Will you be all right now?" she asked. "I was worried when I saw you on the ground."

"They want me to take nitroglycerin pills."

"Won't that make you explode?"

"Don't worry. It's not that kind of nitro. After the envelope, we'll hit a drugstore and I'll get my prescription filled."

The taxi dropped Karl and Ava at the intersection of Banswick Motors and The Coffee Pot, away from the dimmed lights of the dealership. Inconspicuously, Ava and Karl slid into the black alleyway and scanned the ground.

"I dropped it somewhere around here," said Karl, indicating a space about ten-feet square. The two used the full moon and tiny drops from the streetlights to light the way. Karl kneeled and squinted. The red envelope blended well with the building's brick. Ava heard the scurry of a rat and twisted, frightened. "Don't worry," Karl announced, reaching out for the half-showing edge of the envelope, "I've got it."

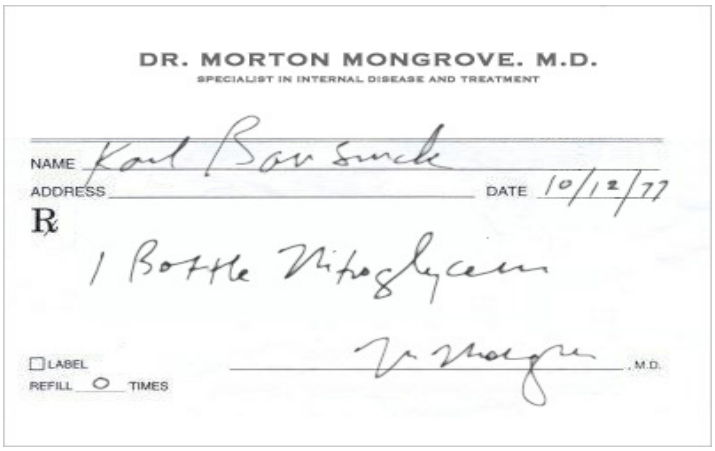
The two returned to the alley's edge. They inspected the condition of the envelope. It was only slightly worse for wear. Mud spots dotted the exterior and one corner was bent. The two passed determined looks before Karl inserted a finger under the bent corner and pried the edge.

He pulled two sheets out and shook them up to the light.

"YOU ARE LUCKY," he read aloud from the typed page. He glanced at the enclosed document – a small slip of paper with a gummy top-line, pulled from a notepad. He laughed loudly.

"What is it?" Ava asked, craning her neck to better see the slip.

"A prescription," he said, "for nitroglycerin tablets."


DR. MORTON MONGROVE. M.D.
SPECIALIST IN INTERNAL DISEASE AND TREATMENT
NAME Karl Bowsucke
ADDRESS _____ DATE 10/12/77
℞
1 Bottle Nitroglycerin
☐ LABEL
REFILL 0 TIMES
_____, M.D.

Karl laughed a second time. "Damn, they're good. They are *good*," he said with appreciation. "Now I have *two* prescriptions. If I had had this earlier, yeah, I'd consider myself lucky. But now it's too late!" He started towards the dealership. "This is amazing, Ava, amazing," Karl hopped across the street with the flashing 'walk' sign. "Amazing," he said again.

"What's amazing?"

"They know *way too much* for me to feel comfortable. Swear to God, Ava, it's making me look over my shoulder."

"Where are we going now?"

"Back to my office." Karl gave a point to the darkened dealership. "I have the other three red envelopes locked in a file cabinet. It's time we went to the police. Tell them about my wife and my envelopes. Tell them about Noah."

"Oh, but I already have."

"What?"

"Yes, the first day Noah was gone, the first hour. Of *course* I called the police."

"This was Saturday?"

"What kind of mother do you think I am? The boy went to play in the park and didn't come back. I told the police everything and they had horses combing the streets by nightfall. I've spend the last five days putting up fliers on telephone poles, trying to get the newspapers to call me back. The best I could get was a teeny-tiny mention."

Karl and Ava reached the front door. Tugging his ring of keys, Karl unlocked the building and disabled the alarm. Leaving the lights out, he made a straight line for the cabinets at the back of the main office. Ava stopped short of the office counter.

"I'm curious to why they stopped *me* from talking to the police, but they didn't stop you," said Karl.

"I'm curious why we always say 'they.'"

Karl held a second and considered. At last, he shrugged. "It just seems like they'd need several people to carry all this off."

"Okay, well, *they* hardly used force to stop you from the police. You could have gone to them at any time. It wasn't like they had a gun to your head."

"It sure felt like it." He bent at the waist and unlocked the lower drawer of the file cabinet. "They sent that fake detective to delay me, then basically told me to get out when I was in that stationhouse." Karl sighed with relief when he looked inside the cabinet drawer. Just as he had left them, were the red envelopes, their contents, Dodge's book, and the Supreme Running Watch from Jogger's Den. He removed the watch and buckled it to his empty wrist. He turned to Ava, showing off the watch with a twist of his arm. "These criminals are either great guessers or have access to a time machine. They knew I might need this wristwatch. I broke mine chasing after Brody Easter. This one, I think, should hold up better. They knew about this just like they knew I'd need a prescription for nitroglycerin."

"It is pretty strange," she agreed.

"More than that. It's impossible."

Bending again, he gathered the evidence into his hands, crossed to Arturo's desk, and dumped out a box full of blank contracts. He dropped the stash into the box and began to secure the flaps.

"Your fingerprints are all over those," remarked Ava.

"True. And yours are on your envelopes, too. If these guys are so smart, I doubt they did any stuffing without a good pair of gloves."

Ava put out her palm. "Is that the book you told me about?"

Karl tugged Henry Dodge's "Maps – The Seven Secrets to Cartography" from the box and dropped it into her waiting hands. "Knock yourself out." He struck a match and lit a cigarette.

She flipped the pages. "How is it?"

Karl grunted. "Let's just say I'm not its audience." Ava handed him back the book and he returned it to the box. "Ready? Off to the police. No distractions this time."

From a shoulder-high rack mounted on the office wall, Karl put a key into a brace and pulled the visor aside. Inside, keys for every car on the lot. He read the dangling tags and unhooked a set. "We'll take the Pontiac," he said with a nod towards outside.

"But you're not supposed to drive," she cautioned. "Doctor's orders."

"You have a license?"

"I live in a city. There are taxis everywhere."

"Then I'm drivin'. I hate taxis."

Karl drove out of the dealership with a squeal of tires and a toss of his cigarette butt.

The two were silent for six blocks.

"Hey, don't pass that – you can get your prescription filled." Ava's finger pointed north to the blinking sign of an all-night drugstore.

Karl turned into a space along the street. He put the car in park and left it running. "Don't go anywhere. I'll need you at the police. You're my proof that I'm not making all this up." He slammed the car door and hopped the curb.

Entering the drugstore, he withdrew both prescriptions from his pocket – his own and the one from the red envelope. If they had never heard of the doctor's name on the second one, the slip could be considered evidence. Rather than risk being questioned by the pharmacist for having two identical prescriptions from two different sources, Karl led with the hospital's, the more legitimate of the two.

Behind the counter was a young woman pharmacist in a white lab coat, thin with feathered brown hair. She wore heavy eyeshade and long, false fingernails. "May I help you?" she asked politely while dispensing anonymous pills into an open bottle.

Karl placed the prescription slip on the counter. The pharmacist read the scribble and moved to her shelves. "It will be a few minutes." He wandered the closest aisle, smoking a full cigarette before he heard his name called.

I feel good. I just had an angina attack and I feel okay. Ava's gonna help me. This is the right thing to do. Go to the police. I should have done it yesterday. Finally, I've got my head on straight.

"Karl Banswick," announced the pharmacist with a toss of her hair. She held a stapled-shut brown bag, receipt affixed.

Karl reached for his wallet to pay the $10 price.

"Oh!" said the pharmacist suddenly, as if she had been pinched. "Karl Banswick. I thought that name sounded familiar." She reached toward the cash register and plucked something from behind.

A red envelope.

"For you," she explained, "someone dropped it off about thirty minutes ago. Maybe from the doctor?"

Like she was handing him a live, bleeding heart organ, Karl shivered as he took the envelope into his hands.

"I didn't open it," explained the pharmacist, unnecessarily.

Karl's eyes floated to the front door of the drugstore. Though he couldn't actually see the Pontiac parked just outside, he pictured Ava in the front seat, smiling. She had tricked him. She must have. It was her suggestion to stop at this random drugstore. He tried to hide his anger from the pharmacist. He had let it happen again – another Brody Easter, another false front, another set of lies. He began to doubt everything Ava had told him. There was no Noah. That probably wasn't her condominium. The red envelopes she had shown to him were, most likely, props. Whoever had kidnapped his wife – and *kidnapping* was the word that came to mind, something from violence, something for ransom, something born out of criminal intent – these people were manipulating him. He felt more and more like a stringed puppet with every passing hour.

Karl looked up to the brown-haired pharmacist.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You don't look so good."

She was remembering the prescription, his symptoms, his chance of another heart attack there, right in front of her. Maybe she was trained in resuscitation or how to bring back the dead. Maybe she had been waiting for something exciting to happen at her boring pharmacy job. Maybe that something was tonight.

Reaching out, Karl placed a $10 bill between the woman's flat hands. "Thank you," he mumbled, crunching the top of the brown bag and letting the red envelope stay in his grip. He pushed his way through the store's front door and out into the cold air. The wind had picked up and the city smelled sweet, for once, in the pre-Halloween haze. The Pontiac was parked where he had left it, lights on and engine idling. He walked a few paces and peered into the dark interior.

The blue cloth seat was dead empty. Ava had flown. She wouldn't help him with the police. He had been abandoned.

Eyes to his two hands – his bag of pills and his red envelope, Karl let out a frustrated groan. "Son of a BITCH!" He rounded the car to the driver's side, flopped inside, and whipped the bag of pills into the now-empty passenger seat. He raised the envelope to the streetlamps and tried to peer through any transparency. Not a thing – he may as well have been looking into the future.

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

FIFTH DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

Is it worth it? Does she really even want me to find her? Is she locked in a closet in some torturer's house waiting for her new lover to break down the door and rescue her? Do I really think I have a hope in hell of saving anyone? He felt completely and utterly defeated. He lost the strength to open this latest message, to be led around and lied to. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the red envelope next to the discarded pill bag.

Has she thought about me once?

On the way home to his father's apartment, images of his wife came and went. When was the last time he had actually seen her, face-to-face? Was it in a courtroom? A month earlier, the two of them had been on opposite sides of an arbitration table, Mr. Rabassa at Karl's elbow, his wife's lawyer on hers. The two hadn't spoken that day, preferring to let their counsels be their mouthpieces. He had remembered the scent of her perfume, a warm chemistry to his senses, and had spent much of the meeting dwelling, as he did this night, on the earliest, happiest days of their marriage.

She was great. She was. Better than that lying Ava Moon. Much.

He passed Mrs. Keane on the shaky rear stairs of his father's building. She was a woman about his age and had known his father. "Good night, Karl," she smiled, but it was a strange, knowing smile – as if Karl's every trouble was pasted on his face, and she could plainly see.

He slept very, very late. He hadn't fallen off until after 2 AM. He had missed the start of business at Banswick Motors. Arturo had opened many times since Karl's father passed, usually when Karl was down with a common cold or other lie. Arturo would check the master ring for the keys to the missing Pontiac

and realize: Karl had taken the vehicle and had violated doctor's orders.

Karl's first thought that day: *Is she still missing?*

His second: *Did Ava lie about the museum statue – the one that looked like Noah?* If there was no statue, she was a liar.

Just before eleven o'clock that morning, he drove to the city art museum. Banners flapped from the building's columns advertising the spectacular debut of a Dutch sculptor, the one profiled in Ava's red envelope magazine article. "Welcome," said a brown-shirted woman, who took tickets at the entrance and smiled at tourists. The look in the woman's eyes was just like Mrs. Keane. He could hide nothing.

The museum was fairly empty – midday Thursday not a prime hour – but that didn't stop Karl from thinking every person he saw was watching him, judging him, following him. Three teenagers appeared to follow him room to room and he had to duck inside a toilet to throw them off. *You're dreaming, Karl, you're dreaming – don't lose it, pal. No one's after you, Karl. Keep it together.* Karl wandered past oil paintings, at last finding the exhibit for the Dutch master.

At first, he detested this Dutch artist. The work was very simple, almost insulting. A student of little skill could have made the first three pieces in the hall. But as Karl progressed through the cavernous exhibit, nudging elbows with people of all types and nationalities, he began to settle into a moderate respect.

At last, he caught sight of the marble boy.

Alone in one room, the boy was pure white and positioned in prayer and raised on a black marble platform. The face had been sanded away. All that remained was the sketch outline with two eyes and a sweep of hair across the forehead. The model for the sculpture must have been eight or nine years old. Ava wasn't a liar. The boy existed.

Gradually, Karl became cognizant that he was finally alone in the exhibit. There was a lull in the procession. No spies to witness his foreign behavior.

Karl withdrew the red envelope.

The boy's foot was cocked, leaving a deep recess in the sculpture. There were no ropes to guard and, as far as Karl could tell, no cameras in the room. After all, this was not a priceless work, but the first American tour of a living artist.

He was struck with an impulsive idea.

Before he could change his mind, he reached forward and dropped the red envelope beneath the boy's foot, where the envelope blended against the pedestal. The object could be seen. Patrons might think it a clever addition. But to the casual observer, it may be missed. Karl stepped from the sculpture and checked for rushing museum security guards. None came.

I won't even read the damn thing.

He felt richly satisfied. And greatly relieved.

He had broken from what was expected.

He blew through the rest of the Dutch exhibit with great speed, glad when he surfaced for air and a cigarette in the museum café. He ate a quick, fatty lunch and then retrieved the Pontiac from the parking lot.

Darnell's eyes were on him as he rode onto the dealership lot. "Hey, uh, Karl," the salesman said. He appeared to have more on his mind.

Karl rolled up the Pontiac's window and dumped the full ashtray on the lot's only plot of grass – a four by four square near the showroom's entrance. At the pull of the door, Karl noticed that the car had become dirty from the drive. Parking-garage dust covered the hood and the front quarter-panel. Arturo wouldn't be happy. *I've been such a disrespectful bastard lately; I'm gonna make it up to 'em,* he promised without any idea how to follow through. Karl palmed the keys, entered with his head down, and, without saying a word to Franklin, who stood beside the key box, replaced the borrowed ring.

"Karl..." Frank started, coffee and donut in hands.

"Not now, Frank."

"Karl, I should warn you."

"Later, Frank. Sorry. Kinda busy."

Passing the file cabinet, Karl kept on in the direction of the dungeon. When he opened the door, four men turned. Two were

in police uniforms. A third wore a blue-patched sweater and held a notepad. Arturo, the last man, came forward first with pleading shame in his face. "Mr. Banswick," he started, "these men...they just barged in and started waiting for you, I—"

"Are you Karl Banswick?" asked one of the officers, a two-way radio in the palm of his hand.

The man in the sweater boxed Karl in. "Mr. Banswick, we need some of your time this afternoon. We have some questions we'd like to ask you at the precinct."

Karl was rattled. His eyes widened. He was numb and confused. It took every effort to speak. "I don't suppose I could say that I'm busy."

One of the policemen mournfully shook his head. "I'm afraid we're just being polite." As if to a wild animal, the uniformed man gingerly revealed a pair of silver handcuffs held behind his back.

"You don't need those," protested Arturo, astounded at their cold, disrespectful professionalism.

"What's this about?" asked Karl.

"Just some questions," said the sweater man evenly, betraying nothing.

This is no fake. Karl absolutely knew it to be true. These men carried with them a whole different demeanor than Brody Easter; they were professionals. Karl let his hands be taken and cuffed. "Call my lawyer," he said to Arturo, "Rabassa is his name. His number is in my desk drawer."

"Of course. I will. And I swear – we didn't telephone them or anything. They just showed up. You told me your wife was not missing. They say she is."

"I know, Arturo, it's okay. I just didn't want you to worry about it."

Out in the showroom, things had gotten rapidly crowded – an entire waiting room full of faces. Franklin and Darnell, along with Dolores and two actual customers, formed a gauntlet for Karl to pass through. Dolores stamped her feet. "He's innocent, I told you that, you idiots!" she called to the man in the sweater. To

everyone's ears, her certainty made Karl sound even more criminal.

Karl wished everyone would stop looking at him. He was taken out of the dealership and guided headfirst into the rear of a squad car that had been hidden around back of the lot. A third uniformed policeman sat ready to chauffer Karl to his destination. Karl looked to his cuffs. He cussed quietly under his breath.

He rode to the stationhouse in silence. His mouth was completely dry and the smell of burnt paper seemed to stay in his nose. He realized he was terrified. *I'm a suspect. I'm a suspect. I'm going to jail for the rest of my life.* And, bubbling below these high stakes, that cynical voice again: *Does this mean she's dead and gone forever?*

On arriving, Receiving took Karl's valuables, placing his wallet, necktie, and shoelaces into a plastic baggie. This was a different building from the one he had waited in just the day before. LEAVE NOW. He wished he could. "Don't I get a phone call?" he asked the arresting detective.

"Your lawyer's on the way, Mr. Banswick," replied the man in the sweater.

"No. I want to call someone else."

"All right. But you're not technically under arrest yet. You know that, right? We're just waiting for your lawyer and we'll start asking questions. I'd like to begin, though, if you feel comf—"

"I'll wait for my lawyer, thanks."

The detective nodded with sly understanding. He turned his telephone so the rotary dial faced Karl.

"In private," Karl clarified.

The detective paused, winked, rose from his hard chair, and, finally, drifted to the corner of the stationhouse, out of earshot.

Karl found it difficult to dial with his handcuffs, but he made the turn of the zero and soon heard the voice of a friendly operator. "Ava Moon," he said. He gave a street name and asked to be connected to the number, if it was listed. *Please be listed,* he thought.

One ring and she answered.

"Hello?" her voice was pure across the line.

"Ava, it's Karl."

"Karl! Look, I've got some n—"

"I've been arrested."

"Arrested!"

"Yes, I need you to do me a favor. I don't know who you are, Ava. I don't know if you're real or you're with them. But you've got to help me." Karl cupped his hands over his mouth so his lips could not be read. "Do this for me...and I'll do whatever you want."

"I need to find Noah."

Karl hesitated. "Okay. I'll help you however I can. Just do me this favor." She did not answer. "Ava?"

She spoke. "Anything"

"I went to the Dutch exhibit," he said softly. "I saw the sculpture of the boy. Last night, I received another message from our friends, but I didn't fucking open it. Instead, I left it on the statue – underneath the boy's foot."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because I'm an idiot. Whoever is leaving me those envelopes must be feeding me information as I need it. And since I didn't open this one, I can only assume it will help me now. Do you understand?"

"You want me to go back to the museum, get back the envelope, and come to see you."

"Exactly." He gave her the precinct number. "Now can you do that for me?"

"Yes," she answered, "I can."

"Good. Thanks."

"You're welcome. And, Karl, I also have something to tell you. You're going to love this—"

The detective crowded Karl, spinning a finger for him to wrap it up.

"Okay, sounds good. I'll see you soon. Goodbye."

Karl hung up on her, mid-sentence.

They locked Karl in an eight-foot square holding room on the third floor of the stationhouse. There, he waited for hours for

anyone, even Mr. Rabassa, to be allowed to see him. *She's a fake. There's no help coming. Here is where you stay.* When the corridor finally sounded with the heavy clapping of shoes and the rattle of jailer's keys, Karl stood and said a silent prayer of thanks. *Rabassa.* Better late than never. But the body that entered was someone slightly unexpected.

Ava Moon, in a red blouse with long silver raincoat, hood off, velvet skirt and high-heeled black shoes, shook her wet hair and gave Karl a wink. The gesture took him by surprise. She winked again, this time more forced, and allowed the jailer – a brutish man with thick eyeglasses – to unlock Karl's cell.

Lock undone, the jailer tugged the vertical bars and metal scraped. The door stood open for Karl to cross. "I can leave?" he asked. The jailer nodded. "Just like that?" A second nod.

In ten minutes, he and Ava were alone in the parking lot. A late afternoon rain had started. The drops were cold on Karl's face, but it didn't matter. "Thank you, thank you, Ava. I definitely owe you. I was getting a little worried that no one was gonna show up. Do you know how that feels?" he asked. "It's pretty fucking depressing, I can tell you that."

Ava didn't speak. Instead, she leapt into a standing taxi and, not knowing any other calling course, Karl did likewise. She told the driver an address, but Karl didn't hear it over the acceleration of the engine.

"I've got a great lawyer," Karl bragged. "He must have worked like hell to spring me. I know he's mostly a divorce lawyer, but he's got skills. I can see that now." Karl put his hands to his belt and leaned back into the seat of the taxi, repeating, "I've got a great lawyer."

"No you don't." Ava shook her head. "Your lawyer left an hour ago to have dinner with some political friends."

"What?"

"It's true. Don't be thanking any lawyers; you should be thanking *me* and that precious little envelope." From her pocket, Ava pulled a torn envelope and a white sheet, folded in thirds.

Karl read dead center.

GIVE THIS TO THE POLICE

Karl turned the page over. "Where's the other part? The document?"

Ava gave him a dubious look. "Um, Karl...I gave it to the police!"

"*Well*? What was *inside* it?"

"Just a sheet filled with numbers. Didn't mean anything."

Karl put his pointer to the red envelope. "This is the envelope I left at the museum? Under that boy's foot?"

"Yep."

"Well, it must have meant *something*," he pressed.

"Not to me."

The taxi took a tight corner and Ava slid on the seat. Her bare leg touched Karl's and he found his hand resting on it, for just a second. When the taxi had again righted, she slowly scooted back to her side. "Do you want to know what happened to me the other night?"

"You left me."

"I didn't mean to."

"Is that the truth?"

"I just got you out of *jail*. Now you have to *help me*. Remember?" Her words, and their sudden ferocity, made Karl look to his lap. "I was surprised that you phoned," she said. "I thought for sure you were abandoning me."

"I thought about it." Karl considered. "But you know...I don't have many people in my life. No friends. No family. Just those three guys at the dealership." Karl held up the torn red envelope. "Until I figure out what's going on, I'm keeping quiet. I'm getting the distinct impression that the police won't help us."

"I've taken matters into my own hands."

"And I'm gonna do that, too," agreed Karl. "These notes – they obviously have a way with things. Nick-of-time stuff. Like that bit with the police. I got that page of numbers last night. If I hadn't dragged my feet, I could have given it to the cops the second they set foot on my car lot. Instead, I got a taste of what jail is like. And I'm not anxious to return. So until I figure out what the hell's going on, I'm keeping all options open. Including my options with you."

Ava smiled, grateful.

"So, Mrs. Ava Moon...what happened to you last night?"

Ava patiently waits in the parked car outside the all-night drugstore. She rolls down the Pontiac's window and thinks of her son. Already, in five days, she feels that his face must have changed. Whenever letting him out of her sight, even for hours, she finds him a different boy – with new words, with slightly different hair, with a vaguely more polished manner. What if it were to be months? What if he disappeared for years? She covers her eyes and when she looks up again, there's a man standing beside her on the curb. He's looking inside the car.

He has a kinky Afro and skin so dark he blends with the walls of the building. In one hand, he holds a large AM / FM radio, its antenna raised two feet tall and catching his purple sweater at the shoulder. The radio's handle looks about to break and it has been poorly taped into position. In his other hand, he holds a red envelope.

"Ava Moon?" he asks in a low rumble that barely sounds like her name.

Ava takes too long to answer.

He doesn't want to wait any more.

He drops the envelope in the window of the car, like he's making a night deposit at the bank.

Looking at the rectangle in her lap, she freezes. When her muscles are again her own, able to move, the man's shuffled off down the street, fiddling with his radio dial until music lifts out and bounces off the drugstore's façade. He likes his music loud.

"Wait!" she calls after him, fumbling for the door and tightly holding the red envelope.

The black man doesn't hear. He's gone around the corner.

"Wait!" she calls again and stumbles over the curbstone and onto the sidewalk. She feels her heels buckle and her hands start to shake uncontrollably. The rush of blood to her body, the panic of loss, overtakes her and she starts running.

At the corner, he's running, too, picking up speed. There's something wrong with his leg, though, and he lumbers. The repaired handle breaks and his radio nearly falls to the sidewalk. He catches it, wrapping the radio in his arms as if it were his baby.

"Wait!" she says a third time, nearly a scream.

He doesn't stop, he makes it around one corner, then another, and then a third, until Ava is so disoriented she doesn't know what street she is on relative to the parked Pontiac.

Winded, the black man stops and its here that Ava realizes how old he might be. He's not young, as she first suspected, but instead late thirties and fighting it. His skin isn't soft enough for youth, but instead cragged, with tucked ears and strands of gray growing into his Afro.

"What th' hell do you WANT!" he yells at her.

This makes her stop.

Only five steps separate them.

"Who – who gave this to you?" she asks.

"SomeBODY." He says the word dismissively, as if protecting himself from incrimination.

Ava takes a step forward, then another. At last, she falls into the man's arms, weeping. He holds her, but wants badly to let go. She cries onto his shirt and he can feel wetness soak through to his skin.

"I just want to know who has my son," she says, muffled; he can't understand her. "I...I don't care who you are, or what they gave you. I just want to know who has my son. Please."

"I don't know WHERE your son is," he says. "My buddy Vix gave that to me."

Ava perks up. "Vix? What's his last name?"

The man pulls from her and scans the street for voyeurs. He fiddles with the taped handle of the radio. "Oh, lady, see what you gone and done? It's broke." He pulls a strip of masking tape loose and tries to wrap it around the plastic that once kept the handle secure.

She apologizes.

The man gives another frustrated huff.

"I don't even know what's IN *that damn letter," he snaps. "Vix was told you'd be at the drugstore and asked, Could I do him a favor?" The man stops his futile repairs and gives a long, deep groan.*

As quick as he appeared, he's gone down the narrow side street, favoring one leg and cradling his radio, white static playing as he fixes different positions of the antenna to the sky.

By the time Ava finds her way back to the drugstore, the Pontiac is long gone.

"So what did it say?"

"YOU MISSED ONE."

"What was attached?"

Ava hesitated. She wouldn't meet his eyes. "When you left me, I never thought I'd see you again. I thought...maybe you lied to me."

"Funny," he replied, "I was thinkin' the same thing about you."

The taxi gave a jolt.

They were entering a campus, dusk setting on the city and only the lights of the dormitory halls peeking through the drizzle. A red-bricked library and four short-stack, matching buildings came into their sight, the classrooms, were the familiar landmarks of the city's public university.

"Where are we going?" Karl finally asked.

"The Human Geography Department."

Karl's eyes went back down to Ava's single white sheet. "YOU MISSED ONE," he read aloud, in a daze.

The taxi careened over another speed bump and then stopped. Ava dropped two bills into the front seat and slid out.

Standing before one of the buildings, the two watched as the yellow taxi squealed out of the circular drive, leaving them. A few students could be seen crossing the quadrant on their way to evening classes, books in hand and packs on backs. At the end of the narrow sidewalk hung a sign.

Geography – Physical / Human
Paper Science
Engineering
Architecture

"Your first envelope," said Karl, matter-of-factly, "that university application."

"Exactly. I never came here to check it out."

"They're catching you up on things."

"Apparently so."

"So no document this time?"

"Nope."

The wind gusted between the buildings, bringing more mist than rain across their faces, the last of the autumn storm. Karl shielded Ava with his arm. Together, they hopped to the building's double-door entrance. Karl yanked the door open and pulled the crossbar shut against another blow of wind. Once in the quiet halls, they took their breaths. The smells of fresh floor wax, faint aerosol disinfectant, and the printer's ink lit their noses. Further inside, the clacking of Karl's shoes and Ava's heels echoed along the corridor.

"Place is deserted," said Karl.

"It's dinner time."

"We should come back tomorrow."

"No. I want to find the human geography department."

The two followed arrows into the labyrinth. Karl flashed back to his business college upstate, where he gave his guts to please his father. It was a long two years and a hard promise. He found real work more rewarding, if only slightly. Stress of academics proved tough on his body. He was surprised he didn't have a heart attack twenty years before, all that pressure. Karl tapped his pocket for his nitroglycerin pills, his stash, to be certain they were close.

Ava had none of this damage. He could see that in her confident stride through the halls. She was educated. She knew things. She had probably even learned the answer to his nagging question.

"What is human geography anyway?"

"Don't you know?" Ava gave him a wink. "Physical geography is the study of places – the land, state capitals, the names of mountain ranges. Human geography is the study of how humans interact with their environment – their cultures, urban blight, poverty, politics. That kind of thing."

"Oh," he said dumbly, "that."

"I looked it up."

"Thank Christ."

HUMAN GEOGRAPHY said the arrow, pointing at a slant. They followed the path to the second floor of the building, where a tall corridor trickled off into the fluorescents.

After ten yards, both stopped dead.

"Holy shit!" It was as if Ava had walked into a wall.

Crudely taped to the door of an instructor's office was a red envelope.

Ava raced forward, ripping the envelope from its moorings. The peeling tape spit sound as it gave. Her hands shook and she dropped the treasure onto the white-tiled floor.

Karl bent at the knees and gripped the envelope tightly with both hands, turning his body so she couldn't get at it. *It's for me,* his mind shouted.

No, it's mine, Ava's eyes telegraphed as she reached through his arm and tried to wrest it free – but no use.

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

SIXTH DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

"Give it to me!" Ava demanded and tried one last time to free it from Karl's white knuckles.

He met her eyes – the intense blue of her gaze, her tight jaw turning her into a lioness, ready to pounce. Knowing he couldn't fight her, he let go of the envelope and she stumbled a few steps. Ava threw her back to him and Karl could hear the tearing of paper. Pieces of the ripped envelope dropped to her feet and, head cocked, she silently began to read.

"Shit!" she cussed in frustration before turning on Karl. She stuffed the pages at his stomach and stormed away down the corridor, for distance.

Karl looked down on what he held in his hands.

IF A MAN, BE A MAN

He re-ordered the pages, the white one to the bottom, and examined the second document.

"They think I'm a pervert," he said with humor and held up the page for Ava to see. "The Silver Pony. No thanks. I'm a married man." The design to the Gentlemen's Club advertisement – the curly lettering, the warehouse district address, the stark black and white relief of the dancing girls, all gave him a strong desire to stay clear. "Ava?" She hadn't turned. Instead, she had fixed her eyes to posted notice, level on the wall of the corridor. "Ava," he said again and crossed to where she stood, holding out the advertisement for her to see.

Slowly, the typeface on the posted notice sharpened. Ava's right-hand pointer finger lifted from her hip and stabbed into the laminated list of names. "Look," she ordered and waited for Karl to catch up. "Isn't that the guy who wrote that book?"

Karl's stomach dropped.

Henry Dodge.

Karl checked his feet to confirm where he stood. He leaned in to Ava and lost his balance, nearly shoving her away from the notice in order to read it better.

The author of "Maps – The Seven Secrets to Cartography" was affiliated with the university.

DR. HENRY DODGE – OFFICE HOURS 2-4 PM T W

"He teaches here," said Ava, amazed. She sailed to the office door that had held the red envelope. Her fingers traced the residue where the cheap tape had been.

Karl forgot all about The Silver Pony. "Holy Moses," he said with his mouth open. "Do you think that door is Henry Dodge's office?"

Before Karl could stop her, she knocked on the door.

No answer.

"We should...we should come back tomorrow," she stammered. "Maybe he'll talk with us." The fog lifted from Ava's face. "Do you think he knows where they've taken Noah?"

Karl read her excitement. It was wrong of him to temper it. His thoughts went to his wife's hair color, her hairstyle, her hairspray, the smell of it, where it touched her neck, what it looked like when she awoke, how it changed when curled, how her bangs hid her forehead and her right eye, all the minutia of her

wisps and the texture, her shampoo bottle in the shower, her brush on the sink. The flash pan of this detail blinded Karl. He couldn't think.

Ava knocked harder.

No answer.

They were halfway down the stairs to the first floor before either of them spoke. Ava took Karl's hand and squeezed it tightly. "I feel lost." Karl nodded, but didn't know what could be said. "Do you think it's Henry Dodge who's been leading us around?"

"It's possible."

"How old is he by now?"

"Sixties? I don't know how old he was when he wrote that book. It's hard to tell from the picture on the flap. It was published in '47. Add thirty years to that." He looked to her cheeks. She was growing mighty pale. "When did you last eat?" he asked her.

"Days."

"We should get something to eat."

In the soft light of the entrance, they saw it. Simultaneously. Set at the inner tip of the double-doors leading outside of the building.

Another red envelope.

This one had a lonely appearance, kicked to the edge of the corridor and ignored.

"That's probably for you," Karl huffed.

"I don't want another one."

"Oh but you have to," he joked.

"I do?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We would have found Henry Dodge five days ago if you hadn't ignored your first red envelope." Ava hung on Karl's hand; she wasn't moving; his argument hadn't yet pried her loose. "Want me to get it?" he offered. She shook her head, her black bob swinging. She was a child being called for punishment. The

inevitable spanking. She didn't want to obey the wagging finger of her parent. "We'll pick it up together, then..."

Karl started forward. Ava followed with his pull.

Reaching the red envelope, both bent and, not letting go of each other, stretched out free hands to draw the envelope up from the tile. At last, Karl let the envelope fall to Ava, who tentatively examined its corner.

This one had already been opened.

Ava widened the flap and freed the pages.

WELCOME LAZLO MUNDT

"Who's Lazlo Mundt?" they asked in layers.

Muffled bangs came from outside.

"What's that?" Karl moved forward to the building's door.

Passing – a man, an Asian man –

Arm out, heavy black pistol in his hand.

"Get down!" Karl pulled Ava down below the window slat.

"What is it?"

"Somebody with a gun."

The man fired two shots. He stood not five feet from the building's entrance. The crack of the discharge boomed in the campus quadrant.

Karl got an eye above the slat. The man was shooting like a professional, taking his time, arm straight and face without fear. He wore a crème-colored suit.

Another shot. The smoke from the gun floated and mixed with the fog and mist.

"I can't see what he's shooting at," said Karl and raised his body higher.

Ava pulled him back by the shoulders. "Get down, you idiot!"

Away from the building, the next shot was distant. They heard the sting of the bullet at it lodged in the brick. *It's a shootout.* Karl's mind raced and with of plan – race out the door and tackle the Asian man from the side; run back upstairs to Henry Dodge's office; cover Ava. She gripped his hand, he could feel his muscles responding, cramping. He shook her loose.

Two more shots outside. One from the man, one from afar. This bullet landed in the trees, invisible. Karl craned once more, despite Ava's pleas. "I know that man," he realized.

The man broke from his stance and began to walk, as a robot, around the side of the building.

Karl opened the door by pushing on the crossbar.

"Where are you going, Karl! Stay inside."

"I know that man," he repeated and pushed the door fully open.

Ava grabbed hold of Karl's coattail. They went out into the fog and stepped between the bushes lining the walls.

"That man was at my lawyer's office," whispered Karl as they moved. "I rode in an elevator with him."

At the bend of the brick they saw the Asian man once more. Arm up he fired another round. Karl and Ava followed the point of his pistol to the target – an identical man in a black suit, who stood across the university's drive. This twin, too, held a pistol perfectly.

The two men stopped their firing. They were not more than twenty yards apart. One more shot by either of them would kill.

They began to shout at each other.

Japanese? Korean? Chinese?

Karl didn't know.

For a split second, it was over. They looked about to run into each other's arms.

But then it changed.

A hail of bullets came from each man's pistol. Bullets shattered the windshields of cars parked on the drive. A stray pierced the window of the building behind Ava's head. Both men dropped to their knees and one kept on shooting. Riddled and dead, they flopped face first into the ground – one on the grass, the other face first onto the tar of the drive, smashing every bone.

"Fuck!" exclaimed Karl, his hand to his mouth.

Ava turned away, horrified. She moved into Karl's body and held him rigidly.

People came out of hiding then – people who must have been witnesses to everything. Into the growing rain, young

students, men and women, gathered on the periphery. One kid came forward and kicked the man in the street's gun clear of the body, as if he half-expected the dead to rise. Angry as before. Murderous as ever.

Karl and Ava could hear their voices – their plans for phoning the police and calling the nightly television news. From their vantage by the bushes, they could see it all. They rose up from their crouched positions, together, embracing. At last, awkwardly, they separated.

"I was in an elevator with that man," Karl asserted a second time.

Just then, they saw something strange. There was one lone young man in a long black raincoat. He wasn't with the other students. He was walking away from the crime – very quickly, hands in pockets, stolen glances over his shoulder to make sure he was not being followed.

Both knew this man must be...

Lazlo Mundt.

"That's him," said Karl. "I bet you a million dollars he's involved."

His face was young, early twenties, with dark stubble lining his face and twisted curls of hair enveloping his ears. Karl fixed on the boy's eyes – as black as the raincoat he wore and wildly moving in their sockets – up and down, left and right, stricken.

The boy took off running, wildly hurtling himself towards the looming university library. At the crisscrossing concrete walkways, the boy vanished, out of sight.

Ava grabbed Karl's hand and dragged him. "Can you run with me?"

Karl shook his head. He couldn't. His heart.

She broke from Karl's and ran, full-speed, after this Lazlo Mundt. Karl remained outside the Human Geography building. He dug in his pockets for the nitroglycerin tablets, the bulge of the bottle, touching that and the cigarette pack beside. One foot out, then another, he picked up speed and reached the university's main plaza, the lawn widened and the fog faded into the trees.

Into the silent passageways of the library, Karl marched the rows in search of Ava or this Lazlo Mundt. A flash of confusion, of abandonment, burst in his mind like fireworks.

He thought of his wife, missing, and of Ava, separated from him two times in two days. Unlike the night before, Karl stung with sadness instead of anger.

He heard a panicked, whispered voice.

"Don't arrest me! Please don't arrest me!"

Karl doubled-back two rows and shot down to the end.

Ava had cornered the boy in a narrow enclave.

Lazlo Mundt was in tatters – the muscles of his face continued to expand and contract, displaying a dozen emotions. His hands shook and he appeared stricken. "It wasn't me. Not me – no way." The young man said into his shoulder, only to be pulled back straight by the determined Ava.

"You're Lazlo Mundt, aren't you?"

"That's my name, that's my name, that's my name."

Mundt, at the sight of Karl, shrunk even further into a fetal ball.

Karl took Mundt harshly by the coat collar. "What's going on?" he demanded.

Ava pulled Karl's arm free and blocked him from another slicing attack.

"I didn't give them those letters," Mundt said through teeth, "no, they just found them and then, and then, well, they had guns, fucking guns. Did you see? They just started shooting, BAM BAM!"

Karl pushed and tried to get his fist into Mundt's chest, to nail him to the window, but Ava again intercepted by placing herself between them.

"Let me go!" protested Mundt, this time raising the volume of his voice above library etiquette.

Karl checked over his own shoulder. No one had heard the loudness or, if they had, no one was coming. He backed off a few pounds of pressure, allowing Ava to get fingers under his Mundt's knuckles and pry them loose from the enclave's window. The boy

wanted out. He would hop out the first floor transom if they would let him.

"Karl, please. This isn't helping."

Karl held up the typed page from Mundt's red envelope. "What do you know about *these*?" he hissed at Mundt.

"What do *you* know?" Mundt shot back.

"Don't get smart..."

"I'm an idiot," said Mundt, going limp, "a goddamn dimwit without sense of *anything*, easily confused, not to be trusted with the simplest errands, oh sure, sure, I go to a good school, but I'm an idiot. I don't like letters. I don't like stamps. My father – he's an ambassador. You run after me and I run away; it's a *survival* instinct. I didn't get to be twenty-three with only lucky breaks, you know? I had to cut a few corners, make some wise choices. Wise, wise, wise. All of 'em. All of 'em wise."

"Shut up!" Ava held out her index finger and scanned their little corner of the library. "Shut up, shut up." Mundt's mouth continued to move, though no sound came out. "Shut up," Ava said again, with less force.

Tears welled in the boy's black eyes.

Ava switched on her motherly powers. She sat beside Mundt on the windowsill and smiled, letting her fingers gently fall on his shoulders. Her quiet ways worked charms on the boy, who, if he were even slightly human, surely recognized the beauty of her face. "Lazlo Mundt," she began, saying his name as if sweet honey, "who were those two men?"

"John Wayne."

"Ha ha, very funny," snapped Karl.

"No, really. John Wayne. John and Wayne Chen."

Ava touched Lazlo's shoulder. "You said they each got a letter..."

"Just now. We were coming across the city to find my brother—"

Ava dropped her hand. A bell went off. "You're brother?"

"Fenton. He goes to school here. I go to a different school. I came to find him. Can't. No clue where he is. And yesterday, I got a letter. And today, well, I met these John Waynes. I didn't

know they had guns. Twins, you know. Brothers, too. Looking for a sister. Been looking a while, I think."

"How long?" came the question in stereo. The mention of a long hunt struck both Karl and Ava hard in the chest.

The boy shrugged. "Dunno."

Winded, Karl let his body slump. He was suddenly, ferociously tired. *Bad sleep, museum, jail, shootout, this.* The boy talked like a machine – a broken, sputtering recording of himself. "What made them kill each other?" he asked in a whisper.

The boy shrugged again. "Dunno. I could really understand what they said most times."

"Is your father really an ambassador?"

Mundt nodded. "To Australia. But he's home now. In the city. He drinks and smokes cigars. He's ten feet tall and, and, and has a big, big voice that scares your pants off. Yeah yeah. Gravitas. That's him. Gravitas."

"*Lazl*o." Ava returned to soothing. "Was this...your first red envelope?" She pulled the torn envelope from her pocket and waved its scent in front of Mundt's nose.

The boy nodded.

Karl said with bite, impatient, "Where's the other page?"

From the breast pocket of his shirt, Mundt withdrew a crumpled card. "It's a class schedule," he said to Ava, "my brother's." He handed the paper to Ava.

She gave it a quick examination. "One of his instructors is Henry Dodge." She raised her eyes to Karl.

The three of them were lost in the library silence.

"You're staying with us," Ava said at last. Gingerly, she tugged the boy's raincoat sleeve. "Come on. Let's get out of here. They'll be looking for you. And we can't lose you now that we've found you."

The campus was becoming alive with police and ambulances. Even a fire truck. The three traveled the entire width of the city university to avoid the clamor.

An hour later, they finished eating a late supper at a university dive. Seated around a thick table and resting in wobbly chairs, Ava told Lazlo Mundt everything – about her and Karl's

envelopes, their missing loved ones, Karl's trip to the hospital and his bad ticker. She even told Lazlo about Detective Brody Easter, about the arrival of a red envelope when Karl was at a stationhouse, and Karl's document of numbers that eventually sprung him from jail. The last stories were more Karl's to tell than hers, but she detailed them anyway. It was best; she kept her patience. Karl, smoking cigarette after cigarette, would have rushed things.

The boy understood only a little of the story.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, hate the police, hate them, yes...but why keep us from them?" said Mundt, his vocal flightiness returning, his knee bobbing, his twitching fingers and over-active manners grating on Karl.

"We don't know," answered Karl, without inflection. "Look, kid, we're being played be somebody or some group and it's going to stop. This Henry Dodge – he's getting a visit from all three of us tomorrow. What time is your brother's class?"

Lazlo read the schedule, flat on the table in front of him. "Nine in the morning, oh, but I'm a late sleeper. I'll never make it in time. And I checked the whole campus for my brother. Missing since Monday, so says a source – did I tell you that? Yes, I did. Yes, I did. My father wanted me to check up on Fenton. He's got a tracer on him. He doesn't show for classes and there are always questions. Fenton's got a special friend who follows him and gives reports to my father. Everyone has to look out for each other. Mundts have a pact, like a negotiated agreement – Dad loves pacts – he's an ambassador. Australia? Oh, but I've said that. Do you think I can get more coffee—?"

"No!" said both Ava and Karl, but Lazlo steamrollered on.

"Waiter! I snapped my fingers, but he didn't hear me. A sheep. A sheep. They're everywhere on these campuses. I'm from across town at City College. Good school. No – GREAT school. Didn't have the grades for this place. My brother's the brain. But he's got that guy who follows him. Did I say that? Dad hired a man to check up on him every week, make sure he was turning up for class, taking good notes, passing tests. Fenton's got a few – wheeeee! – mental problems."

"You don't say," nodded Karl dryly.

"Yeah, I'm the normal one in the family. Can you BELIEVE it? I've got my nose in the books and that makes Dad real darn happy. He's back in town. Did I tell you that? A great privilege to be asked to check on Fenton. He coulda done it himself, if he had the time. But being an ambassador. You know how it is. It's like being a doctor or, or, or, or a trash collector. You can't take one day off – not one *hour*. People will die. People get killed. You know people are killed every day in this city – grandmas, children–" Mundt, not completely devoid of tact, saw the sting on Ava's face and rolled in a different direction. "Fenton's a bit of a drinker. Likes to go to parties. Women love him. He's as good-looking as me. We're two years apart. He's older. Mom's a teacher. She moved and I haven't seen her in years but I get reports. Dad reads me letters. Sometimes I think he's written them himself. Crazy kook. Being an ambassador goes to your head." Full stop, Lazlo smiled at them both as if withholding a punch line. At last, he downed his water glass in full until empty. "Waiter!" he called.

"That does it!" Karl said, decided. He stubbed out his dwindling cigarette. He dropped a five-dollar bill on the table and stood to leave the restaurant.

"Wait!" called Ava, but she was just a fly in his ears until he was well down the sidewalk. Ava and Lazlo had caught up with him and trailed at either arm. "Where are you going?"

"Back to my apartment. I smell like a jail cell and I want to go to bed." Karl lit a cigarette and wondered how he might catch at taxi in this part of town.

"What are *we* supposed to do?"

Karl turned to Ava. "Do what you like. Go home and sleep." He gave Lazlo an off-hand glance. "You got a place to sleep, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, sure."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow at Dodge's doorstep."

Ava blocked his way. An empty taxi turned the corner and Karl moved to signal it. Ava pushed his hand down and waved the driver past.

Karl gripped Ava's shoulders.

"What do you WANT from me?"

"I want your help!"

"Ava, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I can't keep my head on straight. I just saw two people shoot each other to death. I'm feeling a little powerless right now."

"But you're not!" she shouted at Karl. "We have to stick *together*. You promised. Someone *wanted* the three of us to meet, don't you *see*? There might be a dozen more people in this city with these envelopes. All I know is every one leads me closer to Noah. Please!" Ava began to weep tears of frustration. "Don't *leave us,* Karl." She changed her tone to anger and raised a finger. "I got you out of *jail*! I waited for you at the *hospital*. The police have known about my son for six days now and they don't even *call* me. You're not leaving my side for one minute, Karl." She reached out and clamped Lazlo's arm; the boy made a sound. "You either," she said to him. "We're sticking together day and night until we find everyone we love."

Karl reached into his jacket, pulled his pack, and lit a fresh cigarette, discarding the spent match into the rainwater of the gutter. Then, defiantly, he raised his hand to signal a fresh taxi. A bright yellow one appeared, heading in their direction.

Ava's hand moved quickly to Karl's front jacket pocket and she snatched from inside his last document – the advertisement for the Gentlemen's Club, The Silver Pony. "Here," she said, waving it in front of him. "Remember the last time you threw away a clue! You ended up in jail. Maybe this time there's no magical sheet of numbers to get you out. I think by now they've taught us to not ignore ANYTHING!"

Her last word was a scream. It shook Karl in his shoes.

The taxi driver spotted Karl's signal and steered to the curb. Karl yanked the taxi's squeaking door ajar.

"Give me that," he said to Ava and made a grab for The Silver Pony advertisement.

She clutched the black and white page to her chest, but in only seconds surrendered, knowing her actions were futile. She handed Karl his page then hid her face.

Lazlo floated in confusion.

But Karl didn't shut the taxi door.

"Get in," he said. "Both of you."

Ava lit up and did as she was told, dragging Lazlo with her.

Lined along the backseat, the three shook with the road. Karl gave instructions to the driver. "My apartment," he said and gave the cross-streets. "We've got some time to kill before this joint opens," he explained to the Ava and Lazlo while waving The Silver Pony's advertisement.

As Karl showered, he could listen to Lazlo's chatter through the walls. Though he couldn't hear the exact point, Karl knew it was more of the same – rants and nonsequiters, admissions and roundelay. He heard this tide of mumbled words, endlessly drowning Ava (who said nothing,) and thanked his stars that he wasn't in the room.

His solitary life – so quiet since moving into his father's apartment – had become a preferred choice. Though his wife was never a loud woman, being a city official meant a constant parade of guests, telephone calls, and interruptions.

Suddenly, he felt very lonely.

He wished his wife were with him in the small apartment bathroom, brushing her teeth as he showered. Karl pictured her shape through the foggy glass of the shower stall. He wanted to ask her for a towel, but she wasn't paying him any mind. She was telling him of her day. His wife's voice was sweet, stopping only to spit out the toothpaste and give a final rinse to her brush.

"Isn't that interesting, honey?" she says.

"Can I have my towel?" he asks.

But she never hears.

"What are you two talking about?" Karl asked, standing in his plaid bathrobe and rifling his closet for something befitting a Gentlemen's Club.

"Lazlo was just telling me about his brother," Ava said with a warm smile. She patted the boy's leg. "He sounds wonderful."

When he was near to the efficiency kitchen, Karl motioned for Ava to join him in private.

Ava switched on the black and white television to the late evening news, to distract the boy. It was something she may have done with Noah. "Why don't you watch a little TV, Lazlo? I'll be back in a moment." Lazlo curled up on the couch, content.

"He's fucking nuts," started Karl when the two were out of range.

"Most likely."

"Do you think he's acting?"

"No. I don't."

"He could be another Brody Easter."

"I doubt it."

"You don't really believe all that garbage about his father being an ambassador?"

Ava hushed Karl with her hand. Lazlo, she could see through the crack of the partition, was turning up the sound on the black and white. "Okay, Karl, I'm not sure about the ambassador part. If it weren't for the red envelope, I wouldn't even really think he had a brother."

"What? You just called his brother 'wonderful.'"

"He does sound wonderful. But he doesn't sound much like a real person. A bit more like one of Noah's imaginary friends. Slightly idealized."

"Then he's lying!"

"No. I believe him." She could see that her endorsement wasn't having much effect on Karl. "For now, he's better with us. I'm sure he'll come in handy at some point. And what would we do with him otherwise? Even if he's a faker, he's some kind of connection, right? It's because of him we know the time Henry Dodge's class starts."

"We knew his office hours."

"Yes, but he didn't have hours on Thursday or Friday, did he? We would have had to crash the university records department or wait until next week to see the man." Ava grew intense; she pushed past Karl and deep into the kitchen, glancing out the rear window. "I, for one, couldn't have waited that long. I'd go insane. If it weren't for all this business with the

documents, I'd have lost it. The pursuit of them is the only thing that's keeping me sane."

She turned back to Karl, framed by the blowing curtains of the kitchen window.

"I've got to find Noah. I have to. When he vanished on Saturday, I...thought that he had just gotten lost. That's all. Lost. It's a big city. Maybe he turned down the wrong corner of our street coming back from the park. Maybe he was on our stoop and, and chased a ball too far." Ava's face began to weaken, letting go. "Then, on Sunday, I thought he had been taken. That he had been...murdered. Then I got the first envelope, the second, the third... It's a trail. It will lead me to him. I know it. I have to follow." Ava pointed to the other side of the kitchen's partition. "And that kid – that crazy kid on your couch – he's going to help me." She studied Karl's expression, his stony silence. "And you're going to help me, too."

Karl found himself nodding, though he didn't want to. "Yes," he agreed. What he wanted more than anything was to be solo again. He shouldn't have phoned her from the jail. He should have let Mr. Rabassa do his work, get him out on a technicality, for there was no evidence linking him to his wife's disappearance. He, like Ava, knew the documents were a trail and he should follow it. He did not, however, want company. "We're not an army," he said in Ava's ear as she brushed past him, returning to the main room of the apartment.

Ava took a seat beside Lazlo, who sat scratching his fuzzy hair. "It's almost eleven o'clock," she said. "We should leave for that club."

The three took a bus to the warehouse district. It was a straight shot from Karl's apartment. Karl had settled on a tight sweater with a fuzzy collar. After the rain, the temperature was in the lower 50s. The sweater, with his wool trousers, was comfortable and seemed a fashionable middle ground. They had debated whether this particular Gentlemen's Club was formal attire; Ava doubted it. "Who would advertise on a handbill if it were that exclusive?" Ava and Lazlo remained dressed as before. Lazlo in his black raincoat would fit in well with the crowd, Karl

assumed with a hidden smirk. Ava with her high style would blend anywhere but a foundry. She was an attractive sophisticate, a valuable currency in the city.

The bus dropped them at dark cross-streets underneath the train tracks. They had said little on the trip and the trend continued for several minutes more. Between two dark storefronts was a single neon sign blinking THE SILVER PONY at strange intervals.

When they reached the spot underneath the neon, Lazlo said loudly and unnecessarily, "Heh! Yeah, yeah. No door. Sure, sure."

A cheap, flat board blocked the way inside.

Ava touched the barricade. "It has to be open," she said, "the sign's on."

Karl checked his Supreme Running Watch: 12:15 AM.

They looked up again at the blinking pattern. THE SILVER PONY. THE SILVER. PONY. PONY. SILVER THE SILVER PONY. At that instant, faraway sounds touched their ears. Men's laughter. Ava rounded the warehouse and peered down a seedy alleyway. "Here," she said and pointed at a propped fire door.

Karl led the single-file parade, though he didn't like it. His shoes were soaked by rain-puddles and the narrowness of the passage elevated his heart rate.

When they reached the alley's end, two large men came out of the shadows of the doorway, both in black jackets. White masks covered their faces.

"Boo!" they shouted before crumbling into cackle laughter.

Karl, Ava and Lazlo jumped back in the alley. But then they slowly realized.

They were bouncers – one held a hand stamp, the other a gray cash box.

"Welcome to The Silver Pony," said the one with the stamp though the sanded features of his plain white Halloween mask. "Cover charge is ten bucks a person." The bouncer said to Karl, and then let his eyes drift over Karl's shoulder. Out of the shadows and into the trickle of door light, the man could now see

Karl's friends. "Hold up, hold up. We'll need an ID on that one," he said to Karl, with a point to Lazlo.

"And no women," said the second bouncer with the cash box, half-hidden behind the big arms of the first.

"No women?" Ava was stunned.

"Not unless you're naked." The cash box bouncer smiled a self-congratulatory smile. He winked to his partner.

Karl turned to Ava. "IF A MAN, BE A MAN," he whispered, reiterating the exact phrase from his last document. Karl then reached into his wallet and plucked out a fifty-dollar bill, handing it over. "This is for all three of us. All three. Hear me? And she keeps her clothes." He hoped his voice didn't sounds unsure, because inside his head, his bribe rang thin – with a heart condition and easily beaten.

Cash Box came forward, took the money, and gave Karl back a twenty and a ten. "Sorry," he said, no further explanation offered.

Karl turned to Ava. In a hush, he said, "What do you want to do?"

"I'm not stripping!"

"Good choice. What do you want to do?" he asked again.

"We'll keep her company," offered Cash Box.

Karl turned. "What?"

"Sure. She's pretty. And we can be charming."

Karl smirked. "I don't think so."

"No, seriously." The first bouncer's tough voice cracked a little. He reached up and removed his mask. Underneath, his baby face revealed, he gave a devious smile and a wink to Ava. "We're off-duty cops. We just do this for some extra pay."

"I don't believe you," said Karl.

"We don't believe you," repeated Lazlo from the rear ranks.

From their pockets, as if rehearsed, the two bouncers pulled out their badges. "See?" said one. "No fucking lie. Your wife's safe as kittens."

"She's not my wife," Karl corrected.

Cash Box winked. "Gotcha."

"She's not that either." It didn't matter; Karl's words were wasted on them. He pocketed his change and turned again to Ava. "A little help here? I didn't even want to come, but now that I'm here, I don't want you standing outside."

"No, I'll be all right."

Karl turned to Mundt. "You wait with her."

"You already paid for me."

"I'll get it back."

"But I want to go. Sure, sure."

Karl gave a shake of disbelief with his head. "Great, a horny fucking kid," he grunted.

Ava peered over Karl's shoulder at the two smiling bouncers. "I'll be okay," she said, quiet but certain. "You go in. See what you have to see to get us one step closer."

Karl turned his back on the bouncers. In a soft voice, he reminded Ava, "Hey, I just saw two people killed tonight. We could be next."

"They shot each other. Don't worry, I have no plans to kill you tonight, Karl." Ava put her palm to Karl's chest. She didn't realize she was touching the zipper in his skin, his scar. "I'll be all right," she said once more.

"You comin' or goin'?" said Cash Box, impatient.

At the end of the alley, three businessmen in suits and neckties appeared, laughing, heading for the entrance.

Karl pulled out the advertisement. "This get me anything?" he asked the first bouncer.

"Sure. One free drink."

Karl allowed his hand to be stamped. He crossed into the dim entranceway of the club, not looking back to Ava, or to see if Lazlo followed.

It was like entering a haunted house.

Music played under his feet. The boards shook with the sounds of funk. A rickety banister lit by a hanging utility light led him further down into the foundation of the converted warehouse. A string of red light bulbs wrapped themselves around a silver pony, a sculpture that sat squarely in the middle of a dance floor. Folding chairs separated by dividers surrounded. Each sectional

had an open front and rear. The rear had room only for a small drink table and standing ashtray; the front had a view of the pony, and the dancers.

Karl entered the pinwheel.

A topless hostess wearing tight bellbottom jeans stood at the end of the ramp and escorted him to a folding chair. She asked him what he wanted to drink and he said whiskey, both of them shouting over the din. The girl, no more than nineteen and with cherry-colored hair and voluptuous build, vanished into the smoky interior of the club. Because of the walls, he could not see the location of the actual bar. He was at a disadvantage; the walls gave him tunnel vision to the center stage.

He also couldn't see any of the other customers in the pinwheel except two men directly across the wheel and within his sightlines. Those men, too, were only a dream, bathed in the red light of the pony and the cloudiness of the room. A third station was empty.

At the end of the song, another funk number blasted into the room, this one a notch higher in volume. Karl laid the black and white advertisement down on the table as payment for his drink. A minute later, his hostess returned. Her breasts draped in front of his face as she handed him his whiskey, wrapped in a Silver Pony napkin. "Enjoy the show," she said directly into Karl's ear. Her voice made his neck tingle.

Karl set his drink on the tiny table then reached for his cigarettes. Lighting up, he spotted Lazlo Mundt being seated by the same topless hostess into a chair in the empty station.

The kid beamed ear-to-ear, a smiling dunce. "Son of an ambassador, my ass," scoffed Karl as he took a drag.

Karl had reached the end of the world. He had been to strip clubs, sure, go-go bars and topless bars – all in his youth, before marriage. But he had never been a place so dripping with dirty-old-man stink. The three businessmen who had followed them into The Silver Pony were no cleaner because of their neckties. Red envelopes did not lure them here. *Or did they*, considered Karl. *No, probably not.*

The show started.

Dancers, three of them.

Dressed in black leather, they exposed themselves without much care or choreography. All three women were voluptuous, Karl admitted, but none had the qualities of his wife – or even of Ava Moon, a matching beauty. The girls rotated in front of the pinwheel of customers, giving a semi-private show to each, containing elements of vamping, flashing, and masturbation.

Karl lit a second cigarette, then a third.

Halfway through that one, he realized he was growing bored. And anxious. He finished his whiskey. Aside from a test of his moral code, The Silver Pony seemed to offer little for his search.

"Would you like another drink?"

The hostess had returned to his side. She held her hands on her hips and stood straight.

"What's a nice kid like you doin' in a place like this?" asked Karl. The funk music obliterated every word.

"Coming right up," said the girl. She took his whiskey glass and left his sight.

Karl returned his eyes to the floorshow. One of the vixens was doing a bump-and-grind for Mundt. The boy was behaving himself, Karl supposed, though his hands were on the dancer's hips, probably a violation of some rule.

The cigarette smoke in front of Karl's face was hit by a sudden wind.

He turned.

A red envelope had been innocently left on the tiny table.

With his fingers flat, he slid the envelope into his lap and touched his nose. His eyes went to Lazlo, embracing the second dancer, her nipples lapping the boy's face.

When Karl felt the presence of the topless girl beside him, he looked up. She had just placed the new whiskey at the table's center. She was frozen. Karl thought she was flirting, positioning herself for extra tip, for a smile, but her gaze was squarely on Karl's new letter.

"Where did you get that?" she shouted over top of the music.

"What?" he said, attempting to read her lips.

"Did you take that from me?"

"No." Karl shook his head, confused. "From you? It just appeared on the table." Karl gestured to the whiskey. "Someone must have—"

The hostess leaned into his ear.

"I get one of those every few days," she said.

His eardrum buzzed with the words. Her breath was hot and her body warm. "You do?"

It was Karl's turn at the pinwheel. A dancer was removing her silk scarf and exposing the top of her pubic hair, Gypsy-style. The dancer tried to shoo the hostess away with a playful-yet-irritated slap of the scarf, but the redhead did not budge.

"Yeah, fifteen or so by now."

"What do they say?" shouted Karl.

"I only opened one," she answered. "It didn't make any sense."

Karl stood up. The dancer moved off to the right, to the next station of the pinwheel, with devil eyes for her interfering co-worker. Karl took the hostess by the wrist and, for a moment, the girl grew scared. "Who put this on my table?" he asked, knowing the answer would do him no good. The girl shrugged. She hadn't seen. It could be any of the customers, any of the employees, anyone quick and at the end of the chain. "Listen," he started, "there's a lot to tell you about these—" Karl shook the red envelope in the space between their bodies. "But I can't tell you with the music so loud. Can you come outside?"

The redhead wrinkled her nose and the signal was obvious – she didn't trust Karl. He was a conniving customer, the type she had seen all too often.

Karl pointed across the pinwheel to Lazlo Mundt, now free of dancers and smiling like an idiot. Karl waved the boy over using the red envelope. "See that kid? He's with me!" shouted Karl. She let her trust dim even more. "Don't worry," Karl assured, "he seems harmless. If you want to know about these envelopes, meet us outside." He retreated to the exit ramp, leaving the hostess to stand dumb. Right before the bass kicked in loud at the start of the next funk number, Karl got out, "We're all missing somebody!"

Past the warehouse door, Karl and Lazlo were relieved to discover Ava as they had left her, in the company of the two bouncers. They had cozied up, surrounding her on either side of the wall, masks on the tops of their heads.

Ava flipped her bob haircut to the side and beamed at Karl. "They're going to help!" she exclaimed.

Karl looked doubtful that this was true.

"They're going to check on Noah's case!"

"Sure, doll, that's our sworn duty," said Cash Box, with upturned lip. "We're just foot patrol, but we know detectives. Detectives that know detectives. We'll push the wheels a little." He gave a slap to the back of the other bouncer, congratulatory.

Ava waved a small piece of paper. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Absolutely," said Cash Box, sleazy, "you do that."

Ava, oblivious to their motives, let Karl take her arm and turn her towards the alley's end. She immediately noticed the red envelope clutched in Karl's hand. "What's in it!" she said, excited.

"I haven't opened it yet."

"Another one," chimed in Lazlo. "Crazy world, crazy world, nutty, spectacular. Those girls, wow. Those girls. Every of them the most beautiful I've ever seen. So great, so great!" The boy rubbed his hands together. "I want to go back some time with my brother. He'd love it. Love it. Crazy love it."

At the end of the alley, they stopped under a street lamp. Karl turned the red envelope on its side, prepared to break the seal. In their ears, they heard the thrust of a door and a tumble of voices. ("Hey, hey, where ya going, Jodi?" "Slow down, you'll break a heel.") The cherry-haired hostess – denim jeans and heels, bright pink sweater (no bra) – was making a beeline for the three of them.

"Who's that?" asked Ava, reading Karl's face. Yes, he recognized the girl, it said. "Found more than that envelope inside, did you?"

"She was my server."

"Is that a code?" she asked slyly.

The hostess planted herself in front of Karl, with quick sights to Lazlo (smiling) and Ava (demur.) "His name's Jeff," she

confessed. "He's my ex-boyfriend from two years ago. We kept in touch. Then he stopped calling."

"Jodi?" Karl confirmed her overheard name.

"Yes. Jodi Fuller."

"This is Ava Moon. Lazlo Mundt. I'm Karl Banswick. Welcome to our little club." Down the length of the alleyway, back towards the neon sign, Karl called to Cash Box and the other bouncer. "Say! You're cops, you'd know this." The two had put back their masks. They stepped forward and bent their ears. "How many people go missing in the city every year?"

"I dunno," called out the first bouncer, "coupla hundred?"

Karl met the eyes of the other three, letting this number sink in. In his hands, the thick paper made his palms sweat.

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

SEVENTH DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

He held it all the way to Jodi's car – a beat up Vega wagon, color to match to the day's events: blood red. The four piled into the tight seats – women in the front, men in the rear.

"Hey, look, there's another one," said Jodi with a point. Under her wiper blade was one more red envelope.

"That could be for me," said Ava at the sight of it, her voice tinged with fear.

"Or me!" added Lazlo, with a cackle.

"Ladies first," Karl said then checked his Supreme Running Watch. It was nearly 1 in the morning. Exhaustion washed heavy onto his bones. The whiskey, the music, the awful, terrible day. He thought about that early morning appointment with the mysterious Henry Dodge.

Jodi rolled down the driver's side window and brought the message inside. Then, she callously tossed the new envelope between the seats. The eyes of the others followed it until it landed on top of two other red envelopes, covered in cigarette ash and dotted with footprints, coffee stains, and rainwater.

In horror, Ava swept up Jodi's discards – holding the red letters tightly to her chest. "How dare you!" she scolded. "These are important! Don't you want to find everyone? Only someone as young and stupid as you could ignore these."

"Hey now," interjected Karl, "you ignored the first one, Ava."

"Yes, but I didn't ignore THREE!"

"That's only some," said Jodi, "the other fourteen are back at my apartment. Oh, and I threw one away by mistake."

"Eighteen! You've gotten EIGHTEEN of these!" Two thoughts swam into Ava – first, that there could be so many clues without an answer, second, that someone could neglect something so important for so long.

"Who are you to judge me?" Jodi snapped back, not intimidated by the older woman's barbwire. "Jeff didn't call for my birthday, so I called him and, and his new girlfriend – that bitch Wendy who stole him in the first place – said that he hadn't come home the night before." Jodi turned her face from the others. Biting her thumb, she stared out the car window. Breaking, she threw her hand deep into her purse to find her car key. "How was I supposed to know the envelopes had anything to do with Jeff!" she screamed and jammed the key into the ignition. She revved the motor when it caught. "I thought they were from some creep at The Pony."

Jodi peeled out – fast – letting the tires dig into the gravel underneath the elevated tracks. The Vega kicked into the street and headed south.

Ava, fuming, looked back to Karl, then down at Jodi's envelopes.

Karl dug a cigarette from his coat. Lighting up, he pushed out the smoking window in the rear, flicked an ash into the wind, and started opening his latest red clue. Lazlo watched Karl as if Karl was opening a birthday present. After Karl had given a quick assessment, he handed a single sheet to Ava. No typewritten sentence this time. Just the document.

"What is it?" Jodi had been watching Karl in the rear view mirror.

"It's a missing person's report. On my wife."

City Police

Report of Missing Persons

Form MP23AA7 / D

Dated: 10/12/77

Station: West Hart Boulevard, Precinct 32, Ward 11

OOD: Timothy Weitzel, Sgt.
BADGE: 73D44

Reporting Party: Farzi Rabassa
Occupation: Legal Counsel
Age: 58
Relationship: Acquaintance

Missing Person: Lana Banswick
Occupation: Botanist
Age: Unknown
Last Known Address: 57 Ainsle Street
Missing since: 10/11/77

Ava noticed the name. "Lana," she said softly. "That's pretty. You always call her your wife. I wondered."

Karl shrugged. *Lana. Lana.* His mind exploded with sadness. *Christ, Lana. I'll never find you, will I? This is some sort of horrible test and I'm failing miserably. Aren't I? I'd beat down all the doors in the city if I thought it would do any good. I don't want all this responsibility, you know? Can't anything ever have been easy between us?*

Once, they had been true partners, young and new to marriage. Karl eked out a living doing Ombudsman work for small businesses. Lana was a landscape designer. Unlike Karl's reputation, hers was just beginning to grow. The city had given her traction with a nice new contract. The contract was renewed, and renewed again, until she was promoted to mayor's staff. She would consult on city planning – particularly about finishing touches to the city's concrete veneer. She would supervise crews of workers and was known for putting on overalls and pulling weeds when required. For a wife so obsessed with beauty and color, it was a shock to Karl when she ignored the watering of their own marriage.

Last year – when he struggled with a heart condition and continued to smoke two packs a day, she had said, "You love cigarettes more than me." He assumed she was joking. When he prepared (mentally and physically) for his bypass operation, she was with him. In that month recuperating, her tender care had suddenly ricocheted to indifference. The more removed she became the more he wanted her. He was like a young child needing to be held by a busy mother. It only took a few months to shatter thirteen years. He never saw it coming.

In Jodi Fuller's car, the blackness of the city skyline covered everything. Each told their stories. Karl was finding it difficult to remember all of his documents – what they were and in what order they were received. The library notice, the sales receipt, the carousel coupon, the sheet of numbers – *no, no, the prescription, then the sheet of numbers* – the Silver Pony handbill, and this latest missing person's report. Lazlo had just the one – his brother's

class schedule – so he listed it in one quick bark. Ava knew hers exactly in order: university application, magazine article on the Dutch sculpture, fashion pamphlet, newspaper clipping on depression.

"I'm overdue," said Ava. "I haven't gotten any since Tuesday night, and that was just that reminder to go back to the beginning." Ava ripped into the envelope that was found on Jodi's windshield wiper. She smiled, as if having won a prize, and flashed the first page around for everyone to see. "MOTHER'S ADVICE: LOOK BOTH WAYS," she read. "A mother, that's me. This one is mine."

"Hey, I could have a kid somewhere," said Jodi. Ava gave her a look. "But I don't."

Ava shuffled to the document. "A car advertisement." Slowly, Ava's face changed, from hope to despair. Karl reached into the front seat and put his hand on her shoulder. "Do they have to make the things so fucking vague?" She touched his fingers then slowly withdrew into herself.

Jodi broke the silence with a question. "Where should I go? I thought the three of you had a plan."

The Vega careened over the bridge and entered the residential Northside.

"I have to sleep," said Karl. "Take me home."

"What about this writer you guys are stalking?"

"Henry Dodge!" interjected Lazlo with a slap on the knee.

"I'm sleeping on your floor tonight, Karl," whispered Ava. "I don't want to be alone."

The idea thrilled Lazlo, who overheard. "Can I sleep there, too?" he asked.

Karl surrendered. "I don't care."

"It's so late," said Ava, "and I'm all the way across town. I'd just fall asleep and have to find my way back to you. If you have a bar of soap, I can be ready for Henry Dodge."

"I showered before work," shrugged Jodi. "I guess I'd like to stick with you. Here—" The waitress cocked her head to the other two envelopes, the stained and discarded ones from the

floor of her dusty Vega wagon. "Open those. Tell me what they say."

Ava didn't have the strength. She handed them to Lazlo. "Your turn."

Lazlo didn't hesitate. He shredded both together using his teeth and spit out the ends. Then, he extracted both sets of documents – four pages total. "Coupons," he declared.

Karl took one top page, Ava the other.

"He's right. Coupons. The message says 'LIMITED TIME OFFER.'"

"That's what this one says, too."

Jodi took her eyes from the road for a few seconds to read the outstretched sets of documents – Karl and Ava holding them flat. The Vega swerved off the street's center line and Jodi quickly corrected. "Huh. I thought you said these messages *meant* something."

Karl's apartment was a mess. Before leaving for The Silver Pony, Lazlo had strewn the daily paper all over the floor. He was momentarily embarrassed – not because of Lazlo, the destroyer, or Jodi, whose car was so cluttered, were witnesses; it was because Ava, whose apartment had been luxury, would soon be sleeping on this very floor. He pictured her blue coat and black skirt covered in dust, and it dampened his opinion of himself. When he had lived with his wife, things were tidy and organized. Karl, though, was too tired to exert effort as a maid.

Karl set the timer on his oven for four hours forward – to six o'clock a.m. – and was asleep in a reclining chair the second he closed his heavy eyelids.

Opening his eyes, Karl felt no time had passed – that it had been only minutes. The oven's buzzer drilled in his ear. Karl arose in cramps and pushed the toggle to 'off.' He quickly shaved and threw on a clean shirt, pants, and another tweed jacket from his closet. When he resurfaced, the two women were sitting upright in their places – Ava on the couch, Jodi on the floor next to Lazlo, the boy still dreaming. Jodi gave Lazlo's body a shake. After stiff cups of coffee and a few stale pieces of toast, they were all on their way out the door.

Karl directed Jodi to Banswick Motors, where she parked her Vega away from the shined merchandise.

Karl gave an obligatory wave to Curly. The old man stood in his usual position, hocking papers to stopped cars at the intersection. Karl bought the morning edition and hurriedly flipped through.

TWO DEAD IN CAMPUS GUNFIGHT

The headline was on the back of the Metro section. Karl scanned the article, the three others looking over his shoulder while they stood in the lot.

John and Wayne Chen. Known ties to the Asian mafia. Reason for shooting unknown. John Chen in a protracted court case against the city.

"That explains why he was at the legal offices," noted Karl to the page.

The body of the Chen's sister discovered dismembered in a dumpster overnight. Gang slaying suspected.

In one night, all the Chen siblings had been wiped out.

Karl wadded the paper up and dunked it in a city trash container on the street corner. He pushed his key into the lock of the showroom's main entrance. When he twisted the ring, the door locked – the opposite of his expectation. Face to the glass, he scouted the dim interior of Banswick Motors.

"What is it?" asked Ava.

"The door wasn't locked."

"Well, you were in jail, then at the university, then home, then The Silver Pony. You never closed shop."

"Yeah, but Arturo would have." Karl pushed inward on the door. "Keep your voices down," he instructed with a shush. Reaching, he snapped on the row of fluorescent lights that hung above the showroom's two cars.

Jodi descended on a white Buick as if she had discovered a bag of gold in the center of the room. "Oh, what I wouldn't do for a better car!" she said softly, giving the antenna a hug. Lazlo had drifted to the windows, the racks of popular car magazines, and began doing the same damage to the showroom that he had done to Karl's apartment.

"The light's on," Karl whispered to Ava then pointed to his rear office. Something was different back here. Something had changed. His eyes floated to the master rack of keys – intact and secure. He lifted the gate and passed the counter. His office door was cracked; light sprayed onto the opposite wall.

Ava kept at Karl's heels.

Karl's hand extended toward the office doorknob –

Arturo crossed in front of the open space.

"Arturo!" snapped Karl.

His employee spun to face him. "Mr. Banswick! You're out of jail!"

"That's right."

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed, then opened the office door as wide as it would go.

"What's different in the main office," Karl said with a point over his shoulder, back at the partition. "I can't place it."

Arturo now saw Ava, recognizing her from two days before, then a stranger, now ubiquitous. He answered slowly. "They took the file cabinet. The police."

That was it.

Karl recognized the empty space against the far wall. He had rescued his red envelope booty just in time.

"Why would they take your files?" Ava asked Karl.

"They probably still suspect me. Or they sent the order to confiscate them before I was released from jail and forgot to change it." Karl stood near the blank space. There was a ring of dirt where the cabinet once had stood. "Well this tells me one thing," Karl sighed, "My wife's obviously not come home yet."

"Yes, I don't think so, Mr. Banswick." Arturo headed to the showroom, gesturing. "I come in early to straighten up. I knew today would be hard without any files. And I thought you were still in jail. I knew you would want us open." When Arturo reached the high counter, he spotted Lazlo and Jodi at opposite ends of the waxed floor. He turned to Karl, eyes questioning.

"They're with me," Karl said flatly, just as Lazlo knocked over a stack of magazines, sending them sprawling. Karl rolled his eyes.

Ava moved from the office to help the boy fix the damage.

Jodi waved from behind the wheel of the Buick, a girl in a parade.

Karl turned to Arturo, who remained confused and suspicious. "They're harmless," Karl explained. "Look, I can't tell you anything today, Arturo. Maybe tomorrow." As he spoke, Karl undid the lock on the board of keys and pulled free a tagged ring – the keys to a black Mercedes, the biggest car on the lot. "I'm borrowing a car. We've been using that girl's, but it's a piece of shit. Thanks for everything, by the way. You're doing a wonderful job keeping things running. I won't forget that."

Karl bobbed the keys into his palm, closed on them tight, then pushed his way through the office gate and out onto the floor. With a signal, he gathered his little army and headed for the door.

"Mr. Banswick!" Arturo pursued his boss, tugging the man's his fuzzy tweed jacket. "Is...can I...please, is there anything I can do for you?" The man was practically begging, and it made Karl stop in his tracks.

Jodi was out of the Buick and the magazines were back in their place. Karl watched as Lazlo straightened his back, strangely smiling. When the boy did this, something cleared in Lazlo's eyes.

"Yes," Karl began softly, putting a hand on Arturo's shoulder. "Find out the name of the ambassador to Australia."

Karl pointed to the black Mercedes. "We're taking this car."

Arturo, stifling any objections, pulled the car out using the showroom's expansive side door.

Jodi asked about her Vega; Karl said leave it. Before climbing into the back seat with Lazlo, Jodi rescued her two red envelopes, the expired coupons, the limited time offers, from her car's floorboards and sat with them in her lap. "I want to get the others," she announced, "the ones at my place."

"What?" Karl checked his Jogger's Den wristwatch. Five 'til eight.

"Take me to my apartment," said Jodi. "I have the other envelopes there."

"Why do you need them?"

"Most of them are unopened."

"So?"

"Maybe this guy you're all going to see can help me understand what's in them."

"We can get all those *after* we meet Dodge."

"No," she said, obstinately, "I want them *now*."

Karl groaned. "Okay, how far do you live?"

"Baker Street and Madison."

"But your place is across town!"

"That's okay," she said with a smile, "I bet that Mercedes goes real fast."

Ava came forward to cast her vote. "Henry Dodge's class starts at nine. It will take us at least forty-five minutes to get the campus and find a place to park."

"I don't care. I need to get my envelopes."

Karl checked his watch again. "How long is that class?"

Lazlo reached into his pocket and hurriedly withdrew the crumpled class schedule. "Hour fifteen, hour fifteen," he repeated.

The rubber of his tires squealed as Karl pulled into traffic. Though he couldn't see Arturo in his rearview mirror, Karl knew the man's eyes were on the departing Mercedes. He would bring Arturo into the game later. *Later,* he promised. He liked the man, but there wasn't room for another. Four was plenty.

Jodi's neighborhood was trendy but rough. Her apartment was on the fourth-floor of a faded-brick building. She bounded up the stairs and returned in a dull-orange, tight blouse (with brassiere), wide-bottomed pants, and low-heeled shoes. Her hair was brushed and her eye makeup reset. And in her arms, she carried a small brown grocery bag, the top rolled shut.

"You look great!" said Lazlo as she slid onto the backseat, a waft of sweet perfume touching everyone's noses. "And that was fast!"

"You get used to dressing and undressing fast in my profession."

Karl appreciated the speed. It was fifteen minutes until the start of Henry Dodge's morning class, and they were forty

minutes from the campus. He tried to make up the time by taking the freeway, but it was mangled with traffic.

At a stop, awaiting the turn off, Karl watched Jodi in the rearview mirror. She stared into the interior of the brown bag and fingered the envelopes.

Ava caught Karl's distracted eyes. She turned in her seat to Jodi. "Aren't you going to open them?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now. Maybe see what they say before you show them to Dodge."

Jodi considered. At last, she shook her head. "No, I don't think so. No." The girl was willful in her ignorance, and, for a moment, Karl and Ava envied her.

"Have you got your envelopes?" Ava asked Karl.

"Shit. I left that box back at the apartment." He wouldn't have time to go back. He cursed his own forgetfulness. "I just have that one. In my pocket. The last one. You?"

Ava tapped her temple. "Only here." Her gaze went back to Jodi. The girl blankly looked out of the passenger window. Ava gave herself an appraisal. "I look a wreck."

Karl tapped her knee. "No, you're golden."

"I feel like we're off to see the wizard," she joked.

"We are."

The Mercedes hit the university just before ten o'clock. Through the maze of small roads and parked cars, Karl's began to sweat. They might not make it in time – be forced to either scour the campus for Dodge's location, or risk losing him altogether until next week.

After parking in a faculty zone, the four headed for the Human Geography building and located the numbered classroom on the second floor.

At the open door, they heard the low, mumbled speech of a man. To Karl, though he knew it not to be true, the man's voice sounded familiar, a voice he had known long ago – a resemblance to his dead father, perhaps – as the speaker had the same clipped cadence.

"I'll look," Karl volunteered.

He craned his neck over the doorframe. Three-dozen chairs, all occupied by students, came into sight. Half of the students immediately noticed Karl – his graying black hair, his unkempt tweed, and his exhausted eyes. The deep voice continued to lecture. Karl moved further into the frame and could only see the gesturing arms of the professor, not the full body.

"Dr. Dodge?" interrupted a young girl at the end of the row; she wore a flower dress and had roly-poly features. Dodge stopped speaking. The girl softly pointed to Karl, who madly waved that she should stop. But it was too late. Karl could hear the heavy steps of the professor's shoes.

"May I help you?"

Karl was face-to-face with Dr. Henry Dodge.

Tha man's face was much older than it had been on the flap of his book. He was twenty-five years past Karl. His hair had gone shock white. His glasses had widened on his wrinkled face. But it was, most certainly, him.

Dodge could not see the three others stacked behind Karl.

Karl reached into his pocket and withdrew his lone red envelope. "I've come about *these*," he declared. Out of the corner of his eye, Karl detected Ava's step forward. "And so have they." Karl directed Dodge's attention to the others.

The professor leaned forward.

Jodi steered between Karl and Ava and opened her bag for Dodge to look inside.

Lazlo bounced on each leg and rubbed his hands together.

Weary, Dodge's eyes returned to his classroom full of students. Without changing his voice, Dodge announced, "We'll be ending early today. I'll see you next week." The students – some happy, others confused (including the girl in the flower dress) – all filed-out the narrow door and, for a time, made a river between Henry Dodge and the new arrivals. "Sit."

Karl, Ava, Jodi, and Lazlo took chairs in the first row, not speaking, not objecting, as if they were machines.

"You are the third group in five years. The last one had eleven people, so you're the smallest. I've come to expect these

surprise visits. But I never really get used to it: people showing up on my doorstep...with *those*..."

Dodge flicked a finger in the direction of Karl's red envelope. It was placed on the writing desk in front of Karl, partially covered by his flattened hand. Karl looked down to the evidence, oddly ashamed, then fished out his pack of cigarettes.

"There's no smoking in here."

Sheepish, Karl closed the pack.

Dodge continued. "Tell me who's missing."

"My wife," said Karl.

"My son," said Ava.

"My brother," said Lazlo.

"My ex-boyfriend," said Jodi.

Dodge nodded, understanding. He leaned against the chalkboard, covered with diagrams and hand-drawn globes, the remnants of his instruction. He did not mind the white power dusting his matching shirt or his pale fingers. "For me," Dodge said solemnly, "it was my sister. She disappeared off the coast in summertime. Everyone assumed she had drowned, but then I started to get documents."

"Did you follow?" asked Ava.

"Of course. Well, let me take a step back. The first few, I did not. I read them, but didn't understand the connection. I thought it was a prank. But around the third or fourth envelope, I was on my way. And I found other people, too. Like you have." Dodge silently counted them in their chairs. "One." "Two." "Three." "Four." "Four of you. People seem to clump together." Dodge raised his eyebrows.

"Did you tell the police?" Karl's own troubles with the law came to mind.

"I told *everyone*," said Dodge. "It was a waste of time. I even went to the newspapers, detailed my whole story to a man I thought worked for the Daily. A few days later, I phoned to follow up. That reporter had been a phantom."

"I had one of those," smiled Karl, flashing back to Brody Easter. "Mine pretended to be a detective."

"A liar!" shouted Lazlo. "A big fat liar LIAR!"

Dodge took the boy with good humor. "The variety to humanity is something I teach in this class. We are all...very different...but we are connected. As the four of you are. As the six of us were. As those eleven before you had been, that other group. Someone wants certain combinations of people together at this stage and, well, I didn't question it. My time in the field of Human Geography has made me more patient with coincidence."

"Karl's read your book," chimed Ava, with a point to the neighboring desk. "It was one of his clues."

Dodge was surprised. "Really? Which book? I have several."

"'Maps – The Seven Keys To Cartography.'"

"*Shit*," declared Dodge. "I was a little upstart. Full of piss. Did you like it?"

Karl grew shy. "I only read a bit."

"Shit," repeated the professor.

Dodge pushed himself from his chalkboard, taking a trail of white dust with him.

"You know it gets harder from here, don't you? So far, I bet you've just been chasing a few clues. You've been given a few...helpful objects. Somewhere between five and ten envelopes is my guess." Dodge waited for nods from Ava and Karl. Lazlo and Jodi admitted nothing, so the professor turned on them. "What's your story?" he asked Jodi.

The girl opened her bag, slightly tearing the paper at its top edge.

"Didn't you see?" she said. "They're not opened. I only opened the first one I ever got. I just kept throwing them in a pile. Then we all opened the last ones together. Just last night." Jodi's face slowly melted, as if confessing a great crime. "I haven't got any new ones in a week."

The authority of Henry Dodge, which had served him well with his neglectful students, beat down on Jodi and made her appear small in her writing desk. The man had an expression of disapproval on his wrinkled face.

"Can you help me understand them?" Jodi held out the bag in hope.

Instead, Dodge waved her away. "I cannot help you with your envelopes. Nor can I help you search. Each document is uniquely tailored to you, to your life. To the habits, sufferings, yearings, educations, and inclinations of you and those you have lost. Even if I were to spend months in your company, I doubt I could answer very much."

Dodge took two steps toward Lazlo Mundt. Impatiently, the boy rocked his head and beamed that impish smile. The boy was trying to pay attention – or at least it appeared that way.

"What's *your* story, then?"

"I got one," said Lazlo, holding up his brother's class schedule. "One, one."

"Only one? Well, not to worry. You'll get more soon."

"My brother was in your class. Fenton Mundt."

Dodge stumbled. "I don't—"

"Fenton Mundt. He was in your class."

"No, it's...I don't think he's shown up at all this semester. I vaguely remember the name, but..."

"Fenton Mundt, Fenton, Mundt."

Dodge's eyes went upwards in thought.

"My brother."

Irritated, Dodge returned to meet the boy's face. "Yes, but I don't recall him as a student. Understand?"

"Understood," said the boy. He turned to Ava, Jodi, and Karl. "I betcha he paid off that guy – the one my father hired to get Fenton to class. I bet he paid the guy off and didn't come at all." Finally, Lazlo returned to the professor. "I only got one envelope," he said lamely, once more flagging the class schedule.

Dodge wandered back to the chalkboard. "Well, as I said, son...don't worry. You will get more." The old man took a long pause before asking his next question. "Have any of you received any *black* envelopes?"

Ava and Karl looked to one another. "Black envelopes?" they asked in unison.

"Hmmm, yes, it might be too soon for those to start appearing. Two in our group eventually got black envelopes. One was a woman in her late sixties. She was looking for a high

school sweetheart, a man she had kept in touch with for decades who then went missing after Sunday church."

Jodi was fading – her eyes became distant and her body shrunk into her chair. She crunched the top of her bag and hugged it to her. "What's different about black envelopes?"

"This particular one – for that old woman – required that she swim." Dodge turned away from them. "So she tried to swim. And she drowned. The black envelopes...they can kill you." Smiling, he glanced over his shoulder at his newest students. "At least they warn you." Dodge let good-nature color his comments, but Karl saw right through him. This memory of the old woman in water had affected Henry Dodge very profoundly.

Lazlo's face blanched. "The John Waynes," he said, "John Chen and Wayne Chen. Their last envelopes were black, they were. Black as black. It's true."

Karl spoke up. "Are you certain, Lazlo?" The boy nodded his head – a definite yes. To Dodge, Karl explained, "Lazlo's a stray from a different group. We picked him up yesterday evening. You may have heard about the shooting–"

"The shooting last night?"

"Yes, on the campus."

"Those men were with you?"

All three of them nodded. Dodge's face turned grave and he paced in thought.

Ava asked, her voice uncertain, "Who was the second person in your group who received a black envelope?"

"Me," replied Dodge, unornamented.

Ava's hopes returned. "Well *you're* alive!"

The professor shook his head. "I didn't open it," he confessed. "I turned back." He paused. "And I stopped searching for my sister."

Ava couldn't believe such a thing was possible – a retreat, a surrender. "You never found her?"

"No. I did not."

"When was this?"

"1972."

A hush came over the room. The only sound was the tapping of Lazlo's shoe underneath his desk. In the end, even that came to a tapered stop.

"You said it gets harder," started Karl.

"It does."

"How?"

"You'll have to see for yourself. Apparently," he drifted off, "I'm just a teacher – in profession and in this circumstance. I was sent to see someone, too, six or seven documents into the search. To get information. My merry band converged on a filling station west of the bridges. The owner gave us an earful. One of our six didn't even speak English, so that made things difficult. All of her clues had been in Mandarin. We had to find a translator."

Dodge dusted his sleeves and his shirt, raining chalk particles. He snared his blue suit jacket from its place over his lectern, where it had been lazily thrown.

"So you see," he continued, "I'm just putting things into context for you. So you know what you're up against."

Ava shot from her seat, emotion coloring her voice. "No. No, no, no. You have to help me find my son."

"I'm sorry. I can't."

"But you *have* to." Her composure quickly dissolved.

Karl slid from his chair and to Ava's elbow. "Come with us."

"I can't." Dodge headed for the door.

"Don't abandon us," stressed Karl. "You know so much more than we do."

"Not about your own selves. I had my own experience. It was quite different, I'm sure, from what you're going through. And mine was five years ago. I left my group and they went on. If you want an ally, better to find someone who got further. Maybe someone who lived past a black envelope."

At the doorway of the classroom, jacket on and briefcase in hand, Dr. Henry Dodge straightened his back as he gave a parting wave. "Good luck," he said. "Good luck to each and every one of you." He took a step.

"Dr. Dodge!" Ava called his name like the last bowing of a violin. It stopped him, if only for a moment. "Do you think," she asked, "that your sister is *alive* somewhere?"

He shook his head. "Not anymore."

"Do you think she drowned?"

Dodge considered his answer. "Do you believe in ghosts," he asked, not just Ava but everyone in his classroom. They did not answer. "I should have kept going. I should have *opened* that black envelope." Dodge's eyes fell to his shoes. "It's one of the great regrets of my life," he admitted, genuine, before returning with a strong and final, "Good luck."

The sound of his footsteps faded off down the university hallway.

Ava looked as if she had been struck. Karl remained by her side. Her pale face grew gray and sickly.

The sound of torn paper made them jump, the quick rip of Jodi's grocery sack. The girl dumped the contents onto the desk, red envelopes falling away to the sides, spilling off the writing arm, over her legs, littering the ground. Quickly, she dug into the top envelope, pulling free the pages. She did the same to a second, a third, a fourth. Each time, she paused only a moment to read the top page and the enclosed contents, a variety of shapes and sizes and colors.

Karl picked up the closest document. Lazlo moved to grab one as well, but Karl slapped the boy away. Taking a second into his hand, Karl became the hand off man for Jodi, who was becoming more and more upset as she read. Before even denting the stack of unopened letters, Karl knew the pattern. Each said the same three words: LIMITED TIME OFFER. Each had an enclosed coupon – for milk, for bread, for eggs. All from various chain stores, unconnected in every way except one: they were all expired.

"He's dead, he's dead!" screamed Jodi. She swept her arms across the desk and displaced the last of her envelopes onto the floor. Face in her hands, she heaved great, tearful sighs. Her last words were a muffled hum. "I waited too long," she cried, "I waited too long..."

Lazlo stood. He went to the chalkboard and began drawing cartoon faces.

Ava sat beside Jodi, tentatively patting the girl's back, whispering words of negation, words of comfort, into the younger girl's ear.

Karl couldn't breath. He wanted a cigarette. He wanted out of Henry Dodge's classroom. He had a desperate urge to leave the room, the campus, to drive away in his borrowed Mercedes and lock his apartment door, to sleep for hours, uninterrupted, and wake with his wife snugly at his side, her cheek on his chest.

He stepped into the corridor, alone. He could now only see a portion of Ava's body, and none of Jodi's, and could only hear the irritating scratch of Lazlo's chalk drawing.

"Excuse me," said a distant female voice.

Karl's eyes focused down the corridor. A silhouetted girl stood distant. Karl walked towards her. After a few steps, he recognized her as the roly-poly student from the front row of Henry Dodge's class.

"I wasn't listening," she said in defense, "I stood way down here because it looked serious and I didn't want to be an eavesdropper. That's a bad thing to be."

"You're damn right," coughed Karl, fumbling for his pack of cigarettes and his lighter.

"This is for you," she said.

She thrust out a red envelope for him to take.

She said goodbye and descended on the stairwell, her book-bag hooked over her shoulder.

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

PART TWO

Friday, October 14, 1977

(Documents Eight to Eleven)

Monday, October 17, 1977

A nightmare. Remember the nightmare? You waking up to find her there, but she's changed. Instead of a wife it's a corpse. How do you feel about ghosts?

I don't care. If she's dead then I'm dead, too. Might as well be. I feel dead. This is how you feel when you can't sleep, and when you do it's a fitful, nightmarish terror filled with black and red envelopes, burying your body like so much dirt on a coffin.

This floor is a coffin's floor.

This ceiling is a coffin's ceiling.

These walls are a coffin's walls.

Or they will be if you don't get up.

How long have I laid here?

All night?

All year?

All my life?

She's just up the ladder.

Get up, you weak and dying chump.

To come this far and... It's what they want. All of them. You know it. Don't let them win. You love her. Don't let them win. You love her. You know it.

EIGHTH DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

He didn't have the heart for it. Not right then. Not in his haze, his fatigue. *You know it gets harder from here, don't you?* Henry Dodge's words stuck in Karl's head and he wanted them out. He slid the letter into his jacket pocket and felt the corner poke his side. He would deal with it later. *Mistake. Mistake.* He knew it, but he did it anyway.

The four of them left the building, Jodi still shaking and upset, her bag of red envelopes now just something to hold the coupons, and the repetitive typed pages. Ava Moon had directed all her energy to Jodi's needs; she didn't dwell on her own circumstance, but instead held Jodi's arm and spoke positive words.

"He's alive. Don't you worry. He is."

"How? How do you know?"

"I just do."

"But I haven't got an envelope in a week!"

"That doesn't matter. They helped you find us, didn't they? Why would they do that if there wasn't some hope?"

When they reached the spot where the Mercedes was parked, the car was not there.

"SON OF A BITCH!" shouted Karl. He looked up to the tow zone sign. "Shit, shit, shit. Fucking faculty parking." In the rush to get to Dodge's class, he hadn't considered the full effect of the law. He threw down his cigarette into the gutter.

"Calm down, Karl." Ava read the street-sign. "Tarver Impound Lot." The posted address was discouraging. "It's pretty far."

"Hey!" cried Lazlo, startling them all. The boy reached through the fencing that lined the university campus. The object that had caught his eye: another red envelope, tucked between two posts, balanced on a support board. The boy didn't hesitate; he ripped open the letter and withdrew the papers. After a quick

read and a cackle laugh, Lazlo passed the contents off with a shove.

Ava held the top page, Jodi the other. Karl pretended to not be interested.

"MAKERS MAKE DUE," read Ava from the first page.

Jodi held out the second: an article on Maker's Mark bourbon and the appointment two years earlier of Bill Samuels Jr. to brand president.

"Fenton's favorite drink," laughed Lazlo. "He, he liked Kentucky. Always liked Kentucky. Had a girlfriend from Kentucky. Far, far, far away land for us, you know, like it could be the moon or something, Kentucky. He kept the labels."

Karl's regard for Fenton Mundt, the drunk, and Lazlo Mundt, the lunatic, declined by the second. "This is only your second clue, Lazlo," he said. "They're toying with you. Like they did with all of us in the beginning."

Ava's face showed she thought Karl was being cruel. Her protective wings covered Mundt, and she gave him a pat on the shoulder and an assuring smile. Over her shoulder, she asked, "What are we going to do about *the car*?"

"I can't deal with it now," he replied. "I'll get someone from the dealership to pick it up. I'm going back to my apartment and sleep."

"Sleep!" The thought was alien to Ava.

"I'm useless right now. I'll just do something stupid. I need forty winks."

"But... but we can't waste a moment. Your wife... Noah... we've—"

Karl snapped at her. "They've got it planned out! Don't they? Every second, every move. They sent us all to Dodge; they're keeping us from the police, the press, from anyone but our little group. I've been getting their goddamn messages for four days. How long before we all snap and start shooting at each other like the Chen brothers? I'm sleeping. I've got to sleep. I'm not going to be led around on another wild goose chase." Karl reached into his pocket and took out the bottle of nitroglycerin pills, shaking it in Ava's face. "Consider it a rest for my health."

"We should stick together," Jodi objected. "I'm not going back to my apartment. And I couldn't if I wanted to. My car's at your lot."

Ava agreed. "We shouldn't separate."

"Henry Dodge may be right!" Karl let his finger go out at the others. "We can't *help* each other. So there's no point in sticking together. Is there?"

Ava's reply was parental. "Karl, they wanted us to find each other."

"Maybe it's just bad luck."

Ava touched her own heart, struck by the arrow. "Fuck you." She gave Karl a hard shove, nearly sending him out into traffic. "Get out of here. We'll go alone. We don't need you."

Karl looked at their faces. Even Lazlo wore admonishment. "Fine," he spat, though with slightly less fervor than before. "Fine," he repeated, and turned the corner, out of their sight.

The taxi ride cost him nine dollars. He was nearly out of cash in his wallet. The last four days had drained him. Banswick Motors had a few twenties in the slush fund – money used at The Coffee Pot (though meant for test drive gasoline.) It would be needed now to rescue the Mercedes from Tarver's. It probably wouldn't look good to visit his bank. The police were watching his every move. That sheet of numbers wouldn't buy him immunity for long; he could sense it.

Karl mounted the creaking rear stairway to his apartment. From his front room, dark with the blinds closed, and pin-drop quiet without Lazlo, Ava, and Jodi as squatters, Karl phoned Arturo at Banswick Motors. He explained that the Mercedes had been towed and that Tarver Impound Lot was the place to find it. Arturo agreed to make the pickup. "I'll see you Friday, Arturo. I won't be in today."

"Your friends came back in a taxi," said Arturo. "They picked up that Vega."

Karl had a sudden catch. Guilt.

"That's fine," he said without commitment. "See you tomorrow."

The pillow felt good – for the first time in a long time. He set the unopened red envelope on the night table beside and unhooked the telephone. He wanted no callers, only dreams. He had one: his wife, picking flowers.

When he awoke, he felt more exhausted than when he had gone to bed. It was nearly 8:30 in the evening. The sun had gone down and the room was completely black.

Disoriented, Karl kicked out of bed and helped himself to a cheese sandwich on stale bread. Outside his window, in the apartment lot below, children played with their mothers. He smoked two cigarettes and was a voyeur.

Mind fuzzy, he had thoughts of Ava Moon, her photograph of Noah. He finally detected his primary feeling towards her: respect, for her tenacity in following the envelopes. In her quest for her son, and her certainty that the envelopes were her only hope of recovery, there was no wavering.

Karl had the sudden urge to phone his old house. His wife might just pick up the phone. *"Hello, Karl! No, I've been here the whole time. Just had a long nap, that's all. Four days. Not to bother. What's that you say? You've been chasing envelopes all over the city hoping they'd lead you back to me? Well, that's silly. We're getting divorced. Remember? I don't really care to see you again. In fact, I didn't show that day at court simply because I couldn't stand the sight of you. No, not from sadness, not from anything so romantic. Just plain sickness – the kind you have if you've heard the same song too many times on the radio, that little tickle in your stomach that makes you switch the station. Well, thanks for calling. You really needn't have bothered. I'm safe and sound. Always have been, always will be. And just a reminder, Karl, you still have some boxes in the garage. Let's make arrangements for you to get the last of them, preferably when I'm out. I'll leave the garage unlocked, if you like. Yes, I think it's simpler this way, Karl. Now stop looking for me. There's really no point..."*

He leaned against the doorframe of his bedroom.

The envelope had come loose from the bed and lay on the carpet. It appeared strangely murderous, red against the beige.

Karl knew it was dangerous to ignore them. He had found that out with his last angina, with his arrest. *Why are you so scared*

to open it? The voice in his head was absolutely correct. It wasn't negligence or self-will this time that prevented him from breaking the seal – it was pure terror. *All right, I'm frightened of a stupid piece of paper, I am. I can't help it. I want them to stop coming. I don't want another.*

But you want to find her, don't you?

Yes. I do.

Finished with his cigarette, he bent down and retrieved the envelope, then floated out onto the back porch. From his third-floor perch, he continued to watch the children and their mothers.

The resilient pull of the envelope was great.

He opened it.

Mrs. Keane from the third floor exited her apartment, onto the porch, just as Karl plucked out the pages. "Mail time?" she asked with a friendly, do-not-answer-me jest. With purse and coat, she was apparently on her way out for the evening, as her hair was done in curls and she wore lipstick.

Karl gave a polite nod and raised the pages in answer.

Mrs. Keane brushed past and Karl heard the creak of the back staircase, holding her descent to the second floor.

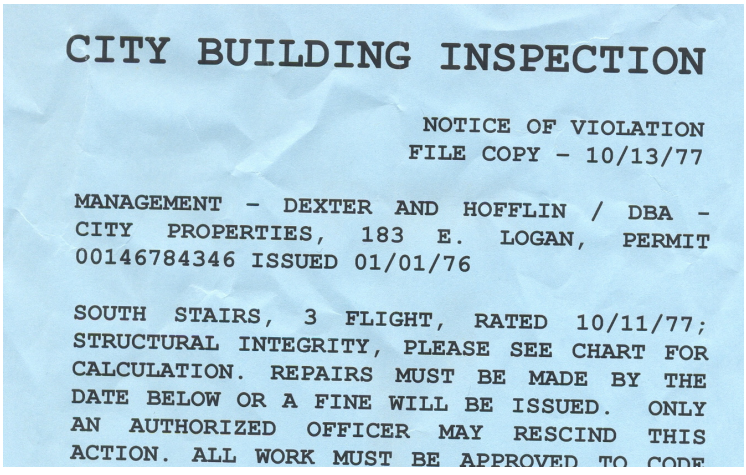
Karl read the typed page.

Only a word.

DANGER

He re-ordered the pages.

The second document took time to decipher.



CITY BUILDING INSPECTION

NOTICE OF VIOLATION
FILE COPY – 10/13/77

MANAGEMENT – DEXTER AND HOFFLIN / DBA – CITY PROPERTIES, 183 E. LOGAN, PERMIT 00146784346 ISSUED 01/01/76

SOUTH STAIRS, 3 FLIGHT, RATED 10/11/77; STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY, PLEASE SEE CHART FOR CALCULATION. REPAIRS MUST BE MADE BY THE DATE BELOW OR A FINE WILL BE ISSUED. ONLY AN AUTHORIZED OFFICER MAY RESCIND THIS ACTION. ALL WORK MUST BE APPROVED TO CODE

The address on the notice was his father's apartment building. *His* apartment building. The reference to the south stairs...was exactly where Karl stood.

The stairs, he questioned. *What's wrong with the stairs?*

The sound of cracking wood reminded Karl of summer baseball games, but this innocent memory leapt from his mind as the staircase quivered. Karl's hand went out to the support post. The torn envelope and its two pages slipped from his hand. Below him, he saw Mrs. Keane at the turn of the landing, clinging onto the banister.

Karl suddenly realized what was happening.

The building's rear staircase was breaking free!

The children in the lot below were mouth open, stunned. Their mothers swept them into their arms.

Karl hugged the post, splinters from the rotting exterior biting into his fingers.

Under his feet, the boards gave way and, one by one, broke loose and dropped to the ground below, nearly catching Mrs. Keane on the head. She let go of her purse and Karl watched as the contents smashed on the pavement, twenty feet down.

"Hold on!" he called to her.

Mrs. Keane flew over the banister, propelled by the lopsided disintegration of the staircase, the weight of each upper ring taking with it the rings below.

The mothers screamed.

Mrs. Keane fell awkwardly into a flower box hung on a first floor renter's wide back windowsill. The box cracked off, but provided some buffering from the ground. Mrs. Keane rolled away, covered in dirt and crushed flowers.

The women and children now looked to Karl, swaying from the center post, all levels having crashed away, leaving him on his island, legs and arms hugging the post.

"Shit, shit," he said to himself, and felt the rising beats of his heart.

Anger flushed into his body – at the building's owner, the landlord, the absentee repairman. But anger got him no closer to his door, distant and open, taunting him.

"Wait there!" shouted a woman from below.

But Karl couldn't wait.

He spotted the bottle of nitroglycerin pills on his kitchen counter.

He tried to swing a leg inside his apartment. His shoe barely touched the cement breaker at the bottom.

To his left, a small platform had not fallen. Four cross boards of the rear stairs held steady. He could reach them if he jumped.

Would the boards hold?

He had to try it; he needed a pill under his tongue.

Now.

Karl leapt from his place, more splinters spearing his palm, and he landed heavy on the cross-boards. The wood supports fissured down their middles, as if struck by an axe. With a second jump, he was back inside his kitchen, landing badly and tottering on one leg until he clipped the kitchen counter, hard.

Fumbling for the bottle, he took hold and yanked the cap. Once the pill was in his mouth and working, he felt his heartbeat slow. He leaned against the refrigerator, bending at the waist, both hands on his upper legs, breathing heavy.

Recovered, Karl stuck his head out the door and looked at the extensive damage.

What had been a working staircase was now a pile of boards, nails, and dust. Other neighbors had put their heads out and were shouting questions at the survivors below. One phoned for the fire department.

The red envelope had drifted to the woodpile, settling on top. "Danger," said Karl, repeating the message.

Danger is right.

That night, around 11:30 – well after the fire truck and ambulance had arrived and after he had gone down the front stairs, retrieved the red envelope and the two pages, and had destroyed them with his lighter – Karl knocked on the door to Ava Moon's apartment.

"I'm sorry," he apologized when she opened.

Even more beautiful, and even more melancholy, her eyes were sunken. She hadn't been eating. She wore a blue silk robe, her hair tucked behind her ears. "Jodi's sleeping," she informed him. "Lazlo's playing with Noah's trains. Can't get him away from them. I was watching television. I can't sleep. Just like you."

She had yet to part the way for him. To Karl, she seemed to enjoy torturing him – keeping him outside of their group, and also keeping him in the immaculate hallway of her building, quite the contradiction to Karl's own crumbling lodgings. The more she examined his face, however, the more concern clouded her expression.

"You got another envelope, didn't you?" she asked, knowing the truth already.

Karl nodded. "Yes. A doozy."

"What did it say?"

"Let me in. I'll tell you."

"Why should I?"

"I'm sorry."

"You abandoned us."

Ava's stare was practically unbearable. Karl had to look away, to the far end of the corridor. "It won't happen again," he said.

"I'm glad," she said before taking Karl in her arms and giving him a warm embrace.

He returned it, a little late, but just as fully realized. Shorter than his wife, she felt different in his arms – Karl noticed it immediately. Her warm body, her breasts, her hair tickling his chin, all made him feel welcome and, for that, he was grateful.

In her foyer, Karl could hear the faraway whirring of Noah's electric trains. Ava took Karl's jacket and led him into the main room. These familiar surroundings – the pictures of Noah and the discarded toys – brought Karl back to the day they first met at the carousel. The photo albums she had shown to him still rested on her coffee table.

By the window, Lazlo flipped the train set switch from stop to go, stop to go, repeating, in intense concentration. He did not

raise his eyes to Karl, except once, not registering any emotion positive or negative, simply seeing.

"Do you want some coffee?" she asked. When Karl nodded, she walked to the kitchen, pulled the pot from the peculator and a mug from the cupboard. The letters N-O-A-H were inscribed in the ceramic. After a slip of the strong, black mix, Karl and Ava held quiet, letting the toy trains fade into the background, leaning their bodies on opposite counters in the narrow kitchen.

"Where's your husband?" Karl asked.

"I was wondering when you'd get around to that."

Karl deflected the insinuation. "No, no, I—"

"It's okay," she said, "we're divorced. Since '69. I was pregnant with Noah and he got a job overseas. He doesn't want to ever come back. We made arrangements. I kept this place..." Ava gestured to her surroundings. "And the baby...and my husband sends me checks. The occasional letter. I don't think he ever really cared for me." She said this last without doubt.

"Does he know Noah's missing?"

"I sent him a telegram on Monday."

"Did he get it?"

"If he did, he didn't acknowledge it. He's in the hills of Spain. He's a spelunker. Do you know what that is?"

"Caves, right? A person who explores caves."

"Yes. He works for a prominent Spanish university."

"Is he Spanish?"

"No. Texan."

Karl sipped his coffee. "Do you miss him?"

"No I do not." She swallowed. "I only miss my son."

Karl touched her arm, but let his fingers fall. "What about your family?"

"I'm an only child. My father died many years ago and, as I told you before, my mother died a few months ago. I don't have many friends. I've always been very private."

"Same with me," said Karl. "They must research all us victims pretty good. No hope of a national scandal."

"Unless you count Lazlo's ambassador father."

"Yes," said Karl, "though I doubt that bit is true."

Ava steeled herself. "Tell me about your envelope."

"Okay." Karl set down his coffee cup. "It was a building violation. My rear stairs weren't up to code."

Ava cocked her head. "And that means..?"

"It means it collapsed when I was standing on it."

"Are you all right?" she said, checking his arms, his face. At his cheek, she rested her soft hand, and then pulled away.

"I survived," he quipped.

She nodded and took a deep breath. "There was another envelope waiting for me when I returned home."

"Oh?"

"The message said BANK ON THIS. And the document was a bank withdrawal slip. The slip had my account number and $10,000 dollars already written in. All it needed was my signature." Ava's jaw became firm. "It's extortion they're after."

Karl knocked his hand on the kitchen table. "Yes, yes," he agreed, "of *course*. It's kidnapping. Very elaborate kidnapping." As soon as the plot was out of his mouth, the words dissipated in strength. "No," he said, in contradiction, "No, it's not that simple."

"What? Why not?"

"Those stairs gave way *the second* I was on them. *The second* I had opened the envelope. They had predicted my need for a new wristwatch–" Karl held out the face of his Supreme Running Watch. "They predicted my angina, how to get information from Henry Dodge, how I needed to get out of jail-"

"Stop right there." Palm out, Ava lowered her head and tried to think. When she returned to meet his eyes, she said, as serious as stone, "Karl. This isn't magic. These are bad people who have taken my son. And we have to stop them. After all, they *lied* to you. They *lied* to you Karl. By sending that false detective out to help you. These people, whoever they are, whatever their interests, they are not trying to help you or me."

"But, but, Ava, listen to me—"

"I won't."

"They have to be fucking aliens or something to know all this. It's scaring the shit out of me. It can't be just regular people

behind this. If it is, they're not using any technology we know about."

"For Christ's sake, Karl, they drowned an old woman. Dodge said so. And poor Jodi-"

"Yes, how is she?"

Ava's voice became a whisper. "How do you think she is? At least Lazlo is mildly oblivious to what's going on. But Jodi, she knows something is very, very wrong." She lowered her voice another notch, until it was just a faint linger. "Karl...I think her ex-boyfriend is dead."

Jodi boomed, "He's not dead!" The girl had heard this last comment from the kitchen entrance. She had emerged from the bedroom at the wrong moment. "Fuck you, he's not dead! He's not!"

Ava's face blanched. She didn't know what to do.

"How *dare* you say he's dead! Maybe your *kid*'s dead? Maybe someone's fucking *killed* him! Maybe Lazlo's brother's had his throat slit, maybe Karl's wife has been stabbed in the fucking FACE!" She screamed at Ava, merciless.

Ava burst into great sobs and swung her arms at Jodi.

Karl forked himself between the two women, Jodi pushing forward against his shoulders. He forced her into the hallway. A painting on the wall came loose and smashed to the wood floor. Jodi pummeled Karl's chest and arms with her fists, leaving bruises. Karl was forced to flatten his weight against her just to pin her arms.

Ava ran from the kitchen, past the two of them, and into the furthest bathroom. Karl heard the bolt set.

From the corner of his eye, he spotted Lazlo, up from his trains and staring at them, as if he were a child witnessing a fight between parents.

"Stop it," the boy said urgently. "Please stop it."

Jodi relaxed her fury.

Karl peeled from her and let Jodi slide down the wall and to the floor. The girl buried her face in her crossed arms and cried.

Fuck. Now we've turned on each other, thought Karl.

Taking Lazlo by the shoulders, Karl said in a steady and decided voice, "Come on, kid, show me your trains."

The men left the women alone for an hour. Karl watched the circling train go round and round, back and forth, stop and start a hundred times by engineer Lazlo Mundt. The boy grew sleepy. It was nearly one in the morning when they both drifted off, the boy on the soft-carpeted floor, Karl leaning his head against the couch. He awoke only once before sunrise, possibly in a dream, seeing Ava put a blanket over Lazlo then disappearing.

The next morning, Jodi Fuller was gone.

No one spoke about it. They knew why she had left. She had given up. Karl doubted they would ever see her again.

Ava made the remaining eggs and bacon, which they ate slowly and in bitter and pained silence.

While Ava showered and dressed in her yellow skirt, black blouse, and high-cut coat, Karl read the daily paper front page to obituaries. The silence, to him, was good, and necessary. He felt his batteries recharging.

Buried in the local section of Saturday's newspaper was a minor mention of the staircase collapse. Karl's name was not in the text, though it read "two people were treated at the scene," which Karl assumed to be him and Mrs. Keane.

Ava, at finishing the last of the breakfast dishes, looked to the wall clock of the kitchen. "We had better leave if we're going to make it to the bank before it closes. It's only open until noon on Saturday."

Karl made a face. "You want to follow those orders?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "I think we're going to need that money. And if we don't get it today, the bank will be closed tomorrow."

"Do you have ten-thousand dollars?"

"I have *more* than that," she answered coolly.

Karl stood from the table, tossing down the last, mismatched sections of the newspaper. "I'm in the wrong business," he remarked. "How much does spelunking pay?"

"You'd be surprised," she smiled, and soon they were off in a taxi, into the warm and sunny morning.

The bank was a prefabricated branch at the corner of two nearby streets. Ava led Karl and Lazlo inside, but went alone to the teller. Karl killed the time smoking cigarettes near the edges of the windows. The plastic drapes did little to shade his eyes and, already, he was tired and irritated.

Lazlo wasn't helping. He badgered Karl in a low whisper about nonsense this and that, only once mentioning the money, and only once mentioning the red envelopes. The boy kept the Marker's Mark advertisement in his pocket, gripped with one clenched fist. He wouldn't let it go. The early belief that the boy might be faking his condition had long since evaporated from Karl's mind. Lazlo Mundt was a nutcase. If there was a moment of clarity at the car dealership, it was brief and not recurring.

"I've got it," Ava said, holding tight to her pocketbook and signaling to Karl and Lazlo that she was finished. Karl noticed a security guard, eyes tailing the three of them out of the bank's exit. A large cash withdrawal, two men acting suspicious – it was a believable setup for extortion and, for the insinuation, Karl felt nothing.

"Do you still believe they want your money?" Karl asked Ava as they waited for a taxi to pass.

"Yes," she replied flatly.

"Well, I think you're wrong," he sniffed.

"Karl," she began, with a touch of reproach, "they could have dynamited your staircase just to prove their point."

He chuckled. "Dynamited? What is this, a train robbery? No, there was no way they could have known I'd be reading that violation on the staircase the very minute it gave way. Something else is going on. Not extortion. Something else."

"What?"

Karl turned to Lazlo. "What do you think, kid?"

"I have to pee."

They were soon on their way to Banswick Motors.

Ava paid the taxi driver with money from her bank envelope, buried deep in her purse. It was 10:30 in the morning and the busiest hour for the dealership. A dozen customers – mostly men – examined the cars in the open lot as if they were

vultures encircling dead caribou. Darnell and Franklin scurried to shake hands, promise deals, and coax inside anyone who seemed more than casually interested in a vehicle.

Even Dolores was there, bending to read the sticker price of a Chevrolet.

"'Morning, Dolores," Karl said, passing her, Ava and Lazlo on either side of him.

"Karl!" she called, stepping to catch his advance to the front doors. "Karl, where have you been? That man, that man you chased—" Karl slowed. "He hasn't been back. Not a sign of him. I've been lookin'."

Karl waved her away. "Thanks, Dolores. Thinkin' of buying a car?"

"Oh, just curious, Karl." From the way she said it, she was curious about more than just the Chevy. She had probably been dawdling in the lot, waiting for his arrival. But Karl didn't take the bait. *She should be spending her Saturday's making Halloween lanterns with her sister instead of tailing me,* he thought. He brushed by her and was soon inside, leaving her in the dust of the lot.

Arturo's face was visible above the countertop. "Mr. Banswick!"

Karl headed straight for the locked rack of car keys. "I need another car, Arturo."

"Oh, no, Mr. Banswick, no. I just got the Mercedes back from Tarver's. I sent it to be washed. It's all muddy from the yard."

"Sorry, can't be helped. I need some wheels. Tell ya what, I'll take the lemon."

Karl opened the wall rack and snagged a set for the bright green '69 Oldsmobile Cutlass parked out front. No one was looking at that one. No one had looked in weeks. The car was a horrible color, but it would get him where he needed to go.

"See ya, Arturo. Keep up the good work."

"Mr. Banswick!" Arturo snared Karl's jacket sleeve as he passed the gate back into the showroom. Lazlo and Ava kept advancing toward the doors. "I found your answer."

"What answer?"

"The name of that ambassador."

"You did? I didn't think you'd really go and—"

"Here. I wrote it down."

Arturo shoved a slip of paper into his boss's hand.

Peter Mundt, it read in Arturo's block handwriting.

Karl looked to Lazlo. "I'll be damned. The kid's genuine."

"Mr. Banswick?" Arturo scooted closer to Karl, eyes begging to be made a confidant. "You can tell me... What's this about? Why did you need to know th—?"

"Not now. Another time. Gotta go." Karl was wrong to dismiss Arturo, especially after he had done such a good deed. He hadn't expected the mission to be successful. It was said off-the-cuff, not a serious request, but here Arturo had come through with the name of the Australian ambassador. As he held the door open to the bright day, letting Ava then Lazlo pass into the lot, Karl turned and called across the showroom floor. "One day, Arturo, I'm going to tell you everything. I swear. You just keep minding the store. You're due for a raise."

Shutting the glass door, Karl turned straight into Franklin, who had planted himself just inches behind. "I know you must be innocent, Karl," he joked, "you keep coming back to work!"

"Yeah, just to see your smilin' faces."

"Say, why don't you introduce us to your friends?" Franklin added, an eye to Ava's yellow skirt, and her legs.

Karl didn't have time for shenanigans. He said, "Not now," and made a beeline with the others for the parked Oldsmobile.

Dolores blocked his way. She had waited for him to come out. She no more wanted a car than he wanted another heart attack.

"Is your wife still missing, Karl?" she asked bluntly.

"Didn't they tell you?" Karl hitched a thumb in the direction of his two salesmen, eying him from a distance.

"Just that you're out of jail. Is she okay?"

"She's still missing. It's confusing. I don't know what to tell you. Sorry, gotta run, Dolores. Save a donut for me." He unlocked the Olds for Ava, letting her into the front seat. Lazlo took the rear and Karl came around to the driver's side. Dolores

studied Karl as he started the engine and put the car into drive. He nearly ran her down on his way out past the lot's colored streamers, into the street and free of obligation.

"You're in such a rush!" remarked Ava.

"I always get antsy in that place," said Karl. "That tiny office in the back. The place breathes down my neck." Karl tapped the steering wheel. "But at least I have access to cars," he said, smiling.

"I think all your guys seem pretty nice," Ava said, upbeat. "And you really don't work very many hours. Seems like a cushy job to me."

"Banswick Motors was my father's business. Not mine."

"What is your business, then?"

"To survive."

Karl jerked the wheel and the car headed north.

The Olds made an easy way through thin traffic. The memorized path appeared in front of the car, building one block at a time, as if the road only existed for Karl. The Olds handled poorly around turns and needed serviced. It had been neglected too long. He should have voted the car off the lot months ago – called a junkyard or turned it over to a charity. A reduction in price was overdue.

Karl was halfway to his destination when Ava asked where they were going.

"My house," Karl answered. "I mean my wife's house. Where she lives."

"Why? What's there?"

"You'll see."

When they arrived on his wife's street, just as on Wednesday, Karl had strong feelings of melancholy at the sight of his wife's car. Parked on the street, untouched, it appeared abandoned. He slid into a nearby parking slot, shut off the Olds's engine, and stepped out of his car and to his wife's. He gave the European automobile a lingering assessment through its windows. The inside was empty; not a single thing had been touched since his wife's vanishing.

"Oh, man! That's a beautiful house. I like it. Yes I do. That's a *real* house. Don't see many of those. Is it haunted?"

"No, Lazlo. It's not." Karl wanted to squelch the boy's enthusiasm, fast. Lazlo's voice carried; Karl wanted quiet. Karl noted Ava's appraisal. Judgment crossed her face. The home was a better one that she had thought Karl's worthy of owning. He had the vague suspicion that he had lost something, something other than his wife. His entire life was gone. In the divorce, he had forfeited everything.

Up the front stairs, Karl withdrew his keys and found the one for the house. He gave a disappointing knock and then tried to enter. His key wasn't working. "She's changed the locks." *God, she really didn't want me, didn't she? She wants nothing to do with me.* He was suddenly furious, but also very determined to get inside. Karl pulled his arm into his coat and covered his skin. With a punch, he smashed into one of the stained glass panels that bordered the door. The pane cracked, but did not shatter.

Before he could make a second try, Lazlo rocketed back on his heel, lifted his leg, and kicked hard into the window. The glass shattered, causing a clamor on the inside wood floor of the house's foyer. Lazlo smiled and nodded, satisfied.

Arm through the hole, Karl undid the door bolt and then the pressed the catch on the knob. Only a few seconds, and they were inside.

"Will this get you into trouble?" Ava asked in a whisper as they entered.

Karl nodded. "Absolutely."

To Karl, the house smelled different. The absence of smoke – that was the change. When in residence, he finished three-and-a-half packs a day. Unfiltered. His wife had let the air in. A certain antiseptic odor covered his tracks. It was like walking into the house of a stranger.

Lazlo roamed the first floor rooms.

Karl climbed the stairs and Ava followed. They reached the second floor landing. Karl turned left toward the master bedroom.

"Hello!" Ava called into the bare rooms.

Karl turned to her and shook his head. Salutations weren't necessary. The house was vacant. It had been for some time. "The plants haven't been watered," he said, pointing to a browning lily on the foyer table. His wife wouldn't have let that chore slip had she been here. No botanist would let the plants die.

In the master bedroom, Ava paused near the dressing table and gave a quick look at the makeup case, brush, and mirror. She didn't see Karl enter the walk-in closet.

"Why no children?" she asked over her shoulder.

Karl spoke from the muffle of the clothes. "We talked about it. Every coupla years the idea came up. Neither of us was really against it. Then we sorta ran out of time." Karl stepped back into the master bedroom, shoebox in hand. "You know, at some point talking about something has to change into making plans. We were never good at making plans."

Ava turned. "What's that?" she asked, pointing to the shoebox.

Karl dumped the shoebox. A wad of tissue paper, crumbled and yellowed, fell out first, followed by a revolver. Karl waited for Ava's reaction.

"We don't need that," she dismissed.

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"Listen, I was thinkin'. That collapse of my staircase coulda killed me. But it wasn't a black envelope. It was a normal red one. What do you make of that?"

She considered. "It means there's worse ahead."

"Exactly." Karl reached down and plucked the revolver from its bed of tissues. Fumbling, he located a small box of bullets that had been buried in the turnover. "Those Chen brothers and their shootout. Things are getting very bloody. I want to protect myself. Protect you. Even that Lazlo kid."

"I thought you hated Lazlo."

"Hate him? No, I don't hate him. I just thought he was faking. Now I don't think that as much. He really is nuts. Now I just feel sorry for him." Karl paused and held up the revolver, his index finger out straight over the trigger guard. "And I've got

another idea. Why don't we stop following and instead...start leading?"

"What do you mean?"

Downstairs, there was a small commotion. Lazlo had probably stumbled over something. He yelped, his voice a distant echo in the house.

"That boy," Karl said, pointing to the noise. "He's our ticket out. I had Arturo check into him. Lazlo really *is* the son of an ambassador."

"So?"

"I want to go see his father. If he's connected to the government, he must have some power. I'd go to the mayor, but I never did trust that slimy son of a bitch. This ambassador would be different, though. He's got no ties to the local police or any of these red envelopes. At the very least he can make a few phone calls. He's got to care that one of his sons is missing. Hell, he may even know the phone number of the president." Karl undocked the revolver's chamber and loaded six bullets. "This gun...well, I'm no marksman. I've never even fired it. But when we moved into this house, this neighborhood wasn't so nice. But my wife, the city beautician, she was able to make calls and now this is a pretty great street. Why can't Lazlo's father do that for us?" Karl paused; he checked Ava for a reaction. "Whoever's sending us these envelopes will never let us get to the police. They'll never let us contact the newspaper. But there has to be someone out of their reach."

Ava made a face. "Karl. Think. Those sending the red envelopes have to already know Lazlo's father is in the government. Wouldn't they have already, well, figured out how to stop this plan of yours?"

Karl tucked the revolver into his belt and covered it with his jacket. Handing Ava the bullets, he gestured that she should tuck the box in her purse. "Maybe," he hedged. "Lazlo will know a way to get in touch with his father, and the kid is so goddamn unpredictable there would be no way our manipulators can second guess anything that fucker does."

Ava's face remained skeptical. She opened her purse and dropped the bullets inside. The box landed on top of the ten thousand dollar withdrawal. "Oh, *this* looks good," she said with sarcasm, "I feel like a gangster." Her finger went up, as a schoolteacher, "And this plan of yours—"

"It's worth a try." He cut her off firmly and stepped back out into the second floor hallway. Turning, Karl saw that she had stopped a few paces behind him. Ava stood frozen in the hallway. Her arms were crossed, her face to a gallery of hung photographs. Karl slowly approached. "What's wrong?"

Downstairs, Lazlo laughed quickly, then was silent.

Ava faced a gallery of photographs nailed on the hallway wall. As he walked to meet her, the pictures slowly came into Karl's sight, but he already knew each of them well. His wife hadn't taken them down – which, in some ways, surprised him. A dozen photographs – small to large and back again – in a pattern. In every shot were Karl and his wife.

"She's pretty," said Ava. She traced Lana Banswick's face, slowing, as if Lana's two-dimensional skin might just be warm to the touch.

"Yes. She's pretty." Karl's pointed to a photo of him wearing a Hawaiian shirt, a beer can in one hand, a cigarette in the other, his wife hanging on his arm. "Think she's out of my league?" he asked and Ava shook her head 'no.'

"You're not so bad," she smiled and touched his arm.

In the picture, Karl and Lana stood together in a dull green backyard. His wife wore a turquoise dress with a white edging and her sandy hair was tied back behind her head. "I wanted her to take this picture down."

"Why? It's cute. You both look very happy."

"That's the day I had my first heart attack. I think she keeps it up there to punish me."

Ava moved closer to the picture. "Oh, no. No. It's just a really good photo."

"She got strange after that day. I had just taken over the dealership. I was under a lot of pressure."

"Is that what gave you the attack?"

Karl shrugged and began to descend the stairs. At the second step down, Ava spoke to him from the top. "Karl," she asked, "why do you want to find her?"

He turned, putting an arm on the banister. "What?"

"I want to find Noah because I love him. I can't imagine living without him. And when I see him again, I am going to be very, very happy." Ava's face lightened, as if she had made a joke, but tears formed in her eyes. She blushed and caught it with her fingernail. "And if he's dead...I want him to become a ghost. I want him to haunt me. Like his grandmother. Do you believe in ghosts, Karl?"

"I believe in everything now," he answered quietly. "And she's not a ghost. Lana's alive and I'm meant to find her. That's why I'm not stopping. Even when it's so fucking frustrating. These clues aren't even clues. They're just random, irritating repetitions. I feel like a mouse on a treadmill."

"Maybe they don't want to be found. Noah and your wife. Maybe they've both gone off and so blissfully happy now that they can't even imagine returning to us. Maybe it was us that made them sad. My moods. My discipline and my scolding. A home without a father. God, Karl, I've failed Noah so much and he's less than ten years old. What will I do to him in the next ten?"

"No you haven't. You haven't failed him at all."

"I'm failing him now."

"No. You're not." Karl climbed back up to her and took her by the shoulders. "You're doing the right thing. We'll find our ghosts and bring them back to life, Ava. Both of them. I'm still married. As long as I'm married, she's my wife. I can't have her gone without knowing what happened to her. To us – to our marriage."

"Are you trying to redeem yourself?"

Karl thought about this. "No," he said after a pause. "I'm trying to redeem her." She let go of her shoulders and quickly turned away.

At the bottom of the stairs, he spotted Lazlo through the dining room, raiding the refrigerator and eating slices of American cheese.

"Come on, Lazlo," he called, as if to the dog, "We're leaving."

To protect the house from the elements, Karl stuffed a sofa pillow into the busted stained glass. The three again passed his wife's parked car then started the engine of the green Oldsmobile. The engine rattled all the way to the boulevard, where they turned south.

"Why ya smilin' there, Mundt?" Karl asked. He could see Lazlo in the rearview.

The boy snapped out of his happy daze. "I'm not smiling."

"You were."

"Was not. Nope. Not smiling. The opposite of smiling. Not. Smiling."

"Did you steal something from the house?"

"Karl!" Ava thought the accusation was unfair.

"Okay, never mind." Karl took a breath. "Listen, kid, do you know where your father is? Because I think we need to call him. He's not in Australia, is he?"

"No, he's in the city."

"Where?"

"He's at the Cafton Hotel."

"The Cafton? Downtown on Eighth?"

"Yes."

"Is he staying there or something?"

"No, there's a big thing happening tonight. Lots of people, *lots* of people. Big, important people. Dinner and talk talk talk. Politicians and everything, everything. I used to have his schedule memorized. I put it in this noggin and then I knew where he was, just like that. Like a snap. Something he taught me when I was a baby. I always knew where he was. Yeah, I'd *like* to say hello to my dad. I haven't seen him since, since, well, since...I don't remember. Summer? It was warm out. I wasn't wearing a coat and—"

"All right, all right. What time does this shindig start?"

"Dinner, I said. Dinner."

"Like...five o'clock? Six?"

"Dinner!"

Karl brushed him off. He turned to Ava. "We'll go back to your place, kill the rest of the afternoon. Shit, I should have grabbed a necktie." Kari looked back in the direction of the house.

"We can buy you one at the shops."

Karl nodded. Lazlo was grinning again.

"What the *hell* are you smiling at?" he asked again.

"Smoke," said the boy, pointing over the steering wheel.

Karl let his distracted gaze return to the hood of the Oldsmobile. Steam was spilling from under the hood and rising, growing denser and more severe. "Shit!" he cursed and hauled the wheel to the right, aiming for an available bus stop. Karl opened his door and rounded to the front of the car. Ava and Lazlo were soon by his side. Karl put a hand to the hood. It was burning hot. He jumped and swore again. "Fucking car!" Karl waved away the steam and stepped backward.

The steam changed to thick and black smoke.

Ava tugged on the men's sleeves.

The hood of the Oldsmobile buckled. The dashboard burst into flames. The visors and the steering wheel vinyl melted within seconds. Lazlo fell to the curb and scrambled away from the growing heat.

Ava screamed out, "My purse!"

The ten thousand!

Karl flung the passenger side door open. A great lick of flame sent him spinning into the bus stop sign.

Ava made a grab for the purse, but it was no use. She couldn't get within three yards. And the damage was done. The purse, resting in the center of the long front seat, was disappearing along with the cloth interior.

Now the backseat was ravaged by fire and Karl, for a flash, thought of poor Lazlo. Had the boy not fled the car, he'd have been trapped.

The three of them lined against the brace of the bus stop shelter. Traffic on the street stopped on either side of the burning car. Plumes of smoke streaked the sky and blew across the boulevard. The green paint of the Olds slowly changed to charred black – crumbling inward with the heat and energy of the fire.

A man who had been waiting for the bus asked them if they were all right. They each nodded, but couldn't take their eyes off the wreck.

From inside the Olds came a loud crack. Everyone looked back at the car. A second then a third sound stood above the din. "Those are the spare bullets," said Karl into Ava's ear. "We better stand clear." He shoved Ava and Lazlo into greater cover.

"What about the gas?" she asked, in a panic.

"The tank was almost empty."

By the time a fire truck arrived, the car had burned out. All that remained of the '69 Oldsmobile were four flat tires and a skeleton frame.

Two policemen took statements.

"Dealer plates, huh?" joked one.

Karl thought about Arturo. First a towed Mercedes, now a destroyed Oldsmobile. Arturo was never going to trust him with another car again. At this rate, Karl would be through the inventory in two weeks. Banswick Motors would be one big insurance claim.

"It was a bum car," Karl told the police. "It had been giving me trouble all morning. I knew it was a clunker, but didn't know it was dangerous."

One policeman circled the metal pile and gave the blackened bumper a kick. "Strangest thing. Steam then a fire. If it were a fire that caused the overheating, the smoke would have come first. If ya just had radiator trouble, it would have only been steam and would never turn to smoke. Something weird started your mess."

"Really?"

"Yeah, a little unusual. Is it possible your car got tampered with? No one out to get you?" The policeman winked. It would be unlikely that a used car dealer would be the target of assassination, despite the evidence.

Karl's mind went back to the Banswick Motors lot. The first person that entered his mind was Dolores fixed beside the Oldsmobile and waiting for him to emerge from the showroom. *Dolores,* he thought, growing angry. *How well do I really know her? Could she have done a thing like this?* He quickly calculated the gap

in skills between donut-making and vehicle sabotage and knew he was being ridiculous. But the week had made him that way. He could not be blamed for thinking that a harmless woman who regularly sold him jelly donuts might be capable of collusion.

Karl lit a cigarette on a last candle of flame from the Oldsmobile engine, just seconds before a douse with a fire truck hose. He turned to Ava. "I'm sorry about your money."

She looked away, sad.

"You know it's funny," he said, "I didn't get any warning of this. You'd think this is the kind of thing that would come with a red envelope."

"Maybe they didn't know about it," she said. "Maybe it was just car trouble."

"If that's true, I take it as a good sign."

"Good sign? Why?"

Karl tapped his belt, the six-shot revolver hidden beneath his coat. "They can't predict *every*thing."

As they signed the last of the police paperwork and readied to flag a taxi, a small boy, not more than twelve years old, planted himself next to Karl's leg. "Mister," he said. When Karl glanced down, the boy raised his arm. "This is for you," said the boy, who then ran off.

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

NINTH DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

He opened it immediately.

ENJOY THE SHOW read the typed page.

Enclosed, a theater ticket.

Ava spotted Karl holding the message. She twitched at the sight of it then craned to look over his shoulder.

"A puppet show," Karl humphed. "Tomorrow."

Ava read the ticket and handed it back.

Rounding up Lazlo, the three were off in a taxi. Lazlo held the ticket long after Karl had handed it over for the boy's review. Karl had to tug it away when they were a half-mile from Ava's apartment.

"Say, Ava, I was thinking," Karl began, "Henry Dodge was right. This *has* gotten harder. These last few envelopes were

definitely worse. But you've got a few days on me. How come things haven't gotten harder for you?"

"What?" she exclaimed, exasperated. "I just lost ten-thousand dollars! I'd consider that pretty hard, Karl."

Their taxi driver's ears perked. "Someone say Ava?"

Karl and Ava looked to each other.

"I'm Ava," she confirmed nervously.

The driver disappeared under the seat, just for a second. Karl was about to speak with the driver returned, head above the front seat, a red envelope clipped between the fingers of his hairy right hand. "Fella in my cab gave me this and said I should give it to a passenger named Ava."

Ava reached through the partition that separated the front and rear seats of the taxicab. "Thank you," she said softly and drew the envelope down into her lap. The men at either side of her glanced at the valley of her yellow skirt, at the perfectly sealed, pristinely preserved red envelope, its presence now so familiar to the three of them. "How did they know I would be in this cab?" she asked, neither expecting nor getting an answer. She put a fingernail into the sealed flap of the envelope and gutted it.

ENJOY THE SHOW read the typed page.

Enclosed, another puppet show ticket.

"Apparently, they want us to go together, Karl," she remarked.

Lazlo snapped up Ava's ticket.

"Don't get too greedy there, kid. You'll probably get one next."

"I like puppets," said the boy, smiling.

"I'm sure you do." Karl leaned back into the leather of the taxi, a sardonic expression on his face. "I guess it's a date," he winked to Ava.

She gave a hesitant smile that lasted until the taxi stopped at the curb outside of her apartment building.

Getting out, no one reached to pay the driver.

"I'm broke," shrugged Ava.

"I thought you said you had a lot more money than that ten grand."

"Not *on* me," she replied. "I'll have to go to the bank on Monday when it opens. I don't even have any spare change. Everything I had was in that purse. I have a charge card upstairs in my apartment, but I'm at my limit. I probably have only enough credit for that necktie you wanted."

Karl said quietly, so the driver would not hear, "I've only got a few bucks myself. I can't pay him." The fare, a mere seven dollars, had stumped them. "At least that puppet show is free," he smirked. Karl turned to Lazlo. "You got any money?"

"Sure, sure, yes, sir, money money money."

A pause.

"Well? Can I have some?"

Lazlo went into his pocket and pulled out his chained wallet, stuffed full with flotsam and jetsam. Wiggling through the contents, at the growing impatience of their driver, Lazlo located a twenty-dollar bill. Lazlo handed it over and walked away. The driver pulled quickly into traffic.

"Wait!" called Karl. "The change!" Lazlo continued walking and the taxi fled. "Lazlo," Karl said to the boy's back, "you just tipped that guy a goldmine. We coulda used that money. We have no idea what's ahead for us."

As he said these words, Karl felt the pressure of the days wallop him, something he hadn't been expecting. His palms became wet with sweat and a lump came into his throat. *What's ahead* – the words bounded around his skull in irritated, nervous echo. Five days ago, the loss of thirteen dollars would have meant little to him. Now it was of crushing importance. "How much money *do* you have?" he asked Ava.

"In the bank?"

"Yes, in the bank."

"Well, now I have a little over thirty-eight thousand. I had forty-eight at the start of the day. I feel like I came back unlucky from a casino."

"Forty-eight's a pretty good position to be in, if you ask me. I've got less than two. That lawyer Rabassa's bleeding me dry. He's a goddamn vampire." Karl caught up with Lazlo, walking

fast towards Ava's lobby entrance. "Say, kid, how much you got?"

"I don't know."

"Take a guess."

Ava entered her building lobby first, holding the door open for Karl and the boy. "You can tell us, Lazlo," she coaxed.

The boy shrugged. "I got lots, lots. I've got as much as I need. I've never, never, ever been short of money. I just have to ask and I get it, like that, like that." Lazlo snapped his fingers.

"From where?" Karl wanted the details.

"From my dad."

They followed the marble and concrete that bled through the building and ended at Ava's elevator. After finding her charge card (safe in a jar by the window), the three went back down the elevator, out on the street, and down two blocks to a men's shop.

It was obvious Ava had never much cause to shop for men's clothing. Even by Karl's low standards, the wares were second rate. The colors were brash, the fabrics rough, and the designs dated. (Karl was always out of step with the fashions of the day, and he liked it that way, but this store was even further behind than his own taste.) The two combed the tie racks. Lazlo wandered off to try on leisure suit jackets over the piped in music of Sonny and Cher.

Karl located an eight-dollar silk throwaway without a pattern – simple black, a bit short over his belly, but it would do. While tying it around his neck, Ava came forward to tighten the knot. "I think this'll do the trick," she said with satisfaction.

Karl looked down. "Yes," he agreed. As he began to undo her work, he said softly, "I want to thank you."

"Thank me?" She looked up at him with her bright blue eyes and color came into her cheeks.

"For sticking with me."

"What do you mean? *You're* sticking with *me*."

"I don't know where my wife is, I don't know who the hell is passing us all these envelopes, but I do know it feels good to not do this alone."

"Yes. It's better this way. Let's hope we don't start shooting at each other like the Chen brothers."

Karl puffed and shook his head. "Impossible," he said. "When I was hanging from what was left of my apartment stairs, I thought, 'I want someone to pull me in.' But there was nobody." Karl rolled the necktie into a loop, nervous with his words. "I'm just glad you're around."

"Me, too." She smiled then looked over her shoulder for Lazlo, who was caught in a coat too short for his arms. "Come on, Lazlo. Now it's your turn." The boy refused to try on a necktie. They surrendered and left the men's shop.

It was nearly four o'clock.

Karl placed a call to Arturo and told him of the death of the Oldsmobile. The man was sour with the news.

"We sell any cars today?" Karl joked.

"No, Mr. Banswick."

Arturo hung up the phone with promises to open the dealership on Sunday morning.

They ate the last food in Ava's refrigerator and then prepared for the Cafton Hotel. Ava changed into a blue dress. Lazlo stuffed himself into a unisex sport coat from Ava's closet. Karl ironed his shirt and put on his necktie. He did not look extraordinary, but was presentable. At the last comb through his hair, Karl had a flicker of doubt. Lazlo Mundt may be wrong about everything; he may have no idea where his father is located. There could be no dinner tonight. Mundt may be leading the two of them to an embarrassing end.

In the last hour before their departure, Lazlo became a dot in the scenery. Karl took it as sign of Lazlo's withering strength. The boy was running on reserves, like the rest of them, and he was about to face his father. Only Lazlo knew what kind of landmines might be planted in that relationship.

The last thing Karl did before walking out the apartment door was position his revolver in the small of his back. The gun had worn a bruise in his beltline. He grew more and more uncomfortable with having it uselessly on his person. He wanted action; he wanted to feel in control, as he had when he first turned

over the shoebox and loaded the gun. Lazlo's father was his last hope for salvation.

The Cafton Hotel was twenty blocks north from Ava's apartment. The evening had cooled off considerably, but they had no choice but to walk and conserve on taxi fares. When they arrived at the hotel, Karl led them through the revolving doors and onto the red carpet of the lobby. He stubbed out his cigarette in a flower pot. He immediately noticed the tuxedos and nightgowns – the throng of men and women making their way into the far corridor. A sign above the parade read: DeLEXETER BALLROOM.

"I feel underdressed," noted Karl, who then inspected his companions. Ava in her blue dress was perfect; Lazlo, stuffed in his suit-coat with unmatched trousers, looked ridiculous.

"We'll be okay." Ava nudged the men forward, and added to Lazlo, "Remember to point out your father."

At the turn out of the corner, just beyond the registration desk, they faced the long corridor leading in the direction of the DeLexeter Ballroom. The carpet was spiral and plush, red and gold, with subdued, decade-old wallpaper, hanging Victorian mirrors, and portraits of people not recognized. The smells of perfumes colored the air. Added to that, serious-looking men with balding tops and shriveled faces puffed on cigars, ignoring the displeased faces of their wives.

Midway down the corridor, three sturdy young men in formal wear kept sentry. Radios no bigger than quarters hugged their ears. Two of the men had taken positions on either side of a red rope and were letting guests filter past, inspecting ladies' purses and tapping down the gentlemen.

"Sonofabitch," mumbled Karl, thinking of the revolver under his jacket.

Guests surrendered paper invitations to a third security man, their pass to entrance confirmed. Names were checked against a clipboard held in his hand.

Bending Lazlo's ear, he scolded, "You never said this was a *private* dinner. Did you? How are we supposed to get in?"

"Lazlo, do you see your father?" Ava craned her neck above the crowd. There were thirty guests between them and the entrance to the ballroom.

The boy reached into his back pocket. "We could use *these*," he shrugged, and handed around three paper invitations.

Karl scanned the objects quickly. "Holy Moses, Lazlo. Where did you get these?"

"Your house, your house. Today."

"*My* house?"

"Red envelope in your icebox. It said, 'DINNER WITH FRIENDS' and had three, three, three of these. Pretty great, huh?"

Karl exchanged an angry look with Ava. "Pretty great," he echoed, not sounding at all great. "They know everything before we do it," he said, "How is that fucking *possible*? They knew I'd go to my old house, they knew I'd try to contact the ambassador, and, even more bizarre, they knew that Lazlo would look in the goddamn *freezer*."

"It was cold," said the kid.

"What do you want to do, Karl? Leave?"

A television crew jostled past – a cameraman, an assistant, and a reporter Karl recognized from the evening news. The crew was waved through without inspection.

Karl turned over his paper invitation.

It was stamped: PRESS. He turned the word so that Ava could read it. Hers said the same. As did Lazlo's.

"They've thought of everything," whispered Karl. "They even know about the gun."

"Do you want to go inside?" Ava asked again. "Or just walk away?"

"I don't know." Karl hedged. He needed help with the decision. He could not make it alone. "What do you think we should do?"

Ava bit her lip in thought. Her gaze returned to the line, the security men, the rising clouds of cigar smoke. "The path leads to Noah," she said, "I think we should stay on the path."

"But it's *dangerous*."

"I don't *care*. It leads to Noah."

Karl slowly began to nod.

"Come on!" said Lazlo with cheer, loud enough to draw looks, "Let's find my dad!"

Karl and Ava, Lazlo in tow, pushed their way to the side of the corridor and slithered, as the television crew had done, to the front of the line. At the red rope, they raised their invitations and wiggled past. One of the men stopped Karl and, without speaking, gestured that he wanted to see the invitation. Karl handed it over, trying to project confidence and his undeniable right to be there. Ava flashed a winning smile and tried to hide Lazlo's shuffling behind her shoulder.

"Press," said Karl, pointing to the stamp.

"What newspaper?" asked the man.

"The Guardian," said Karl, blowing the word up as it came out of his mouth. There was no "Guardian" in the city. It was the first name that had come into his head – the name of his auto club newsletter.

The security man nodded and turned his attentions to the next guest in line.

Karl didn't move; he didn't know what was expected. Ava took his sleeve and jarred him out of his rut. Karl quickly regained his traction and all three turned into the room simultaneously.

The DeLexeter Ballroom glowed. Silver and black balloons lined the walls, surrounding a twisting, spinning roomful of round tables, rotating guests, and circular conversations. To Karl, the room resembled a splendid aviary, full of clucking birds. The din was deafening, despite the thick carpet. At the tip of the ballroom, the furthest point from where they stood, a small podium had been constructed for speeches.

Karl didn't know how Lazlo would even recognize his father among such stone-faced and similar men. They all looked to be born of the same mother and pickled in the same, salty solution.

"Politicians," Karl dismissed.

Ava gave Karl a slap on the arm. "No commentary, please. We're reporters. We're supposed to stay objective."

"Look." At the end of a long table, Karl noticed the Mayor, chomping a cigar and running his hands through his slick black hair. "That's my wife's boss."

"Do you know him? Maybe he can help."

"No, not directly. What's he doing here?"

"There he is!" exclaimed Lazlo. "Dad!" he called and waved to a table in the far corner, opposite from the Mayor's table.

Karl couldn't see the faces of the three standing gentlemen. They were covered in balloons.

The last stampede of guests flooded the room just as the lights dimmed.

"Dad!" called Lazlo a second time.

Karl put his hand over the boy's mouth and smiled to the nearest table, where the guests frowned at this break in decorum. A woman with a sunken face tipped her eyeglasses so she might better see this troublemaking youth. Karl became acutely aware of the boy's fuzzy sideburns and over-combed hair, his wild eyes and his ill-fitting jacket.

"Dad!" Lazlo called a third time through Karl's fingers.

"Which one is he?" pressed Karl.

The silver balloons parted and Karl could now see the faces of the men. One was refocusing in their direction – a lanky figure with small-rimmed spectacles and thinning white hair.

Lazlo's finger went out. "Him."

The two camps locked eyes.

Karl could tell from the mix of confusion, anger, and irritation, that this was, indeed, their man.

Ava watched the elation in Lazlo settle. The boy, having the joy of first sight, withered with the very real judgment being pinned on him from his father's look.

The white-haired man politely excused himself from those at his table – the standing men and their three seated women – and, without a trace of emotion, crossed the ballroom for Lazlo.

The bright overhead chandeliers of the ballroom were now a memory, replaced by a darting cast of a spotlight. A short and round gentleman took to the podium.

His spoke an amplified introduction, its purpose and elegance, lost on Karl. His attention was drilled into the man walking their way. The white-haired man seemed to pass through the speaker's floating words and into their sphere like a ghost. "What do you want?" the man said to all three of them, his soft words louder in their ears than the amplified voice behind.

"Dad!" Lazlo said again, this time slightly doused by palpable fear.

"We have to speak with you, Mr. Mundt," said Karl officiously. "It's *very* important."

Ava offered, "We're friends with your son."

"Are you in trouble?" Peter Mundt asked them and, for the first time, there was a dribble of concern on top of his question.

"Yes," Karl and Ava replied simultaneously.

"Come with me." With authority, Lazlo's father made his way out into the Cafton Hotel's corridor.

The security detail remained a few feet away and, briefly, it looked as if Lazlo's father might just signal for their attention. Instead, the ambassador turned left, the opposite direction from the burly men, and brought Karl, Ava, and his son alone into a lounge not far from the ballroom. The area was isolated, with a two-seater green sofa and a standing silver ashtray at the arm. Only a small trickle of the political speech from the ballroom remained audible.

"Lazlo," said the ambassador with a lilt, "why don't you wait over there." Peter Mundt gestured toward the drinking fountain, thirty feet down the corridor. "I want to speak with your friends in private."

As a good puppy, Lazlo obeyed, moving off into position. He turned and fidgeted, able to see, but not able to hear any conversation in the lounge.

"You didn't need to send him away," objected Ava.

"Yes, I'm afraid it's necessary."

"Do you know why we're here?" asked Karl.

Peter Mundt took a long breath. "I'm afraid so. It happens from time to time. I'm getting used to it. Though it's never well-timed or very pleasant."

Ava was confused. "You know your son Fenton is missing?"

"Is he? Well, not for long. He'll turn up. Fenton goes missing once or twice a year."

"Lazlo's looking for him."

"Did he check the *gutters*?" smiled the ambassador, saying the noun with light-heartedness. He could tell his joke was lost on his audience. The ambassador dropped into the green sofa, reached into the inside pocket of his tuxedo, and withdrew a pack of Indonesian cigarettes. He offered the open box to Karl and Ava; neither accepted, though to Karl the smoke was tempting. "I've seen two types," Mundt continued, "in my son's company. There are those that want to take care of him, and those that want to take advantage of him. I couldn't say if you're the former or the latter, but if you're either, I should say it's no good. Wrong-headed. Lazlo and his brother are hopeless cases. They're hopeless because they cannot improve their station, and they're hopeless because they're unprofitable for 'hangers-on.' There's no money in being a friend of Lazlo's. He's not even useful to parasites." Peter Mundt took a second moment to light and puff his elegant cigarette. "I blame their mother," he continued. "It was a bad choice on my part. I was young, in a foreign land, and had just started to be interested in advancement. And she wasn't *all* rotten. She had some connections in the capitol. However, like the two children we've brought into this world, she, too, was broken. And now I'm left with two hopeless sons. Fenton...well...he's actually got a *modicum* of sense. Outwardly, he can sometimes appear to be quite normal. His head's mush, though. Don't be fooled. Have you met Fenton?" Peter Mundt suddenly stopped talking gestured with his lit cigarette, eyes squinting.

Ava responded, "Didn't you hear us? Fenton's missing."

"Oh, that's right. Now Lazlo's a different matter. He's wrong on both ends. Inside, he's no more intelligent than a houseplant. Outside...well, let's just say he draws attention. I've encouraged him to leave the city. He's well funded and can certainly go anywhere he wants, *do* anything he wants. But no. He hounds me. And occasionally, he shows up where I *happen* to

be. I'm in the newspapers too much. And he's got an uncanny ability to track me down." The ambassador laughed at his circumstance, not at all registering the blank and disappointed faces of the two people across from him. "And...sometimes...Lazlo shows up with...with friends." Here, the ambassador gave a searing look.

Karl stepped forward. "We're not taking advantage of Lazlo. We're not trying to save him! Look, you're a man who has connections—"

"Not taking *advantage* of Lazlo?" he scoffed. "It sounds to me like you want a political favor. I can sniff those a mile away. I've been in public life for over two decades. I didn't get my appointments for my ability to ignore *signs*."

"But you're ignoring them now!" objected Ava, her voice becoming agitated. "There are these envelopes and, and every few days we get them, and your son, and my son, and Karl's wife, and there was a shooting — the Chen brothers, and car fire, and—"

"Enough!" he bit back, stomping his foot and rising from the sofa. Irritated, he tapped out his cigarette in the standing ashtray. "Now I want you to be *gone* from this hotel. If you stay longer than five minutes I'll have you arrested." He fled down the corridor as if leaving the scene of an accident.

"But...but Mr. Ambassador!" Ava was flabbergasted. The abandonment of a son was a completely alien notion. And Peter Mundt had yet to hear their story. There was so much to tell.

Karl stepped quickly after Peter Mundt, eventually catching his arm. "Please, you have to help us!"

The ambassador raised the volume of his baritone, his voice commanding, a hot tar across Karl's face. "Let go of my arm! Let go! You extortionist! You naïve dolt! Do you know how many times Lazlo has tried to slit his *wrists*? It's his mother's fault and he knows it. Thank God they're not in arm's reach because those depths – those depths are not *pleasant* to witness. If you claim to be Lazlo's friends you'll do what's best for him and keep him away from his parents. It's what everybody wants!"

Peter Mundt shook free his arm. He snapped his fingers and spun his hand in the air. The security men, who had heard his last verbal assault, placed themselves at either side of Ava and Karl.

"Throw them out," he ordered to the men.

Ava turned to Lazlo. The boy still stood by the drinking fountain, dutifully obeying his exile. But he had heard his father's final words. His face, though too far to note details, showed more than his usual dumb fog; it showed hatred – for his father and his abandonment, the boy's aura projecting through the corridors of the Cafton Hotel like a bank of switched-on fluorescents.

Peter Mundt disappeared inside the cocoon of the ballroom, joining his false friends, his supper club supporters, and cronies of the Mayor of the city.

"Follow us to the lobby, please," said the biggest of the security men.

Surrounding but not touching, the security team corralled the three of them past the red ropes, though the lobby, and onto the street.

They were no trouble. They did not resist.

No final words.

No parting shot.

From outside the hotel, through the glass of the revolving doors, Karl watched one guard make a radio call, probably to the police, before he disappeared around the corner, back to his station.

"Why didn't you *shoot* him?" Ava asked, scorching.

"The guard?"

"No. That awful, *terrible* man."

Karl became aware of the pain in his back, the gun having settled down further into his belt, rubbing his bone. "What's the point?" he said limply.

That night, Lazlo was changed. He barely spoke. He would not eat. Around eight o'clock, the boy was asleep in Ava's spare bedroom, door shut. Karl thought he could hear the boy weeping through the walls, but it may have been imagination.

Ava remained on the couch and watched television. She hugged one of her son's stuffed lions, a toy that fit perfectly

against her small belly. Karl watched with her from the reclining chair, finished a bottle of wine from her rack, and felt thankful that his mind had wandered off the topic of the red envelopes, at least for a few hours. The television shows were dull but neither he nor she complained.

Just before ten o'clock, Ava turned to Karl. "I'm going to check in with the police tomorrow about their progress on my case."

"Are you expecting there to be any?"

"Yes. There has to be. It can't have gone completely cold in eight days. And it would look strange if I don't call them. I'm surprised they're not calling *me*. The detective on the case seemed good."

"Was he fat?" Karl smirked, the body of Brody Easter filling his memory. Karl corked the empty wine bottle then set it on the carpet. It tipped over, but he did not right it.

"Maybe you should call in, too?"

"At this point," he smirked, "I'm hoping they arrest me again."

"That's not true."

"I'd feel safer behind bars."

"The gun isn't helping?"

"Not really." Karl looked to the revolver on the coffee table. "My plan for action seems to have been a bust."

Sympathetically, she nodded. "Well, you tried."

Karl climbed awkwardly to his feet. The wine touched his senses and he felt his muscles move out of his complete control. "I need to sleep," he announced. "Can I borrow your couch?"

Ava shook her head. "Take my bed. I'm not tired. I'll sleep out here when I'm ready."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Yes." Ava hugged Noah's stuffed lion.

Karl began a lull to the hallway. "Wake me up if you want to switch places. I don't want to steal your comfortable bed."

"It's all right," she assured. "You deserve a good night's rest."

Karl held by the turn of the hall. "Sorry about your money," he consoled.

"It doesn't matter nearly as much as another day without Noah," she replied, sullen. "I wish it had been a ransom. At least it would be over with."

He remained in the hallway a few seconds, unsure of what to say, then retired to the master bedroom. The down pillow and the soft blankets welcomed Karl as he tumbled into Ava's king-sized bed. Her room was dark and quiet, filled with stylish and understated furnishings, drapes, and carpet. Karl, the wine rushing to feed his dreams, was soon asleep and snoring, fully clothed and not caring.

He didn't sense her when she crawled beside him. He was on his stomach and the bed did not shake. (Or if it did, he didn't feel it.) He only noticed her hand on his cheek, followed by her soft lips in the same spot.

Karl's left eye fluttered.

Ava had both arms around him – one along his back, the other over his head, twirling his salted hair. She had changed into a nightgown and he could feel the warmth of her body among the shadows.

"Karl," she whispered before kissing him again.

"Don't," he replied softly. He was still a little drunk, still a little asleep.

"I want to."

Karl turned his face away from her. "Just don't."

Some time passed; perhaps he fell back to sleep.

Ava's hands had found his belt, hidden beneath the covers.

"I'm married," he said.

She slumped over him, resigned. Soon they were both asleep, backs touching, centered in the bed with space surrounding. Karl dreamed that they had made love. She had been giving and beautiful and fantastic. But she was not Lana. He was glad to know it was just a dream.

When they awoke, it was simultaneous at 10:00 in the morning. The October Sunday came through the windows, blocked only partially by the closed drapes of the bedroom. Karl

rolled to face her. He smiled a bit. *We're okay,* it said. Ava tried to mat down his flyaway hair and he snuck from her fingers.

Karl made his way to the master bathroom, rinsing with her mouthwash and using the toilet. When he emerged, she was in a robe. As she took a space next to him in the bathroom, she brushed her teeth and washed her face.

"What time is that damn puppet show?" he asked.

"Noon."

Lazlo was already awake and glued to the television. Cartoon music blared into the room and Karl had to dial it down. Lazlo didn't acknowledge either of them. Ava sat beside the boy and put a hand on his knee. "Are you feeling better?" she asked.

Lazlo gave a slight bob to his head.

"Do you want some breakfast?"

He shook his head 'no.'

She made him something anyway, which the boy didn't eat. Then she phoned the police, as she had promised, only to end up leaving a message for an unavailable detective.

"We should get going," Karl said, pointing to his running watch as the hands approached eleven o'clock.

Ava frowned, observing the boy from the kitchen. "I don't want to leave him."

"We should. It's for the best," he said. "We'll only be two hours, tops, and he doesn't have a ticket. We'd have to leave him outside the theater. He's safer here." Karl slid the revolver off the coffee table and back into his belt.

Ava, at last, gave a nod of agreement. She grabbed her coat (brown, with belt,) her apartment keys, and the last few dollars from the dish by the door. She left the boy with a sandwich and the schedule of television programs.

The morning had changed from sunny to cloudy, the fits and starts of autumn having taken hold of the city. Dried leaves, fallen from the exhaust-choked trees that lined the sidewalks, blew down the streets. Ava tucked herself into Karl's arm to fight the chill.

The Cope Theater was a run-down vaudeville house that had been closed for decades and had re-opened in 1975, for use by

poor troupes of young actors. Karl had barely remembered the theater's existence; Ava had seen a single, experimental show there with a college friend, who was visiting town and tangentially knew a cast member.

A stage play was in the main theatre. Patrons were already starting to arrive. However, Karl and Ava's destination was elsewhere. Instead of the main theater, they followed the signs to the basement. "THE CROSBY PUPPETS – NO STRINGS ATTACHED," said the hand-drawn white board, mirroring the blurb on their admittance tickets.

"Not fair," said Karl as he descended the dirty staircase. "Lazlo got a ticket to a fancy ball, and we got a puppet show in a morgue."

"Well lets hope this show turns out better than his," replied Ava dryly.

In the basement, two black-clad females escorted them over puddles on the concrete floor, residue from that week's rain having made its way through the theater's foundation. They entered the space – a wide room converted into a makeshift theater, with a small proscenium, a thin black curtain, and two-dozen folding chairs set on a two-tier riser. There were six other patrons seated. Ava and Karl took up the end chairs on the top tier and released their tickets to the female ushers.

It was exactly twelve o'clock.

The lamps dimmed and the curtain was drawn open on squeaky cranks.

No puppets.

Instead, men and women.

Mimes, acrobats.

No strings, just as the ticket had promised. However, their arms were cocked, raised, as if manipulated by invisible rods. The interactions of the "puppets" were generic human activities – shopping, eating dinner, watching television. There was no conversation throughout the play, only the harsh sounds of the actors' boots as they crossed the stage, donning their black and white costumes, conducting their ritual business.

"What the fuck is this?" Karl whispered in Ava's ear.

She sat forward in her seat. "It's us," she said back.

A man and a woman on stage sat in bed, touching but not touching. Their arms, captured by unseen strings, strayed from their bodies and made it impossible for them to connect.

"What the fuck is this?" Karl asked the question again, but this time louder, to the ushers. Five of the six patrons – all women, various ages – shushed him violently. The sixth patron, the man, simply smiled.

More actors entered, tumbling. Nothing else in the performance copied Karl and Ava. The action became indiscriminate and confusing.

"I'm leaving."

Ava's was at his arm as he brushed past the door, into the damp basement, fumbling towards the light of the stairwell. "Wait, Karl, wait."

He stopped on the first step and turned. Above him, on the floorboards of the Cope, Karl heard trampling, the arrivals of more patrons for the main stage performance.

"We're *supposed* to be here!" said Ava, at his heels. "Maybe there's an important clue at the end of the show, maybe—"

A voice came from two-feet away. "You're here about the red envelopes, aren't you?" The man, the single man who sat near to them during the performance, hovered confidently at their heels.

"What did you say?" Karl tried to get a good look in the shadows, the light from the outside flooding the stairwell and making it hard for him to see.

Coming forward, the man, in his early fifties, wearing yellow designer shirt and trousers, sharp raincoat, and exquisite haircut, reached out his hand to be shaken. He wore three silver rings. "I'm here to help."

Ava took his hand and politely returned the man's gesture.

Karl's steely gaze made the man not reach for a second shake. "I know all about the red envelopes. You're looking for someone, aren't you?"

"Yes." Ava answered for them both.

The man gave a point back to the closed door of the basement theater space. "Puppet shows," he scoffed. "They are usually good luck for me. A lot of people get directed to one of those eventually." He laughed. "This one's pretty freaky, though. Glad I didn't have to sit through much more of it."

"What do you want?" Karl spoke with venom. "Do you have another document for us or what? Hand it over."

"Another document? No."

"Then get out of my face."

"Easy. I'm here to help."

Ava maneuvered between the two men. "Help *how*?"

The man opened his arms. "By telling you *everything*."

A pause.

"What do you mean?" Ava wanted more.

Softly, he answered. "I've been through it. I've been all the way to the end."

Ava leapt off the step and into the man. "Do you know where my son is? Do you? You have to tell me? Please, please. Tell me."

"Hey, hey, hey," he protested, giving distance.

Karl dismissed with a wave in the air. "He's lying."

"No, he's not." Ava looked into the man's eyes. "Are you? Are you lying?"

He crossed his heart. "Swear. I know everything. Like I said, I've been through it. Made it past the black envelope, even. Bet you don't know anyone who's done that." The man's voice was drenched in smarm. "I can tell you everything," he pushed. "Greatest shortcut in the world. No more envelopes. No more playing by their rules. You know they've got you cornered. Even when you think it's just a piece of paper, they've got you. They're Gods, you know. You'll never beat 'em. Not them. But I can get you around their bullshit. You just...go to the source."

Karl moved off the stairs. He circled the well-dressed man. A new thought began to surface in his mind. The man *was* telling the truth. "There's a catch, isn't there?"

"Truth costs," the man explained, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together with his fingers.

"Fucking knew it," Karl scoffed. "How much?"

"Same price for everyone. Fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thousand!" Ava's voice rang loud in the basement.

The man shrugged. "And, truth be told, you're getting a bargain, because I'll tell you both together. That's only twenty five thousand each. And it'll save you a lot of hassle. How much is your loved ones worth to you?"

Karl and Ava's minds went to the spot together – the burning purse inside the fiery Oldsmobile. The ten thousand dollars cash, consumed.

"Thirty eight thousand," Ava said dreamily to Karl. "I have only thirty eight."

"A couple thousand," Karl added, citing the value of his own savings account.

"We're short," she said. "We're exactly ten thousand *short*." Ava shot a look to their extortionist. He was reading them, sensing the turning wheels. "What about Banswick Motors?" Ava quickly suggested to Karl.

"Someone would have to buy a few cars."

"No, what about your business account? Can we get into it when the bank opens tomorrow?"

Karl frowned. "The account's frozen...my divorce. The courts only allow me enough for day-to-day operations."

"What about those men – Arturo and the two salesmen?"

"They're in the same boat as me, maybe worse. They have families, too. Do you see how many cars I sell? Almost none." Karl thought of a tactic and addressed the man. "Do you want a car?" he asked. "Forty thousand and a car?"

The man dusted his hands. "I've got too many cars already. And they're all *very* nice."

Karl knew this man – he had seen his type. He had made fifty thousand over and over and over. His accounts were bursting. He was capitalizing on his one patented idea – to expose the secrets of the red envelopes for a price.

"Just *take* forty thousand," pleaded Ava, stepping into a puddle on the concrete. "It's all we have. Just take it. *Please*."

"Fifty is the price."

"I know, but we don't have it."

"Fifty is the price."

"You greedy fuck!" She screamed at him, loud enough that an usher poked her head out of the puppet show and made a hushing motion. "You'd rather get *nothing* than forty?" Ava pressed, controlling her voice. The usher, still displeased, returned to the performance.

"Fifty is the price," repeated the man. "I can't break the rules. I'd get a reputation. And there will be others. Trust me, lady. There are *always* others."

Karl pulled the revolver from his belt and aimed it at the man's face. He cocked the hammer of the revolver and pushed the barrel against the man's forehead. "Tell us NOW," Karl instructed, dead calm.

The man, rather than being frightened, relaxed his body. "You're not the first to try that," he mused.

Karl poked the man's head harder with the barrel, leaving a circle in the skin. "Well I'm going to be the last," he said, tough.

"No, Karl." Ava had her hand on Karl's arm. "We can't. We shouldn't."

"Tell us," Karl urged once more.

He locked his eyes with the man, telegraphing his intentions to fire, to take the man's head off, to leave him dead in the basement of a vaudeville theater, among the rusty pipes and under the sounds of scuffling matinee feet.

A bead of sweat appeared on the man's forehead. "Business has gone down," said the man, as if giving a news report. "I have to make the price the price. I don't get as many hits as I used to. The price keeps me solvent."

"They're onto you, you know that?" mocked Karl.

"Not entirely."

"One day, they will shut you down."

"One day. But not today. Fifty thousand is the price. Take it or leave it."

Karl pushed the gun forward a second time, sending the man into the wall. The basement's mold rubbed off on his

designer clothes. Disgusted, Karl turned away. "Come on," he snapped Karl at Ava, taking her hand and returning to the stairs.

The man called after them as they ascended. "You're missing a great opportunity here. Fine! Go on your hunt! See where it leads you. Good luck if you find a black fucking envelope. I hope you get KILLED!"

Karl winded up, up, up. Ava weighed him down. She didn't want to leave.

"Karl, maybe we...maybe we can...maybe we should..." came from her mouth, the last part of each sentence tugged down into her stomach with each double-step.

"I know that man," Karl batted back, "he would have never made it through a black envelope. He's *lying*, Ava. He's *lying.* He doesn't know any more than we do."

"But are you sure?"

Karl nodded firmly, so she could see. In his mind, though, there was a flicker somewhere, that he had just scuttled a great opportunity. Or it had been scuttled for him with the automobile fire. He tucked the revolver back into his belt.

At the top landing, stood an old woman wearing a dress and a nametag: ELEANOR. "Here you go, sir," she said in a threadbare voice, handing Karl another red envelope. "The theater manager told me that when I finished seating for the matinee, I should wait here and give this envelope to the first man up those stairs." The old woman winked. "Must be some kind of surprise! Or maybe some free tickets!"

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

TENTH DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

He barely acknowledged his messenger and continued to tug on Ava until they were out into the dreary day.

"Are you sure we're doing the right thing?" Ava asked.

"No. I'm not sure of anything."

He opened the red envelope.

LAST SUPPER

"Whew, I was nervous," he said, handing the message off to Ava. "Coupon. A gift certificate. Not expired, though. For some restaurant on Eighth Street."

"That's south."

"Good. I want to swing by the dealership. I think we'll need another car. And there might be some cash in the drawer to get us through tomorrow. Maybe someone bought windshield wipers or something."

"Have you ever eaten at the restaurant on the certificate? The food's not poisonous, is it? LAST SUPPER. Sounds like a bad idea."

"Never ate there. But it's a red envelope, not a black one."

"Does that matter anymore?"

Ava was right. Red envelopes had become tough on a body. The idea of a bout of botulism (or worse) held little appeal. The

next step of the path was before them, though, and neither laid out any more objections.

Back at Ava's apartment, they entered quietly, so as not to disturb Lazlo. It was two o'clock and they did not hear the television on, as would have been normal for the boy. When they turned the corner into the main room, it was empty; Noah's train set had been derailed and a large bowl of popcorn sat half-eaten.

"Maybe he's taking a nap," suggested Karl.

At the end of the hallway, they pushed open the door to the spare bedroom, letting the edge drag on the shag carpet. The boy had his back to them, body under covers. But there, on the white bedsheets, silent but screaming in Karl and Ava's ears...

A black envelope.

"Oh no, oh *no*." Ava kneeled beside the bed, as if praying, her eyes stuck to the wicked message that lay on the bed.

Karl came around her position and craned over the bed. For a moment, Lazlo looked dead. Karl at last saw his chest rise and fall. The boy was sound asleep. He gave Lazlo a gentle shake. "Lazlo," he said, and shook again harder.

Lazlo sprang out from the covers, speaking rapid fire. "I didn't – I couldn't – you – I was sleeping – I didn't – not me – it wasn't me – not me."

Ava surrounded the black envelope with her hands, as if capturing a caterpillar. "Where did this come from?" she asked Lazlo.

"It was under the door," he replied.

"Who is it for?" To Karl, it was the most important question. "I just got a red envelope, so I doubt it's me." As he spoke, he regretted it. Ava's face grew sickly white and her breathing fluttered. "We should open it *now*," he urged. "Get it over with. Nothing's as bad as what your heads thinks."

Lazlo, eyes puffy and sunken, didn't seem to have the strength. He swung his legs over the bed and asked Karl, "Another? Another? You got a red envelope? What's it say? Show me, show me." He stopped and calmed himself. "Show me," he said with clear determination.

Karl withdrew the restaurant certificate and handed it over to Lazlo's waiting hands.

"This is my favorite restaurant on *earth!*" he exclaimed, happy for the first time since first glimpse of his father. "Are we going? Can we go? Because I'd really, really like it if we did. Best food, best food. We're going, right? Good. Let's go there tonight, tonight."

Ava nodded. Lazlo was more like a child than an adult, and he was difficult to deny. "Okay, Lazlo, we will." She did not take her eyes off the black phantom.

She shot out quickly and tore through the paper, black pieces falling on the white blanket. After she had assessed the single page typed within, she handed it to Karl.

"1483 Seminary Street, 1S." Karl read the address out loud, slowly. He asked Lazlo, "Do you know who lives at this address?" The boy shook his head. "Do you?" he asked Ava. She, too, shook her head. "I guess we'll have to go there to find out who owns this envelope." Karl sat on the edge of the bed.

Outside the apartment window, the day had grown dark. Rain clouds were settling over the city. And over the three of them.

They took a bus to Banswick Motors, arriving around four o'clock in the afternoon. The dealership was shut up tight, having closed at 3:00 on Sundays. Karl entered with his key, just escaping the break of the rain clouds that doused the six cars in his lot in a sudden downpour. Lazlo and Ava were at his heels as he switched on the lights.

From the box, he commandeered the set of ignition keys for the showroom's white Buick. The petty cash was only sixteen dollars, but Karl emptied the tin box into his hands and stuffed the bills into his pocket. He raised the sidewall of the building by the lever and then started the car, which thundered in the small space.

"Get in," he told the others.

Once by his side, Ava asked, "Won't your office manager be angry about you taking another car?"

"I'll have it back by morning," he promised. "Safe and sound."

Reversing into the rain, Karl put the Buick in park, hopped out, then locked up shop and returned, soaked, to the driver's seat. His clothes dripped on the leather interior. He dried his face on his jacket cuff.

By the time they reached the restaurant, the rain had abated and Karl had started to dry out, though he smelled slightly damp.

Lazlo's favorite food was apparently hot dogs, the specialty of the house. Ava ordered for the men and killed the last of the petty cash. Lazlo had lost his appetite. He ignored his hot dog and poked at his basket of fries. In the end, he threw everything into the trash and looked cadaverous. "Are you feeling okay, Lazlo?" Ava patted the boy on his knee. "I thought this was your favorite restaurant."

Karl whispered in Ava's ear, "Last supper. Maybe he knows it..."

Lazlo nodded. "The black one," he said softly.

"Don't worry, kid," added Karl with an up-tempo, "We're sticking together. We'll get through it." He said this as much for Ava as for Lazlo. An address didn't *appear* all that dangerous. He expected much more from the first black envelope – perhaps skulls and crossbones and the ink of human blood. *But it's always the bullet you don't see that finally kills you,* he thought to himself.

Outside, the rain abated, leaving behind a dark evening filled with foggy windows, drizzle, and steam.

Karl stood before the others, refreshing his memory on the page's address. "1483 Seminary Street, apartment 1S... We're coming. Ready or not."

Seminary was not a popular street, but Karl knew of it. Sandwiched between two main arteries of the city, it was a part of the residential districts that surrounded the largest of the city hospitals. Here, at these coordinates, Karl had had his open-heart surgery. Doctors had repaired the extensive damage of his first heart attack, cracked open then stitched back together his chest cavity, and nursed him back to health over a painful two-month period.

As they drove past the white buildings of the hospital, Karl held his cigarette low to his leg, flicking ash in the Buick's tray

(something Arturo was sure to notice, comment on, and hopefully clean.) It was wrong to flaunt the ignoring of doctor's orders so close to the source. These people had saved him, had bought him two more years of life.

But for what? For a divorce, a missing wife, and a terrible week chasing strange envelopes all over the city. He may yet die. The one thing he had confidence in was that this black envelope was not for him. He had a few more days, at least. Selfishly, he was glad for the reprieve. He was not ready to face death.

They found the turn onto Seminary Street.

The street was a dead end. It stopped at a mesh fence that was meant to block trespassers from the hospital's rear lawns. Crowded with retirement apartments knitted together and dimly lit by inner lamps. There was something unwelcoming about these tracts. Curtains were shut, cars few, and mist thick around the trees.

"Here it is," said Ava with a point. "1483."

Karl parked the Buick. Engine off, he came around and opened the door for Lazlo, who had not moved. Ava, by Karl's side, coached the boy. "Lazlo," she said in a voice as soft as clouds, "you *have* to come with us, okay? We've got to stick together." Her voice caught on the last word. Ava's hand went out. Lazlo, hesitantly, took it. "That's a good boy," she soothed. "It's going to be all right."

A thin sidewalk traced to the front door of the apartment building. One side of the doorway was marked NORTH, the other SOUTH. Both had separate buzzer panels. Ava found 1S on the SOUTH panel and put out her finger to ring the buzzer.

"Wait!" Karl jumped, catching her finger.

A light had come alive on the first floor, the south side.

Gingerly, Karl stepped off the sidewalk and into the bushes. Through the crack of the window's curtains, he peered voyeuristically into the apartment.

The place was a one-room efficiency, with a bed in the center, a kitchen in the rear, and a television close to the window, tuned to the evening news. Emerging from a door off the hallway, a woman.

"What do you see?" Ava asked in a low hiss, scanning the streets for signs of policing neighbors.

Karl squinted to better see the person through the window. "It's just some woman," he replied hoarsely.

The woman was in her fifties, but wore her wrinkles deep. She went back into the hallway, then returned a second time, this time looking more confused. She repeated the action a third time, now smiling, some unseen gaffe having taken her attentions.

"I don't recognize her," Karl told the others as he maneuvered back onto the walk. "It doesn't *look* dangerous," he lilted. "You should check it out. She may be someone you know, but I don't."

Ava considered then crossed into the bushes, ruffling the leaves, becoming covered in dew and fog, as she, too, peeked into the apartment window. She paused before saying anything. "No," she decided at last, "I don't know her." She returned to the safe territory of the sidewalk. "You didn't see anyone else in the apartment, Karl?"

"Nobody."

"She looks a little funny."

"That's true. What was she doing for you?"

"Stepping in and out of a room."

Together, their eyes fell upon Lazlo, who looked petrified.

"Lazlo..." Ava placed her hand on the boy's shoulder. "It'll be all right. Just tell us if you recognize the woman inside the apartment."

"I don't want to."

"You have to," urged Karl. "I'm not walking into a trap. I'm not ringing the buzzer until we've all taken a look. Now do it."

Ava shot Karl a hard look. She didn't like the way Karl badgered the boy. Lazlo was fragile, had been ever since the Cafton Hotel. "Don't push him," she chided.

Lazlo locked on Ava's eyes.

Slowly, the boy lifted a leg into the line of bushes.

Covered like a ghost, the dark, fog, and dripping rain made it difficult for Karl to clearly see Lazlo. The boy's black coat and

hair made for perfect camouflage. His shadow bent at the knees and craned his neck at the lighted apartment window.

Only Ava could see the change in the boy.

The light from inside the apartment cast on Lazlo's face. The shadow turned, into the light. Karl saw the boy's eyes. Something had gone wrong.

"No, no, no," started Lazlo, loud for his close position to the window, "No, no, no, no, *no*..."

"Do you recognize her?" Karl needed a confirmation.

"Tell us who she is, Lazlo."

"No, no, no!" Lazlo leapt over the bushes and onto the grounds of the building. He spun around, covering his eyes and running. "It's her, it's *her*, it's her!"

Karl and Ava followed, arms out, as if to catch the erratic flight of a butterfly.

"Who the fuck is it, Lazlo!" Karl stopped took a position. *Could the residents hear?* Had their approach been detected by some larger, more dangerous force? The black envelope couldn't be just a woman – a woman who couldn't decide what room she should stand in.

"It's mom, it's her it's her it's her. It's mom."

"Your mother?" Ava's mind raced to the words of Peter Mundt.

Do you know how many times Lazlo has tried to slit his wrists? It's his mother's fault and he knows it. Thank God they're not in arm's reach because those depths – those depths are not pleasant to witness. If you claim to be Lazlo's friends you'll do what's best for him and keep him away from his parents.

A violation – they had crossed a line in locating the boy's mother.

"Come back!" Ava shouted into the darkness, stunned by the revelation and not noticing Lazlo's break into a run.

Karl tore after the boy without regard to his heart condition. Speed was required. The boy was about to climb the fencing at the end of Seminary Street and enter the grounds of the hospital. "Lazlo! Lazlo!" he called as he passed Ava's position. Calling the boy's name didn't stop his escape.

"No, I can't, I can't, I can't..." This repetition from the boy continued even as he found firm footing in the fence and carried over, dropping to the other side. His voice faded as he entered the wide hospital lawn and disappeared entirely into the white fog.

"Shit." Karl collided with the fence. He knew they couldn't climb it. He was not that nimble. And Ava was too short.

Ava, breathing heavily, landed beside him a few seconds later. "Help me over." She said lifted a leg, intending to be ally-ooped onto the hospital lawn.

Karl turned and focused back to the street.

"The car," he said. "We'll drive around. Catch him on the other side."

"Help me over!" she insisted.

"No!" Karl was already in action, retreating to the white Buick. "He's going in a straight line – a straight line away from his mother. We can catch him if we hurry."

Both inside the car, Karl peeled out of the space and reversed, heading opposite on Seminary. They burst from the dead end and onto the perpendicular avenue. A few turns and they were on the front side of the hospital, just in time to see the shape of Lazlo darted from the trees and, for just a flash, appear in their headlights.

Karl blasted the horn and slammed on his brakes.

The boy did not stop. Lazlo's face – the frozen, unredeemable caste of mad confusion – told the story. He was running for his life. For him, the image of his mother, alone, in a simple, looping nightmare, was too much for his brittle psyche.

Karl kicked the accelerator and jerked the wheel, hitting the curb but making the turn onto the hospital road. He followed fifty feet behind the boy, confident that he could catch up, until Lazlo swerved and leapt over a barrier.

With the slam of brakes, Karl and Ava were thrown forward. Karl threw the gearshift into reverse and took to the grassy median, leaving behind the stench of rubber.

Two hospital employees, having chosen to wander in the confusing fog rather than under the streetlamps, were nearly clipped by the bumper of the Buick. "Sorry, sorry," Karl

apologized with a gesture, though the two white-coated workers could not hear him.

"Be *careful*!" shouted Ava.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. I can't see him."

The Buick jumped another curbstone and landed on solid pavement, back on the public road, having crossed the entire median.

Another left turn, another right.

Karl rubbed the steamy window with his sleeve, ran the windshield wipers. The rain was starting again.

"Which way should I go?" Karl asked Ava at the next junction.

"Left," she said, then changed her mind. "No, right."

Karl spun the wheel and accelerated.

A black car came pouring out of the midst.

"Shit!"

The two cars collided. The front ends of both crumpled and sank, sending the Buick underneath the gobbling hood of the black car. Ava flew forward into the dashboard, bracing herself. Karl's arms flattened against the wheel and he was showered in breakaway glass.

For a few moments, silence.

"Wrong side of the road, jackass!"

He was a doctor, and he was angry.

His Volvo was ruined and his nose bled.

Karl managed to lift himself from the wheel. He tried to open his door, but it was bent inward, wedged tight.

Ava had tumbled backwards. A cut on her cheek, but otherwise undamaged. "Karl," she said, her voice dreamy and unsure. Her hand touched his hair, matted with blood. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Get out."

Karl gestured to the passenger-side door. The entire front seat was tighter, having lost ten inches of legroom in the crash. Both slid across the glass-strewn front seat. From Karl's belt, the

revolver slipped out and he worked to quickly cover it and drop it into his pocket. They were soon free from the wrecked Buick.

The doctor, his white coat dotted with his own blood, name badge unhooked and nearly falling from his lapel, tapped his foot impatiently, not a single, Hippocratic bone in his unbroken body. "My fucking *car*!" he cried. "My goddamn fucking car! Oh, I'm calling the police. I'm calling THE FUCKING POLICE!" he screamed. "Don't you know how to fucking drive!"

Dazed, Karl and Ava brushed past the man and looked beyond the rain and haze. Karl withdrew his nitroglycerin pills and popped one under his tongue. He was running low on his limited supply; there weren't many left. He gritted his teeth until the pain abated.

"He's gone," said Ava, not noticing Karl's condition. She laid her head his shoulder, despondent. "I've lost *everybody*." Then she began to weep.

Karl held her tight. Over top of her, he could see the doctor, whose fury began to melt with Ava's disintegration.

"I'm calling the police," he repeated, this time weakly and without commitment.

"Don't worry, we're insured," Karl said, drained, and thought of Arturo's response to another car destroyed. When the doctor looked away, he opened the clasp on Ava's purse and dropped the revolver inside for safekeeping.

The police were, in fact, called, and arrived just fifteen minutes after the accident. Karl found himself answering another set of questions, completing another set of paperwork, including receiving a ticket and issuance of a court date.

Halfway through the proceedings, an officer brought up the Oldsmobile fire from the day before. "Dispatch told me of the report," he said. "You got gremlins following you around?"

An ambulance worker gave Karl a third gauze pad for his bleeding head and shelter from the rain.

"Yes. Gremlins," Karl agreed, thinking of the source of the red envelopes. His head was killing him, but he couldn't tell if it was from the cut or a side effect of the nitroglycerin.

Ava had lapsed into sadness that, to Karl, resembled Lazlo's last few hours. The cut on her cheek was minor and would heal, but the disappearance of her Noah, and now this surrogate son she had become attached to, weighed on her.

For Karl, it was not sadness that pervaded his emotions, instead anger – at what had been done to the boy, at what may be happening to his wife and to Noah, at the hopelessness of his own fight. He wanted to lash out, but there was no one to lash out against. Their villain was a faceless corporation of envelopes. Puppeteers. Cowards. He and Ava were helpless to fight their enemy.

The accident paperwork completed, the two cars towed, all three victims given a clean bill of health by the ambulance crew, Karl and Ava walked across the hospital lawn in the direction of the main thoroughfare. There, they could catch a bus.

It was closing in on ten o'clock at night.

Karl, not having said a word for twenty minutes, grew more and more angry as he soaked in the steady rain.

In seven days, he had destroyed two cars, and had had a third one towed. He had barely been into work at the dealership; he was tired, confused, and bleeding from his scalp. He had been exposed to extortion, cruel politicians, and hot-air professors. What he wanted more than anything after the last seven days was *normalcy*. He wanted to find his wife, but he also wanted the divorce to be over, the way it had wrecked his life; he wanted his old house back, with her, together. He didn't want to play games anymore – not with her, certainly not with his enemy manipulators.

Like *him*:

Brody Easter.

Karl spotted him.

He stood on the other side of the street, awaiting the northbound bus as Karl and Ava waited for the southbound. He almost didn't recognize the false detective. But Easter's fat body gave him away, even in his gray raincoat and his Fedora hat.

"Ava, give me your purse," Karl said, as a hunter asking for his binoculars.

"It's sopping wet," she said, raising the bag up to her waist and letting it drip. "It's ruined."

"Give it to me."

She did as instructed. Karl withdrew the revolver.

"I wondered where that went," she said, expecting him to tuck it back into his trousers now that the police were nowhere in sight. But he didn't. Karl raised the barrel of the gun and pointed it across the street to the opposite bus stop. "What are you doing?" she asked nervously.

Traffic had vanished, just in that moment.

He had a clear shot.

Ava looked to the fat man, his eyes focused down the street, checking for his own bus.

"What are you *doing*!" she said a second time, just as Karl fired the revolver.

The bullet left the gun, streaked across the two-lane street, and put a neat hole in the bus stop sign.

The fat man, hearing the crack and thinking it thunder, knew better once the sign was pierced. He spotted his assailant – thirty yards distant and aiming for a second shot.

Karl fired.

Ava jostled his arm just at the squeeze, sending this bullet into the curbstone, kicking up concrete into Brody Easter's face.

The man began to run, huffing.

The northbound bus appeared out of the dim streetlamps and the fat man ran to intercept it.

Karl tracked his prey along the sidewalk.

"Who is it, Karl! Who is it!"

"It's that detective!"

Karl fired a third shot. The bounce of his walk undermined his precision. The bullet missed Easter and landed unheard and unseen in the trees beyond.

"Stop shooting!" Ava called.

But the anger in Karl wouldn't let him stop.

The city bus slowed to pick up its new passenger, the man huffing and puffing and furiously waving to be seen by the driver.

In another moment, the bus would cover Brody Easter from any more of Karl's shots.

Karl stopped. He took his time and aimed with one arm. With the other, he held back Ava's advance, if only for a moment.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other bus passengers through the lighted windows. Karl could clearly be seen under the streetlamp, his gun raised. He saw a mother cover her son's eyes. He saw an older man's mouth drop and his finger point, calling something out to the bus driver.

Witnesses.

Witnesses.

Karl let his arm down, lowering the revolver.

Brody Easter nearly fell on board of the bus, the hiss and clang of the doors thundering in the quite street. The driver, sensing danger, or maybe hearing the words of his passengers, began to flee the scene, taking his two-ton bus out into the open road fast and with a roaring engine.

Karl stepped backwards into the darkness, out of the brightness of the streetlamps.

"It was him," Karl said to Ava.

"You could be wrong, Karl."

"No," he said, deflated. "It was him."

Deciding to avoid the public buses and the possibilities of radio calls (*Be on the lookout for man and woman; man has revolver; armed and dangerous*), Karl and Ava walked. They walked and walked. Exhausted, sore for the accident, they made their way back into the city proper.

Bone-soaked and tired, Ava suggested they find a hotel. They were both fifty blocks from either his place, or hers, or even the comfort of the Banswick Motors back offices. In the morning, she would go to the bank and withdraw more money. They could pay on checkout. Karl agreed to the plan and they ambled into a seedy four-story place, directly across from a branch of Ava's bank. Single rooms were $25 a night. This was a far cry from the opulence of the Cafton Hotel – the carpets and walls were shades of dull brown, the lobby furniture clawed by cats, the night man a bearded hippy smoking marijuana as he registered his new guests.

The hippy took mercy on them – their wet clothes and their dour state – and gave them a decent room. Door bolted and bed still made, they were asleep within minutes, leaving the Sunday behind them and, for a time, allowed them to be unconcerned for tomorrow.

Karl awoke several hours later to Ava's soft cries beside him on the bed. A bad dream. He nudged her with his elbow, but this just made her worsen. She tossed and called Noah's name, then opened her eyes to find Karl hovering above her.

"I think Noah's dead," she whispered.

Her frail voice, her wide eyes, her soft lips parted just enough to let the words trickle out, made Karl reach out his hand and caress the strands of her black hair.

"No," he softly assured. "He's okay. We just have to find him. Maybe tomorrow we will."

"Do you think your wife is dead?"

"No. She's not."

"How do you know?"

"Because she has to answer a question."

Ava stopped his hand from touching her.

"Unfinished business. Now go to sleep."

It took another ten minutes of unspoken thoughts, and they were both returned to blackness.

Karl awoke stiff and in pain. The effects of the car crash were taking toll on his muscles. His neck, back, and legs all screamed. He had his feet off the bed before he noticed he was alone. Ava had disappeared.

In the small bathroom, he found a note:

WENT TO THE BANK. BE BACK SOON. AVA.

Karl checked his watch, which rested on the sink. It was after eleven in the morning. He must have been exhausted, as he never slept this late. It would be wise to check in with the dealership. If Arturo was sick, the lot would be in the hands of Franklin and Darnell, and, though he had more important things on his mind, he didn't like leaving his seconds in charge this much.

Beside the sink was the revolver. His fingers dusted the cylinder. He had expected the gun to still be warm, its three spent shells heating it even now, twelve hours later. He was wrong; it was cold.

The face of the mother and child in the city bus, their horror at the sight of him soaked like a rat and mad as hell, was burned in his memory.

I almost killed someone. The sentence rattled in his mind. Easter, yes, but maybe someone else, too. Innocents. Stray bullets from a poorly aimed pistol.

Lazlo Mundt, gone. The boy's last red envelope had been in Karl's old house. They knew Lazlo would be inside, so they must have also known of Karl's visit, and his reason for the visit – for the gun. His invisible puppeteers had predicted every move. And it was frustrating. Grandly frustrating.

The revolver did nothing for him but put him in even greater danger. And put others in danger, too. If he had clipped that child on the bus, what would be the difference between Karl the assassin and those who have taken Noah?

He moved to the window of the hotel room.

Outside, the brick wall of the adjacent building was only ten feet distant. Four stories below rested the trash dumpster in the alley. Karl turned back to the room. He shed a pillowcase from one of the pillows and stuffed the revolver inside the casing. Wrapped tight, he leaned out of the window and positioned the white package over the dumpster.

The gun made a clang as it hit the metal floor of the container, easily burrowing its way through the layers of trash.

Karl leaned further out the window and peered down into the four-story drop. The pillowcase was invisible. The gun was buried.

Momentarily, he regretted his decision.

He took a shower in the poorly functioning hotel shower, cold water overcoming the warm and hitting his skin like icy pin pricks. He then dressed once more in his wrinkled trousers, white shirt, and tweed coat, taking a moment to slowly smoke a cigarette while sitting on the end of the bed.

Ava entered as he snubbed out the filter.

"Did you get the money?" he asked.

She nodded. "A thousand dollars. That should cover any surprise expenses."

"I suppose it would." Sitting on the bed beside him, she sighed. "I phoned the police from the lobby pay phone. The detective on Noah's case says they have nothing."

Karl held her hand and gave it a squeeze. "It's up to us," he said.

"Do we wait for more envelopes?"

Shrugging, Karl said, "I'm goin' to the dealership. If I don't show my face, explain about the car, Arturo might start talking bad about me to the police. Maybe that page of numbers that got me off the hook was a limited time offer, too. I think it's best that I keep up appearances. Why don't you go home? Get a shower. I don't really recommend the one here." Karl gestured to the tiny bath.

"Do you think Lazlo might have come back to my apartment?" The idea excited Ava. Hope lit into her face.

"Sure, yeah, good thinking. Maybe he's like a lost dog, following a scent back to you." Karl lit another cigarette. The smoke in his lungs felt good. He squeezed the empty pack and tossed it towards the corner wastebasket, the pack grazing the rim and landing in the corner. "Phone me at the dealership if the kid shows up. Or if you get another envelope – red *or* black." Karl got to his feet.

Suddenly, she rose with him, throwing her arms around his neck. Ava buried her face in Karl's lapel. "We shouldn't separate."

He hugged her back. "Just for a few hours."

She was shaking.

He didn't want to let go. "I'll get another car and meet you at your place."

"Another car? Will you be allowed?"

"Technically, they're all mine anyway. I own the shop. And my driving's not so bad," he joked.

She peeled away from his chest, from her flattened place against his surgical scar, to meet his eyes. She smiled, at last.

Ava handed Karl a hundred-dollar bill from the withdrawal.

They parted in two taxis, one north and one south.

It was lunchtime when Karl arrived at Banswick Motors.

The place was the same – though there was an obvious hole where the white Buick had once been parked.

Someone, probably Arturo, had pulled the black Mercedes inside to take up the hole. It had been washed since it's towing the Friday before and looked remarkably well.

Darnell and Franklin leaned against the office counter and ate delivery pizza. The place was quiet – typical for a Monday afternoon or, more accurately, most afternoons. Arturo sprang up from his desk when Karl entered through the main glass doors. "Mr. Banswick!" he called, eyes going past Karl and into the main circle of the lot. Arturo's face sank at the sight of the taxi pulling away. "Where's the Buick?"

"I got some bad news about the Buick, Arturo."

Arturo shook his head in denial. "Oh, Mr. Banswick, no—"

"It's all right, Arturo, we're insured."

"We're not going to have any cars left!"

"It's all *right*, Arturo." Karl took stock of his neglected business. "What's been happening here these last few days? I'm sorry I haven't been around. I'll tell you all about it someday."

"Well," started Arturo, hands in his pockets, "business is slow, boss. There's some mail on your desk. And I clipped that new ad for this weekend's sale. It ran this morning."

"You placed an ad?"

"Yeah. I thought it was a good idea. It's not really much of a sale, but it might help bring in some business. Only a few dollars to place."

Karl gave the man a pat on the shoulder. "I am impressed with your initiative, Arturo. Good thinking. Let me see it."

Arturo led Karl into the rear offices. "Oh, and the police returned the file cabinet this morning." Arturo gave a knock to the metal, three-drawer cabinet as he passed it.

Karl stopped and examined the cabinet's exterior. "Did they say anything?" he asked.

"No, nothing, Mr. Banswick."

Karl leaned closer. He put three fingers underneath the top-drawer handle, ready to pull.

"It's locked," offered Arturo.

But the words were no more out of Arturo's mouth than the drawer came open, just an inch. "No, it's not," refuted Karl. "Did you check and make sure all our sales files were returned in one piece? It'd be just like the police to forget something."

A nervous look, the look of a man who just realized he's lost his wallet, passed into Arturo's tan face. "No, Mr. Banswick. Like I said: all these drawers *were* locked." Arturo's hand went to touch the second drawer. He tugged, as Karl had, and the drawer sprung out, the squeak of the inner track giving him a start.

Karl tugged his top drawer again, this time until the drawer was fully open. The fluorescents of the office gave him only enough light to see the shadowy top of the contents. Not files. No, not files, not folders and tabs, as expected.

Instead, something else.

In a snap, he had his head half in the drawer and was staring at a pile of red envelopes.

Slamming the drawer shut, he pushed Arturo's arm aside and fully opened the second drawer beneath.

Red envelopes.

Then, the one at his feet.

Red envelopes.

Leaving the last drawer open, Karl shoved Arturo away from the cabinet.

"What is this? What is *this*!"

Franklin froze, mid-bite of his pizza slice; Darnell stepped from the counter, as if avoiding an angry dog.

Karl reached his hands into the open lower drawer and scooped out as many envelopes as he could hold. Red envelopes spilled from his grip and littered the tiled floor like bags of blood. Karl threw the stack at Arturo, catching the man in the face. "What the fuck is going on!"

Arturo backed away from his boss, hands raised in defense. "I don't know, boss – Mr. Banswick, please!"

Karl bent and snatched a single envelope from the dregs of the drawer.

"Where did you get these?" he asked his employees accusingly. "Is this some kind of JOKE!" Whipping the envelope at Franklin's head, the man ducked and lost his grip on the counter, falling clumsily to the floor.

Karl struck open another drawer, hauling it off its tracks with a great, loud crash to the floor. Red paper buried his shoes. He grabbed another envelope and this made Darnell retreat even further, to the trunk of the showroom Mercedes.

Opening the envelope, Karl realized fast that it was empty. He opened a second, a third – all of them empty. Karl kicked at the file cabinet until it toppled to its left in a deafening noise. The two last drawers coughed their stash onto the floor. "You're all INVOLVED, aren't you!" foamed Karl. "You're all fucking involved and you're trying to kill me!" From the fallen cabinet, Karl freed the top drawer and then slammed the heel of his shoe into the side, denting the metal. He then lifted the stray drawer by its cracking handle.

Arturo hopped the countertop to avoid contact with Karl's swing. The drawer mowed the last of the pizza onto the showroom floor, sauce face down. Franklin stood, but slipped on the stains. More red envelopes flew across, as missiles, as Karl let go of the empty drawer.

The metal box smashed the rear window of the Mercedes, sending a shower of glass over the seat.

Karl, out of breath, faced his three employees.

Their faces were familiar – the same horrified expressions as those passengers on the city bus. His employees were frightened of him. Even Arturo was painted with disbelief, distrust, and disappointment.

The dealership fell into silence.

"Mr. Banswick..." Arturo started softly just as the overhead bell rang with the entrance of a customer.

All eyes turned to the new arrival – a black man wearing flared jeans and a white shirt, gray coat, and glasses. In one hand, he held his own torn red envelope, in the other, a newspaper advertisement. Karl made a beeline for the man just as the man noticed the state of the showroom – the strewn glass and the overturned pizza.

"Who are you! What do you want?" Karl was harsh and condemning.

The stranger backed hastily to the door.

Arturo rushed forward to intercede, but it was too late.

Karl snatched the advertisement from the man. He fanned the page to find another underneath – the words "CAR SHOPPING IS GOOD SHOPPING" typed plainly on a white page. The ad was the one Arturo had placed that morning in the city newspaper. Karl stuffed the documents into the black man's hands.

"Get out!" he ordered. "Get the fuck out and don't come back!"

The man's face crumbled. "My name's Roger," he said hurriedly, "my daughter–"

"I DON'T CARE! GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!" yelled Karl into Roger's face, shoving him out the door. The man struggled to keep his ground, but soon quit fighting. The door slammed in his face and he accepted exile. Dazed, Roger wandered the dealership lot until he was soon totally gone from sight.

Karl collapsed at the door onto all fours. Arturo was by his side. "Mr. Banswick!" he said with concern flooding his features. He called over his shoulder, "An ambulance! Phone for an ambulance."

"No!" shouted Karl, short of breath. "In my pocket."

Arturo reached into Karl's jacket and pulled out the bottle of nitroglycerin tablets. He opened the lid for his boss.

Karl scrambled to get a pill under his tongue.

A minute passed.

Karl asked for another.

Slowly, his breathing returned to normal. Moving off his knees, Karl sat on the floor. He surveyed the damage – to his people, to his place of business, to his world.

"I feel better," he said, shaking the pill bottle. Only five more left. He dropped the bottle back into his pocket.

Slowly, with the help of Arturo, he stood.

"I'm sorry," he apologized to his men. "My wife is missing. I've been receiving these red envelopes for a week. I think they're leading me to her." He took a deep breath and checked their faces. "Or maybe they're leading me farther away," he said, "I don't know. I've been chasing these goddamn things all over the city. The police won't help. And I've met a few others – that woman Ava for one. She's trying to find her son." Karl rested his body against the frame of the Mercedes, burying his head.

The men watched as he stumbled to the countertop, where he leaned for support. He picked up one of the many red envelopes that had landed there during his tirade. He opened this one, too, and, again, it was empty.

"They're messing with my head."

Darnell opened an envelope. "Empty," he said.

"Empty," said Franklin after opening three on the floor.

Arturo came to Karl's side. "The cabinet was locked when the police brought it back. I *checked it*, Mr. Banswick. Every drawer." Afraid his words would bring fire Arturo stepped away to avoid a punch. There was none. Karl was too exhausted.

"That's okay, Arturo," assured Karl. "They *wanted* it to happen this way." He looked over his shoulder at the busted car window. "Sorry about the Mercedes."

"We're insured, Mr. Banswick," said the office manager, echoing Karl's own comforting statement.

Karl turned to Franklin and Darnell. "Go home, Frank. You, too, Darnell. Arturo and I will clean this place up. We're closed for the day. We're closed until further notice."

The two gathered their coats and were gone in minutes.

Arturo began gathering the empty envelopes and placing them into a trash bag. "I'll do it, Mr. Banswick, you take it easy."

Karl was grateful. He was recovered from his angina, but could not leave the sturdy support of the countertop. He didn't want to let go. He might just fall into nothingness.

Arturo stopped working, one of the red envelopes pinched between his fingers. Something had occurred to him.

"What is it, Arturo?"

Arturo resumed his clean up. "Nothing boss."

"No. No, what is it? I saw that look."

"I don't want to interfere."

"It's not interfering. Remember at the hospital? You said you'd help. Well you are. You have been. And I'm very grateful, Arturo. You have been tremendous." Arturo's thoughtful expression lifted. "So...what is it?"

Arturo put down the full trash bag and tied the top. Picking up yet another stray envelope, he approached Karl at the countertop. "I was just thinking..."

"Yes?"

"These are *very* unusual envelopes."

"Yeah, I thought that myself the first time I saw one."

Arturo moved his finger over the paper. He nodded. "And the color."

"Red."

"Yes, but red like I've never seen," added Arturo. "I mean, it might have been obvious to you. Maybe you've already done it. But why don't you try to find out who makes these envelopes? Maybe then you can find out who bought so many of them." Arturo gestured to the spilled file cabinet, the remaining piles of empties.

Karl seized the envelope from Arturo's grip. "Holy *shit*," he swore at the evidence all around him. "Oh my God, Arturo. You're a genius!" Leaning his belly over the counter top, he grabbed Arturo by the shoulders, pulled him closer, and gave him a big kiss on the forehead. "Genius!" he exclaimed again.

Dolores!

Her name hit Karl square.

Dolores!

The paper lanterns. Those orange and black Halloween lanterns.

My sister and I made those lanterns over the weekend. For Halloween. Do you like 'em? Dolores's words from the Tuesday before echoed in Karl's head.

He rushed out of the showroom, calling over his shoulder, "I've got to see Dolores." He didn't look back at Arturo, not for a second; he was certain the man stood dumb, confused as ever by Karl's wild behavior.

Karl crossed the street and dashed through the door of the donut shop. He hit his head as before on one of the orange and black paper lanterns and ripped it from its moorings.

Dolores sat reading the remains of the morning newspaper, sipping coffee. She straightened at the sight of Karl's vandalism and was about to protest.

"Dolores," he said, coming forward, torn lantern in hand.

"Karl!" she exclaimed, surprised.

"Where do you buy this paper?" he asked.

"Karl, are you okay? I've been worried sick."

"Please, Dolores, *please* – just tell me where you bought this paper. You said it was expensive. What's the name of the paper shop?"

"The Paper Trail. Oh, my gosh, that is *so* weird, Karl." Dolores set down her cup of coffee and went to the cash register.

Irritated, Karl tried again to plead his question. "Dolores, please, I have to know. Where do you—?"

From underneath the cash drawer, Dolores withdrew a red envelope. "I got another one of these. This time from the milkman. He said I should give it to the first person that asks about *paper*. I should have known it would be you."

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

PART THREE

Monday, October 17, 1977

(Documents Eleven to Thirteen)

Tuesday, October 18, 1977

Frustrating repetition. Frustrating repetition. I'm a rat on a wheel. There is no exit. There is no escape. I've done this only for their pleasure. And they must be laughing their asses off.

Get up.

How long have I been down? An hour? Less?

I've lost track of the time.

It won't be long now and I'll be swallowed up. I can feel myself growing smaller, leaving myself, looking down on myself. Poor, pathetic fuck. I pity you. You have been so easily led about. Like a fucking dog on a leash.

Poor Karl.

They knew me better than I know myself.

ELEVENTH DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

Pure joy coursed through his body, for the first time in nearly a year. As if opening a Christmas present, he split the seal of the envelope and dropped its contents onto the donut shop counter. Red paper rained into a pile in front of him.

"This is it," he said, with certainty. "This is it!"

Dolores's face was a collision of confusion and concern.

He resorted the pages, the document on the top. The image smacked his eyes – black ink on yellow paper.

A page ripped from the city telephone book.

Then he flipped the pages to the typed top page.

TREES MAKE PAPER, it read.

Reaching out with both hands, one still gripping the documents, Karl planted a kiss on Dolores's cheek. "Thank you," he said, genuine, "thank you thank you thank you!" He scooped the fragments of the red envelope into his jacket pocket, losing a few on the ground, but moving too fast to notice.

At the door of the donut shop, Dolores called after him, "Don't get too worked up, Karl. Remember your heart!"

But he didn't hear. He didn't care about his fluttering heart or his nearly spent bottle of angina tables; he didn't care about his ruined business or his totaled cars; he didn't care about the police, the divorce, or his future. He smelled an escape from this maddening game.

He tore across the street and dove into his tiny office at Banswick Motors, shutting the door on Arturo, who was sweeping the shards of safety glass from underneath the Mercedes into a dustpan. "Find something, Mr. Banswick?" he asked over his shoulder, but Karl did not answer.

Karl's fingers shook as he dialed his telephone.

Ava answered on the third ring.

"Karl," she said, knowing it would be him.

"Another envelope."

Her voice dimmed. "What color?"

"Red," he dismissed quickly. Karl looked again to the document.

"The paper, Ava! It's the goddamn *paper*."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's something to go on. A great big, fat clue. We'll track down who makes the fucking *envelopes*, then find out who buys them, then we'll find Noah and we'll find my wife."

Ava laughed – a relieved explosion. "Yes, that's what we'll do!" Her breath fogged the line and then she returned, new caution folded into her words. "But, Karl, won't they have hundreds of customers, whoever makes those envelopes? They got to be busy with—"

"Maybe. Maybe, maybe. But I think this is it." He stumbled to find the name of the store. "Paper Trail. It's on the west side, the park district, near 35th and Clark." Karl gave Ava the address from the ripped directory page. "I can be there in less than twenty minutes," he said, making calculations. "I've got to get another car."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

Karl rolled his eyes. "Probably not. But we'll need a car. I'll make a beeline for your apartment once I have a lead on the supplier. All right?"

Her voice, the excitement, mirrored Karl's own. "Yes, hurry."

"I will." He hung up the telephone.

Arturo was emptying the dustpan when he saw the look in Karl's eye. "Oh, no. Oh, no. Mr. Banswick, please. You can't have another car."

Karl went to the key rack and Arturo blocked him.

"Arturo," he said gingerly. "I'll be real good. I just need to borrow a car for the afternoon."

"No, no, Mr. Banswick. We won't have any cars left. How are we supposed to sell anything?"

"Remember, we're closing. I sent the boys home."

"But what about when we reopen!"

"It's just for the afternoon."

"I don't believe you."

Karl pointed to the wounded Mercedes. "I'll take that one. It's a mess anyway. Makes a bad impression to have a car with a smashed window sitting in the showroom."

Arturo had a momentary debate. Resigned, he stepped from the key box and let out a great sigh. "Be good to her. A window we can repair. More and there will be trouble."

"Trust me." Karl snagged the keys for the Mercedes and passed into the showroom. "Open the chute, will you, Arturo?" He gestured to the showroom's sidewall door.

As Karl cranked the engine and began to reverse, Arturo pulled the lever and let the high door slide with a whirl of gears.

Into the lot, Karl put on the breaks and rolled down the car's window. "Come here, Arturo."

The Argentinean cupped his ear to hear over the rumbling Mercedes engine. "Yes, Mr. Banswick?"

"Thank you."

Arturo smiled. "You're welcome."

"You're a good friend."

"Can I get that raise?"

"You sure as hell can. Name your price. Hell, take the business. You're better at it than me, anyhow. I'll make a fair price."

"Yes you will. There are no *cars* left." Arturo winked.

"When I get back, we'll get you a bunch of great *new* ones." Karl slapped the side panel of the Mercedes. "Not this broken down beast. Something with class."

"Class," repeated Arturo, arching upright. "We'll see about that, Mr. Banswick." Meeting Karl's eyes, he gave a nod. "Just do not crash."

"Damn right."

Karl peeled away west, nearly clipping a van on the way off the lot.

Paper Trail was the middle store in an eleven-store plaza – a moderate investment by the city in low-rent storefronts. Its sign was no better than its neighbors – in fact, it was a bit worse for wear. The "P" in "Paper" had begun to fade from bad weather, from weak business, or from both. The white letters against the dirty blue was a contrast to the handmade sales pitches taped inside the two great windows – 2 FOR 1 ENVELOPES! And, GIFTS!

The ringing bell made the two clerks, both women in their seventies, look up from their conversation and coffee. "Good afternoon!" heralded the one with stringed glasses around her neck. The other woman, with hunched shoulders and puffy hair, tucked a newspaper underneath the table and rubbed clean her inky hands.

Karl shot between the rows, not acknowledging either of the owners. He also paid little attention to the specialty envelopes of all colors that surrounded him on high racks. He ducked under some decorative streamers and stopped in front of a display of red envelopes. He began picking through the inventory, searching for a perfect match.

"Nice weather," said one owner as she lifted her glasses onto her nose. She had followed him to the end of the row and was watching, with great interest, Karl's jittery review of their selection.

Karl, arm extended, held up the directory page for the owner to see. "You sell paper," he said, his pronouncement not surprising to anyone.

"Yes," she answered, agreeable but puzzled, "that's what we sell."

"I'm looking for a particular kind of envelope," Karl continued, withdrawing the fragments from his jacket pocket and dropping them into the woman's hand. "Do you recognize these? It's not a whole envelope, I know that, but it should be enough to go on—" Karl suddenly stopped himself and changed gears. "Has anyone else been in here about these? Anyone asked about red envelopes?"

"Sure," said the woman. She tucked the corner of her gray hair behind her ear, craned her neck to seek out her partner, and gave a signal that Karl could not identify. She then returned to the red shards in her hand. "This is the place for all kinds of envelopes, sir – red, black, white, all the colors of the rainbow. We sell dozens of boxes a month. Mostly, we sell stationary, but envelopes, too."

"No, no, you don't understand," Karl pressed, feeling flustered. "Not *any*body looking for *any* envelope – *particular* people looking for *this particular kind* of red envelope. Look, look at the scraps. You must admit. It's very unique paper. The color. The thickness." He pushed more of the pieces on her, letting scraps fall away from the woman's cupped hands and onto the store's carpet.

The second old woman had now joined them. The owners fixed their gaze on the Karl's shredded red envelope. "Oh, yes, sure," said the second woman, her back a question mark. "This paper...it's quite rare. And expensive. We carried a box once. But it didn't sell. As a matter of fact..." The woman snapped her fingers, left the row's end, and headed for the rear wall of the store where boxes of stray inventory sat piled in a corner. She scanned the sides for identifying marks, at last lifting a black box from the middle of the stack. The boxes collapsed with the retrieval and the first woman had to move to help, pushing her body against the tall stack. "Yep," said the second woman, satisfied with her prize, "still in inventory."

Karl was allowed to look at the box's top, where a sticker with black bold type in a black-bordered white square, was affixed.

"What's this mean?" he said, reading the word.

"It's the name of the company."

Karl popped the lid as the hunched woman held the bottom. Inside was a half-full count of red envelopes, the exact identicals to those red envelopes that had been haunting him these past seven days. He pulled one out to be sure. The hexing of the paper in the deep red ink, the symmetrical cut of the opening, the sturdy weight, were a perfect match. He read the name on the box top.

DOCUMENTICON

"Documenticon," he read aloud.

"Yes, a mill upstate," said the woman in glasses. She turned and dropped Karl's fragments into a wastebasket set beside the cash register.

"Do you have an address?"

"Maybe somewhere," said the woman.

"Get it." The words came quick off Karl's tongue. The order sounded harsh for the circumstance.

"Do you want to buy this box? It's my last one," said the woman.

"I'll need more than this," Karl lied. "I want to see the mill for myself."

The two old women looked at each other, unsure. "Are you a troublemaker?" the older one asked Karl, sensing his desperation, his wild state.

Karl shook his head. "I just need more envelopes."

The woman with glasses looked him up and down before deciding. "I'll...look in the back. I probably have the address in my files. Why don't you have a look around the store? See if anything else strikes you."

Karl paused, then nodded. He worked his way up and down the short, narrow aisles of the small store, seeing nothing, not caring, his mind only on the possibly of the finding or not finding the Documenticon address. He supposed there were other ways of finding it – other connections, other paper stores. He at

least had a name. He would contact the company and find out the name of their biggest customer. The forces that controlled his destiny, and Ava's, and poor Lazlo, had to be buying more than a single box. This was a big fish. And he would catch it.

"Here you are," said the woman as she handled Karl a scribbled pencil address on a sheet of powder-blue Paper Trail stationary. "It's a town called Forest Hill, up the coast."

"Never heard of it."

"Logging town," said the woman. "Lots of mills. I toured some a few summers past...but not this one. Privately owned and didn't have a tour program, if I remember correctly. A little off the beaten path, but they make a good product."

Karl gave the old woman a hug.

"Thank you."

When he left the store, the old women's eyes burned his back, but he didn't care. He had what he needed. *Documenticon*, he thought, *I'm coming to pay you a visit.*

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon by the time he buzzed up to Ava's apartment. She took him into his arms, but he quickly pulled away, showing her the paper. "It's a company called Documenticon," he said with a strong and resolute voice. "They're not far."

"Not far? It's at least four hours to Forest Hill. And a single road."

"You've *been* there!"

"Yes, along the peninsula. My husband – the spelunker. Lots of caves along the coast. We passed through once and–"

"Get your coat."

"What!"

"And money. We're going there today, tonight."

"It's too far, Karl. By the time we get there, the mill will be closed."

"I don't care. I want to see it."

Ava slowly receded from him. In the shifting light of her empty luxury apartment, surrounded by Noah's neglected toys and silence, Karl could barely see her face, only her soft, parted

lips. She became solid as stone. "You think they're *there.* Don't you, Karl? In the mill."

"I do," he replied, unequivocal.

"Why?"

"I just *know*."

She stood frozen another moment, and then spoke quickly. "My coat," she said, "I'll get it."

"Hurry," he urged.

Soon, she was dressed and climbing into the passenger seat of the Mercedes. She raised her brows at the smashed rear window. "Karl," she said with disapproval. He waved her quiet and drove the car onto the city street. "Let's hope it doesn't rain," she added wryly.

Karl checked his roadmap as it lay against the steering wheel. He had to shake himself back into his lane, distracted. Ava commandeered the map and put a finger along the coastline. Inlets and islands, nearly off the top of the page, surrounded the red spot of Forest Hill.

The Mercedes took to the highway.

The wind from the busted rear window blew their hair and made thunderous noise. Karl had to shout as he told Ava of all that had happened that morning at Banswick Motors – his tantrum and the paper lanterns. "They're leading us right *to* them," Karl observed, clearing his throat, growing hoarse. "They *want* us to find them. What do you make of that?"

Ava didn't answer. She set her eyes on the landscape, the last of the city's buildings, the beginnings of trees and rural countryside.

"Did you hear me?" he asked.

She didn't turn.

"Not far now, and we'll have our answers. We'll have your son and my wife."

"Are you certain, Karl?" she said lightly over the wind, her words scattering around the car.

Karl signaled a lane change and then put a firm hand on her knee, the soft material of her slacks and the warmth of her skin good to the touch.

The hours passed frustratingly slow. At intervals, Ava would check the map against the highway signs for the names of northerly towns. Both of them impatiently marked their progress, carrying on idle chat, exchanging theories, revealing histories, reminiscing about their envelopes.

Karl, for the first time in forever, could see the end of the tunnel, the light, an exit. An escape from his treadmill. *The question. The question.* It stung his tongue. He needed his wife, desired her. Not for physical contact, but for an answer. *The question.* He would rescue her, as a good, heroic knight, and put an end to all this separation, to the *proceedings*, to Mr. Rabassa – a man he very badly wished to never see again. He didn't realize how much he hated his lawyer until he saw hope of getting rid of him. He told Ava as much. Not seeing Mr. Rabassa would mean a return to happiness and his most favored life. Domesticity. Health. No more red messages.

He threw his cigarette out of the window and lit another right after.

"Forest Hill," remarked Ava with a gesture as they saw the first road sign announcing the town. They were forty miles away, but it gave them a boost to have the town in their sights.

The sky had turned orange and the sun was nearly down over the horizon. It would be dark by their arrival. The road, once a highway, had narrowed to a two-lane rural way. Empty logging trucks passed them on their way south, the last of the paper mills daily shipments en route to the city. They even saw two trucks painted on the doors with imposing logging company logos, though neither were DOCUMENTICON. Few cars, and by the time their headlights spotted the Forest Hill town limits, the day's glow had trickled to nothing.

Forest Hill was surprisingly active for a chilled autumn night. Mill workers in heavy overalls carried silver lunch boxes and headed home. In the distance the mill whistles signaled close of business, the return of husbands to home and late supper. Bars remained open. Other than the workers, the town was shut down for the night. Ava pointed out a lone policeman, seated in his squad car at the end of a parking lot, his lights off, sleeping.

"Where do we go? How will we find the mill?"

"We ask someone." Karl saw a clutch of loggers smoking cigars outside one of the open barrooms. He pulled the Mercedes to the curb and rolled down his window. He couldn't tell if the men's focus was the dusty Mercedes, a rare vehicle for the town, or the smashed rear window, an unexpected abnormality. "Say," he shouted, leaning into Ava's lap, "do any of you work for a company called Documenticon?"

The smallest of the cigar smokers slowly ambled to Ava. The man gave a lustful glance, appraising her bosom inside her black sweater and those blue eyes, piercing. "Nope," he said dismissively, "none of us do." The logger gestured to the other cigar smokers.

Karl pointed to the barroom door. "Anyone *inside* work for Documenticon?"

The logger shook his head and blew out a cloud of cigar smoke. With a long drawl, he answered, "Not a soul in town works for them."

"No one?" asked Ava.

"Fuck Documenticon," spat the logger. "They haven't hired from this town in a long time. Though they're greedy about their trees. They're hangin' on to them good."

Karl sensed the bitterness. "Yeah, fuck them," Karl echoed. Choosing the worker's side seemed a good strategy, and it was not a difficult side to choose, considering the circumstance. "Where's their mill?"

"The peninsula."

Karl nodded, firm. "Okay then. We need to get out to the peninsula. What road do we take?"

The man looked angry for a second but then he bent his knees. He trained his eyes on Ava's body as he gave directions. Left, right, left, Bridge Road. "Good luck," the logger said with a knowing smirk.

"Thanks," nodded Karl, his voice ringing with distrust. He was on his guard, as it should be, and the logger's whiskey smile struck him as inappropriate.

Karl pulled onto the high street and followed the directions verbatim.

In no time, they arrived at a wharf, at the end of Bridge Road, lit by strung wire lights and a few yellowed lampposts. Under the cut of the road bobbed a nest of small motorboats, each in various states of decay. The air, the damp moss of the wooden docks, wafted into the Mercedes and reminded Karl of winter. At the road's dead end, stood a fat man in blue worker uniform, leaning against a post.

Karl slowed the car. The stones underneath their tires crunched until they rolled to a stop.

The man on the bridge held up the palm of his hand.

Karl shouted a question out his window. "What's wrong with the bridge?"

The fat man didn't speak, only gestured.

Karl stepped out of the Mercedes. Ava followed suit. They stood in the headlights of the car and tried to make out the fat man's face. "What's wrong with the bridge?" Karl asked again, but now, at this angle, it didn't take him long for him to see the answer with his very own eyes.

Beyond the fat man he saw a white gate with construction signs – BRIDGE OUT read one, CAUTION said another, ROAD CLOSED said a third. "Are you with the wharf?" asked Karl just as the fat man came into the headlights, showing his round face and a smile.

"Bridge is out," he said.

"Yes, we can *see* that." Ava let her frustrated emotional state boil into the words.

"How do we get to the peninsula?" asked Karl.

"The peninsula?" The fat man looked over his shoulder, into the darkness on the other side of the water, the land beyond that could only be made out in traces. There were no lights on the peninsula, no buildings, only the blackness of silent trees. "You tryin' to get to the mill?" The bridge worker was confused.

"Documenticon," supplied Karl, "they're over there, aren't they?"

Karl jumped as a second man, this one trim and athletic, shot out of the abutment of the bridge. He had climbed a side ladder and emerged surprised to see company. "I'm all done, Foster," this one said with a nod to the fat man. "Who are these folk?"

"Looking to get to the peninsula."

"Bridge is out," explained the new man.

"We *know*," pushed Karl. "Is there another way? If it's a peninsula, the land has to be attached somewheres, right?"

The trim man nodded. "Oh, it is. But there's no road there. You'd have to walk it and at night that'd be a big mistake. The connection is mostly swamp. That's why they built the bridge. To get to the trees on the peninsula. Great trees over there."

"Documenticon owns the whole thing," said Foster.

Ava looked to both men. "Do you work for Documenticon?"

The men looked confused then shook their heads.

"No," said the trim man, "Foster and I are just measuring the tide along the wharf. We've got workers here tomorrow and we've been taking measurements all month. Bring the right equipment, the right men."

Karl huffed, "That's crazy. The bridge has been out a *month*? How do they get all that paper off the island with the only bridge out? They'd have to close down the mill until you're finished with the goddamn bridge. That would put 'em out of business!"

Foster pointed into the black. "They *are* out of business. Documenticon went under years ago."

Ava and Karl stood dumb.

"You're joking?" Karl couldn't believe it.

"True stuff," nodded Foster. "They haven't so much as made a ream a paper in a decade. Somebody bought the mill in 1971, but I don't think they've been doin' much to rescue 'er. Just...hangin' onto the trees."

"But we drove all this way," said Ava sadly.

The box of red envelopes at Paper Trail came into Karl's mind. It had been old stock. Angry, he began an internal tirade against himself, for his near-sightedness; they were pursuing a

dead end. Ava met Karl's expression – one of disappointment, of reaching a new low.

"Thank you," Karl said to the two workers, with great embarrassment, before taking Ava's hand and leading her back towards the idling Mercedes.

Foster came forward. "You two from out of town, then?"

"Yes, we are," said Ava in haste, anxious for these men to not see her in tears, which were about to come. She let Karl lower her into the passenger's seat and shut the door. He circled the engine to the driver's side.

"There's a great hotel in town," offered Foster kindly. "Named Zoot's. Right on the main road. Can't miss it. That is, if you're interested. Kinda late at night to be driving these country roads. It ain't safe."

"Thank you," Karl said again. He put the car into reverse and watched Foster and the other worker grow smaller and smaller and darker and darker, until disappearing.

After a quarter of a mile, the road became wider, allowing Karl to turn the Mercedes around. Straight again, he drove back into Forest Hill.

Karl slammed his fists against the leather of the steering wheel. "They wouldn't bring us all the way out here for *nothing*!"

"They're just toying with us," said Ava as she wiped her eyes. "That's all they've ever been doing. They probably just wanted us out of town so they could plan some new disaster."

Karl thought on this. He didn't like the idea of something waiting to pounce on him back in the city. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Zoot's Hotel, a modest two-story shack with the lights on. It sat behind a small white fence and had a blinking red sign: VACANCY. He slowly drew the car to a stop five hundred feet from the entrance.

"Maybe," he began, the idea just forming, "maybe, Ava, maybe...we're supposed to go to the hotel?"

"What?" She fixed on him, in despair then slowly turned her head to look at the small-time hotel.

Both their eyes examined Zoot's. It appeared as innocent as any small village lodgings, nothing sinister. There was a large tree

in the lawn and a woman visible through the window, tending the front desk.

"Ava. Maybe...maybe it *isn't* Documenticon we're here to find, but something else. What if it's in that little hotel?"

She faced him again. "Karl – but what about your feeling – that Noah and your wife are in the mill?"

"I'm as confused as you are, kiddo. But it's all we have to go on." Karl could see thoughts dancing in her eyes, the return of Noah's face and the hope that he might be alive somewhere, waiting to be found.

"Let's check in."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Let's check in," she repeated.

Karl parked on the street.

Another hotel, he thought as they entered the sparsely lit lobby. Two couches, a bear rug, and rustic fixtures were scattered about, leading to a Formica island where a middle-aged, brown-haired woman stood to greet them. "Good evening, you two," she saluted. "Need a room?"

"Yes." Karl came forward and placed his hands on the check-in counter.

From her purse, Ava dropped a set of twenties on the countertop, fresh from her reserves. "How much for a single?" she asked.

"$29. $2 more if you want extra towels."

Ava slid the money forward. "Keep the change."

The woman smiled. She pushed a washed leather register in their direction. "Sign in, please," she instructed then turned to locate a key from the rack on the opposite wall.

Ava flipped the book open. It was filled with signatures, more than she would have expected. The dates went back only a few weeks. She looked to Karl, who watched as the woman put the two twenties into the cash drawer. Ava drew Karl over to see the register, pointing. He raised his eyebrows, understanding. This place was busy. More people had been through this hotel than the two of them – more than the small town warranted.

Ava turned the last heavy-inked page to the end of the names. Staring at her from between the pages...

A black envelope.

Her heart stopped. Her first instinct was to slam to registry shut, but she only made it partway. She slid the black envelope out of the registry. She meant to get it into her hands, but it dropped to the carpet. She fell to one knee to pick it up.

Karl, distracted by the hotel owner's fumbling for the room key, looked at his shoes where Ava knelt. He saw her face – her frightened and pale face – and, in her right hand, the black envelope, pressed to the carpet.

Karl signed the open registry quickly, using his real name, just as the woman turned with two soft and clean towels from the linen bin. "Thank you," said Karl, breathless, and took the towels. Ava rose to her feet. Karl laid the towels into Ava's hands, covering the black envelope from sight.

The woman handed Karl a single key on a ring.

"Room 8. You'll want to go out that door and circle the building. It's in the rear. I hope you like it."

"I'm sure we will," nodded Karl.

Pleasantly, the woman waved. "Come around front if you need anything. I'll be here all night. There aren't any phones in the rooms. Sorry about that."

"It's okay," said Ava dismissive, blowing her bang from her eyes.

"Welcome to Forest Hill!" the woman beamed proudly as the two new guests exited the hotel lobby and returned to the night air.

Around the side, near the tall tree, Ava dropped the clean towels in the dirt.

"Oh, God, Karl, oh, *God*." She whispered, trembling. She held the black envelope for him to see.

"It could be for me," he said, to take the sting out.

"It's not, it's not. It's for me. Why else would it be me who found it? Lazlo found his, now I've found *this* one."

Karl snagged the envelope from her, crushing it in his powerful hands. "It doesn't matter!" he said intently.

"Yes, it *does*. It's *black*."

"It doesn't matter!" he repeated. "This is just a piece of goddamn paper. We can get through this."

"No, no. No, we can't. Remember poor Lazlo?"

"Lazlo didn't die! He ran off. He's probably healthy as a horse."

Ava, flustered tears coming into her eyes, smeared her makeup, balled her fists and said, "You don't *know* that, Karl. Lazlo could have jumped in the river; he could have stepped in front of a bus. *Anything* could have happened to him. He's not SAFE!"

Karl shook the envelope in front of her. "Open it," he ordered. "Open it and the spell will be broken. We'll know what it says and how to deal with it. We're scared because we don't know what it says."

"You're scared, too?"

"Of *course* I'm scared. You think I *want* this for you? For myself? For anybody in this horrible fucking mess? But it's just PAPER, Ava. And, what did Henry Dodge tell us – that it MIGHT kill you. He didn't know for certain. We can get through this just like we got through all the red ones." She was not moved; she did not take the envelope. He shoved it into her sweater. "And I'm not going to lose you like I lost my wife. I'm not."

Slowly, she took the black envelope.

She tore the seam and took a breath.

Karl took it from her before she could read it. She did not want to be the first to know the fate written inside. Pulling from the tree's shadow, he held the document up to the moonlight.

It was a drawing, a simple hand drawing.

Two vertical black ink bars separated by more inches on bare white paper.

In the center, between the two bars, was a number and an abbreviation:

4 FT.

"Four feet." Karl handed the document over for her inspection.

Ava read the message, confused. "Something's four feet wide or four feet long." She spoke softly, internal gears clacking.

"See?" said Karl. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"Neither did a random address."

Karl put his arms around Ava and hugged her close. She folded into him, letting the back envelope and its document fall to the ground. When he parted, she stamped the paper into the dirt underneath the tall tree until her heel had ruined all trace of the message.

Karl watched her as she did this. He didn't interfere.

"Let's not stay here," she said suddenly. Ava looked up from the wrecked and dirty bits of paper.

Karl looked to his room key.

"Fuck them," she said. "Fuck their plans."

Karl hesitated. "You want to go back to the city?"

"Yes."

"We shouldn't run."

"It's not running, Karl. They *want* us to stay here at this hotel. I don't want to wait around here for something four feet tall or four feet wide to happen in the middle of the night! It's—"

"No." Karl knew a better course. "Let's highjack a fucking boat and find that mill."

"What?"

"Yes, let's get one of those boats at the wharf and get to the other side of the peninsula. I'm not wrong – something is *inside* that Documenticon mill. I don't think it's as closed as everyone thinks."

Ava was unconvinced – she preferred her own plan. "Your plan for action never pays off."

"This time it will. Trust me."

"Karl." She said his name with sadness. "They could be recording us now. They know *every plan we make*. Every plan we *have ever* made. There could be microphones hidden in our clothes. They could be tracking us with satellites! There could be invisible men following us all around Forest Hill! There could—" She began to pat at her clothes and her hair, swatting away flies.

Karl enclosed her with his arms until she was motionless. "They could, but that doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

"Because I can be unpredictable."

"Not true. They predict *everything*."

Karl held then shook himself free, storming toward the Mercedes. "I'm driving back to the wharf and I'm getting one of those fucking boats and I'm driving it around the peninsula and finding that mill!" His voice had risen; he was sure to have distorted any recording device; he was also certain to have alerted the woman at the desk. Karl didn't look back to see. He only realized Ava was on his heels when she opened the passenger door and climbed in beside him. "Good," he said, turning the key and revving the engine.

They were at the wharf in minutes.

The two blue-suited workers had gone home, but the lights remained on. Leaving the Mercedes at the top of Bridge Road, they climbed down the moss-covered wood steps to the jetty. The lapping water and distant night sounds tickled their necks and smelled of great danger.

Karl stopped at the first boat along the dock, examining its seaworthiness.

"Do you know anything about boats?" Ava asked.

Karl shook his head. "I think it's like a car."

"Let's hope you have better luck with boats than cars," she jabbed, "we only have five to choose from."

He rolled his eyes and brushed her away.

Karl stepped into the first boat and looked at the gauges. He tapped a dial. "I don't think this one has any fuel." He hopped out again and retraced his steps, taking the next jetty.

The second boat was in even worse condition, barnacles and rust having overtaken its fixtures. He didn't even bother to enter the frame. The boat might sink if it were untied.

Ava had beaten him to the third boat in the line – the largest, with a pilot's cabin and the name CAROUSEL painted on its prow. Karl, at the sight of the Christening, became momentarily

angry, thinking he had been played – the boat's name matching the site of his first meeting with Ava, at Derry Park.

"That one's too big," he dismissed, "It scares me."

The fourth boat was a sailboat. One glance to the coiled white sails and they walked away without question.

The last boat – a perfect sized Runabout with an inboard / outboard motor – bobbled in the water with a cover over its single windshield and captain's chair. Someone had taken slightly better care of this one. Karl checked for locks. He only saw the thick tan rope that kept the boat in place on the jetty. Easily untied. "This one," he said, decided. He unsnapped the cover and, with Ava's help, whipped it away from the windshield.

Against the wheel, tied with string, was another red envelope.

Karl saw it first and, involuntarily, he sucked in a breath. "Fuck," he swore in a low voice.

Ava touched his shoulder.

He took heavy steps, executioner steps, and crossed the last boards of jetty, until he had arrived at the chain. Jumping the starboard side rail, Karl ignored the red envelope and hurriedly inspected the gauges. It was as he had expected – a full gas tank and easy controls.

From the wheel, he untied the message.

"They know everything," he admitted.

Karl Banswick held the red envelope.

TWELFTH DOCUMENT

It had taken only seconds to open.
AROUND THE HORN AND HOME AGAIN

A sour taste flooded his mouth, dizziness his brain. The inevitable accumulation of events. The path that *must* be taken. Karl was on train rails and there was only one terminus. "We go where they say." He showed Ava the page then read it himself, checking the controls of the Runabout. There was a key in the ignition.

Ava crossed the chain, snagging and ripping her pants and not caring. She watched Karl work the starter, priming the engine as indicated in the page of instructions.

"Stand back," Karl said as he yanked on the pull chord of the motor. Gears sputtered and smoke coughed from the innards. He

gave the chord another try. No luck. With a flick of his thumb, he launched his spent cigarette into the water and prepared for a third muster.

"Karl, be careful," said Ava, "Don't strain yourself."

"Jesus, I'm ALL RIGHT!" he shouted, his voice echoing on the wharf. He wasn't irritated with her. He was angry with himself and the circumstance – for his weakness of body and his unworkable strategies. He pulled and the motor caught with a thundering buzz.

The sound was deafening along the wharf. Both of them cringed, expecting the arrival of the boat's owners, crying for an arrest. "No one is coming," said Karl at last. "They *want* us to use this boat. Hell, they probably *planted* it here."

Ava sunk into one of the Runabout's netted chairs.

Karl tapped the gauges and switched on the bright night-lights mounted on the bow. The water ahead looked endless. The wind was dead and the water calm. Karl hated to break the surface. He moved the boat into 'forward' just as Ava called his name. She pointed at the two ropes holding the Runabout to the jetty.

"Oh. Those," he coughed and removed the lines from the posts.

Into gear, the boat lurched forward and both gripped the rails. Karl was hesitant to drive the speedometer over ten miles an hour. He did not know the depth of the water. He trusted their puppeteers, though the thought of drowning weighed on his mind. *How deep is the water,* he wondered. *Four feet like Ava's black envelope? No. Has to be deeper or the boat would run aground.* They were a quarter mile out when he realized what danger they were in. He searched the Runabout for life jackets, but there were none. No provisions on board either, only a small orange tackle box with a few hooks and a foot-long flashlight, which Karl did not retrieve.

Karl steered straight. Turning the lights starboard he kept an eye on the peninsula's embankment. The thick trees at the water's edge gave him a good idea of his distance from land.

Ava called over the engine, "Are you frightened, Karl?"

He looked back at her. "Scared shitless." From his shirt, he withdrew his cigarettes. Five left. He struck a match and puffed, easing the wheel as they approached the tip of the land, to round it for the opposite side.

"We really love them, don't we?" Her thin voice was nearly eaten alive by the motor's hum.

"What's that?"

"We really love them. To do all this. I love Noah. I love him and I want him back. I'll do anything. I'll do it all. Whatever they want. If this is a test, I've passed. I just want my son."

Karl examined Ava's face, her steely resolve.

She *had* passed. Gone were the tears from the hotel, or the breakdowns of the last ten days. Since the carousel, when she had so rudely approached him and grabbed his red property, he immediately respected her character. She wasn't a coward, only a human being. Not even in the face of a black envelope and an even blacker coastline did she retreat.

"Do you love her that much, Karl?"

Karl didn't answer. He focused his attention on the turn. The wind gusted and took his jacket like sails, the button holding. Karl threw another dead cigarette into the water. Straightening the wheel, staying on at ten miles per hour, he righted the Runabout and fixed his course. Up ahead, he could see coves.

"Answer me, Karl."

Safe now, he could speak. "I've always loved her."

"Then why divorce?"

"It's what people do nowadays, isn't it?"

"Not everyone. Not those in love."

"She gave *me* up, remember? Not the other way around. I woke up with a ghost."

"Maybe it was you who died."

"No," he corrected her, firmly. "I stayed put."

A single beacon of light appeared through the black fog. The trees hung like heavy bags over an empty wooden dock. Karl turned the beam to the shoreline. The dock was empty – of boats and of people.

"Should we stop?" he asked.

Ava stood from the netted chair and squinted to see further down the shoreline. There were other lights, pinpricks, in the distance, all small and lonely, like stars in the sky.

"What's up ahead?"

Karl shrugged. "We'll go a little further and find out."

He slowed to five miles an hour and let the motor quiet.

At the second dock, equally bleak and lonesome, Ava and Karl exchanged uncertain looks. They wanted a clear indication from shore. Ambiguity on where to land wasn't part of the bargain. They had known which boat to take because of the red envelope. They had been led to each and every point, only now the small single-boat docks all looked the same. Dilapidated, abandoned.

The third dock appeared to sway against the beam of their lights. The silver rails and the hovering moon glinted on the water. Karl focused his eyes on the jetty's pillars and the lapping water.

Ava stood and took his side. She pointed to the yellow bulb of the single spot lamp as it flickered, only slightly, before coming back on. "There," she said, "it's a signal."

"It's not a signal," Karl protested. "It's just a busted lamppost."

"They wouldn't light the docks unless there were people. You were *right*, Karl! Someone's here!"

"Settle down. Don't get too excited." But he felt it, too, his palms growing sweaty as he steered the Runabout in the direction of the third dock.

Their motor buzzed through the cresting waves, the bubbling coastline, and Karl jerked to the wheel. The Runabout moved parallel to the shore and then glided forward. He cut the engine just feet from the dock.

"Get the rope," he ordered and pointed.

Ava returned, the heavy lines leaving marks on her wrists.

Karl stood back from the side of the boat. With a heave, he tossed the inch-thick binding over one of the jetty's posts. Then, slowly, the two of them together pulled until the boat was flat against the crumbling wood.

The smell of rotten fish and weeds entered Karl's nostrils. He switched off the boat's power and listened. From the trees beyond the dock, blowing in the night's cool October breeze, leaves rustled and insects chirped. Natural sounds. Commonplace. Not like the city they had left behind, the zooming cars and taxis and the exhaust of city buses. The ambient mix of human machines. Here, along the peninsula, the world was asleep.

Karl helped Ava onto the dock.

At the end of the jetty was a pathway – a single-file snake of broken tiny stones that killed the grass and disappeared just out of the lamplight.

"Wait," said Karl, returning to the Runabout. He searched the bins under the controls, finding the orange tackle box. Inside, the flashlight. He switched it on. The batteries were good and strong. He dropped back onto the jetty. "They think of everything." Karl shined the light ahead. In daylight, he was sure the path was nothing but normal – a convenient way through all the fifty-foot trees of the island. At night, though, it was a dark tunnel that only Ava's husband, the cave explorer, might appreciate.

"We have to keep moving forward," said Karl.

"I know. Does it look safe?"

"Hell no."

Ava glanced back to the boat. "We should have waited for daylight. At least then—"

"It's too late," said Karl. "We're here. Take my hand." Karl held out his right hand, moving the flashlight to his left and letting the beam drop to the stony ground.

Ava put her hand into his.

Together, they mounted the path.

The incline became steeper, but not taxing. Karl raked the flashlight back and forth and took slow steps, leading Ava, who never let go her grip. After ten minutes, they were at a landing, a man-made fan of boards nailed together strong. Opposite, was a short stack of stairs leading to a narrow gangway. It had no handrail and only a few under supports. Beginning at the bottom

of a rocky hill, the gangway wound itself around the growing hill into a gully.

"This way?" Karl's face betrayed panic. "I mean...maybe there's a-"

"They *want* us to go this way. Even if it looks dangerous." Ava's voice was distant. "Noah's this way. Up there." Ava's eyes went upwards until Karl's joined. In the far distance, over the gully and erected on top of a tall hill saturated with trees, were the twinkling lights of a monolithic building. They could see it now, in black outline against the stars. "That's where my son is," she said. "Locked in a tower."

"It's not a castle, Ava. It's not a prison."

"What is it then?"

Karl tugged her arm until she was wrested from her spot. "It's a paper mill," he said, sure of it.

They took the stairs to the wooden gangway.

Karl's fist step elicited a heavy creak, a moan of boards, and the sound echoed in the gully below. Feet firmly planted, Karl turned the flashlight on Ava's footing.

She stared up at him from the first step. "I don't like heights."

"Keep holding my hand."

She took his outstretched arm from the wrist down and let him use his weight to pull her onto the plank.

"This must wrap around the side of this cliff and end at the mill," he remarked.

"What a terrible place to build a business," she commented as the mill disappeared behind trees. She surveyed the dripping fog, the nauseating height above the coastal cliffs, and the remote area.

"Damn right," Karl agreed, then began to follow the gangway. "Maybe that's why they went bankrupt."

After a few yards, he looked down. "I can see our boat," he said and gestured. The boat was a dot, lit by the single, yellow lamp of the jetty.

"I'm not looking," replied Ava, gripping Karl's hand even tighter.

They walked slowly, hugging the rocks, aware of the wind. Karl feared losing his grip on the flashlight. The tighter he held it, the more it loosened in his sweaty palm. He desperately wanted to hold it with two hands but letting go of Ava would be an unforgivable sin. She was depending on him to be her ballast.

The higher they went, the stranger the sounds. Karl felt as if there were cotton in his ears, and he barely heard Ava when she began to recite a prayer. "What was that?" he asked her, but her ears must have been the same, as she did not hear his question.

The gangway grew narrower with each turn. The top didn't seem to be that far off with the climb so gradual. Yet, it was as if the path might never have an end, but instead be an infinite loop, rounding the shorn cliff in search of an entrance to the Documenticon Mill, which had been gone from their sight for more than thirty minutes.

"I have to rest," said Karl, sucking himself up against the stone wall and switching off the flashlight. Ava made a quick sound at the sudden dark. "It's all right," he said, "I'm just preserving the battery."

"How's your heart?"

"Ticking. How's your stomach?"

"Falling."

"Don't say that word. Please." Karl separated himself from the wall and looked straight up the cliff. "We can't have *that* much more. This incline's not that big. Who the fuck would build this goddamn gangway! If it's like you said, a test, this is getting to be a bit much. I think it's time for some extra credit."

"Amen to that."

Karl breathed heavily.

Ava touched her hand to his chest. "Do you have your pills? In case you need them?"

"Yeah, but I just have five left."

"We can go slow if you want," she offered.

"I don't believe you. You want this over with. You'd be *running* up there if you could, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," she said. "Karl, I want to see him. I do. He's so close. I want to see him. I *have* to see him. I can't take any more

life without him, without Noah. If something's happened to him, I, I, I'd be lost."

"He's fine, he's fine. He just at the top of this hill. This *goddamn*, never-ending hill."

"Is he? Is he Karl? Do you promise?"

"Yes." Karl said the word with absolute conviction. "He is, Ava. We'll find them both. They are *here.* This is the place they were taken. And when I find out who's behind all this I'm going to punch them in the goddamn nose."

Ava gave a short laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"What makes you think there's only one nose to be punched, Karl?"

"*All* of them, then. I'll come out swinging and won't stop until they're all bloody." He rubbed the arm of her blouse and switched back on the flashlight. "Let's go. It's not far now. I can smell fresh paper."

They continued their ascent up the cliff.

Two more gradual turns and Karl found it.

The meaning.

The diffused glow of Karl's flashlight jerked with his hand and he came to a full stop. It could not have been more shocking if he had turned the corner into the barrel of a gun.

There was a gap in the gangway.

A section of boards was entirely missing. No signs of vandalism, or of natural rot. It was as if the gangway had been erased by the butt of a pencil.

Ava lifted her head over his shoulder to see the cause of his sudden stop. "Oh, no," she said. "No, no, no!" Her words bounced off the rock and came back to their ears triple.

"How wide do you guess that break is?" she asked, knowing the answer.

He gave a sigh before saying. "Four feet."

Karl handed the flashlight to Ava. He took off his jacket.

"What are you doing?"

Karl threw his jacket over the side of the cliff. "It'd slow me down," he said, decided.

"You're not going to jump it?"

"We both are."

"Karl, no. No, Karl. That's my black envelope. I'll never make it."

"Yes you will."

"We could turn back – go back to the boat, we could find another spot to land—"

"No!" Karl took Ava by the shoulders and stared her straight in the eye. "It won't *work*, Ava, you *know* that! This is what we have to do. If it's not *this* document it would be another. If we decide not to do what they ask, they'll put up another roadblock. Another wild goose chase! Another goddamn *dead end*. We've been at this so many days now with so little sleep that we've forgotten that there's an end. There is. We've forgotten that the road exists! This *is* a path. Say it."

"There is a path," she repeated, flustered.

Karl's throat had a catch. "Ava," he said, pleading, his face muscles drawing down his mouth, the blood draining from his cheeks, "we get through our black envelopes and we have Noah. We have my wife. Don't you see? *It's the last test.* We can't run away like Lazlo did."

"That's easy for you to say," she said, anger infusing her voice, "it's not *your* black envelope!"

"What? I *could* die. They don't know my fate. Anything could happen. I'm heavier than you, and less able to jump four feet and land safely."

"So what about when you get your black envelope? Today? Tomorrow? Next week? You could have fifty more fucking envelopes ahead of you before you find your wife, Karl!"

"I don't!" Karl pointed up the cliff. "Look – the way is ending. You can see the boards stop just a hundred feet ahead of us! That's a *clearing*. That's the mill. Maybe I don't ever get a black envelope. Maybe I missed one."

"Not possible," she argued.

"They're not *perfect*. They don't know you can't make this jump. I'm the one that's overweight with a bad heart. I'm the one who smokes three packs a day. You're perfect for this. They've

underestimated *you*, Ava Moon. Yes they have. You're going to make this jump and we're *going* to find the end." Karl let go his grip from her shoulders. "Stand back," he said.

"Please, Karl," she pleaded, tugging at his shirt.

Karl shook her off.

"I need some room," he said, twisting away.

"Please, Karl, don't, don't. Stay on this side with me. Let's go back and get the boat. Let's wait until the sun comes up—"

"I'm sick of waiting, Ava!" Karl found firm footing and space for a run, mindful of the edge of the thin gangway and the implications if anything went wrong. "Stand behind me." Ava did not move. "If I can do it, you can, too. Don't worry – I'm not the suicidal type."

Ava covered her face with both her hands. After a second, she pulled them away, wiping tears. In a quick motion, she kissed Karl on the lips. He returned it. When she broke seconds later, she positioned herself behind him, hands in prayer. "Good luck," she said. She angled the flashlight where he would need it to be, then shut her eyes.

Karl looked to the gap.

Four feet.

Like jumping over a very short man, he thought, the perspective not giving him any comfort.

He launched himself with a hand against the rock, building speed. His running feet shook the boards. Karl's eyes went to the cliff's edge, the long drop down into the tops of leafless trees, the branches, the snap of the neck, the broken body and irrecoverable damage should he waver from the gangway.

And he leapt, throwing his two hundred pounds farther than he ever thought possible, to land, badly, on the other side of the gap.

He rolled, nearly spilling over the edge of the precipice and to his death. Hand out, he took splinters in the skin to stop his roll. At last, he lay on the gangway, hand over his heart, feeling the beating rise and then fall, to normal.

"Are you dead?"

Ava's voice was soft in the night.

"I don't think so," he answered.

Sitting up, he watched Ava uncover her eyes.

"Thank you, God," she said with a nod to the sky.

"Toss me the flashlight."

Ava came forward and underhanded the flashlight into Karl's waiting hands. He turned the light once more toward the gap. "Now you."

"I don't want to."

"You want to find Noah."

"I don't want to jump."

"You'll do it, just like me. No problem."

"But the envelope—"

"Fuck the fucking black envelope!" he yelled, startling her. "Now, back up, get some speed, keep your eyes on the end of the fucking boards and you'll be through this in no time." Ava, at the spot, remained in place. To Karl, she appeared helpless, lost. She did not have the confidence to make the jump. He lowered the beam down from the boards and left their faces in darkness. "What do you want me to do, Ava?" His voice was tired; he felt more distance from her than ever – not four feet, but miles. "What do you want me to do?" he repeated. "Do you...do you want me to go up the hill and tell you what I see? Do you want me to get Noah?" She didn't speak. He could only see the shadow of her face, the outline of her shape. "Ava? Do you want to go back to the boat?"

A pause.

"No," she said at last. "Shine that light where I need it." She backed up for the jump.

Karl nodded. "All right," he said and positioned the beam. "Just concentrate."

She held her ground, a slightly smaller version of herself in the rear shadows.

Then she ran, as Karl had, full steam towards the gap.

Karl put out his free arm, to catch her when she landed, so she wouldn't roll off the gangway.

She leapt into the air.

Her hand flew out from her body, to rock her weight forward. She hadn't calculated correctly. Her weight, her body, the gap, the pull of gravity. Ava was thrown short of the gangway and with both hands caught only the end of the plank. She dangled helplessly.

"Hold on!" shouted Karl, tossing the flashlight, which rolled against the cliff, safe. His grip on her left hand sealed and then slipped.

She said, in barely a whisper, "Help."

Stomach on the gangway, Karl tried to reach her arm, her wrist, any part of her body he could.

Ava's fingers lifted from the plank, as hinges flying off a door, and she dropped.

He watched as her body became an object, barely recognized as a human form. She fell into the chasm and vanished into the tops of trees. Karl barely heard the crunching of branches, the velocity of her fall not seeming real or possible.

"Ava!" he called down to the darkness. "Ava!"

Ten minutes passed with Karl on his stomach.

"Ava!"

He repeated her name at intervals. Praying for a response, a moan, anything to indicate Ava had raised from unconsciousness with only minor cuts. He heard nothing – only the lapping water of the peninsula's shore and the distant sounds of night. He rose up. He collected his flashlight. He called her name one last time. And he finished the journey up the cliff's gangway to land on the platform at the top of the cliff.

There, before him, stood the tall tower. It was made of wood, without windows, and was affixed to another equally intimidating rise in the land. The mill's closeness had been an optical illusion. It was still further, beyond this tower, after the next plateau. To climb a mountain only to find another, taller mountain, made Karl slouch his shoulders, cover his eyes, and begin to weep.

He brushed at his face and turned the flashlight beam onto the path. Following the stones another hundred feet, Karl found the tower's door.

The wooden door creaked loudly as he pushed it open to the black. He smelled mold and damp and could see a single pinprick of light giving shadows in the square gallery of the tower's bottom floor.

Ahead of him was the beginning of a staircase.

On the first step.

A black envelope.

Karl took a pace forward. Stopped. Then took another. He bent at the waist and retrieved the black envelope from the step. Looking up the staircase, he saw it disappear into the ceiling, a dozen feet above his head, through a cut in the floor of the next landing.

He stared down his destiny.

Karl Banswick held the black envelope.

THIRTEENTH DOCUMENT

Karl Banswick held the black envelope.

He opened to find his typed page.

"458" said the message.

"Four hundred fifty-eight," he read aloud, letting his voice echo in the chamber. "Four hundred and fifty-eight...stairs."

He counted those in front of him. Ten before disappearing through the first level. If they stayed even, that meant he had forty-five floors ahead of him. Forty-five. A skyscraper. More stairs than he had ever walked at once in his entire lifetime. He dropped the black envelope and its document and let it fly under the stairwell.

Resigned, he began his ascent up the enclosed tower.

"One," he said to the first step.

"Two," he said to the second.

"Three."

"Four."

"Five."

At "ten," his body was through to the next level. Another staircase was constructed on the opposite wall. Ten steps. He crossed to begin the next set.

"Eleven."

"Twelve."

"Thirteen."

The third landing was identical.

"Twenty-one."

"Twenty-two."

"Twenty-three."

The fourth landing.

The fifth landing.

The sixth landing.

The seventh.

The eighth.

At one hundred stairs, he couldn't catch his breath. He had to wait in the chamber until his lungs filled and the muscles of his legs returned under his control. *Go slow,* he told himself; *you're in no hurry.*

At the thirteenth level of the tower, he drifted to thoughts of Ava. Her expression at that last moment had been burned into his brain. "Help," she had asked. He did nothing. She slipped through his hands, just as his wife had, away from him.

Fifteenth floor.

Sixteenth.

He had to stop again. He could feel his head fluttering.

"You won't fucking get me like *this!*" he swore up the next landing hole. His words continued up the shaft, but didn't come back. It was still too far for reverberation. Karl tapped his pocket for his pills. The bottle was still there.

Seventeenth.

Eighteenth.

Almost halfway to the top.

He stopped again and rested for five minutes. It was a long pause, but his body wouldn't let him continue. He felt every one of his forty-two years – in his legs and his lungs and his heart, which thumped fast in his chest. At last, it slowed.

Floor twenty-three.

Halfway.

"Two hundred thirty," he counted, "two hundred thirty-one."

Eventually, he lost count. Dizzy. He had been in the tower an hour, by his estimate. Or had it been longer? It *felt* longer.

As he took the next landing, he again thought of Ava. He had no one to coax him along. He had no traveling companion. And he thought of her son, Noah – of what to tell the boy when Karl reached the mill. *Oh God,* he thought. *She came all this way for nothing.* Karl couldn't accept her as dead. He only thought of her as fallen. Injured. He would phone for help. The police. A rescue helicopter. He had read in magazines of mountaineers falling from grappling or being caught in avalanches, only to recover in a

hospital, not a scratch on them. That would be her. *Yes, that would be her. She will live through this. She has to.*

Every landing the same.

Thirty?

No, not that far yet.

Even when stopped, he couldn't catch his breath anymore. His heart did not slow its rapid pace.

He pulled the pills from his pocket and clenched them tightly into his hand. He felt that familiar tug on his right arm – the pain, the shot. "No," he told his body. He made it to the next cut in the landing and flopped like a fish onto the floor. Prying loose the safety cap, he spilled the last five nitroglycerin tablets onto the boards. Hands shaking, he quickly put one under his tongue and rode out the angina, clenching his teeth and shutting his eyes.

I'm having a fucking heart attack.

Images of the black envelope, the numbers "458," Ava and his wife, the events of the last days, Arturo, the broken window of the Mercedes, his father' face, and Lazlo Mundt's idiot smile spun inside his closed eyelids like a kaleidoscope.

He slowly relaxed his jaw.

His eyes came open.

The angina was easing. The medication was taking effect.

He sat upright.

When ready, he rescued the last four tablets from the floor. As he put them into his shirt pocket, one slipped out and disappeared in between the crack of two boards. "Shit," he swore and tried fruitlessly to recover it. He put the three last into safety. He discarded the empty pill bottle down the last staircase. He listened as it rattled and held before breaking into two sounds, the lid separating and rolling to a stop.

The next ten stairs laughed at him.

Karl raised himself into the darkness.

He waved the beam of the flashlight at the opening and began to climb. He had completely lost count of the floors. Trapped in a maze of ascending stairs with no hope of exit, two more flights and he thought, *this has to be the last. This has to.* But

neither had been. There was always one more. *Maybe they've lied to me. There's not forty-five landings, but eighty.* It had not occurred to him ever before that he had been misled; all the documents contained the truth; he had come to expect that. But now they toyed with him. *They. Them.* He hadn't measured the four-foot break in the gangway. Had it really been five? Six? Seven feet? It may well have been a hundred.

"Fuck all of you!"

He regretted calling out.

Encouraged by the adrenaline, his heart sped up again, faster, faster.

He waited on the stairs, gripping the wobbly rail. The pain did not pass.

The flashlight slipped from his hand and broke on the boards below, plunging him into pitch black.

Looking up, he saw a pinprick, which seemed to grow – a light at the top of the tower. Not as distant as he had thought, but it may well have been on the moon.

He popped another nitro tablet.

That bought him two more stairs.

Karl stumbled around the next landing, a drunkard, clutching his chest.

Resting his face against the cool wood of the stairs, he waited for the nitro to hit his blood. He couldn't feel it. Not even the taste of it under his tongue affected him. *Am I too late?* Rushed, he fumbled another pill from his shirt pocket. His shaking hands dropped the pill and it vanished through the hole beneath the stairs. "Fuck," he swore. He gripped his last tiny pill between his thumb and forefinger. He touched the pill under his tongue – very aware that he was not yet to the top of the tower. His reserves were exhausted. All his medication was gone.

What choice do I have now but to die?

In the span of hopelessness that followed – three, four minutes – the angina attack subsided.

What followed was every muscle in his body collapsing. His knees gave out and he fell backwards onto the landing. He

became unconscious. When he came to, the stiffness returned with him.

Get up, said a voice in his head.

Get up, Karl.

Concentrate on that light.

You're almost there.

You're almost there.

Get up.

Get up, you fucker, get up.

But he couldn't. His body wouldn't let him.

He opened his eyes.

The light was practically on top of him. It was as if it had moved closer. He could see through the whole in the landing and, for a moment, thought he saw a figure move across it, casting a shadow.

"Who's there?"

He was able to squirm onto his elbows. Then upright. Then to his knees. Then, at long last, bent and in searing pain, he was on his feet. Hand out, he flopped on the fifth stair of the rung. There weren't *ten* on this landing. He counted them. There were exactly...

Eight.

"Four hundred fifty-one."

"Four hundred and fifty-two."

Karl's head went through to the next floor, followed by his torso. He flopped out of the opening like a caught carp and collapsed again onto a metal service platform.

"Four-hundred fifty-eight."

He let out a great, glorious breath that shook the air around him. On his hands and knees, Karl let himself focus. A utility light swung above his head. He looked into the glare and had to shut his eyes.

He had made it to the top. He was not dead. He was not defeated. His body felt like it had been through a war, all shuttering aches and pains, but he had lived through those nightmare stairs, to arrive on a metal platform facing two enormous red doors.

Barely recovered, Karl got to his feet. Hunched, stiff, he slowly walked toward the doors, his right hand out for a long time before it actually touched one of the handles. At contact, the door swung open on horrorhouse hinges, revealing blackness beyond.

At the top of the gap, Karl saw twinkling stars.

He took a step.

Not stars – *holes* in the rotten ceiling, spraying moonlight. Another bare utility light, giving an umbrella of illumination in one corner, was at half the power from the one on the platform. It swung as if recently touched by a hand.

The mill, in years past, had been a working business. But no longer. The machinery was rusted. Cobwebs hung between gears. The faint scraping of rusted chains yawned in an unfelt breeze. The vaulted ceiling resembled a cathedral. The entire structure was made of wood and the sting of sawdust hung in the air. Another bare utility light swung from a hook as if recently touched by a hand. The umbrella of brightness hit in one corner.

Fearless now, Karl stepped into the center of the mill's floor. "Hello!" he called out. "I'm here!"

No answer.

"It's Banswick!" he added, as if that might help clarify things. He couldn't decide which emotion to wear – anger, at the killing of Ava, and the attempt on his life, at this godforsaken path – or sadness, at his lack of sleep, of mourning, of finding nothing. "Show yourself!" he called again.

His words echoed, unanswered.

Karl took two strides forward.

He looked to the utility light, to the machine it highlighted – a feeder belt and a massive steel saw, with a forty-inch blade for cutting the biggest of trees. The blade was stock-still. The machine looked like it could swallow a man whole. Focusing on the conveyer belt, Karl caught sight of an object.

Something white.

A white rectangle was centered under the spotlight.

One more step and he nearly exploded in frustrated fury and debilitating surrender.

Another envelope. A different color.

White.

Karl stumbled forward and braced himself on the machine's safety shield. Wary of the saw-blade an inch from his hand, he seized before making his move. At last, he flicked his fingers like a frog's tongue and brought the white envelope to his chest.

What now, his mind spoke, *what's the hell now?*

The white envelope contained a single white card with two words printed in black ink, dead center.

GO HOME

Karl wept. He almost wished the saw *had* cut him in half. He had visions of his body diced – parts strewn and eaten by dogs. *Not another not another dear God not another. Leave me alone leave us alone. Just leave me alone.* He put the card and envelop into his inside jacket pocket. Looking at the abandoned emptiness, he couldn't bear to return to the labyrinth of stairs. The gap. The gangway. The boat.

Instead he went to the braced main door of the mill. He lifted the splintered wood cross bar, and set his sore shoulder into the wide square, hoping it might give, and it did, easily, making a chilling grate as the oversized door scarred the metal floor beneath. When the door was wide enough for his body, he slipped out and onto the trampled dirt.

Outside was a staging area for newly shorn trees. Some of the unlucky last trees cut before the shutdown lay on their sides in a 2-ton, rotting pile.

Opposite was a short stretch of land, a drive path leading to the bridge onto the peninsula. The bridge was no longer disconnected from the land. No longer 'out.' He had been lied to. He had gone around to the other side of the peninsula with Ava for nothing. Karl could see the black Mercedes parked where he had left it beside the boat dock.

"SON OF A BITCH!" he screamed through frustrated tears before trekking down the incline and to the embankment. He crossed the bridge and saw no one. It was still nighttime, though he doubted there was much of the night left. Karl had lost complete and total track of the clock. But there was a smell in the air. Another day – distant, but coming soon.

I can't take it. I can't take another day not knowing. It's cruel.

For a long time, he simply stood beside the Mercedes' front hood, crying. He had no more cigarettes left. If he had had some, he would have smoked them all until gone, despite the cold morning, despite the desperate isolation of the ghostly paper mill and the snow-quiet peninsula.

At last, he found the strength to get behind the wheel, only faintly aware of the chilly October cutting through the car from the smashed rear window. He couldn't stand to look at the empty passenger seat. His mind stayed on the road.

Reverse. Drive. Goodbye Forest Hill.

By the time he hit the city, the traffic had begun to thicken. A bank sign told him that the time was nearly 10 AM. Banswick Motors would be open for business. Shamed, he could not return there. He couldn't see Arturo's face or, more exactly, he couldn't have Arturo see *his* face, the disappointment permanently tattooed. He toyed with a straight shot to the police. A report could be filed – the mill, the deception, Ava Moon's death and a hunt for those responsible. *Those responsible.* Who might that be? When he thought of an answer, a black rain settled over his eyes and he wanted to go into a long, coma-like rest. To sleep.

A siren called him to his apartment. His *father's* apartment. The room that held all he had left in the world. And nothing he cared for. Up the stairs, he withdrew his apartment key.

Cocking his arm, he moved to insert it into the chipped brass lock.

And stopped.

GO HOME

The words pierced through to his brain.

GO HOME

Aren't I home now?

An unsettled feeling came over him and he began to shake. He pulled the key back to his side.

GO HOME

"I'm in the wrong place," he said aloud, knowing it to be absolute fact.

Karl raced down the stairs, started the Mercedes, and drove as fast as he could to the farthest neighborhood of the city – his old haunt, the town-home where he and his wife had spent the best part of their lives.

The street in front of his house was crowded with extra cars. A Lincoln, a Volvo, and a single black city police car, lights off. He eased the gas and let the Mercedes glide. At first, they didn't notice him. The man in uniform; the two older men in long, belted trench-coats; the last man at the bottom of the steps, checking his watch. Then, slowly, first one and then another and then another turned. He'd been spotted.

Karl considered rapid acceleration, fleeing the scene. He felt urgently guilty and afraid to speak, afraid to hear what they might have to say. The four men looked at him, but not in the way he had expected, not with the same faces he had seen in the jail – the incriminating stares, the procedural coldness. Instead, these men wore compassion. He wanted very badly to drive on. But he did not. He slowed, and stopped, and stood above the roof of the Mercedes to shout, "What do you want? That's my house."

One of the trench-coat men moved down a single step from the house's landing and asked calmly, "Are you Karl Banswick?" He waited for Karl's nod. "Why don't you come inside with us..."

He expected to enter and find tragedy. There was no sign of murder. Instead, only awkward kindness.

One man took Karl's jacket, another helped Karl to a chair in the sitting room. Karl soon found himself parallel to the three plainclothesmen. Two were detectives. The third man was from the Mayor's office. He thought about checking their identification and calling for references, but got so damn weak when thinking about it, he surrendered. They were real. He could tell. He knew it from their eyes. The last man, the uniformed officer, remained outside, as if guarding a diplomatic official from assassins.

"We've found her," said the detective, showing his crow's feet, drawing attention to his thin hair and thick torso.

"Who?"

Ava or Lana, he wondered.

"Your wife. She's been found."

"Where?" Karl began to move from the sofa and color came into his face.

"She's dead, Mr. Banswick."

The words knifed through the room.

"She's what?"

"Last Sunday afternoon. She was tending to one of the gardens near City Park. It had rained. There was a drain gutter near the garden and she must have been working around it when she slipped and fell. It was a fluke. The angle. She died of a broken neck."

"That's not true."

"I'm afraid that it is."

The second detective took the lead. "There are no signs of foul play. A city crew discovered her around 5:30 this morning. She may have been surveying the area for landscape changes. We understand from the Mayor's office–" (Here, the man made a gesture to the immaculate third man seated, hands on knees, in a drawn-close kitchen chair) "that that's part of her normal job routine."

The men let some silence into the room before continuing.

"You may begin arrangements for the funeral, traveling relatives...anything you feel is necessary. There's very little we need from you. We've already confirmed her identity. Her body has been moved to the city morgue. Anything else we can take care of another time. Today, we're just the messengers."

As Karl remained in stunned silence, the three men slowly rose, like malfunctioning pistons, before beginning to make the first excuses to leave. They were closing shop, just like that. A mere formality, this news – spoken with genuine regard, but the business done, there was no need to become friendly.

"Wait a minute," Karl said with a raised finger. "Are you...are you sure?"

They all nodded – even the Mayor's man. "We're sure," said one. "It was a very clear case," said the second. "We'll keep the file open another week if anyone comes forward with more information," said the last, "but it appears to have been an accident."

The next day's newspaper validated the story.

CITY PLANNER FOUND DEAD IN PARK

Karl read the details in a blur. He had yet to sleep and had had his eyes open for over 36 hours. He had spent much of the day and night before drifting through parts of the town-home and wondering how he got there. Afternoon, he caught himself staring at the gallery of photos in the upstairs hallway (the ones Ava had remarked on) and he had been there an hour, maybe two. He knew this because his bladder had been full, though he had just emptied it, to his recollection, a moment before in the hallway toilet. The same thing happened in the bedroom – the overturned shoebox with its tissues that held the pistol were where he had left them, in the center of the bed. A minute, an hour – who could tell the difference in that time travel house? When he had walked into the room, it was bright outside, now it had been raining for hours. He threw away everything but wished he had kept gun, instead of throwing it into the dumpster days ago.

After reading about his wife, he continued to turn pages of the newspaper. He was destined to find the other notice.

BOY KILLED, DRIVER SURRENDERS

A car near Derry Park struck Noah Moon. He was alive, not yet dead. The woman who hit Noah took him into her arms and drove towards the hospital. But he died on the way. The woman put Noah's body into her trunk. Her car has been parked in her garage ever since. Yesterday, she drove to the police and confessed everything. Attempts to reach the boy's mother have not yet been successful.

Ava is better off, Karl knew. If she had learned of her son's death the way Karl had been told of Lana's, Ava would have thrown herself from the top of a building. End result the same. The mother and son together – just not here on earth. ("What religion are you," Brody Easter had asked him. "I believe that I know nothing," he had answered, "but not that there *is* nothing.") For once, he considered his manipulators – the designers of those documents – to be merciful. *Why don't you do the same, Karl? Why don't you end your suffering? Too bad you threw away that pistol. You could use it on yourself.*

He pictured his friends and his employees – would they have seen the article on Lana's death? He expected the telephone to be ringing off the hook, but it was strangely silent (for which he was grateful.) He couldn't speak with anyone. Not today. Not ever. Arturo would be worried, but Karl couldn't bear to pick up the phone to make a simple report.

Distantly, he heard the knocking at his front door. But only after it had been going on for a very long time.

Karl methodically folded the daily paper back into its original configuration, even reinserting the coupons and the other useless stuffing. At last, he slipped the daily paper back into its slipcover, which had protected it from the rain. It was as if the paper had never been read at all.

And then he answered those knocks.

Henry Dodge.

"Hello, Karl," the old professor said solemnly. He wore a tweed suit and a Fedora hat, the color of them to match the gloomy October rain behind him. "Hello, Karl," he said solemnly. "I saw the notice in the newspaper. You have my deepest condolences."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

Dodge removed the hat from his head, revealing the blinding white of his hair. "May I come inside?"

Karl nodded with only the faintest of commitment; Dodge took it as approval. The old professor entered the house, strayed into the sitting room beside the foyer, and rested deep into one of the three aligned chairs – the same that had been occupied by the Mayor's man just twenty-four hours before.

Karl watched Dodge's meticulous hands nervously crushing the brim of his hat. Following the man, he planted his body at the edge of the sitting room, standing, keeping a distance between.

"I was you," Dodge explained. "Five years ago. When I was looking for my sister. I lied to you, Karl. I *did* make it through my black envelope. And I came back alive, just like you."

"Alive?" Karl imbued the word with sarcasm and doubt. He leaned away, moved his eyes to the foggy windows.

Dodge puffed, showing that he had expected this melancholic behavior. "I'm afraid of heights. Or at least I was. I had to jump from an airplane onto the peninsula. It was the only option they had left for me. An old man and his parachute. I had paid a pilot for an hour in a private plane. He thought I was a bit crackers."

Karl turned again. "Why didn't you tell us the whole story when we came to your classroom? Why didn't you tell us we'd find *nothing*?"

"I lied about something else, Karl, to you and your friends. You weren't the third group in five years to show up and ask me questions. You were the twenty-second. Sometimes just a few people. Other times as high as fifteen. I told the truth to the first few groups and never knew the results. Then I took to lying, and to following." Dodge's face showed shame and bitterness. "I suppose you consider me a coward."

Karl's face showed it to be true. "Tell me this, Henry: how many more envelopes do I have ahead of me? I never want to see another document as long as I live."

"There are no more envelopes. The white one was the last." Dodge's face became serious as stone. "Do you still have it?"

"I threw it away."

"No you didn't."

Karl hedged, but eventually left the room to find his jacket, laid across a chair in the kitchen. From the pocket, he withdrew the white envelope and the white card. He handed Dodge what he wanted.

The professor read the words:

GO HOME

He then returned the property to Karl's clutch. "You have done a great thing," he said. "You made it into the mill. Do you know how few people do that? I know. I've followed dozens. Men, women, every stripe, every profession. They all turned from it; they all gave up. And yes, a few become statistics in the newspaper. But you made it through. I never thought I'd find another person that made it all the way through!" Dodge stood up, using the Ottoman to find his balance. "I wanted to save my

sister so badly that I never flinched, never turned away. I just kept going. That's what you wanted, too. You wanted it so *badly* that you followed *every* clue to find your wife."

"But it didn't matter!"

"Yes. It most certainly did! Listen to yourself, you fool. You utter fool." Dodge's hand went out and he laid it on top of Karl's shoulder, holding tightly. "Some people just don't love enough. Commitment to another person is a very hard thing to quantify. When two people are married, for example, you do *not* know if they are truly *committed* to each other. Some people just give up. My sister and I had been terribly estranged – for decades. It became very important to me that she knew I was trying to reach her. I had lost all opportunities ever given, until this one, after my sister had passed. This quest, which you have rightfully succeeded in, proves to us that you know the meaning of love."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Karl was dismissive. The hopelessness stayed with him.

"Think of it this way...if you had found out that your wife had died in an accident, without the documents, what would that mean – years from now, days from now – what would that mean? I've thought long and hard about it Karl, and I think I know. It would have meant that she never knew. She never knew that you would have fought for her, that you cared that much to never, ever stop. Without the quest, you had squandered every opportunity and would never get another. But with the envelopes, with them, you, you, you have something to point to and say, say, 'I loved you! I did. I did. I did I did I did. I *sacrificed* myself for you. Know that I loved you.'"

The two men squared off in the sitting room.

Karl could hear the ticking of the wall clock. "Was it you?" he finally asked.

"The documents? No. It was not."

Karl checked the man's eyes for lies. He did not crack. "Who cares that I have proof of how I felt about Lana?"

"I don't know."

"You mean in five years, you still don't know who is behind all this?"

"I don't. I really don't."

"You're lying. I can tell." But he could not really tell, however. The professor's mouth, eyes, and body did not flinch. Dodge did not give away anything.

"I'm not lying. I just have not been allowed to know. But I have a theory," he sighed, placing his Fedora back onto his white hair. "Do you remember what I asked you in the classroom? I asked if you believed in ghosts." Dodge held his expression, to show he was not bluffing. Karl wanted to laugh but couldn't. "Everything that happened to me, everything that happened to you. Men couldn't have done it. No government agency, no business, no rival. Who would have such resources? No one. No one but God himself could know us all this well."

Karl eventually nodded. Dodge moved forward, to the door, opening it and replacing his Fedora on his head.

"Tomorrow," he continued, "someone else will get a red envelope in this city. Someone will question it, someone will ignore it, someone...someone will *follow* it. Keep looking for the lucky person that survives to the very end. Like you. Like me. For that person...is a person worth knowing."

Dodge fished deep into the inner pocket of his jacket and withdrew his own envelope. He handed it to Karl. It was white and the same size and shape as the one Karl had received at the mill. Dodge's own white envelope had not faded or become worn with time, the quality of paper preserving, though the seam was torn.

Karl reached inside Dodge's white envelope and pulled out the card.

Two words were printed on it.

FIND HIM

"See?" smiled Dodge. "Mine just took a little while longer to finish."

Karl watched Dodge leave through the rain, without umbrella, unlock his rag-tag car, wave, and disappear.

In his fading memories of Lana, his exhaustion, his blurry eyes and masked anger, Karl saw his future: a rat on a wheel, never ending. It had happened to Dodge. The obsession. Instead

of seeing the man as a teacher, with wisdom, a learned man, a guide, he only saw Henry Dodge as an addict. An addict for the answers. He saw in those eyes the reflected sadness Karl had been carrying all those months since he and Lana separated. And suddenly, like the catch of a spark turning into flame, he knew.

I don't want to know who's behind it. I don't want to know anymore. She knows I love her. Somehow she knows.

Karl Banswick held the white envelope.

Author's note:

The documents in this book were created by Ruth Schmidt.
Thank you, Ruth! dc