

Magic

You say you don't believe in magic. That's okay. Lots of people don't believe in magic and they live their lives just fine. I just want to assure you that there is such a thing as magic. Do you know how I know? I can do it.

No, really! Since about age five or so I have never once — not ever — been bitten by a mosquito or been stung by a bee or wasp or caught poison ivy or stepped on a nail or been cut or scraped by something sharp I happened to brush past. It was about then that I learned to coat myself — that's how I describe it — with a layer of... something... I don't know. In science-fiction stories, they might call it a force field. Maybe that's what it is. I just think of it as a coating. Nothing can get to my skin closer than the thickness of a pencil lead. What's that? Half a millimeter?

And that's not all. A couple of years back I learned to hone my reflexes. That might be a bad way to describe it. I know what you're about to do a half-second before you do. When you throw a punch, I already know it's coming and (usually) can get out of its way. Even if it lands, if I've got my coating on, I barely feel it.

Okay, so I can't wave a magic wand and cast a spell to turn lead into gold, but you may have seen me on some TV game shows. I was on two of them a few years apart and raked in \$135,000 on one of them and \$81,000 on the other because I have this ever-so-slim advantage over most — not all — of the other players.

The latest 'trick' I've been perfecting is something I call 'dusting'. It takes a heap of concentration, but what I'm targeting will suddenly turn to dust. It is the wildest effect! A flower suddenly — like a light switching off — goes from a pretty pink construction to a cloud of particles falling to the ground — POOF! It comes in pretty handy every now and then, too. Once I was taking an old piece of lawn equipment apart, and everything was rusted in place. It occurred to me that I really didn't need to save all those nuts and bolts, so one by one I just dusted them. There's no real sound when it happens. It just turns to dust. My brother looked at all the disassembled parts later and asked "where are all the bolts?" I told him none of them survived the disassembly process and he seemed to be okay with that. All that stuff would normally be replaced with new ones anyway, so it was no big deal.

I got mugged a month ago. When two guys about my age confronted me, I was already coated. I coat myself whenever I go out and even sometimes when I'm at home. So, here are two guys, both with knives that look like they could do some damage. I wasn't worried for me — I've got a protective coating and reflexes better than theirs — but I felt that

running away was cowardly, and their next victim might not have that option, so I acted.

"Fuck off," I replied to their demand for my wallet. The one nearest jabbed at me with his knife. I grabbed his hand and twisted it back into his wrist. This caused him to drop the knife and go down on one knee. The other one stabbed me in the ribs. I think we were both surprised that he didn't break the skin, but when he decided to keep stabbing, I dusted his knife. He screamed and ran off. I let the other one go and he soon followed his partner. I collected the remaining knife just to keep it from falling into the wrong hands.

I can coat other people, too, if they're close, and I even tried coating our house one Halloween during a period marked by 'eggings' where trick-or-treaters would throw eggs at houses as a prank. A single egg splashed against the coating and slid down to the ground like the house had a non-stick coating — which, in fact, it did.

The bad thing about that coating is that I can't eat or pee or poop through it, although I can breathe through it. I just thought of that and I can't explain it, but I can put that coating on and take it off so quickly that it almost doesn't make a difference. *Off*, take a bite, *on*, swallow... like that fast.

My ability to coat other things came in very handy on one occasion. A bunch of us were riding around in Leo's new used car and we found ourselves in the middle of a street riot. Gangs of rioters were throwing bricks and rocks at cars driving by on the street. As I watched, a brick came soaring through the air headed straight for Leo's windshield. I probably should have let it hit, but it was by then nearly a reflex: I wrapped the car a half second before the brick smashed into the glass — and bounced off. Leo sped away from the action and I unwrapped his car as soon as we were clear.

Later, when I finally got my own car, I made it a permanent practice to put that protective coating on whenever I took it on the road. I've been involved in one accident — not my fault — in which the other car got wrinkled and mine didn't get a scratch. The trooper was highly perplexed that my car didn't have damage comparable to that on the other car and I declined to speculate on how that might have happened. It helps with the insurance, too, because I can opt for a very high deductible and not have to worry about paying for damage. It also makes my car essentially theft-proof.

I now typically leave that coating on around the clock. I almost never have to take the car to the car wash. Dirt and rain spots never get near the finish — and don't even bother trying to 'key' it if you get ticked at me.

I'm cultivating a deliberate sense of *noblesse oblige*, largely because I'm a little afraid of what I might become if I don't. Can you imagine a

tyrant with such power? They say the ends justify the means, but I have felt for a long time that it's the means that make the ends worthwhile.

It didn't occur to me until much later that my talents were as easily turned to evil as to good, and that there were probably very many instances where it would be hard to tell which of those were in play. Sure, if I were witnessing an armed robbery, it would be easy to dust all the ammunition in a robber's gun. It might not stop the robbery, but it would ensure the victim didn't lose anything but money, and no one would be the wiser. That's a nutty example, I know; almost no one ever witnesses *somebody else's* armed robbery. I did, however, once watch a cop bash a suspect with his night stick and it looked to me like it was done for no real reason except the cop was ticked off. I probably *should have* dusted that night stick then and there, but it didn't occur to me until later that I could have prevented abuse of a prisoner. Sometimes these situations happen so fast they're over and done with before anyone realizes what's happening.

It was because of that and a few other similar incidents that I decided to go into journalism.

Do you remember during the last election circus when President Charles wanted to avoid confrontations with his detractors? Hired security details set up "free speech zones" ringed with cyclone fencing where all the protesters could be isolated and not make a big fuss where the regular news crews might see them. Yeah, that was me. I dusted just one zigzag strand of fencing and the whole thing just unzipped. The big news services didn't have any choice after that but to report what was happening.

Because I was making a public pain-in-the-ass of myself, I suppose I drew unwanted attention. I got pulled over by a state trooper one night for what was probably a made-up offense or a manufactured one. I got ordered out of the car along with the girl I was with, the trooper searched the car because he said he smelled something he shouldn't have, found it, and then we were both arrested.

I knew I didn't have anything illegal with me. "Did you have anything in that car that you shouldn't have?" I asked my date. She swore up and down that she didn't smoke anything, and having kissed her more than once, I found that believable. I was being set up, and she was collateral damage. I hired an attorney to represent us both. During my attorney's preliminary interviews, I asked him to arrange a one-on-one, just me and the District Attorney.

I was ushered into the DA's office and was surprised to find a uniformed police officer present.

"I thought this was going to be one-on-one," I started.

"You're an indicted defendant," he told me. "If you think I'm going to be alone in this room with you, you're not thinking straight."

"I have confidential matters to discuss, and his presence will make that problematic."

"Can't be helped," the DA replied.

"Are we being recorded?" I asked.

"No. Your attorney insisted this was to be off the record."

This wasn't how I imagined it was going to play out. "Okay, off the record, I am being set up by persons unknown and I'm asking for your help to make sure that doesn't happen."

"I prosecute based on the evidence presented. If there's evidence you committed a crime, I'm going to prosecute it. That's how this all works."

"I'm OK with that," I told him. "What I'm not OK with is when false evidence is presented. The trooper who pulled us over planted evidence in my car and that's a crime in itself..."

"You can prove that?"

"No, but you can. You have access to that trooper's arrest records and can perhaps discern a pattern of illegal activity..."

"Not my job," the DA cut me off in mid-sentence.

"'Justice' is not your job?"

"Technically, yes, but my job is mainly focused on 'putting law-breakers in jail'."

"So you're not interested in whether the evidence against me is bogus?"

"If it is, you should probably be able to impeach it in front of a jury."

"I kind of thought that was your job," I remarked. The DA looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, as you and the system attempt to railroad innocent victims into prison, I think you should expect significant push-back."

"Is that a threat?" he asked.

"No," I told him, "it's a prophecy." As we were shaking hands, I dusted the ring, probably a wedding ring, on his left hand. He didn't notice right away, but I'm sure he was aware of it by the next day.

With no prior record to speak of, I made bail easily, even though my newspaper didn't want to get involved in a matter involving illegal drugs. I had given my attorney enough information about my suspicions that his questioning during depositions was incisive. The experts the State would call for the prosecution would — none of them — be able to testify truthfully that the chain of custody of any of the subsidiary evidence — primarily urine samples — taken from me and my date that night was unbroken. That evidence would be challenged and very likely thrown out. DNA analysis of the marijuana said to have been found in my car also revealed that it matched exactly to a large haul made by the State Police within the past year. The coincidence of that would call into question the trooper's testimony and support my contention that it had been planted.

In any case, the DA seemed disinclined to press this case too hard, and before it came to trial, the State moved to drop the charges. This wasn't entirely unexpected given everything else that happened in conjunction with the trial.

They didn't, however, back off from the civil asset forfeiture charge against my car. They still held that in an impound lot and had plans to auction it off as 'proceeds of a crime'. Having won my case by default, I was even so going to have to replace my car.

As I walked out of the courthouse a free man, I paused long enough to dust the valve stems on all the tires of all the police cars in the parking lot. Thirty-two tires and eight spares suddenly went flat with forty rapid-fire 'pop's.

"When you get a chance, tell the DA that push-back can be very painful for slow learners," I instructed my lawyer.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"The DA will understand," I told him.

They sold my car at auction. I made sure I was there, and I made sure the car had four flat tires when people were bidding on it. In fact, I made sure that all the cars sold that day had four flat tires. I bid on the car, but was outbid by someone with more disposable income than I could muster. By the time each car was being hauled up onto the beds of tow trucks, none of them had tires at all, and the oil pan plugs had mysteriously disappeared, allowing the engine oil to leak out onto the auction lot.

I heard later that several of those auctioned cars had generated lawsuits against the county, but that since they were sold 'as-is', all the lawsuits had been dismissed.

Over the next several months, city vehicles, county vehicles, and police cars from several jurisdictions had reported sporadic problems with their engine oil and inability to lock the doors and trunks, along with rampant low tire pressure problems.

Periodically, I would call the DA's office to complain about being cheated out of my car, but I think none of those complaints ever made it as far as the DA's office itself. It was fully eight months of rapid turnover of city and county vehicle mechanics due to their inability to keep their fleets on the road before someone — probably at the request of the DA — decided to return one of my many calls.

I explained at some length the nature of my complaint — that even though the county had dropped all charges against me, personally, and my date that night, my car had still been seized as being involved in a crime, and had subsequently been auctioned off with the county pocketing the proceeds.

"Now, Mr. Durkin, you do realize, don't you, that what happened is strictly in accordance with state and federal law?"

"I understand that it was legal," I told her, "but 'legal' is not equivalent to 'right'. An act that is wrong cannot be made right by action of

the legislature. It is wrong and it remains wrong no matter what the law says about it."

"That may be true, Mr. Durkin, but this office is guided by the law, not by considerations of right and wrong."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I told her. "I just want you to understand that while two wrongs don't make something right, it can provide a great deal of satisfaction to one party or the other."

"Are you referring to the county's problems with its automobile and truck fleets, Mr. Durkin?"

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're referring to," I told her, "but I do know that doing the right thing always leads to positive outcomes. I hope the proper officials within the county learn that lesson soon. You would do the citizenry a very great service if you could successfully transmit that message."

It was no more than two weeks later that I received another call from someone at the county government offices.

"Mr. Durkin, the county recognizes that it has treated you unfairly, and we have resolved to rectify that. I hope that you will allow us to replace your car that was inadvertently sold at auction."

"Mr. Simms, my car was not 'inadvertently' sold by the county. My car was sold under the provisions of a long-standing county policy, and I am not the only person treated unfairly as a result of that policy. If the county is truly interested in rectifying their past sins, the county likely has a long list of persons similarly treated unfairly. While I'm happy that the county recognizes that it has behaved badly in the past towards me, there are many people who need to be made whole again, not just me. Is this apology strictly for me, or are you making similar apologies to others?"

"Well..." Simms hesitated, "I believe you are the only person we are apologizing to."

"I accept your apology and your offer of restitution, but only if it extends to all the others who have been affected."

"I..." Simms stammered.

"It would be morally wrong for you to treat me preferentially, whatever your reason for doing so, and it would be morally wrong for me to allow you to treat me that way. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"You're saying we have to replace all the cars..."

"All the property," I interjected.

"All the property we have seized... I'm not sure my superiors would be willing..."

"Then you have to convince them, Mr. Simms, that 'doing the right thing' is more than fixing a single problem. If all they want is to fix a single problem, Mr. Simms, they aren't serious about curing the problem of them behaving badly. Please call me back when you have good news." I hung up on him.

It wasn't more than four days after that that I answered a knock on the door. It was a low-level county employee offering me a set of keys to a new GMC parked at the curb in front of my house.

"What's this?" I asked him.

"I don't know. I was told to deliver this vehicle and hand you these keys."

"By whom?" I asked.

"By my boss."

"...Whose name is?"

"Gene Rooker."

I got Rooker's phone number from the deliveryman and called him.

"What can you tell me about this car?" I asked him.

"It's the replacement for yours. That's all I know."

"I spoke a little while back with a Mr. Simms," I prompted.

"Yeah, Simms isn't with us anymore."

"Right," I told him, "I'm sending this car back. Have Simms' boss call me direct. I'm certain they have my number."

"Well," he started hesitatingly, "I was Simms' boss."

"Tell me, then, why isn't Simms 'with us' anymore?"

"It's a personnel issue," Rooker replied. "I can't discuss it."

"Listen, you," I barked into the phone, "if you expect to deal with me, you'd fucking well better deal with me straight. Answer my question."

"The county manager didn't like his message."

"Didn't like my message, you mean. Okay, here's the deal: you assholes contacted me and I told Simms the conditions under which you could make things right. If you're not willing to meet those conditions, go away and never contact me again. You're not serious about solving your problems and I'm not interested, either.

"P.s.: you should hire Simms back. It's bad policy to shoot the piano player." I hung up. I handed the keys back to the delivery driver and he left with the car.

It was a gigantic hit to the county budget, but it was small potatoes compared to what the county was spending keeping its trucks and police cars rolling. The local birdcage liner had a field day roasting the county executive over all the money he was spending to correct past sins, many of them not even attributable to his own administration. The worst instance was someone who had since moved out of state. His family estate had been seized under similar circumstances, and since the county couldn't replace the property without blatantly unconstitutional action, they just wrote him a check for \$7.3 million. Neither the DA nor the county executive knew it at the time, but that one check doomed both their re-election campaigns.

You're welcome.

The town my family lives in is small enough that, if you grew up there, you probably know a substantial portion of the populace. It is,

because of that, one of the safest places in the country, if not the world. Our crime rate is remarkable only for its absence. My next door neighbor is more likely to be struck by lightning, attacked by a shark, or to hit the state lottery than to be the victim of a crime.

There's a nearby larger city for which this is definitely not true.

My work as, first, a newspaper reporter, then as a TV community advocate, made me intimately familiar with which parts of our local metropolis were the hotbeds of criminal activity. It didn't occur to me until much later that I was mirroring a series of cult movies in the 70s, 80s, and 90s about a vigilante who kills street thugs, although the impetus there was that the vigilante had lost family to street crime. In my case, it just — happened.

My ability to cloak myself with a protective film and my ability to dispatch evildoers by dusting them meant that I had little to fear from walking alone through the less-safe parts of our big city neighbor. The combination called to me like a siren. Did I have the right to walk away from this? Did I not have a responsibility to help my community?

You have no idea how long I grappled with those questions or how passionately I wrestled with the moral issues behind it. 'Vengeance is mine' sayeth the Lord, but 'self defense is the first law of nature'. On behalf of all those for whom self defense was only wishful thinking, I took my stand.

My station had sent me on an assignment to New York City to cover a sci-fi convention, and they put me up at a hotel on W. 59th Street, Central Park South. My hotel's front door was across the street from Central Park and less than a hundred yards from a pedestrian entrance. At this point, I hadn't given serious consideration to 'embarking on a mission'. I just couldn't resist the lure of walking through one of America's iconic parks. When shooting for our 'special' wrapped around 4pm, I dumped my gear in my room and headed across the street to enjoy a walk.

If you haven't experienced Central Park, you just won't understand. It's twice the size of Monaco, almost one-and-a-half square miles, so there's a lot of park here. Make walking paths though that much land, and you wind up with miles... no, leagues of walking paths. It would take you days to traverse all the miles of paths in the park. As a result, it's almost impossible to police all those paths, and Central Park has gotten a bad reputation as a mugger's paradise. After dark, it becomes unusually dangerous for anyone except those in a group, and sometimes even those.

That first night, it hadn't even occurred to me that I would be putting myself in danger. My special talents gave me a *bravado* native New Yorkers would have scoffed at. I probably hadn't gone three hundred yards into the park when I realized I was being stalked. Any other person would have panicked. I just thought: *they don't know what's in store for them*.

I kept walking but stayed cognizant of the pack that was trailing me. At one point, the path tunneled under a roadway above and it was there that my stalkers had planned to start their attack. One group was sent on

ahead, crossing the roadway above and doubling back so that I could be trapped in the tunnel by one group ahead of me and another behind me.

I didn't understand that when I first entered the underpass, but it became apparent very quickly thereafter. By about the time I was half-way or a little further into the tunnel, the group behind had blocked off my retreat. About the same time, the group ahead appeared at the far end of the underpass. I kept walking.

"Well, look at what we have here," a voice from behind boomed, his voice echoing against the walls. I kept walking, getting closer to the group ahead. I, per my usual practice, was already wrapped, so I wasn't concerned for my own safety. Right about then, I wrapped everybody in sight, the group ahead and the group behind. They, of course, noticed nothing.

"You kids aren't contemplating anything illegal, I hope," I called to them.

They laughed. "Not unless you call 'taking your wallet' 'illegal'," one of them answered.

"Yes," I told him, "I would call taking my wallet illegal. I'm afraid all of you are going to be very disappointed tonight."

"What? You don't have a wallet?" their leader challenged.

"I have a wallet," I told him. "You won't be taking it."

"We'll see," he barked, and the whole group, maybe eight of them, closed on me. One tried unsuccessfully to stab me. The rest of them seemed befuddled that they couldn't get a decent grip on my arms or legs. After a few minutes of fumbling they drew back from their attack. "What the fuck..." their leader mumbled.

I pulled free and turned on them. "Now, you all have to be punished for your bad behavior," I explained. "The Golden Rule tells us that how you treat others is the way you want others to treat you, so now I'm going to relieve you all of your wallets. Everybody get in line over there against the wall."

A few moved toward the wall, but most of them just stared at me.

"Fuck you!" one of them shouted at me. I wrapped him in an air-tight bubble and he immediately started to gasp and suck air frantically. After a few seconds of that, I unwrapped him so he could breathe again, then re-wrapped him like the rest of them. Everybody lined up against the wall.

I motioned the rebel to come forward first and seized twelve dollars from him along with a small-caliber pistol. I pointed as if dismissing him and he took off running. "Next!" I motioned to the next in line to move forward and dropped his wrapping as he approached. "Money and weapons," I ordered. He handed over seven dollars and a knife. "Take a walk," I ordered, and he departed in a great hurry.

The next claimed only to have pocket change which I declined. From the next several thugs, I collected a grand total of forty-seven dollars,

three more knives, and a loaded .45 caliber Glock, sending each of them on their way as they paid their ransom.

As I exited the park on my way back to the hotel, I passed a homeless man huddled against the park's stonework. I handed him the sixty-six dollars I had collected. "None of this for alcohol," I told him as I handed him the wad. "Get yourself some food, and maybe spread it around."

Inside the hotel, I buttonholed the concierge. "I ran into some thugs during a walk this evening," I explained, "and I relieved them of their weaponry. Do you have any suggestions about what I should do with two pistols I took from them?"

The concierge had a startled look on his face. "You're not hurt?" I assured him I was fine, but that I didn't want the New York City police arresting me. "Oh, nothing to worry about," he assured me as he dialed the local precinct.

Within a half hour, there was a knock at my door. Two uniformed officers entered, I handed them the guns, and they arrested me. Apparently it's illegal to have guns in your possession in New York City without a permit regardless of how you came by them. My attempt to explain how I acquired them they waved off as irrelevant. "Tell it to the judge."

As we walked by the concierge's desk, me in handcuffs, I told the concierge: "Nothing to worry about, huh?"

Sitting in the back seat of the police car on our way to the lock-up, I dusted the handcuffs to free my hands. I thought about dusting the whole police car, briefly, before it occurred to me to dust the two guns. Silently, they both turned to powder within the plastic bags that held them.

At the police station, they started to book me when they discovered their evidence had disappeared along with somebody's handcuffs. "What do you know about the two guns these officers said you had?" the desk sergeant demanded.

"Guns? What guns? I have no idea what they're talking about."

In the end, the sergeant declined to book me for a crime his DA couldn't argue in court.

"How about a lift back to my hotel?" I asked.

"Call a cab," the sergeant snarled.

I dusted the valve stems on three NYPD police cars parked outside the station as I left.

As I mentioned earlier, my town is a suburb of a larger city with a similarly-sized crime problem, albeit concentrated in particular sections of the city. From time to time, especially when other matters took me there, I patrolled — I probably shouldn't use that word — those seedier sections of the city alone at night. It didn't happen very often, but I did have several episodes that very closely paralleled my experience in Central Park. Only on the rarest of occasions did some low-life wind up with terminal damage. I

pride myself that street crime took a small but not insignificant dive in time with my efforts.

The most uncomfortable incident happened while I was out with my then-current girlfriend. A man was running toward us in apparent panic and he was being chased by two others shouting 'Stop, thief!' or something similar. I could have just stepped aside and let events unfold naturally, but something deep inside urged me to act. I wrapped the running thief and when I did, I imagined a much thicker 'bubble' than I usually used for myself or others close by. Suddenly, the runner was lifted two inches off the ground and his feet were no longer giving him any propulsion. They weren't much use to slow him down, either. He seemed to bounce off nearby people and objects, losing speed with each collision, until his two pursuers finally caught up. At that point, the trio were half a football field away. I unwrapped the thief, his feet dropped to the ground, and the chasers grabbed him by his arms.

"Did you just see that?" my girlfriend asked in amazement.

"Yeah, they caught him."

"No," she said. "He was flying through the air."

"Not very fast if they were able to catch him."

"Are you saying you didn't see that guy's feet inches off the ground?"

I looked at her. "Are you alright?"

"I was not seeing things!"

I shrugged. "Optical illusion," I told her. She had her lips so tightly clenched together that her lips were white. "Okay, I admit it. I did it to him. Is that better?"

"You're impossible," she huffed. "I'm going over there to ask if they need a witness. You should do your 'reporter' thing and get some pictures for the 11-o'clock news." We both headed for the heart of the action and got there about the same time as two police cars.

Four police tumbled out of their vehicles and urged the crowd to back away. One of them started gathering facts from participants and bystanders. I flashed my press credentials and they let me stay relatively close so I could hear and see what was happening.

The probable thief was street-wise enough to say nothing, not even bothering to deny anything he was accused of. The chasers gave mutually conflicting and highly implausible accounts of the chase and capture. I snapped a few pictures with the camera I always carried and took notes of overheard dialog. None of it would qualify for the 11-o'clock news, but the news director took notice that I was on-scene and turned in a first-person account. It wouldn't get me a raise, but it might keep me from being laid-off someday. Might.

Thinking that it couldn't hurt, I got my Private Investigator's certification and quietly began to spread the word that I was available for hire to provide security services. That turned out to be a wise move,

because when the TV station I worked for needed to cut staff, they cut the least experienced staff with the least seniority. So long and thanks for all the fish.

Soon afterward, I got a short contract babysitting some corporate executive's kids. It wasn't a lush contract, but it allowed me to pay the rent on the office and stay fed. Because it was just me running the operation, I wound up working around the clock and bunking with the kids at their parents' house, which was pretty nice.

At first, I thought the guy's fears were overblown, but my fears turned out to be very much underblown. On the third day, I was escorting them home from school when our car was cut off by two others on a side street. Yes, our car was wrapped at the time, sealed the instant the doors closed with the kids inside. Four burly thugs surrounded us with guns aimed at the car's windows. Some of the guns looked like they would have needed ATF paperwork.

"Everybody out!" their leader screamed at us.

"Drive!" I yelled at our driver. "Crash through!" He froze. I wrapped all four thugs air-tight, drew my own weapon, and exited the car. Both of the other cars' drivers seemed unaware that their operation had just fallen apart. I pointed my 1911A1 at one driver and motioned him out — which he did. I wrapped him immediately. I tapped the passenger window of the other car and did the same to the second driver.

I relieved them both of their sidearms, phones, and wallets, putting the wallets and phones in my pockets, then collected the phones, guns, and wallets from four now-deceased thugs, stowing them in the trunk of the limo.

I waved a wallet at them. "I know who you are, and I know how to find you, so do yourselves a favor and answer my questions so you don't wind up like these mokes." I indicated the four corpses. "Are these your guns or did somebody supply them? Or did you steal them?"

"They're ours," one of them volunteered. "Not stolen."

"Who's paying you?"

They hesitated.

"You could be a crumpled pile like your buddies," I warned, "and it's a one-way trip."

"Manny Vasoulides," one blurted. I nodded.

"Unlock your phone," I ordered one. "Find Manny in your phone's addressbook." He did so and handed the phone to me. I copied Manny's contact information, address and telephone number, into my notebook.

"Tell Manny he's in 'way over his head on this one. He needs to find a safer way of doing business. Buy new phones," I ordered them. "Now, get lost, and it would be a very good thing if you mentioned what happened today to nobody, right?"

They both nodded. I unwrapped them and their cars and my four victims, waved them toward their cars, and they scooted. I got back inside

our limo and put our wrapper back on. "Let's go," I ordered the driver who had finally unfrozen.

"Kids," I whispered to the children, "I would like it if you just told everybody that you slept the whole trip home from school." Both of them were wide-eyed over what they had just seen, and it may have occurred to them that no one would believe them anyway. They wouldn't be able, of course, to say nothing, but what tales they did tell were somewhat disjointed because they didn't understand what had happened before their eyes, and there were enough discrepancies between the two that their stories were heavily discounted.

Their Dad was very appreciative of my skills at keeping his children safe, and offered a fat bonus if I would stay on. Yes, I accepted. Do I look stupid?

I carefully documented the names of the four dead thugs and the two drivers I allowed to live, just in case. As I suspected, some of the hardware I collected was very illegal without ATF paper and the proper tax stamps, and I stowed those carefully away in a wrapped gun safe. The ordinary hardware I sold in private sales to trusted friends on condition they never mentioned my name in connection with them. A buddy wiped the six phones I had and I sold them on eBay for pocket change.

It was a very nice contract after that. There were no further attempts on the kids, and it was just a matter of escorting them here and there and collecting my paycheck.

The only uncomfortable spot was a visit from two detectives following up on mysterious deaths. The victims were traced by bank records back toward Manny, and interviews with others similarly connected had, in turn, led to my employer, but everything they had was hear-say and it was easy to just shrug my shoulders and deny everything.

I could have, now that I think about it, admitted to everything, and they would have let me skate because (a) I had done a public service for a prominent citizen who held many IOUs from other prominent citizens, and (b) where could they find a jury that would believe any of this?

But I did feel very unhappy with my increasing tendency to paper over the truth.

Susan

I began to feel less unhappy and uncomfortable on the day I discovered there existed another person like me.

Susan Burke was, by profession, a librarian. She worked for a large corporation whose name you would recognize in a heartbeat, and managed their private library of proprietary documents, many of which were considered too valuable to be made available digitally. Perhaps 'librarian' is

the wrong word, except that her degree was in Library Science. 'Custodian' may be closer to her actual function. Nobody got access to those documents without her permission. Although I asked her once, she declined to share with me the nature of any of them.

She was pretty but not beautiful, with straight black hair that ended in a well-coiffed line just below her shoulders. What little makeup she wore was meant merely to emphasize rather than attract. A string of pearls perfectly accessorized her little black dress. The combination made her far more attractive than she probably intended.

I met her at a party hosted by a mutual friend. As was my custom, I attended 'wrapped'. It kept me from spending money unnecessarily on dry cleaning clothes accidentally spilled upon by semi-inebriated party-goers. As I was engaging her in conversation away from the main action, someone nearby tripped, and a drink came flying through the air toward us. In the blink of an eye, I coated her just as the plastic tumbler tagged her... and the fluid slipped directly to the rug beneath us leaving her dress untouched and dry.

She looked at me, then smiled. "You did that, didn't you?" she asked accusingly.

"Huh?" I responded.

"You cloaked me," she explained. I gave her my 'stupid' look. "I'm the only person I know who can do that, and I didn't do it," she continued.

I considered how stupid it would seem if I continued this conversation and I was actually misunderstanding her. It seemed worth the risk. "What else can you do?" I asked.

Her hand fell to her side and the empty plastic tumbler leaped into it from the floor.

I nodded in silent understanding. "Impressive," I whispered. "I'm finding you much more interesting than this party. Why don't we move to someplace quieter so we can let this conversation range far and wide without risk of interruption?"

"Your place or mine?" she asked.

"Either or neither. I need to know how dangerous you are before I make an inappropriate suggestion."

She snorted in laughter. "Follow me."

She headed for the door and I followed.

We wound up at an all-night diner three blocks from the party.

"You're the only other magicker I know," she admitted as we each wrapped ourselves around steaming coffee mugs. Her eyes darted from one corner of the room to another, always on the lookout. I realized I was doing the same. Our individual coatings were flipping on and off as we sipped our drinks.

"Do you know how you do that?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Nope. I just do it. Every now and then I discover something else I can do that I never suspected before. I just

learned to cloak myself a few years ago. I can't cloak anyone else, though, like you did tonight. I'd like to know how to do that. How many...?"

"I could have done everybody in the room tonight," I admitted, "but they would have been upset that they couldn't drink. I once coated my whole house. Cars are a cinch, too.

"What else can you do?"

The salt shaker started to move smoothly but slowly toward me. Suddenly, the salt turned pale blue before becoming white again. She laughed. A small — well, 'two and a half feet tall' small — green dragon appeared briefly by my side before evaporating. I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed, but nobody had.

"Was that...?"

"Just for you," she said. "Nobody else could see it but you."

"We'd make a hell of a nightclub act," I mused.

Most of our 'talents' were of such a nature that you wouldn't think they were valuable enough to mention. Our ability to protectively coat ourselves was an obvious exception. She was as impressed with my ability to dust objects as I was with her telekinesis and hallucinogenesis.

We talked for almost an hour, and exchanged telephone numbers and addresses before I offered to drive her home.

"I brought my own."

I walked her back toward where the party had been and made sure her motorcycle started before I drove myself home.

I quietly dropped all my other lady-friends and concentrated on Susan. It seemed quite obvious to me that we were meant to be together, at least temporarily.

"I wonder how many others there are like us?" I mused one night at dinner.

"I've often wondered that myself," Susan agreed, "but there seems no way to ask that question without exposing myself, something I'd rather not do. There's another facet to that that scares me: suppose one of those 'others', if they exist, wants to do me harm? I took an awful chance with you that night at the party when we first met."

We discussed and quickly discarded the idea of putting an ad in a newspaper. We discussed and quickly discarded the idea of forming a magic act. Susan found a website for the local Magicians' Cooperative and applied for membership.

Within a week she was receiving information about 'gigs' for which she might apply, and invitations to casual get-togethers with other local magicians. She Rsvp'd to several on our behalf, intending to use any opportunity that arose to demonstrate what we were certain would be inexplicable tricks. To help us pull off an air of professionalism, we actually practiced a few of them, an action that looked to me an awful lot like 'forming a magic act'.

The trick I liked best was to select an object from the host's decor — an object that could not, because of that, be one of our props — and changing its color repeatedly as a cloth alternately covered it and revealed it. We also found that most hosts had one or two objects that they could stand to lose forever. "It's going away," I would warn them, "and it's never coming back." The victim knick-knack would be placed on a table covered with a cloth, and the cloth would suddenly collapse flat as the object was reduced to dust. "Okay," one magician probed, "that's a great trick, but where did the thing go?" Some of them were pretty upset when we wouldn't share how the trick was done.

Susan had also given up all her men-friends after she met me, and since we were dating nobody except each other, we often went trolling — her term for walking in dangerous parts of town looking like marks. Together, we did a better job than the local police of removing criminals and weapons from the streets. Did you know that even junky old guns can be worth hundreds of dollars? The nice stuff can bring in much more if I take the time to clean them up ahead of time.

One of Susan's old boyfriends was a cop, and Harvey would check our booty against some nationwide database cops can get to to see if any of them had been reported stolen. Those that were reported as 'stolen' we handed over to the police to be returned, we hoped, to their proper owners. The remainder we sold in private sales with no paper trail.

"Where are you getting all this stuff?" Harvey demanded of her.

"Marty looks like an easy mark," she explained. "He's not. By the time they figure that out, Marty is holding their guns on them."

"So, why doesn't Marty just call the cops at that point?" Harvey pressed.

Susan laughed. "Because you guys tend to ask too many questions that don't really need to be asked!"

"And I'll bet the answers are pretty interesting, too!" he offered.

"Yeah," Susan agreed, "some of the answers would probably cause Marty more trouble than he's willing to put up with, yup, but the police commissioner probably likes the effects. Your crime numbers are on the decline, aren't they?"

"Yes, until Marty runs into somebody who's faster than him. Then he'll be a part of our crime numbers."

Susan shrugged. "My money's on Marty."

Publicity

Whether it was Harvey who ran his mouth in an unguarded moment or someone else that either he or we thought trustworthy — and there were very few of those — the fact of the matter is that our names began to be bandied about in journalistic circles. Who can blame a reporter for following up on a story with obvious local interest? Crime is being reduced and the

police have no plausible explanation. Suddenly someone in a position to know suggests that Batman and Robin are loose on the streets of Gotham. I know I would be jumping on such a lead if I were still a reporter.

I always let calls from unknown numbers go to voicemail where the caller can leave a message. It's a good way to screen sales calls, spam calls, and robocalls. It also gives me a breathing space where, as in this case, I can collect my thoughts and not have to shoot from the hip, as it were:

"Hi, this is Tom Lincoln from The Globe. There's a rumor circulating that you might be connected to the recent plunge in street crime, and I wanted to give you a chance to respond before I break the story. Call me back at 867-5309. My deadline is tomorrow at noon."

I called Susan to fill her in and get her thoughts.

"This is not good news," she sighed. "It would be very good, and I mean 'very very good', if we were able to talk him out of this story. At the very least, we need to keep him from making our names public. I would be seriously contemplating hurting him if that's what's necessary to stay in the shadows."

I thought about her words for a long moment. "That probably won't be necessary, but it has given me an idea about how I can handle this. I'm going to call him and invite him over for a quiet chat. Do you want to be here for it?"

"Nope. The less involved I am, the happier I'll be."

"Okay. I'll let you know how it goes."

Tom wanted to bring a photographer with him. I told him it probably wouldn't be either necessary or productive. He came alone. We sat and sipped iced tea on my sun porch while he asked me questions and I did my best to evade answering them.

"Look," I said as he was beginning to realize he wasn't going to get much of anything from me, "there are just two possibilities here: one, I am the guy who's being such a pain in the ass to local criminals, and two, I'm not. Let's consider both of those.

"If I am some Batman-like threat to local criminals, do you really want to blow my cover and end my career? I can't imagine your readers being very happy that, largely through your efforts, crime makes a comeback in our peaceful little burg.

"But it's the other side of that coin that most seriously concerns me. If I'm not some superhuman crime fighter able to escape 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', are you going to want to be the guy who painted a great big target on my back? How are you going to explain this when I turn up dead, a victim of shadowy underworld figures? I can absolutely guarantee that you will be the primary target of the largest libel suit in American journalistic history if that happens. My family will not be in

a forgiving mood after my funeral. I'm urging you not to put me in a position where I have to go into hiding in order to stay alive."

While I delivered this pitch, I envisioned gripping his right forearm tightly and was mildly surprised to see him apparently favoring that area, occasionally shaking it as if to help the circulation.

"There's another aspect to this matter that ought to concern you, personally, greatly," I continued, and I now envisioned poking his left arm with an awl. "If it is true that I have special powers that some people find sufficiently unpleasant that they are unable to continue a life of crime because of them, and you find yourself on my bad side, that would be something you would regret, don't you think?" He was now rubbing his left arm with his right hand, having stopped taking notes altogether.

"It comes down to this: you either believe I'm some supremely dangerous person, or you do not believe that. If you do, why would you run the risk of making yourself my enemy? If you do not believe it, why would you write a story that — there's no nice way to put this — libels me?"

"In short, there are many reasons for you to not write this story the way you seem to have planned it, and almost no reason for you to go public with what, I assure you, is the most nonsensical thing I have heard in my life.

"Please don't do this. The only thing you'll accomplish is to harm both of us. I know you don't want that, and I swear I don't, either."

Tom Lincoln nodded in silence, thinking. "You make a very persuasive case, Mr. Durkin. I think you should consider that you have won the day."

"So, the story is dead?" I asked.

"Yes. Without a smoking gun or catching you red-handed, there's just not enough here to make a plausible case that you're the Midnight Marauder."

I laughed at that. "I have one question for you that I need to have answered," I finished up. "Who gave you this lead that pointed at me?"

He suddenly got very serious. "I can't give up a source!"

"Wait," I remonstrated, "whoever gave you this reeking pile of horse manure is not 'a source'. Whoever it was was merely someone who passed along a barely-believable anecdote that you've now determined isn't worth following up on — or maybe is too dangerous to follow up on, or would violate the public's trust to follow up on. Unless that sort of whispered nonsense counts as 'a lead', that person isn't 'a source', and I need to know who it is so I can put a stop to gossip. You owe me that."

"I'll think about it," he said before closing his notebook and departing.

In the end, he didn't run the story. Susan was pleased. So was I, but we had to be very circumspect in our activities after that because anyone could have been surveilling us and we might not know it until we had provided them with the smoking gun Tom Lincoln didn't have.

Susan and I invited Harvey over for dinner one night and we had a very interesting conversation regarding 'confidentiality'. Harvey swore up and down that he had revealed our identities to no one.

"Well, somebody knows!" Susan pressed him.

"Of course, somebody knows!" he came back. "I had to tell them something when I'm running checks on a new gun every other week, and sometimes several in a week, and returning the clean ones to someone not on the force! There are several people in the department who know I have a connection to the mysterious vigilante who's making our town a safer place, but nobody knows it's you two."

Harvey speculated that anyone who knew he, Harvey, was involved might have made the connection to Harvey's circle of friends, and that could have implicated me or Susan or both of us.

I showed Susan my trick of concentrating on inflicting pain on a subject and she discovered she could do it as well. Pain is a great tongue loosener, and this talent left no physical evidence behind. With the information we managed to gather using it, we could proactively go after people in the crime biz we might otherwise never have encountered in the normal course of our activities.

The Chief of Police was not happy when we blew the whistle on his nephew, and we weren't particularly happy to learn that several firearms we thought were being restored to their rightful owners had been, instead, funneled straight back onto our streets. For that, the nephew went up for 7-to-13.

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I kept a running inventory of the stuff we collected along with serial numbers where they were available, and the date we collected each, whether we sold it or turned it over to the cops, and the date and price for those we sold. Over the course of 2½ years, Susan and I collected 97 handguns, of which 19 had obliterated serial numbers (we gave those to Harvey for disposal), and 41 had been reported 'stolen' (and we hoped the cops actually routed those back to their owners). The remaining 37 we sold, usually to private buyers at one of the local gun shows or at pistol ranges, for a grand total of over \$16,000, which Susan and I split 50-50.

Every once in a very great while, we would come across something that required ATF paperwork — paperwork that probably didn't exist for it. Susan didn't want them, so I kept those and stored them in a gun safe that was also wrapped to prevent tampering. I now have three select-fire UZIs, a suppressed M3A1, and two suppressed STEN knock-offs. At least once a year I take them out, clean them, oil them, and put them back.

No, I have no idea what I'm going to do with them. If you have any suggestions, I'll be happy to hear them.

Durkin Courier Service

The 'private investigator/security consultant' gig pays barely enough to keep myself fed and watered. I had mulled the idea of asking Susan to marry me, but I can barely support myself. Starting a family was out of the question until just recently.

An acquaintance asked me if I knew anyone who would serve as a courier. Pressing him for more detail, he revealed that he knew someone who wanted to ship something cross-country and didn't trust any of the regular carriers — FedEx, UPS, DHL, USPS — to get the cargo to its destination. All of them will lose the odd package every now and then, USPS more regularly than the others, and whatever was being shipped could not, absolutely could not go missing.

"What does it pay?" I asked.

"Don't know," the other replied, "but if you're interested, I'll pass your name along."

"I might be interested, depending on the remuneration," and I handed him one of my business cards.

It must have taken some time to 'pass my name along', because it wasn't until three days later that I picked up a message on the office line:

Hi. This is Steve. I'm looking for someone to act as a courier for a very important cross-country shipment. Call me back at 914-555-1101 if you're interested.

I called him back immediately.

"Yeah. My name is Marty Durkin. I'm a private investigator, but I'm open to contract work. Depending on the cargo and the payroll details, I might be interested in babysitting a shipment on a cross-country trip."

"Thanks for calling back, Marty," Steve began. "The cargo is a set of paintings that I sold to a West Coast buyer, and it has to be delivered safely to her or there's all sorts of negative financial ramifications, if you get my meaning.

"Because the object is so large, an airline will make you send it through as checked baggage, and we don't want to risk that since airports are notorious for being the places where valuable stuff goes missing."

"So you want me to drive it across the country?" I inquired.

"You could, but I wouldn't recommend it," Steve answered. "There may be some danger involved — danger that someone might try to hijack you, and there will be lots of opportunity for that on a four- or five-day cross-country road trip. My personal recommendation is that you take the train. We'll pay for the private compartment going and the flight returning, and your fee will be \$10,000 dollars."

"Just out of curiosity, what's this shipment worth?"

There was a slight pause before Steve admitted "The contract price was three million."

"What happens if I get hijacked and lose the paintings?" I asked.

"You guarantee that won't happen. If you lose it, I expect you to cover the loss."

"You mean as by a surety bond?"

"Yes, something like that."

I did some quick math in my head. "So my fee is 0.3 percent and I'm expected to get my own bond. Make it four percent and I'll do it."

"Two and a half. That's as high as my principal will go."

More math in my head. 2.5% of \$3 million is 75 Grand. For a trip that will last no more than a week. And I'll get the bulk of my bond back if there's no claim.

"Okay," I agreed. "You just hired me. Let's meet and get to know each other."

Steve gave me the address of a semi-ritzy gallery in Manhattan and a time when he could show me the paintings just before his workmen would seal them up in their packing crate.

At the appointed hour, I presented myself at Gallery Absalom and was ushered into their workroom at the rear of the building.

I know a little about fine art, but I'm not an expert by any means. Even so, I recognized what was going into the shipment.

"That's by Eduard Cortès," I remarked. "He did fine work, but he's certainly not in the million-dollar range. What's going on here?"

"You have a good eye," Steve congratulated me. "Have you ever seen these works by Cortès?"

I looked a little closer. They were, six of them, like most of Cortès' work, *belle époque* Paris street scenes.

"I'm not conversant with all of Cortès' *opus*," I admitted, "but I can't say I've seen these."

"You haven't. These six canvases are never-before-seen. Because of that, they carry a hefty price tag."

"Hefty," I repeated. "I'll say."

I watched Steve slide each panel into an enclosing envelope, seal each, and write his signature across the seals. I added my initials next to his scrawl. Then the workmen finished crating the artwork. The crate now rode on four casters and had a set of handles, one on top and one on each end of a tall, thin wooden box. The last touch was to paste a page-sized sticker on which was the name and address of the sender and the name and address of the recipient onto the outside of the crate.

"This is how they'll travel to Seattle?" I asked. Steve nodded.

"Okay," I confirmed. "There's no reason for anyone to re-open this crate for any reason until it arrives at its destination, is there?"

"I can't think of any reason," Steve agreed.

I nodded and pulled a ball point pen from my pocket. I scrawled some cryptic marks at random spots around the crate. Then I wrapped it in its own force field.

"If that changes... if you decide you need to re-open the crate for any reason... don't open it unless I'm physically present. I'll know if you try.

"When do I leave?"

"See Gloria, my secretary out front. She'll make your reservations and get you your itinerary. Four hours ahead of your departure, you come here. My guys will load this onto our delivery truck and escort you to the station and put you onto your train. From then on, you're on your own."

"Can my girlfriend come along?" I asked.

"If she does, you're paying her way," Steve advised me.

I opened my phone and dialed Susan. "How would you like to come with me to Seattle by train?" I asked when she picked up.

"Sleeper?" she probed.

"We'll have our own compartment," I assured her.

"I have time I can take, and things are kind of slow here at the moment. Yeah, that sounds like fun."

I left to talk to Gloria.

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Gloria booked us on the Lake Shore Limited out of Penn Station into Chicago, a trip of almost a full day, then, after a four-hour layover, onto the Empire Builder into Seattle, another almost two days. We had four days to prep for the trip during which I purchased a surety bond for \$3 million dollars naming Gallery Absalom as the beneficiary. It cost more than I expected.

I briefed Susan on the contract I had taken and that Steve suspected we might be in danger of being hijacked.

"You wrapped the shipment, I take it?"

"Yes. I watched the crate being loaded with the cargo, marked the crate so it can't be swapped out, then wrapped it so it can't be tampered with." She nodded.

On Friday morning, Susan met me at Gallery Absalom, we shook hands all around, I examined the crate and satisfied myself that it was intact and had not been swapped, the work crew loaded it into a delivery van along with me, Susan, and our luggage, and we headed off to Penn Station.

At the station, I showed my Private Investigator's license and got waved past the security checkpoint still in possession of my .45 automatic, one of the guns I had 'liberated' from someone who shouldn't have had it. Susan met me on the other side having cleared security in the traditional manner. By 3:40 when the train got rolling, we were already settled into our private compartment.

"What about dinner?" Susan asked.

"Great idea. Let's go."

"No, I mean 'who's going to guard the package while we're at dinner?'"

"It's already wrapped," I explained. "When we leave the compartment, we'll wrap that, too. We'll put out the 'Do Not Disturb' tag so it will look like we're engaged in hanky-panky."

Susan gave me a wry smile. In all the time we've been together, we haven't yet become intimate partners. One of these days, maybe.

"Okay," she agreed, "that's a good plan. Let's go eat."

We watched Poughkeepsie go by the window of the dining car as we nibbled appetizers, and finished our meals just as we were pulling into Albany. As we entered the car containing our compartment, we could see two Amtrak employees working on the door to our compartment and another person looking on as a spectator. When the spectator saw us, he turned and walked briskly away. I immediately wrapped him with an air-tight shield. He stopped, staggered, and gasped as his air was cut off.

"What's going on here?" I demanded.

One of the Amtrak employees — not the locksmith, maybe a supervisor — turned toward me.

"This gentleman," he pointed at the spectator, "says he thinks something may have happened to his friends in this compartment. We knocked but there was no answer. We're trying to get the door open, but there's something jammed in the lock."

The spectator was by now in serious distress.

"Him?" I pointed at the spectator.

"Yes."

I dropped the spectator's air-tight envelope and motioned him toward me with a crooked finger. He staggered back toward us, steadying himself against both corridor walls.

"Turn around, hands behind your neck, lace your fingers." He apparently knew the drill and executed it perfectly. I reached around to his chest and patted him down for weapons, then patted his waist, front and back, and retrieved a Beretta 92FS from a small-of-the-back rig. I handed this over my shoulder to Susan, then pulled a magazine from his back pocket, and sent that back to Susan, too. In the breast pocket of his jacket, I found a suppressor that assuredly fit the Beretta, and extracted it with my handkerchief so as not to disturb any latent prints.

"Oh my God!" the locksmith almost shrieked.

"Yeah," I said. "You need to notify train security that we have apprehended someone breaking into a compartment with the help of two Amtrak employees." I dropped the room's protective shield and swiped my key card. The door unlocked.

The locksmith looked puzzled. "My master key wouldn't open the door. It sounded as if it unlocked, but the door wouldn't open. How did you do that?"

"Magic," I explained.

By now, the supervisor was talking with whomever he reported to and was trying to cover his own ass.

A few minutes later, a plainclothes train security agent entered the car. Eyeing the handgun in Susan's hands, he reached for it. "I'll take that," he informed her.

"Not so fast," I stopped him. "I want to know who this person is, how he got past security with a handgun and a suppressor, and who sent him to break into my compartment. Until I get answers to some of that, we're going to hang onto his hardware." I flashed my PI credentials for the agent.

I started unloading his pockets. He had a wallet, but it didn't contain anything that you might call 'identification'. I didn't find a ticket, either. "Where's your holding pen?" I asked the agent.

"All the way forward," he replied as he snapped cuffs onto the suspect.

"I'm going with you. I presume you're going to turn him over to the Nystapo?"

He grimaced at my use of a common slur for the State Police. "Yeah. We'll alert the Schenectady barracks. If they don't respond in time, we'll hold him for Utica."

I turned to Susan. "Are you going to be okay alone?" She nodded. I took the gun and magazine from her hands. "The State Police will want all this evidence when we turn him over. Do you want mine?" She shook her head. I was pretty sure she didn't need it, either.

When we arrived at Schenectady there were two uniformed State Police officers waiting. They boarded the train and met us in the mail car that also housed the security facility. They put their own handcuffs on the suspect and returned the security agent's set. I handed over the gun, the magazine, and the suppressor, each of which went into its own Ziploc bag. They questioned the suspect but didn't get anything out of him, and finally left the train in Utica. Before they departed, I took a picture of the guy with my phone.

I returned to Susan and found her petting her hallucinogenic dragon which disappeared in a puff of equally-hallucinogenic smoke when she saw it was me.

"I think if any malefactor had entered this room before me, we'd be mopping up shit by this time." She laughed.

We spent a few hours reading before paging the steward to get our bunks opened, then turned in early. In separate beds. We were both asleep before the train rolled into Rochester.

Saturday morning, we had breakfast as soon as we were awake enough to cope with it, then hurried back to the compartment to gather our things. The steward assured us that redcaps would be available to help us change trains in Chicago. The change from the Lake Shore Limited to the

Empire Builder went off without a hitch, although we had to sit around for four hours until we could board.

The Empire Builder left Chicago four minutes late, which is hardly worth mentioning. We hadn't eaten anything except food court fast food in Chicago because of the necessity of keeping watch over the crate, so when dinnertime rolled around, we were ready with a capital 'R'. We were already seated and drooling over the menu when the train got to Columbus WI. The crate had not been unwrapped since it left the gallery in New York City, and it was now inside a compartment that was itself wrapped for security.

Before heading for the dining car, I told the steward that I was to be notified immediately should he notice anyone lurking near our room.

After dinner, we spent some time in an observation car watching Minnesota roll by in the gathering dusk before heading back to our room. It was full dark before we got near Minneapolis, and we turned in early again. When we awakened, it would be Sunday, and barely more than a day left to our trip.

At least, that was the plan.

About 3 in the morning Sunday, on the leg between Minneapolis and Fargo, I was sound asleep but I had wrapped myself for safety's sake. I had not wrapped the entire compartment, and Susan couldn't, having never mastered the art of wrapping anything other than herself. Susan, always a light sleeper, heard the door unlock and then, quietly, inch open.

Silently, a dragon — as realistic as Susan could manage (having never seen an actual dragon) — formed behind the crate that held the Cortès paintings as two shadowy figures entered the room. One of them gripped the nearest handle on the crate and began to gently tug it toward the door. That, apparently, was when he first spotted Susan's hallucination. He froze and began to back away. His partner noticed him retreat from the crate and turned away from his sentry duty — watching us for movement — to find out what was happening, and that was when he noticed the dragon. He shrieked loud enough to wake me.

I came snap awake in the twinkling of an eye, did an instantaneous scan of the room, saw the dragon, saw the two intruders, and knew precisely what was going on.

I put my finger to my lips in the universally-understood admonition to make no noise and whispered "For you own safety, don't make any sudden moves." The two nodded their understanding. "Dragons are notoriously suspicious creatures. Slowly, so you don't get her nervous, face the wall and put your hands behind your heads. Try not to look her in the eye."

One of them was visibly shaking and softly whimpering, but they both did as I commanded.

Frisking them, I relieved them of a short-barreled .38 Special revolver and a compact .380-caliber automatic pistol. As with the first

operative, neither carried ID. I handed the guns over to Susan and motioned to her to get out a pen and paper.

"Guys," I explained to them, "this is very, very bad, you breaking into our compartment. I'm going to ask you, just once, to tell me things I need to know, and if I think you're not being completely honest with me... well... dragons, it turns out, are never so full that they'll refuse an early-morning snack, if you catch my meaning." The shaking guy let out a little sob.

"You," I tapped the shoulder of the more-composed one, "name, address, and your current employer."

"Gary Benson, 402 East 71st Street, New York. I work for Steve Tuttle at Gallery Absalom."

"You next," I tapped the shaker.

"Ed Tuttle, 909 170th Street, Hammond, Indiana. I work for my brother Steve on contract."

"Steve Tuttle is trying to steal the stuff he's hired me to transport safely to Seattle?" I asked incredulously. Gary Benson nodded affirmatively. "Why?"

"He's found another buyer," Ed Tuttle explained.

I turned to Susan, winked at her, and asked "Can your dragon handle this neatly?"

"Oh, no," she replied. "There's always some debris — blood, at least — after she finishes. It'll be messy." Ed Tuttle began sobbing softly.

I grabbed them both by their shoulders and turned them to face me. "Should we expect any more visitors before we deliver this to the buyer?" I demanded.

"I don't know," Gary began. "I think we're the last attempt, but I could be wrong."

I thought briefly about how I should handle this. "Okay," I delivered my judgement, "Ed and Gary, you tell your boss that in exchange for not turning you over to the police and not offering you up as breakfast for Susan's dragon, my fee for this delivery — think of it as 'your ransom' — is now \$325,000. When we get back to New York, Steve better have an extra quarter mil ready to hand over to Susan and me on top of my agreed \$75,000. Understood?" They both nodded vigorously. "And if Steve decides to scam out of town without paying, remind him that I'm in the business of finding people who don't want to be found... and Susan has a dragon who is never 'not hungry'."

"Pack your stuff and be off this train in Fargo. If I see either of you again... *chomp!*"

They both scurried away and, as directed, we never saw either of them again.

After that, the remaining day of the trip was as uneventful as anyone could have wished. The train rolled into Seattle a mere 7 minutes late which, given that it's Amtrak, was less than expected. I called the

woman who was named on the delivery label and arranged to deliver the crate, called a ride-sharing service to drive us there, enjoyed a fabulous lunch put out by her staff, and proceeded to go through the motions of 'delivery'.

On the way over, I asked the ride-share driver if he were interested in buying a firearm. He chose the little automatic and made a quick stop at an ATM to get us the \$400 price we agreed on.

At the mansion where the buyer lived, I unwrapped the crate, and one of her gardeners used a pry bar to crack open the wooden framework. Each of the six envelopes signed by Steve Tuttle I removed one by one and opened. The buyer examined each painting for damage and accepted each of them.

In the end, she autographed the delivery acknowledgement document I would use to prove delivery, and had her chauffeur drive us to the airport. The chauffeur, it turned out, was interested in the .38 snub nose and wrote me a check for \$375. We stayed at an airport-based hotel overnight and flew out the next morning, my .45 auto going as checked baggage in its own lockable case.

That afternoon, Susan and I went directly to Gallery Absalom to confront Steve Tuttle. His receptionist had us wait almost 20 minutes while he finished up with another customer before he called us into his office.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he wailed. "*Absalom* is in financial trouble... we're about to go in the red because we can't contain our costs. I needed that bond payoff to get us back on our feet. That's why I tried to steal it. I never meant to hurt anyone... you were never in any danger..."

"Yet all three of the goons you sent after us were armed and dangerous. Where's my fee?"

"I don't have it. I was going to pay you with the proceeds of the performance bond, but no... you had to actually succeed in delivering the damned shipment..."

"What about the \$3 million you got for the paintings?"

"Those things cost us \$2.6 million. The rest went for 'expenses'. I'm busted."

"So, I bought a \$16,000 performance bond of which I *may* get \$5,000 back, I got a train trip and a flight, but I paid Susan's way myself, and all you can say is 'I'm busted'? You owe me \$325,000 and I intend to collect it. You need to start thinking in terms of how you're going to make good on that debt. Give me your driver's license."

Steve got his license out of his wallet, and I had his secretary make a photocopy of it. I already had his cell phone in my own phone's history.

"Here's what's going to happen: from now until I get my fee, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at noon precisely you are going to call me and give me a status report about how you are working toward getting my fee to me, and those status reports had better make me feel all warm and

fuzzy. When I become convinced that you're not seriously working toward that goal, you're going to meet Susan's friend. I take it Ed and Gary briefed you on what they saw?"

"No, what did they see?"

"Oh, you'll want to call Ed and have a nice chat with your brother. There are so many things you need to be brought up to speed on. You probably want to do that today... maybe even this afternoon.

"Remember: every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday." I stood and helped Susan rise, and we left. Steve was working his cell phone as we exited.

"Well, that was a bummer," Susan commiserated as we dragged our luggage down the street.

"Yes," I agreed, "I was counting on that \$75,000 to allow me to pay my rent next month. And other things."

"Do you need a loan? I have some money put aside..."

"No, I think I'll make it. In a worst-case scenario, I can always take a ride on the subway, look vulnerable, and harvest some cash or something that can be turned into cash."

Susan chuckled. "I still have my share from our previous escapades where my entire function was to act as bait. '50-50' was very generous and I wouldn't begrudge you its use in your hour of need."

I shrugged. "I'm not broke yet, but it's going to take some time for me to get over being scammed. Lesson learned: always check the financials for anyone you work for on contract."

Susan invited me to dinner, but I wanted to get home and unpack. I took a rain check for the following evening, caught a train heading north, and was home before sunset.

At noon the following day, Wednesday, my phone rang. I had forgotten about requiring Steve Tuttle to give report at noon, but he hadn't.

"I've been thinking..." he began, "*Absalom* isn't the only gallery that employs couriers for expensive shipments. How about I act as your booking agent for... say, 10% of whatever fee they offer, and when you've collected \$3.25 million in fees, my debt to you is paid off?"

I thought about this very briefly. The prospect of millions in fees for babysitting crates of artwork actually sounded quite attractive given that, between Susan and myself, there was never any chance that the shipments would go astray.

"How long do you think it might take for me to earn that much in fees?" I inquired.

"I don't really know. I guess it could be a few years."

"Let me think about it. We'll talk more when you report on Friday."

"One more question... my brother said your girlfriend had a dragon... a real dragon?"

"As real as dragons get," I assured him. Which was true — in a manner of speaking.

Thinking over Steve's proposal left me feeling uncomfortable. There was no incentive for Steve to bring this matter to a rapid conclusion. When he called to report in on Friday, I had a counter-offer for him.

"Yeah, I like the idea of riding herd on shipments of artwork, but while you're working off your debt, that debt will increase by \$1,000 each month that I don't have at least \$10,000 in revenue. That means if you get me a contract worth \$30,000 and then let me go three months without another job, you're back where you started. You have to come up with \$10,000 a month in revenue to me or your debt grows. All my contracts are 'cash up front' starting now. Go gin up some business."

The Monday following, I got a call from a gallery in Greenwich Village wanting to bring artwork from Boca Raton back to the city. They offered \$7,000 for the trip but insisted on a million dollar performance bond. I agreed on condition that they reimburse me for the bond on delivery and buy me a ticket on the plane south and a private bedroom on the train north. After inking the agreement at their offices, I collected my fee, headed for Newark, and flew out that afternoon.

Tuesday morning, I presented myself at the origin point of the shipment, examined the pieces to be transported, oversaw the packing, wrapped the crate in a force field, and let their driver deliver me and the package to the Amtrak station. By Thursday evening, I was able to deliver the shipment to the buyers in New York City who verified that everything that was supposed to be there was actually there. They wrote me a check for the non-refundable portion of the bond, shook hands, and showed me to the door.

When Steve called me at noon on Friday, he had two more leads.

Every now and then, I would land a contract involving shipment between two locations that were not served by trains. Then I would have to rent a car, usually a van, and drive it one-way. My travel agent loved to see my number pop up on her caller-ID. It usually meant an open-jaw flight, one-way car rental, and overnight lodging for which she would get a small booking fee for the minuscule amount of work that required.

Driving long distances, even given the efficiency of the interstate highways, was always a physically trying experience. Rarely, I could talk Susan into going with me, but she had a job of her own that most often required her physical presence. As a result, my P.I. business got less and less attention, but my bank balance ballooned. There was much more courier business than ever I suspected there might be. Apparently, my rate was low enough that my customers began recommending me to others, widening my circle of contacts.

Every now and then, I would turn down a contract. I always insisted on knowing what I was accompanying. A potential customer who insisted on so much secrecy that they wouldn't tell me what was in the package naturally set off alarm bells in my head. There was, of course, no

danger that the police might arrest me for transporting contraband because there was no chance they would be able to break through the wrapper I placed around a shipment and prove that the package contained contraband. Even so, I didn't want to get into that business. *Lay down with dogs; get up with fleas.*

The one time I actually refused to complete a contract because the shipper wouldn't let me examine the contents, I was lucky enough to (a) be in a vacation destination that (b) was the origin-point of a future contract for which (c) the shipper was happy to be given an earlier shipping date. I lazed around the hotel for four days, spending much of my time either at the pool or the beach, enjoying a well-earned vacation until the time arrived for that upcoming shipment.

I printed off one of my standard pro-forma contracts at the hotel's 'business center', filled in the details in the appropriate spots, had the shipper sign on the dotted line, collected my fee up front as was my practice, and delivered the package to the designated buyer, which left me reasonably close to my home base. Perfect.

After that, every subsequent contract required the shipper to declare the contents and allow inspection before crating. It also required the shipper to declare that the shipment did not violate any state or federal laws. I really wasn't keen on going to prison.

The first year working with Steve as my procurer, I grossed \$386,000 which, given my typical revenue stream, was both impressive and personally satisfying. Because Steve had gone in on this 'partnership' with enthusiasm, I rounded up his commission to \$60,000, an act that made Steve even more dedicated to finding business for me.

Galleries and the suchlike, it turns out, have connections that range beyond the borders of 'fine art'. I was very surprised to receive a call from a very well-known and highly-respected Wall Street financial concern whose name you would recognize instantly. They had been directed to me by at least one Connecticut gallery for whom I had delivered artwork.

While speaking with their contact person, Bob Frazier, I got the distinct impression that I was not getting the complete story on what it was they intended shipping via *Durkin Investigations and Courier Service*, and my probing questions were met with what seemed to be evasive answers.

"You do understand that I will have to observe the actual packaging of the material to be transshipped, right?" I finally asked their representative.

"The actual packaging?"

"Yes. I'm going to be there when whatever you're shipping is laid out, wrapped, boxed or crated, and labeled for delivery."

"Oh, you won't be able to be there for the packaging. The contents are strictly confidential," he finally admitted.

"Then I'm sorry to have wasted your time. If I can't see exactly what I'm carrying to the receiver, I'm not interested in doing the carrying."

You'll have to find someone else to act as your courier. Good evening." I hung up.

He called back the following morning. "The contents are sensitive financial instruments. I hope you can understand why they can't be exposed to persons not a party to the transaction."

"I understand fully. My policy is that I don't want that kind of business. There are other courier services that can accommodate your needs. I cannot. Is there anything else we need to discuss?"

"I don't believe any other couriers can give us the level of security you can."

"I'm certain that's not true," I told him.

"We know of no other couriers that employ a dragon on their security staff," he blurted.

"A dragon..." I began, and then paused to collect my thoughts. "Who told you we use a dragon?"

"I can't..."

"Wait," I stopped him. "I need to know who is telling unfounded stories about my business. I promise not to sue them for slander — if you tell me right now who is doing that. If I have to hunt them down, I promise that they will be involved in a lawsuit that will end their business. And if you propagate that nonsense, you will be party to that suit. I probably don't have to remind you what your reputation will look like after that trial. So, tell me now the identity of your source."

"I..."

"Ten seconds. Nine. Eight..."

"Keith Murchison. He's..."

"I know Keith. I'll put a stop to this today. We're done here, right?"

"I... I guess..."

I hung up without saying good-bye and immediately dialed Keith Murchison in Greenwich, Connecticut.

"You're telling people I have a dragon," I told him accusingly. "Where did you hear that?"

"Marty? I heard it from Steve Tuttle at Gallery Absalom in Manhattan..."

"Stop telling people that. It's not true." Well, it wasn't true. Susan had a hallucinatory power that she could materialize as a dragon. I couldn't do that.

"But Steve told me his brother saw the dragon..."

"Steve's brother is a drug user. There's no end to the things his brother thinks he might have seen. You're sending clients my way on false pretenses. I appreciate the referrals, but not if they're coming to me based on a lie. Stop it. Stop it immediately."

"Okay, Marty, I didn't think this all the way through."

"Is there anybody else you've told this whopper to?"

"No, only Bob Frazier at..."

"Good. Let's keep it that way." I hung up and called Steve next.

"You told Keith Murchison I have a dragon. Who else did you tell?"

"Nobody."

"Okay. Steve, for the record, I do not have a dragon, your brother's rantings to the contrary notwithstanding. Do not tell people I have a dragon. For one thing, it's not true, and for another, there's no telling what effect that might have on my reputation. Clear?"

"Clear," he agreed, sounding very chastised.

"Excellent." I hung up.

That afternoon, Bob Frazier called back. "Okay," he began, "I agree you do not have a dragon. Even so, your record is completely unblemished for on-time and secure delivery. We still want you as our courier for this shipment."

"I already explained to you, Bob, that I don't handle shipments where I do not know the contents of the package..."

"I explained that to the Treasurer. She'll allow you to watch the package being assembled if you agree not to touch anything."

"Agreed. I don't want my fingerprints on anything connected with anybody's cargo, especially yours."

"*Whew.* That's good to hear. I was getting hammered over this. Is your passport current?"

That took me by surprise. The family had gone on a Caribbean cruise some years back and we all had to get passports so we could do shore excursions, but I had no idea where it might be.

"I'll have to check," I told him.

"Do that quickly. If you need to get it renewed, do it the fastest way possible and submit the receipt to me for reimbursement. Let me know how that goes. Oh... and your fee..."

"My fee is 2% of the value of the shipment up to ten million, and 1% of the excess."

"We were thinking of a flat-rate since you will be traveling on our own secure transport and thus unlikely to be in danger of being held up or hijacked."

"What number did you have in mind?"

"\$125,000."

I did some quick math in my head. "That's about what I'd charge for a \$6 million shipment. I'm guessing your cargo is more valuable than that?"

"Yes."

"What, specifically, is this cargo?" I asked.

"That's on a need-to-know basis, and you don't have a need to know," Bob explained.

"But I'll watch it being packed," I reminded him.

"True."

I didn't have to think long. \$125,000 would be the largest single invoice I had thus far issued, and this operation seemed to present much

less danger than I would normally expect for the kind of stuff I typically babysat.

"Deal," I told him.

When we finished talking, I called Mom and Dad. "Do you have any idea where my passport might be?" I asked my Mom.

"Give me a minute... Yes, here it is. I put them all away in a safe place after the cruise."

"Great. When does it expire?"

"You've got three years left on it. Do you want me to mail it to you?"

"No," I told her, "hang on to it. I need an excuse to swing by and pick it up. Love you."

I popped by later that day to pick up my passport, but more importantly to have some face time with my parents. Of course they insisted I stay for dinner so that they could pump me for information about how my love life was going along.

"How's Susan?" Mom asked, the reply to which would tell her if Susan and I were still 'a thing', but which also would tell her how close we were to marriage.

"Susan's well. She still has that high-profile job and keeps resisting taking our relationship to the next level, but she did accompany me on a trip I had to take for my job." Mom smiled. "On a brighter note, I just crossed the boundary with my courier business that means I'm now the 'alpha-earner' between us."

Dad's ears perked up at this. "Really! What sort of revenue does that compute to?"

"My adjusted gross is going to be above \$300,000 for the last tax year..."

Dad nearly choked on his mashed potatoes. "Holy cow! What does Susan make?"

I smiled. "I don't know exactly, but it's well over \$200,000. She's highly valued by her employer."

"I'll say," Dad responded. "What is it that she does, exactly?"

"Exactly? I can't say, exactly. Her job title is 'Senior Librarian for Document Security'. Whenever I ask her what — exactly — that means, she smiles at me and changes the subject. The only thing she'll say in a positive vein is that it's not illegal."

"Well, that's a relief." Dad smiled. So did I.

Susan slipped into the conference room and found herself a seat. Her nominal boss, the VP for Technology, had scheduled this meeting with her and a handful of other VPs. She was 'low man on the totem pole' here, but she didn't think they were about to fire her.

"Did you review the minutes from the last board meeting?" her VP asked.

"I did. Is that what this meeting is about?"

"Yes. The board has determined that putting all our eggs in one basket poses too much of a risk of loss. They want an alternate site where is kept a copy of the most sensitive records, basically all the records you're responsible for."

"Two can keep a secret if one of them is dead," Susan reminded them.

"Understood," the VP agreed. "We asked you in to see if you had any insights related to how to mitigate that problem while at the same time giving us the comfort of having an off-site backup."

"Do you want my recommendations in writing?"

The VPs exchanged glances between each other. "Not necessarily," one of them offered. "The fewer pieces of paper..."

"Okay," Susan began, "I should introduce you to my boyfriend." Several eyebrows arched noticeably. "He's in the 'courier' business that you'll want to employ for the actual movement of copies of those documents that you all have decided will not be digitized. He's also in the 'security' business that you will want to employ for making sure no unauthorized persons gain access to those documents, and I solemnly assure you that he is the best you've ever even heard about, much less 'seen'."

"Expensive?" one of them asked.

"Do you care?" Susan retorted. "Yes, his services are somewhat pricey, but he's worth it."

"And you know this... how?"

"I once accompanied him on one of his deliveries, \$3 million dollars worth of original *belle epoque* artwork to Seattle from New York City. I watched him fend off two separate attacks by three armed-and-dangerous bandits with not a shot fired."

"He works alone?"

"Usually. Not on your job, obviously. I'm going with him."

"We should probably meet him," her boss offered.

"I'll arrange something," Susan agreed.

"Hey," Susan began, "my employer is in need of some secure courier work. Know anybody in that business?"

I laughed. "I have a contact or two. What's the cargo?"

"Paper documents. Stuff I'm responsible for."

A thought flashed through my head. "Are you being transferred?"

Now it was Susan's time to laugh. "No. They just want to establish a second site where, in case our building burns to the ground, it won't be a total loss. I recommended you highly, but they want to meet you face-to-face anyway."

"Okay. I can meet them..." I flipped through my appointment book. "...Thursday a week or anytime after that sporadically depending on existing contracts."

"They were kind of hoping to meet you early next week. So was I, actually."

"I'm leaving for Frankfurt Sunday night and won't be back until sometime Wednesday. Thursday's the earliest I can commit to. Sorry."

"What's happening in Frankfurt?"

"Just a delivery."

"Of what?" she asked.

"According to my contact, 'sensitive financial instruments' but that's all I know."

"Alright, pencil me in for 9am Thursday at 350 Park Avenue. I'll meet you there and escort you upstairs to meet the boys."

On Saturday afternoon, I met with Bob Frazier and his crew at their offices in midtown Manhattan, and I observed white-gloved packers place bundles of elaborately-printed sheets into heavy-duty envelopes that were in turn loaded into a large leather briefcase. As each envelope was sealed, I used a fine-point permanent marker to endorse the seal line with my signature and a sequential number for each envelope. When the loading was complete, I wrapped — unbeknownst to all the onlookers — the entire briefcase to prevent it being opened. I warned them against trying to open the briefcase without me being present, and we parted until I would be reunited with the briefcase Sunday evening at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey.

At 7:30 Sunday evening, I parked my car at Teterboro's General Aviation lot and made my way through the FBO to the corporate jet with a recognizable logo, showed them my passport, took possession of the briefcase, and boarded the plane with Bob Frazier for company. Within thirty-five minutes, we were airborne and on our way to Frankfurt, Germany. I took advantage of a light meal and a glass of wine before settling down for what promised to be a terribly boring flight.

Eight hours later, after a restful night, I was presented with a typical airline breakfast including juice and coffee as the plane began its approach into Frankfurt-am-Main. By 10:00 Monday morning, we had both cleared customs and were on our way to the offices of Deutsche Bank with our two escorts where my instructions would have me hand over the hopefully-intact briefcase.

The limo in which we all rode rolled toward downtown while its occupants kept up a stream of conversation about trivial topics. The trip so far had been without incident and no one expected any to happen within the next quarter hour, by which time we would be deep within the bank's vaults.

A rocket streaked down the street, on which we were one of only three cars, headed straight for the Mercedes' radiator. All conversation

halted for the half-second ahead of impact. Everyone saw their life flash before their eyes, fully expecting this to be the end of everything.

Two centimeters from the chrome grill work, a wall of flame shot up. Instead of being rocked on its springs, the limo rolled straight through the conflagration as if nothing had happened. Three gunmen ran toward the limo firing submachine guns at what they expected to be a burning wreck. Seeing it still rolling on its own wheels caught them by surprise and they hesitated. The shell in which I had wrapped the limo the moment we were all safely inside at the airport had protected against the rocket attack and was now protecting against the bullets hitting the shell and gently dropping to the ground.

"*Schnell, Schnell!*" I commanded the driver, and, obedient German that he was, he stomped on the gas pedal and barreled through the line of attackers, striking and injuring two of them.

The limo streaked away leaving the chaos of the attack behind. Once clear, I turned to Bob Frazier. "You will, of course, want to recommend my fee be increased, given the lack of casualties from this attack." Bob merely looked back at me with a stunned expression on his face.

Nine minutes later, the limo eased to a stop in front of Deutsche Bank, and its four occupants, wrapped for the sake of safety, hurried inside. I handed the briefcase, now unprotected, to Bob, and he snapped the latches open. From the case, he extracted five reinforced envelopes, allowed me to inspect the outside of each, and ripped them open one by one.

The representative from Deutsche Bank riffled through the stacks of paper that I now recognized, seeing them up-close, as dollar-denominated bearer bonds. He called out to his assistant when each individual stack had been counted, and the assistant wrote a number on a white board behind us. When the fifth number went up, the assistant totaled the figures and wrote the sum: \$1.62 billion. The Deutsche Bank rep inked his signature on the receipt, shook Bob's hand, shook my hand, and moved the five stacks of bonds beyond a jail-like gate into what must have been a more secure area of the vault, although all of it looked pretty damned secure to me.

"\$1.62 billion," I remarked to Bob as we exited the vault, "yes, you got an extraordinary bargain, and that's the last time that will happen."

At 8:50 Thursday morning, I entered the lobby at 350 Park Avenue to find Susan waiting for me.

"You're nothing if not punctual," she congratulated me, then led me to the security desk where I was fitted with a 'visitor' badge.

"Were you near that incident I heard about in Frankfurt Monday morning?" she asked as we strolled to the elevators.

I nodded. "\$1.62 billion in bearer bonds — safely delivered."

"Billion?" she asked incredulously, "with a 'B'?"

I nodded again.

"What was your fee?" she asked through a startled look.

"\$125K," I told her through a grimace.

"Were they holding your family hostage? What prompted you to work so cheap?"

I shrugged. "They asked for a flat rate and I quoted a fee not knowing the actual value of what I was going to be transporting. I won't do that again."

Susan shook her head. "Even so, it looks like you did a professional job. I assume they were pleased."

The elevator door opened and Susan led me past the receptionist to a small conference room. Inside the room were six distinguished-looking gentlemen. Susan introduced me.

"Susan says you're her boyfriend," one began. "That alone is high praise..." Susan blushed. "...but we'd like to hear something like a résumé, perhaps a few words to explain why we should choose you over someone else."

"Certainly. My last assignment was to deliver \$1.62 billion of bearer bonds to Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt. That was Monday. In the past, I have mostly concentrated on ferrying expensive artwork hither and yon for various museums and galleries, although a fair bit has involved banks sending, as in your case, original documents of substantial value. Susan actually accompanied me on one of those and provided invaluable assistance. I've been trying to hire her away from you since, but having little success.

"My fee is typically 2% of the value of the cargo up to \$10 million, and 1% of the excess."

"That presents something of a problem..."

"Too high?" I asked.

"No," one of the VPs answered, "we have no idea how to value the cargo. Two percent of 'unknown' also has to be 'unknown'. The documents you will be transporting are valuable, but how valuable is a mystery."

"I take it they're not insured or, even perhaps, 'insurable'." Several of them nodded. "What would be the financial impact on your business if they were destroyed? What would be the financial impact on your business were they to fall into the hands of your competitors? I certainly can't make that determination since I have no idea what these documents are or what they address. I would accept Susan's estimate, but I think none of us wants to put her in the position of quoting a too-low value to save her employer from a too-high fee, or of quoting a too-high value so her boyfriend will get a lush payoff."

"Perhaps a flat-fee..." one of them suggested. Susan stifled a snicker. "What's funny about that?"

"Coming up in the elevator, Marty revealed to me that the Deutsche Bank contract was a flat-fee that, had he known the value of the cargo, would have been..." she glanced over to me "...orders of magnitude greater.

As a result, he's now somewhat gun-shy about such things. One percent of a billion-six is \$16 million, and he did it for one percent of that."

"On the other hand," I picked up Susan's line, "the physical size of the cargo plays into how difficult the job might be. How big, in, say, cubic feet is your shipment?"

Susan answered for them. "It probably won't be more than three file boxes," she speculated. Max, fifty pounds per box, 150 pounds in total."

"From here to where?" I prodded.

"Destination: Phoenix. We can probably lend you the company jet, if that makes things easier."

"That will make things much easier. I'll only have to guard the shipment from here to the airport and from the airport to the drop-off location. Since you're all friends of Susan's, I'll do it for \$150,000."

Susan caught their eyes and nodded. "*This is a good deal*," the gesture said.

"Okay," their apparent leader spoke, clapping his hands, "let's get the details down on paper."

It took Susan and her assistant librarian over a week to select the documents to be transferred, then methodically photo-copy them page by page, bind them into rough replicas of the originals, and catalog the pieces to be shipped.

When they were done, Susan called me to let me know she was ready. I put together a small valise adequate for an overnight trip, and Susan did the same. We met at her offices and she observed as I wrapped the three boxes and loaded them onto a hand truck that would move them downstairs. A small utility van waited for us at the curb outside 350 Park. The boxes were loaded into the back along with our luggage, and the driver headed for Teterboro Airport where most local corporate jets were housed. The pilot wanted to stow them in the cargo area, but both Susan and I objected that the boxes could not be out of our sight. In the end, we stowed them in the bulkhead area behind the cockpit.

We made a stop in Kansas City to drop off a passenger and refuel, then did the second leg into Phoenix. The ride from the airport to the final destination was as uneventful as could be imagined. I was disappointed since I really expected some kind of attempt, but nothing...

"They'll want a rebate on the fee since I didn't have to do anything," I suggested to Susan as we hailed a cab to our hotel.

"Not a chance. This just means that all the local malefactors have heard that Durkin & Burke are on the case and have decided to play it safe rather than wind up as some dragon's mid-morning snack." I laughed at that and Susan soon joined me. As it turned out, she wasn't far wrong. Her company's competitors did try to find someone to hijack our cargo, but couldn't. One of them turned down the contract because of rumors that I used black magic and had the assistance of other-worldly creatures. I think

I'm never going to quash that rumor, but I'm also beginning to think it might be a good thing.

We both got a good night's sleep — separately — and were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed the next morning.

"I just thought of something," Susan began while we were being flown back home. "What if you wrap something and then you die? Does it unwrap at the moment of your death or does it stay wrapped through all eternity?"

I shrugged. I had no idea and no way of finding out.

Or did I?

I handed her a magazine that I had just wrapped. "Try to unwrap it." She fiddled and fumbled with it for a few moments before the pages suddenly came free and she could open it. "Now, if we can just get you to the point that you can wrap other things..."

She reached over and curled her left hand around the back of my head. "Wrap that magazine again. I want to see if I can detect anything happening." She closed her eyes.

I placed the magazine on my lap again and put a fresh coating on it. Her eyes opened wide.

"I felt it!" she gasped. "I felt the coating going on. It was almost like watching it happen!" She took the magazine from me, and it was clear from the way all the pages held together that it was still coated. Suddenly, she riffled the pages with her thumb and they all fluttered apart, the coating now gone.

She held the magazine closed and her face said 'straining to concentrate', but nothing happened.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

"I'm trying to replicate the feeling I had when you wrapped it," she explained. "I can't seem to get it quite right."

"Well," I comforted her, "you know how to get to Carnegie Hall, right?"

She laughed, knowing the traditional answer: *practice, practice, practice.*

We were seat-belted for almost the entire flight due to unsettled weather, and we were happy when the plane turned final for Teterboro's runway 1. The company's limo awaited us at the FBO, took us across the George Washington Bridge, then dropped me at Grand Central Station, and finally delivered Susan to 350 Park Avenue where she had a few final tasks to take care of before calling it a day. I boarded a train for White Plains where I had parked my car, and spent the rest of the day at my office prospecting for high-risk-high-payoff security gigs.

Off We Go...

The two most recent contracts had opened my eyes to the possibilities of general aviation as it applied to secure courier services. I started calling flight schools in the area, finally settling on a provider at Danbury Municipal since they could do high-intensity, Berlitz-style training: not just an hour or two every week, but four or five hours every day.

My largely-open schedule and lush bank balance meant that I could devote significant time and money to flight training, and in just three weeks I qualified for my license, then moved on to get my instrument rating, multi-engine, and 'jet'. Because I occasionally had to work on this task or that for my business, it wound up taking me nearly four months in total, but by the end I was able to fly almost anything, however...

Carrying cargo, even if it were only a piece of artwork or a box of books, and charging for the service, made me 'a commercial pilot', and that was — by the letter of the law — illegal with the license I had. On the rare occasions where I estimated the risk of running afoul of the FAA as being too high, there were charter operators at both Danbury and White Plains, and they would often give me a 'professional discount' since I almost always could serve as a back-up pilot on those occasions when I had them fly me to wherever I needed to go.

After that, Susan and I never used the train again for shipments. The speed with which I could deliver a cargo now made my otherwise-elevated fee seem to be more of a bargain. I stopped doing investigative work almost completely, and concentrated exclusively on courier work.

I was surprised to get a call from the regional office of Garda Security Services. Their regional manager informed me that they had lost two one-off contracts to me strictly based on word-of-mouth and he was not a happy camper, but he did invite me to have lunch with him that Friday, and I accepted. Never blow off a business opportunity. We settled on a well-known midtown eatery and I planned to combine it with a date with Susan later that evening.

Greg Paulsen wondered whether it was possible I would like to work for Garda under contract. I politely declined, explaining that I already had about enough work on my own to keep me as busy as I wanted to be. I didn't mention that my usually-high fees kept me in a lifestyle that I had never dreamed I might one day be living, but I'm sure Paulsen was well aware of my ability to bring in 6-figure payoffs. Nevertheless, I left open the possibility that in slack times I would welcome the occasional special assignment that Garda thought might exceed the abilities of their regular crew. We traded business cards.

Susan and I took in a Broadway play after she got clear of her work, and we finished up with cocktails at a lounge in her neighborhood. She invited me to 'bunk over' rather than catching a very late train north, and I

accepted. This was something that happened occasionally, and I kept a couple of changes of clothes in one of her spare closets for late dates like this. Susan would toss my used underwear in with her next laundry and send the outerwear to be dry cleaned so everything would be prepared for the next time.

Although I shared her king-sized bed for our sleep-overs, it was understood that that was not 'an invitation'. I was okay with that, figuring that she would tell me when she was ready to step up our relationship.

As we got ready for bedtime, I couldn't help but notice that Susan was sporting a very filmy *négligée* over equally-flimsy pajamas, something I had not observed before.

I smiled. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

Susan smiled back. "It's taken me a long time to decide whether you're 'husband material' or not," she offered.

"And am I?"

"Let's just get into bed, *hmm...*?" She draped her gown over the back of a chair and crawled under the coverlet.

I shed all the rest of my underwear and, naked now, slipped in beside her. "Well?"

"You've passed all the other tests. There's only the physical left."

There was no longer any mistaking her meaning. We rolled toward each other for a kiss and an embrace. I felt her stroke my cock which was already quite stiff, and I slipped my hand up under her pajama top and down inside the bottoms. I felt her hips lift off the bed, so I tugged the bottoms over her butt and down her legs until they slipped off her feet. When I moved my hand to her pubis, her thighs were already spread apart as if in invitation.

"Play with me," she commanded, and I obeyed, beginning a back-and-forth motion along her pussy that soon had her moistening until the outer lips parted and my fingers slipped between them. I could feel her thighs twitching, caught between an urge to clamp and an urge to open, and it appeared the latter was winning.

Her kissing became more urgent and more violent, and she was now manhandling my cock, probably unaware of its effect on me. I knew that if I let her continue that way, she could easily ruin me for her intended purpose. I rolled onto my back and pulled her atop me. It was as if we were communicating telepathically; as she rolled onto me, her hand still grasping my cock guided it expertly into her vagina and she settled herself onto it, impaling herself.

She began grunting and making animalistic non-word noises, still not having ceased her kissing. Cautiously, I began to withdraw my cock from her vagina, but only far enough that I could slide it back in, then repeated the motion until it became continuous. I could now feel her hips twerking on my cock and I could feel her vocalizations through the kiss.

Suddenly, she broke the kiss, moved her head into the notch between my neck and shoulder, and gasped... and gasped... and gasped. Slowly, she calmed and her breath resumed its normal cadence.

"That was a beautiful fuck," she congratulated me.

"So, did I pass my physical?"

She giggled and I could feel her nodding her head. "You did. Do you want to help me make a baby?"

"Don't you want to get married?" I asked.

"Yeah, someday. Right now, I feel like getting pregnant, and I feel like getting pregnant by you. Fuck me again."

I was still hard and still horny, and Susan was obviously still horny. In a few moments we were humping each other again, Susan bouncing on my cock, and me... I was just enjoying the ride. It wasn't long before her ministrations had me to the point of no return, and I filled her.

She kissed me again, then rolled away to her side of the bed. "What time do you want to be up in the morning?" she asked.

"It's Saturday," I observed. "We can sleep in, right?"

"Sleep in' it is, then," she agreed, rolled over, and tapped the bedside lamp off.

I don't know what time it was, but I slowly came awake due to Susan licking my cock and getting it hard as a rock.

"Oh, good," she said, "you're awake. You're a really deep sleeper, you know that? I've been working on you for a good quarter-hour."

With that, she slithered up along my body until she was in a good position from which to slip my cock back into her pussy.

"Good morning," she greeted me cheerily as she began pumping my meat with her cunt. She was now completely naked, having shed her pajama top sometime during the night, and I took advantage of that by playing with her tits. Susan's not what you would call 'boy-chested', but she's not far from it. If she wears a B-cup, I'd be surprised. Because the actual breasts aren't that big, her nipples are — comparatively speaking — pretty large, and when they get aroused, they get as hard as hazelnuts. The best way to get her nipples aroused — maybe this is true for all women — is to lick them and suck them and tease them, all things Susan appears to enjoy.

"How's my oil level?" Susan asked me.

"Pardon?" I replied, not knowing what she was talking about.

"You've got your dipstick in pretty far," she explained. "Do I have enough lubrication?"

"Oh, your lubrication is just fine."

"Good," she said, and disconnected. She spun around on her hands and legs until she had her pussy presented to me for a rear entrance. "Fill 'er up, please, mister. With the good stuff."

I knelt between her calves and slid my cock back inside her, then began gently pumping in and out. I could feel the walls of her vagina clamp

every now and then, and it was the most delightful feeling... In mere moments, I was teetering on the edge of orgasm, and Susan was rocking back and forth helping me lose control. Before I knew what was happening, every muscle in my groin area spasmed in unison. I grabbed her hips to help me stay connected to her, and I gushed semen deep into her cunt.

When it was obvious that I was finished, Susan hung her head and glanced back at me, upside down, with an impish smile. "Did I get it all?"

"Well, there's nothing left, so I guess you got all that there was to get."

She spun around again to face me, grabbed my head and pulled me into another ferocious kiss. "I love you," she announced. "Let's go get breakfast. I'm buying."

Susan has this really sweet little loft apartment on East 57th street, so it's easily walkable to and from work. It's a safe neighborhood — not that she cares — and has plenty of shopping around it.

We took a table at a *chi-chi* little bistro on the avenue and perused the menu, settled on *crepes* for the both of us, and engaged in quiet chit-chat over coffee.

"So," I began, "you're anxious to get pregnant but not to get married. Explain that to me. Most girls have that exactly the other way 'round."

"I'm not like most girls," she answered. "I thought that was what you liked about me."

"*That's* true," I agreed. "And here I was trying to make myself into an eligible bachelor because I thought that was what you were looking for in a partner."

"Oh, I was. I am. Now that you're successful with your business, you've proven yourself something more than a trickster. Congratulations, by the way, for becoming the alpha earner among us. I've been contemplating motherhood for some time now, and mulling over several issues." My ears perked up.

"One, there's a fertility problem in my family, so it's not a foregone conclusion that I can get pregnant, and I wouldn't want to shackle you to someone who can't provide you with a family — if you want one. If you manage to put me with child, we'll have lots of time to make things legitimate. If you can't, for whatever reason, we will still have what we already have.

"Two, it's possible that any offspring will inherit some or all of our talents. If our child is a boy, the boy will need a father, but if our child is a girl, then I'm going to want that little witch all to myself. You will not be raising her, and we may decide that marriage is an unnecessary complication..."

"You may decide," I corrected her. "I have already determined that marriage is neither a complication nor unnecessary, and I'm distressed to

hear those words from one who, within the hour, proclaimed that she loves me."

Breakfast arrived in the nick of time to quell any argument that might have been about to erupt.

After breakfast, we grabbed a ride-share over to Central Park and spent a few hours strolling the paths and talking about everything except marriage and family. We came out of the park on Central Park West near 86th street, got a C train down to 42nd street and the shuttle over to Grand Central where we parted, me to head north on Amtrak, and Susan to find a Lyft or Über to take her home.

Home Ownership

At the terminal, I picked up a magazine devoted to rural properties and spent the time on the train examining some of the offerings. I had always wanted a little rural hideaway and there seemed to be a few I could afford, even a few lakefront properties that would be ideal to fly into with an amphibian. Back at the office, I sent off a handful of emails to realtors to see what might be worth flying or driving up to to see with my own eyes.

Just as I was starting to think about what I was going to have for dinner, my planning was interrupted by the chirp of an incoming call. Caller-ID was no help; it just displayed the number with no other identification.

"Hello?" I answered the phone.

"Hello, Mr. Durkin?"

I admitted I was.

"This is Anastasia Hupp with ReMax in Harrisburg. I received your email about waterfront property and hoped I could get a little better handle on what, exactly, you're looking for. Do you have time?"

"Yes. Thanks for calling back so quickly."

"The early bird gets the worm, Mr. Durkin. I try to be the earliest bird around. Were you interested in lakefront?"

"Maybe. I want something I can fly into, so if it's a lake, it has to be a pretty good sized lake. Half-mile long is a bare minimum. Seaplanes need a long runway, especially if the wind is coming from the wrong direction."

"So riverfront might be better even than lakefront?"

"Probably, but it can't be a twisty, slow-running river."

"Well, that's good to know. That gives me something to work with. Let me look around and get back to you when I have some leads in your price range."

"Looking forward to speaking with you again," and we disconnected.

It didn't take her long. She called back about two hours later.

"I only have one property to offer at the moment, but it's such a close fit that I wanted you to hear about it," she started. "I'll keep looking,

of course, but I felt sure you would find this one intriguing if not exactly 'attractive'."

"You have my attention."

"It's on an island in the Susquehanna River about 35 miles from Harrisburg."

"Sounds expensive," I said. "It's just a property, not the whole island, is it?"

"Correct, and while most of the current owners have docks for mooring their boats, this one does not. I suspect that, should you acquire this property, the first thing you'll do is have a dock built for it. What do you think?"

"You haven't told me the price, yet."

"\$250,000."

"Is there a house or is it just a lot?"

"There's a house, but it needs some work to make it livable."

"Find me a marina I can fly into where I can meet you, and let's make an appointment to go see the property. I'll pick you up there and fly to the island. That way we won't need a boat."

"Will do."

I got an email from Anastasia on Sunday pointing me at a marina on the Susquehanna that would let me tie up, and I reserved an amphibian out of White Plains for Tuesday.

The weather Tuesday morning was awful, so I changed everything to Thursday and flew the 220 miles to the marina that morning. The straight-line distance is shorter, but I prefer to zig-zag to avoid the hassle of transiting major airports. Mrs. Hupp joined me at the marina and we flew three whole miles — I barely got the plane out of the water before I was setting up for landing.

The owner had arranged with his next-door neighbor, Stuart, to let me moor at the neighbor's dock, and I cajoled the neighbor into accompanying us on our tour. That way I could ask questions about how much things cost and get believable answers from someone who ought to know.

She was right. The house needed some serious work to make it livable even as a summer cottage, and it would make sense to have my own dock available for the workers and tradesmen that would have to take care of that work. As we prowled the property, I kept a running tally of what it would cost to get this property into the shape I would want before inviting guests over.

"Roof: ten grand. Dock: another ten. Insulation: five, maybe seven. The electric service is from hunger. I may have to 'Bob Vila' the place from the wall sockets out to the service box. God alone knows what that might cost. The place needs a paint job. I would consider \$250Gs if it didn't need so much work, but the seller will have to come down — hard — if he wants me to be interested."

I thanked the neighbor for his help, handed him my business card in case he needed to contact me, he gave me one of his, and Anastasia and I flew back to the marina where I dropped her off before heading back to Westchester County.

Damn it! Except for the price, the site was as close to ideal as anyone could want for solitude when the cares of the world threaten to intrude.

By the time I got back to Westchester County Airport and reliable cell service, there was a text message waiting for me: "*Owner has reduced his price: \$215,000.*". I texted back: "*\$200K, not a penny more. Penalty for trying to dump that piece of crap on a stranger. You don't have to tell him that.*".

I didn't hear back for several days.

"Are you still interested at 200K?" Anastasia asked when I picked up her call.

I'm about to buy a house, I thought silently and paused to give myself a few moments to mull the entirety of it.

"Hello?" she prompted.

"I'm thinking," I told her. She went silent so I could think. "Yes," I said finally, "contingent on an engineering inspection that doesn't turn up anything horrible."

"Okay, I'll make the offer on your behalf." We disconnected.

I next called Stu, the next door neighbor.

"I think I'm about to become your new neighbor," I informed him after we had exchanged pleasantries. "Who would you recommend to do roof repairs, dock building, electrical work, insulation, and general maintenance?" He started rattling off names and phone numbers and I started frantically copying his words onto a note pad.

One by one, I called the tradesmen Stu had named, gave them the location of the property, and asked for their estimate for the various repairs I knew were in that house's future. "No rush," I assured them, "although it would be nice if the place were livable come Spring..." The Susquehanna freezes during severe winters, but usually not thick enough to land an airplane on it according to the locals. That meant any house on that island was a summer home, nothing more. That, in turn, meant that when winter closes in, work stops and doesn't resume until the ice breaks up. On the other hand, the amphibians I flew were lightweights: well under 2,000 pounds at take-off. I might be able to land on the frozen river, but if the weather warmed after that, I might not be able to get back in the air until Summer.

Convinced now that I could actually afford to turn the house into something I could use, I closed on the property.

The roofing contractor was the first to provide an estimate and his number was pretty close to what I expected. Since it was a critical part of the upgrade and he promised that it would be complete before the first snow, I told him to start. Within the week, the electrical contracting company I had contacted gave me a number and a start-date that I could live with, and I gave them the green light. Without proper insulation, however, the place would still be unlivable before Spring made it economically feasible to heat the house with electricity.

"You want a *what*?" the dock-builder demanded.

"A concrete ramp," I explained. "Thirty feet of clearance, minimum, side-to-side, but the actual pad only has to be about eight feet wide with a full-size apron at the top. I need to drive an airplane up the ramp and turn it at the top."

"Let me think about that. Do you want a regular dock as well?"

"Future enhancement," I speculated.

He called back three days later after, apparently, boating out to the island, checking the water depth, and consulting with associates who did concrete work. I gave him my fax number and he promised to send sketches of what he was proposing with estimates of the cost for each option. I had them in hand within 30 minutes, but the prices simply floored me. I don't know why I thought it wouldn't be expensive. Because the pitch of the ramp had to be fairly shallow, not more than 20°, the ramp itself had to extend quite far out from the shore in order to put the end underwater and that just zoomed the cost into low-Earth orbit.

I started looking at alternatives, finally zeroing in on a company that did boat elevators. They proposed a carbon fiber pad that could be lowered into the water when needed and raised when not needed, much the way aircraft carriers move planes to and from interior decks, and it cost one-third what it would cost for a permanent concrete ramp. They got the contract but couldn't start until the electrical work made it possible for them to run the heavy-duty motors that would raise and lower the platform. I put them in touch with my electrical contractor to make sure everything would hook together properly.

In a stroke of truly unexpected luck, the insulation contractor called to inform me of a cancellation that left him with a great deal of material for which his customer had already paid a non-refundable deposit. He offered me a small discount if I authorized him to start installing immediately. His crew began insulating the house the following week, carefully coordinating with the electricians.

I called Stu and asked him to be my local eyes. Delighted that someone was going to make the ramshackle house next to his into something that would undoubtedly raise his own property's value, he agreed and began sending me almost-daily progress reports. The detailed images he sent along allowed me to stop one gross error in its tracks before it became too expensive to correct. The contractor wasn't thrilled at having to

do re-work, but made the changes I demanded when I showed him the pictures that clearly said 'one of your workers screwed up'.

When the dock elevator crew informed me that their part — the last major task — was complete, I called Susan.

"Feel like a trip to Pennsylvania?" I asked.

"What's the occasion?"

"The house is done," I informed her.

"Already?"

"They were in a feeding frenzy and I managed to get all of them talking to each other and coordinating nicely. It's really amazing what the prospect of an early payday will do for craftsmen... and what it does for us. I'm planning to have Christmas on the island, but I want to personally make sure everything is working as intended before I solidify any plans."

"That's amazing. You're amazing. When?"

"Saturday. Pack for a casual weekend and meet me at White Plains as early as you can. The river is still wet and I'm anxious to see how my elevator works."

I called Stu. "I'll be flying in around noon on Saturday. I presume you know how to operate the elevator?"

"No problem, Marty. They gave me instructions. Call me on my cell when you're in the water and I'll lower it for you."

We splashed down at 11:48 and I rang Stu. As I approached the pad area, I could see the plate dropping slowly into the water and submerging. I lowered the wheels to provide a base and Stu raised the pad, lifting the plane, me, and Susan out of the water and up to the level of the concrete apron. I gunned the prop and the little amphib rolled onto dry land.

Stu strolled over to greet us, and handed me the controller. From now on, I would carry it with me so I could launch and recover the airplane myself.

There were a few minor problems with the work that had been done, but nothing that warranted getting anyone out on a service call on a weekend. The 440v electrical service to the house was entirely capable of bringing the interior to a comfortable temperature for an October evening and we were confident Christmas would come off without any problems. Besides, I had a *Jotul* wood stove installed as the primary heat source, so electricity was simply an emergency fall-back option for when wood was unavailable. At my request, Stu had ordered three cords of firewood brought to my property from a supplier on shore.

The house had two bedrooms and another that could be quickly converted for unexpected guests. It was everything I wanted, and the total was less than the original \$250,000 price the seller asked for.

"Like it?" I asked Susan.

"I love it. It's amazing. Poor place to raise kids, however."

"Do we have to worry about raising kids here?"

"Possibly. I'm pregnant."

"Marry me?"

"Umm... okay."

"So it's a boy..."

"Maybe. I don't know yet," she admitted.

Marty smiled. "What made you change your mind?"

Susan wrapped her arms about Marty's neck. "I've been practicing my clairvoyance, and I'm getting pretty good at it. I see a bright future ahead for Mr. and Mrs. Marty Durkin." She kissed him.

Some of the stores on land would, for a small extra fee, fill a shopping list and have it ferried to the islands for the convenience of their customers who lived in the river. Stu had offered to host a cook-out for the rest of the inhabitants so they could all meet me and we could get to know each other. I paid for the groceries that Stu would feed to our neighbors.

There were only four families that lived on the island 'more-or-less-permanently' and it happened that one other family was in residence at the time of the planned cook-out. Stu set up the barbecue on his back deck and did the cooking there, but everyone brought their food inside for the actual eating because the weather was, by then, uncomfortably cool for sitting outdoors.

In this way I met the Barkers, the Schmidts, the Fords, the Pearsons, and the Gundersens. I had already met Stu's family. There were enough people in attendance that Stu's house became quite full. We all seemed to be adequately compatible. Everyone mentioned how much they appreciated someone renovating a property that had become something of an embarrassment.

FBI

The knock on the door brought Mrs. Coleman out of her reverie occasioned by her listening to Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* played by the *Gimnazija Kranj* youth orchestra. She opened the door to be greeted by two FBI ID cards at shoulder-level.

"We'd like to speak to Mr. Martin Durkin, please."

"Mr. Durkin is out of town at the moment," Mrs. Coleman informed them.

"Do you know where he might be located?" She shrugged. One of the agents handed her a business card. "Please have Mr. Durkin call us when he returns."

"McArdle", he answered his phone in his typically terse fashion.

"Good morning. My name is Martin Durkin, and you asked my housekeeper to have me call you when I got back in town. What... uh... has brought me to the attention of the FBI?"

"Thank you for calling, Mr. Durkin. Your name came up as part of an investigation we're conducting, the nature of which I am, unfortunately, unable to disclose. Would you have time to speak with one of our investigators?"

"...About an investigation whose nature you may not disclose? No. If you wish to interrogate me on such a topic, you will only do so with my attorney present."

"I want to be clear, Mr. Durkin, that you are not the subject of any investigation. We merely want to pick your brain for details that only you, perhaps, can supply."

There was a long pause. "I'll have my attorney call you back." The line disconnected.

Percy Swain dialed the number on McArdle's business card. McArdle answered on the first ring.

"I represent Mr. Martin Durkin. I understand that you wish to, in a sense, 'pick his brain' for information. Do I have that correct?"

"It is," McArdle answered. "I wish to emphasize that Mr. Durkin, himself, is not the subject of any current investigation, but we believe your client has knowledge that would help us advance other lines of inquiry."

"I see. When would you like to speak with my client?"

"The sooner, the better."

"Tuesday, the 18th in the early afternoon?"

"We'll be pleased to see Mr. Durkin at 1:00pm on Tuesday." McArdle gave Swain the address of the FBI sub-office in Mamaroneck.

Swain's next call was to his client.

"This is very intriguing, Marty. They admit up front that you're not a suspect. Are you able to share with me any information — understanding that anything you say is protected by attorney-client confidentiality — that might let me better prepare for Tuesday?"

Marty hesitated. "I have talents," he began after a long pause. "I believe those talents are shared by a very small slice of the population. To be clear, that may be a single-digit number. If I am not unique, I'm very close to it."

"And what is the nature of these talents?"

Marty hesitated again. "I can wrap things within impenetrable shells. I can wrap things within air-tight shells. I can destroy objects by force of my will. Other things, too."

Now Percy hesitated. "I guess you don't want that knowledge to become public."

"That's correct."

Percy Swain entered the unremarkable office on the Boston Post Road at 12:54pm followed by Marty Durkin. "We're here to meet with Kevin McArdle," he told the receptionist, and was directed to a seat while the secretary paged McArdle.

Moments later, McArdle himself appeared. "Follow me, please."

When they were all comfortably seated in what seemed to be an interrogation room, and both McArdle and Percy Swain had started voice-recording devices, McArdle began:

"The FBI investigates all manner of cases in all 50 states. As a result of some of those investigations, our attention has been drawn to one Martin Durkin of White Plains, New York." He nodded toward Marty. "I want to reiterate that we have no evidence that Mr. Durkin, himself, has done anything that would be considered 'criminal', and we do not expect that we will develop such evidence. On the other hand, it seems very clear that Mr. Durkin has done things that are plainly 'interesting', and it is those things that we would like to address with your client."

Percy nodded. "I want to make clear that my client may decline to answer any question and that action should not be construed as an admission of either guilt or knowledge of the topic. In short, everything said here should be considered 'hypothetical'."

"Naturally."

"Mr. Durkin... may I call you 'Martin'?" Marty nodded. "Martin, have you ever been mugged?"

Marty looked at Percy, then back at McArdle. "Define 'mugged'."

"Have you ever been accosted by assailants who then relieved you of money or possessions?"

"No."

"Have you ever been accosted by assailants who tried to relieve you of money or possessions?"

"Yes."

"But they were unsuccessful," McArdle pressed.

"Correct."

"Can you elaborate on why they were unsuccessful?"

Percy butted in. "My client declines to address that issue. Please refrain from asking questions that touch on my client's actions or inactions."

"But, counselor, that is precisely the reason for this interview. I would ask you to keep in mind that your client is here voluntarily at the invitation of the FBI. He has not been subpoenaed and he has not been sworn. And I would remind you — again — that Mr. Durkin is not suspected of any criminal activity that would have driven us to get a subpoena and that would have given us cause to place him under oath."

"But you seem to be looking for exactly that sort of evidence..."

"Counselor, we have already agreed that everything said here is hypothetical. Whatever information Mr. Durkin passes along is, therefore, speculation as far as the FBI is concerned. We have a puzzle with a few

missing pieces. We are hoping your client will be able to suggest, at the very least, what shape those pieces have."

Percy turned to Marty and shrugged. "If it were up to me, I would shake his hand and go home," he told Marty.

Marty turned to McArdle. "I overpowered them," he said flatly.

"Well... we already know that from other sources. In one case, you 'overpowered' seven, count 'em, seven New York City street thugs without, as far as we can tell, getting so much as a scratch."

Marty looked at McArdle blankly. "So?"

"It would be very helpful to the Bureau to know how one person with, according to our background research, zero martial arts training was able to 'overpower' seven assailants. If you are willing to share that information, the Bureau would be in your debt."

"Ah," Marty said as he began to understand the point of this conversation, "that's a problem. You see, I don't know how I was able to avoid injury on such occasions."

Kevin McArdle pursed his lips. "According to our sources — 'first-person sources' — they each found themselves suddenly unable to move more than an inch or two and were convinced to abandon their nefarious intent solely because that seemed the only way to regain their freedom. Were they lying?"

"I wouldn't answer that question either," Percy advised Marty, but Marty continued:

"They may have believed that was their situation. I can't speak to their mental state."

"So, on that occasion, you relieved several persons of money and weapons, turning the tables, so to speak, on your attackers?"

"Did they say that?"

"They did. Beyond that, there is the account by two New York City policemen that they arrested you later that same day for possession of two firearms that they later were unable to produce."

"And...?"

"Doesn't any of this strike you as 'odd'?"

"Yes. You know what's odd? You have a handful of disconnected stories, each full of holes where data seems mysteriously missing, and your first reaction is to assume that all of the stories are true. Yes, that's very odd."

"And you are unable to fill in any of the holes..."

Marty hesitated again, considering his answer. "That's correct."

"There's another incident in which your name figures prominently that I would appreciate you addressing. A year ago April, you were couriating a shipment of art work when two hijacking attempts were made." Marty nodded in affirmation. "The first perpetrator was apprehended — by you — and taken into custody by the New York State Police. We only know of the second attempt because one of the two criminals involved later claimed that you had a..." Marty raised one eyebrow. "...dragon. We asked

his alleged partner about it, and the partner confirmed the story. A dragon?"

Marty smiled. "Let's analyze this coldly, shall we? First, were these people sober when questioned? Because if you're telling me that you believe them, you have to explain how a dragon big enough to be a threat was smuggled on board a train and kept hidden from room porters and other staff, and then smuggled off the train at its destination, all while my girlfriend and I had our hands full with the art shipment and our own luggage. Are you serious? Why would I not simply have taken these mysterious perps into custody like the first one and just handed them over to the police at the next stop?"

"Do you know what this sounds like? Somebody was hired to steal the art and fouled the operation up so badly they had to invent a story to cover their behinds. These perps probably missed the train completely."

"So you're unable — or is it 'unwilling'? — to corroborate any of these stories?" McArdle offered.

"Well, some of the details are correct, certainly, but when presented with tales that are almost certainly fictitious, why is it your instinct to accept them as true? Occam's Razor tells us that if some set of facts is hard to believe, we probably should not believe them. You are undoubtedly hoping that I will say 'Yup, all true, and this is how I pulled it off.' Instead, I'll advise you to dig deeper where there's still a layer of nonsense covering the facts. Are we done here?"

McArdle closed his notebook with a snap. "I guess so."

Susan glanced at the phone's display and answered the call. "How did it go?"

"You are really not going to like this..."

"I didn't like it from the first moment you briefed me."

"I know. It seems the FBI has me firmly in their sights. They so far have nothing with which they can charge me, but they mentioned my dragon..." Marty could hear Susan burst into laughter on the other end of the conversation. "Yes, well, laugh all you want, but they have amassed a very large pile of circumstantial... it's not 'evidence' yet... call it 'data'. With a very little more serious digging, we could be exposed. I'm getting as nervous as you already are."

Susan was thinking furiously as Marty talked. "Do you recall that reporter from The Globe? Maybe we need to press him into service — our service."

"Maybe..." Marty mused, "but I want you involved this time."

"Grrr..."

"Tom Lincoln," the reporter answered the phone.

"This is Marty Durkin, Tom. Do you remember me?"

"Mr. Durkin, I'm unlikely ever to forget you. To what do I owe the honor of your call?"

"My girlfriend and I are planning a cook-out and we'd like to invite you over for steaks and cocktails. What do you have on for Saturday afternoon?"

"When the object of a reporter's affection invites him over socially, all manner of warning bells start ringing. What's happening here?"

"Susan and I are hoping you'll leave your notebook and sound recorder home and join us for steaks, medium rare, and pleasant conversation, none of which you'll be able to immediately use to advance your career, but all of which we believe you will find enlightening and entertaining, not to mention 'intriguing background for a possible future story'."

"You sure do know how to fish for reporters, Mr. Durkin. May I bring a date?"

"She'll be bored to tears by the company we have planned for her, but sure, bring a date."

Tom Lincoln opted not to bring a date. He had the feeling that he was going to want to devote his full attention to whatever Marty Durkin was planning for his cook-out. It turned out to be a good decision.

Moments after his arrival, Susan intercepted him, linked her arm with his, and guided him away from Marty, Percy, and Elizabeth, Percy's wife.

"So, you're the reporter who thought Marty was Batman? Tell me how that all came about."

"That would involve me outing confidential sources. You wouldn't want me to do that, would you?"

Susan smiled. "I'm torn between lying and telling the truth. You, as a reporter, always want the truth, right?" Tom smiled back. "The truth is: yes, I want to know how my fiance almost became famous — or is the proper word 'infamous'? — but I guess that's not going to happen, huh?"

"Probably not," Tom informed her.

"Well, then, let me ask you a related question. What sort of circumstance can you imagine where you would rat on a CI? Did they ever cover that scenario in J-school?"

Tom rolled his eyes toward the sky as if thinking. "No, I can't recall that topic ever coming up. But you do ask an intriguing question. I'll have to think about that. I can almost guarantee the answer will involve some very unusual circumstances, if there actually is an answer."

"Marty was very pleased you decided not to write that story the way you originally intended. I was, too, come to think about it, and that just prompted a thought about one of those 'very unusual circumstances': what if you learned your 'confidential source' was actually trying to do harm to the subject? I'm not saying that's true here; I just toss it out as a possibility.

"What if the CI actually had ill-intent and wanted you to be his instrument for placing the subject into danger? Would that be enough to get you to back off from '*never ever, not in a million years*'?"

"Is that what this afternoon's gathering is about? How to get Tom to give up his CI?"

Susan feigned a 'shocked' look. "Not at all! I'm just making conversation with a guest. If the topic is too sensitive, I can change subjects with the best of them."

"As long as there will be other topics, I think I'll stay for the steak," and he winked.

"There will be other topics, but you should expect that they'll be somewhat related. Do you know about Marty being investigated by the FBI?"

"What? No. What did the FBI want with him?"

"The more intriguing question, Tom, is why was the FBI interested in him? It may be that a little bird whispered in somebody's ear that Marty Durkin was somebody special. Naturally, the next obvious question is 'who would have done that, and why?'. Did I see your reporter's antennas go up at that, or are you not as curious as we hoped you might be?"

"Ahh... you're approaching the border of that land where I might have to re-examine my commitment to the sanctity of a confidential source."

Susan shrugged. "Something to think about over *filet mignon* and *cabernet sauvignon*," she offered.

While Tom and Percy and Elizabeth sipped wine and chatted, Marty and Susan tended the grill trying to get everyone's steak to the proper state of doneness. "Progress?" Marty asked Susan.

"I suggested the FBI was looking at you because someone ratted you out. I think he may have bought it, some of it anyway. I may not be able to wheedle the name of his CI out of him, but I think he sees investigative possibilities in the FBI zeroing in on someone he knows or suspects is not worth their time." She shrugged. "Either way, it's a win."

"How do you connect with Martin Durkin?" Tom asked Percy.

"I'm his attorney," Percy admitted.

"What can you tell me about this 'FBI thing' Susan mentioned?" Tom asked him.

"I can tell you that I was there with Marty when the FBI questioned him. They had already interviewed what they call 'witnesses' who brought them barely-believable stories of strange goings-on including two co-conspirators who claimed Marty has a dragon..."

"Whoa, wait, a dragon?"

Percy crinkled his mouth in apparent disbelief and nodded. "You simply wouldn't believe professionals in federal law enforcement could be so gullible. They took that story seriously, never even considering, as far as I can tell, that the people who were passing the story along were known substance abusers." Tom Lincoln shook his head and Percy continued: "It sounds a lot like the tales you were told about him. Oh, yes, I know how you and Marty are connected, and between the two story lines, it sounds

suspiciously like somebody is trying to ruin Marty's reputation, but I can't figure out why. If we knew 'who', the 'why' will probably become obvious."

"I think I'm getting two story lines out of this afternoon's meeting," Tom mused aloud, "and they're both connected to my CI."

The remainder of the afternoon's conversation carefully avoided re-plowing old fields. The five participants got along well together, the steaks were perfectly done to each person's taste, and not enough wine was poured to endanger anyone's driving privileges. As the evening wore on, Tom shook hands all around (business cards had already been traded), and the party broke up.

The phone rang. "Hello, this is Mark."

"Mark, Tom Lincoln. Let's get together for lunch. My treat."

"Sure, what's the occasion?"

"I just want to talk some more about leads."

"I already gave you everything I had, Tom. What else is there?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised. Tuesday?"

"Okay..."

"Whistler's, noon Tuesday. See you there." Tom disconnected.

Mark Gelert strolled into Whistler's at two minutes past noon, saw Tom Lincoln sitting at a table apart from most of the crowd, and headed in that direction. The two shook hands and Mark took his seat across from Tom.

"Are you still working that Durkin lead I gave you?" Mark asked as an opening gambit.

"Uh... yes, off and on. It's tough to develop corroborating evidence, though, but there is something new that I wanted from you."

"What's that?"

"How did you come to know or suspect Marty Durkin was the Midnight Marauder?"

Gelert's face went white. He hesitated. Finally, he regained control of his thoughts. "If I tell you that," he explained, "I expose my own source. I'm not going to do that. Why would you even ask?"

Tom Lincoln looked straight into Gelert's eyes. "Recent developments as regards Marty Durkin lead me to suspect somebody is deliberately trying to sandbag him, and that person or persons is using me to do it. The most likely candidate is you. The next most likely candidate is your source. Look, I understand that a story is a story, even if it's just speculative. This is something different. This is — potentially — me being used as a tool of vengeance or retribution. Either you are using me or you are allowing a journalist to be used for nefarious purposes. That's... not nice, and it invites speculation that the real victim here is actually me. So, I need to know where this 'lead' originated. You say you have a source. Yes or no, did this knowledge originate outside yourself?"

"Yes."

"I need to interview your source, and I need you to not warn your source that he, she, or they are about to be interviewed..."

"...Ambushed..." Gelert interrupted.

"Whatever. I'm now investigating, and you must not hamper my investigation. Do you understand me?"

"I understand you, and the answer is still 'no'. I'm not giving up my source."

Lincoln pursed his lips. "You put me in a most fragile position, Mark. Either you give up your source, or I will be forced to give up mine. If you won't help me track down the source of that lie, I'm going to give your name to Marty Durkin's lawyer, after which you should expect to be sued for slander. I will absolutely, positively be called as a witness at any ensuing trial."

"How do you know it was a lie?"

"Because I've been keeping a close eye on Durkin and I'm finding no evidence that he's anything other than as he appears: a talented private investigator and an upright citizen. Despite that, the FBI is now investigating Durkin for similarly bizarre stories being circulated about him. That's a story in and of itself, and that's my current story. You are an integral part of that story, and so is your source... if such exists."

"Why don't you ask the FBI for their source?"

"I don't have nearly the leverage with FBI that I do with Mark Gelert. Okay, I tried, but I can't protect you any longer. I advise you to 'lawyer up'."

"This is a bad way to treat a source," Gelert whined.

"You're mistaken as to the definition of 'source'," Lincoln responded. "A source is one who provides a valuable lead that helps a reporter complete a story. The lead you provided turns out to have been 'not valuable', therefore you are not a source. In fact, you appear to have a valuable lead that would help me complete a story and you refuse to share it. You may have once been a source before I discovered how lacking in value was your lead, but you're not a source anymore. Now you're a slanderer. Get set to be sued. Have a nice day... somewhere else."

"I guess that means lunch is off."

"That's right. I would have bought lunch, but I don't have much incentive to do that anymore, do I?"

Gelert shrugged, rose from the table, turned, and left. Tom Lincoln picked up his menu.

"Kimber and Swain, Attorneys. How may I direct your call?"

"Percy Swain, please."

"Mr. Swain is out of the office at the moment. May I take a message?"

"This is Tom Lincoln with the *Globe*. I have information that Mr. Swain will certainly find interesting. Please have him call me, 914-867-5309, when he finds it convenient."

Percy and Tom played 'telephone tag' over the next two days until their schedules aligned sufficiently that they could finally have that conversation.

"My 'confidential informant' has declined to prove that what he told me was backed by fact," Tom started. "I asked him where he got that story and he wouldn't tell me. I warned him that I wouldn't get sued for libel all by myself and he seemed unconcerned. I have, therefore, no further obligation to protect him. Do you want his name?" Percy assured Tom that, yes, indeed, he did want the person's name. "Mark Gelert, 27 Barker Avenue."

"Thank you, Tom. I'll take it from here."

What followed was a letter from Kimber and Swain, Attorneys, inviting Mark Gelert to call Percy Swain to straighten matters out, and when that was ignored, a second letter demanding that Mark Gelert respond, and when that was ignored, a notice of the filing of a personal injury suit alleging damage by slander against Mr. Martin Durkin.

In The Wind

"According to the rental agent, Mr. Gelert notified him about 3 days following our first letter that he would no longer need his apartment after the end of that month. It cost him his security deposit because he gave them less than 60 days' notice, but I suspect he considered that a small price to pay for being able to disappear. There was, unsurprisingly, no forwarding address, and a letter sent 'address correction requested' has likewise yielded no information about Mr. Gelert's whereabouts."

"Did he have a moving company handle his transfer?" Marty asked.

"No. He vacated the apartment two days before the end of the month, and the furniture rental company showed up the next day and removed everything that wasn't nailed down. Gone. Clean as a whistle."

"Okay. I'll take it from here. I'll let you know if I come up with anything."