

# The Prancing Jacana

Steven Jon Halasz

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# Prologue

To: SoS John F. Kerry

From: INR

Date: 3 October 2014

Re: Alan Henning Beheading

ISIL beheading video posted of Alan Henning, Salford taxi driver and British humanitarian aid worker. Video depicts hooded man dressed in black standing behind Henning, who is kneeling and dressed in orange jumpsuit. Henning makes statement: "I am Alan Henning. Because of our parliament's decision to attack the Islamic State, I, as a member of the British public, will now pay the price for that decision." Executioner holds Henning under chin with right hand while using six inch knife in left hand to saw at throat of Henning. Image goes black then shows headless body of Henning stomach-down on ground, hands tied behind, with Henning's severed head poised on lower part of Henning's back, eyes closed and face pointing upward towards camera.

— Caroline! I can't hear myself think!

Robert is in a bad mood. My latest crime thriller, *The Prancing Jacana*, is two weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List, sitting at number three, and after a full day of media interviews, I'm relaxing on the sofa in the Greenhouse Suite at 1 Hotel Central Park, indulging myself in an orgy of UFC on Fox cable. I pretend not to hear him but he's insistent.

— Caroline!

— What is it darling?

Robert is in a stew, trying to make sense of his publisher's demand that he make changes to his latest children's story, *Mouse and Snake*. I'm in clover from my most recent success but he's languishing in writer's hell. He plays the guilt card.

— Caroline, please! I need some help here.

I turn down the volume and wrinkle my brow. When I'm working on a book, I apply myself to the task completely, shunning all distractions and indulgences. Now that I finally have the chance to treat myself to a little well-earned televised mayhem, he's determined to suck me into his bout of writer's angst. It's not fair.

— OK, what is it?

— Snake eating Mouse! I just can't make it work.

— Why is that a problem?

He's incredulous.

— Why? Because Mouse is the main character, so she can't be eaten in the middle of the book! She can't be eaten at all!

I sigh, trying to take an interest in the conundrum.

— Why not?

— Because this is supposed to be for ages three to five. Who would buy a book for a toddler that's going to give them nightmares and send them into therapy for the rest of their lives?

— Not me, certainly.

— Not anyone. So OK, she gets eaten half way through. But what then? I'm left with Snake wriggling around the garden happily digesting his meal. That's not much of a story, even for a child.

I want to make myself useful, but children's literature is not really my thing.

— Well. She could be reincarnated.

— No, nothing religious, it's not allowed.

I toss back my head and squeeze my eyelids closed, trying to imagine how Mouse might continue after such a misfortune.

— Could it be like the circle of life? Mouse's molecules become Snake's feces, which fertilize berries that are eaten by Crow... who then eats Snake.

He grimaces.

— That's so like you, darling, to think of something scientific, but these are small children!

— I'm doing my best, Robert, but it's not easy wrapping my adult brain around this arcane kiddie universe you inhabit. Why does Mouse need to get eaten at all? Why can't they just live happily together?

Robert settles himself in for the explanation.

— According to my editor, Snake has to eat Mouse. It's what snakes do. It's what mice are for. It's reality. It's the current thinking in children's literature.

— Well crows eat too.

— Yes, but because snakes have gotten such bad press for so long they need to be rehabilitated. They have as much right to eat mice as mice have to eat... well, whatever it is they eat.

— Cheese.

— No, not really.

I take a deep breath. It seems that I'm not to be permitted my escape into vicarious savagery so long as the competing demands of brutish nature and infantile sensibility cannot be reconciled. I'm frustrated and it makes me sarcastic.

— Your children’s lit is too complicated. You need help from Thomas Aquinas I think, not from me.

He’s adamant and proceeds to turn the tables.

— Detectives have their complexities, don’t they? I never knew you to shy away from a mystery.

— Mystery, yes, but I avoid any excursions into metaphysics as much as possible. My readers have a pretty low threshold for it.

I turn off the TV. That’s probably all he really wanted anyway because no sooner does the screen blink off than he changes the subject.

— Speaking of mysteries, any more reviews of *Jacana*?

They have all been more or less favorable, but some not so much. I don’t really care, other than *Publishers Weekly*, which is money in the bank if they give you a good one. My agent keeps sending them, though, and I browse them out of idle curiosity. Sometimes they’re good for a laugh.

— Just one. No one important. He has an ax to grind about something, I think, I don’t know what. He says the story is derivative? It’s all been done before? Really?

— What’s his name? You should Google him.

— Oh I’m not going to bother. He’s nobody.

I really don’t give a hoot what people think of my writing, so long as they buy it, but Robert takes criticism much more seriously.

— But aren’t you curious? Remember the time that woman from *Minneapolis Star Tribune* attacked *The Duck Who Couldn’t Walk Straight* and it turned out that her daughter was one of my students and I had given her a “C” on her term paper, and even that was a gift. She was supposed to be the next Virginia Woolf but she couldn’t even plagiarize worth a damn.

I can’t help rolling my eyes at him. I do remember the incident. It troubled him for weeks.

— You take it so personal. It’s just business.

— It is for you, maybe, but my writing touches the lives of children at a tender age. When a critic from a major newspaper implies that my animal character uses illegal drugs, I can't let that go, can I.

How many times have we had this discussion, I wonder. The writing, for me, is a way to pay for my travel addiction with maybe a little left over for old age. These struggles get his blood boiling, though, and I worry sometimes that it's going to give him a stroke.

— No, I guess you can't let it go. But I have to say I'm a little curious what the guy thinks is “derivative” about a gay Senegalese detective whose sister is an abortionist.

He waves his arms in the air.

— Well of course it's not derivative! I'm sure he didn't even read it. The part where the sister performs the abortion on the imam's daughter is very good. No one has ever written anything like that before.

I have to agree, but I'm tired of this quarrel and let him know it.

— Isn't that enough for tonight, darling? Isn't it time for bed? I think it is.

We've been married for five years. It's the second one for both of us, though in my case I was single for some ten years after a short earlier marriage. He, on the other hand, leapt from the frying pan into the fire. I thought I could never be happy with just one man, but so far, he's managed very nicely. He works at it and I have to give him credit. I've never had a more generous lover. If I can't have my UFC tonight, he will just have to amuse me in other ways.

I go over to him and run my fingers through his hair and this gets him to smile up at me. He puts his hand over mine, then assents, in principle.

— You go. I'll be right in. Who is he anyway?

— His name is Haiden Stills. He writes for Bookbag.

— Oh, an *internet* critic...

I can't resist a teasing remark at his disdain for everything modern.

— You’ve heard of it, the internet? It’s a happening thing, you know.

— Haha. Very funny. I’ll look him up.

Robert is an intelligent man—has a Ph.D. from Columbia in American Literature—but he’s truly hopeless at finding his way around in cyberspace. If I leave him to his own devices, he will take much too long and I don’t want to be left waiting, so I offer to take on the mission.

— You go get ready. I’ll Google him.

He’s more than happy to hand over the duties. He gets up and trots towards the bedroom, turning to give me a sly flick of his eyebrows as he goes through the door.

The Stills guy is easy enough to find. He’s on Facebook, but he’s not sharing too much that’s public. Has a thing for “Twilight” fan fiction and “fantasy metafiction”, whatever that’s supposed to be. A friend request will maybe unlock more info, though I’d just as soon he didn’t know it was coming from me.

That shouldn’t be a problem if I make the request from Robert’s account. I kept my last name when we married and write under a pen name, and on Robert’s Facebook page, devoted to his children’s literature fan following, we have carefully avoided any reference to his much-too-adult-oriented detective-novel-writing spouse. In truth, he’s a little embarrassed by my *oeuvre* and so we’ve worked to keep all our public personae incommunicado. I make the friend request figuring that that the guy probably won’t make the connection to me. Then I turn out the lights and slip into the bedroom where I find Robert unclothed and climbing into bed.

I undress and join him soon after. It doesn’t take long for his solicitous and sympathetic handling of my eager anatomy to bring me to the edge of orgasm, whereupon he switches gears, unleashing his bottled-up literary rage on my concupiscent body. I feel him pulsing inside me, then release in ripples of gratification.

After a few minutes awash in the opium-like stupor of our sex, thankful for the man I love and for the charmed life we have together, I



turn my languorous eyes to him, watching as the wakefulness slowly drains out of his placid face, then allow myself to drift into a deep and tranquil slumber that carries me gracefully through the passing of night into the realm of a brilliant New York morning.



— Senegal is a lovely country. I visited Dakar several times a few years ago. I'm sorry that *The Prancing Jacana* has been banned there. I understand that some people might be offended, but no one is forced to read it, are they. If you don't like it, just leave it alone. Governments shouldn't decide what people can read or not read.

I'm hamming it up a little and the shapely young morning show host is bleeding sympathy for me. It's not my style to play the victim but I go along. After all, what author wouldn't aspire to have their book banned somewhere? In the publishing business, scoring your ten or fifteen minutes of fame in the crowded agora of media mongering is the difference between affluence and penury. In my case, the banning will bring in an extra hundred thousand at least. I make a mental note to donate some of that to a Senegalese charity.

— Your visits to Senegal, Ms. Pembrose, how did that inspire you?

— Well, you see, it's a French speaking country, of course, and I took my masters degree in French literature at the Sorbonne. And also, the natural beauty! I visited the magnificent Niokolo-Koba National Park. It's a UNESCO World Heritage site. I went on a birding tour there. Birding is one of my hobbies. I especially liked seeing the green bee-eater, a very clever bird, very intelligent. They watch you and know what you're thinking.

The interviewer performs her practiced simulation of astonishment.

— They do?

— Well, so they say. The ones I saw were more interested in eating bees than they were in my opinions, I think.

She laughs a little too much at my lame joke.

— Do they really eat bees?

— Yes, but very carefully. They remove the stingers first.

She laughs again.

— I'm glad to hear that. Your novel is named for a bird, isn't it, the "jacana".

I can't count how many times I've answered questions, phrased in one way or another, about the unusual title of my novel. Every time, it's like *déjà vu* all over again, but I compose myself and do my best to keep the recitation sounding fresh.

— Yes. It's a native of Senegal. It has long legs and enormous feet and dances precariously on lily pads across the water. It's like my character, Detective Bampoky, whose delicate situation requires him to tread lightly in uncertain waters.

— Did you get to know many Senegalese while you were there?

— Oh yes. The people, they're so welcoming, so much hospitality. It's their national character.

The woman's voice becomes a little anxious and she knits a poignant furrow in her brow.

— Perhaps not so much, now that they've banned your book.

I nod.

— Sadly, that may be true. I would be glad for another visit there, of course, to discuss such things, but...

Her face recovers its smooth, cheerful glow as she cuts me off. Evidently my time is up.

— Well, hopefully you'll have the chance to go back some day.

— I would like to. It's a beautiful country, beautiful people.

That's it. I'm out of the TV studio by ten-thirty and free for the rest of the day, but Robert is having lunch with his editor, poor man. Well, the sun is bright, the sky is blue, and it's a perfect day for a promenade through Central Park and then a nice meal at the Boat House.

I walk up Fifth Avenue to our hotel, glancing up as I pass by

the glass and stone honeycombs with their hives of incarcerated workers. Thinking about the unfortunates toiling in those morbid monstrosities makes me bless the day I made the resolution to be a writer, come hell or high water, though I've faced neither perdition nor drowning as a result of my decision. I'm a disciplined workaholic, but that's no guarantee of anything in this business. I'll be the first to say that I've been one of the lucky ones. After an early breakout, it all came to me as easily as, well, as a walk in the park.

And that's just what I'm going to do now. I change into my laid-back clothes, then enter at East Drive, heading for the Ramble. It's going to be a warm day and the shade and coolness of the wooded paths there will be refreshing. And there should be some solitude on a Monday morning. It's one of the most pleasant places I know, all the more remarkable because it's in the middle of a bustling and frenetic city.

I cross 65th Street and head up the Mall, its rare and monumental elms arching overhead like a natural outdoor cathedral. I don't pray, but I can't help considering as I pass under the vaulted boughs decked in their verdant splendor that, if I ever did feel compelled to seek the succour of the Almighty, this would be my church.

I make my way underground through the Bethesda Terrace Arcade, stopping briefly to enjoy the tiled ceiling of colorful floral mosaics and the crypt-like stillness before moving out to the fountain and around the lake to the wooded footpaths beyond.

I'm lost almost immediately among the narrow, twisting paths. I never know quite where I am in the Ramble, however many times I've been there, but the delicious sense of being wayward and unruly is, for me, a part of its charm. I'm not someone who favors orderliness. As an excursion into the wilds, the Ramble is safe enough. Walk a few minutes in any direction and you'll come out somewhere.

I feel blessed. I pass a well-dressed middle-aged couple walking hand in hand, oblivious to my casual gaze, then a young

mother, or maybe a babysitter, pushing a stroller. The child, a lump of needy, self-satisfied proto-humanity, peers out at me from its swaddle.

What urge there is in me that longed to have a child has ebbed and flowed through the years. But I've always held my career to be sacrosanct, and between a lack of suitable fathers and a loathing towards encumbrances of any kind, it has never happened. Sometimes, when I see happy mothers enjoying their happy children, the maternalistic instincts rear up in me, but I always brush them off and carry on. Now that I'm approaching forty, I've mostly reconciled to being childless, not the least because Robert has sworn off engendering any more offspring after his two by his first marriage turned out to be such a disappointment—one, a minor league baseball player, dabbles in bookmaking, while the other took to Wall Street. Robert had his vasectomy long before I knew him. It seemed to settle the issue for me and I was glad for that.

I glance back over my shoulder at the woman pushing the stroller and think to myself that she's probably a babysitter, the mother entombed in one of those hulking glass boxes, grinding away under the watchful eye of a loutish and puerile supervisor. No, I do not regret my choice.

Soon I'm at the "rustic shelter", an old-fashioned, oversized gazebo at the center of the woods. Happily, it's unoccupied at the moment. I take a seat and close my eyes, letting the therapeutic aroma of the green space around me fill my senses and ease my soul.

This contented state holds me in its thrall for a relaxing twenty minutes before I'm aware that someone else is shuffling around nearby. I open my eyes and see a man, middle aged, about twenty yards away. He's one of the Ramble's famous gays, I'm guessing, very neat and well dressed and with a lost and lonely look to him. He walks casually in my direction, but not in a threatening way. When he reaches the shelter, he looks up at me, smiles and seeks acquaintance.

— You're Mable Pembrose, the author?

It seems he's a fan. How nice.

— Yes, I am. And you are?

— Alan Bates. It's a pleasure to meet you.

His diction hints of a barely detectable British accent, which tells me he's spent some time in England, but there's another accent lurking in the background that I can't place. His skin has just a touch of olive complexion and he's a very good looking man, but not English. The name doesn't fit the man at all.

— That's a famous name. No relation I suppose.

He seems puzzled.

— I'm sorry?

— Alan Bates, the film actor. *An Unmarried Woman? The Rose? Pack of Lies?*

I stress the last one when I say it. He's startled and a little disconcerted.

— I don't see many films.

— That Alan Bates was very famous. You look like him.

He has the dark hair and the bushy eyebrows, large mouth and narrow chin. I had a thing about the actor Alan Bates when I was young and thinking about him could always get me bothered. I ask myself how long this particular Alan Bates could have lived in England without someone noticing that he shares his name with a quite prolific English celebrity, especially in light of the resemblance.

When most people meet a stranger alone in a park under suspicious circumstances, they will try to avoid that person, or maybe get out their pepper spray, but I'm not like that. It only makes me curious. Such people are my raw material, after all. If he turns out to be sufficiently interesting, he may find himself in my next novel. I motion for him to have a seat next to me on the bench and he obliges, then I continue my interrogation.

— Have you read my books?

— No, I'm sorry, I haven't.

His reply is half honest at least. I'm sure he hasn't read them, but somehow I doubt that he's sorry about it.

— I'm surprised you would recognize me then.

— You were on the television this morning, Ms. Pembrose.

Alan, or whoever he is, has definitely piqued my curiosity. I go to a great deal of trouble to avoid being recognized when I don't want to be, and at the moment, I look more like a frumpy housewife than the glamorous author who has just appeared on morning TV. It's not a question of disguise. Just going without makeup and wearing my hair down is usually enough, together with my favorite tie-dye muu-muu. I don't think anyone who only saw me on TV this morning would know me in my present state. I get the distinct feeling that Mr. AB may be stalking me. If I must be stalked, though, this distinguished, good-looking and somewhat sexy man will do very nicely.

I feel something brush against me and reflexively reach up with my hand.

— Ow! Oh damn! Oh damn damn!

A burning pain pierces the back of my neck. Mr. AB jumps up and cries out.

— A wasp!

He swats at it with his hand and chases it away.

— Oh shit! Oh shit that hurts! Shit!

— Ms. Pembrose, are you alright?

— Hell no I'm not alright! I've been stung by a goddam wasp!



The screen lit up when he opened the laptop. Ten was early for Haiden Stills, but he hadn't slept well and decided he might as well get started.

There were two high priority messages. Haiden communicated in public almost exclusively through social sites but for private communications used Signal protocol encrypted messaging. As paranoid about cyber security as anyone who ever put fingers to keyboard, he used any and all means possible to protect his privacy, including long, randomly-generated passwords changed frequently and entered automatically by software of his own design. Because his cyber-existence was his very life, it was essential that these passwords

should not be lost, so he kept everything backed up on an encrypted flash drive that he carried with him on his keychain, and another, identical backup in a two hundred fifty pound fireproof tamper-resistant high-security safe with a UL listed group 2 electronic lock. This behemoth he kept encased in a polished walnut cabinet that doubled as a living room end table.

The first message was from *maxj*, the usual conspiracy bullshit from him, but the dude was loyal and trusted and had got him out of a pickle once, so a good man to keep in touch with. The other was from *ellapr*. She drifted in and out of the group on her own terms and he hadn't heard from her in months. Fiercely independent and self-reliant, she had never asked him for anything, so he was surprised by her message.

ellapr: Haiden, I need \$10,000, very urgent, you owe me.

Yes, it was true. He did owe her. Eight years ago, when his business partner stole his Boston-based security consulting business out from under him, he had ended up flat busted and she had staked him. And besides, she had brought him into the group, and that turned his life around in ways he could not have imagined. He wrote back.

haiden: That won't be a problem. Bitcoin?

He had thought she was doing well enough and wondered what might be going on with her, but didn't ask. If she wanted him to know, she would tell him. He got a reply from her almost immediately and then sent her the money.

He had tried to start over again from scratch after he lost the business, but his two-faced business partner was the one with connections to paying customers. The only people he had contact with were techno geeks like himself. After working a few leads, he had managed to get a short-term contract with a small law firm, but then

*ellapr* contacted him through a consultant he had met at a security conference in upstate New York.

She had loaned him some much needed capital, then dangled the promise of long-term, good-paying work. But for that, he first had to go through a lengthy vetting process that included cracking an arduous and convoluted coding problem that took him a week to solve. Once on board with the group, they started him on small, harmless-looking tasks, working him up gradually to more challenging, and, as it turned out, more apparently illicit assignments. As he began to suspect that their activities might be partly, if not entirely, illegal, he had expressed misgivings, but then she sent him a long and detailed message, an exegesis of the origins of the group, their motivations and methods, and the lines they would and would not cross to achieve their aims.

His partner's betrayal had left him angry and pessimistic. Everywhere he looked he saw nothing but corruption and rot—in the cozy, self-dealing symbiosis between salespeople and corporate buyers, in the sinister cabal of lawyers and judges marketing their lofty principles to the highest bidder, in the governmental guardians of the people slithering silently from their flag-draped bureaus to the alcohol-powered salons of rich and pernicious “friends”. The group was out to fix all that. Laws contrived to protect the guilty, they would disregard. The black, fetid slime that flowed through the dark corridors of power would be cleansed by the sanitizing glare of the spotlight. None would be spared in the group's conception of the cyber apocalypse they were concocting. In their version of the end of days, a fifth horseman would ride, and his name would be called “Revelation”. He would shine a beacon on the cowering, terrified plutocracy and they would shrivel and die in agony.

To Haiden, still bitter from the humiliation of defeat, a life devoted to thwarting evildoers and protecting the downtrodden like himself was a calling that seemed worthy of his talent and effort, though the fact that the group had no difficulty sustaining a sufficient



and reliable cash flow made it that much easier to affiliate himself with their cause.

His role as de facto leader of the group came gradually after that. He tended to be somewhat more cautious than many of the others and certainly less radical in his views, so the consensus among them grew more and more to trust his equable judgment. Though *ellapr* had been with the group much longer and might have been a more obvious gravitational center, she didn't stay in regular contact and in fact her behavior tended to be introverted and mercurial at times, not the best qualities for a leader. Regardless, she wasn't interested in playing the mother hen, whereas Haiden took to the role more readily.

When he'd got nothing more back from her after sending the bitcoin, he continued through his usual stack of electronic messages, in order from most relevant to least, opening his Facebook account last, where he found a friend request from Robert Bersley, no friends in common, children's writer, *The Duck Who Couldn't Walk Straight*. So, he thought, looking to get a review out of him on Bookbag.

He did a little research before accepting the request, and what he unearthed galvanized his attention and absolutely made his day. The couple had done a pretty good job of sterilizing their internet presence, but no one was better at connecting the dots in cyberspace than Haiden Stills. He found an academic paper that gave them away, "Ethnographic and Epistemological Analysis of the works of Robert Bersley" in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. The clue did not come in the paper itself, but in the online comments. A reply to a comment suggesting that Bersley's stories tended to have a manifestly adult subtext read, "Are you aware that this guy is Mable Pembrose's husband? That should tell you something!"

Yes, it did tell him something. He had already figured out that Mable Pembrose equals Caroline Parker, and had spent the better part of a week probing for a way to break through the protective circle of assistants and agents that insulated such people from stalkers such as himself. He was sitting alone in his apartment, but he spoke out loud.

— I've got you, Caroline Parker. Come to papa!

The sting feels like a giant hypodermic needle stabbing into my neck. Tears roll down my cheeks and I'm flushed and perspiring. My face feels incandescent. Mr. AB takes my free hand and sits beside me.

— Ms. Pembrose! What a terrible thing!

I'm not usually at a loss for ways to express myself, but the only phrases coming out of my mouth at the moment are Anglo-Saxon expletives.

— Damn that hurts!

— You do not look well, Ms. Pembrose. Are you going to faint? I'm going to get some help.

I don't know what you can do for a wasp sting, probably nothing except wait for it to stop hurting. The swearing seems to help though.

— Shit!

My breathing is rapid and shallow and Mr. AB grows increasingly alarmed.

— I have been stung once, it's terrible. Is there anything I can do? I think I should call someone.

He takes the hand he's been holding and places it in my lap, then takes out his phone, but I reach up and stop him. I'm starting to recover a little and I really don't want to spend the whole day being fussed over in a hospital emergency room. I'm pretty sure I'm going to survive the bite. I wave my hand at him.

— No, no.

Slowly the pain begins to subside, but coherency still eludes me. A warm flow travels down through my body to the tips of my toes. He takes my hand again and pats it and I let him. It does have a soothing effect. After a few moments, I finally recover enough to be able to compose polite, complete sentences.

— Thank you, Mr. Bates.

— Alan, please.

— I think I will be all right, Alan, thank you.

I'm slightly woozy, whether from the sting itself or the shock of it, I can't say. I'm not seriously worried about it, but I don't feel entirely myself either. It's a little frightening and I don't want to be left alone.

— I would appreciate it if you would stay with me a little.

He nods, his dark eyes soft and gentle.

— Yes of course.

It takes a minute for me to really feel myself again. We don't speak, but he maintains an attitude of genuine concern. I'm glad to have someone around and I'm thinking that it might be better to have him along until I'm somewhere safe, and that a stiff drink is what I need more than anything.

— Mr. Bates, I'm going to the Boat House for lunch. Will you join me?

— The Boat House?

He seems disinclined and his face goes blank. He looks around, but there's no one nearby. He consents, reluctantly.

— I will walk with you.

He leads me out of the Ramble. He seems to know where he's going and I take his arm, partly because I'm a little unsteady but also because I like the feel of his sturdy bicep. It takes about ten minutes and by the time we get there, we're sharing a laugh about the time I found myself in Sicily flailing at a swarm of vexatious motor scooters, the term "vespa" being both a brand name for those demonic machines and the genus of the vile insect that stuck me in the neck.

The Boat House is high on my list of favorite places. Classic and elegant, its columned terrace presiding serenely over a raft of boaters gently rowing to and fro over the quiet waters of the pond, it never fails to bring a deep calm to my soul. Plus, they have linen napkins and tablecloths, and very good food.

It's not cheap, though. When we arrive, he is about to leave me and go his own way, but I find that I'm not quite ready to part company.

— Are you sure you won't join me?

He looks down shyly, and it suddenly occurs to me why he might be reluctant. I do my best to reassure him.

— It's my treat. Please, I very much enjoy your company. My husband is busy and I hate to eat alone in a restaurant. Everyone wonders what's wrong with you.

It takes a little more persuading. Perhaps he's not used to having a woman take charge and he's embarrassed, but finally he agrees.

We sit out on the terrace. It's a little too warm to be outside, but I want the open air and the view of the lake. I suggest the pork chops but he orders salmon. He doesn't drink. I order scotch for myself. It's so much better for what ails you than whatever a paramedic might have given me.

As he scans the bucolic scene laid out before us, I study his eyes and realize that they are multicolored, mostly dark brown but with a splash of emerald. Then he looks at me and I hold his gaze for a moment before speaking.

— I'm grateful to you for the rescue, Alan.

He chuckles.

— I think you hardly needed rescuing, Ms. Pembrose.

— Well, I was in the mood to be rescued.

He laughs abruptly and his eyes light up, giving me an impish stare. I can't help thinking what a charmer he is.

My drink arrives and I put it to my lips. Sitting back in my chair as the alcohol brings on its familiar glow, I survey the man, the latest addition to my collection of prospective literary paladins. He's very dapper, rakish even. The inexpensive but well-chosen suit befits his slim physique, and he had been wearing a tie at some point because I can see it poking out of his coat pocket. I'm thinking that he is most definitely going to be in my next book, but I need to know more, so I try to pry him open a little.

— What do you do, Alan?

It is, perhaps, a somewhat forward question, but he seems willing to talk.

— At the moment, I'm looking for a position. I have worked in many fields, normally as a supervisor or a manager of one thing or another. My last job was in a men's clothing store. In fact that is why I'm in the city today. I came for an interview.

— Did it go well?

— I'm afraid not. I'm overqualified or underqualified, it's not clear which. Both, I think.

The scotch is getting me tipsy faster than usual and I laugh a little too much at his quip.

I can sympathize with Mr. AB's situation. I once worked in an office, long ago. It's not difficult to imagine the scene, someone coming to look for work from out of town only to be told they are too much this, not enough that, and not quite the other either. Of all the perks that go with being a published author, not having to go on job interviews, and, for that matter, not having to take a job if it's offered, are high the list of advantages.

The man is evidently sensitive, cultured and refined, but I'm curious about his intellect.

— I know you don't read my books, but do you read anything?

— Yes, I read.

— Detective stories? I suppose not, if you haven't read mine. Biography? Science fiction?

He seems embarrassed.

— Nothing like that. Nothing in a very long time.

This line of questioning is making him uncomfortable. Perhaps he's not so intellectual. Too bad. Well, when I use him as a character in my writing, I can fix any such shortcomings easily enough.

— Do you come often to New York?

— This is my third trip. I can't say I like the city very much, but today is an exception.

My innocent question has led to a surprisingly intimate repost. He smiles tenderly, and so do I, more than I intended and, really, more

than is wise. It's naughty of me, but I'm finding it difficult to resist the dulcet song of this charming and sympatico gallant. So as not to get too carried away, though, I steer my cross examination back on track.

— It *is* turning out to be a very pleasant day. So tell me more about yourself. I think you are not from here, is that right?

— That's true, I'm an immigrant. I've been here five years.

— From England then?

— Yes.

— What part?

— London.

This, at least, is an entree to some conversation.

— I know London very well. I spent time there when I was in school. It was years ago. It's changed some. They didn't have the "Eye" then.

He's looking puzzled again, and uneasy. Before he can be my main character, he's going to have to become a much better conversationalist. I try to help him out of his confusion.

— The London Eye. It opened in 2000. I was there in the 90s.

He still doesn't know what I'm talking about. It's a little distressing. I try again.

— The giant wheel, in Jubilee Gardens, by Westminster Bridge.

Finally he gets it, or maybe he's just humoring me.

— Oh, yes.

How it's possible to be from London and not know about the wheel, I can't imagine it. My consternation is showing so he tries to explain.

— I lived near Marble Arch. I didn't venture very far from there, but yes, now that you mention it, I've seen it.

I think you must be able to see the Eye from Marble Arch, so maybe it's just that he didn't know what it's called. If he's really from there, he wasn't much in touch with the place. I decide to let it go.

We've finished our lunch and I order dessert, the truffle cake, while he settles for an espresso. I linger over the decadent indulgence,

my body wrapped in a flush of sensual exhilaration. I can't help feeling that I want more of this gentleman's company.

— I was thinking I might take a stroll through the Met. Have you been there?

He frowns.

— I haven't. Thank you for asking, it would be pleasant I'm sure, but I'm sorry, I can't today.

It's a disappointment. He pauses, though. He's hesitant, as if considering something, then gives me a questioning look.

— I hope I'm not imposing, but...

— Yes?

— If you should know of something that I might do, perhaps if I give you my number, you could let me know.

Well, he needs a job. We know that about him. I'm not likely to run into anyone who's looking for a men's clothing manager, but you never know.

— Yes, of course.

Maybe that's all it is, the stalking, the attention. Maybe he did recognize me from the TV and he's just looking for a way to get a lead on some kind of employment.

He gives me his number and we shake hands warmly, our eyes locking dangerously as we part. My step is light as I pick out a wandering, pleasant route to the Met, the slip of paper with Mr. AB's phone number simmering suggestively in the inner pocket of my wallet.



Despite the success that Robert had realized over the years through the efforts of his publisher, trips to their offices, located in a downtown Manhattan skyscraper, always put him in a bad frame of mind. The steel and glass building held none of the architectural charms that he felt must be essential for a proper publisher of books, according to his quaint and archaic notion of things—nothing to stir

the hearts and inspire the minds of the world's book editors, those stalwart wardens of humanism, taste, inspiration and catharsis, indeed, the guardians of civilization itself. In place of the cathedraled oak and stone chambers of his imagination, whose stained glass portals might stand sentinel against the dull, polluted monotony of a mean and mundane existence, admitting only the sparkling light of reason and truth, the offices in which he found himself offered nothing to kindle the spirit save endless slabs of painted wallboard bathed in oppressive overhead fluorescence enclosed in infinite sheets of glass looking out over a hundred other synonymously glazed erections.

The place of meeting was not even a proper room per se, but rather a "conference area" delineated by shoulder-height partitions sheathed in beige carpet, just a garish slash of red splashed across one side to interrupt the insipid sameness of the place. White plastic table and chairs completed the scene of a dystopian future in which all nuance was reduced to varying shades of nothing.

The Chinese takeout came in foam food containers. Rather than allow themselves to be distracted by the effort of wielding bamboo chopsticks, they settled for the plastic forks, conversing earnestly between mouthfuls of something called "seafood delight". An egg roll poised delicately in her fingers, Robert's editor sat stiffly on the edge of her seat, bending her tall, thin frame in his direction like a cobra ready to strike.

— Mr. Bersley, everyone here agrees, Snake has to be the main character, not Mouse. Please don't take it wrong, but your way of thinking about this is anthropomorphic and out of date. Even very young children today know that snakes eat mice, and that it's the way things should be. Real mice are not like Mickey Mouse. They don't sing and dance. They're rodents. When Snake finds Mouse in the garden, he eats her. He doesn't ask for directions. He doesn't admire her fur. He doesn't remark on the weather. He eats her. Anything else is a lie, plain and simple, and these days, here at Shorewood Editions, at least, we do not lie to children. And look, it just won't sell in today's market. You'll get terrible reviews.



Robert eyed the egg roll as it darted from side to side, punctuating each element of her disputation with its greasy inflection, then took a few moments to recover his composure before attempting to lay out a defense.

— Jolinda, I've heard all that and I've considered it very seriously, though I have to say that I looked it up and Mickey Mouse merchandise is something like a billion dollars, so somebody is still buying Mickey.

The woman glared at him, tilting her head and putting on a sanctimonious expression.

— This isn't Disney. We publish serious children's literature. You weren't complaining when we published *The Duck Who Couldn't Walk Straight* even though no one else would touch it. It wasn't Donald Duck, was it.

This was true. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and gave her his most attentive look.

— No, it wasn't Donald Duck, but Mouse isn't Mickey Mouse either. She has serious issues. She wasn't happy staying in the nest and needed to get out and explore the world. That is something that mice do, I believe, even postmodern mice. That's the story, isn't it. It's Mouse that is on the journey, not Snake. Snake is just waiting under a rock for Mouse to come along.

— And eat her.

— But don't you see, there's no story there! What is the story then?

Jolinda's phone hummed and she put down the half-eaten egg roll, looked to check who was calling, then tapped the phone and turned her attention back to Robert.

— Mr. Bersley, you're the author. I think you can figure this out. Malcolm is very firm on this. Snake must eat Mouse. Snake is the protagonist.

Malcolm, the editor-in-chief of the modest, independent publishing house that put out Robert's books, was an individualist, which meant that when he got an idea into his head, it stuck to his gray

matter like superglue. Robert sighed gloomily and resigned himself to the inevitable.

— If Malcolm wants it, then it must be done. You understand that the work is completely written, that this means redoing at least half of it.

— Well, it's a children's book, isn't it? We're talking about ten pages. It's not *War and Peace*.

— Ten pages, ten weeks.

Jolinda nearly choked on a shrimp, gasping slightly and washing it down with a sip of cola before replying.

— Ten weeks? Are you serious? Ten weeks?

She seemed shocked. He wondered if she had ever written anything in her life. Nothing published, he knew that. He stood his ground.

— Yes, ten weeks.

She shook her head grimly, then looked again at her phone.

— Well, we need to finalize this in four weeks.

— Yes, I know.

He stared at the rebellious red swath while she paused to type a reply to an email. On the one hand, he knew that he had done some of his best work under pressure. They had required substantial changes to “Duck” with precious little time remaining before the deadline to make the Christmas season, and on that occasion, at least, their criticisms were valid. His additional work on it had resulted in a much superior story. On the other hand, he chafed at the thought of going through another caffeine-fueled work jag like that one, its weary, manic nights alternating with fretful stretches of daytime anxiety. For one thing, it had put a terrible strain on Caroline. She had been at the point of fleeing the wretched disorder that his peripatetic exertions had created.

Jolinda finished her email and tendered him a satisfied smile.

— So, do we have an understanding?

Twenty minutes later, his reserves of self-control running dangerously low, he burst out onto the sidewalk, snorting like a frantic

bull as he plunged angrily into the swirling crowd of office workers hastening back from their mid-day break.

In his mind, he shouted, “Where is Caroline!”.



Robert’s call finds me at a display of Islamic arms and armor. He desperately wants to know what I’m doing. I tell him.

— I’m at the Met, Robert.

It must have gone badly. He’s nearly breathless, his voice urgent and unsteady.

— I’ll be there in fifteen minutes, if I don’t have a meltdown.

Oh, it is bad. I answer in my most soothing and consoling tone of voice.

— Please try to relax, darling! You’ll have a heart attack! Take a deep breath. Just get a cab and I’ll meet you out front when you get here.

He hangs up. Besides the aggravation that his hyperbolic professional anxiety inflicts on my peace of mind every time he blows a gasket, I’m more than a little concerned about the harm it will unleash on his middle-aged physiology, however athletic and vigorous he may be.

When I was interrupted by Robert’s distress call, I had been enjoying a quiet and contemplative moment, rooted in a trance for some unknown span of time, a curved gold dagger with scabbard the focus of my attention. The pearl handle, inlaid with gold and emeralds, its guard encrusted with a burst of diamonds bounded by two large jades, drew me into its ancient world. I could imagine the weapon clutched to the breast of Saladin as he slept, ready to slice into the heart of a Templar assassin lurking in the shadows of the sultan’s inner sanctum—the smooth haft in hand, the blade flashing with a flick of the wrist, at once an instrument of brutal violence and an article of exquisite beauty.

I allow myself a few more minutes with the seductive relic, then make my way out, loitering along the way to savor the quiet of the “mausoleum” before passing through the heavy doors of the columned portal and giving myself over to the nursing of Robert’s distemper.

The grand steps of the Met are baking in full sun so I wait in the shade of the entranceway. When the cab lets him out, he looks like he’s about to explode, and as soon as he’s within earshot, he begins unloading about Jolinda and Malcolm and whatever else is wrong with everything and everyone everywhere. Little is required of me during this phase of his decompression, save to nod and give voice to my sympathetic concern.

Before long, the storm begins to calm. He pauses to breathe and I offer a suggestion, though purely a rhetorical one.

— That’s intolerable, I think you should find a different publisher.

I know he doesn’t want to go through *that*. It’s worse than going on job interviews and the thought of it brings him to an abrupt halt.

— Well...

He’s evidently talked out for now, so I quickly change the subject.

— I’ve been having quite a day myself. I met an interesting man in the park this morning and we had lunch.

This news is just the thing to put his other issues on the back burner.

— Oh?

— He recognized me from the TV this morning. He says his name is Alan Bates. Looks like him too, but I have my suspicions.

His expression betrays a slight umbrage at my mention of the name of my former fantasy lover. His voice takes on a certain coolness and he lets fly with a harmless mini-jab.

— I thought your Alan Bates was dead but there must be others of course.

I've never known Robert to exhibit real jealousy, but then I've never given him reason. It's good to know he still cares enough to get annoyed. I show him the swelling on my neck.

— I was stung by a wasp. It was ghastly, it still hurts like the devil. I was wobbly for a while and he looked after me, so I asked him to lunch. He's in town looking for work, says he's from England?

— But he's not.

— Not so much.

He adopts an exasperated tone of voice.

— You're a regular dirt magnet. Where do you find these people?

— The park is a good place. They find me, you know. I'm famous.

I'm baiting him and he doesn't much like it.

— I wish you'd be careful. You could end up...

— ...published?

He sighs. I've won and he knows it.

— Some day you'll write something and it will end up being your obituary.

— Some day, but not today. Come on inside. There's a room I want to show you.

I take him to the exhibit. The cavernous spaces proclaim their dominion over time with quiet force and it calms him down still more. Cradling us in the arms of its marbled protection, the venerable gallery, with its endless silence, quells our demons and soothes our wounds, giving us a few treasured minutes of marital contentment as we admire the archaic but elegant instruments of death.



The pacifying effect of the museum is short-lived. At dinner, Robert is back at it, exercising his considerable talents as a living thesaurus to lambaste Malcolm in particular and publishers in general. He savagely skewers his *foie gras brûlé* with lime poached apple,

tarragon and toasted *brioche*, then finishes off with a cruel dismemberment of our shared chocolate cake with hibiscus sorbet. It's a one-man symphonic harangue, meticulous in its thesis and a study in erudition. Even when he's being boring, he beguiles me.

By the time we get back to the hotel, he has exhausted his vocabulary, but he paces around, still trapped in a whirlwind of torment. I manage to sit him down and get him to check his email, welcoming anything that might distract him from his worries. He opens the computer and stares at it for a moment, but then lets go with an excited exclamation.

— Aha! Your man Haiden Stills has accepted my friend request!

— He's not my man, darling. So, who is he?

Robert focuses intently on manipulating the mouse and keyboard for a minute or two before announcing success.

— Well, he has his own web site, and there's a resume. Is it safe to click on a PDF?

— It's OK.

The document that opens has an embedded video and I tell him to click on that too. To our amazement, we're treated to a chorus of ethereal sounds wafting gently over a collage of green mountains and tropical islands, while a sonorous voice recites a cataclysm of spasmodic, desultory verse. It finishes off with a request to leave feedback on his website. I twist my mouth into a pretzel shape and cross my eyes, pronouncing judgment on it.

— What twaddle!

Robert is as amazed as I am.

— What kind of *job* do you think it is that he's applying for with a resume like *that*?

I purse my lips and place a finger to my head in mock consideration.

— Activities director at Cuckoo's Nest State Hospital?

Robert grins broadly and chortles.

— He's no Jack Nicholson, I can tell you that!

Like a car wreck that we can't stop watching, we have to look at it again, and this time we're completely broken up. It's scarily, uncannily, ridiculously, perfectly awful. The belly laughter makes for such good medicine, just what the doctor ordered. Whatever mental condition the unfortunate man labors under, I'm grateful to him for offering us the balm of a moment's hilarity.

I take a breath and let it out, then Robert closes the laptop and we sit together on the sofa. I grab a magazine while he does the New York Times crossword. We're still breaking out in giggles as Robert reads the clues and first one of us then the other offers a word from Haiden Stills' psychotic poetry as a possible entry. Finally, sighing deeply, the sniggering under control at last, we settle into the pleasant enjoyment of our evening together.

After a trying day, I delight in the quiet companionship we share. It's something I've only learned to appreciate since I've been with Robert, to be side by side and apart at the same time, each in his and her own bubble, but connected, with only the gentlest of ties between us. The convivial interlude lasts for a cherished, fleeting hour before the phone rings. By the time I'm done talking to my agent, Robert has finished the crossword. I give him the news.

— I'm invited to Senegal.

He shoots me a surprised look.

— Will you go?

— It would help book sales. I'll have something more to talk about on the Today Show. I want you to come with me, though.

He stares at the ceiling for a moment before replying.

— I will if I can work on "Mouse".

I come up to him and wrap my arms around his neck, kissing the thinning hair at his temple.

— You'll have all the time in the world, darling.

The plan settled, I let him know that I'm in need of his husbandly attentions. We retire to the hotel's excellent *boudoir* for a rapturous encounter before passing dreamily into a restful night's sleep.



A series of soft peeps and a flashing red icon alerted Haiden Stills that someone had viewed his resume and clicked on the video, which, besides regaling the viewer with a sample of his poetry, also triggered a software flaw that, in turn, sent a sequence of eccentric and peculiar events cascading through the user's microprocessor, memory, hard disk and network connection like a phantasmagorical Rube Goldberg device, finally allowing Haiden to gain full access to the victim's computer.

He enjoyed snooping around in other people's lives. Almost everyone he came across seemed strange to him. The trivial flotsam and jetsam of their minuscule existences, downloaded from easily pregnable hard drives, fascinated him but also disturbed him. Was he insane or were they? The question irked him.

It was Robert's life he was perusing now, laid out helter-skelter across a labyrinth of file directories, emails, texts, Google searches and social media contacts—the cacophony of passionate entreaties, indifferent narratives and tender inducements making up the soup of a man's life. The aimless jumble of accumulated endeavors perplexed and repulsed him, and yet he yearned to grasp it, concluding though, in the final analysis, that however many facts about the person he might hold in his hands, the algorithm that drove Robert Bersley through that muddled, superfluous reality would and must remain forever indecipherable.

He found an electronic version of Robert's book, *The Duck Who Couldn't Walk Straight*. Had he ever read a children's book? He couldn't really remember. He must have read them, everyone does, but none of the stories had left any lasting impression.

The fact was, no one had ever been happier than Haiden Stills to leave his childhood behind. What memory he had of it, he sequestered in the spectral shoe boxes and old suitcases tucked away in the dim corners of his mind, gathering dust against the day when he



might try to find meaning in it all. It wasn't that they were such terrible memories. He'd certainly had every advantage that a person could have, growing up well-off and the child of loving and attentive parents. It's just that whenever he ventured into the domain of his reminiscences, they knotted in his brain like the tangled stems of an unkempt garden.

Why, when he fell in love with a girl, did her parents call up his parents and tell them that he should leave her alone? Why, when he spoke up in class, did the teachers get upset? Why, when he woke up on Christmas morning, was he haunted by the ghost of discontent? Why, when he walked into a room, did everyone go quiet and stare? As a child, the world tried hard to swallow him, but could only spit him up. As an adult, therefore, he was resolved to be in control. The world would meet him on his terms, or not at all.

He read Robert's book. He read about how Duck couldn't walk in a straight line like the others, and how the others made fun of him, until one day, they all walked straight off a cliff, all except Duck.

It moved him. Yes, that's who he was, a duck who couldn't walk straight, an awkward, clumsy duck. And it was true, he knew, that the others, those who walked the straight and narrow, were marching off to a tragic end. He would save them if he could, those who were worthy, as many as could be saved. As for the rest...

Robert Bersley had the vision, he decided. The man could see it, where it all was leading, even if he might not know it yet. He might be worth saving. Caroline was another matter, but he would save her too, if he could. She was, after all, the focus of the operation he was currently engaged to carry out.

He'd got the information from *ctepan47*. There was something called a Halls letter on her. Exposing the scheme would entail a huge amount of risk and would be the most impossibly difficult operation he could imagine. The thing made for such an outrageous abuse of government power, though, that it could not be permitted to stand, whatever the cost. They all agreed on that.

He thought about Snowden. Was it worth it? He'd changed the course of history but ended up a long-term guest at the Vladimir Putin Hotel. The guy must have regrets. He must have known what it would mean, but he'd done it anyway. Haiden asked himself for the Nth time if there was any other way, and decided, as he had N minus one times before, that there was not, not for him.

He clicked casually through a few pages of hacker chat, but his mind was elsewhere. It was one thing knowing that Caroline Parker had been made a patsy in the global grudge match being played out on polished marble in the edifices of American government. Proving it would be quite another.

We've used our miles to upgrade to business class on Delta and have slept the nonstop to Dakar. I'm awake before Robert is and peer over at him reclining in the next seat, eyes closed, enjoying the last dregs of a good night's rest.

It's been some years since the last time I was in Senegal. It was before I knew Robert. Looking at him now, napping serenely, it's hard to believe there was ever a time when he wasn't by my side.

If I ever imagined the sort of man who would induce me to give up the pursuit of love as a breezy pastime and embrace it as a full-time stewardship, it certainly wasn't him, at least by any outward appearance. The Alan Bates of my juvenile fantasies was my model counterpart, deriving mostly from his portrayal of the moody D.H. Lawrence character from the film *Women in Love*, a man who struggles to fully realize his sexual nature in its purest form.

Robert wrestles with his many complications, but sexuality is not one of them. No one would guess it, upon casual acquaintance, but sex comes as easily to him as it does to a stag in rut. Once aroused, the weighty cloak of intellect is cast off along with his trousers, unleashing a feral beast lurking within. I suppose I'm addicted, in a way. Putting up with his frequent episodes of inquietude is the price I pay for my regular infusions of carnal satisfaction.

He wakes up and we enjoy a good breakfast and then the plane descends over the Atlantic Ocean, the golden radiance of the morning sun drenching the city's rocky shore and low, sandy-colored masonry buildings in a still, even light. He looks out the window and nods, letting me know that he's up for it.

— It looks interesting.

— It is.

We touch down at last on the thorn of the hook-shaped peninsula called Cap-Vert, the westernmost point of Africa, arriving refreshed, with Robert in a good mood and ready to experience

something new, perhaps. He's not a great fan of travel to unfamiliar places, but once you get him going, he's game. He won't like the airport, though. It's one of the worst, and I decide that I'd better prepare him.

— The arrival here, it's a trial. It's maybe the worst ever. Prepare to be attacked by hawkers and watch out for pickpockets.

It turns out to be not as bad as I remember, though it's bad enough. Robert grumbles his way through the experience but comes through it like a trouper. We're both relieved to discover a young woman waiting for us with a handmade sign that says "Ms. Pembrose" in neat italic calligraphy.

Yacine is something between twenty-five and maybe thirty-five and looks stunning in a multicolored flared dress with bold streaks of red and black set off against splashes of olive and tan. She's from the university where I'm going to be interviewed and takes us in her Peugeot to the Terrou-Bi, newly expanded and now supposed to be the best hotel in the city. On the way, Robert zones out in the back seat while I get to know Yacine in French. He understands it a little, but strains to follow conversations and compose replies and so quickly becomes enervated when forced to deal with it.

I find out that Yacine is a graduate student in international relations at the University of Dakar, is married and has a child, but that her husband is now with a younger woman, which suits her fine because he was "not like her", which I take to mean he wasn't smart, which she clearly is. She asks if I have children. There are times when I've found the question difficult, but not today. If I had children, I probably wouldn't be where I am now, and I'm glad I am. I give her my stock answer.

— No, it just never happened. I've had a different kind of life.

I know well enough that for most people, especially in a country like this, a woman without children is considered a great tragedy, so her response doesn't surprise me.

— That's sad.

— It is sometimes, but I’ve made my choices and I live with them. I don’t think I would have become a writer, not a well-known one, anyway, if I’d had children.

She can’t comprehend that and I don’t expect her to. She knits her brow as she speaks.

— Is it so important, being a writer?

— If you have to ask that question, then it’s not, not for you. Once I started on that journey, I never doubted that it was important. It just was.

The half-hour trip passes along the ocean, which is hardly visible for most of the way with buildings and walls blocking the view. I ask Yacine about her boy, who is four. She takes out her pictures and explains all of his many remarkable accomplishments. Finally we pass through a gated guard house to the hotel complex where Yacine leaves us off and we check in.

The staff speak good French and some even speak reasonable English. We’re booked in a “Suite Panoramique” with a large terrace overlooking a pleasant-looking beach, but it’s the immense pool, spectacularly decorated and wonderfully unique, that catches the eye, an unusual light-colored geometric tile design set against a dark blue background, giving the impression of a tropical lagoon. Robert stations himself on the suite’s balcony, taking it in. He’s a pool person, and from the eager look on his face, I can see that he’s keen to give it a go.

The main appeal of the place for me is not the pool so much as the restaurant. They have a great one here, and I’ve made sure that we’ll be in attendance for “Gastronomic Thursday”. I’m looking forward to enjoying the *blanquette de veau*, prepared to an elegant perfection as only the best French chefs know how to do it.

I go up to Robert and reach my arms around him from behind.

— Welcome to Dakar, darling.

I can feel him smiling, even though I can’t see his face.

— Not so bad.

— So long as you stay in the hotel. We’ll see what you say when we go into the city.

He sighs.

— I don't really need to go with you tomorrow, do I? I really need to work on "Mouse".

It's as I expected. I was sure he would be happier if he never set foot outside the hotel. I reassure him.

— It's OK, I can manage.

I'm glad for it, really. I'd rather not have him tagging along with nothing to do, whining about the heat, the noise and the untidiness. I'm thinking that spending some time by the pool will help him work through his issues. He's worried about me though, the sweet man. He turns solemn.

— Just let me know the details, where you're going to be and when and with whom and all that, just in case.

— Yes, a good idea.

I leave him to stare longingly at the beckoning water while I get Yacine on her mobile and make the request. She promises a fax within the hour. When I return, I rest my cheek on Robert's shoulder. Hotel rooms always make me amorous, five-star ones at least, so I don't mind that we spend so much time in them.

When I was single, between marriages, I passed some heady intervals luxuriating in the embrace of skillful and sympathetic lovers. After Robert came along, though, I never wanted to be with anyone else. I traded the narcotic ecstasy of that serial eroticism for the quiet durability of a constant and resolute lover. With Robert entering my life, the turnabout was as natural as the next beat of my heart.

I'm devoted to the man, and I feel sure I would never cheat on him, but old habits *can* still sneak into my ruminations from time to time. This moth is careful not to fly too close to the candle, but that doesn't mean she can't flutter her wings. Anyway, as I tell myself, meeting new and captivating characters is part and parcel of the job of a writer of popular fiction, and there's no law that says the work has to be unpleasant. In short, the slip of paper with Mr. AB's phone number is whispering to me from its niche in the pocket of my wallet. I'm in

the mood for a dash of harmless caprice, and so I urge Robert's mind in the direction that it's already taking.

— What a fantastic pool! Why don't you go for a swim?

He doesn't need much convincing.

— You should come too.

— No, I'll take a bath. The tub looks splendid to me right now.

Quick as a rabbit, he's showered, lotioned and into his swim shorts, then out the door like an escaping teenager, leaving me with a wave and a quick "see you later". I take my phone with me to the tub along with a bottle from the mini bar. With the hot bath exuding the aromatic enticement of hyacinth-scented bath oil, I dial the number scribbled on the scrap of paper, then slip my naked body into the water's sensual, salubrious embrace.



Yacine put down her phone, then cast a serious look at the fellow graduate student sitting across from her at the university office where they worked, passing on the message in an anxious tone of voice.

— She wants an itinerary.

The man thought for a moment before answering.

— Well, then give her one.

Her computer bore the signs of a dedicated and industrious graduate assistant, with the caps of certain often-used keys worn away and the screen pocked around the edges with sticky notes displaying the various accounts and passwords she had access to. She brought up the university web site and browsed for names and addresses, then looked up again at her colleague.

— What if she calls someone? She speaks good French.

— She won't. Just the same, don't put any phone numbers.

The young woman created a new document on her computer, switching between the document and the web browser while copying and pasting.

She considered herself a model of efficiency and was convinced that nothing in the department could function properly absent her taut focus and rigid attention to details. Most of the time, though, she kept her feelings about her strong abilities to herself. It wasn't wise within the power structure of the university for a woman to seem too ambitious as it could invite a backlash. With Assane, though, she tested the limits of her female assertiveness. They had known each other since childhood and he was used to her impudence. It charmed him, in fact.

Contracting for the venue was his responsibility, but she wasn't satisfied with how things were going.

— Did you check with Abdoulaye? Is everything ready?

As always when she challenged him about anything, her friend responded with nonchalance.

— You know what he's like. I haven't been able to reach him. But don't worry. He will take care of things one way or another. It's not so simple you know. He'll call when he has everything arranged.

She wrinkled her face, then glared at her accomplice. From what little she knew about this Abdoulaye, she didn't consider him reliable and said so.

— He'll call when he's spent the money on girls. He'll call us to get him out of jail.

Assane gave her a toothy smile. It was his usual response to her nagging.

— No, he's promised. He'll do what I told him. Don't worry. He'll do it.

She frowned and closed her eyes in frustration. Everything with Assane was so easy. As far as he was concerned, to simply think something was to have it done, and when it was not, he was always ready with an excuse. She didn't share his faith in the brash and street-wise Abdoulaye, who had drifted ghostlike into their acquaintance like the Harmattan wind that sweeps in from the Sahara, and she harped on it.

— You should have arranged this yourself.



He squeezed his lips together, the teeth disappearing behind a patronizing grin.

— Abdoulaye knows people, knows who to talk to. You don't just start walking around this city asking for things. If you're lucky they will ignore you, and if not, maybe worse, if you seem like you'll bring them trouble. Or they will tell you "oh yes", and take your money, and then, you never see them again.

This much was true. Making arrangements for facilities to conduct the interview of an important American, with people who would be discreet and not ask too many questions, though certainly possible, needed someone who was comfortable in ambiguous situations, and probably, given the subdued status of women in their backward-looking country, someone of the male gender. She had to accept that practical reality. But she still wasn't satisfied.

— Anyway you should have gone with him. He has used the money to hire a girl, I know it, for sure. Should I put that the American is visiting Dr. Pape Sene or Dr. Ibra Sarr?

— Dr. Sarr is in France. Put Dr. Sene.

She hated the deception involved in what they were doing, but the professor had convinced them of the necessity of it. The university would never approve an invitation, so they would have to do it themselves. The professor himself had to avoid any direct involvement, but he was a wealthy man and would provide the money, in the interests of academic freedom and to bring about the opportunity for his graduate students to meet the author of the only American bestselling novel ever to be set in their country, however ignorant and trivial that book might be. And what's more, it would be a chance for his students to educate an influential international luminary concerning a country and a people that she had written about but which she seemed to know so little of. Yacine had another question and looked up again at her colleague, whose eyes were glued to his own computer screen—probably, she thought, scrutinizing photos of women on Facebook, his favorite waste of time.

— And a cultural event. We promised her a cultural event. And lunch.

— See what's at *Place du Souvenir Africain*. There's always something there. Make up some restaurant name.

— Le Petit Escargot?

— No, La Grosse Vache.

An enormous gloat filled his large, childlike face. Caroline Parker was neither fat nor cow-like in any way, merely an amply-sculpted woman of a certain age, but Assane was a champion of the universal masculine sport of commenting on women's bodies. Yacine pushed back.

— You are repulsive! Anyways, she's not stupid, she will know.

— She won't even give it a second thought. Besides, she will never think that it refers to her. No woman thinks she is fat.

Yacine was what most men would call voluptuous, but wished she could be more like Anais Mali, the leggy, emaciated African fashion model who had once graced the cover of *Vogue*.

— I think I'm fat.

— Fat! You're so thin! I would like to fatten you up!

If Assane thought he was flirting with her, he was barking up the wrong tree. She knew very well what he meant. The thought of another pregnancy at a time when she was focused so strenuously on her degree and trying to make something of herself was the most repugnant thing he could have said. She scowled at him.

— Assane, you don't know how to talk to a woman.

The young man assumed an attitude of mock seriousness, folding his hands on the desk, as if receiving a lecture.

— Then you must teach me. I will take you to a good restaurant and while you are telling me what I should say, I'll put some meat on your bottom so I can take you home and thank you properly.

She completed the document, ignoring Assane's rude choice of restaurant name in favor of her own, clicked on the icon to send it to

the printer, then seized her cohort square in the eyes with a look of contempt calculated to go with her stinging reply.

— It would be the last thing you do as a man, Assane. I have eaten bulls testicles. Yours are smaller.



The bath envelops my body like a warm *hammam*. Slowly the steaming floral-scented brew soaks the tension from my muscles while the little bottle of intoxicating liquor I'm sipping loosens my synapses as well. I listen anxiously to the ringing sound on my phone until the familiar baritone voice answers, dripping with testosterone-charged honey.

— Hello?

Caching my delight behind a professional demeanor, I confirm who it is I'm talking to.

— Is this Mr. Alan Bates?

There's a pause. I assume he would remember me as it has only been a few days, and he seemed to have been affected by our charming repartee in the park as much as I was, but I may be presuming. It is my experience that men normally do not muse over their random encounters as much as women do, but as it happens, this one has, or says he has anyway.

— Yes it is. Ms. Pembrose? How nice to hear you! I have thought about you very much since our meeting and I have been hoping you would call.

My toes are tingling. I carefully scoot down lower to let the water lap over my shoulders as his syrupy voice oozes inside me, unlocking my hidden places, urging me to heed its secret summons. I control myself, though, doing my best to maintain a pretense of formality.

— I have been thinking about your job search, Alan. I do know a good many people, and perhaps I can help. I just need to know more about your qualifications and experience.

— Yes, of course. But I must tell you, I'm with someone at the moment.

A wistful sigh comes over me. It was foolish to imagine that the comely and personable Mr. AB would be spending his time alone.

— Oh, I see. I'm sorry.

My tone of voice gives away the direction of my thinking and he quickly picks up on it, the hint of a lilt inflecting his words.

— No, it's not like that! An acquaintance is all. I'm at his apartment. I stepped into another room to take your call.

So it's a man. Maybe my first thought when I spied him in the Ramble was right after all. Maybe he *was* there looking for male companionship. The thought is disheartening.

— I see. Don't let me keep you. I can call you back another time.

I'm ready to hang up but his manner becomes emphatic.

— There's no hurry! He will wait a few minutes. It's very good to hear from you! I'm *delighted* you called.

So he says. I'm not sure I believe him, though I would like to.

— I will help you find something if I can. If you can't talk about it now, I will call you back at a more convenient time.

There's a pause, and then his tone changes to something more urgent.

— It's not just that. Ms. Pembrose, I felt something when we were together that day, something I don't usually feel. I think you did too.

The words send a charge of electricity through my flesh. A man can say anything, of course, and they do, and I was never quite sure what his game was and I'm still not. Even so, he *sounds* sincere. But he's coming on very strong. I don't want my erotic musings to morph into any kind of reality. I want him in my fantasies, in my next book maybe, but I not in my bed. I carefully craft a reply that will avoid encouraging him too much, but not discourage him either.

— Yes, it was a very pleasant day. You were a very agreeable companion. I hope we will be friends. So, where are you now? Still in the city?

He seems willing to accept my cautious parry of his overly-intimate suggestion, acceding to the change of subject.

— Not in that city. I have gone to another, Philadelphia.

— Which is not your home city either, I take it.

There's another pause. Despite the mischievous pleasure I'm allowing myself with this long-distance encounter, my bunkum detectors are on high alert, and I'm challenging him a little. It prompts him into a confession, of sorts.

— I must tell you the truth. In fact, I don't have a home city. I don't actually have a home. That's not to say that I'm "homeless", as in living on the street or anything like that. I travel, I look for work. Sometimes I find it for a while and when it's done I move on. If I ever find anything that lasts, that will be home.

It's a plausible explanation for everything—why he doesn't seem to fit anywhere, why he approached me looking for a connection. He's a roving factotum who sells men's clothes or works at whatever. I can't help feeling that his wandering ways are a match for my own. I'm enchanted by the man and want to believe him. I profess to him that his vagabond lifestyle is something we have in common.

— I travel so much that it sometimes seems like my home is Brigadoon.

— Oh? Where is that?

I stifle a chuckle at his continual failure to catch on to my cultural allusions.

— It's a mythical place. It doesn't really exist.

He laughs warmly.

— In that case I can tell you honestly that I've never been there.

I'm grinning from ear to ear. His sense of humor delights me. I explain it to him.

— It was a place in a musical, a Scottish village that appeared for only one day every one hundred years.

He gets it right away. His quick wit and intelligence come shining through.

— A place cut off from the rest of the world.

— Yes. A tiny, self-sufficient paradise where there's nothing to do but make love to the one you adore.

For a moment there's no reply. I've let my mouth get ahead of my brain and now I've not only encouraged him, but as much as issued an engraved invitation. The silence continues for too long as I try to find the words that will rewind the conversation back to a safe place, but finally he does it for me, though not without acknowledging the implication.

— If there were such a place, Ms. Pembrose, I would certainly make it my home, even if only for a day.

I'm relieved. He's a kind and perceptive man who knows where I'm coming from and respects that. He thoughtfully guides us back into platonic territory.

— So, is New York only a temporary home for you too?

— Yes, *was* a temporary home. I've left New York. I'm in Dakar. I'm being interviewed at the university.

There is another long silence. It seems that this news may be perhaps something of a shock. It was a little quick how things came about, after all, jumping on a plane and flying off to another continent with little planning. The break in our conversation goes on for so long that I need to check to make sure he's still on the line.

— Alan?

More silence. When he speaks at last, his voice betrays an anxious concern.

— Ms. Pembrose, do you think that is wise? They banned your book. Some people there may have very strong feelings about what you wrote. You may be in danger.

I give a little laugh. He's a world traveler so he ought not to be so worried about a simple trip to Africa, but he takes me for a shrinking violet, evidently. My voice turns a bit cool, despite myself.

— I'd rather be in danger than be dull. I like a little adventure. But anyway, it's safe enough here. This is a civilized country. Civilized enough.

Again, there's a hiatus before he responds.

— Many civilized countries aren't safe these days. Please, Ms. Pembrose, don't go anywhere alone.

He's lecturing me and I'm not in the mood for it.

— I'm not. There's a lovely young woman from the university taking care of me. Besides, I'm something of a celebrity. It makes me a target, but, well, I do feel that they will send the cavalry if I run into any trouble.

He's confused again.

— A military unit?

— No, well, maybe. It's just an expression. Never mind. I'll be fine. I've been in uncomfortable situations before and always managed to wriggle myself out of any difficulty. And I'm a writer. You can't be much of a writer if you live your life hiding under a rock. I'll get on the morning show again, it will help my book sales, and if there's a little excitement thrown in, all the better.

He becomes staid and somber. It's time for another confession.

— I myself have been to Dakar. It is not a place where a gracious lady such as yourself would wish to become involved in anything... adventurous.

Well, now it's my turn to be shocked. The man is footloose for sure, and Dakar is a major city and the European gateway to Africa, but even so, I can't help but think that it's a surprising coincidence. And why didn't he tell me that he'd been to Senegal when we first met? He knew perfectly well that I'd been there and written a book set in that country.

— You have? You do get around, don't you.

— My heritage is Algerian but I have lived many places. I lived for two terrible years in Dakar.

I switch into French, as he undoubtedly speaks it if he lived in Senegal.

— You probably didn't stay at the Terrou-Bi.

— Is that where you are? No, of course I didn't stay in a luxury hotel. I don't want to disgust you by describing the places I stayed. It was a very wretched time for me.

Yes, he does speak very good French, which he slips into as easily as putting on a comfortable old coat. Of all the things that might draw me ever more deeply under the spell of such a fascinating creature, discovering that he is articulate in my beloved second language tops them all. I'm well aware that I could be yielding to my emotions way too much and using my intellect much too little, so I steer things back onto solid ground.

— Don't worry. I'll be back in a few days. You should email me your resume. I'll text you the email address. When I get back, we'll get to work at seeing if we can find you something. I'm very grateful for your concern. You seem like someone I would like to help, if I could.

— I'm most grateful, Ms. Pembrose, but *please, please*, don't take any chances in Dakar.

His voice is surprisingly urgent. I've never had the least trouble here before and I can't imagine what he thinks could happen to me.

— I won't. Don't worry. Thank you Alan.

The tantalizing conversation, compounded by the alcoholic buzz, has had a stupefying effect on me, such that I bobble the phone, almost dropping it in the bathwater. As I make a grab for it with my other hand, there's a loud splash, which I'm sure he can hear, but he very politely makes no mention of it.

— Be careful, Ms. Pembrose.

— I will.

The conversation with my new Alan Bates, who I'm finding to be a more than adequate successor to the original one, has left me



flushed and libidinous. I very much hope that Robert will be invigorated from his swim and in the mood for some horseplay when he gets back. I don't want to let this pleasant aura of erotic anticipation go to waste.



The glimmering, liquid blue glass of the hotel's ocean-facing pool presented a serene picture of luxurious indulgence, dissolving Robert's apprehensions about his first trip to Africa. He felt gratitude towards Caroline for bringing him to such a delightful hotel and prescribing the perfect therapy to ease, at one stroke, the debilitating symptoms of jet lag and the emasculating effects of obdurate American book editors. Mouse and Snake were a thousand miles away, and he was starting to feel that they could damn well do as they pleased, at least for the next hour or so.

He plunged in and started swimming his laps. A competitive swimmer in college, he had kept up a training regimen of more or less regular pool sessions, mostly indoors at hotel pools or as a paying guest at the Y. The outdoor pool under the tropical sun was a rare treat.

Twenty minutes later he pulled himself out of the water, dripping and contented, and laid his rejuvenated body on a lounge chair. Alone except for a tall, slender young woman, black as coal, sunning herself at the far side, he closed his eyes and let the heat bake his torso while a sea breeze lightly stroked his arms and legs. Once dried off and warmed up, though, he moved under a patio umbrella to protect his pale skin from from the broiling rays. With his mind cleared and the sound of water lapping gently at the edge of the pool, he settled into a dreamy reverie.

Had it really been five years that they'd been married, he thought. It hardly seemed possible. He reflected on how improbable it was that they should ever have meet. What were the odds? And yet they had, in manner that was both unlikely and, all the same, not unusual—at a stadium filled nearly to capacity, with her sitting in front

of him talking to a friend of hers who was trying to explain the game of baseball but making a bollocks of it. He had become aggravated with the man's incompetent commentary and couldn't help intervening aggressively to straighten him out. It turned out she was doing research for a book, she had said, one she never finished. Instead, the two of them started writing a new story together, a tale of two writers who meet at a ball game and, as they often joked, hit a home run.

He regretted the lost years before they met, though perhaps they weren't ready for each other until that point in their lives—she, throwing herself at, what would you call them, dubious, inconstant, precarious men, and he, well, pretending to be a husband and father. Yes, he mused, it had to wait until the time was right, their differing tastes and ambitions honed and refined along divergent paths but coming together at just the moment when a syllogism was possible. Logical, he thought, that's what they were. They were logical.

He heard splashing, opened one eye and spied the woman, a black figure knifing through the water, her round buns filling the yellow and orange bathing suit like ripe fruits. He closed the open eye but the image remained. He wondered, is this where supermodels go when they're not supermodeling? Dakar? The question had passed from his mind unanswered when he heard wet footsteps and felt drops of water on his feet. He opened both eyes this time and saw that she was standing in front of him.

The woman said something in French and he tried to awaken the recesses of his mind that supposedly understood that language, but before he could decipher her first utterance, she launched into another. None of it meshed with his limited vocabulary. As he was about to recite his standard "speak slowly please I don't speak well", she lost patience and slipped her bikini top off one shoulder, revealing a startlingly well-formed breast. That, he understood well enough. "No thank you," he told her, "I'm married," or at least that's what he thought he said, but maybe not, because she became irritated and let fly with a string of apparently negative utterances. "I'm sorry," he managed finally, "I'm not interested."

That offended her even more, though he was sure he had said *that* right. She marched off to her chair, took her towel and left, to his great relief. Having sex with a French-speaking prostitute, even if he were so inclined, would not have been worth the exertion required to navigate such hazardous shoals in that perplexing language.

The blessed state of relaxation had evaporated and was now out of reach. Caroline, he thought, must be finished with her bath by now and draped in one of the hotel's plush Egyptian cotton robes. He gathered himself up for the trip back to the room, his vision of unwrapping a moist Caroline from her flocculent cocoon catalyzed by the provocations of the black *fille de joie*.



Outside it's ninety, but the room air conditioning is set ice-box cold for Robert's sake. And on top of that, I've had a hot bath, all together making for a heavy carbon footprint, never mind the flight from New York. I ask myself if there's anything more damaging to the environment than a bestselling author on the prowl. It's fortunate there aren't too many of us.

The electronic door lock clicks and Robert steps in. I'm standing by the bed in my robe, making a show of arranging my lingerie, but I can see his eyes settling on my cloaked body. His voice carries a jaunty note.

— Enjoy your bath?

I reply with equal cheerfulness.

— Immensely. Enjoy the pool?

He makes a face.

— I did, thank you, until some woman tried to speak to me in French.

I give him a wry smile and a coy look.

— You just need more confidence. You're not all that bad.

— Oh yes I am. She showed me her breast.

I raise my eyebrows in mock horror but it's not at all surprising. I had seen signs of the sex trade when I was here before.

— Oh! How wonderful!

— No. Too skinny.

I place the underwear in a drawer and then pull back the bedsheets. Now it's Robert who's raising his eyebrows. He motions with his hand so as to say he'll be just a minute and makes for the bathroom.

My close friends expressed thinly veiled surprise when I took up with Robert, but they wouldn't have guessed how well bestowed he is, given that he isn't tall and doesn't have large feet or a large nose. What is just as important as length and girth, though, is that he knows what to do with it. And, of course, he cares.

After we had been on a couple of dates and I'd had a taste of his charm and intellect, I'd offered him our first sex just to be charitable. So imagine my surprise when his member appeared in all its glory and he wound me up tight as a clock spring, eliciting multiple deep-body convulsions that left me quaking like jelly. I made up my mind right then and there that I wanted to keep him close at hand so he could work his wonders on me on a permanent basis. "Old faithful", I call him.

When he returns, he lays me back on the bed and opens the robe. We're both feeling greedy and impatient, so I pull him to me and let him have at it. He holds on until I'm at my peak, then spasms, and I answer in kind. The pleasant, mindless sensation stays with me as I stretch out, sprawled across the oversized bed. Before long Robert is breathing gently, asleep. I enjoy a mellow twenty minutes of serene pleasure before getting up and making myself some tea.

I've just set the cup on the dining table to steep when there's a knock at the door, so I close up my robe and check the peephole. A young man is holding a piece of paper, the fax from Yacine, I assume. As I open the door and retrieve the document from him, I remember that I need to give him a tip. Robert is still senseless so I ask the man

to wait. It takes me only a minute to retrieve the money, but when I return, he is gone.

I'm feeling a little bad about that. I know how much the tip must mean to him and wonder why he didn't wait. Perhaps he was just shy because I wasn't dressed or maybe he didn't understand. It's just the kind of confusion that one always runs into in countries like this and it can be frustrating and bothersome. I decide that I'll arrange with the concierge for him to get something later.

I say to myself, "Africa, a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma". Churchill spoke of Russia when he used those words, but today they are more suited to the wild and ancient continent that gave birth to the human race, our Eden. When I was here before, I sometimes had the feeling that I was riding a train that wasn't quite on the track, slipping and rocking from side to side and about to derail at any moment. The sensation always discomfited me and the episode with the porter has brought back that feeling. I shake it off, though. If you let little things get under your skin, you end up withdrawing from the world, and that's the last thing I want to do.

I look over at my becalmed lover. He's resting peacefully, perfectly content. For someone who seems at times to live in a permanent state of apprehension, it's good to see him so relaxed. It makes me all the more glad that he's not coming with me to the interview. A couple of easy, restful days spent lazing in the equatorial sun are just the thing to rejuvenate his creative juices and ease his frazzled nerves. He's my dear, sweet man, and I need him to stay that way for a long, long time.



It was late when Abdoulaye finally called and by then Assane had almost lost hope.

— Abdoulaye, what have you been doing? It's dark already. What have you been up to?

— Assane, I have to tell you, it's not so easy what you want. Everyone is twitchy about this.

Such news was distressing. If they couldn't arrange things on schedule, it might be possible to delay the interview, but there was a risk that the woman would become annoyed or suspicious and go home.

— Don't tell me that. You had plenty of money. Money buys anything, didn't you tell me so?

— Yes, but, well, an American celebrity...

Assane scolded him.

— You didn't have to say so much about it.

— But that's the thing, everyone knows. Everyone knows about her. Word gets out from the hotel, the staff, the girls. It's what everyone is talking about, the woman who blasphemed, here in the city. They are afraid. Not of America, you see. Of the Nigerians. Of Boko Haram.

Assane was well aware that a couple of Senegalese had been arrested for preaching extremist theology, but he didn't consider it to be a serious threat.

— They are not here, Abdoulaye. You don't believe all that, do you? Are you like a child who is frightened of the *croquemitaine*?

— I'm glad to hear that there's no danger, but you cannot tell that to anyone. The imams were arrested, yes, but no one believes that is the end of it. They see jihadis in every *pañe*. So they think I am maybe a jihadi. Wouldn't you think that?

Assane was becoming doubtful of Abdoulaye's commitment to their cause. Maybe Yacine was right about him after all.

— No, I wouldn't. Yacine says you spent the money for a girl. Did you?

— Yes, how else could I find out anything? The girls know what goes on here. One of them let me know where to go for what we need.

Assane had a sinking feeling. Yacine was certainly right about what Abdoulaye would do with the money.

— More than one, then.

— Yes, more than one. Until you pay them, they won't tell you if they know anything or not, and sometimes they don't know, or maybe they are frightened to say, or they are only able to pass you on to another girl who might know.

— I hope you were up to the task.

— I was, do not worry about that.

Abdoulaye had claimed to have knowledge of the ways of the streets, but Assane wondered how true that could be given that he seemed to be so easily played by the girls, or maybe it was simply that, with a pocket full of money, he had no particular motivation to perform his mission with any great expediency.

— And so?

— Something can be arranged. There was one man who was not afraid, and I cannot say for sure that I can trust him, but who can you say that about in Dakar? He took some money. There are people who will help us, he says, but we need to bring more.

— How much?

— He wouldn't say. He said to bring as much as we have.

— What, fifty thousand, a hundred thousand, two hundred thousand?

— Well, he was sure five million would be enough.

Assane nearly choked. He couldn't believe his ears.

— What? Five million! The professor didn't give me five million!

— I don't know, you must bring all you have. You can get more?

— I can try. He is most eager, but he has already spent a lot to bring her to Dakar. I don't know if he has it.

The professor was known to be a major force for liberalization in Senegal, and though he was well off, he was not a billionaire. It could be more than the man could do, or would do. Abdoulaye, for his part, had always questioned the risky scheme and did so now.

— I still think this is foolish. This is so much trouble to bring. Is it so important? What is he thinking? Nothing will change. Nothing changes here.

— Not if everyone thinks like you, Abdoulaye. I have read this book. It is trash. It is supposed to be about about Senegal, but in this book, we are all supposed to act like idiots. We talk like children—not even like children, like baboons, if baboons could talk. It’s like, “scratch my back please, I hate you, you are a bad woman, let’s go to pray, the imam will get you, blah blah blah”. It’s a cartoon of Senegal, a bad cartoon, where I am Daffy Duck and you are Bugs Bunny. And this Detective Bampoky! He is the silliest thing you can imagine! Strutting around all day like a peacock, whispering with people, worried only about his clothes, solving crimes so absurd that I cannot even think of them without laughing. And this is what people who read this book will think of Senegal, that we are simple-minded and farcical people who can hardly take care of ourselves and only care about eating and having sex, except when we are praying, and then we are like robots without brains. No, Abdoulaye, this book is a terrible thing, and this foolish woman needs to understand that in Senegal, we are human beings with minds and hearts that we use, every day, in everything we do. That is what this is about. Don’t you see that? When she writes the name “Senegal”, it is a libel.

Abdoulaye understood his friend’s passion for their cause, but was not sanguine about the prospects for achieving their goals.

— It may be as you say, but the woman is an American. She is deaf and blind to us. You can stand right in front of her face and shout at her and she will not see you or hear you. We are risking our lives for nothing.

— She will see us and hear us and remember us, and then when she goes on television, she must tell the real story of our country. You must arrange for the room for tomorrow morning with the money we have. Will you be ready by then?

— I’ll be ready... to go to prison! Will you be ready, Assane?



The mention of prison gave Assane a chill. His great uncle had been incarcerated for seven years and had spoken of it. Assane knew from his studies that Senegal spent only six hundred a day per person on prisoners, which was enough to buy six eggs and nothing more. But he was sure that it would not come to that.

— No prison. The professor has assured us.

— In the ground then. At least it isn't prison.

Assane paused to consider the possibility. Death seemed unreal, abstract. He was too young to take it seriously. He smiled as he replied.

— In the ground then.

— *Salaam aleikum.*

— *Waleikum salaam.*

The morning in Dakar dawns humid and hazy. After an ample breakfast in the room, I'm fueled up for whatever the university has in store. Robert, for his part, is energized and ready to spend the day in the hotel attacking the problem of which of his animal characters will be eaten and by whom. Anxiety is starting to creep back into his voice, though, so I've told him to take it easy and "let it come". It always works for me.

Yacine picks me up at 9:30. My brain is still on New York time and it's a little early for me, but not too bad. As I stifle a yawn and climb into the back seat, I realize that I've neglected to arrange the tip for the bellboy who delivered the fax, but decide that I can take care of that when I return.

Yacine introduces Abdoulaye, the driver, and Assane, who is next to him in the front seat. As we start off along the shore, she turns towards me to speak.

— We think that you will meet some interesting people today, Ms. Pembrose.

I smile politely.

— That would be nice, though I hope that they find *me* interesting, as I'm the one being interviewed, yes?

A slightly embarrassed look crosses her face, but then she quickly recovers her poise.

— Yes, I'm sure they will. But we want the day to be worthwhile for you also.

I nod politely.

— I'm sure it will be.

The way in which she imagines it will be a rewarding experience for me and the way I expect it to be rewarding are entirely different, of course. She is thinking that I will appreciate the cultural

exchange, but for me, the news coverage back home and scoring a good bounce in book sales are the main reasons I've agreed to this.

Yacine continues with her train of small talk.

— Your book is enjoying success in the United States, is it not?

— Yes, thank you. It's doing well. I have many devoted readers built up over the years. It's a particular audience, those who read detective stories, not everyone does, but yes, those who do are very loyal.

They *are* very loyal, bless them, but after all, I give them what they want.

— Do your readers travel much, do you think?

— Some do, I expect, but like most people in my country, they stay within the borders, go to the mountains or to the beach for vacations and not much else. Almost no one comes to Africa, I'm afraid.

Yacine seems genuinely surprised by this. I'm sure she can't imagine how negatively most Americans would treat the idea of traveling to what is perceived, even now, by a majority of my fellow countrypersons, as the "dark continent".

— Why is that, do you think?

I could be unsparing and give the real reason for their reluctance, being the fact that ninety-five percent of Africa is occupied by people whose skin colors range from *café au lait* to jet black, but I choose instead to give a sugarcoated answer.

— Well, Americans, we're used to having things as we like it, everyone speaking English, everything done the American way, and for the most part we're not much used to dealing with foreigners. America is a big country so there are lots of places to go and not have to contend with language difficulties and different ways of doing things.

I'm reminded that Robert is a case in point, insofar as these reasons are concerned. Since he's been with me, he's gotten over his annoyance with the metric system, electrical outlets and how the rest of the world writes dates differently, but he still talks loudly in English

in hopes that people will somehow understand him. Yacine is a little dismayed.

— It sounds boring.

— It is. That's why I travel, at least to countries where I speak the language.

This inspires her with an idea.

— More Americans should learn French!

I laugh. I love the language but as much as I try to encourage him, Robert just hasn't been able to develop any facility with it. I'm reminded of my new French-speaking friend and the thought of him momentarily distracts me before I continue.

— Well, yes, they should. They should do a lot of things, but they don't. Americans are just fine the way they are and they don't pay much attention to people who try to tell them what they should do differently.

I'm pondering the truth of this when I notice that we're passing the airport. I can't say that I ever got to know Dakar very well when I was here previously, and that was some years ago, but even so, I get the feeling that we may be going out of the way. The university was supposed to be closer than this to the hotel. I mention it to Yacine.

— Excuse me, but aren't we going to the university? I think we've gone too far.

She gives me a reassuring look.

— It was necessary to change the location of the interview. The room we planned to use was needed this morning. We are going to another office which is also equipped for recording.

This is so typical. It's exactly what I remember from the last time I was here, everything changing at the last minute and no one telling you about it. I suppress my displeasure because it's useless to complain. It's just how things are done in such places. I do have one request, though.

— I will need to tell my husband about the change of plans.

— Yes, of course.

— Can you tell me please exactly where we are going?

Yacine asks the driver for the address and he shrugs. Yacine apologizes.

— I'm sorry, I'm afraid we don't know the exact address, but Abdoulaye knows where it is, and when we get there, we will find out and you can tell your husband.

Well, perfect, they don't know where we're going either. I decide to call Robert and give him the updated non-information. I get voicemail and leave a message.

— Robert, there's a change. I'm not going to the university. We don't know the new address but I'll text you with it when we get there.

It's a perfectly normal message for Senegal, but Robert is likely to find it odd, so I try to reassure him.

— Don't worry about me, everything is fine.

I look out the window again and find that we have entered an area of congested, shabby-looking buildings. I recognize the area and it unsettles me.

— We're in *Parcelles Assainies*?

Yacine is looking straight ahead, composed and unflappable.

— Yes.

I'm starting to become slightly disturbed and my voice reflects the urgency of my question.

— What are we doing *here*?

She answers matter-of-factly.

— This is where we are going.

We pass some more or less modern but not very upscale buildings.

— There's a recording studio here?

— Yes. It is what could be arranged on such short notice. I hope you will not mind.

— So long as there are no riots, I won't mind, no.

There were frequent demonstrations in this section of the city a few years ago, but Yacine doesn't seem concerned.

— None are expected.

She is quite serious but I don't find it comforting. Riots, like heart attacks, often arrive unexpected. It's time for me to raise a strong objection.

— Yacine, I don't feel safe.

She turns to me and speaks in a recalcitrant tone of voice.

— Ms. Pembrose, I'm sure that as an experienced traveler, you know that these dangers you refer to are very much exaggerated, and that no one wishes to have trouble with a foreigner.

As an experienced traveler, I know that the dangers of wandering off to places you don't expect to go and where you shouldn't be are very well *not* exaggerated and that foreigners, far from being immune to attack, make very attractive targets. Mr. AB's dire warnings are ringing in my ears and I make up my mind to put a stop to it.

— I must insist...

Abdoulaye turns his head slightly in my direction.

— We will be driving right into an enclosed garage attached to the studio. It won't be necessary to be outside at all.

Sure enough, moments later we turn down a narrow alley, where Abdoulaye beeps the horn and someone opens a garage door from the inside. We drive in and the door is quickly closed behind us.

There is only a dim light but it's enough to see that the walls are covered with wrenches and various other tools. Two young men approach, and when they open the car doors, there is barely enough room to get out. I consider my options, then steel my voice as forcefully as I can.

— Yacine, I'm very much concerned. I want you to take me back to the hotel. *I insist.*

She frowns and looks at Assane, who makes a vigorous effort at persuading me.

— Dear madam, many people have gone to great trouble and expense to arrange this day for you. It may be a small thing to you, but it is not a small affair to us. You have spent some time in Senegal. You

are familiar with our country. This is not New York City, but it is also not *Heart of Darkness*.

The reference to Joseph Conrad's novel of savagery, both European and African, in the Belgian Congo, shames me slightly. He's right, of course. I make myself remember that this is a civilized place and these are civilized people, if somewhat disorganized. And it seems that they aren't going to be easily dissuaded. My concerns are still giving me the jitters, but I corral my fear and get out of the car. Abdoulaye leads the way as we pass through a door to what does indeed seem to be a hastily thrown together recording studio, complete with a baby-faced sound engineer frantically twiddling his dials.



Robert didn't get from the bathroom to his cell phone in time to answer Caroline's call, but he listened to the voice mail and then ruminated only briefly over the incongruity of their going someplace where they wouldn't know where it was until they got there. She had reassured him, though, and he realized that it was perfectly logical that you might know where a place was without knowing the street address.

Camped alone for the day in a luxury hotel in which his every need was but a phone call away, and despite Caroline's admonition not to let himself get stressed out, he found no excuse for not coming to grips with the *Mouse and Snake* crisis. He ordered room service, then arranged himself in a comfortable chair for a short meditation, which was just the time it took for his chai and finger sandwiches to arrive. He filled a cup, then took a sip. The warm drink soothed and comforted him as he settled his mind to the task at hand.

He sat at the hotel room desk and took out his Pentel Tradio Pulaman pen, his go-to writing instrument when he had serious work to do. Like a Jew will don a kippah "in order that the fear of heaven may be upon you", taking up his Pulaman meant he was prepared to do

battle with the deadly sins of literary listlessness and intellectual insignificance.

He retrieved a few sheets of hotel stationery from the desk drawer and began by writing a brief outline of the plot.

- *Mouse leaves the nest*
- *Mouse meets Snake who strikes up a conversation*
- *Snake eats Mouse*

The status quo. So now to brainstorm plausible continuations. He reminded himself that, for a writer, it was important to keep an open attitude and not dismiss ideas too quickly. That was the essence of the creative process, to let the ideas flow, as Caroline often said, unimpeded, without prejudice. Before critiquing any possible continuations, he would make as complete a list as possible, fearlessly and without hesitation or apprehension. He took another sip of tea and started making the list.

- *Snake spits up mouse*

That was one, now for some more. Various ridiculous things insinuated themselves into his thoughts but he adhered to the discipline of not rejecting any notions out of hand, and so wrote them down uncritically.

- *Mouse eats her way out of Snake from the inside*
- *Snake and Mouse meld, producing a snake-mouse*
- *It's only a dream, Mouse is not really eaten*
- *Mouse becomes a mouse guardian angel who forgives Snake and watches over him*
- *Mouse's spirit takes over snake's mind so that Snake becomes Mouse*
- *Due to quantum mechanics, Mouse is both eaten and not eaten at the same time*



The last one appealed to an impulse he'd often had to write children's science fiction, though he was sure he wouldn't get very far trying to explain quantum mechanics to his preschool audience, especially considering he didn't understand it himself. But he kept the idea for now.

He topped up his tea and stared at the list, carefully analyzing, debating and speculating about each item in turn and making some crude drawings of possible snake-mouse creatures. After going through the list several times, he crumpled it and dropped it in the waste basket. The drawings followed close behind.

His inspiration for the original *Mouse and Snake* had been the Native American tale of the "jumping mouse", and so he recalled the story to mind. A mouse hears a roaring sound and goes off to find out what it is, which turns out to be a river. At the river, a frog tells him to jump, and when he does, he sees sacred mountains and wants to go there, but it's dangerous because an eagle will eat him. A buffalo keeps him safe along the way, but only at the cost of one of the mouse's eyes, and then a wolf helps him to find the medicine lake in the mountains but it costs the mouse his other eye. At the medicine lake, the mouse becomes an eagle.

His own story was much simpler. It was for very small children, and as lovely as the American Indian parable was, anything as complex and occult as "jumping mouse" risked rejection by parents and teachers alike, let alone what the critics would do to it. In his story, Mouse sees a lawn sprinkler and goes off to find out what it is, but gets lost and then various animals help her find her way home, tired but wiser.

As he now found himself in Africa, he decided to see if there were any African folk stories about mice or snakes. He found one on the internet, *The Baby Mouse and the Baby Snake*. In that story, the baby mouse and baby snake were taught by their parents not to become friends because snakes need to eat mice. Well, he thought, Malcolm would like that one. Then he found another, *The Man and the Snake*, a variation of the classic tale, told in many different ways in

different cultures, about someone who rescues a snake but is then bitten, the snake proclaiming “you knew I was a snake when you helped me”. It also supported Malcolm’s thesis but didn’t seem to offer Robert a way forward. Finally he discovered *The Black Snake and the Eggs*, about a chicken who gets upset when a snake keeps swallowing her eggs and gets revenge by tricking it into eating one that’s been hard boiled. That plot, he thought, might have possibilities.

He would have to think about it, but his brain was getting tired so he decided to give it a break. He got up from the desk and went to the balcony to look at the pool. It was safe, no one was there.



The hyperkinetic recording engineer looks up at me briefly before going back to fussing with his equipment. Folding tables and chairs are set up in a “U” shape with microphones mounted on desk stands. I’m offered a table with its own microphone and chair in the center.

The setting has more the appearance of an inquisition than an interview. A team of young men and women fidget nervously in their seats, personages who I take to be students from their evident unease and serious demeanor. I direct myself to Yacine.

— Where is the professor?

She replies in a somewhat artificial tone of voice.

— The professor is delayed. He will be here shortly. He says to begin without him so as not to detain you longer than necessary.

This does nothing to help me feel more secure but I go along with it on the grounds that I do want to get the whole thing over with.

Each of the students has a paperback copy of my book with numerous small strips of paper stuck between the pages. It looks like more of an academic exercise than the kind of softball interview questions I usually get from the media. It also seems like it might take longer than I expected and the folding chair they’ve provided is

uncushioned. Plus, I don't see a bathroom, though I'm sure there must be one somewhere.

I'm suddenly sorry I agreed to this but tell myself that, like most ordeals, if you can simply endure them, they will pass. I sit down and take out my cell phone, then look at Yacine.

— What is the address of this building, please.

She makes some whispered inquiries, but receives nothing except shrugs and puzzled looks.

— No one seems to know that, Ms. Pembrose. We will continue to try to find out and let you know.

I *really* don't want to be here. Bogeys are popping up everywhere on my radar. I could make a fuss, and probably should, but that's hard for me in this context. When I'm in a foreign country I'm reluctant to seem like a "typical American". And, I don't like to think of myself as being such a crybaby. After all, there's no obvious, immediate threat. I'm still weighing all of this when the proceedings begin.

A plump, smartly-dressed woman sitting across from me is in charge. She checks her notepad, smiles up at me disagreeably, then directs herself to the recording engineer.

— Bouba, is everything ready?

He looks at his dials one more time and replies.

— Yes Mariane, you can begin.

With that, she turns back in my direction and gives an introduction.

— Ms. Pembrose, my name is Mariane Akanni. Thank you for coming to this interview for Cheikh Anta Diop University. We are broadcasting live on Radio Futurs Medias, Dakar. For our listeners who may not be familiar, Ms. Mable Pembrose is the author of a popular American novel called *The Prancing Jacana*, which is the story of a Senegalese detective named Salif Bampoky. Salif is homosexual, and for that reason, and others which we will raise in this interview, the book has been banned in Senegal. The members of our panel, who are graduate students, have read the book and will be

questioning Ms. Pembrose about it. Our first question is from Thierno Diouf. Thierno, what is your question?

Thierno, with his short haircut, dark-rimmed glasses, close-cropped moustache and white tee showing under an unbuttoned dress shirt, is the most trendy-looking of the group. He grins at me eagerly.

— Thank you Mariane. Ms. Pembrose, my question is this. Why do you think that a Senegalese police detective would become a homosexual?

What an odd question. It takes me a moment to unscramble in my mind the multiple assumptions and beliefs behind it before deciding that the question is backwards.

— I think you mean, “why would a Senegalese homosexual become a police detective”, yes?

Now it’s the students who look puzzled. They glance at each other, then Thierno continues his questioning.

— I think we understand why he would become a police detective. It is because his father was a police detective. What we want to know is, since he’s a police officer, why would he want to be a homosexual?

This is just the first question and already I’m up against a wall. It’s apparent that the gulf of misunderstanding between myself and these students is deep and wide. I explain as simply as possible.

— Salif does not want to be homosexual. He is, but it’s not a choice. Yes, he chose to be a police officer because his father was one, but he did not choose to be gay. He was likely born that way.

Confusion has turned to consternation. Thierno seems confounded by my response, and quite alarmed. Another student, a woman wearing a black shawl head covering, manages to break the uncomfortable silence.

— Good morning Ms. Pembrose. I’m Awa Gueye. Do you mean to say that Allah made Salif homosexual?

Oh-oh, here we go down the religious rabbit hole. This is a lose-lose question for me. Either I must answer that God did not make Salif, or that God made him homosexual. The air conditioning in the

room is not quite keeping up with the growing heat and I'm beginning to get flushed and sweaty. But after a little reflection, the response comes to me in a moment of inspiration. I look at the woman and manage a pleasant smile.

— God didn't make Salif, I did. Salif is a character of fiction. I made him a homosexual.

This seems to be an acceptable answer for now. Of course, if Salif isn't real, it's not a problem, is it. I've been to university. I'm prepared to discourse on realist versus objectivist versus relativist theories of art all day long if that's what they want. Thierno is emboldened by my response and takes a stride in that direction.

— You are saying that in writing your books, you do not try to show the truth. You do not try to show how people live, or how they should live. Which means that your writing is false, is it not?

The word "false" is not one I would use to describe my writing, but to allow the man a point, the words "fiction" and "false" are, after all, synonyms of a sort. I try to clarify as best I can.

— My readers, they are Americans mostly, you see, they want stories that are unusual, speculative, that ask "what if?". What if there were a gay Senegalese police detective? What would that be like? It's like saying, what if there were some great beast like two different animals combined, like a horse and a lion. What would that be like? It can be pure fantasy. My readers don't want to know about ordinary things, what they live with every day. When they sit down with my book, they want to be taken away from all that. My stories, that's what they give you, they are an escape.

A bearded man wearing a floor-length gray shirt and knit skullcap, who has been staring intently at me since the moment I walked in the room, leans towards a microphone.

— I am Oumar Mbengue. I believe, Ms. Pembrose, that if such a beast existed, it would be a sign to you that the end of the world was near, would it not? In fact, such a story has been written already. It is in your Book of Revelations.

His penetrating stare unsettles me. I don't like God talk. I don't know much about religion or the Book of Revelations in particular and don't care to. But perhaps his point is helpful anyway.

— Then you understand what I mean?

He speaks calmly, like a kindly teacher explaining science to a ten year old, but it's not science he's extolling.

— What I understand, Ms. Pembrose, is that Allah is the creator of all things, except that which is made by Shaitaan. You say that Allah did not create the character of Salif in your story. Then it must be the creation of Shaitaan.

Despite my best efforts to remain poised and professional, my annoyance is beginning to show through and I'm a little to short with him, despite myself.

— Mr. Mbengue, Salif is the creation of Mable Pembrose. That's all I know.



Alan Bates had boarded Royal Air Maroc 201 departing JFK at 8:30 PM for Casablanca and was trying to sleep the seven hour flight, but without success.

The fact that he had bought the ticket with his own funds was the least foolish thing about his decision to make the journey. What he was doing was unauthorized and could have unpleasant consequences. Try as he might, though, he could not persuade himself to remain on the sidelines.

He asked himself if it meant he was in love with the woman, but didn't know how he could answer such a question. There was no denying that certain feelings had found their way into his normally insensate mentality. Searching his mind for something to convince him that she was just another of her species, just one among billions, possessed of such flaws and shortcomings as would make her merely ordinary and expendable, left him blank. She was not.

However small the part he'd played in it, he'd been personally involved in the business of leading her down the garden path. He knew that if it hadn't been him, it would be someone else, but it *was* him. He couldn't escape his participation. He'd had no specific idea of what they were going to do with her, but he could not deceive himself that it was going to be in her best interests.

Would he have done it if he'd known exactly what unfortunate scenario they had planned for her? Yes, he would have, when she was still nothing more than a rich and spoiled celebrity doing silly and insignificant things, no less susceptible than any other random, indifferent soul to be cast for a role in the existential drama in which he was a player. But now, since that morning in the park, there was a thread, however thin, running between them, slight but taut, tugging painfully on a sensitive part of him that he thought had callused over long ago.

At one level, he recognized the absurdity of his actions. He told himself that, once he got to Casablanca, his mind would clear and he would turn around and come back. He would leave her to whatever fate the universe had arranged, pay her whatever sadness might be due and then go on with his life. But for the moment, *that* life seemed no longer possible. On a sunlit summer day, with the breeze brushing his face and the laughter of a charming, intelligent woman dancing in his ears, he had left the main route and was now on a bypass to a place he did not recognize but somehow needed to discover.

He'd had feelings like this once before. There had been another, so many years ago, in his native Algeria. Then, he had abandoned the girl who had captured his heart, chasing something that seemed important to him at the time but which now he couldn't reconcile with the person he had once been.

It seemed as if he had not chosen the life he lived, but rather it had chosen him. In France, where he had migrated when he was a young man, the paths to a full life for someone possessed of a certain intellect appeared limited. Moody and restless in his adequate but uninspiring job in the family food business, he had gravitated into the

orbit of a seedy and solitary neighborhood bookseller who had encouraged his interest in English language, tutored him and introduced him to the works of British novelists—Graham Greene, George Orwell, D.H. Lawrence. But then, stealthily, his curriculum had been expanded to embody aspects of the bookseller’s activities that were driven by ambitions of a distinctly non-literary nature.

The bookseller was a spy, and the person now known to Mable Pembrose as Alan Bates had become one too, with the same easy resolve as when one tries on a new suit of clothes.

But what he was now had become divorced from his true self. There had been terrible things, things that he could not live with if he were ever to accept the notion that it was he who had done them, so he did not. It had been Alan Bates, or Charles Dunsmore, or Yance Zafer, but never him, who had done these things. But the old mind tricks weren’t working this time. He could no longer hide real actions behind a false name. It was him, after all. He, and no one else, had packaged an unsuspecting woman for delivery into some loathsome circle of hell.

He took a pill, hoping for a few hours of unconsciousness, restful sleep counting among the many blessings of simply being alive that he had lost along the twisted road to this point in his life. He wasn’t sure what he was about to do, but he knew that whatever it was, he would do it.



For the moment, the students seem to have put aside their efforts to trap me into uttering blasphemous remarks and have turned instead to their bookmarked passages. A woman, her long hair braided in neat cornrows, takes the microphone.

— Ms. Pembrose, I am Mariéma Sambe. My question is about the title of the book, “The Prancing Jacana”. I have read the whole book, and nowhere does it mention a jacana, though there is a picture of this bird on the cover. What is the meaning of this title?



What a relief it is to be out of the religious quicksand and on to safer ground.

— Thank you, Mariéma, for your question. You may know that the jacana is a bird that is found in Senegal. It has very large feet so that it can walk on lily pads. When it walks, it lifts its feet high, which is like a horse when it “prances”. Prancing is also associated with being proud. Detective Bampoky has large feet and is proud. So it’s the detective who is “the prancing jacana”. He lives in difficult circumstances and so needs to tread carefully.

The friendly-seeming Ms. Sambe, however, has a treacherous follow-up to her innocent-sounding query.

— I researched this bird, and found that it is also called the “Jesus bird”.

Oh crap. More quicksand.

— Yes, because it seems to walk on water. Jesus walked on water, is supposed to have, on the Sea of Galilee.

So once again, a general state of alarm arises among the students. The bearded Oumar takes up the cause.

— I think you mean for this detective, who is Muslim, to be like Jesus. Is that so?

— No, certainly not.

Diallo picks up the thread. It’s like I’m being tag-teamed.

— Are there not parallels with the life of Jesus? Detective Bampoky does not know his father, who comes from a “high place”. He is tempted by a male prostitute and appeals to the spirit of his father to make him strong. When he arrests the bankers for committing frauds, a false friend betrays him, then he leaves Dakar, but says he will “come again”.

I’m dumbfounded. Yes, this is the plot of my book, but I have never thought of it in those terms.

— Well, I see how you might come to that point of view, that is interesting, I agree, but it’s not what I had in mind when I wrote it.

I wonder, have I plagiarized the Bible without realizing it? I haven’t thought about Jesus since I was a child attending Sunday

school but I suppose those stories have been lurking in the back of my mind, waiting to burst out on the page. Well, if I have copied from the Bible, at least I can't be sued as it's solidly in the public domain. There is one important difference between my story and the story of Jesus, though, which I quickly point out.

— And anyway, the detective is gay, and Jesus wasn't, so far as I know.

Immediately the words come out of my mouth, I wish I could take them back. Oumar leaps to the attack.

— It seems that the detective in your story is supposed to be a kind of homosexual Jesus.

This latest turn places me completely on the defensive.

— No, he's gay, but he's not Jesus. And anyway, even if Bampoky is like Jesus, gay or not, it may be a problem for Christians, but it's not a problem for Muslims, I don't think, is it?

Complete bewilderment among my questioners. Oumar proceeds to straighten me out.

— Ms. Pembrose, I think you don't know very much about Islam. For Muslims, Jesus is the Messiah and his words are the words of Allah. He is in heaven and will return on the day of judgment. We don't believe he is God, though. We believe there is only one God.

Damn. My illiteracy with regard to religious matters is showing like a slip that's a little too long for the dress. I rush to shore up my argument.

— I see. Well, I'm sorry, I didn't know that. So it does matter, but that's not what I intended. I didn't mean to say that Bampoky was Jesus, or like Jesus, or anything like that.

Oumar is gentle but firm, schooling me in the ways of the devil.

— I believe you, Ms. Pembrose. Shaitaan is cunning, and unless you pray as we do, he may sneak into all that you do like the snake that he is and turn your works against Allah.

I'm properly chastised, humiliated, hot, and thirsty, and the hard chair is bruising my back and my bum. I'm hoping this will be over soon.

— Yes, well, I see what you mean. I will take that to heart. Thank you.

— If you are sincere in that sentiment, Ms. Pembrose, I can arrange for you to learn the *shahadah*, our statement of faith. It is simple to learn and reciting it is all that is required to join the family of Islam.

It's a good thing I'm so miserable or I wouldn't be able to hold back from laughing out loud. In the event, I manage to preserve my dignity and avoid insulting Islam even more than I already have.

— I don't think, I'm Presbyterian you see. I'm not, at my age, it's not that I have anything against Islam, I don't, it's just that I've always been Presbyterian and my family are Presbyterians, so I think I'll remain Presbyterian for now, but thank you for your offer.

Oumar suddenly seems twice his size, his soft voice becoming stentorian as he utters what is certainly a devoutly held belief.

— Your Presbyterian religion will not save you from Shaitaan.

His words come out like the voice of God Himself, or at least Charlton Heston, commanding me from above. What can I do but acknowledge it.

— Well, I don't know, maybe not. I will think about it. It's something to think about, certainly.



Robert opened his eyes to the sight of dazzling sunlight glinting off the ripples of the pool. He had nodded off, and a part of his left foot sticking out from under the shade of the patio umbrella was turning red and beginning to sting.

He collected himself and headed for the concierge, hoping to get some aloe for the burn. The lobby seemed empty though. No one was behind the counter. He heard voices drifting out from an open

door behind the front desk, but no one answered his polite “hello is anyone there?”, in English or in French, so he stepped behind the counter and looked into the back room.

Several hotel employees were gathered around a radio. It took him a few moments, but then he recognized Caroline’s voice and announced his presence.

— That’s my wife!

He spoke in English, but they appeared to know who he was, and so nodded in agreement, then quickly turned their attention back to the radio broadcast, seemingly mesmerized by the interview. His French wasn’t good enough to follow his wife’s interchange but he did pick up a phrase here and there. From all he could tell, she was doing OK. He framed his request loudly and distinctly in English.

— Does... anyone... know... where... I can... get... some aloe?

A middle aged gentleman, a manager, came over and spoke to him confidentially.

— Your wife may be at risk.

Robert was startled.

— Why?

— Her book is banned in Senegal.

This was not news, or course, but she herself wasn’t banned. He protested.

— Yes, I know, but she was invited to this interview, by the university!

The manager gave him a dubious look, then spoke to him in a stern tone of voice.

— Do you know who, exactly, invited her?

— Yes, we have an itinerary, well, had one, it was changed.

The manager signaled him to wait, holding up a hand. He walked a few steps to a telephone and after a one or two minute conversation, came back with disconcerting news.

— I spoke with the university. She was not invited by them and they are very upset by this radio broadcast. It is not authorized.

A sense of dread raced through Robert’s bones.

— But we received travel expenses, in advance. This hotel...

The manager walked to a computer, typed on it and after a few moments came back with the details.

— The bill is paid, but it was not paid by the university. I don't recognize the name of the man who has paid it.

Robert was sweating and beginning to feel sick. His speech became choked and excited.

— She's at risk? Of what?

The manager placed a hand on Robert's arm to steady him.

— Of arrest by the police, for one thing, though we should hope that the police find her first.

A burst of screams emanating from the women in the back room made Robert's hairs stand on end. Then he heard it, the sound of automatic weapons fire barking over the radio.

With pandemonium breaking out among the hotel employees, Robert's legs began to wilt. The next thing he knew, he felt the manager's strong arms around him, easing his collapsing frame into a chair. A few moments later as he recovered his senses, his eyes staring into a cluster of black faces silhouetted in the glare of florescent lights from above, a powerful force forming deep within him like the rapidly expanding gases of an artillery shell traveled up his body to his throat, where it emerged as a harrowing roar that froze and horrified the flock of onlookers gathered around him.

Cold drops of perspiration race down my aching body and my heart is pounding. I'm dizzy, confused and nauseous. The van I've been crammed into together with two armed terrorists and the surviving participants from the radio broadcast is swerving around corners at breakneck speed, throwing us into each other. The only window, a small one in the front between the cab and the cargo area, is mostly covered over with duct tape and admits just enough light for me to make out the blood-spattered figures around me.

We were rushed out of the studio at gunpoint, stepping clumsily over the bullet-shattered bodies of Yacine, Assane and Abdoulaye, accidental warriors in a brief but grisly battle who audaciously resisted the attackers before drawing their last, gasping breaths. Words are coming out of my mouth, in English, but they don't make sense, even to me.

— I want to go to the hotel! Where is Robert? Robert!

I can make out the face of the one called Oumar across from me. He says something to the terrorists in a language I don't recognize and one of them replies, then he leans over to me, speaking in French.

— You must lie down, Ms. Pembrose.

Words keep coming out of me, but they do not seem connected to my brain. I'm still shouting in English.

— Get me out of here! Take me home!

Oumar is insistent.

— First you must lie down. Please, Ms. Pembrose. Do as I say.

He takes hold of my shoulders and gently guides me onto my back, then lifts my feet and places a large metal box under them.

— You're in shock, Ms. Pembrose. You need to lie very still. Don't try to speak.

I make an effort to prop myself up but it's like my body is weighted down with lead. I don't have the strength to so much as lift

my hand from the floor. Oumar's soothing voice keeps whispering in my ear.

— Everything will be OK, Ms. Pembrose. Please try to be calm. I am trained in first aid. I will help you. You are going to be alright, but you must be still. Please try to breathe normally.

I slip in and out of consciousness. The van is rocking and bouncing, and time passes in uncertain intervals that sometimes seem like instants and sometimes like eternities. Every time I open my eyes, I see Oumar bent over me, his steady, solid face bearing down, willing me to pull myself out of it.

Then all at once, the motion of the van settles down. I begin to notice that some of the others are sobbing. The attackers are searching us and collecting our belongings in a cloth bag, including a few cell phones. Mine, and everything else I had with me, was left behind in the panic.

Little by little, thanks to Oumar's comforting if illogical reassurance, I start to recover my wits. I look him directly in the eyes. He sees that I'm coming back from the shock and leans close to me, speaking directly in my ear.

— Ms. Pembrose, this is very important. Please do as I say. You are going to become a Muslim. It may save your life.

In the middle of this insanity, his voice consoles me like a father assuaging a frightened child. I would listen to anything he has to say that might keep me from drowning in the dark ocean of madness that threatens to engulf me. He continues.

— You must repeat after me. Say LA EELA, EELA LA, MOO HAM AD, RA SOO LOO ALA.

It takes me a few tries, but I am able to say it. He makes me repeat it over and over, saying I must remember it in case I am asked. He tells me it is the *shahadah*, the Islamic profession of faith. I repeat it slowly and quietly, like a mantra, and it seems to be helping me to calm down. As the abject terror begins to abate, my mind struggles, grasping at any support to steady my tattered nerves. Reeling and disoriented, for a fleeting moment I look at Oumar, his dark, bearded

face calling me back as from death. My heartfelt words spring forth from a comforting sense of communion. I answer him in French.

— Thank you Oumar.

He has my hand in his and is stroking it gently.

— We will be safe, my sister, *in sha Allah*.



Robert recognized the hotel manager among the heads hovering over him and started to pull himself up from the chair, but the manager placed a gentle hand on his chest to stop him.

— Please be still until we can be sure you're all right.

Robert's face contorted into a mask of horror and he cried out again.

— CAROLINE!

The manager placed a hand on Robert's, then answered him as best he could.

— There has been an attack on the studio. That is all that is known at this time.

The wave of panic hit like a blow to the chest, then the floodgates opened, releasing a torrent of hysterical tears that might have been interminable, except that it stopped suddenly when a sharp odor of ammonia drilled deep into Robert's nasal passages. His eyes shot open and he saw a man in a police uniform holding an ampule under his nose. The man spoke in English.

— I'm Captain Ndoye. You are Caroline Parker's husband?

The smelling salts, compounded by the presence of an authority figure, roused him back to awareness.

— Yes! Caroline!

The captain spoke gently but concisely.

— She was not found at the place of the attack. Ten people were discovered at the scene but there had been more in attendance, besides your wife. The attackers were seen speeding away in a van and



they must have taken the others. No one else has been found anywhere nearby.

A spark of hope leapt in Robert's heart as he processed this explanation.

— She's alive?

The captain was solicitous, but honest.

— We don't know, but she's not there.

Robert quickly realized that his anguish would need to be placed on hold. If she was alive, he would need to do what he could to get her back. He sat upright, then loomed himself unsteadily to his feet, spitting out his words like bitter seeds.

— Who was it? Why did they take her?

— We don't know. It may be a kidnapping for ransom. She is a wealthy woman, yes?

— Yes. We can pay. I will, anything. Anything at all.

The policeman seemed to discount that theory, though, giving his own opinion of the matter instead.

— But it appears that they have taken some of the students also. And the killings, the others, that makes no sense. So it's more...

The captain paused, searching for the right word.

— ...more complicated.

Robert understood what the captain meant by "complicated". He didn't need to have it spelled out.

— Terrorists.

The captain nodded.

— Most likely.

Ndoye sat Robert back down and pulled up a seat beside him, took out a writing pad and began his questioning.

— She came here to be interviewed?

Robert tried his best to take his time with the answers, making sure he got everything right.

— She was invited... about the book... by the university, we thought, but it wasn't. The hotel manager...

The captain looked over at the manager, who explained what he had found out. Then Ndoye turned back to Robert.

— Do you know who exactly invited her and who she was going to see?

— There's an itinerary. It's in our room.

The manager offered to retrieve it and left with another officer in tow. Robert continued, gaining momentum as he chugged through the facts.

— We were met at the airport by a young woman named Yacine, in a red Peugeot, and she picked up Caroline for the interview this morning, I assume. You can contact Caroline's agent. I have his number and he can give you more information about the arrangements.

The captain took the number and called it, leaving a voice message. Before long the manager returned and handed over the itinerary, along with an explanation.

— The fax was not received by the hotel and I can't be sure it was delivered by one of our employees. We will provide you with the hotel's security video. It will show anyone entering or leaving.

The questions continued for another forty-five minutes, going through everything Robert could remember multiple times. Finally the captain told him that he was to remain in the hotel for at least the next twenty-four hours and gave him the number to call in case he could think of anything else that might be helpful. As he escorted Robert to his room, Ndoye tried to be reassuring.

— I don't know what you think of our country, but our security forces are well trained and competent. We are earnest and capable of everything reasonably possible to bring your wife back safely, God willing. Don't despair. Let us do our job. We'll get her back if...

The captain paused. He would have liked to make an unconditional commitment to the distraught man, but his professionalism led him to the rational continuation.

— ... if it's possible.

Robert, in no mood for logic or reason, looked at him suspiciously, then spoke sharply, more acid in his voice than he had ever uttered in his life.

— Yes. Get her *back*, captain. Whether it's *possible* or *not*.

The police checked his room before letting Robert back inside, posted a guard at the door, then left the man to himself. It had all been done by the book, the captain reflected. But he couldn't help pondering, as he passed out through the hotel entrance into the parking lot, both the evil and the necessity of the official charade he had just conducted. He told himself that he had no real choice in the matter, but even so, what he'd had to do didn't rest comfortably with him, not at all.



Alan Bates arrived at Dakar airport groggy and drained after two long flights and a five hour layover in Casablanca. But even in that debilitated condition, he could hardly have missed the signs of a crisis unfolding in the city. Small, tight groups of people had gathered in the airport concourse to share news reports streaming on smartphones and tablets. He walked over to a knot of travelers collected around a magazine stand and heard the name Mable Pembrose repeated often. As he listened to reports of the attack, he felt a deep sense of dismay. He was too late.

He needed to take stock of the situation, so found a snack bar, bought something brown in a foam cup together with a pitiful-looking pastry, then sat down to consider his options. He'd arrived with no firm idea as to how to proceed and the kidnapping had rendered even that sketchy plan of operation, which involved contacting her and somehow looking after her, completely irrelevant.

It had been seven years since he was last in Dakar. Possibly everything and everyone had changed since then, and possibly nothing had changed. He had barely managed to achieve even a minimal level of operational success when he was there before. It was perhaps the

most hospitable city in Africa, but for all its welcoming character, not a place that tolerated intrusive meddlers such as himself.

Another thing he needed to consider was that he was now in open defiance of the greatest earthly power that had ever existed—a delinquent agent operating outside of the etiquette of a fraternity both infinite in its demands and illiberal in its mercies. He remembered the story of Jonah, a righteous man who had strayed from God’s command. Well, he thought, it was time to seek the belly of the whale. He left the airport and found a taxi, then directed the driver to the U.S. Embassy.

The cab dropped him at the consular entrance on Route des Almadies. He knew how things worked there and hoped that whoever was monitoring the security cameras was doing their job. When he approached to plead his case, the officer guarding the entrance behind bulletproof glass patiently explained to him the necessity of an having an appointment before he could be interviewed for a visa. Assuming an air of distress, he pressed on, his voice constricted and his face contorted with the effort.

— Yes, I know, but this is a grave emergency. Isn’t there someone I can talk to?

The guard, practiced in the art of indifference, remained unmoved, his tone bleak and robotic.

— What kind of emergency.

— My wife is in the U.S. and she is extremely ill and might die.

The officer reached to the side and slipped him a card through the pass-through security drawer.

— You can call this number. They may be able to help get you an appointment quickly.

Pathos did not come naturally to Alan Bates. Anyone truly in need could have managed a better performance, but convincing the guard was not his objective. He persisted with his story as best he could.

— But it's so urgent, I really must see someone now. Isn't there anything that can be done?

At every opportunity, he was looking directly at the security camera pointed at him from above, making sure it had a good clear view of his face. It required a few more rounds of increasingly exasperated appeals, but finally the officer received a phone call and the agent was escorted inside by two U.S. Marines, where he was searched, relieved of his property and placed in a holding cell.

He had been waiting for about twenty minutes when a young woman, short and muscular, came in, her blond hair cut in a mannish style on the sides and back but with a large shock of bangs hanging over the top and down in front. She addressed him sternly.

— Tell me your name.

He answered honestly.

— Mansur Hakim El-Mofty.

She left as quickly as she had arrived, then it was another half hour before the door opened again. This time he recognized the man who walked in. The embassy officer spoke first.

— Mansur, what the hell are you doing here?

The Algerian focused a laser-like stare into the eyes of the portly, balding, middle-aged Midwesterner standing before him, then fired off a burst of angry words that filled the air like buckshot.

— I came because I was worried about someone I helped recruit into one of your schemes. It seems I was *right*.



Cooped up in the hotel suite, extravagantly spacious by most standards but which now felt oppressive and confining, Robert was going slowly insane from the procession of hideous visions cavorting along the boulevards of his fevered imagination. He had called everyone he could think of on three continents and they had offered whatever they were able, all amounting to exactly nothing, and since then he'd been pacing off the dimensions of the place like a caged

animal, fantasizing about what he would do to the kidnappers when he got hold of them.

Anytime someone takes something from you, maybe your wallet or your car, there is a maddening rage that comes over even the most phlegmatic of personalities. When that something is the love of your life, your reason for being, that rage boils like a river of magma feeding a pregnant volcano. He tried to pick up the large ceramic table lamp from the writing desk, meaning to throw it through the window, but the fixture was bolted down.

He grabbed his laptop instead and raised it towards the ceiling with the intention to hurl it at something, sweeping first in one direction then another, but then stopped, the device poised above him, its indifferent circuits awaiting his judgment upon them. Slowly, he lowered it and set it back down, then sat down himself, his arms draped over his whirling head. He stared for several minutes at the black clam-like machine, then pulled it closer and opened it.

His email was clogged with messages, the first two expressing sympathy and offering “help” while another contained the suggestion to remain calm and let the police do their work. He deleted them without replying and then did a bulk erase of the remaining unread missives.

He was just about to close the lid when a strange window sprang up on his screen, outlined in pink, purple and black, the edges decorated with thorns but with a large red rose at the upper left corner. He ranted silently to himself that, on top of everything, he had acquired a computer virus. As he scanned the room once more for a suitably hard surface to serve as the place of execution for the infernal device, a chat appeared in the window. He blinked twice and focused on the words.

haiden: Hello Robert, this is Haiden Stills. I saw what happened to Caroline.

Haiden Stills. The blogger. He typed a furious reply.

bersley: Get out of my computer!

After a few seconds, another message appeared.

haiden: I can help.

Nothing that he knew about the person called Haiden Stills suggested that the man could so much as fix a parking ticket, let alone rescue someone from terrorists. He grabbed the laptop, looking around once more for a place to end its miserable existence, but then noticed small bits of herself that Caroline had left scattered here and there—a pair of earrings, discarded just before she went out in favor of another set; her small green leather-covered note pad lying open on a table, its matching pen resting diagonally across the paper in that certain way she always placed it; a favorite pair of blue suede pumps with one of the rubber heel pads missing that she had set out, hoping to get them repaired. Tears welled in his eyes, then poured down his cheeks.

In his delirium, Robert was ready to believe anything. Whatever else Haiden Stills might or might not be capable of, he had broken into Robert's computer. It was grasping at straws, but he had no better idea for the moment than to find out if this literary-critic-cum-hacker had something more on offer than the worthless outpourings of moral support extended by the police, his family, his friends and acquaintances. He typed a reply.

bersley: What kind of help?

The response flashed on the screen after just a few seconds.

haiden: I'm going to put you in touch with someone in Dakar who will help you get Caroline back.

Unlikely, he thought. Robert had read articles about scammers, some operating from African countries, and anyway, he knew enough

to be suspicious of strange offers. He was ninety-nine percent certain that this was some kind of flimflam designed to get money out of him, but that remaining one percent was more than he was getting anywhere else. There was no harm in at least hearing him out to see what the man's game amounted to. He started typing.

bersley: You know someone in Dakar.

haiden: I know people almost everywhere, or people who know people. I'm very well connected.

Yes, he thought. Internet connected.

bersley: Like who? Police? Military? Mercenaries? Spies?

haiden: No. Guns and spooks won't get Caroline back, but software might.

bersley: Hackers like you, you mean.

haiden: Software engineers.

Stills had managed to get himself into Robert's computer easily enough, but as for fighting bullets with bits and bytes, Robert was not convinced. Whatever it was, though, it couldn't be any more futile than storming around the room breaking furniture.

It seemed he had nothing to lose. He gave his assent, for now.

bersley: How do I get in touch with this person?

haiden: They will contact you the same way.

The window disappeared. A minute passed before another one materialized, decorated in more muted but equally unconventional colors and images.



mimi: This is Mimi. Hello Robert.

bersley: Hello. Are you going to help me get Caroline back?

mimi: We'll try, but we need your cooperation.

This was all leading up to a large debit to his bank account, he was sure of it. He made up his mind to find out as much as possible before giving in to whatever it was they were cooking up.

bersley: You're a hacker, or software engineer or something, yes?

mimi: Something.

bersley: What good is that against terrorists?

mimi: You've heard of jujitsu, no?

A martial art. Robert had heard it mentioned on one of the ultimate fighting channels that Caroline liked to watch.

bersley: Yes.

mimi: It means "soft technique", the art of using the opponent's force against themselves, without weapons.

"Soft technique", he thought. More like "soft touch", which is what he was just now.

bersley: I don't know jujitsu.

mimi: Neither do I. But it's like what we do, turn the enemy's strength against them.

bersley: Do you have many enemies?

mimi: Many.

He couldn't help being cynical. He considered whether he shouldn't just call the police captain and have Mimi and her lot arrested. Probably this was not the first time they had extorted money from people in fraught circumstances who happened to get in the news. He prodded further.

bersley: Why should you help me? What's in it for you?

mimi: We don't like terrorists. But also, Haiden asked me and I like him. And also, it's how we make a living.

Well, at least she was being straightforward about that. They expected to be paid.

bersley: So how much?

mimi: Five hundred thousand dollars, but only if we are able to get her back alive.

bersley: Nothing up front?

mimi: No. There's no time. We need to start now.

So, he thought, they're willing to trust him for it. He would pay it in a heartbeat if it brought Caroline back, but he had trouble believing they would accredit him for that amount of money.

bersley: What if I don't pay?

mimi: You will. You really don't want to stiff us. We will make your life miserable if we think you've played us.

No money up front, cash on delivery, dire threats of retribution for disloyalty—this was just like the publishing business. He could deal with that. He had just a few more questions, though.

bersley: So tell me what you're going to do. Shouldn't we let the police take care of it? What if you're placing her in more danger?

mimi: The police will almost certainly fail, and she couldn't possibly be in any more danger than she already is.

This was the truth that he'd been denying to himself, and the clarity in which she had framed it ran like cold fingers up his spine and froze the back of his neck. He agreed.

bersley: OK. Do it. I'll pay.

mimi: We'll need your help.

bersley: I don't know what help I can be. I don't know how to program and I get confounded even just using Microsoft Word. I'm a writer, I write children's books, but I'm sure that's no help either.

mimi: That's not what we need you for. I'm just outside the hotel, wearing a yellow and red dashiki. In one minute I'm going to activate the hotel's fire alarm. When you get outside, wait for the fire trucks to arrive. There will be a diversion, and then you can walk over to me without being noticed.

The chat box disappeared. One minute later, as promised, the fire alarm went off. He left the room and the police guard accompanied him to the street. He could see Mimi about fifty yards away standing next to a blue Kia Sportage. When the fire trucks arrived, the fashion model prostitute from the pool the day before, wearing only a silky robe, who had evacuated with the rest of the guests, commenced screaming and violently assaulting a well-dressed man, a hotel guest apparently. The man tried to back off and held up his arms to defend himself, but the woman came after him, her black legs kicking out from the opening in the white robe. She caught him one in the tender region and he yelped.

Mimi was right. No one was paying any attention to Robert. He walked casually over to her and they got in the car and drove off, the

thin wooden gate at the hotel's guardhouse rising abruptly as she sped through it.

I'm alive, but a part of me doesn't believe it. Nothing seems real, as if I'm in a nightmare I can't wake up from. My head is pounding and I have no sense of time. I feel like we've driven for hours but it could have been only one, or even less. Finally we stop, the doors open and we're pushed out of the van, which has come to rest in an enclosed courtyard. Then we're herded into a building whose gray concrete block walls give the impression of a prison.

Inside, our captors shove us down a hallway and into a hastily-arranged communal cell. There are five of us—myself, Oumar, and the three female students who had been wearing head coverings. There is food and water, and a small bathroom with a door. They let me use it first and I wash off the spatters of blood, my hands shaking so feverishly that I can hardly manage that simple feat.

When I come out, Oumar tries to talk to me, but I feel myself descending into a black hole that's draining my rapidly dwindling cognition. He presses me to respond.

— Ms. Pembrose. Please look at me.

I'm staring past him at the wall. He reaches for my hand but I wrench it away and he shouts.

— Ms. Pembrose!

I want to answer him, but the only impulse urging itself on my vocal chords is a howling scream aching to explode from me and shatter this unwanted reality into shards of glass. I'm fighting it, knowing that if I yield to the craving, the unbridled fury will transport me to a place from which I might never return. Oumar can see the darkness enveloping me like a deathly fog. He tries to pull me back from it by getting me to talk.

— Ms. Pembrose, tell me about your family.

I can hear the words but I'm unable to process them. When I fail to reply, he tries another tack.

— Why did you write about Senegal?

It's the sort of question I was expecting to get at the interview, one that I've replied to many times. My mouth loosens a little and I try to form the familiar reply, but the words come haltingly and painfully.

— I have always wanted... to write about Africa... Isak Denisen...

Oumar is encouraged and he follows through.

— I see. The author of *Out of Africa*. That was in Kenya, though. This is Senegal.

— Yes, Senegal... is French-speaking. French language...

— You speak it well.

My mouth and brain are beginning to connect again. He's drawing me on with his sympathetic eyes, his soft words pulling me to him with gentle tugs. I manage a little more.

— I always try to spend time... in French-speaking countries...

— That is as good a reason as any, Ms. Pembrose.

I take a deliberate breath and look intently at the man. He reaches for my hand and this time I let him have it. He asks me a more pertinent question.

— Do you remember the *shahadah*?

I recite it for him. He nods.

— Good. Do not forget it.

We remain like this for several minutes, my hand held between his two. Gradually my breathing becomes more normal and my mind grinds slowly into gear. With some effort, I'm able to articulate a cogent question.

— Do you think they'll believe I'm a Muslim?

— No, but it may confuse them, maybe long enough for us to be rescued.

One of our keepers enters the room carrying garments which he distributes to the other women. Oumar goes up to him and speaks, and the guard looks at me, disoriented, then leaves and returns with one more, which Oumar brings over. It's a kind of large, heavy, blue canvas bag. He explains.

— It's the burqa, for you to wear. You are a Muslim woman now.



The station chief spoke sternly to Mansur.

— You know how this works.

The Algerian had a bad taste in his mouth and his reply was flat and menacing.

— Tell me again.

The officer's eyes focused on the agent like green lasers.

— You had a job to do and you did it. You're not involved at this point.

Mansur matched the other's gaze without flinching.

— I am involved. She's in extreme danger and I helped put her there. So did you.

The man tilted his head and spoke in a voice that was, at the same time, scornful and sympathetic.

— You're involved...

— Yes.

The station chief changed his approach, trying an appeal to the man's presumed loyalties.

— She is serving her country.

— So you say.

Mansur had been told very little of what the operation was all about, which was not unusual in his line of work. He had been advised, though, that everything was legal and proper. Some part of his mind had accepted the pronouncement as coming from a place of authority and involving matters that he was not qualified to judge, but now he was having doubts. The station chief continued.

— You're not any good to us unless you follow instructions and do your job.

— What instructions?

— Go back to New York. You're not needed here.

Mansur shrugged.

— But as long as I'm here...

The chief straightened up, bellowing at him.

— Go back! Actually, I'm sending you back.

Then he left. Mansur sighed deeply, telling himself that coming to the embassy had been ill-considered. He could have perfectly predicted the outcome, but working from the inside, he could have done so much more. He had to at least make the attempt.

He tried the door. It was locked, and it was a real lock, not a commercial grade item. The room was monitored by a video camera and he took off one of his socks and covered it. A few minutes later he surprised the guard who came in to check on the problem, gently lowering him, unconscious, to the floor, then made his way out of the embassy, hailed a passing taxi and directed the driver to the chaotic Sandaga market, where he used a bank card bandaged to the inside of his thigh to withdraw cash from an ATM, paid the driver, then picked up a new mobile and other necessities. After scarfing down a quick bite to eat, he headed to a colonial era building in the Plateau district, mostly because the girls there, being from Ghana, were less coy than the locals when it came to sharing information with strangers.



Mimi, a thin, attractive young African woman with a self-possessed but savage look in her eyes, was a good driver, in the sense that a Formula One race car driver could be said to be a good driver. Robert was prone to being excitable on car trips in normal circumstances, but this was Dakar and Ms. Emerson Fittipaldi was in a hurry. He planted his hands on the dashboard, his pulse pounding in his chest like a pile driver. Finally the woman decided that no one was following them and slowed down a little, letting Robert catch his breath enough to get out a question.

— Where are we going?

She glanced at him and gave him a thin smile.



— Would you like a coffee?

— Yes, OK.

A coffee break seemed like a peculiar idea in the circumstances, but it meant stopping, so he was for it. He needed to talk and couldn't manage any kind of conversation with the woman wheeling around the city streets like a nut case. He would have said yes to any suggestion that involved planting his feet on solid ground.

She parked and they went into a French bakery stocked with elegant delights and furnished with a few small tables and stools. She ordered espressos and a *brioche chocolat* to share, then got him to pay with his credit card. Eating was the last thing on his mind, but a sip of the potent brew and a restorative bite of the buttery confection gave him the energy to get down to business.

— I'm here, so now, what do we do?

She poured sugar into her coffee, then dug out an ample forkful of the brioche and held it up.

— We're doing it.

He snorted.

— Snacking?

She popped the pastry into her mouth, then washed it down with a slug of the syrupy drink.

— I never pass up the chance for French pastry when an American is buying, but the thing is, what we need is for you to be missing, and now you are.

An enigma. Clearly her mind was working on some astral plane that Robert had never visited. Not wanting to fall behind in their contention for the brioche, he cut himself a generous piece before continuing.

— Missing? Yes, I suppose I am. Is that all?

— Yes, that's all. And you need to stay missing, for now.

— How long?

— A day, maybe two. Also, we need to leave a trail that the police can follow.

His mouth was full and he mumbled.

— Are we?

— Yes. Soon your picture will be on the news and the woman at the counter will remember you and call them.

He suddenly realized an obvious fact, which had somehow escaped him since arriving in Dakar, that nearly everyone in the city was one or another shade of brown, whereas he, exception made for a rash of sunburn blooming on his prominent cheekbones, was as pale as a winter moon. Even so, he wondered.

— Are you sure she'll remember me?

She looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then drew her lips tight and nodded.

— Just to be sure, you should maybe go up to the counter and speak to her.

He didn't relish the idea.

— I don't speak much French.

— All the better. Get going.

He did as he was told, activating the French-speaking part of his cerebral cortex in an earnest attempt at ordering another brioche. The woman became agitated at his awkward and stumbling effort, and after a second failed try at communication, turned nasty and disagreeable. So he apologized, gave up, and returned to his stool, the redness on his cheeks deepened by the humiliating debacle. Mimi greeted him with a crooked half smile.

— That should do. She will remember you.

Mimi checked her smart phone, entered a few taps, then turned it to his face. Splashed across the screen was his passport photo.

— You're on the news.

It was an older photo, from before he knew Caroline, but the resemblance was good enough. He looked down and noticed that, in his absence, Mimi had polished off the last of the pastry. She rose from her seat.

— Drink up, then we should go.

He was in no hurry to get back into the crazy woman's car, but he did as instructed. In for a dime, in for a dollar, he told himself.



The burqa, which I've put on over my clothes after a short struggle to figure out how the thing is worn, is really, *really* hot. The minute I have it on I can feel the beads of sweat breaking out and running down my body. Our prison is closed to the world, and while fans in the ceiling provide some ventilation, there is no air conditioning. The oppressive garment only adds to my claustrophobia.

The women have been ordered to one side of the room and Oumar to the other, with large rugs hung from the ceiling between. A few wooden boxes scattered around have smaller rugs thrown over them, providing places to sit or sleep, but in my present state, restfulness is impossible. The only thing I can think of is that I'm going to die and how much I do not want to.

For some crazy reason, the phrase "nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition" pops into my head, except this is not Monty Python and my sense of humor is completely gone. In its place, an insidious panic has coiled around my chest, squeezing me like an actual python. Knowing that you will die "someday" is very different from being scheduled for execution, your life to be terminated within a time certain—in a week, in a day, in an hour.

A vision sweeps through my mind, glimpses of the world going on without me—Robert, our families, our friends, my fans, but me not there. I think of the money put away for my sunset years, skillfully invested to fund the carefree diversions I had imagined. Robert will have it, but will it bring him any joy without me?

You always think that the other could not possibly go on with their life without you. Normally that's not true. People do go on, but in Robert's case, I don't know. He always said that his life began when he met me. Would it truly end if I were gone? It might, in any sense that matters. I feel heartsick for both of us.

Like bathwater when the plug has been pulled, hope is draining out of me. I am starting to believe that my life is coming to an end.

A bath. I want a bath. I don't want to die dirty. I don't want to die at all.

I won't, I tell myself. I try to believe it, but it leaves me with the sense of being an actor in some ridiculous soap opera, or maybe a character in one of my own novels. The plots of my bestsellers, so fresh and clever when I conceived them, now seem laughably pointless.

Despite my newly-adopted religion, I wish for the Presbyterian God of my infancy. I yearn to be on speaking terms with that someone or something supreme and all-powerful who can part the sky and lift me out of this calamity. Softly, under my breath, I recite the twenty-third psalm, whose six verses lie etched in the impressionable clay of my childhood. "The Lord is my shepherd... He leadeth me beside the still waters... I fear no evil..." The words evoke a distant memory of my six-year-old self lying snug in bed, my mother reading to me and everything safe and good and right with the world, and it brings a moment of repose to my depleted spirit.

But then the rugs part and two guards come over to me, taking me politely but firmly by the arms. I don't resist as they lead me out of the room, going somewhere, for some purpose, as yet unknown. I am prepared, as much as anyone can be, to face whatever is to come.



Mimi was back at the wheel of the Kia. The little stamina that Robert had gained from the coffee and pastry dissolved in a spray of gravel as she rocketed out into the turbulent noontime traffic.

Her phone made a sound and she tapped it and drew it to her ear. If there was a law in Dakar against using a handheld phone while driving, she was ignoring it, and the distraction did nothing to make her more heedful of the moiling commotion of the city. Two swerves, a near miss and a slamming on of brakes had his heart quivering in his throat. She put down the phone and made an announcement.

— They're close.

An encounter with a pothole made him gulp between his words.

— How... close?

— Too close.

This new information seemed to release her from whatever constraints may have been keeping her driving under some kind of control. He wouldn't have thought that there could be another level to her mania, but their flight now took on surreal dimensions. The onslaught of vehicles, buildings and pedestrians far surpassed the realm of common experience, and as Robert's mind ceased trying to process the onrushing sensory input, a peaceful tranquility settled over him—a state of awareness he had never experienced before, assuring him, however improbably, that in this version of reality, everything was going to be all right.

And it was. They came to rest in front of a bank. She looked over at him and issued instructions.

— Take out as much from the ATM as you can.

He got out of the car and did as he was told, netting about eight hundred dollars in local currency, his daily limit. But when he got back in and offered her the money, she refused.

— Keep it for now, but we'll need it later to get a room.

A room? There must be enough for two rooms. What did she have in mind? With Caroline about to be decapitated, he was not in the mood for an erotic tryst, if that was what she was thinking.

Her phone rang again and with the thing pressed to her ear, she made a rollicking U-turn and they were off to the races again. Not that it mattered, but he tried asking anyway, between gasps.

— Where... are... we going?

— Back to your hotel.

He hung on as best he could to keep from being slammed around, wondering absently how and where it all might end. In between grunts and an occasional yelp as she slammed her foot first on the brake and then on the accelerator, swinging the wheel wildly from

one extreme to the other, he raised his objections, his voice breaking like an excited boy.

— What the *hell...* are we doing this for?

She shrugged and turned to look at him as they sped through a red light.

— Who knows? But it's better than doing nothing, don't you think?

If he were determined to descend into absurdity, there were better ways to do it than allowing himself to be terrorized by a mad woman. The thought entered his mind that maybe he *should* have just stayed in the hotel and smashed the furniture.

When she slowed down and turned into a side street, reverting to what could loosely be considered normal driving, he strained to settle the disconnected thoughts swirling in his rattled brain.

— What has this got to do with hacking? You don't even have a computer!

She took a hand off the wheel and pressed the tips of her fingers together, stabbing the air for emphasis.

— To use the enemy's power against them, you need to get them to *act*. You need to get under their skin, get them to *do* something.

He thought about that. His normal instinct was to avoid provoking people in general and agents of government in particular, but the circumstances were far from normal.

— So what are they doing?

— They're chasing us.

— The police.

— Yes. Haiden thinks they know where she is. We need to find out where.

She got on the phone again, then executed a skidding turn onto a cross street. The maneuver didn't disconcert him so much this time. He was getting used to it, but this was all sounding very looney. He was more convinced than ever that he'd made a mistake getting mixed up with a gang of demented whackos.

— Well then, explain to me why, if they know where she is, they don't just go get her.

— Good question.

— And what good is this going to do against the terrorists?

— The terrorists aren't the enemy.

This was news to him. It seemed that the jihadis were very much the enemy. He pondered that question as they wove through the churning stream of cars, taxis, *sept-place* vans and delivery trucks, all trying to go about their business in the hot, gray city while the Kia darted in and out among them, deliriously maneuvering from one meaningless destination to another.

They did end up back at the Terrou-Bi eventually, but it was a short visit. Mimi parked in the same place she had picked him up and put a veil over her head. They got out of the car and then walked in front of the hotel with her knuckle pressed against his ribs. After this brief pantomime, they walked back to the car again and drove off.

From there they headed down along the shore and made another stop at an ATM. It wouldn't give out this time, but the camera got a good shot of his face, his ashen features reflecting a sickly goulash of fear and skepticism exacerbated by the queasy carnival ride through a teeming North African city.

The captain looked at a replay of the security camera recording. When he saw from the timestamp that this had occurred forty-five minutes earlier, he railed angrily at the hotel security guard.

— Why didn't you see this when it happened?

The guard raised his palms and tried to explain.

— I must have looked away for a moment. There is so much distraction here today. We didn't expect they would bring him back here.

Ndoye replayed the video several times. There was definitely something not right about it. Why would they bring the husband back to the hotel and then take him away again? They seemed to be parading him around. As he considered this, the police radio droned in the background and he heard the phrase "heading towards the area". A sinking feeling came over him. He pulled his radio from its holder and pressed the talk button.

— This is Captain Ndoye. Stop talking about the location!

An officer replied, his voice excited and strained.

— But they're heading in that direction!

— Stop talking about it! Everyone!

The "kidnapping" of the woman's husband had puzzled him from the start. First, there was no struggle when he was "taken", not that anyone had noticed. The false alarm and the prostitute's "street theater" made for a very elaborate scheme, worthy of the CIA, except he knew for certain that it wasn't. Then, their racing around the city, generating confusion to no apparent purpose, it made no sense, until now. He realized that he had been "taken for a ride", both literally and figuratively.

But who? And for what purpose? And why was the husband cooperating? If he was.

He didn't need this complication in the middle of the most ambitious and difficult operation of his career and his friends in Ngor



were not going to be pleased about it. He had told them that he was treating it as a kidnapping for money, but now he was sure there was more to it. Reluctantly, he concluded that he would need to report this latest development.

He found a place where he would not be overheard, then made the call on a landline phone, which he regarded as infinitely more secure these days than the mobile. When he reached the CIA station chief, they spoke in English. Though the chief knew a kind of French that he'd acquired while posted for a time in Canada, his attempts at communication in that language were about as useless as the skis he'd brought with him to Senegal in the hopes of enjoying winter vacations in the Atlas Mountains of Algeria.

— Mr. Foster, this is Captain Ndoye.

The chief, as usual, was in a gruff mood.

— Any more news about the husband?

— He has been sighted again. I'm certain now that it's not the jihadis. Whoever it was, they were just running around the city leading us on a wild goose chase.

There was a pause as the American tried to process the suggestion but came up empty.

— What for?

Ndoye sighed. He knew that the information he was about to convey would not be well received, but it had to be said.

— I'd like to know. I've stopped pursuing them for now. It was taking resources away from more important work. And, I'm sorry, but on the police radio, my men were talking about the location.

The station chief uttered several staccato bursts of common English profanity. When the eruption subsided, the captain continued.

— I told them to stop, but it may have been too late. But it's not jihadis, I'm sure. Whoever it is, they drove him around the city, took him to restaurants and ATMs, and even showed up at his hotel. It could be just a robbery and they will let him go when they've got enough money out of him, but I think they wanted us to follow them.

The chief snorted.

— I don't care about the husband anyway. I just don't want this to interfere with the operation. One more thing. Mansur is in the city.

Ndoye knew the agent from the time the man had spent in Dakar as a CIA contractor. The captain had gotten the guy out of a few jams but had not been told anything about his missions.

— What's he doing here?

— He came on his own. He's developed an attachment to the bird. He handled her in New York.

An attachment, he thought. It didn't sound like the man he knew, a cold and calculating operative who maintained no attachments to anyone but himself. Still, this was yet another untidy circumstance. He expressed his unease.

— A lot of loose people flying around.

— Yes, I don't like it either. Don't do anything to jeopardize the mission, but if you run across him, take care of it please.

Ndoye had always found it curious, the many uses the Americans made of the phrase "to take care of". It could mean anything from nursing a newborn to cutting a man's throat. It did, however, allow leeway for the listener to interpret the ambiguity and perhaps that was the point. The captain felt he needed to push back and replied in his most official-sounding tone.

— I don't have any basis to arrest Mansur, do I, Mr. Foster?

— He was here and assaulted one of our guards.

— Have you filed a complaint?

— No, and we're not going to. Captain, I appreciate how cooperative you are with us. We consider you a friend. But please remember that there's a reason why we anticipate your cooperation.

This reminder was at once grating and unnecessary. He had come to expect such indelicacies from the Americans and was resigned to it. He didn't need reminding that they had once helped him out of a difficult personal situation and that they kept a dossier on him. Being in their grip was both a curse and a blessing. It was likely that he might need their services again at any time, as his situation vis-a-vis his cherished but dogmatic country was precarious at best, and certain to

remain so. And, the Americans could help with foreign troublemakers, when they weren't making trouble themselves. Ndoye agreed, reluctantly.

— I will have him picked up for questioning, if we find him.

— That's all I want. Let me know if you do.

But this was all a distraction and there was the operation to consider. He thought to ask for an update.

— Speaking of the woman, are there any developments?

— It will take some time yet. Is everything in place for you to secure the perimeter?

The plan was for the police to assist the Americans in establishing roadblocks once the exact location of the terrorists was known for sure.

— The units are staged in the area. We can secure it with an hour's notice, at most, as we promised.

— Can't you do better than that?

It was so like them to always ask for more, no matter what you gave them. But he was experienced enough not to over-promise.

— We'll do what we can do. This is Dakar, you know. It depends a lot on where it turns out to be exactly. And a one kilometer perimeter, that's a lot.

— Yes yes, I know, do your best.

It seemed that the conversation was coming to a close, but Foster still had one thing that he wanted to emphasize.

— And captain, *get Mansur*. I don't want him messing around in my playground.

Ndoye did not agree with the station chief regarding whose playground it was where the operation was taking place, but he let it go. He knew very well that the Americans could and would play in any playground they wanted.



Haiden Stills woke from a short nap. His sleeping habits were irregular in normal circumstances and were only made worse by the stress he was under.

A quick check of the chat room told him there had been progress. The police had been operating in full panic mode, not being particularly circumspect about what they said over the radio channels as they chased Mimi and Robert around Dakar. The hackers' scans of the police frequencies had picked up references to what translated as "the target area", with chatter about whether the subjects they pursued were traveling towards it or away from it, or were getting close. The area they referred to, he was reasonably sure, was where the woman was being held.

The police *did* know where she was, then. By cross-matching those radio intercepts with Mimi's movements at the time, he could narrow down roughly where "the area" might be. It was looking like it must be somewhere at the point of the hook, in Plateau, which is where the Grand Mosque stood. It would make sense. He studied the satellite imagery and street level views. There were buildings in the vicinity where terrorists might be able to set up a refuge and, if they were careful, not attract too much notice.

But now the police had stopped talking and the ploy had come to a screeching halt. The question was, what next? What were they going to do? And more to the point, what was *he* going to do?

The most likely scenario, it seemed to him, was that the police would surround the location and then storm the building. In that case, everyone would be killed, including the woman, though that depended on what weapons were used in the assault. They might try stun grenades or fentanyl gas, but the terrorists would have sentries and he doubted they would let anyone get near without executing the hostages.

He studied the satellite photos again, asking himself what it was that terrorists would be looking for by way of a safe haven. It should be an area where strangers were not unusual, so crowded places were better, but they would also need a building they could rent temporarily, with owners who, for a little bit of money, would not ask too many questions about who was using it and for what. He considered a few possibilities before deciding that the area around Sandaga market, between the market and the sea, offered good prospects in that regard. And besides, with the market close at hand, they would be able to buy just about anything they needed without raising suspicions.

Yes, it was a good possibility, but how to narrow it down further, he couldn't envision just now. Would Robert be of any use? The area they were searching was much smaller and would end in a win for the police if they tried the same tactic in such a small arena. He would have to think of something else.

And then there was the matter of the Americans. Messing with the local police was one thing, but the Americans were not so easily rolled. Once you got on their radar, it would be different rules entirely. There would be body checking, and worse. He was sure that Mimi was up to whatever they might have in store, if it came to that. She was one tough lady and had gotten herself out of difficult scrapes before. Even so, he didn't want to put her at any more risk than the situation called for.

A message from *ellapr* distracted him from his reflections. It was broadcast to everyone.

ellapr: Bad boy needs a spanking, handle is gbtusa or variation, associated IP is 141.43.3.182.

Well, he thought. That request was going to cost her plenty. She must be using the money he had given her. He hadn't encountered that handle before and he was too busy to help with it, but out of curiosity

he did a quick search and didn't like what he found. He sent her a private message.

haiden: High voltage, be careful.

Her reply was calculated to put him in his place.

ellapr: I'm always careful. You be careful.

He smirked. Yes, he thought, we'll *all* be careful. It was the word of the day.



I'm brought into a room and placed in a seat. Through the knit face covering of the burqa, I can make out three robed and bearded men arrayed behind a table in front of me. Then Oumar arrives and sits at my side. The man in the middle speaks in what might be Arabic and Oumar replies to him. They have a further conversation, then Oumar explains to me what is going on.

— You are accused of blasphemy for your book, for which the penalty is death. I have told them that you have become a Muslim and that you repent of what you have written. They don't believe me and they want you to say the *shahadah*. It's important that you are sincere.

I recite the confession of faith as he taught me, gravely and with as much solemnity as I can manage, which isn't difficult given the funereal atmosphere. The judges say a few words to one another and then speak to Oumar again, and he turns to me.

— They want you to give testimony. You must swear by Almighty Allah that you will tell the truth.

I nod, but he tells me to say it out loud, and I do.

Oumar translates what I said, then there's more discussion after which Oumar gives me the first question.

— When may a Muslim be homosexual?

This is a trick question, designed to trip me up for sure, but at least I've had some practice with the students at the interview. Normally I'm not one to think very deeply about such things, but the prospect of imminent beheading has focused my mind. I look into the eyes of the judges, trying to divine what is going on inside their thick, loutish heads. One good thing about the burqa is that they can't see me staring, so they are totally unaffected by my angry and combative glare.

I once went out with a criminal defense attorney whose charming manner pleased me well enough, though I didn't care much for his acquaintances. The several months that we dated gave me a chance to pump him for details about his profession that I might use in my writing, and one of the things he taught me was the trick of answering a question without answering. "*Never* answer a question," he told me, "It's the first rule of criminal defense. Even when you *must* answer, *don't*."

His words are playing in my head when the proper rejoinder suddenly leaps to mind. If they can have their diabolical questions, this witness must be permitted her diabolical replies.

— A Muslim may do what Allah allows, and may not do what Allah does not allow.

Oumar smiles knowingly with his eyes. He seems relieved to find that I am catching on. He gives them my response, but the judge on the right has reacted before getting the translation. Evidently he understands French. Then there's a followup question from the judge on the left. He wants to know what Allah wishes us to do. Well, that's easy.

— I'm sorry, I don't know, I've only just become a Muslim.

There is a quick and heated reply from the judge in the center, followed by a vigorous argument among the judges and with Oumar. It goes on for half a minute, then Oumar turns to me.

— They are not satisfied with your answer. You must reply.

So it seems I must respond after all. I struggle to retrieve the vestiges of religious education that lie moldering in the recesses of my

memory. After a few moments of concentrated effort, I recall a verse from Sunday school, words spoken by Jesus to his disciples: “As you do to the least of my brothers, you do to me.” I take a breath and speak as convincingly as I can.

— Allah wants us to help those in need.

Oumar translates my words, which spark still more clamorous discussions among the nabobs. Then he informs me of their conclusion.

— That’s all for now, we can go. They are going to confer and bring us back later.

As I try to stand up, I’m wobbly and feel the blood rushing from my head. Oumar takes my arm and, with his support and encouragement, I’m able to make it back to the women’s quarters under my own power.

My head is still attached to my body, for now. Each minute that I’m still alive is both an ordeal and a precious gift, a trial to be endured, tempered by the tenuous and irrational hope that the horror will end before I do. I had been used to counting my time in years, but now cannot escape the fact that I may have only hours remaining before the curtain falls for the last time on the life of Caroline Parker.



The red glow of dusk was stealing across the timeworn city blocks as Mansur stepped out of the cab in front of the stuccoed stone house, its goldenrod-colored paint chipped and peeling in patches. He walked through a small door and down a corridor into a large well-lit yard where the women occupied a circle of chairs waiting for clientele.

Well-dressed and prosperous-looking foreigners were unusual in that place, so his entrance provoked a certain amount of excitement. He walked around the circle as the girls performed for him their best impersonations of women in love. Despite the obvious falsity of their supplications, the appeals to base instinct aroused his interest and made him flush.



He had been there before but he didn't recognize any of the women, which wasn't surprising. They came and went with the seasons, the haggard veterans pushed aside by an influx of fresh arrivals. Passing by the younger and more alluring among them as he loitered along the perimeter, he sought out the few who showed signs of maturity and, perhaps, wisdom, the mission being more important than feeding his ego on a low-nutrition diet of sugar-coated copulation.

He stopped in front of a woman who had an intelligent look about her. Wearing a simple but elegant black dress, more plain and less revealing than the others, she gave the appearance of being at least thirty years old, her long, bold hair surging confidently around her face and over her shoulders. She caught his eyes with an intense caramel gaze, tenacious and defiant, proclaiming a life of hardship and survival.

She led him to a large bedroom, neat and clean-looking in the dim light, apart from the double bed, which was fitted with a sheet that had already seen action that evening. Noticing a basket of folded linens in the corner, he nodded to it and she obligingly shook out a clean sheet and tucked it snugly over the used one. A low table set up beside the bed and an unframed print of the sun setting over the ocean completed the furnishings.

The relatively decent condition of the place combined with the modest cost and the generally good quality of the information, not to mention the sex, had led him to favor this house in the past. The women from Ghana didn't know Dakar as well as the local girls, but they were also not as shy about sharing what they did know with strangers, and anyway, he couldn't stand the filth and rubbish of the tin-roofed shacks that served as rooms in most of the brothels in that city. The downtown hookers, besides costing more, were never truthful about anything, no matter how much you paid them. Here, amid the simpler surroundings, he usually found a refreshing absence of guile.

The woman began removing her dress and she was not unattractive. There was no talk of money yet. He would need to see what he was buying, and also, once the goods were on display and his

juices flowing, she would be expecting to wheedle a higher price out of him. She walked naked to the small table and poured whiskey into two glasses, “whiskey” being a loose term for whatever the brownish liquid might actually consist of. He took a sip. It contained alcohol at least. She put hers to her lips but didn’t drink, which was not surprising given the need for frugality, not to mention sobriety, when working long into the night. Probably she would pour the rest back into the bottle when he left.

Her muscular body glowed dark amber and was unmarked, her breasts slightly pendulous, but pointed, in the African way that appealed to him. She was unshaven, but to him, her body hair held the promise of a robust and gratifying assignation. She initiated the bargaining.

— What you like?

Her rough English was at least understandable. He decided to be direct and go for the information first. If she didn’t know anything, he would have to try another girl.

— We need to talk first.

She frowned slightly, then sat on the bed. The girls didn’t like “talkers” because they wasted time and didn’t pay as much, so he got right to the point.

— What do you know about the American who was taken?

The question raised a look of consternation in her eyes, which he thought was a good sign. It meant she might know something and needed to decide what she was going to do about it. She knew of the kidnapping at least, everyone did, and that it was serious business. She scrutinized him for a few seconds, trying to judge the look of him. He took out a small quantity of bills and handed them over to her, then did his best to express the sincerity of his motives.

— I care about the woman. I want to help her.

She remained skeptical. Anyone would be careful in such circumstances, a wizened sex worker, twice more.

— Why you care about her?

He was not used to sharing his feelings, not used to having them, for that matter. It wasn't easy for him to find the words.

— She is... a friend. A dear friend. Someone I don't want to see... butchered.

A softening in the woman's face revealed her sympathy for the affliction that he suffered. She nodded, glanced at the money and put it in her purse, then stood up, passed over to the window and called down into the yard. When she returned, she instructed him to take off his clothes, and he did so, puzzled at first, but realizing, when another girl, quite young, came through the door a minute later, that it would seem suspicious if he were still dressed.

Some words passed between the two women in a language he didn't know, then the new girl's coquettish face turned sober. The older woman turned to him and explained.

— This girl have cousin, man who live by Grand Mosque. He know something. How much you pay?

He reached for his pants and withdrew a sum that most ordinary Africans would not see in a month. The young girl came towards him and grabbed for it, but he pulled it back.

— I will give it to your cousin if he will meet me and tell me what he knows.

The girl thought briefly, then nodded.

That business having been concluded, the three of them moved on to other matters. In training, they had told him that the girls won't trust you if you don't have sex, though he'd never objected to that aspect of the work. Twenty minutes later, his energies spent and his needs met, he gave the women a few more bills, more than was strictly necessary.

The uncomplicated provision of sexual gratification was a skill these women excelled at and a service he greatly appreciated. For the next few hours at least, he could hold the warmth of human contact in his breast. It was a meager diet for the soul, one that would leave him hungry again before long, but he could survive on it, for now.



CIA station chief Crane Foster punched the autodial button on his secure phone and it was answered by the duty officer at the Special Operation Group temporary headquarters in Dakar. He passed on the unsettling news.

— Mansur is in the city. He just came to see me but he got away. He's off reservation.

The gravel-throated army major grunted his displeasure.

— Why? Do we need to be worried?

— It's hard to say. He's concerned about Noisy Bird.

The major let out a sarcastic chuckle.

— Concerned? Well, aren't we all now. But I don't know what I'm supposed to do about him.

— Nothing, just letting you know. Also I got a call from Ndoye. The husband's kidnapping may be related. It's not just for money. It may not even be a kidnapping.

The reply came over the line in a rash of military bluster.

— What the *hell!*? Have you people got your shit together or *not*?

The military types liked everything buttoned up tight, but on the civilian side, it was never so simple.

— We're still looking at it, but there could be another actor in play.

The operation was the station chief's doing and by far the most audacious and high-profile exercise he had ever handled. He didn't like the idea of a bunch of unknown, out-of-control berserkers throwing a monkey wrench into his carefully laid-out mission. He reminded the major about the rules of engagement.

— If anything *does* get in your way...

— Don't worry, we'll remove it.

Foster loved the military guys. He had never heard the major utter the words "on the other hand" or "conversely" or anything like it.

With them, there was no “other hand”. They just do it. And the chief was anxious for it to get done.

— How close are you to getting a fix on the bird?

— We’ll get there when we get there. The RFID vans are patrolling the area where we lost the vehicle but they need to be within a hundred meters before we can nail it down.

— How much longer?

— Twelve hours with twenty percent probability, twenty-four with eighty percent.

— Let me know. I’m reporting to Langley every hour. We’re picking up heavy noise around el-Khairy. He may be involved.

The major let out a wolf whistle.

— El-Khairy! That would be a big fish. Do we get the five mill if we whack him?

The five million dollar reward offered on El-Khairy had every jihadi hunter seeing green.

— No, but a grateful nation will thank you.

— You can save the flag ceremony for later. That kind of cash would buy a pretty nice fishing boat. There’s a few tarpon in the Gulf of Mexico I haven’t caught yet.

The station chief had himself been an avid sport fisherman at one time, but hadn’t been to Florida in years.

— Leave a couple for me.

He’d gone after tarpon just once. The huge silver fish, more than a hundred pounds, put up a ferocious fight, leaping high out of the water and turning cartwheels in the air. The two-hour fight with the battling monster was as heady an adrenaline rush as he’d ever experienced. Just the thought of it could still make his face flush and his heart pound. His real aspiration, though, was to retire to Costa Rica for the sailfishing. He’d learned of it from the senior officers while briefly posted on the Santa Elena Peninsula in the eighties, and while he’d never had the chance to go out, the stories and photos from that time had fertilized his imagination ever since.

He sighed, finished up with the major, then placed a call to Ndoye before typing his update to Langley. It was going to be a long twenty-four hours.



By the time Mimi lurched into the parking lot of their hotel for the night, Robert was shaking and nauseous, and very grateful at the prospect of staying in one place for a while. He let out his breath as he spoke.

— Thank God!

She gave him a twisted look.

— Thank Mimi! You're alive, aren't you? Not so much as a scratch!

He grimaced, then bowed his head in her direction in veneration.

— Thank you, your ladyship, for bringing us here alive.

She smiled broadly at him.

— That's the spirit! Don't you forget it.

They stopped at the desk just long enough for Mimi to take from him a lot more of his cash than he would have thought necessary for a room in such a modest hotel. The clerk accepted it and gave her a key, with no further formalities. Leaning in close to the man's face, she said something very forcefully to him and flashed the rest of the money, and he nodded. She explained all this to Robert as they made their way to the room.

— He's no friend of the police. No friend of mine either, but he likes money. We'll be alright.

— Just one room then...

— If we took two rooms, he would be suspicious, maybe even clever enough to think that there's more money to be had from turning us in than waiting for me to pay him the rest in the morning. With just one room, it's all very normal. I've brought men here before. White men too.

He gave her a look, not meaning to, that showed his surprise, and she smiled and replied to his unspoken query.

— Yes, I’ve done it, sometimes, if I’m short of money and it’s somebody I might want to go to bed with regardless.

He was fairly sure that he was not that sort of somebody, and even if he were, careening around Dakar on the “Screaming Mimi” thrill ride had left his body crying out to lie down flat and not budge an inch. When they got to the room and he saw the two beds, that’s exactly what he did, on the nearest one.

He closed his eyes, hoping for a moment’s peace, but there was none to be had. Caroline, if she still lived, was not at peace, and he couldn’t be either. He spoke quietly into the darkness of his shuttered eyelids, addressing his questions to himself as much as to the woman busying herself nearby.

— Are we getting anywhere?

Mimi paused a moment before answering.

— Haiden thinks she’s in this area.

The idea that Caroline might be nearby was both comforting and disturbing. The reality of what she could be going through battled with his desperate desire for her to be safe and sound. He clung to his hopes, fighting the unpalatable truths that sought to force their way into his thoughts.

— So how will we find her?

— Haiden is working on it.

He heard a rustling noise and opened his eyes. Mimi was removing a sheet from the other bed. “Haiden is working on it” was not what he wanted to hear. He sighed deeply.

— There’s no plan then.

— He’ll think of something.

Robert had no real confidence that their desperate crusade would end in anything but tragedy, funerals and heartbreak. He closed his eyes again and said a prayer out loud.

— Let it be a good one.

The woman didn't reply, but stopped what she was doing and stared at the man laid out on the bed, as still as a corpse. There was pity in her voice as she spoke.

— You love her, don't you.

“Love” was not his favorite word and he hardly ever used it. Those four letters, printed so gaily on Valentine's Day candies and in Facebook posts, could not begin to say what he felt for Caroline. But he was supposed to be a wordsmith, so he made an effort to give voice to it, speaking slowly and meditatively as he constructed the edifice of his sentiments.

— Do I love her? The day begins with her... and ends with her... and in between, moment by moment, she breathes life into every torpid thing there is... making the mundane momentous... the senseless sensible... the worthless wondrous... the everyday extraordinary. And in dreams, that hope of life yet un-lived, she works... weaving the fabric of our longings... tracing the lines of our destiny. The question then, for me, do I love her, cannot exist, and so... cannot be answered.

Mimi stood fixated as Robert's words trailed off. She regarded the muscular but languid form of the exhausted writer, dumbstruck. Then, taking the bedsheets, she went into the bathroom. When she came out, she was wrapped in it. By the time she crawled into the second bed, he was dead to the world and she followed soon after.



Captain Yusuf Ndoye arrived late in the evening at his one bedroom apartment on the far southern edge of the Dakar region. The simple two-story building on the ocean near the Toubab Dialao tourist village lay in a quiet area free from unwelcome intrusions. He lived alone.

His spent body sank comfortably into the Zoe Verzelloni beanbag lounge chair he'd bought from a French mercantile trader, an oily, fidgety, middle aged reprobate forced to decamp on short notice



when complaints about his shabby business practices attracted the attention of the Dakar authorities.

The possibility of acquiring goods at distressed prices from persons needing to arrange quick *sub rosa* departures, a not infrequent occurrence, was one of the benefits of being a police official in that city. The foreigner had rented a large house and furnished it lavishly, and officers at all levels had contested for the large trove. No one else was much interested in the ungainly-looking beast of a chair, however costly it might have been when purchased new, but the captain could see how agreeable a welcoming hug from the overstuffed leather divan would be at the end of a tiresome and stressful duty shift. Besides, there was room for two, if they were on friendly terms. The chair was where he did his best thinking, and he was almost always thinking.

His service radio was turned on and he was being paged, so he picked it up.

— Ndoye. What is it?

— The embassy wants you to call.

He spoke much better English than anyone in the department, which was the reason they had appointed him as liaison with the U.S. officials. That, plus the benefit of many months spent training in the U.S., made him uniquely qualified to deal with the odious arrogance of their quiet superiority.

It was Foster who answered the call. The chief was not one for pleasantries and got right down to business.

— Find Mansur?

— No. Have you found the woman?

The captain knew that they had not, and the American knew that he knew they had not, because if they had, they would be telling him to activate the perimeter, and they weren't, so Foster rightly understood Ndoye's turning back the question as a sign of his annoyance, and eased off slightly.

— Look, captain, we need each other, right? I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, but there's a lot at stake here, for you too. For your country. If we get the suckers, you'll be a lot safer too.

Ndoye had heard this line before but he wasn't buying it. There were a lot of those "suckers", and every time they got one, another one crawled out of the woodwork. While Senegal was, on the whole, solidly in sympathy with the fight against extremism, Islamophobic rhetoric was coming out of the new administration almost daily, seeming to make religion itself the issue, and the captain's country was more Muslim than pro-western.

He wouldn't waste his time trying to persuade Crane Foster of any of this—the CIA officer had little to do with it anyway—but rescuing the woman was something that did concern Ndoye. The Americans were handling the assault, and what he knew about their way of doing things left him with little confidence that her welfare would be a priority.

He was a policeman, sworn to look out for the welfare of everyone, and he couldn't easily disregard her safety. And, she was a woman. The Americans, it seemed, did not favor gender distinctions, but in his culture a woman was something special, someone to be protected. For what it was worth, he decided to risk the chief's reaction and speak on her behalf.

— It's your operation of course, but the woman, how do you plan to get her out?

— You're right, it's our operation. It's not your concern.

Ndoye reached for an argument that might get through to the man.

— She's an innocent victim in this. Perhaps it can't be done, but you at least need to consider it, if there's some approach that would bring her out safely? With all your resources?

The station chief reacted angrily.

— We've considered all that. We've considered everything. And no one's an innocent victim.

Ndoye was taken aback by this last remark.

— No one? There are no innocent victims?

The chief's voice ratcheted up a notch. He was almost shouting.

— Look, captain, this is war! Anyone can be asked to make sacrifices. Do you think that any of us is entitled to sit comfortably at home and enjoy a privileged status while others take all the chances? When your country needs you, any able-bodied citizen can be called upon.

— Was she asked? Did she sign up for this?

Foster fell silent for a few seconds at this remark, then regained his composure and spoke in normal tones.

— I don't know how it is in your country, but if you're an American, when you pledge allegiance to the flag, you agree to stand up for the republic when the circumstances require it.

Ndoye could not understand why the station chief was being so defensive. It seemed that he had asked a simple enough question, not one requiring a lecture in political science.

— Mr. Foster, if she were really a soldier instead of a civilian, wouldn't you try to get her out if you could? You *do* want to get her out, don't you?

The question turned out to be an awkward one for the chief. Rather than blow his top again, he just ended the conversation.

— Yes of course. As I said, we've considered all the options. And anyway, this is a pointless discussion. Just do your job, Ndoye, that's all we need from you.

The captain had heard many lies during his twenty years as a policeman and was sure that Foster was lying now, but could not imagine why the Americans were willing to leave the woman to her fate. He was not in any position to call out the station chief on it, though, so he dropped it.

— I'll do my job.

— Good.

Captain Ndoye had never felt completely comfortable being tethered to the American spy agency, but the moral ambiguity of how this operation was playing out had him more unsettled than usual and he couldn't afford to be losing sleep over it. When the conversation ended, he put on his 1953 Maria Callas recording of Tosca. It was in

mono, but nothing he had ever found by way of a contemporary voice worked so well to release him from his cares. He sat back and closed his eyes, said a prayer for peace, then let *La Divina's* entrancing coloratura quiet the demons taunting his hectored soul.

I'm still shaking and sick from the massacre and the kidnapping when Oumar comes to the hanging rugs that separate the women's area and calls to me.

— Ms. Pembrose, may I see you for a moment?

The women are all dressed so I invite him in.

He gingerly separates the rugs a crack, checking to be sure that we're decent, then pushes them aside and walks to where I'm lying down, addressing me in a very formal manner.

— Ms. Pembrose, I must speak with you.

I've been staring blankly at the ceiling for an indeterminate amount of time, trying to bring my thoughts under control. The other women, terrified, dazed, and treating me like a leper, have arranged themselves at the far end of the room, which leaves Oumar and me more or less alone. He looks meekly at me and then drops his eyes. I would say he's almost sheepish, but I can't imagine why. He speaks haltingly.

— Ms. Pembrose... this is... very difficult.

That must be the understatement of the century. I can't help replying with a note of cynicism, which I can only just manage to get out with faltering and muffled breath.

— Difficult? I would say... *horrendous*.

He twitches slightly from something suggesting a chuckle, but it's a nervous reaction, not laughter.

— Yes, our situation is bad. Otherwise I would never ask this of you.

He's gazing at me intently and perspiring slightly. Whatever it is, he's having a great deal of trouble getting it out. I sit up and move aside to give him some room, then try to settle myself by folding my arms over my stomach. His attentions are the only thing keeping me sane right now, so whatever it is, I'm prepared to listen.

— Sit down, Oumar. Go ahead. Tell me.

He nods, then carefully places himself on the makeshift couch, being careful not to rub against me. He speaks in barely more than a whisper.

— Yes, thank you.

I'm puzzled by his manner and it only adds to my distresses. He's well into his twenties but he's staring at the floor and acting boyish and tongue-tied. I wait for a few moments but then grow impatient.

— Please, just tell me what it is.

He takes a deep breath. Of all the things he might say to me, he chooses the absolutely most unexpected.

— Yes, I will. Ms. Pembrose. What I need to say is, I am asking you to marry me.

The full, heavy burqa I'm forced to wear over my head and body is sweltering, uncomfortable and humiliating, but at the moment, I'm glad that Oumar can't see my face, my mouth hanging open in astonishment and indignation burning in my eyes. Now it's me who's flushed and clammy, but I do my best to give a measured reply, and fortunately, I have a convenient excuse in hand that avoids the insult of an outright rejection.

— Oumar, I'm already married.

Perhaps he knew that. He doesn't seem surprised or put off.

— They don't know it, evidently. As for me, that may not be an obstacle. Was it a Christian marriage?

— No. It was civil.

I don't tell him that my maternal grandfather was a Jew, and that my first husband was also and we married in a reformed synagogue. It can't be helpful to mention any of this just now, so I keep it to myself. He continues, more confidently, with his proposition.

— Then we can ignore it.

— I'd rather not.

His strength is returning and his voice becomes more animated.

— I believe that we need to, Ms. Pembrose. For your sake and for mine.

— Why?

He reaches over to me and takes my hands in his, squeezing them firmly and leaning close to me, speaking urgently.

— The tribunal have decided to marry you. It is their right, under Shariah, because they consider you a Muslim woman without a protector.

I'm silent for at least a full minute, staring at his hands wrapped around mine while I try to process how I feel about this importunement. Oumar sits as stiff and still as a post, waiting patiently for me to reply. Finally I look into his troubled eyes, fixed on me in anticipation.

— And what if I refuse?

His manner hardens suddenly, changing from polite pleading to a stern and excited exhortation.

— Ms. Pembrose, please understand me! It is not only your life that is in jeopardy, but mine also! The knowledge of your conversion has distracted them for the moment, but they are not convinced of your sincerity, and if we do not do as they request, well, do I need to tell you what the result will be?

I'm not used to being dictated to, and certainly not as to whom I should marry, and certainly not by a bunch of black-frocked religious crackpots. There's a fight going on in my head, my dignity grappling crazily with my instinct to survive, and it's causing me to tremble. I inhale deeply, struggling to remain in control. I need to force myself to consider the matter rationally.

— You're unmarried?

— No, I have a wife, but I can have up to four.

I knew that Muslim men can have multiple wives but I didn't know it was limited in number.

— Yes. Yes, of course.

I have heard that an animal will chew its leg off to escape a trap and that humans have done the same. So the decision should be

obvious. If I must be forced into marrying, Oumar is at least considerate. And, it's just a temporary expedient. I tell myself all this as a modern, sophisticated, intellectual woman, but even so, the word "marriage" carries such power.

It surprises me that I'm feeling so balky. As between chewing off an appendage and entering into a forced marriage, there is no comparison, but the idea of it oppresses my spirit like a chilling fog. And there is, certainly, one other thing I need to know.

— Would you, would you expect to...

— Only if necessary.

— Necessary?

With the mention of sex, Oumar has gone bashful again. He looks down and is almost mumbling as he speaks, making it difficult to understand him clearly.

— They may want proof. I don't know. They shouldn't, it's not the law, but... I don't know. Anything is possible with them.

It takes me a few moments to make a guess at what it is he's trying to say.

— Proof of... consummation?

He looks directly in my eyes and finally manages to get the words out clearly.

— Of virginity.

I wouldn't have thought it was possible to feel any more degraded than I already am, but I do.

— Are they insane?

— Yes, they are, Ms. Pembrose. They're completely insane. But don't be alarmed about it. I know what to do. It was the situation with my wife because we were together before our marriage. It's not a real matter of concern, not here in Senegal, but she was anxious and ashamed, and I did it, so I know what needs to be done.

To say that I'm unhappy with this would be a gross understatement. I pull my hands from his grip and fold my arms, giving him a stern look which of course he can't see.

— I need to know *exactly*.



He jerks to attention and responds quickly and distinctly.

— It will be my blood.

Thank God for that. I study his eyes, which are riveted to mine, dark and steady and frightened. It's the fear in them that convinces me. I can see that I may be saving his life every bit as much as my own. There's only one plausible answer to his proposal.

— When will this take place?

— Tomorrow afternoon.

He grasps my hands again in his, warm and steady, and we sit in silence. After a time the trembling stops and he brings me the first food and drink I've been able to make myself put down since it happened.



It was light when Mimi, fully dressed, shook him urgently and woke him, whispering loudly.

— Get up. We need to go.

Robert turned over, bleary-eyed and confused. She was hovering over him, her mouth set in a purposeful expression. He rasped a response.

— Where?

— I'm taking you back.

Still in his clothes and lacking a toothbrush, all he needed was a quick trip to the bathroom and a splash of water on his face. But his stomach was growling. If she only ate pastry and coffee once a day and nothing else, that would explain her anorexic physique but not her boundless energy. Maybe she used amphetamines, he thought. If so, he hadn't seen any telltale signs.

The idea of returning to the Terrou Bi both appealed to him and repulsed him. He wouldn't mind a meal and a change of clothes, but he would just end up pacing around the room again, useless and agitated, insufferable scenes of havoc playing out in his mind. So much better to be doing something, however feckless it might turn out to be. By the

time he returned from the bathroom, he had made up his mind to confront the woman with all the force he could muster.

— Why do I need to go back? I won't do it.

She was momentarily startled by his refusal, but then quickly dismissed the remark with a flick of her fingers.

— We don't need you any more. You're just in the way.

Pathetic he may be, he thought, but it must be possible to be more diplomatic about it. He stood as straight as he could and pleaded his case.

— I must be of some use. I'll stay out of the way unless I'm needed.

— No.

She turned away from him and picked up her purse. He felt aggrieved. Determined not to be left out, he spoke in an indignant and menacing voice.

— If I go back, I'll tell them about you! I'll say you kidnapped me. I know your name and your car and license number!

She turned on him, glaring, her voice rising to match his own.

— No, you don't! It's not my name. It's not my car.

— I know what you look like.

That struck her as funny and she laughed.

— You do?

— If the police have a picture of you I can point you out.

She chuckled.

— Good luck. We all look alike to you, don't we. But anyway, I've changed my appearance.

— Well then, I know about this hotel.

This caused an abrupt change in tune. She sobered and shot him a forbidding scowl, then issued a threat of her own.

— If you cause trouble, we won't be able to help Caroline.

That was a consideration for sure, but it occurred to him that maybe things were not as they seemed.

— How do I know you're really trying to help Caroline? Who are you anyway?

— There's a reason.

— The money, OK, but I'm starting to wonder about that too. You're all very full of yourselves, aren't you. Psychologists have a word for it.

She softened just a little, offended at the accusation.

— It's not just the money. And we're not psychos.

He could see that he had her on the defensive and pressed on.

— Maybe you're the Justice League of America! You must be Wonder Woman and Haiden is Green Lantern.

She smiled graciously and gave him a somewhat respectful look for a change.

— How very 1960s of you. I'm more Jade and Haiden's more Jesse Quick.

— Never heard of them.

She gave him a smug look.

— I didn't think so.

Superhero comics. For such an exotic woman, she was awfully geeky. Robert felt he had been abused long enough and let loose with a tirade.

— You do have an agenda and it's not about Caroline. It's about something else! You don't really expect to get paid, do you. That was just bullshit! At the moment, I'm not thinking that you really mean to help us at all. You're up to no good, and if I finger you to the police, maybe that's the most sensible thing I could do.

It wasn't much of an argument but it was all he could think of. She got out her phone and typed in a message. A minute later she gave him an inscrutable look.

— Maybe we can use you after all.

The desk clerk from the night before was still on duty and greedily accepted another fistfull of money without comment as they left, then Mimi stopped at a grocery where they grabbed some food and water to eat in the car. The last thing Robert remembered before passing out was Mimi turning into a warehouse parking lot. When he regained consciousness, his head throbbing from a brutal headache, he

was in a wooden box about one meter square with air holes around the top, the remaining food and water wedged in his lap.



Mansur waited in the courtyard of the brothel for the cousin to come for the girl. It was a long wait but the company was congenial. It got busy until two AM, but then slowed down enough that he was able to share a few laughs with the women who, despite their best efforts to avoid getting drunk while working, were a little boozy by the end of the night.

The cousin came at three. He was about thirty years old, tall and thin, sporting a small well-trimmed goatee. After the girl spoke to him and pointed at Mansur, the man approached warily with a grim look on his face, speaking in bad French.

— Show me money.

Mansur took out a wad of bills and fanned the stack in front of the man, who nodded and reached for it, but the agent held on tight and shook his head.

— Information first.

The cousin made a show of being offended, but seeing that Mansur could not be moved, soon gave in.

— I don't have. I take you.

After a further negotiation involving the question of where they were going and who was involved, the three of them squeezed into the man's decrepit Mitsubishi pickup and they took off into the night.

Ten minutes later they pulled up in front of a blue and white one story building alive with mbalax, the popular African-Cuban-Reggae music of that city. Inside, Dakar's plainly-dressed nightowls hopped to a pulsating rhythm under a wash of ever-changing colored lights. If the party was winding down in the wee hours, it wasn't yet apparent. The person he had come to see was a drummer in the band. They would have to wait until the set was finished.

An hour later, as the crowd thinned and the band started packing up, they moved towards the stage. The cousin spoke and the drummer replied, then looked at Mansur suspiciously. Once out on the street, the negotiation began, the drummer opening with a flat denial.

— You are mistaken. I don't know about anything. I can't help you.

His French was good and his reticence not surprising given the seriousness of the matter and the possible consequences, in a city like Dakar, of involvement in anything dicey, let alone something as perilous as a terrorist kidnapping. But Mansur felt certain that the girl and her cousin were anxious for a share of the bounty he was prepared to offer. He decided to leave it up to them to persuade the drummer and so responded politely.

— I see. I'm sorry to bother you.

The agent's capitulation initiated a loud and vigorous conversation that went on for a good while, the three others shouting over each other like a scene from a badly tuned and poorly rehearsed operetta. He didn't try to follow it too closely. He wasn't interested in the arguments, only the result. Finally the cousin turned to him and spoke.

— Show money.

He took out the bundle that he had offered before. The drummer shook his head vigorously and the cousin shouted in response.

— Need more!

Mansur felt reassured that the information was not coming easily. He expected to pay more than he had offered for anything good, and if they agreed too readily, it would be a sure sign they were out to dupe him. He added some bills to the pile and the man made a motion with his hand indicating "still more".

When the right amount had been produced, the drummer stopped shaking his head but still appeared reluctant. He stood silent in a kind of trance, prompting the girl to reach over to him and give his arm a vigorous shake. Finally he looked at Mansur and spoke.

— Rue de Reims.

It was in Medina, the poor section of Dakar not far from the Grand Mosque and a plausible location for jihadi kidnappers to be holed up. Mansur prodded him for details.

— It's a long street. Where exactly?

The man shook his head resolutely. He was obviously in great fear of being involved in anything that might have grave consequences.

— All I know.

The agent had ample experience with negotiations of this nature. He stiffened and spoke sternly in a clear, commanding voice.

— I need more than that, something more specific, or else no money.

The man stared angrily at him, then relaxed slightly.

— Place where they make metal pots. I don't know more.

There were lots of such places on Rue de Reims. It was known for it. Feeling sure that this was all there was to be had, Mansur handed half the money to the drummer, saying he would give him the rest when better information was forthcoming. Then he gave the man his mobile number and left the three of them to squabble over how to split the take.

Black and yellow taxis were congregating to pick up the revelers coming out of the nightclub and the agent took one to Millenaire, a budget hotel one street over from the street in question, where he spent what was left of the night stretched out on the bedcover, wilting in a hot and restless stupor. Pots and pans on Rue de Reims. It wasn't much to go on, but in the business of tracking down terrorists, there hardly ever was.



Haiden Stills looked at the Google map of Dakar and tried to work out his next move. Plateau was a large area and it was only a rough approximation of the woman's location. He was sure that the

Americans would find her sooner or later but was equally sure that they wouldn't be especially careful when they did. Her welfare might not be uppermost in the minds of the functionaries running the CIA operation, but *his* objective depended to a large extent on getting her back alive.

Mimi's message had given him food for thought. He had been considering that another diversion might be in order. Kicking the beast could yield something, though that something could turn out to be a dangerous and unpleasant retaliation. He thought that maybe he could use the husband again. The police seemed to have given up on him, but if he suddenly reappeared in just the right place...

In the meantime, *ellapr* had contacted him again. She needed another ten thousand.

He didn't have feelings for her as such. He had never met her in person, for one thing, assuming she really was a "she". The money was no problem, and what she was worth in terms of experience, skill and loyalty vastly exceeded the sums she was requesting. He knew what it was like to be holding the short end of the stick, and besides, as leader of the group, he was expected to help out when the others found themselves embarrassed in one way or another.

It wasn't the fact that she was asking for money that was the problem. It was that she had asked twice in a short period of time. Some people might ask for less than they need, thinking that it will be easier to get a smaller amount at first and then ask for more later, or ask others for the rest, or might underestimate what they need. In all of his experience with *ellapr*, though, she had proved to be an unabashed, straightforward, cunning, and extremely competent actor. If she needed twenty thousand, she would certainly have known what she needed from the start, and would certainly have known that he would give it to her, no questions asked. Requesting it in two separate amounts in short order was a bright red flag that something really bad was going on with her.

He sent her the money without hesitation, but the question kept injecting itself into his calculations and would not go away. After

struggling and failing to think of a good explanation, he decided that he needed to say something and messaged her again.

haiden: Everything OK? Will you need more? You know I'm good for it. Do you need anything else?

It took a while for her to get back to him, and when she did, the answer was uncharacteristic but not really unexpected either.

ellapr: Got my tit in a wringer.

haiden: Sounds bad.

ellapr: It's bad.

The fact that she seemed unwilling to talk about it didn't surprise him too much. If she really was a woman, she was the most reticent he had ever encountered. He felt sure that she would never ask directions if she ever got lost. Just one thing occurred to him that seemed like what might be going on.

haiden: Someone is squeezing you.

Again it took a while for her to reply.

ellapr: Something like that.

Extortion was a tactic the group had practiced on others often enough, but only once before had they found themselves the target of such a racket, and in that case they had dispatched the hapless malfeasant in short order, leaving the loser crushed and defeated. She had helped with that operation. The others would certainly come to her aid with whatever she needed, for a price, of course. She must know that, he thought, but even so, it wouldn't hurt to provide some reassurance.



haiden: I'm here if you need me.

The answer came more quickly this time.

ellapr: I know.

It was all he could do for now. He put it out of his mind and turned his attention back to the situation in Dakar, that being the husband, and how to use him.



By late morning, Robert's cramped wooden box was becoming exceedingly uncomfortable. He had mostly recovered from whatever it was that Mimi put in his water bottle, but he now had a nagging pain in his back from being folded up like an origami.

He considered the alternatives and there were just two that he could think of. First, he could just wait. His mobile phone had been confiscated, but he had food and water and could breathe, so they must be intending to come back for him and not just let him die there. His second option was to yell as loud as he could, and that seemed to make sense. Filling his lungs to capacity, he let out a long, wailing moan, then yowled "help" several times as loud as he could.

A few seconds later, he heard a door opening in the room, then footsteps, followed by a terrible, ear-splitting crack as something large and heavy whacked the top of the box. Whoever it was did not like his outburst and let him know it.

— *Ferme ta gueule!*

He couldn't locate the phrase within his limited vocabulary but the meaning was clear enough. He shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears, then tried his French.

— *J'ai pain dans le dos! Je vauz aller!*

This was met with an even louder whack, this time on the side of the box.

— *Vous ne valez rien, putain d'américain!*

He recognized “*putain d'américain*” from a past attempt to make use of French language, having been left by Caroline one time to fend for himself in Paris while she spent the day with an old friend from the Sorbonne. The box beater had a point though. Robert realized suddenly that he'd told the man he had “bread in his back”, and so corrected himself.

— *MAL dans le dos! MAL dans le dos!*

This caused the man to stop pounding on the box at least. There were a few seconds of silence, then the banger said to shut up again, but more politely this time, and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

It was the first time he'd been kept in a box and he didn't like it, but there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it. It made him appreciate the times, his entire life in effect, that he had not spent stuffed in a box. He thought that, instead of complaining, when for example the mashed potatoes have gone cold, one should say, “I'm just glad I'm not locked in a box with an angry francophone beating on it.”

As it appeared that he was stuck there for the time being, he resolved to use the opportunity to consider the situation. His threat to thwart Haiden Stills' plans, whatever they may be, seemed to have been taken seriously. He was more convinced than ever that the hackers' intentions were not primarily concerned with Caroline's well being, or his own. The question was, whether he should cooperate, or try to escape to the police, if he had the chance. Mimi had said they'd decided to use him. Maybe they would, though if they did, he hoped that it would not be another “twenty-four heart attack sightseeing tour of Dakar”.

But then, curled up in the darkness, he began to feel another pain, much worse than the strained muscles in his back. He had never actually had a heart attack, but he felt something like what that must

be. Alone and isolated, the bleak truth of the kidnapping and of Caroline's fate, which he'd been holding at bay with all the force of denial he could summon, burst through the wall of his resistance like a runaway freight train. The reality took hold in his mind that his wife had been taken from him and would be killed, if she hadn't been already.

The agony of that realization was incarnate, a wound deep in his breast, but he welcomed the pain. It was all he had of her at the moment, and absent a miracle, was all he would ever have of her. He held desperately to the clenching, bitter ache, because if it left him, she would be truly gone.

He had known the moment he fell in love with her, and it came back to him now. It was the morning after he had stayed overnight in her hotel suite for the second time. She was up before him and had ordered breakfast in bed. They laughed together, about what, he couldn't remember, while gobbling eggs Benedict and guzzling orange juice and coffee. But as he kissed her and was about to leave the bed to get dressed, she pleaded with him, "just one more time before you go, darling, please!"

No one had ever begged him for love and it touched him to the core. He was more than obliging, and afterwards, she held him tight, tears of happiness flowing freely. It was then that he understood that she needed him, really needed him.

He had never been needed before, not in that way—as a provider and protector, for company or just to be a husband, but never as a lover. She had struck a chord in him that had never rung out before, and it sparked a yearning as powerful as any drug. She had divided his life in two—the time before that moment, and the time since.

But now there was to be a third division of his life, a time after Caroline, a possibility he had never considered and which had seemed inconceivable. He shook and sobbed convulsively. "Oh Caroline," he muttered to himself. "Oh my Caroline. Do not leave me..."

As if by some numinous alchemy, whether by trick of his own desperate mind or by the action of a more substantial agent, he could feel her reaching out to him, that she was still there.

She must be. She had to be.



The Americans hadn't called so Ndoye was able to sleep a little later than he had expected to and then take his time with breakfast, grateful for the extra bit of rest. The police radio was on, but it was relatively quiet, just before the shift change. He would monitor it closely, he thought. If the call came in and he had to throw up the perimeter, that would be just the time when things could go wrong, more so than usual. He called his squad leaders in turn, doing his best to make sure the changeover went smoothly.

It was going to be a hot, dusty day, as it almost always was in Dakar when it wasn't raining, and there was no sign of rain. That, at least, was good. When the rains came to the city, it could make a mess of things.

He dressed, got in his car and started the long drive back to Dakar. The captain had been criticized for living so far out, which was, strictly speaking, against regulations, but for him it was essential. For one thing, he could not afford anyplace at all desirable within the city boundaries, certainly not anything near the water, and he was someone who craved pleasant surroundings. For another, while many on the force were the thick-skinned types who didn't let police work get to them, the frustrating and often brutal character of law enforcement could easily overwhelm a sensitive man like himself, turning him into a cynical and vulgar misanthrope if he didn't have a quiet refuge where he could get away from it all. The most important reason, though, was the need to keep his personal life distant from anyone in the city who might take notice of his unorthodox and, in Senegal, highly illegal predilection in matters of the heart.

The Americans had helped him to obtain the exemption, intervening in some mysterious way to secure permission for him to reside such a great distance from the station. He sometimes marveled at how they managed to achieve such miracles with relative ease, but at the same time, understood well enough that it had to do with the piles of ready cash they harbored in such amazing abundance, ready at a moment's notice to bend things their way when they found it convenient to do so.

His choice of lodging meant a considerable trek in and out of the city every day, but he spent the time on the police radio and usually got more done during the drive than when he was at his desk. This morning, as he started out on his commute, he checked and rechecked the preparations, disquieted but not surprised to hear his units reporting that all was in readiness, when, on further investigation, it turned out that nothing in fact was.

The two-lane route along the water, with its occasional views of the ocean visible between crowded masonry buildings, abruptly turned inland, then passed briefly between lush green vegetation on the one side and new, unfinished industrial buildings on the other, before joining the N1, where it reverted once again to semi-desert. From there, it was a not unpleasant drive for a while, the traffic moving reasonably well that time of day, a few trees along the road serving to break up the stretches of block-house buildings and occasional stacks of old tires. But then the route widened to something resembling a four lane highway, and the going was smooth and easy on the new-laid pavement, finally joining the A1, as fine a superhighway as could be found in any European city.

The route took him past Camp Thiaroye, and he recalled, as he always did, the story of *les tirailleurs*, the African soldiers who had served in France for a hundred years but whom the French saw fit to send back to Senegal as part of a policy of “*blanchiment*”, the “whitening” of the French armed forces after World War II. Angry about the conditions at the camp and the terms of repatriation, particularly with regard to pensions, the Senegalese soldiers had

rebelled, only to be massacred by French troops. The scandal had been a turning point in his country's nationalist movement and the captain saluted the brave patriots as he drove by.

It took the full hour's travel time to sort through the loose ends that needed tying up, and in the end, he was as prepared as he could be. What it meant to be "prepared" in Senegal was certainly not what it meant in Washington, he knew. He had been to that illustrious city and seen for himself what being truly primed for action could be, and was resigned to the reality that his force would never rise to that level of discipline. The role he was asked to play was limited, though—establish and hold a perimeter. He had some confidence that he could do that much. The Americans would be taking care of the assault itself.

Once in the city, he rejoined the N1, which took him straight to the temporary command post he had established in Plateau. Foster wasn't available when he called the embassy, but a woman spoke to him.

— Yes, captain.

Her voice telegraphed an intention to treat him with a hollow and unyielding disrespect. It was typical of the female bureaucrats he had encountered while working with the Americans, alien beings so far as he was concerned, who if they had any humanity about them, preferred to cover it over in a cloak of impregnable armor. He made his request.

— I've just reviewed my units and everything is in order. Any developments I should know about?

— We still don't have a fix. We'll call you.

Her clipped response irritated him, but he felt he needed to convey certain important information about local conditions in Dakar.

— You understand, once we start to move, everyone in the city will know very quickly that something is going on. The kidnappers will know within fifteen minutes, maybe less.

The American agent seemed offended at the mention of this, evidently taking it as a form of criticism. Her reply was sharp.

— That’s expected, captain. We’ll be in place before we give you the go to establish the perimeter. We know they’ll notice it and react. We’ll be after them when they do.

That made sense. The kidnappers were more vulnerable when on the move than when they were holed up in a safehouse, and maybe there would be more hope of saving the hostages, but it did mean that there was more of a chance his men would see some action. He asked himself if his people were up to it. He wished he were more sure of it, and decided to push further, despite the risk of causing still greater offense.

— You will keep us informed quickly when things start happening? I would prefer to hear about it from you before I read about it in the newspaper.

This brought on the anticipated harsh rejoinder.

— Yes of course, you’ll know everything you *need* to know, but you’re ready for *anything*, aren’t you?

Americans, he thought. How nice it must be to be ready for “anything”. He had mustered his resources as best he could in terms of personnel and equipment. In addition to the advisers being supplied by the CIA, and given what was likely on the part of the terrorists, it should be enough. If not, he didn’t savor the prospect of recriminations raining down on him for any operational failures, and so made up his mind to press just one more time.

— You must give me *full* information immediately, *when* it’s available. It’s imperative.

He could almost see the frost forming on her lips as her words hissed over the phone.

— We will give you everything you *need to do your job*. Just *you* be ready, *captain*.

Then she hung up.

The encounter left a sour taste in the back of his throat. Some people said that the world would be taken over by robots, but after dealing with the Americans for so long, he wondered if maybe it hadn’t already happened.

As an African, he believed that every thing, and certainly every living thing, was a being possessed of a certain vitality. If even so much as a tree is destroyed, or even a rock, it is occasion for sadness at the loss of some part of existence, let alone the loss of a person. He would not, he hoped, ever become so indifferent as to consider any aspect of creation “expendable”, liable to be sacrificed in the name of an idea, or an impulse.

Well, he thought, the Americans may do what they will. For his part, he would do what he could to protect and serve all who passed within his purview, whether that happened to be a foolish American woman who had written an unfortunate book, or anything else. Nothing happens without a purpose. That purpose may be unknown to us, but nonetheless fulfills a part of the great design, and he himself had to play his role in it.

He looked down at his hands, the color of bark of the Khaya tree. He remembered a time from his boyhood when he’d become infuriated and struck his sister. His father had taken hold of him and asked, “Whose hands are these?” Those hands, he reminded himself now, were his, his to command. What he did or didn’t do with them, made him who he was.

He would be true to those hands, he decided, to his purpose. Whatever that might turn out to be.



The nights in Dakar are nearly as hot as the days, and with no air conditioning, sleeping would be difficult even if I weren’t being tormented by a pack of dodos planning my expiration date. The most I can manage is to drop off for short spells of restless unconsciousness brought on by sheer exhaustion.

I’m wearing the burqa over the clothes I had on when I was kidnapped. Sleeping in it is uncomfortable and I sometimes wake gasping for air. The other women take theirs off when there are no men around, but Oumar has told me to leave it on, saying it will help keep



me safe. Perhaps it will. I do feel slightly protected being so covered up, like when I was a child and made a tent on my bed with the blanket. Back then, I believed that what could not see me couldn't hurt me. I wish it were true now.

At noon more food is brought in. It's simple and edible and I'm terribly hungry and thirsty. I've mastered the trick of passing morsels and a small cup of tea up under the loose hood of the garment. It seems that they've prepared something special for me, a larger portion with several pieces of fruit added, for my wedding day, I suppose. I think of offering some to the other women, but they aren't exactly congenial. I put the notion aside and finish it myself. Having enough to eat is a small comfort.

The afternoon passes in weary detachment as I nap at times and at other times lie alone with my unsettled musings, wondering when they will collect me for the ceremony. No particular preparation is possible, or required, I decide, given that the burqa covers me completely. I have no aspirations for the proceedings so it's fine with me if I look like a sack of potatoes.

The hooded garment with its face shield makes for a kind of isolation chamber and strange thoughts play out in my feverish brain. Something blue—the burqa. Something borrowed? I can't think of anything. Something old—just me, perhaps. I have nothing that is new.

There certainly has never been a more jittery bride. The thought of Oumar coming to me with the intent of entering into conjugal union, although not as alarming as the prospect of execution, is nevertheless very unwelcome. He is a gentle soul and I keep repeating to myself that the whole business we're about to undertake is nothing but a means for survival. But, he is a man. I recall that in my thirty-eight years, I've allowed exactly eleven men inside me. He would be the twelfth.

The first four were at the liberal arts college in New England where I studied French literature and was inclusive of my first husband, Arthur, a poet. He wrote stunningly beautiful verse after sex and made a good career of it, the poetry and the sex both. I was young

then and accepted that his thrice daily ministrations, no more than two of which were ever with me, gave him a kind of energy that stoked his genius. I had a separate life, satisfying in its way, lived on a delirious carousel of obsessive-compulsive francophilia and bookish absorption. But then, finally, I outgrew him.

I had been stepping out with another man for six months before I told Arthur I was leaving. He reacted with deep hurt, complaining that it would cripple his career if I left him, which it did. Being married, it seemed, served as a kind of brake on his hypersexual self-indulgence, such that once cut loose from his moorings, he used himself up in just over a year and a half and had to take a professorship at our alma mater to keep the wolf from the door.

The three before Arthur didn't amount to much. I gave my virginity with hardly a thought to a pre-law student in my first semester of freshman year. The guy was nice enough but nothing special. All my friends had already had sex by then and I just wanted to do the deed. I didn't expect much, before, during or after, so wasn't disappointed. The next one obsessed over me for no reason I could divine and even dragged me to his home town for spring break to meet his family. They had the most terrible time persuading him to give me up, but finally succeeded when I said that I agreed with them, siding with his parents being the only thing he absolutely could not tolerate. The third one, who I actually had some feelings for, turned out to be a connoisseur of the female species, embarked on a Homeric quest for the one rare and elusive goddess capable of satisfying his exacting palate. Needless to say, it wasn't me.

Together with the six more or less indifferent liaisons during my wild years, and with the addition of Robert, that makes eleven, in all, who have joined that somewhat exclusive club. And now, in a very short time, another will be knocking on the door of my womanhood, one who has by no means been invited to the party. Better than an ugly death, surely, if it comes to that, but not at all acceptable.

I was sure that Robert would be the last, though if I should ever waver from that resolution, I'd have thought it would be someone like

the new Mr. Bates, and certainly not a grad student from Dakar, however sympathetic he may be. I close my eyes and recall that day in Central Park when a man whose gentle intelligence and rough good looks roused my animal spirits. For a few precious moments I feel alive again, but the reverie is broken as Oumar announces himself from outside the seraglio, then parts the rugs and enters.

It was late afternoon and Robert was feeling badly discomposed in his incommensurable crate. He recalled how people always say that you can get used to anything and decided that he didn't want to be there long enough to find out if that was true. He'd discovered a heavy quilted blanket at his feet with a strong animal smell to it, and arranging it behind his shoulders and neck had taken the sting out of his back pains at least. After finishing all the food and water, he'd used the empty water bottles to relieve himself. The angry box-beater hadn't returned and Robert hadn't called for him, nor had there been any other activity that he could hear.

Suddenly a disturbance outside the room and the sound of voices gave him a start. A flood of light poked through the holes in his box and he heard paws and nails scraping the floor and then several loud barks in his ear, terrifying him and setting his tense muscles vibrating.

A familiar female voice spoke to him in English. It was Mimi.

— Don't worry, it's just that you're in his box.

It took Robert a few seconds to settle his nerves enough to respond.

— He can have it back.

There was a mischievous laugh and then Mimi addressed him in motherly tones.

— How is your attitude? Are you going to give us any trouble?

He answered meekly.

— No. I have Stockholm syndrome, I'm sure of it.

She crowed.

— Ha! Glad to hear you've come around.

There was a rattling of the box at his feet and then one side of it swung open, giving him a view of Mimi's ankles with an enormous dog held between them, a mutt with yellowish hair, maybe part golden

retriever and part lab, fierce and mangy looking, that she had trouble holding back as it struggled, growling and snorting, to sniff at his legs.

— Don't worry, he won't hurt you. He's my baby.

Between frozen joints and his fear of the hound, Robert hesitated to make a move, but then Mimi ordered him.

— Come out of there *camarade!*

He scrambled out on his hands and knees. It took him a couple of tries to straighten up as Mimi unhooked the leash and the animal darted into the box, thrashing around in the debris that Robert had left behind, then pawing resentfully at the blanket before peering out through the open end and snarling at him. Robert backed away a few steps, making an offer of friendship.

— Nice doggy.

— He *is* a nice dog. I found him at the beach. His name is Surfer. It's just you were in his place.

Once Robert had stretched his arms, taken a few tentative steps and worked some lubrication back into his bones, he was ready to come to terms with matter at hand.

— So, do you have a plan yet?

Mimi nodded.

— Yes. We do need you after all.

His role in the affair had begun with a stomach-wrenching tear through the streets of Dakar, followed by a half day spent folded up in a shipping crate, culminating in a mortal fright administered by a rapacious beast. He wondered what could possibly be next.

— Will I live through it?

— You might. Probably you will. If you're killed it will be because of your bad French.

She told him the plan. When the time came, they were to drive somewhere, then he was supposed to get out and explain to anyone who was around that he was the husband of the kidnapped American woman and ask for help. It didn't seem like much of a scheme and he assumed there must be more to it than that.

— What then?

— Hopefully, chaos.

Again with the chaos. Disorder was something he associated with evildoers, not the good guys.

— That’s your plan?

— Chaos is our friend. They win when they’re able to control things. With matters a little out of control, it creates opportunities.

It seemed like much more of an un-plan than a plan. And who was this “they”? The police? Was interfering with the police a good thing? He shook his finger in her direction.

— People get hurt when things are out of control.

She looked at the finger and frowned, then poked her own in his chest and replied, her eyes intense.

— People get hurt either way. It’s a question of who. Right now, your Caroline is on the wrong side of that equation.

Her fierceness shocked him momentarily, but then he spoke back angrily, his fists clenched at his sides.

— Look, I believe in law and order. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I should be talking to the police.

She crossed her arms and stared at him intently, then lectured him in even tones.

— Now, *you* look. Law and order is good for some people but not others. Right now, your Caroline is with the “others”. The authorities will do their duty, but if a few people come to a bad end... The greatest good for the greatest number doesn’t sit so well if you’re the one who gets their throat cut!

He froze at this reminder of what was at stake. Of course, he wanted the greatest good for his Caroline and didn’t give a damn about the good of the many. He asked himself how well the police would likely be able to protect her in a battle with the kidnapers and had to admit that the answer was, not much at all, never mind what importance they might place on her safety in the order of things. And it might not be, and probably was not, their first priority.

The vision of her body lying broken and bloodied forced itself into his imagination, shaking him and bringing tears to his eyes. He

put a hand to his forehead and struggled to take in air, then tried to steady himself, determined to hold together and do anything that had a chance of getting her back. He forced the words out in tight gasps.

— Yes... OK... Let's go...

They shook on it, then she took his phone from the box-beater and handed it back to him. A moment later her own was vibrating and she took it out, looked at it, then spoke to him.

— It's time.

She grabbed his arm and dragged him out to the car. Seconds later they were racing through the streets of the city again on a mission to provoke whoever it was who needed provoking.



Rue de Reims was indeed a long street with a good many makers and vendors of pots and pans. Mansur worked his way down the dusty dirt road in the early afternoon—lingering over various items of cookware, questioning the prices and quality, making conversation, and all the while, alert for signs that anything other than the selling of kitchen utensils might be going on. In the midst of dickering over quality and price, sellers would sometimes pause and exchange views on the issues of the day before continuing with their extravagant claims and offers of discounts. He knew that underneath the superficial confusion of the place lay a kind of logic, the struggle for daily existence, and he was looking for anything that violated that logic.

One shop seemed to be closed. That in itself wasn't surprising. He walked around the side towards the rear, calling out as he went so as not to alarm whoever might be there. In the back, he found an old man stooped over a gas stove burner set on the ground where he was heating a copper pot held with iron tongs, melting tin beads that he pinched a few at a time from a plate.

He wasn't African. Mansur greeted him and he answered in oddly accented French. Looking at the piece of work more closely, the agent saw that it was likely going to be a Turkish coffee pot, missing

only a handle and spout. He glanced into the shop through an open back door and saw a number of the finished items sitting on wooden shelves, then offered himself as a customer.

— How much for a pot?

The man looked at him suspiciously. It occurred to Mansur that now he himself was the one who was violating the logic of the street. Probably no stranger had ever come to the back looking to buy a pot, not in however long it was that the man had been conducting his business. If he was making the pots for the tourist trade, he would know every shopkeeper in Dakar who might be a customer and they would know him. But no matter, this was just the opening line in a scene Mansur had acted in often enough before, each man performing his role, feeling the other out, then perhaps coming to some kind of accord, or not.

After a few moments of silent consideration, the pot maker quoted a price that seemed to Mansur like it must be at least twenty times what they sold for normally.

— Too much.

The man shrugged and went back to his work.

Mansur scanned the small and very cluttered open air workshop, every space littered with tools and materials and the whole yard covered over with a simple tin roof supported by the shack in front and metal poles in back. An ancient lathe was the only implement that bespoke the industrial age. The man obviously didn't take Mansur for a real customer, so the agent decided he might as well get right to the point.

— I'm looking for the American woman.

This drew the expected reaction. The man became still for a moment, then looked back to his work and shook his head. It was not the kind of "no" that said "I don't know". It was more the kind that said, "I know better than to answer a question like that from a stranger." Mansur sized the man up. His thin, graying hair, wiry but fragile-looking frame and rough, well-worn clothes gave him the appearance of a seasoned and venerable doyen—not the sort who



would risk his skin for a fistfull of money he could happily live without. He might, however, be sympathetic to the plight of a woman about to be murdered.

— The woman is in danger. Jihadis.

The man didn't react. Mansur felt certain that the man knew what result to expect from the kidnapping, but he wanted to make the point plain.

— They will behead her.

At this, the man stopped and looked at the ground, as if pondering. Finally, he shook his head sadly and went back to his work. Mansur took out what the man had asked for the coffee pot and placed the money, together with his new mobile number, on the earthen floor of the workshop, then left.

He visited a dozen more shops. So as to not arouse suspicions, he did finally buy one of their wares, a smaller example of that country's ubiquitous hand-cast scrap aluminum pots, but he was no closer to finding what he was looking for. If there was anything unusual happening in the neighborhood, it escaped him.

The pot reminded him that he needed to eat and he turned back up the road towards a corner he had passed where a food stand offered Lebanese empanada-like beef rolls, but then he stopped short. About fifty meters in front of him he saw the Turkish pot maker standing at the side of the street smoking a cigarette. The man, who had apparently been following Mansur at a distance, took a drag on his smoke and then turned and walked slowly back in the direction of his shop, crossing and walking on the other side of the street. Mansur followed carefully, keeping the distance between them. The pot maker didn't look back, but after a minute or so, paused for a last drag, then tossed the butt to the side and continued on.

The place where the man had thrown his cigarette was a block building with the doors and windows bricked up, the front-facing ones at least. Mansur had noted the building when he first came down the street but saw nothing peculiar about it at the time. As he looked more closely now, he spotted a small, faded marking on the side wall that he

had missed when coming from the other direction—*Casseroles et Poêles*, pots and pans. A driveway ran down the side, so there could be a way in around the back.

The thought that Caroline might be in that building, somewhere behind the wall he had just passed, gave rise to an urge to take action, but he remained stolid, adhering to his discipline. The hardened warrior consciousness held sway. He refrained from any outward show of attention to the place, in case, as was likely, they had posted a watch. Instead, he continued up the street, pot in hand, and when he got to the corner, bought his *fataya* and a mint tea and then found a place where he could keep an eye on the building's goings and comings without being noticed. But the emptiness he felt could not be filled by anything so ordinary as a fried meat pie. Eyeing the building's bricked-up front, his bleary eyes tried to pierce its stone walls, but could not.

He had spent much of his life staring at obstacles. One more didn't matter. He would be patient.



I stand up as Oumar comes over to me, his expression serious. He seems as troubled as I am, maybe more. This forced marriage doesn't sit well with him and his distress shows plainly in the sober, pained look he's giving me.

He may not be happy about it, but he has somehow managed to dress for the occasion. He was fastidious before, his beard neatly trimmed and hair cut short, but now he's looking quite the proper groom. Someone has given him a long charcoal gray tunic that reaches below the knees, outlined with a bejeweled design around the neck and down the front that lends him a very distinguished appearance. He makes a motion of his hand for me to come and I follow him out of the women's area.

I'm expecting to attend a ceremony in the room where the tribunal was held, but instead we go to a smaller room and he closes

the door behind us. There's a bed, simple and clean, and little else. Oumar gently removes the hood of the burqa and I breathe in deeply. Then he explains.

— We are now married.

My eyebrows shoot up.

— We are?

He tries to smile but can only manage the most paltry attempt.

— The ceremony was held without you. This is the old way. A man who served as your representative spoke the vows. He accepted the marriage and received *al-sadaq* on your behalf.

— Received what?

— The dowry. About ten dollars in your money. It's all I had with me. He will hold it in trust for you.

I'm hardly disappointed by the news. Missing the ceremony allows me to avoid yet more public humiliation. But I'm not used to having strange men make life-changing decisions on my behalf without even so much as a how-do-you-do, and it's deflating.

— It's all I'm worth at this point, I suppose.

He takes my hand.

— It is not, my dear wife.

How strange it is to hear him speak the word. Obviously this marriage is real to him. But of course, he's religious, and so a marriage, even one compelled by circumstances such as ours, is a sacrament. Having gone through the ceremony, whether out of fear, caring, or whatever other motivation, we are now husband and wife in the eyes of God, as he sees it. I don't feel that way myself considering I've had almost nothing to say about the matter, but I accept all that he's related of the affair without protest. Nothing could surprise me any longer in this twisted and deranged world I've fallen into. I look at the bed, then back at Oumar, and raise the subject that has been hounding me since he first proposed.

— Is it really necessary to... continue with this comedy?

His brow furrows with embarrassment and he blinks a few times, his voice weak and constrained.

— I believe so. One of the judges...

— The one on the right.

I remember him. He was the one who understood French.

— Yes. He knows that we have done this to frustrate them. He was the one who insisted on marriage. I'm sure he will... investigate...

He's having trouble getting the words out. It takes a few seconds for him to continue.

— ...personally.

— The consummation.

— Yes.

I'm disgusted and I really don't want to give in to all this nonsense.

— Oumar, I'm sure we can... make it look like...

— They will make me swear before Allah.

And that is something he couldn't do, give a false oath about whether the marriage was consummated. I understand that.

— What about my supposed virginity? Will they make you swear to that too? I'm not so young, you know. I've been married before.

— You're wearing the burqa. They haven't seen you. I'm sure they know nothing about you, except that you are an American woman who wrote a book about a Muslim homosexual. If necessary, I'll think of what to say. I'll give certain carefully-chosen facts regarding the... event. I don't *really* know if you're a virgin, do I? How could I have absolute knowledge of such a thing? Dear wife, you're not the only one who knows how to give skillful answers.

The room is hot and I'm still wearing most of the burqa. The next step would be for me to remove it, though I'm not able to bring myself to undress even that much. As ghastly as the thing is, it does provide a boundary, a last line of defense. I'm sick to my stomach, my body a seething caldera of psychic and physical mortification. I have one last hope.

— Do you have a condom?

— No.

That's it then. I'm expected to get into the bed, spread my legs, and let this man, my supposed husband, come inside me. For a moment, I wonder if I shouldn't just open the door, march out and let them go ahead with whatever carnage they have in mind. But then I look at Oumar, his face stone cold with fear, for himself surely and perhaps for me also. I stiffen my will and force my recalcitrant thoughts to the only rational conclusion.

— Let's get this over with then before I change my mind. What are you going to do about the blood.

— I've brought a piece of broken glass. I will cut my finger.

I lie on my back on the bed and close my eyes, letting my mind soar as far away from the proceedings as possible. Whatever he's going to do, he's going to have to do it by himself.

He's evidently up to the task. I hear his clothes rustling as he kneels at the bottom of the bed and lifts the burqa and then my skirt, but then he stops. It surprises me.

— What's the matter?

— You're not clean.

Well, if this isn't the final insult. I cannot restrain myself from letting go with a caustic remark.

— I'm sorry, my dear husband, this is not the Ritz Carlton! There's no bathtub in this place!

— I mean, it's your time, when you are unclean.

My period. Yes, of course, it's that time. It had not entered my mind. I must be spotting.

— Well that's good, yes? You don't have to cut yourself.

— It cannot be done while you are unclean.

I recall that according to orthodox Jewish belief, women are separated from their husbands during menstruation. It must be so for traditional Muslims as well. He hurriedly pulls his pants back up. I've never been so glad of my period in my life.

— We can't consummate?

— Not until you are clean.

I push the burqa quickly down over my legs. The sense of relief is palpable. I feel back in possession of myself, for the time being at least.

— They will understand that I suppose.

— Yes.

— Will they need proof?

— Any proof they may want will be forthcoming, I'm sure.

— Yes, it will.

I start to rise from the bed, momentarily elated, but then suddenly the back of my neck feels like it's on fire. I put my hand over the excruciating pain and scream, and Oumar springs to my side.

— Ms. Pembrose!

— My neck! It's burning!

He sits beside me on the bed and takes my hand away to look at it, then tells me what he's seeing.

— It's bright red and there's something black in it.

— I was bitten by a wasp! It must be the stinger. Get it out!

He reaches into his shirt pocket and takes out the piece of glass he had brought for my simulated deflowering, then quickly slices into my skin. I feel the blood trickling down my neck and then the burning stops. He holds a small black object in the palm of his hand but then shakes it suddenly onto the floor, crying out.

— Ah! It burned me!

I can see a white raised blister on his hand, mounting up among of the red smears. As I look down at the thin, elongated capsule sizzling on the floor, everything that has been building up in me for the last two days erupts in a paroxysm of rage.

— What the FUCK is THAT?!!



Crane Foster picked up the secure phone. The voice on the other end was emphatic.

— We got her!

The station chief's adrenaline shot up. This was it. They were about to flush their quarry out of the nest.

— Give me the location.

He wrote down the details then gave them the green light.

— Get moving.

Foster had managed operations before, but nothing like this. There was good intelligence that at least one really bad hombre had taken the bait. And what's more, being that it was the first time they'd used the Halls procedure, the attention focused on the chief and everyone involved could not be any more intense. The White House was said to be monitoring every move. The new President would lavish rewards on those who brought him glory, but was also known to heap boatloads of scorn on anyone and anything that showed him in a bad light.

But the chief was an optimist and could imagine receiving an invitation to Washington to accept personal congratulations from the CIC himself. And then, who knew? Assistant Director of Operations was certainly a possibility. He pictured a Georgetown row house just a twenty minute drive along the Potomac from Langley. His wife had had enough of foreign postings and would take well to occupying herself with the life of a Washington hostess.

At the moment, though, there was a war to be won. He drummed his fingers on the desk. The captain had promised he could have the perimeter up in "less than an hour". That was too long. He decided to light a fire under the gentleman.



The captain sat at a small folding table in his portable command center, a trailer parked at the new *Palais de Justice* in the Plateau district. He checked his mobile again, making sure it was charged and connected. The call could come at any moment, or in hours, or days.

His men had been ready since the morning, but he knew only too well what the Americans said during his training at Langley: “Readiness rots.” Try to maintain personnel in a high state of alert for too long and, unless constantly reinforced, preparedness would deteriorate rapidly. So he’d been calling his units repeatedly to confirm their status.

Thus far everything seemed to be holding together well enough, but the wait was being dragged out, so he was not surprised when he called one of his squad commanders and a subordinate answered. Ndoye was annoyed but not alarmed, not yet.

— Where is Diouf?

— He is here, sir, he is just not here at the moment. He is eating, sir.

To be someplace and not be there at the same time was a common paradox in Dakar and the police were not immune to the phenomenon. One thing for sure, the man was in fact eating because he was always eating and so there were only two things Diouf could be, eating or dead. Three things, he corrected himself. Though the practice of polygamy was becoming less common in the city, the sergeant had two wives, the younger of them living near where his squad had been staged.

— Tell him to report at once.

— Yes sir.

Diouf had not reported back when the call came from Foster giving Ndoye the location along with a profusion of motivational adjectives. The captain placed the point of a compass on a map laid out across the table and drew a circle, then drew an X at the intersections he needed to cover. The police radio crackled briskly as he ordered the deployments and his units responded, moving towards their positions, the second-in-command taking over for the missing Diouf.

Ndoye had guessed right about where to stage his men and it took no more than ten minutes for them to get to their checkpoints. The chief was happy, and with everyone in place, the captain’s work



was essentially done. The American military advisers attached to his units would be in effective control of whatever happened from then on.

He sat back in the folding chair and stretched his arms, listening to the squeals and squawks coming from the radio, his ear attuned to anything that might require his attention but otherwise disregarding the restless noise.

Closing his eyes, he tried to imagine what might be going on in the streets of his city. The Americans were armed with M16s fitted with grenade launchers as well as CGM4 shoulder-held recoilless rifles firing 84mm anti-tank rounds. These were not the sorts of weapons that *he* would use when attempting a hostage rescue. What on earth were they thinking, he wondered. The woman, whatever she might be, was a human being. It was true that the chances of returning her unharmed were slim, but even so, if he were in command, he would make the effort.

Most police officers joined the profession because they liked guns, but Captain Ndoye hated them. He had joined because he liked taking care of people, in the more benevolent sense of that phrase. It was not his nature to write any of them off, however flawed, not a single one—all of them worthy, in his eyes and in the eyes of his God. But on this day, guns there would be, and the woman, precious at least to a husband who loved her, stood a good chance of being separated from her earthly life.

The vision of impending catastrophe that crept across his mind appalled him. He said a prayer for her, and for all of them, but could only feel that the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The grim reaper was about to pay a visit to his world and there did not seem to be anything he could do about it.



Our “honeymoon” comes to a rude end as two armed men burst through the door of our bedroom. Oumar quickly helps me put on the hood of the burqa and then we’re hustled out of our bridal suite and

into the back of a windowless van, chucked in together with the three judges, their faces even more dour and acerbic than before, and the two guards. With the doors slammed shut, the van lurches forward, then turns onto a deeply rutted road, the van rocking so violently that the only way I can keep from being hurled around is by cleaving with all my might to Oumar's muscular arm.

It's a short drive, then we stop somewhere, the scraping sound of a metal roll-up door grating on my brittle senses. We drive in and the door closes behind us, then the back of the van is opened and we empty out. Someone throws on a single dim light, revealing a large, open building two stories high. Oumar has a few words with one of the judges, then turns to me, taking a comforting tone.

— We won't be here long.

This information doesn't improve my outlook. I've lived the last two days in the belief that I probably won't be *anywhere* very long and nothing has changed, except that I've been thrust into a strange and disorienting state of matrimony.

It's some consolation that Oumar seems to have stepped into the role of protector and is taking the responsibility in earnest. I appreciate it, though it's clear that his attentions amount to no more than a mollifying balm, offering no practical defense against the barbarism to come. Even so, out of impulse, I take hold of his elbow as we huddle together in the empty building.

Now that we're on solid ground, my grip on him is no longer a practical necessity and it seems to be making him uncomfortable. Maybe his other wife didn't do that, take his arm in public, that is. The judges seem disconcerted and embarrassed as well, but then one lets slip with what might be a fleeting look of compassion before his face turns once again to stone.

There's no air conditioning in this building either, but also no ventilation. The stale air is oppressive. Oumar whispers something I don't quite catch and then gently takes my arm off of his and goes to look around the room. A few moments later he comes back with a sturdy box, offers it to me and I sit. He stands beside me, the two of us

comprising a woeful wedding portrait as our ghoulish celebrants look on, their faces chiseled with acrimony.

Sitting in the faint light of the soundless crypt, no one moving or speaking as the minutes tick away, I can't help meditating on what a depressing contrast this phony marriage makes with my real one to Robert. I would give all I own to be standing once again on the grass near Bethesda Fountain in Central Park on a clear, bright Monday morning in June reciting vows to my beloved, while our duly registered officiant from the New York Society for Ethical Culture, the bulging, bespeckled Jacob Ferris, suffuses us with the glow of his cherubic smile, Robert reaching out his hand to mine then placing the ring on my finger.

I give the ring a gentle touch. It's still there, on my left hand. There is no engagement ring because I didn't want one. I had a diamond from my first marriage and it was such a nuisance that I hardly ever wore it, never mind the worry that it might get lost or stolen. No notice has been taken by the kidnapers of my simple white gold band and I can only assume they haven't noticed or don't know what it represents.

For the longest time, I thought Robert wasn't going to ask, even after it became obvious to both of us that this was the real deal. Neither of us is religious and we didn't plan on having children, so I can't really say why it mattered, except that we would save a little on taxes, but there was something in me that wanted it—the romantic idea of two souls navigating in orbit around each other and finding a new center of gravity, not just me and him, but us.

I thought that, given his practical mindset, the reason he hadn't asked might be that marriage didn't have the same import for him. He would have agreed if I'd hinted or broached the subject, I'm sure, but I felt that it had to come from him or I would be afraid he was doing it just for my sake. I had just about lost hope when he suggested dinner at the candle-lit, book-lined Milk and Roses in Greenpoint, where he said that he didn't want to put too much pressure on me, then

confessed his desire for a matrimonial union. I told him, simply, “I thought you’d never ask.”

The plan at first was for a three hundred person affair at the Plaza on Fifth Avenue, but then we decided we didn’t know three hundred people we cared to have hanging around for our joyous occasion, so whittled it down to fifty at The Water Club overlooking the East River, finally concluding that the only ones we really wanted to be present at our joining was each other. We got the license, waited for that perfect day, then called up Jacob to meet us in the park. By the time we arrived, a little late, he had rounded up two civilized-looking and enthusiastic witnesses from among the hoi polloi enjoying a morning stroll—a modish, beaming middle-aged African-American gentleman and a chatty elderly lady in a floral print dress. In the wink of an eye it was done, the photos snapped by the witnesses on my smart phone, and then we celebrated with a leisurely two hour walk in the park. With the money we saved on the wedding, we binged on three weeks of shameful indulgence at the incomparable *Château de Bagnols* in the Beaujolais region of France.

Animated shouting and gesturing among the judges startles me out of my memories, the visions of my former life evaporating like mist in the desert. I feel myself as filthy as I have ever been in my life, stifling hot, in a dingy, airless building, expecting to be executed, if not now, very soon. Tears of hopeless frustration stream down my face, mourning a past that is gone, a future that seems doomed, and the rending asunder of a life with a good and loving man I cherish beyond all else.

Suddenly a Muslim call to prayer wafts from the amplified minaret of some distant mosque. A few seconds later, another arrives, louder and closer. I’m accustomed to the plaintive, five-times daily songs that set the rhythm of life in Islamic countries and usually don’t take note of them. But now, with Oumar and the other men beginning their ritual devotions, it strikes me as never before how the practice of that religion impels and orders the lives of its believers. Oumar has gone to join the others and they perform their worship together. The

guns are put aside, out of our reach certainly, but also out of mind. They may be enemies, but in this they are brothers.

The quiet show of civility has a calming effect, not just on me but on all present. The prayers last just a few minutes, but afterwards there is a tranquility that pervades the dusty building a little longer. I find myself wishing the feeling could remain. It's impossible to imagine any of them cutting my head off while bathed in the serene harmony of a sacred afterglow. But it won't last, I know that. Five times a day is not nearly enough to cleanse the blackened souls of those who hate.

Mimi stormed out into the heavy traffic and minutes later they arrived in a meager-looking area of small, shabby buildings, many of them brightly painted. At a corner crowded with small shops, she pulled over abruptly and shouted at Robert with the shriek of a high-pitched army drill sergeant.

— This is it! Get out!

He did. The moment he closed the door, she gunned the motor, made a tight U-turn and sped away, the wheels blasting out grit and stones.

He stood for a moment scanning the gallery of stunned black faces staring at him in amazement, then walked up to one of them, a reliable-looking man wearing dark colored dress pants and a white shirt. Robert had worked out the words in advance, so his French was more coherent than usual as he announced that he was the husband of the American woman who had been kidnapped and asked for someone to please call the police.

The man shook his head and hurried away, but a buxom woman in a blue sarong and matching head wrapping waved her hand excitedly in his direction and then pulled out a phone from her handbag. She made the call, then sniffed at him, wrinkling her nose and exclaiming, in a disgusted voice, “*chien*”. Yes, he replied, he had been kept in a “*chien maison*”, a “dog-house”. This reply sent a few of the curious onlookers gathered around him into fits of muffled giggles. The woman shook her head and waved a hand in his face. “*Niche à chien*”, she corrected him, explaining that what he had said was that he had been “kept as a house dog”.

Soon vendors from the shops began pushing fruit juice, fried dough and what looked like chinese egg rolls at him, which he offered to pay for. That brought on still more food, more than he could hold in his hands, so someone provided him with a wide, flat basket, woven with green, yellow and black string, and he filled it up.

They brought a chair and sat him down, then peppered him with a hail of questions no more intelligible to him than the chatter of birds. He ignored the noise and ate, nodding and muttering “oui, oui” as best he could with his mouth full. He still had doubts that the hackers would or could do anything for Caroline, or that their plans, such as they were, offered anything more than vain hope, but the despair had left him for now and he was experiencing a bout of optimism. Something was making him believe that he would find her, that she would come back to him safe and he would hold her once again in his arms. The fact was, he simply did not wish to live in a universe that permitted any other result. If this one didn’t serve, he would have to find another.



Captain Ndoye was checking on the status of his units and trying to locate his missing squad commander when the report came in of an American needing assistance.

The sudden reappearance of the husband inside the operational area was not welcome news. Ndoye considered the alternatives, all of them undesirable. He’d have preferred to simply ignore the wayward husband and carry on with the mission as planned, but if anything unfortunate befell the man... On the other hand, sending a car into the protected area could impact the American operation if any ineptitude were involved, which could not be discounted given that all those he considered reliable had their hands full already. That seemed to leave one sensible option. He would go pick up the husband himself and then take personal command of Diof’s checkpoint, which was nearby.

As he passed through a perimeter roadblock he was reassured to find it in place and functional. The sky was darkening along the horizon, though. No rain had been expected, but he knew from painful experience that whenever there was the possibility of something interfering with his careful planning, it usually did.

He found the husband at the corner, engulfed in a gaggle of locals, and quickly made his way over to him, scattering the crowd by means of shouts and gestures. The American, clutching his basket of snack foods to his chest, seemed well enough, so Ndoye took him curtly by the arm and dragged him away, interrogating him in the process.

— What have you been up to?

Robert swallowed a mouthful of egg roll, then replied.

— Kidnapped, they had a dog.

The captain looked again at the sky. The clouds were rolling in and a quickening breeze was blowing up dust and debris. He tugged impatiently at Robert.

— Tell me later. We need to go.

As they came up to the car, Ndoye took note of a man standing beside it, a man he knew. Mansur, from his observation point on the roof of an apartment building, had seen the commotion unfolding a few streets away, then saw the white face in the middle of it and the police car pulling up. By the time he reached the corner, the captain was busy collecting Robert, so the agent had waited. The captain, already annoyed at having to deal with the husband, reacted angrily.

— You're out of line! I'm supposed to bring you in.

Mansur remained unperturbed. He considered Ndoye to be a level-headed and rational person, someone he could deal with. He offered his information.

— I know where the woman is. It's an old industrial building. A van just arrived there.

It took Robert a few moments to process the man's French, but the phrase was simple enough that he could manage it.

— Caroline! Where is she?

The captain grimaced. This was just what he would have expected from the Algerian. The last time Mansur had been in Dakar, his ill-advised pursuits had caused no end of trouble. And anyway, Ndoye didn't need his help and said so.

— We know exactly where she is. Get in.



Ndoye directed Robert into the back seat and motioned Mansur to the front. For Robert, it was exciting news.

— You’ve found her! Is she alright?

Ndoye raised his hand for him to calm down.

— We don’t know. We know where she is but we haven’t gone in yet.

Mansur added an important detail, giving Robert even more reason to hope.

— The *Americans* haven’t gone in yet. It’s an American operation.

— Americans! Not that there’s anything wrong, Captain, with the Dakar police, but if the Americans...

Mansur could have said a lot about that but only said one thing.

— They will try to get her back.

They would, too, he was sure of it. What he didn’t feel the need to say was that she might well come back in more than one piece.

A report came over the captain’s radio. Two vans had left the location, headed east, with the Americans in slow pursuit. Robert demanded to know what was going on, so Mansur explained it to him in English.

Ndoye breathed a small sigh of relief when he heard the direction the terrorists were moving. The weakness occasioned by his squad commander being AWOL was on the other side of the perimeter. Diof still had not checked in and now Ndoye wasn’t able to get a response from that unit at all, but with the terrorists going the opposite way, it shouldn’t matter.

The captain maneuvered to catch up to the pursuit while the radio blasted out bursts of increasingly excited transmissions. The vans had reached a checkpoint at the perimeter and had been stopped, setting off a hail of gunfire that chattered over the voice of the policeman who was frantically relaying the updates. Robert lept forward, emitting an anguished plea, just as the wall of dark clouds swept over them and the first heavy drops of rain slapped at the windshield.

— Tell me!! Tell me!! What’s happening!?



Crane Foster sat back in his chair and sighed. The way the operation had unraveled was messy but not so unexpected. Everyone was dead and all that was left was to count the bodies. The report was coming in over his speaker phone.

— Eight jihadis, three hostages.

— The woman?

— No identification yet.

The original location had been cleared and no one had been left behind. He felt bad for the woman, but they had whacked some very bad guys. He was ready to score it a “mission accomplished”, but it was not to be. The next report hit him like a punch to the stomach.

— Targets not identified. Woman not identified.

The expertly crafted chain of rude military epithets exploding from the station chief’s mouth froze everyone in the room into silence. The bastards had snuck away somehow. No big fish, no noisy bird, just a bunch of minnows. His simple plan had now become much more complicated. What’s worse, the phone line to Langley had just lit up and he was about to get an earful. And if *he* was in for an ass whooping, a certain pansy police captain was going to get one for sure.



When the report came over the radio that the woman had not been found after the shootout at the checkpoint, Mansur turned and bellowed at Ndoye.

— There’s another hideout! I know where it is! Turn around!

The captain’s phone was ringing but he ignored it, spinning the car in the tight street and heading back in the direction they had come. As he approached the building where Mansur was directing him, the clouds finally let loose, hammering the car with torrential gobs of

sticky rain. Racing through the dirt streets, wheels sloshing fitfully through muddy pools, they arrived just in time to see the van pull out of the alley next to the building and then head west. Ndoye followed, shouting into the radio, trying to raise his unit, but on reaching the intersection where Diof's roadblock should have been, there was nothing. The van zoomed out of the blockaded area unchallenged and Ndoye sped after it.

The realization hit the captain like a stone to the forehead. The kidnappers knew there would be a hole in his perimeter, and where it would be. But the sorting out of the who, what, where, when and how of the betrayal would have to be deferred. For now, all that mattered was the van and its contents.

When they reached a paved road, the rain let up as suddenly as it had come. The van was accelerating, and he did likewise, then dialed the Americans and handed the phone to Mansur. It was better not to talk and drive, but regardless, he was in no mood for whatever it was they might have to say. And he was sure they weren't interested in his thoughts on the matter either.

The order to scramble back into the van came suddenly. As we drove out of the building, the staccato rhythm of a driving rain pounded the roof like falling gravel, a furious counterpoint to our flight, then ended as suddenly as it began. We were bounced around over a rutted road for several minutes, but for the last half hour or so the ride has become smooth and monotonous. The van isn't starting and stopping as much, which tells me that we must be on a highway, and perhaps in for a long ride. The judges seem to think so, from the way they've settled themselves in.

I've couched myself in Oumar's embrace and he's let me, my head resting against his chest. The ride is more comfortable this way, at least for me, but it's also a solace. The drone of the wheels on the road, the faint light inside the van and the heat of his body, all have a tranquilizing effect on me. I whisper softly to him.

— Where are they taking us?

He replies in Arabic.

— *Faqat Allah ya elam.*

He knows I don't understand what he's said, but I didn't expect an answer anyway. I just need to talk. Since he considers us to be truly married, it makes me think that perhaps he won't mind my making personal inquiries.

— Tell me about your wife, your other wife, and your family.

He's silent for a moment, considering the question, then begins to speak, quietly and slowly.

— My first wife is Amina. It means "trustworthy". It is also the name of the prophet Muhammad's mother. I met Amina at the university. She is working for her degree in public health. We have only been married a year. We don't have children yet.

I have an awkward question but I feel compelled to ask it.

— She will understand, I assume, about your having another wife?

He squirms slightly.

— She is strong in the faith, and this is part of our faith. Even so, it is always a delicate question. In Senegal, when you marry, you declare whether you intend to have more than one wife. I did declare it, because it is Holy Quran. We have never discussed it, the possibility that I might take another. I have never considered that I would, to be honest, before this. I think, it must be like in your country. When you marry, the first time, you never imagine that there will be another, do you? Yet somehow, it happens.

This was true in my own case, certainly. After a pause, he continues.

— It usually means supporting two households. Holy Quran does not allow it, unless you can afford it. I think I never would have been able, even if I wanted. But you never know.

The conversation has a consoling effect on me, and it seems to do the same for him.

— How did you meet her?

He adjusts himself. He's sitting propped against the wall of the van, his back resting on a metal ridge.

— We were introduced by a friend, my best friend for many years. At first, they were to be married and in fact they moved in together, but then he lost interest in her. I couldn't understand it. She was very hurt and embarrassed. She's such a lovely person. I was angry and I never spoke to him again. When I saw her around the university, I would go up to her, but she always turned away. Finally I couldn't stand it anymore and I spoke strongly to her and let her know how I felt about what happened. She was shocked to see me lose my temper because I almost never do. Then the next time I tried to talk to her, she didn't turn away. After that, we talked several times a week. My feelings for her were growing and it must have been obvious to her, but I didn't know how she felt, so I asked her. She said that however I felt about her, that is how she felt about me. So I asked her to marry me. But she wanted to take me to her bed first. She wanted to be sure I was pleasing to her, maybe because of what happened the

first time. I can tell you that she had nothing to worry about in that regard, Ms. Pembrose.

I'm utterly captivated by his unbosoming and I can hardly think of what to say. One thing comes to mind, though.

— Caroline.

— What?

— My name is Caroline. We are married now so you should know that. Mable Pembrose is a pseudonym, my pen name. My name is Caroline Parker. Call me Caroline.

He's momentarily confused but then I feel him nod.

— Caroline. Yes, I should want to know that. Thank you.

My feelings for this man, while nothing like what I would call love, are gravitating in the direction of a profound respect and I feel compelled to express that.

— Oumar, you're a good man and I am fortunate to have you for a husband.

He says nothing in reply. It's enough talk for now. His humanity has overcome for the moment my sense of meat being led to the slaughter.

Some time has passed in silence, my eyes closed and my mind drifting in and out of semi-sleep, when a noticeable odor begins to fill the stale air. I had started getting headaches soon after the kidnapping, but now one is coming on strong and I'm getting dizzy and nauseous as well. The others in the van don't seem too good either. Oumar also notices the problem and speaks up.

— Exhaust is coming into the van. They need to do something!

He has a conversation with the others and they look around in the cargo area, which is completely separated from the front cab, but there does not appear to be any way to get some ventilation. Finally one of the guards goes to the back and opens a door, holding it part way open with his hand, trying to keep it from flapping around.

I can see that we're out of the city. When we hit an occasional bump in the road, the guard struggles to keep his equilibrium while holding on to both the door and his weapon. I calculate whether I

could make a move to knock him out of the door, and maybe tumble out after him, guessing at how fast the van is going. Twenty-five miles per hour? More? Certainly not less.

I recall a boy in my high school who, as a joke, jumped out of a moving convertible that was going just fifteen miles per hour. I went to visit him in the hospital where he was recovering from a compound fracture. Much faster and you would stand a good chance of being horribly crippled. I reject the notion, not so much from fear of injury as from the fact that they could merely scoop us up off the road and continue. I decide that it would be wise to save my strength for a better opportunity.

One of the judges pounds on the window that separates us from the cab up front and there is shouting back and forth between him and the driver. When the shouting is finished, Oumar translates for me.

— They're going to stop.



Ndoye had no trouble following the van through the city. Evidently they didn't know they were being followed, or didn't care, because they weren't speeding, weaving, or taking any other evasive action. Once out of the city, though, the captain slowed down and let them get ahead, sometimes to the point where they passed out of sight. There were only a few main roads in the countryside and he was fairly sure he knew where the van was headed. Mansur's initial report to the Americans had been brief and he'd called several times to keep them updated about the pursuit, but there had been no further instructions. The husband, sprawled across the back seat, was silent, his eyes closed.

Mansur, studying the map on his phone, arrived at the same conclusion as Ndoye.

— They're heading to St. Louis.

The captain nodded agreement, then motioned with his finger to the north.

— Yes, then to the crossing at Rosso.

There were two plausible destinations where terrorists might flee to—Mali to the east and the Sahara to the north. It was now clear that they were headed to the latter, to Mauritania. Mansur glanced over his shoulder at the rumpled man dozing in the back seat, then looked at Ndoye.

— Will you try to stop them before they leave the country?

It was a question that the captain had been asking himself for the last half hour. Now that Mansur had said it out loud, Ndoye acknowledged the fact that he had no real say in the matter.

— It's up to the Americans. It's their operation. We'll do what they want.

After that, just a few words passed between them as they drove for nearly an hour through the rocky, arid landscape, dappled here and there with such green vegetation as the sandy soil and the paltry rainfall would support, but then Robert woke suddenly in a disagreeable mood, his head heavy from the daytime nap. He directed himself to the captain.

— Where are we?

The captain gave a straightforward reply.

— We're out of the city, heading north.

While that may have been a correct statement of the facts, it meant nothing to Robert and it wasn't really what he wanted to know.

— Where are we going?

Robert's tone was clipped and indignant, but Ndoye answered calmly.

— Mauritania.

Once again, a fact, perhaps, but not one that Robert could connect with. His voice grew louder.

— And where is that?

The captain considered how he might respond to such a question. Mauritania was in Mauritania, and that was all there was to it, but he was able to manage a sober reply nonetheless.

— It's to the north.



Such endless loops were just what Robert had come to expect from everyone in what was, in his view, a country fond of running in circles. It enraged him, and he demanded satisfaction.

— So what are you doing about it? What is anyone doing about it? Where is the rest of the police force? Why are we chasing after them all by ourselves? Why aren't they being stopped? What is going on here? What in the HELL kind of country is this?

They were all good questions, but Ndoye could only speculate about the answers to most of them and he was unwilling to speculate. He did feel he could address the last one, though, thinking that perhaps it might help Robert come to terms with his situation.

— Senegal is a country...

He paused, wanting to frame his words precisely, then continued.

— ...in which there is life. Life, life itself... is what we are, what we do, and what we seek.

Ndoye pointed ahead down the road at a bare and monstrous-looking trunk that looked like a tree planted with its top in the ground and its roots spreading into the sky, as familiar to him as an oak tree might be to the American.

— See that tree. It's a baobab. We call it the "tree of life". Most of the time it has no leaves. Even so, to us, it is sacred. It represents our devotion to all of life, in all its forms.

Robert studied the spiny tree as it passed them by. He knew what a baobab was.

— The little prince was afraid they would overrun his home, but in this country it seems you let them grow wild.

For Robert, Antoine de St. Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, about a boy who travels from his asteroid to the Sahara desert looking for a sheep to rid his tiny planet of its profligate baobabs, was the epitome among children's stories. As for Ndoye, like most French-educated Senegalese, the book numbered among his earliest experiences.

— Here, the baobabs don't need our permission to grow. They have been here much longer than us. Many of them have had names for longer than anyone can remember.

Robert felt a momentary pang and tried to look back for the tree, but it was out of sight.

— Does that one have a name?

Ndoye thought for a minute, but if it did, he didn't know it.

— Maybe. It's a large one. Maybe not.

A philosophical discourse on Senegal was not what Robert had been seeking, but at least it seemed that the captain was the sort of person who cared, and that gave Robert a little reassurance. He would have to accept his status as a mere passenger on this journey, for the moment. He spoke quietly, more to himself than to the others.

— In case it doesn't, I'll call it Caroline. She is my rose, though not someone you can keep under a glass bell. Not at all.

The van had been out of sight for some time and Ndoye sped up until it was in view again. He noticed that something was going on with the rear doors and decided to risk getting closer for a better look.



Foster, speaking with the director on a secure line to Washington, tried his best to conceal his embarrassment at the failure of the operation, but the tightness in his voice gave away his discomfort.

— Yes, sir. Mauritania, probably. They're headed in the direction of the border. We believe they're heading for a camp in the Sahara.

But the director was not about to cast aspersions. He wasn't sorry for how things had turned out.

— We have some more on el-Khairy. We're pretty sure he's headed that way too.

So the bugger *was* involved. That was a horse of an entirely different color. If they could line up one of the world's most hunted

terrorists in their gunsights, the washout in Dakar would be quickly forgotten. His spirits soared at the prospect of landing a big one.

— Son of a bitch! It'd sure feel good to smoke that mother. We'd have to deploy in the desert, though, with no planning.

Normally, he knew, the United States would not invade another country without their consent, or at least, would undertake a fair amount of soul-searching before doing so. But the new President, in office just six months, was doing a slow burn, itching for the chance to show that he didn't hold by such niceties. The director confirmed as much.

— The CIC is ready to pull the trigger any time we have a target in range. It's not going to take us no four frigging months of head scratching this time. You're still tracking the van then?

The chief withheld comment on the new director's impatience with the months of planning that had gone into snagging bin Laden. He himself preferred to presage such matters with as much groundwork as possible, if you had the time. In the case of bin Laden, they did, but el Khairy was not likely to hang around while they engaged in much in the way of ponderous deliberations. If they didn't act quickly, the fucker would do the deed and then run back to his rat's nest in Mali before they had a chance to draw a bead on him. The chief had a request though.

— The policeman has them in sight, but it's not easy in the open with no support. Can you get them on satellite?

— In about fifteen minutes we'll have one in range. We only have a twenty minute window on this overflight, then it's another forty minutes to the next pass.

The director paused, then continued with an admonition.

— It's up to you, Foster. We need to whack the bastard when he shows.

— Yes sir, message received.

The conversation ended and the chief sat back in his chair, wrapping his fingers behind his head. If he'd had a cigar he would

have lit it up and taken a long, exhilarating drag. This was what he had signed up for and it had been a long time coming.

It was a very good feeling to be on the hunt.



Dieyna Niang snaked the blue Kia Sportage around the roundabout with cool but reckless precision, forcing Saloum to reach down with his left hand and grab hold of the seat while trying at the same time to hang on to his iPad with the right. He winced and his voice strained in protest.

— Why do you drive like that?

She gazed at him, catching his eye for a full second, the intensity of her look scorching him like a hot iron.

— It's the only way I know.

She looked back at the road, stretching ahead of them now, straight and empty. He took a breath and tried using logic instead.

— They're behind us. You'll get too far ahead.

That worked. She nodded and backed off on the gas pedal.

After dropping off Robert, they had parked a discrete distance down the road and watched as the policeman extracted him from the crowd of street sellers. The software Saloum had installed on Robert's smartphone was sending GPS locations to Haiden's server, which forwarded them to the mapping app on Saloum's iPad, allowing the Kia to follow from a distance as the policeman sped east, then doubled back west, then raced through the breach in the police perimeter, finally turning north and east into the open country.

The policeman was driving slow and was now behind them and falling farther back. Dieyna forced herself to reduce speed, but she wasn't used to the slack pace and it made her restless. She glanced over at the iPad.

— Where are they going?

He turned the screen away and gestured sharply at the windshield.

— You drive! I'll watch the map.

She did as he said, but the dull terrain could not hold her attention for long and she glanced back at him.

— If we knew why, we might know where. What do you think? Rendezvous with the Americans?

Saloum shrugged.

— I don't know that the Americans have anything outside the city but who knows.

Haiden had ordered them to follow, but they had no idea where they might be going or what they would do when they got there. She trusted Haiden, though she hadn't when she first fell in with him and his hacker circle. He was arrogant and abrupt and didn't feel the need to explain himself to anyone. When he thought you were wrong, which was almost all the time, he dismissed you rudely. But she had come to realize that when he said you were wrong, it was because you were. She had never known him to make a misstep. Irrked at giving in to his bullying manner, she still challenged him at times, but when the inevitable derisive comments came pouring out of him, she swallowed hard and endured it. Just now, though, the uneasy sense of being at sea without a compass was giving her qualms.

— And then we get there, wherever it is, whatever it is, what do we do? Do you think Haiden has any idea?

— I don't know. It's not like him to think too far ahead.

She tried to watch the unbroken and featureless highway, but as she forced herself to follow the road, her brain rebelled, the pavement seeming to waver and bend into impossible configurations while the ground itself rippled like a sheet of rubber.

— I don't like it. We're out of our element. I'd like to know what I'm doing this for. For the money, yes, if we ever see it.

Saloum smirked slightly, hoping she couldn't see. She was in one of her moods.

— Maybe you should have stayed at IBM?

She wrinkled her mouth and shook her head.

— No!

They had hired her out of university to work in their newly-formed subsidiary in Dakar five years earlier. She lasted just two years before walking out one day. They had too much sweetness, for one thing. It felt like her mind was turning to molasses.

There was nothing really wrong with them, the Americans, but nothing very good about them either. And they didn't recognize or appreciate her talents. She told them she felt like a Lamborghini being used to ferry infants to day care. They had seemed perplexed, then asked her if she needed a salary increase. Money, it was what defined them, and everything else, from their point of view.

Unlike Dieyna, Saloum had no experience dealing with the Americans. All he knew of them was what he saw in films. They were worth having around, he thought, so long as they didn't pull out their guns and start shooting in your direction.

— Was it so bad?

She sucked in and pushed her arms straight against the steering wheel, sinking back into the seat to relieve the tension. It was an uncomfortable subject for her. On the one hand she had wanted very much to work for the company. On the other hand, she had come to realize that she could not.

— I made one friend while I was in New York for training. She was from a place called Minneapolis, where it's cold. She showed me pictures of the snow. She was smart but her mind worked so sluggish. Maybe the cold makes you slow, I don't know. She couldn't stand the heat. She was always trying to keep herself refrigerated.

Saloum checked the screen, then looked up.

— They've stopped. We have to go back.

To Dieyna, this news was just the excuse she needed to loose the reins on her restless mania. She whipped the car around so briskly that Saloum did not have time to flinch.



Exhaust fumes had continued to seep into the van's hot, enclosed cargo area, and holding the door open wasn't helping much, so by the time we finally pulled off the road, I was thoroughly nauseated and fighting off a looming collapse.

Through the open back door, I can see that we've stopped on a wide area of asphalt paving. The guard who was holding the door hands his gun off to one of the judges, then climbs out and posts himself as lookout.

The clinking of a metal nozzle dropping into the tank tells me that we must be at a gas station. I badly need to pee, and besides, my period is flowing unchecked and I'm trying hard not to vomit. In short, I very much need to use the ladies room, which I explain to Oumar, who launches into a fevered diatribe with the judges. Even enlightened, educated men will balk at the mention of menstruation, so I can only imagine to what extent these berobed, benighted throwbacks must loathe the "unclean" woman in their presence. Oumar confirms this.

— The have decided to let you go into the station. If you do anything foolish, they will kill you and everyone there.

That's clear enough, though with the bloodbath at the broadcast studio still fresh in my mind, the threat is redundant. They don't trust how I really feel about Oumar or whether my conversion to Islam and our marriage is sincere. That assessment is accurate enough, but I'm not eager set off another blood-spattered jihadist firestorm by attempting an escape that is probably hopeless.

I reach out my hand and touch Oumar's face tenderly, a gesture calculated to convey the bona fides of our relationship but which, by now, carries a measure of genuine feeling on my part. Fate or circumstance may have thrown us together, but he has taken up the mantle. I'm not going to risk another bloody rampage unless an endgame is in sight.

The judge who has been holding the guard's gun points it at Oumar's head and casts me a stinging glare, nodding in the direction of the door. From the somber look in Oumar's eyes, I sense that he wants or expects me to try an escape. He nods slightly. He's telling me it's OK.

The kidnappers need me for some reason and perhaps it's their religiosity that makes them keep my husband around as well. If I bolt, they might kill him, but he's telling me he's prepared for that eventuality. For him, I suppose, a godly death is preferable to dishonor, or he may simply accept that the end is inevitable in any case. I don't accept it, though. I don't accept it at all.

Before the goons can change their minds, I'm out of the van as fast as I can manage without stumbling to the ground.

The station is a modern, steel structure with lots of blue plastic on the walls, large windows, and a well-stocked store inside. An unarmed guard stays by me as we walk in. I hold out my hand and rub my thumb and fingertips together, the universal sign for requesting money, but he shakes his head no. I go to find what I need, but when I try to hand the item to him to pay for it, he freezes, looking at the box of tampons like it's something filthy. I try again to hand the package over to him but he won't touch it. After a short, uncomfortable impasse, he finally gives in, extracting a few bills from his pocket and handing them to me, gingerly, like one might feed a crocodile.

When I go to pay, he's right behind me. An elderly, bearded man sits at the cash register looking like a tired old bear. I try to bide my time but the cashier motions impatiently with his hand. He has only just enough French to manage the simple transaction and I think better of any notion I might have had to telegraph him my predicament. I consider that it's even possible he could be in sympathy with the radicals. He seems perfectly at ease with my being in a full burqa, for one thing, though it's unusual in Senegal.

Package in hand, I make my way quickly to the ladies room, the guard scurrying close behind and acting even more high-strung than I am. He stops when we get to the door and dispatches me a look



that is at once menacing and childishly inane. I press through the door, relieve myself, vomit and insert a tampon, then struggle to summon enough brain function to contrive my next move.

If I just stay and refuse to come out, what will they do? I assume that I must be of no small importance for them to go to this much trouble in the first place. Robert could and would raise a large ransom and probably they can guess that. But once they had the money in hand, they might well kill me anyway. There would be no reason not to. One way or another, they have plans for me and they are not likely to leave me here if I refuse to come out.

This is an Islamic country, if a relatively liberal one, and we're outside the city. Would the sight of a group of robed and bearded men dragging a burqa'd woman out of the ladies room kicking and screaming move anyone to action? Would they even call the police?

Whatever the risks of staying in place, I'm having trouble bringing myself to leave the sanctity of the toilet. Restoring myself voluntarily to captivity seems like certain death. I can't see any better chance at surviving than to just hunker down and wait where I am for the next act to unfold in this pathetic melodrama. I think of Omar, and however grateful I am to him for stepping into the role of protector, I'm not prepared to go back just so we can die together. There's been no sign of any rescue, and now that we're out of the city, the possibility of our being found, let alone recovered alive, seems increasingly unlikely.

I've been in the ladies for maybe twenty minutes and I'm wondering how long it will be before they come crashing in. I make up my mind, finally, that they won't leave me here and that I don't care to be dragged out. I've cleaned myself up as best I can, but my clothes are hopeless and I decide to get rid of them and just keep the burqa. As I'm trying to wedge the soiled garments into the too-small trash container, though, an idea strikes me. I retrieve the clothes, hang my undergarments over the stall door and splay my dress out in the center of the floor. I use some soap to write on the small mirror, then hurry out.

It's quiet in the station. The guard is not far away, browsing newspapers. My picture must be plastered across the front pages though I can't see from where I stand. There are men around but no women so I wonder how long it might be before anyone finds my message. It occurs to me that it may not be until morning, if then. And by then, we surely would be far away from here and possibly, or probably, no longer among the living.

We go out, but the van is not at the pump. The guard is momentarily at a loss before spotting it on a lift with a mechanic banging on the underside and the remaining occupants gathered in a cluster nearby. There are no guns visible but the judges are standing with their arms inside their robes.

The work doesn't take long, and when the van comes back down, we get in. I glance at the mechanic, who watches with a confused look as our strange assembly loads into the back of the windowless van. If he finds anything odd about it, he doesn't seem inclined to interfere. As the last of the guards makes his way into the back, I look out the door at a car stopped about forty feet away. My view isn't good and I'm sure my mind must be playing tricks, but a man standing by the car looks to me for all the world like the new Alan Bates.

The door slams shut. In the sudden blackout before my eyes adjust to the slivers of light that filter in from the cab, my mind retreats to the chance encounter I shared with that dark and sympathetic stranger. I tell myself that it can't be him, that there must be many men who resemble my Alan Bateses. But I want it to be him, very much. I want there to be someone who knows where I am. I want them to come and save me from this wretchedness.

Ndoye saw the van stopping and pulled over to the side of the road a couple hundred meters away, then watched through binoculars as the car was being repaired. When he saw the van coming down off the lift, he pulled back onto the road and drove on to the station. He needed gas, but also figured that, by letting them see him rather than playing coy, he might throw off their suspicions.

Robert was told to stay down, as the sight of a white person in the car would certainly be noted, but he peeked out from the back seat and watched as a group of bearded men helped a woman wearing a baggy, blue canvas covering into the rear of the van. He reached up and put his hand on the captain's arm, whispering loudly.

— It's Caroline!

Ndoye sat as still as a post and replied quietly.

— Maybe. Probably.

Mansur finished filling the tank and got back in. Robert felt himself possessed of an almost irrepressible impulse to leap out and run to his wife, but didn't need to be told to stay put. The jihadis had murdered a good number of people already and would surely not hesitate to do away with a few more. He squeezed the captain's arm, then asked a question. He thought he knew the answer, but was hoping for a better one.

— What do you think they might do with her?

When the captain didn't reply, Mansur supplied a succinct response.

— They'll kill her.

For Robert, it was the answer he knew to expect but not one he could swallow. He wanted reassurance, not facts, and argued against the agent's conclusion.

— What about ransom? We can pay a lot.

The detective replied this time.

— They will gladly take it, but terrorists don't release their victims.

Robert sank back into the seat. He wasn't going to find a cure for his pessimism from these two.

The captain pulled out of the station, doubling back in the direction they had come from. The van was obviously waiting for them to go and so they needed to leave first. Now that they'd been spotted, it meant hanging back out of sight from that point on. Robert addressed himself to the captain, who he considered to be more sympathetic than the Arab.

— What about the military? What about the Americans?

Ndoye thought about that for a moment. If the Americans were going to do anything in Senegal, they were supposed to plan it together with the police, or at least let him know, and there had been very little from their end. He drew the logical conclusion.

— They're waiting until they get to Mauritania.

Robert's growing frustration was reaching an apex.

— Why? Why wait?

Neither of the men offered any reply. Robert supposed that they considered it not any of his business. Or maybe they didn't know either. He was getting tired of all the mystery and reached out his hand between the front seats to the surly and recondite passenger.

— My name is Robert Bersley. I'm Caroline's husband. How do you do. You are?

The man reached over and gave Robert's fingers a gentle squeeze.

— Alan Bates.

If the man had said he was Sasquatch, Robert could not have been any more flabbergasted than he was to hear the name of the man that Caroline had met in Central Park. Robert's high-pitched tone conveyed the utter totality of his astonishment.

— Alan Bates? The Alan Bates who helped Caroline when she was stung by a wasp?

— Yes.

Robert pulled his hand away and sat back, a hundred questions convulsing in his head. He chose the one that seemed the most exigent.

— What are YOU doing here?

Silence. He looked from one to the other, but they sat like monoliths, neither one showing any indication that they might provide an answer, which led him to one last interrogatory.

— What in HELL is going ON?

The captain made another U-turn and they headed back in the direction of the gas station. When it was in sight, a couple hundred meters ahead, they slowed down and pulled to the side of the road again where they could just make out what may or may not have been the jihadis' van pulling away. When it was clear which direction it was going, they started up again. Finally, the captain deigned to provide a reply, of sorts, to Robert's question.

— Just what it seems.

If their intention was to shut him up, they had succeeded. Robert sat back in his seat, then began trying to puzzle out what in blazes "what it seems" might be.



Dieyna was only able to get just a glance inside the captain's car as they sped by in the opposite direction, but it was enough.

— I know him!

Saloum looked up, startled.

— Who?

— The policeman. I know him. I met him once. His name is Yusuf Ndoye. He's a captain.

She didn't turn around after passing the captain's car, but kept going, back towards Dakar. Saloum glared at her, a questioning look on his face, so she explained.

— I have to stop.

He checked the gas gauge. There seemed to be plenty.

— Why?

She wrinkled her face at him.

— To pee.

He raised his eyebrows.

— Anyway it won't hurt to fill up.

She piloted the Kia into the station and Saloum topped off the tank while she went inside. He had just hung up the hose when she came running out, shouting.

— Get in!

The tires squealed as she sped back up onto the highway. Saloum stared at her.

— What?

Her face burned with a ferocious anger that he had never seen before.

— The woman. She was here. The policeman is following her. They're following the terrorists.

The needle on the speedometer hit one-twenty at times, but when Saloum, tracking their course on the iPad, let her know that they were getting close, she let up. The car they were pursuing was going much slower, usually not more than sixty. Evidently the jihadis were in no hurry. After passing the policeman, it wasn't difficult to sort through the cars in front. Saloum saw it first.

— White van.

She repeated it.

— Got it, white van.

They maintained their speed and passed it, then continued until it was almost out of sight behind them before slowing down. Saloum looked at her dubiously.

— She's alive? How do you know?

— She was in the ladies. She wrote on the mirror. Left her clothes too.

She glanced every few seconds into the rearview mirror, making sure to keep the van in sight but not letting it get too close. They were going slower than most other traffic, and she worried that the van would notice she was also going slow. It made it difficult to

track them without being spotted. She sped up at times until she was out of sight, then slowed down again. Probably the policeman was doing the same. The loose pursuit was necessary but risked losing them if they turned off the road.

She realized that it would be better if they had some way to communicate with Ndoye.

— Saloum, message Haiden, let him know what’s going on. See if we can phone the captain.



Haiden Stills looked at the chat and exclaimed out loud.

— Holy crap.

Finding a Senegal police captain’s private mobile would be a challenge, but nothing’s impossible, he said to himself. He went to `hack.chat/?elibom616` and started typing.

```
haiden | xxx imm urg
```

The reply was almost immediate.

```
zygote44 | state ur imm urg  
haiden | dakar senegal police captain yusuf ndoye  
zygote44 | pay bc
```

Haiden thought for a moment. He had enough bitcoin for now, but helping out *ellapr* had left him with not a lot of slack in his reserves of ready cash.

```
haiden | 2 / 10 min, 1 / 20 min  
zygote44 | 2.5 10 min guar or 2x ref
```

The price was stiff but the guarantee seemed solid. He agreed, created a new bitcoin address with the required amount and sent the payment to the address he was given. Then he started the timer on his

phone. If it didn't come back in ten minutes, at least he would be three thousand dollars richer. It didn't take anywhere near that long though.

He punched the number into his phone and the captain answered.

— Captain, you don't know me but my name is Haiden Stills. I know you're following Caroline Parker who's in a white van en route to Mauritania. I have someone in a car ahead of them. The two of you should work together. I'm texting you her number.

Haiden's ego was soaring. It was in moments like this that he loved what he did, loved the elegant machines that danced to his rhythms and the vast global network that lay stretched before him like a beautiful woman undressing at his command. The power he felt was sexual—even better than sex, godlike. If God had sex, he thought, this is what it would be like.

It took him a minute to come down from his hacker high and remind himself that the mission was far from accomplished. Besides, he had no idea what was coming, let alone any plan for dealing with it. He wondered if the real God, if there was one, ever made plans, or if he just winged it. As for himself, he had always found that the only strategy that worked for him was to maneuver, and keep maneuvering.



The problem with the exhaust odor has been fixed, but the long, slow trek to wherever it is we're going has become tiresome for everyone, though we did at least make a brief stop along the side of the road for afternoon prayers.

Oumar has managed, after some negotiation, to take over the front left corner of the van's cargo area from one of the guards and I am curled up next to him with my head in his lap, his right hand resting gently on my arm. I haven't slept more than two hours straight since the kidnapping. The urge to sleep weighs on me like a warm blanket, but despite my best efforts, it won't come.



Thoughts race through my mind. I want to believe that I really did glimpse Alan Bates at the station, but the probability is infinitesimally small, to say the least. No one has ever accused me of lacking imagination, but when I try to picture him rushing off after me to Senegal, then catching up with me at the gas station, it's just unfathomable. Yes, I think he does care something for me, and yes, he must have heard I've been kidnapped. But to hop a flight and then somehow end up fifty feet away—it's like winning the lottery, maybe even much less probable than that. But I want it to be him, very much. I can imagine him sweeping one arm around me while he dispatches my captors with the other—the climax of my next novel, perhaps, if there's ever going to be one, which seems doubtful at the moment.

If this latest incarnation of Alan Bates was real, then it would mean that someone knows where I am, at least. That possibility, however tiny, is much more tolerable than the suffocating hopelessness I've been holding at bay with all the powers of resistance I can summon. When you have no hope at all, the slimmest of chances is everything.

The great dilemma roiling my mind, though, is whether to passively await rescue or to act for myself if the opportunity arises. "To be or not to be", seems to be the question. As it's not my nature to suffer gladly "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", I make up my mind to be as observant as possible, studying the enemy's habits, strengths and weaknesses and hypothesizing courses of action and the probabilities of success, like one of my erstwhile detectives might do. If the time comes, I will be prepared. If not, at least it gives me something to occupy my mind besides the contemplation of a knife at my throat.

I transport myself into the world of Detective Bampoky, the brilliant if somewhat flawed hero of *The Prancing Jacana*. How would he think about this? First, of course, how many of them are there? Two guards in the cab of the van, two guards in the back with us, three judges. Each of the four guards has an automatic weapon. How many are we? Two, unarmed.

There is no direct communication between the cab and the back of the van. When they need to communicate, they shout or use mobile phones. They all have them but Oumar and I do not. There is a double door at the rear of the van that has the usual door latch but they never lock it.

The judges are short and fat but seem to be muscular, whereas the guards are short and thin and don't seem to have much faculty for thinking. They execute orders, that's all. They, like the judges, are sitting on the floor of the van and leaning against the inside walls. All have their eyes closed and may or may not be sleeping, the guards hugging their guns with the barrels propped against a shoulder like mothers burping their babies.

If all this amounts to exactly nothing in terms of opportunity for escape, it's all I can think of for now. The effects of sleep deprivation are finally sneaking up on me. Morpheus gains the upper hand and I let him have his way. In the last moments before I pass into oblivion, my eyelids closed and heavy, I try to recall the man I saw pumping gas. What if it is him? What will he do? What will I do? What can anyone do? I murmur softly and unintelligibly to myself as my consciousness slips away.

— Alan Bates, Alan Bates, if you find me sleeping, let it not be the sleep of death.

The caller hung up and a few seconds later a text came through on Ndoye's phone with the name Mimi and the number to call. He looked at Mansur.

— Who the hell is Haiden Stills? He wants me to call some woman in a car up ahead.

Robert, slumped down in the back seat, suddenly sprang up alert when he heard the hacker's name and shouted.

— Mimi!

It was Captain Ndoye's turn to be astonished. He turned slightly towards Robert.

— You know them?

— Yes, she kidnapped me.

He shot Robert a sardonic look.

— You weren't kidnapped, were you.

Robert replied with a sly grin.

— Well, no.

— So who are they?

— Software engineers.

The captain looked over at Mansur, who just raised his hands in ignorance. Ndoye returned his attention to Robert.

— Tell me everything.

He did, starting with the hack on his computer, continuing with the fire alarm, the spectacle with the prostitute, Mimi's driving, the hotel, the box, and the dog.

Something dawned on Mansur and he turned to Robert.

— Do you have a mobile?

Robert was taken aback, but replied quickly.

— Yes.

— Give it to me.

Robert took it out, opened it and handed it over. It took only a few moments for Mansur to make a diagnosis.

— It's hot and the battery is almost dead.

He turned it off and handed it back. Robert was confused so the captain explained.

— They installed a program on your phone. It's probably been sending our GPS location. That's how they followed us.

— But they're the good guys too, aren't they? Aren't they, well, on our side?

Neither Ndoye nor Mansur had a ready answer to that. Ndoye called the Americans and got the duty officer.

— This is Ndoye.

It took about thirty seconds for the station chief to come on the line. The captain took a deep breath. The American was not going to be happy with this new wrinkle.

— There's a complication. I have a call from someone, the ones who took the husband. They hacked his phone and they have a car dogging our signal from in front. The subject gives his name as Haiden Stills. They want to help.

The American replied through his teeth.

— Shit on a stick!

Ndoye remained unruffled. Normally he would expect much worse from Foster. He pleaded with the chief.

— I can use the help. It's getting hard to tail the van by myself. I'll probably lose them.

Exasperation showing in his voice, the station chief voiced his displeasure, but acceded.

— I don't like a bunch of buttinskies messing around in my business! But do what you have to. I'll take care of them later, after we're done with the jihadis. Anything else?

— No.

The chief hung up and Ndoye called the other car. The piercing, feminine voice that answered spoke with quiet authority.

— Captain.

He had heard that voice before, he was sure of it.

— This is Captain Ndoye of the federal police. To whom am I speaking?



Dieyna sensed something disturbing in the policeman's tone and shoved the mobile at Saloum.

— You talk to him.

He looked at her quizzically, so she explained.

— I think he recognized me.

Saloum shrugged and took the phone.

— Hello? This is Kazago.

The captain sounded skeptical.

— Kazago what?

— Ferengi.

Saloum often used the alias as a kind of shibboleth. His fellow travelers in the techno-underground would recognize the name of the well-known Star Trek troll while clueless agents of officialdom would often take it at face value. Whether the captain perceived the specific reference or not, he certainly considered it a *nom de guerre*.

— OK “Kazago Ferengi”, where are you?

— We are on N2 going north, coming to Ndande.

The captain's voice assumed a sympathetic tone.

— I need to talk to the one calling herself Mimi. Was she the one who answered first?

Saloum looked at her and offered the phone, but she shook her head.

— She can't talk while driving. Talk to me please.

Ndoye decided to put aside his other concerns for the time being and focus on the task at hand.

— Do you have them in sight?

Saloum looked back. He could scarcely make out what he thought must be the van.

— Yes, I think so, just. Do you?

— I'm close. We'll do a floating box and then a leapfrog. Do you know what that is?

Saloum looked over at Dieyna.

— Floating box? Leapfrog?

She shrugged and shook her head.

— No, we don't know what that is.

— You should slow down a little and let them catch up. I'll slow down until they're out of sight. Then after about fifteen minutes, you will speed up until you can't see them and I'll close the gap. But do this very gradually so it's not too obvious. Do you understand? Later you will pull off and let them pass you and we'll change positions. Take the most obvious route and if they divert while you're out of contact I'll let you know and you can double back.

— Yes OK.

He relayed the information to Dieyna. She nodded and slowed down slightly. After a minute, the van started to gain on them.

It had been nearly four years and she found it hard to believe that the captain would remember her at all, let alone recognize her by her voice, but there was something in how he spoke to her that said otherwise.

She had been arrested just once. It was foolish of her. After she walked away from her job at IBM but before she hooked up with the group, she'd had trouble getting by. She was stealing, small things, candy bars and snacks, and getting good at it, but one day she got caught making away with a basket of monkey bread and got pulled in.

The captain happened to be at the station where she was processed. He was tall and muscular, with a neat, intelligent look to him that interested her, so when the opportunity presented itself, she spoke to him, her charm engine firing on all cylinders. They'd had only an abbreviated conversation, but enough for her to perceive in him a certain type, someone like her, a perspicacious oddity adrift in the melancholy sea of human mediocrity. He did not seem physically attracted to her, as it turned out, but he did recognize something about her, enough it seemed to convince him to make an effort on her behalf

by diverting her case into counseling rather than sending her to jail. It was in a group session that she met Saloum, who introduced her to another kind of group, one that suited her perfectly and was much more to her liking.

After that first, brief conversation, she had never spoken with the captain again, but never forgot his intervention. Sometimes, in the midst of the mad, relentless fugue that was her life, when devils threatened to overtake her, she found it a comfort to recall that at least one person had noticed something of value in her restless vitality and clever individualism, qualities that others found annoying, if not downright evil.

Now the man was here, her accidental accomplice in a game of hide and seek being played out with a gang of terrorists. All to the good. If she had to partner with anyone from the other side, it should be him.

A smile crept over her face and a delicious, satisfying calm percolated through her. She was in the zone, a feeling like being high but with her faculties crystal clear and laser-focused. She was sure now that everything was going to come out right.



The N1 was a two lane road, but well paved and in good condition. Still, the drive was tiresome, straight as an arrow and flat as a pancake with little in the way of scenery or towns to break the tedium. The captain was getting bleary-eyed and would have let Mansur take over some of the driving except the agent was conked out with his head resting against the window, jet lag having overtaken him.

Ndoye rang the other car. Cell phone service had been spotty, dropping in and out, but now he had three bars. They'd been playing their game with the white van for over two hours. The van was still in sight, and if their surveillance had been noticed, there was no obvious reaction to it. He gave instructions to the one who called himself Kazago.

— We're coming to St. Louis. It's a good place for us to leapfrog. The van will most likely take the bypass along the estuary, but they might drive into the city. Pull ahead and stop just before the roundabout. After we know which way they're going, we'll pass and lead until the border.

The border made him nervous. The last time he'd crossed into Mauritania it hadn't gone well. The war between the two countries was in the past, but you could easily encounter officials there who harbored latent suspicions or even outright hostility.

He called the Americans and got through to Foster.

— We're coming to the Mauritania crossing soon. Can you do anything to make sure we don't have problems? They especially don't like police coming in. And we have the American with us. He doesn't have a visa.

Mansur interjected.

— I don't have any papers. They took everything at the embassy.

Ndoye nodded and added this information. Foster's reply was simple.

— Leave them.

— Sir, the husband's French is worse than yours. He can hardly speak a word. The city is one thing, but out here, he won't do well.

The chief's reply reflected the self-assurance that lay behind his own lack of interest in the local language.

— Leave him anyway. He's an American. He'll figure it out.

That was probably true, and the husband *was* more trouble than he was worth, but Mansur was another matter.

— And our friend, you told me to pick him up, and I did.

— Well you can just un-pick-him-up.

While he didn't have a lot of confidence in the agent, the man was at least a known quantity. It wasn't often that the captain stood up to the station chief, but this was one of those times.

— The husband, OK, he's no use anyway, but I'm not going into this alone. If the Algerian doesn't cross the border, I'm not either.



Ndoye knew this would send the chief into a rage, and it did. The words literally hissed out of the phone.

— Listen, *captain*, nobody but *nobody* serves me with an ultimatum, have you got that? Least of all *you*!

The habit of giving in to the demands of the Americans was deeply ingrained, but Ndoye really didn't want to continue into an unknown situation with no one at his back. It was a reasonable request and he resolutely stuck to his guns.

— No policeman goes into a scenario like this solo if he can possibly help it. You must know that, sir. Do what you want. I'm not going through by myself. That's all there is to it.

He'd heard the Americans use that expression, indicating that there was to be no further discussion, and felt that this was an appropriate occasion to be tossing it back at them. In any event, it worked.

— Ndoye, you're on thin ice with me. You can keep your towelhead for now if you insist, but we're going to have a talk when this is through. We may need to review our relationship.

The warning made him nervous. He wanted to believe that the Americans wouldn't cut off a valuable asset such as himself over anything so trivial as a fit of pique, but he also knew that it was just the sort of thing they were apt to do.

Ndoye turned towards Robert, reaching back to give him a nudge that woke him out of his slumber, then gave him the news.

— We're going to have to leave you in Senegal. I'll try to let you out where you can easily find lodging. That will be easy if we go into St. Louis but might be difficult otherwise.

Robert ran his hands over his face and shook the drowsiness from his head, then considered the situation. This development was nothing less than he expected. He didn't like the idea of abandoning his part in the struggle to free Caroline, but he had to admit that he was just excess baggage.

Mimi sent a text saying that the van had indeed taken the bypass. They did the leapfrog, passing the blue Kia stopped just before

the roundabout and then speeding up to pass the van. As they did, Robert sank down in the seat to try to avoid being noticed. He was well aware how much he looked the American, his clothes and hair, not to mention the fact he was much paler than anyone he had seen in quite a while. He caught a glimpse of the top of the vehicle as they passed and it pained him to think that Caroline was there, just meters away. For all the good he could do about it, she might as well be on Mars.

Nodye gave the details that would be needed to get help with the border crossing to Foster, who was still on the phone.

— We're operating joint surveillance with hacker's car, blue Kia Sportage license DK-9189-P. I'm black BMW coupe license DK-1818-D. Target of course is white van license DK-4882-M.

Robert flinched. That's what she was, his Caroline, a "target". He closed his eyes and silently voiced a prayer, a simple one—let her be all right. It was all he wanted. If he had ever in his life asked a higher power for anything else, he was sorry for wasting the time of whoever it was who might be listening. He hoped with all his might that, this time, someone was.



Crane Foster called his counterpart at the U.S. Embassy in Nouakchott and requested assistance handling the Mauritanian border police. He listed the vehicles and license numbers, then gave instructions.

— Tell them to let the van through, and Ndoye and El-Mofty in the BMW, but not the Kia. El-Mofty has no documents, get him something.

Fucking hackers, he mused. Cyber wasn't his department, but there had been chatter about how badly the company's hacking projects had been screwed over by Wikileaks disclosures. Surely someone back home would be interested in whoever it was who was meddling in the operation. If he sent it up the chain, though, it was

sure to get lost in the clutter around the ongoing operation. His mind ranged over the hundreds of people he had met over the years who were still on the inside, before settling on one in particular. The thought of her brought back memories of a steamy summer night in D.C., heavy with the scent of holly blossoms, and he smiled, then began to compose an AMADS.

foster\_crane: Marguerite, I hope you are well. I have a situation here in Dakar that may be of interest to your division, a jerk-off with a computer who's sticking his nose in where it hadna oughta be stuck...

It was an hour before sunset when the captain left Robert off in Rosso, at an inn on the Senegalese side of the river, then crossed into Mauritania on the ferry. Robert had his phone and wallet and his American Express card. The inn didn't take it and there was no bank, but he had fifty dollars worth of West African CFA, what was left after he had maxed out the ATM in Dakar. It was enough for two nights, including meals, but he paid for only one. If he couldn't be along for the rescue, there were better places for him to go insane.

He tried twice without success to tell the desk clerk that he needed to talk to the police. On the third try, she agreed to make the call for him, so he went to his room to clean up and then came down to see if he could get some supper.

The hotel's small eatery was a shabby affair with none of the indicia of sanitation that he was accustomed to, but on closer inspection, he saw that it was acceptable and in fact quite a bit more tidy than a McDonald's he had once been dragged into by an insistent grandchild.

He didn't recognize anything on the menu. When the waiter came, he tried asking about the various entrees but caught only a word here and there of the explanations, none of it helpful. Finally he supposed that anything he might happen to get would be edible and so pointed to a couple of the more expensive items, on the assumption that, whatever they were, they would be the most palatable.

A small, thin young man seated a few tables away from him, fairly light skinned and dressed in Arab clothes, spoke to him in very good English.

— Your French is terrible.

Robert looked up, startled at first, but was instantly gratified to find himself in the company someone he could speak to without straining his brain.

— So I'm told.

The man gave a twist of his head and raised his eyebrows, requesting permission, evidently, to join him. Robert's first thought was that the guy might be a homosexual and that this was a come-on, but be that as it may, he was not going to turn away what could be the only English-speaking person within a hundred miles. Robert nodded and the man came over, bringing along his plate and cup.

The stranger's generic American accent was flawless, but somehow un-American, in that it was not like anything he'd ever heard anyone actually speak. It was not New York, not New England, not Alabama or Ohio—not anywhere. The man held out his hand and introduced himself.

— Henry Linden, from Seattle.

As Robert had never been to that part of the country himself, and supposing that being from Seattle was maybe a little like being from nowhere, he concluded that it was at least plausible.

— Robert Bersley, pleased to meet you. You're a long way from home.

The man grinned wryly.

— So are you.

Robert rolled his eyes.

— You can say that again. What are you doing here? And what's with the getup?

The man's reply was direct but not entirely intelligible.

— I'm learning Berber.

Robert thought he heard "barber" but knew that couldn't be right, and not just because it didn't make grammatical sense. Americans don't come to Africa to learn to be barbers.

— I'm sorry? Bar...?

The man laughed.

— BER-ber. A language, and a people, in the Sahara. The original inhabitants of North Africa. The Berber language has been mostly displaced by Arabic, but still survives. I'm a linguist. I try to integrate as much as possible and dressing like the locals goes a long way towards being accepted as just part of the scenery. You get more

out of them that way. Linguistically. Otherwise they won't say much. They'll think you're spying on them.

— Oh. Are you?

The man laughed again.

— I suppose I am. What about you? You didn't come to Rosso on a culinary tour, I don't think.

The waiter had arrived with Robert's food order. His companion looked down at it, then commented.

— It's an unusual combination, but probably not too bad. You should order something to drink though.

Robert poked at the food, then decided the man was right.

— Wine maybe.

The man shook his finger.

— They don't have it. Muslim country. No alcohol, not here, anyway.

Robert looked at the man's glass and decided that the thick, malt-colored liquid looked appetizing.

— Then I'll have what you're having.

— *Bouye*, made from baobab. Good, but no, too sugary with what you've ordered, if you're not used to it. I'll order you a *gingembre*. It's good for the digestion.

And he did. The pear-colored drink arrived and when Robert took a sip, the zinginess jolted him to attention and lit up his eyes.

— Ginger ale!

Then he took another sip and corrected himself.

— Without the "ale".

His meal companion nodded.

— No carbonation, but plenty of kick without it. So, I've told you why I'm here. What are *you* doing in this far corner of our little planet?

Robert thought about what it would be wise to say to a stranger. He probably shouldn't be giving away too much to someone he didn't know, at least not before the police arrived. He decided to avoid the question.

— It's complicated.

The man nodded knowingly.

— Isn't it always.

They worked on their food for a while, Robert indifferently but his companion more exuberantly. The stranger took a drink of his *bouye*, then continued.

— What work do you do, Robert?

— I'm a writer. I write children's books.

The man stared at Robert for a moment, lost in thought, then brightened.

— Robert Bersley! Who wrote *Squirrel's Holiday*?

With so many improbable things happening in such a short span of time, Robert could hardly have been surprised by much of anything and so just accepted that, of course, he would come to Rosso, Senegal and meet a linguist, possibly *not* from Seattle, wearing a—Berber?—costume, who was a fan of his children's writing. He replied matter-of-factly.

— Yes. The same.

The man was giddy with genuine excitement.

— I love that book! It's one of my favorites!

Robert looked at the man more closely and tried to gauge his age and the age he would have been when he read the book, then thought to himself, has it been that long? The stranger continued.

— Do you still write?

— Yes, but I guess you wouldn't know my latest works, unless you have children.

— I don't.

The man seemed sympathetic and Robert was aching to talk to someone, anyone, about Caroline. The need to share his feelings with another human being won out against his better judgment and he blurted out a confession.

— The American writer, she's my wife.

The other seemed less startled to hear this than he was at finding out that Robert wrote *Squirrel's Holiday*.

— I'm very sorry. Do you know anything? I saw it in the newspaper, of course.

Robert was on the brink of tears as he recounted the situation.

— They've taken her into Mauritania. The terrorists. I was with a policeman and... someone else... We were following them but they left me off before crossing over.

The man seemed amazed.

— Following them? Just you and two others? What about the police? What about the army?

— Good question. The "Americans" are in charge, that's all I know.

This caused the man to sit back in his chair and stare at the ceiling before continuing.

— Yes, that explains it.

So far as Robert could tell, it explained nothing, and he was about to say so when the man broke in.

— Look, I'm going to help you out if you don't mind. At least, I can help you with the languages. You'll run into at least two around here, French and Wolof. I need to leave tomorrow morning, but I'll stick with you until then.

The prospect of even a little help navigating in a country that for Robert was as more foreign than he had ever thought possible, was most welcome, even if only for a short time.

— I appreciate that, but the hotel clerk has called the police, and I suppose they will be taking care of me.

The man turned serious, and nodded.

— If they come, but they won't. This city is the most corrupt place on seven continents. The police, they're too busy stuffing their pockets with money to bother with you. It's more like a mafia family than a law enforcement agency. In fact, you should hope they don't come, because if they do, they'll give you more to worry about, not less.

Robert sighed. Since coming to Senegal, his innate optimism had continually led him to expect that things would be as they ought to



be, but as it was now clear to him that they were not, he decided that he might as well go whole hog and place his life in the hands of yet another casual acquaintance.

— All right then, I would be grateful for any help you can give me. Where are you going, then, tomorrow.

The man chuckled slightly because he assumed that Robert ought to know the answer to that.

— Mauritania! The desert!



Dieyna knew only too well what an ordeal it was to cross the border at Rosso. She had done it just once but the exasperating experience was seared in her memory. Long before you reached the crossing, you were assaulted by scammers demanding that you give them your passport, and if you did, they extorted ridiculous fees to expedite your dealings with the border police, who were evidently in league with the scoundrels. She had resisted the onslaught of hucksters, only to be caught up in hours of wrangling with the authorities before she got through, and then the same again coming back into Senegal.

This time, the ferry was in sight as she was motioned to pull over to the side. She did as directed, then rolled down the window. One of the border patrol came over and spoke.

— Passports.

She handed them over, for herself and Saloum. They were fakes, good fakes that she was sure would pass muster, but after the border policeman walked away to confer with his partner and the two of them stared at the documents for some time, the policeman came back to the car and gave further instructions.

— Ms. Faye, Mr. Ferengi, please leave the car and come with me.

The rustic border station they were led to was neither intimidating nor welcoming. Hardly more than a wooden shack, it

nonetheless displayed some of the trappings of the state—a framed *bismillah* in Arabic lettering, a portrait of the President, a telephone and a computer.

They were told to sit, and did. One of the officers took a seat behind the only desk and the other sat at a chair to the side. For the better part of an hour, the officials seemed to be busy, coming and going, handling papers, having short discussions between themselves, none of which had any obvious connection to the two supplicants posed before them. Finally Saloum spoke up.

— Will we be much longer?

The officer behind the desk picked up their passports and looked at them again, then replied.

— I'm sorry but you won't be able to go into Mauritania today. My investigation will take some time. You may go but I will keep your documents and your car. Let me have the keys please.

The other policeman accompanied them back to the car where they retrieved a few belongings then walked back into town on the Senegal side of the river. It was no less than she expected. Mimi was agitated but philosophical.

— You know what they say about Africa.

Saloum replied sarcastically, his voice filled with disgust.

— I don't know. What?

— Whatever is possible, that is what is.

He shook his head.

— I've never heard that. What does it mean?

Dieyna looked somberly at her companion, a deep sadness in her eyes as she spoke.

— It means that Africa is great, but in a small way.



The news that the linguist would be traveling to the desert in Mauritania piqued Robert's interest.

— You have a car?

Henry shook his head.

— No! A car here is just a nuisance, and doubly so at this crossing. You wouldn't believe the paperwork and the bribes you need to pay. The expense is terrible, the roads are terrible and it's always breaking down. There's always *some* way to get from one place to another without it. Much easier to just pay someone a little something to get you where you need to go. After all, how many people here have cars? But they do manage to get around.

There were two comfortable-looking lounge chairs in the small hotel lobby. They sat themselves down to wait for the police, who in fact never did come. While waiting, Robert learned a great deal more about Seattle and the Pacific Northwest than he needed to know, and when his new companion asked him about the details surrounding his travails, Robert gave him the short version.

— I was contacted by hackers offering to help find Caroline. They faked my kidnapping and drove me around the city before drugging me and locking me in a dog house, but then they dropped me off on a street corner where I was picked up by a police captain and a man my wife met in Central Park who knew where to find the kidnappers. We chased the terrorists here, but they left me behind because I don't have a visa for Mauritania.

Henry sat transfixed as he listened to Robert's brief telling of the events. His eyes showed a certain fascination, but then he tilted his head and spoke in a tone of sympathetic resignation.

— Quite a story. I have to say, you've got gumption.

Robert remembered that he had his phone and took it out, but when he turned it on, the battery indicator was just a tiny speck of red. He held it up to show Henry.

— I need to charge my phone.

— Do you have the charger?

— No.

Henry looked more closely at it.

— Samsung Galaxy S. Should be easy enough. It just needs a micro USB, probably the hotel has one, though it will go slower than if you had the charger.

— I don't seem to be in any hurry.

They went to the hotel desk and for a few hundred francs the clerk agreed to provide a cable and plug it in.



Saloum's iPad was beeping. He took it out of his satchel and logged on.

— Robert's phone is transmitting.

Dieyna's eyebrows went up.

— Oh? Where are they?

He studied the map closely and zoomed in.

— About 200 meters away.

The hotel was easy to find, as it was the only one in that part of the city and the only plausible place to go looking for a lost American. When Robert looked up and saw them walking through the door, he was immediately dismayed and spoke in a wistful voice.

— What are you doing here? Why aren't you following the van?

Mimi shook her head.

— They won't let us in.

Henry stood up and spoke to Mimi in a strange language, to which she replied immediately. It took him two tries to find the right one for Saloum, but then he turned smugly to Robert.

— Mimi is Serer. Kazago speaks Mandinko, which I don't know, but he speaks Wolof also. Despite his name, he doesn't speak Ferengi.

Henry gave an impish grin. Robert was impressed, but confused.

— But they speak French...

Henry grinned.

— Doesn't everyone?

Kazago, the box beater, didn't speak any English, so Henry continued conversing with him while Mimi brought Robert up to date. Then Robert sighed.

— No car. No papers. Looks like we're going nowhere. Is the police captain still following them?

— Yes, but it will be hard for him. If they're headed for the Sahara, which I'm sure they are, it will be impossible for him to stay close without being noticed. Really, though, two cars wouldn't be much better. There's no phone service there, for one thing.

Henry had been taking it all in and was brimming with enthusiasm. He spoke excitedly, gesticulating for emphasis.

— We need to go to the Sahara and rescue Caroline! How much money do we have?

Even dressed in Arab clothes, Henry's nerdiness and small stature made him come across as a most unlikely hero. They all stared for a moment, then Mimi spoke up, in English, for Robert's sake.

— I suppose you have an army? Or are you just going to talk them into giving back the hostages. You do speak Arabic, I suppose.

Henry closed his eyes and thought, wanting to give precise answers to each of her inquiries.

— I do speak Arabic, well enough, though not as well as I'd like. But no, I don't have an army just now and I'm not thinking of talking to the terrorists. I don't suppose they are likely to listen to me anyway. An army, even if I had one, probably wouldn't get Caroline back, not alive. No, none of that, but what I do have is friends in "high places"—sitting on camels, that is! In this part of Mauritania, there are Bedouin tribes. I stayed with one for six weeks on my last trip to Africa. Nice people, but fierce. If anyone can rescue Caroline, it's them!

The image of Arabs riding to the attack on camels, Lawrence of Arabia style, flashed through Robert's mind. The older, pre-Senegal part of his brain would have rejected the notion, but the newer part,

formed in just the past two days, reflected briefly on the idea, then accepted it as a plausible plan of action. He gave his go-ahead.

— OK, then. Sounds good.

They started pooling their cash, which Henry counted, including his own.

— About nine hundred dollars. We'll probably need more. What can we sell?

Saloum was reluctant to tender his iPad but Mimi convinced him it would be useless in the Sahara and promised to buy him a new one afterwards. They also had their smart phones and that would bring something. Henry counted mentally what it all might go for.

— We could get maybe a five hundred for everything. It should be enough.

It took them an hour and a half to peddle the goods, bringing only three hundred in various currencies. It would have to do. Then Henry posed a poignant question.

— Do we all need to go?

He looked at Robert when he said it. Robert didn't hesitate.

— Yes. We all have to go.

Henry gave him a piercing look.

— If bad things happen, we may need to leave you behind. If you can't make it. In the desert. You wouldn't survive.

This gave Robert pause. All rational considerations pointed to his being as useless for the purpose as a bag of rocks, but he wouldn't allow himself to be left out of it. If nothing else, he would be there to guilt them on if there was any idea of giving up the attempt. He was determined.

— If it comes to that, so be it, but you're not leaving me behind.

While he was negotiating the sales of their possessions, Henry had also inquired after the help they would need for the next stage. They went to a man with a fishing boat who, for five hundred dollars, it was said, would take them across. In the inky darkness of a moonless night, the outline of the far shore a thin, tentative line against

the starlight, they waded through shin-deep mud to a tiny craft, then set off slowly and quietly down the still water of the Senegal River.

We make it to the terrorist camp an hour or so after the ferry crossing, just as the last rays of the setting sun are disappearing over the distant sands. Oumar and I are the guests of honor, with many young jihadis turning out to gawk at us as we're marched along to our quarters, their stares bearing looks of awe and respect. They are watching people who are about to leave this life. The excitement is palpable.

It was slow going at the end along the rocky, windswept dirt road. When we got close to the destination, we were transferred to a truck more suited for off road travel. The van, abandoned some distance from the main road, could not have made it over the rugged terrain.

The camp consists of a few stone buildings covered in desert camouflage netting, weapons bristling from every corner. Outside the camp, there is nothing but desolation in all directions. Given the presumed fanaticism of the occupants, it's evident to me that any rescue attempt launched against this garrison will result in the death of everyone here, including myself, and Oumar. My only thought is that we have to find a way out.

Our hut is spare, but someone has made an effort to make it comfortable. Multiple rugs are arranged neatly on the ground into two separate beds, a container of water and two cups carefully placed between them. I didn't see any women when we came in, but there must be some. I can't imagine any of the men we saw being so domestic.

We're exhausted and parched. I pour a cup of water for Oumar and take one for myself, then lie on one of the beds while Oumar stretches himself out on the other. It's hot enough in the room and not a breath of air to be felt, but even so, a great improvement over the van.



As night steals over the camp, the urge to sleep claws at me, but my senses are fully awake, recording every moment of the experience while my mind searches in all corners, seeking escape from the stone and metal realities that imprison us. I turn my head to look at my putative husband. He is lying with his eyes wide open, but has a peaceful expression. I feel the need to express what I'm feeling for him.

— Oumar, I don't know what I'd do without you. I am truly grateful.

He seems surprised, then smiles slightly.

— There is nothing to thank me for. You are my wife. I should thank you.

His calmness flows over my shaky nerves like a gentle wave and I close my eyes. He continues.

— We are going to die, and then we will be together in heaven. There is nothing to fear, Caroline. We will be greeted by the angels, and we will know nothing but eternal peace and joy. Death is not to be feared, dear woman, but to be welcomed. We will be with Allah.

I have never believed in the doctrines of the Presbyterian religion to which I ostensibly belong. I have certainly never believed in life after death. I ask myself whether the prospect of dying has brought me any closer to hoping that there might be something after. The answer is no, it has not, and even if there were, I'm not finished here yet. I have plans.

One of the doctrines of my putative religion is predestination, the idea that the future is foreordained, that there is no such thing as free will, so, we should just leave everything to God. But my restless nature leaves no possibility of abandoning myself to such passivity. I address myself to Oumar.

— How are we going to get out of here?

He doesn't reply. I hear him speaking softly. There is no call to prayer, but it's prayer time, apparently. Oumar is on his knees, facing Mecca.



The trip across the river took the small band of unlikely rescuers downstream, the boat leaving them off to slog through a rice field on the other side in the dark, some distance from the city.

They walked into the Mauritanian section of Rosso from the west. It was prayer time so Henry went to the nearest mosque while the others crouched together in a cafe, doing their best to look invisible, though that was difficult with Robert's white face beaming like a searchlight from the midst of his dark-skinned cohorts. A policeman happened by asking for passports, but Mimi passed him some bills from the dwindling stash of currency and he went away.

Henry returned with news. He had spoken to a friendly and sympathetic local, giving the man the story that he had come from America to study languages and mentioning in passing that he had heard of jihadis in the area. This was denied. No jihadis here. The jihadis were in the east, near Mali.

He did manage to find out, though, that a group of Bedouins was said to be camped nearby, just outside the city. Henry explained that the nomadic tribes detested the radicals and usually did their best to avoid them, and anyone else for that matter, but that given any excuse, in particular the inducement of a sum of money, they could possibly be persuaded do indulge their famous stalking abilities in pursuit of whatever game was being hunted. What was needed was to find someone who knew exactly where they were and how to get to them.

The troupe traversed the outskirts of the town along dirt roads teeming with activity, making discreet inquiries and spending small amounts of their precious cash on anyone who seemed at all knowledgeable or sincere. But in the end, they could find out nothing. Finally, exhausted, they persuaded a shopkeeper, for the equivalent of five dollars, to let them stay in his shed where they could take their rest on his collection of rugs.

What with the lumpy accommodations, the heat, the dust, and the gnawing fear that gripped his stomach, Robert was sure he would not sleep, but he did. The others talked for a while in their various languages, then as the sounds of the city quieted, followed him into slumber in due course.

They woke after sunrise, the full light of day revealing that another, quite unexpected personage had taken up residence with them in the shed. A Bedouin had appeared in the night and was sitting on the floor, his back against the door, patiently waiting for them to stir.



Crane Foster studied the satellite photos of the area on the edge of the Sahara where Captain Ndoye had lost sight of the van. Ndoye had needed to fall back, sometimes as much as a mile or two, to avoid being detected, while the white speck they were following blinked in and out of view. Finally, it disappeared for good.

The photo he was examining at the moment had been processed and enhanced by technical personnel in Washington, but even so, Foster could only just barely make out the buildings. The thing about them that gave rise to suspicion was that they were heavily camouflaged. For comparison, he had a photo of the same area from two years ago, in which the buildings were plainly visible. If there were anything like roads leading to the compound, he couldn't see them.

He checked with Langley. Reports had el-Khairi on the move from Mali and the chief had to assume that the jihadi was coming to take charge of the woman. The celebrated evildoer had been laying low of late and his prestige and importance had been suffering. A featured role in the video of the execution of an American would put him back in the limelight.

The station chief called Fleet Forces Command at Hampton Roads and reached his liaison at DEVGRU.

— I’ve sent you the coordinates for Noisy Bird. We’re still awaiting confirmation of the arrival of Camel.

— We’ll be ready.

Foster grunted. The military guys frequently grunted and so he felt he needed to also, especially when he was about to make a point.

— Rules of engagement are, kill everyone, yes?

— The woman?

Foster hesitated. He hadn’t honestly expected her to last as long as she had, and while the prospects for her successful rescue were about as small as could possibly be imagined, they weren’t zero, and the plan didn’t really call for her to be coming back. Probably she wouldn’t give them any trouble if she did, but she was a loose end nonetheless. He couldn’t be seen to be writing her off completely, though.

— Her RFID was removed and they have her in a full burqa so we won’t be able to ID her. If you go up casual like to one of them in a gunnysack you’re like as not going to get a bellyful.

— True enough. May as well use drones then.

Drones wouldn’t risk any losses, but using them when there was an American on site would ignite a media storm back home.

— No, not against our own, hopeless or not. We need to make the effort to get her out at least. Anyway, if we go in, we can collect intel when you get there and I.D. the targets. And the woman of course.

— Roger that. We’ll keep it simple.

When he was finished with the call, Foster sat back in his chair and thought about Caroline Parker. He hadn’t given her much consideration up to now. He knew she had a husband, no children. She was a writer. She went on morning talk shows—she hadn’t been code-named “Noisy Bird” for nothing. So long as she was bottled up with the jihadis, she wasn’t making any racket. But she could, if she made it out and managed somehow to figure things out. The thought sat in his stomach like too much dumpling. He didn’t like gambling with his

career, especially if crapping out meant a Congressional hearing. He spoke out loud to no one in particular.

— Fuck.



At the border, the officer didn't ask Ndoye for his papers, handing him a satellite phone instead as there would be no cell phone service in the desert. Then he wished them both "good luck", in English.

Other than that, they hadn't stopped since the gas station and so weren't supplied for a night of camping in the open, except for the stale one-liter bottle of water, flashlight and old blanket the captain kept stashed in the trunk for emergencies. They found a rocky outcrop, arranged the blanket in a convenient crag that provided them a good view to the north, then huddled together in the narrow space for what might be a long, somniferous vigil.

They had left the car in the least obvious place available, then climbed up the small stony mound to a point where they could reconnoiter possibly as much as ten kilometers down the dirt track that stretched over the sand like a taut string. Against the darkness, vehicles coming down the road with lights on would be seen long before they arrived. Navigating the road might be possible by moonlight, but it was a moonless night. The targets would be using their headlamps.

The two men didn't know exactly what they were looking for but were sure they would know it when they saw it. There had been no traffic so far and they didn't expect much, other than the convoy of terrorists expected to arrive from Mali sometime before dawn. The jihadis would likely be coming with multiple vehicles, and they would leave the road at some point, hopefully within view of the surveillance.

The clear, dry desert air, once the flashlight had been extinguished, opened an infinite vista into the empty blackness from which an impossibility of stars poured over the men like a heavenly snowstorm. Once their eyes had adjusted to the dim glow, they could

plainly see the edge of the distant horizon and the rocky features of their aerie perch by the light of a thousand tiny suns.

How many years had passed since Mansur had seen the stars, he could not say. The boy who had once left footprints in the sand, but who had, in his impetuous years, squandered his credulous, youthful energy on the busy importance of town and city, the artificial glare blinding him to everything in eternity and quelling the fever that once burned in him, felt now only a flicker of what had once been a lustrous flame. He could hardly remember that passion, faded now in his memory, but he longed for it, and for the boy who had once embraced it. Could he care about anything or anyone? He'd thought that the fire in him had died, but here he was, sitting on a stone in the desert, thousands of miles away from where he was supposed to be.

He spoke to the captain.

— They are coming with the seals.

He felt, but could not see, the captain's nod.

— Probably.

If he could do nothing else, the agent could calculate, and the calculus was not good.

— She doesn't stand much of a chance.

— She could get lucky, but no. She doesn't stand a chance if they don't come, either.

Of all the imponderables involved in the affair, the presence of the agent in the middle of all this, in open rebellion against the company, was the most puzzling to Ndoye. It was totally out of character for the man and he couldn't imagine what was driving him.

— Mansur, what on earth are you doing here? You can't be in love with the woman, are you?

The agent shrugged.

— She's a delightful woman. What do I feel for her? I feel... something.

Of course, a man can lose his mind. Ndoye understood this. But it had never happened to him and he could not conceive of it

happening to the man sitting beside him. He recalled the Mansur he used to know.

— Someone once told me, I believe it was you, that in this business, feelings are like blood oozing from an open wound. You must staunch them or else bleed to death.

Mansur closed his eyes. The stars were too bright.

— I've not often been bothered by feelings. Just once before.

Ndoye didn't ask and Mansur didn't volunteer. The agent had lived a lifetime of checking his feelings at the door to any room he might enter. A trained stoic, he had never spoken of tenderness, but it didn't mean he had never felt it. The image of a young woman, smiling, a clutch of purple flowers in her hand, reappeared to him as if in a dream. He had left her behind to make his way in the world, thinking that someday he would find her again, or another who stirred him the same way, but he never had. Would he have left if he realized then how rare and precious that feeling was? A moot question. He hadn't known then. But now he understood, finally.

— I want to be able to feel, and Caroline makes me feel. I want to care, and she makes me care. It's myself I need to rescue.

The captain remembered an episode from their American training that seemed apropos.

— If you care about her, you won't care about her.

It was from a training exercise at Quantico. If he were to free her from danger, caring was the very thing that most endangered her. To do his job, if it came to that, he would need to act with cold-blooded precision, like a surgeon excising a tumor. They had a phrase for it which the agent recalled.

— The art of "mental gymnastics".

— Yes.

That's what they called it, the ability to make yourself believe what you must believe to accomplish the mission, a discipline more harsh and exhausting than any physical training. But just now it seemed irrelevant. The agent had done what he could, but matters were out of his hands.

— We won't be anywhere near it. We'll be out of it.

Ndoye was in agreement.

— Yes. I'm not staying for the fireworks myself. We would just be target practice.

Mansur imagined himself and Ndoye on the road back to Dakar even as the seals choppered over the ocean, then dropped into the camp with their hellish load of cartridges and fragmentation grenades. "Mental gymnastics," he repeated to himself.

They settled into their weary watch, the great low-hanging brushstrokes of the galaxy raining down on them in hues of blue and gray. Two creatures of the desert hunkered in their sandy roost, they waited.



It's early afternoon. Oumar has been praying and I have been thinking, but the situation, to all appearances, remains intractable. We were fed at least, a healthy meal of fruits and vegetables accompanied by warm flatbread and tea, intended to sustain us, I suppose, on our journey into the hereafter.

I'd been hoping for any sign of rescue and contemplating how I might act in that event, and for a brief moment during the night, I thought the time might be at hand when, just before dawn, I awoke to Oumar's hushed but urgent voice. The sound of vehicles arriving in the camp stirred feelings of exhilaration at the prospect of deliverance, but our hopes faded quickly when no gunfire or other evidence of fighting could be heard.

I'm lying on my back on the rug bed, eyes closed and trying to bring order to my thoughts, when the guards come for us. Still without any idea as to who has arrived at the camp, we're escorted to a heavily fortified building and placed before a raised dais where the three judges, joined now by five more robed dignitaries, are holding court. Seated among them and exhibiting a serene and self-important posture that evokes the image of Jesus from DaVinci's "Last Supper", sits a tall, thin Arab with pointed ears and narrow, squinty eyes staring out blankly into space from under a knobby and rutted forehead, his mouth drawn into a pout so extreme that it seems he must be about to kiss someone. The ridiculous appearance of the man and his inane expression bring on a nervous spasm in my belly that I choke off quickly. I'm sure he's not someone to be laughed at, and though I may be about to die, I'm not anxious to find out what corrective actions might be forthcoming if I don't comport myself properly.

Oumar is a silent oak, myself, a blue hydrangea planted at his side, both of us quaking imperceptibly with apprehension. Some kind of Arabic rigmorole passes with great pomposity among the other officiants while the ersatz Jesus affects a god-like state, eyes lifted to a

higher plane of existence. This goes on for maybe twenty minutes before Oumar speaks. I have no idea what he's saying, but he sounds eloquent and the judges are paying careful attention. When he finishes, Jesus rises and makes a pronouncement, and then we are taken out. Back in our quarters, Oumar explains the verdict.

— Tomorrow morning. We are to prepare ourselves.

Well, no beating around the bush. I ask the question that keeps haunting me.

— What do we do now?

He doesn't answer. It's clear enough to him—get ready to go to heaven. He takes out his Quran.

He's not being much of a husband at this point, so if anything is to be done, it seems it will have to be up to me. When we were taken out for the trial, I could see that since the arrival of the others during the night, there are now more of them, and more vehicles. I also noticed that we are at the edge of the camp. When we first arrived, we came through the center of the compound from the opposite side, so our location on the periphery wasn't so obvious, but this time I paid careful attention. There is only one building between us and the desert. I counted six guards around our one-room hovel, two at the door and one at each corner.

There are no windows and the heavy wooden portal is barred from the outside. The roof is metal and doesn't seem well attached, but loosening it and getting out that way would be noisy.

I lie in my bed and stare at the ceiling while Oumar mutters his devotions.

The roof. It's the only way. I need a plan.



The two men easily spotted the convoy arriving from the north in the predawn hours and made note of where it turned off the road. Ndoye had never used a satellite phone so he let Mansur call in the report.

The captain did all he could to talk his companion out of it, but finally acquiesced to dropping the agent at the side of the road just before sunrise at a point near where they thought the convoy had disappeared, leaving him with the binoculars, a pocket knife, the blanket, the remaining water, and his benediction. The agent's cell phone battery had run down outside of St. Louis so he left that behind, and Ndoye also kept the sat phone. Mansur said he wouldn't know who to call anyway.

The last few stars were fading behind the incipient light of a desert morning when the agent began to probe the tracks left by the convoy over the rocky terrain between the road and the terrorist hideout. He avoided the sentries posted along the way by crossing back and forth over the route rather than following it directly. This tactic allowed him to spot the guards from the side and maneuver around them, though he had to be careful not to face the binoculars into the sun and risk the telltale glint of a reflection off the lense. This plodding, meticulous work took most of the morning, the sun climbing high into the sky before, finally, parched and hungry, he spotted the camp. After that, there was nothing more to be done until nightfall. He laid the blanket over a crevice in the side of a rock to rest.

Still a long ways off, it was as close as he dared to come in daylight. He couldn't see any outposts but knew they were there, making a mental list of the likely locations—rock formations, raised earthen mounds that might be bunkers, and a derelict truck. He slept the rest of the day in fits of miserable, heated lethargy, wetting cracked lips during periods of wakefulness with his last few swallows of water.

Relief from the scorching sun came, finally, when a dry, dusty sunset commenced to paint the rugged landscape in hues of yellow and gold. He moved himself a little closer, finding a spot that seemed to offer the most likely way in, then surveyed the compound thoroughly. With the last rays of light flickering over the low hills, he noticed the activity of the camp diminishing. It was prayer time. It had not been his practice for many years, but he followed his impulse to join them

in worship, praying to that same god in the same words, seeking the same mercy.

Then he posed the question to himself one last time, demanding to know what it was that he was doing there and why in hell he was doing it. The answer came back to him simple and direct—he was entering a terrorist camp to save a woman he cared about.

Only a few dim bulbs lit the camp after night had fallen, pin pricks that he could just make out against the curtain of black beyond. With no way to tell time, he studied the stars to use as a clock, memorizing the pattern of the brightest ones rising just over the horizon. When they were overhead, it would be after midnight.

Then he slept. The night before, while waiting for the convoy to arrive, he had nodded off just a little, and had managed only a couple hours of sleep at midday. He was sure he would wake up in time, though. He had not slept more than five hours at a stretch in many years. His nightmares were the only alarm clock he needed.



Coming alert hours later with a start, trembling and sweating heavily, it took the agent a minute to remember where he was and why. When he looked for the memorized pattern of stars, he saw that it was well past midnight.

There were no lights at the camp now, but he knew the general direction of it and, using the binoculars, could just see the tops of the buildings obscuring the celestial dome. He started on his course, confidently at first, but then more cautiously.

As he approached a suspected outpost beside a small hill, he made an arc around it to come at it from the side. As it turned out, he might as well have come straight on, because the two sentries were fast asleep. With quiet but ruthless efficiency, he made sure they wouldn't wake up.

Having a gun and ammunition he'd taken off one of the sentries gave him confidence. Logic might have told him that it hardly

mattered whether he came with a knife or a gun, but logic had left him some time ago. He counted perhaps a half dozen moving silhouettes as he approached within a hundred meters of the buildings, all seemingly vigilant, though it was perhaps three in the morning. There was no cover, but he put his trust in the knowledge that he was as hard to see in the near-total darkness as they were. He put the gun to his back and his face into the dirt and inched towards the compound on his chest.

A half hour later he had approached as close as he could, about twenty meters away. He studied the guards, who spoke very little but moved about, scanning outwards, sometimes in his direction. There seemed to be thirty or so buildings. He wondered where Caroline might be. He wondered what he might do next.



I have no idea what time it is but it has been a long, sleepless night. I can't see Oumar in the dark but I can hear him. He hasn't stopped praying and I haven't stopped thinking.

I keep staring at the roof. From the faint slits of light coming from outside, I can make out barely perceptible openings where the edges of the metal covering meet the walls. I've been studying them, trying to imagine where the panels might be loose. It looks like my best chance is at the center of the wall above the door.

I have my doubts as to whether I could make a large enough opening to get myself over the wall and escape, but if I make a nuisance of myself, maybe the guards will come in. Then I can tackle them and take their guns. Or something. Whatever it is, I'm not going to just lie here and wait to be turned into a side of beef.

I've been telling myself to hold off as long as possible, that my best chances are just before dawn. I don't have a watch, but probably it's time. At least, I'm not waiting any longer. I go over to Oumar and gently put my hand on him, and he flinches.

— I need your help.

He's slow to come out of his meditations.

— What is it?

— Come here.

I take the empty water pitcher in hand, then get up and lead him to the door. He seems confused. Probably he's not used to having a woman give him orders. Of course, he's not used to any of this, and neither am I.

— Lift me up.

He shakes his head.

— No, please, Caroline.

I tell him again, in a hushed but insistent whisper.

— Lift me up, Oumar! I don't want to die. I'm getting out of here.

He's stiff and robotic, but complies. I manage to get him to hold my foot and then hoist myself up, giving the metal roof a loud bang with the pitcher.

It takes a few moments for the reaction. Excited voices rise up outside the building and I crouch by the door to wait. But the voices die down and it becomes quiet. At first it seems that I've failed. Then I hear the bar being lifted and the door opens slowly. Two figures appear in the doorway dressed in dark turbans and white robes.

With my water pitcher at the ready, I'm about to launch myself at their knees when Oumar emits a stifled cry.

— No! Wait! They're Bedouins!

One of them looks down at me squatting in the darkness by the side of the door, still gripping the water pitcher. At first I'm baffled, but it's true, they don't have the same scruffy look as the terrorists. In fact, they look quite grand. I put down the pot and go to Oumar, reflexively taking hold of his arm. He recites the usual Islamic greeting and they reply in kind.

— *As-salaam 'alaykum.*

— *Wa 'aleykum as salam.*

They seem puzzled, looking from me to Oumar and then back again, so Oumar tells them in French that we are husband and wife, and I nod in agreement.

One of them grabs my wrist and tugs at it, saying that I must go with him. We go outside and conceal ourselves in a narrow passageway between our quarters and the next building, where the six guards, now deceased, have been neatly piled up, watched over by two more Bedouins.

The one holding my wrist, evidently the leader of the group, picks up one of the terrorists' guns and thrusts it at Oumar, who takes it, startled. It may be that he's never held a gun in his hand before, and almost certainly not a military grade weapon, unless he has had military training. From the way he is holding the thing and staring at it, it seems that he has not. The leader motions with his hand for Oumar to leave, gesturing towards the center of the camp.

Oumar seems confused. He looks at me, and then at the gun. Finally, he understands what they expect of him and his anxious face turns peaceful. He smiles a sad acquiescence, then addresses himself to me.

— My dear wife, Allah be with you until we will meet again in a better place...

Then he turns, tussles clumsily with the gun until he figures out how to hold it, and marches off on his short voyage to paradise. A few seconds later we hear the chugging of automatic weapons. From the corner of my eye, I can see jihadis rushing towards the sound of the gunfire as we slip away into the night.



Mansur was still trying to decide what to do next when he heard the *dakakakakak* of an automatic rifle coming from inside the camp. As the guards turned and raced towards the sounds of battle, he lept up and charged after them.

Once they had turned their backs to him, they were easy targets. It took the terrorists a little too long to figure out that bullets were coming at them from behind, and by then, a good number of them were down. Mansur, scrunched behind the corner of a building in

a frenzied ataxia of “shoot, reload, repeat”, was too filled with joy to feel the pain when, finally, the enemy’s bullets found their way into his quivering flesh.



The seal commander studied the live satellite feed and frowned, then spoke to his squad leader.

— Gunfire in the compound. Hold position.

— Roger.

His men were stationed a hundred yards from the buildings, arrayed in a skirmish line but lying flat in the sand, part of the landscape for all anyone could tell who did not know what to look for. They lay there watching the green sparkle of muzzle flash in their night vision goggles until it slowed and then stopped. Then the order came and they moved in.

The terrorists, milling around and disorganized in the aftermath of the gunfight with Oumar and Mansur, had no idea what was happening to them as the seals sprang into the compound, their hellfire slicing through the befuddled swarm of humanity in a blaze of white-hot death.



The sun awakening on the desert dunes announces a new day, bringing with it a tide of bronze over the ocean of sand as the Bedouins lead me into their camp, where Robert embraces me in a vice-like grip, his words exploding in bursts of crying and laughter.

— Oh Caroline! Caroline! I thought I would never see you again!

Tears of joy are streaming down my face also, my own words choked with emotion.

— I didn't think you would, Robert. I didn't think you would.

The Bedouin women quickly gather around me and drag me away to one of their tents. They give me a thorough cleaning, then dress me in a long, black, loose-fitting wool robe with ample sleeves that feels cool and comfortable after the sweaty canvas burqa. A silk scarf wrapped across my forehead and under my chin completes the transformation, and then I'm taken to a large tent where I'm welcomed like visiting royalty.

A meal laid out on a carpet, though comprised of unfamiliar foods, looks to me like the most delicious banquet I have ever laid eyes on. The exhilarating onrush of my newfound freedom and resurrected life has made me hungry enough to eat a camel. In fact that may be what's on offer, though I don't ask and I don't care. The actuality of being alive and together again with my husband is more luxurious than anything I have ever experienced.

Robert and I huddle together while I gorge myself, reciting for him the story of my rescue in between mouthfuls of food and sips of sweet tea.

— I took the water pitcher and Oumar boosted me up...

— Oumar?

I back up to explain about my Muslim husband.

— He saved my life, darling. The Bedouins found the heavily guarded building and realized it must be where they were keeping me,

then waited for their chance. When I hit the metal roof with the water pitcher, it distracted the guards and the Bedouins killed them. Oumar said that we were husband and wife, which we were, sort of, I'll tell you about that later, so they gave him a gun, telling him to attack, which created a distraction so that we could get away. Oumar was very brave, Robert. He gave his life for me. It was his religious belief, his sense of duty that made him do it, but he did it. He did it.

From his expression, I can see that Robert is troubled by the idea of me having another husband, whatever the circumstances, especially one who acted so heroically. In case he's forgotten, I remind him of his own part in it.

— Of course, darling, without the Bedouins, I wouldn't be here. You're by my side, in the desert, the last place I would expect to find you. A girl is lucky if she has even one valiant husband to rescue her. I had two!

Robert smiles at that, but protests, indicating the others gathered around.

— I didn't do anything, it was them.

He introduces me to his new friends, explaining the role that each one played in his miraculous odyssey. But then the one called Mimi startles me by addressing me in a very odd way.

— How do you do, Captain Parker. It's a pleasure to finally meet you.

I stare at her for a moment, mystified, thinking that I may not have heard her right, but after deciding that my first impression was not mistaken, I ask for an explanation.

— It's a pleasure to meet you as well, but please, why ever did you call me "captain"?

She has a cat-like grin on her face. She waits a dramatic moment before giving me the answer, a proposition that, even compared with the many preposterous statements I've been subjected to recently, takes the prize for absurdity.

— Because you are a captain in the United States Army Rangers.

I try to digest this piece of information. I have been through a lot in the past few days and I don't fully trust my faculties at this point, but finally, I can come to only one conclusion.

— No, I'm sorry, I'm not.

But Mimi is unyielding and replies forcefully.

— Yes, Caroline Parker, I'm afraid you are.

She persists with her sly smile. She seems quite sure of herself. I'm expecting the March Hare to join us for tea any time now. Surely the woman is sipping from a very cracked teacup.

— In that case, you are going to have to explain to me what on earth it is that leads you to such a conclusion?

— Gladly. You were inducted into the Armed Forces of the United States on March 18, 2017. You, of course, were not present. Your agent, chosen to act on your behalf by the Attorney General of the United States, administered the oath. You, or rather she, speaking for you, swore to defend the United States against all enemies, domestic and foreign. Which is what you've been doing, though you didn't know it until now.

The accumulated stress of the killings and the humiliation, which has been building in me every moment of every hour since the kidnapping, suddenly bursts forth in a flood and I start to laugh hysterically. When I recover my composure, I look pleasantly at the woman, wipe the tears from my eyes and raise my eyebrows.

— You, young lady, have some kind of imagination!

She chuckles in turn, then continues gravely, her voice rising to a crescendo.

— I *do* have a lot of imagination, but I wasn't the one who thought this up. You are a "Halls draftee".

She seems very steadfast so I decide to take her seriously. I tilt my head to the side, ready to listen.

— OK. I'll bite. Please explain this to me.

— It's part of Presidential Proclamation 9083a, February 11, 2014, making certain changes to the selective service system—the draft. It makes a finding that unconventional threats require

unconventional response, and provides that U.S. persons can be drafted secretly, without their knowledge, when necessary to meet terrorist threats and the like. Some people, like yourself for example, would not be able to properly perform the role assigned to them if they knew that they were involved. So you can't be told. They create a document, called a "Halls letter" after the government attorney who came up with the idea, drafting you into the military. You are, as I said, a captain in the Army Rangers.

I can't help chortling to myself. A few days ago, I would have dismissed any such nonsense as the ravings of a lunatic, but now, after all that's happened, I wonder whether anything is truly impossible.

— So, why haven't I heard of this "proclamation". I read *The New York Times* just about every day!

— It's a secret, was a secret, until we found out about it. The proclamation, the letter, your induction and all your military records—all covert. You are a captain in the Army Rangers and you have been on a mission. Probably they didn't expect you to come back from it. It could be awkward that you have, especially since you know about it, now that I've told you. You're getting paid at least. It's being held in trust for you, though it's not clear how you or anyone inheriting through you is supposed to ever get their hands on the money without giving away where it came from. Retirement pay too, once you're eligible.

The thought of receiving a military pension intrigues me momentarily. I certainly have enough saved already and I can only imagine how my book sales are going to take off after this, but a little more can't hurt.

— Well, that's something. Still, I don't like it. And I don't believe it. If it's so hush-hush, how do *you* know about it?

— Not everyone in the government who's involved thinks it's a good idea. But they don't want to have their lives ruined and go to prison, so they're leaving it up to us, for now.

— And you are, who?

— A group of concerned citizens.

The sudden realization that I might have been drawn into this by treachery, placed in mortal danger and my life thrown into turmoil without my consent, enrages me, and I shout out my objections, shocking everyone to attention.

— It's not legal! It's not constitutional! It can't be!

Mimi patiently continues her explication.

— Well, you're right, it's not legal, though not for the reason you might think. The Selective Service, as the military draft is called, was created by an Act of Congress, but it doesn't say much about how it's to be organized. That is determined by Presidential proclamation, and there's virtually no limit to what the President can specify. The Act does say, though, that only men can be drafted, and you are a woman. That's the only thing that makes your being drafted illegal. But even that little detail doesn't mean anything if you can't go to court, and you can't, because it's ten to twenty years in prison for anyone who says anything at all about it.

— I can't go to court?

— So far no one has been willing to find out. Most people have families. Most people have lives.

— But you don't?

— No. Not in that way.

Robert has been in his own world, eating up a storm, but my outcry has got his attention.

— What? What are you talking about?

He wouldn't have been able to follow my conversation with Mimi in French, so I explain it to him.

— I'm a captain in the army.

He thinks for just a moment, his eyes wide with wonder.

— You never told me that!

— I didn't *know* about it, darling, but it seems I am. Don't tell anyone, though. It's a secret.

He stares at me, confused, then reaches for something else to stuff in his mouth, shaking his head as I turn back to Mimi.

— So now, you've rescued me, and I thank you very much for that, by the way. So what next? What am I supposed to do about it?

— We want you to meet with some people inside the government, one person in particular who's very high up. You're a celebrity, and after what's happened to you, and with the amount of publicity and, frankly, sympathy that you can generate, they may feel safe enough to disclose their role in the affair and blow the whole thing into the open.

I'm trying to evaluate the prospects of such a scheme when we hear the sound of heavy helicopters in the distance. I stand up, anticipating the arrival of transport back to, well, back to where I belong. I can't help shouting.

— The cavalry is here!

Henry pops outside the tent, then comes back in and corrects me.

— No, sorry, not the Americans. They're Russian helicopters. It's my father.

In the time it takes me to wipe the breakfast from my hands and lips, the camp is swarming with armed men in desert camouflage, indistinguishable from modern soldiers of every nation except for the red star on the whirling machines they are leaping out of. It must be a normal occurrence in this part of the world because the Bedouins seem completely unmoved.

A very large bear of a man whose chest displays rows of military insignia emerges from among the soldiers, marches sternly up to Henry, then unloads a broadside of paternal cannonfire on the young man, who stands perfectly erect in the face of his father's withering denunciation. Finally the Russian officer turns to us, speaking in English.

— My son has been involved in things that are not his business. He thinks he is a genius. He is not.

Robert, gratified to be dealing in a language he understands, shouts out a reply.

— He's smart enough! He saved Caroline's life!

He points to me and I nod, raising my hand in greeting. The Russian acknowledges me in turn, then morphs into the perfect gentleman.

— Ms. Pembrose, I am glad to see you alive. Can I offer you a ride somewhere? Not back to the U.S., I’m afraid, but some place where our little air taxi service operates. Casablanca, perhaps?

For days, I’ve been hoping for a rescue by the American military. I’m not sure I believe her, but if what Mimi has told me is true, I would be just as glad to make my way back to the states without their assistance. Anyway, the Russians are here now and I don’t want to hang around in the desert any longer than I have to. I graciously accept.



A week later, after a trip to Washington during which we endured medical checks and tiresome debriefings at the hands of a gauntlet of officials, both civilian and military, Robert and I are back in New York. When I told the government interrogators about the hackers and their claim that I had been made a captain in the Army Rangers without my knowing about it, they had a good laugh. I’m doubting the veracity of it myself and I’ve decided that, true or not, it hardly matters. I don’t expect that the U.S. government is going to be sending me on any more “assignments” any time soon. As for the RFID planted in my neck, they have assured me that they had nothing to do with that, but warned us not to talk about it as it might lead to unspecified “undesirable consequences”.

Happily, sales of *The Prancing Jacana* are through the roof and the money is pouring in. There’s even talk about a film starring Scarlett Johansson. Today, though, it’s on to a live news broadcast, with a television crew tagging along as Robert and I go to the hospital to see Mansur. The poor man lies buried in wrappings and pillows, a virtual mummy, tubes coming out of him everywhere, but he’s alive. It’s the first time we’ve seen him since Senegal. When the seals

evacuated the survivors, they were surprised to find a rogue CIA contractor among them, bleeding heavily from multiple wounds but somehow still breathing. He's what has been described as "a courageous Algerian friend of the Senegalese police captain", who we've helped bring to the U.S. to receive advanced medical treatment.

He's been given drugs for pain, which have left him in a daze. It takes me a couple of tries to get his attention.

— Mansur! Can you hear me?

He moves his head slightly at the sound of my voice.

— Mansur! It's Caroline!

He opens his eyes, and after a few moments, they focus on mine. He's frowning, but his eyes seem to smile.

— Mansur, I'm Caroline Parker, we're on TV. Is that OK?

His eyes sweep around the room and he sees the video camera, then nods slightly.

— How do you feel?

He shakes his head "no".

— Can you talk?

It seems to take all his effort, but he manages to speak my name in a rasping voice, so weak that I can hardly hear him. The public haven't heard anything about our encounter in Central Park and aren't supposed to know about that, so I'm careful to provide cover for the camera.

— Mansur, yes, I'm Caroline Parker, the American writer who was kidnapped. We've come to thank you for your courageous actions. Your unselfish sacrifice helped to save my life and the lives of American soldiers. You are the bravest man I know.

This last sentence is untrue. There is one man at least as brave as Mansur—my Islamic husband, buried quietly in a private family service in Dakar—but that, I'm keeping a secret. Embassy personnel advised us that his family would be highly embarrassed, endangered, and generally put through a nightmare of misery and shunning if it ever became known that he had married the American author of the blasphemous book, regardless of the circumstances. That part of the



story, I've excised from the public account. Whatever gratitude is due to Oumar must come only from my heart, where he will be welcomed and remembered as long as I live.

The camera is on me and it's time for my speech.

— I want to thank Mansur and all those who risked their lives to rescue me from the kidnappers, and to express my condolences to the families of those who died at the hands of the terrorists.

I pause. The next part of the speech is difficult for me, but it needs to be said. I pull myself together and press on.

— When I wrote *The Prancing Jacana*, I had been to Senegal, it's true, but somehow I failed to understand much about that country, its people, its culture and its religion. My most recent experience, as horrible as it was, forced me to confront my own ignorance and isolation from the world, a disease that can afflict Americans especially, walled up as we are in our privileged and protected prosperity.

The reporter is glaring at me, frozen in place, suspecting perhaps that she is witness to what may be the unleashing of a tsunami of political repercussions. I continue.

— What right does an American writer have, informed only by sanitized and superficial news articles, television programs produced by our sequestered and incestuous media and by carefully escorted tourist excursions to a country that has such rich customs and values, to presume to write a story that creates turmoil and distress in that nation, a country which, perhaps more than any other in Africa, sincerely seeks to find its way through the difficult maze of questions and challenges presented by onrushing modernism and the shrinking of global distances, both physical and cultural.

The reporter seems like she is about to hyperventilate, the microphone shaking slightly in her hand. I think she would like to ask a question, but the woman appears paralyzed by my unexpected recitation, so I go on.

— I was baptized Presbyterian. I confess that I never took to that faith. But they say that there are no atheists in foxholes, and I

guess that's true. During my ordeal, I submitted myself to the will of God. I am now a Muslim.

I turn to Mansur. Now it's not only his eyes that are smiling, but his lips as well. I put my hand to his head and his eyelids gently close as he feels my touch. He lets out a satisfied sigh.

Do I really mean it? Well, I don't know. I'm sure that I don't believe in nonsensical doctrines any more than I ever did. I do know that I want to make this profession of faith though, for Mansur, for Oumar's family, for everyone whose lives were thrown into turmoil as a consequence of my writing a bestselling novel about a place and a people I hardly knew. And, I want to say it for my fellow Americans, who need to be reminded that the sincere beliefs of those who honestly and generously seek to live together in peace and prosperity on this watery rock deserve our acknowledgment and our respect.

The reporter knows she must say something at this point but she is having trouble and stutters before continuing.

— Well... well, are you saying, if I understand you, that you're, that you reject your book? That you agree with the Islamists?

— I'm saying that I'm going back to that beautiful country, where I hope to truly grow to understand the people who call that place home, and then I'm going to write another book. And this time, my only goal will be that it should be a bestseller in Senegal.



After the interview, we head back to the Greenhouse Suite at 1 Hotel Central Park, where we've booked ourselves in for the next ten days. There's probably some good UFC on but I leave the television off, having experienced enough real violence to last a lifetime, and anyway, my nerves are still strung as tight as piano wire. It's all the stimulation I can handle to just find my chair and sit quietly with the latest copy of *The New Yorker*. Like every media outlet on the planet, it has a piece devoted to my close call with the jihadis and a cartoon to boot. It depicts me in the burqa standing before the judges and saying,

“I’m OK with the beheading, but only if I can have a U.S. military honor guard present.”

Thankfully, Robert seems to have achieved a breakthrough with his Snake and Mouse story. He takes up his laptop, excitedly clacking out refinements to the new plot line. His rapid two-finger typing ends with a definitive, emphatic punch at the period key, then he turns to me and I look up, raising my eyebrows and prompting him for the anticipated elucidation.

— So?

He exhibits an oh-so-pleased-with-himself smile as he offers it for my consideration.

— What do you think of this? Mouse is actually an orphaned baby rat, not really a mouse at all! She is adopted by a mouse family, but feels self-conscious and embarrassed because she doesn’t look like the other mice. Her adopted mouse mother, feeling sorry for her, takes some loose mouse hair from the nest and glues it to her back to make her look more like a real mouse, but then the other mice make fun of her, chiding her with cries of “rat, rat, ugly rat”, so she runs away from home. When she encounters Snake in the garden, though, Snake is fooled by the mouse hair into thinking she really is just a timid little mouse, and so feels confident about striking up a conversation before eating her. But because Mouse is really a rat in disguise, instead of engaging Snake in polite conversation, she chomps her tiny, razor-like rat teeth into Snake’s tail, sending Snake skulking off to nurse his wounds. After that, Mouse realizes that it’s OK to be an ugly rat instead of a cute little mouse because it saved her from being eaten!

I’m utterly mesmerized and momentarily speechless. Robert is waiting for me to pronounce my verdict, so I give it to him.

— It’s clever and original, of course, but do you think Malcolm will go for it? Didn’t he want mouse to be eaten?

— Yes, but don’t you see, he wanted mouse to be eaten because snakes eat mice, but if Mouse isn’t a mouse at all, but a rat who will give Snake as good as she gets, that’s different, isn’t it?

I know that children today are more sophisticated than in the past, but even so, I can't help wondering how the story is going to be received by the public, even if Malcolm approves of it. I don't like throwing cold water on his idea, but I feel I have to say something.

— Children's stories are supposed to teach something, aren't they? They're supposed to have a moral, or a lesson?

Thankfully he's not offended, and in fact it seems he's thought it all through.

— Yes. The moral of the story is, things are not always as they seem. And, it's all right to pretend sometimes, but in the end, you must be true to yourself or you won't survive.

I rub my chin, considering this carefully before responding.

— You're saying that in order to survive, we need to be false and act uncivilized, that's the lesson we need to teach to children?

— Yes, well, something like that.

This gives me pause. It certainly is OK to lie to survive and no one knows that better than me. And put a gun in my hand, I would not have paused for an instant before blowing the guts out of my kidnapers, given the chance. But does that mean we're all reduced to living in a web of lies, and to "do unto others before they do unto you"? Is it even possible for humanity to survive in a world where you must be constantly paranoid of everything and everyone? I can't believe that Robert really wants that to be a lesson for children. I continue to prod.

— You and me, for example. You trust me. I trust you. You told me things about yourself. Were they true? You said your name was Robert Bersley. I believed you. *It is your name, isn't it?*

— So far as I know. But would it make a difference if it wasn't? If my name were Adolf Eichmann, I would still be the same person. I wouldn't be gassing people in death chambers, I don't think.

I chuckle and he smiles. His dry sense of humor always disarms me whenever I go serious on him. I agree with him, basically.

— It wouldn't make any difference if it was something else, though I'm glad it's not Adolf Eichmann, but I'd expect you to tell me if it was.

— If I had been named after a Nazi war criminal, I'm sure I wouldn't admit it, not to you, not to anyone, not if I expected to sell children's books, anyway.

This gives me a thought.

— It's too late to think of doing it now, of course, but did you ever consider using a pseudonym? For your writing, I mean. In my case, it was for marketing purposes. My first publisher came up with it, said it sounded more like a name that went with my writing style.

He puts on a cloak of mock cynicism. He really is a terrible tease.

— Really? I didn't know that. I suppose it suits you, Mable Pembrose, your public persona anyway. If I did have a *nom de plume*, what do you think it should be? Alan Bates, maybe?

Now he's got me chuckling.

— No, not that. It's not you, not at all!

— I'm not sure how to take that, darling.

He's acting well and truly offended, but I know it's only for sport. He wants me to come over to him, run my fingers through his hair and soothe his wounded ego, and I do.

— Take it as a compliment. I've had my *fill* of Alan Bateses.

He's satisfied with that. The hair mussing turns to kisses and we resolve to take matters to the bedroom, where he works his magic on me once again. Afterwards, in a moment of dreamy reflection, eyes heavy with orgasmic relief, I think to myself—God, how I do love this man!

The woman and her husband were safe, he'd received the five hundred thousand in bitcoin, and "Talking Turkey", as Haiden Stills code-named the senior army officer who had clued him in on the whole "Halls letter" scheme, but who hadn't talked yet, at least not publically, was getting ready to come out of the closet. Life was good.

It was icing on the cake, but *ellapr* had also managed to extricate herself from whatever jam she was in and had paid him back the twenty big. What's more, she wanted to meet him and thank him personally.

He could very well remember the last time he'd tried to go on a date, several years earlier, though he'd just as soon forget it, as it had been a major fiasco. The woman worked for his cybersecurity firm as a coder and he had thought of her as someone of more than adequate intelligence. She wrote good code, at least. Three martinis into the evening, though, she transmogrified into a satanic succubus from hell, ranting about the transgressions of men, her co-workers in particular and the insults they had visited upon her. She let him know that she wanted something done about it, and that he was the one to do it, offering to sleep with him if he could act on her complaints. When he let her know that he would not comply, it all ended badly.

He had more hope where *ellapr* was concerned. Though he had never laid eyes on her, he had known her online for a long time. He couldn't imagine a more rational and straightforward woman, and that was, above all, what he sought in someone who might become a long-term companion.

She was staying at the Hotel Zetta, just an easy ride up Market Street on the streetcar from his apartment in Castro, and he was invited there to dinner. He didn't know where she was from, of course. If she didn't live in San Francisco, and probably she didn't, given that she was staying in a hotel, had she made the trip just to meet him? Perhaps not, though anything was possible.

He hopped on a yellow PCC car. He preferred taking the antique streetcars from the 1940s rather than the modern light rail. They might be slower, but he was rarely in a hurry. In fact he rarely went out anywhere.

The hotel was chic and modern but not to his taste. And expensive. Whatever had been going on with her lately, she had money to burn now. As he rode the elevator, he imagined what she would be like. Tall, skinny, glasses, no makeup, straight hair, T-shirt and leggings, was how he pictured her. The woman who answered the door, though, could not have been more different—a short, curvaceous, South Asian woman, maybe thirty, dressed for a night of clubbing. But as it turned out, they were staying in. She had a suite, with separate living room and dining area, the table set with Indian takeout. He spotted a few of his favorite foods—tandoori chicken, lamb vindaloo, chana masala, a plate of samosas, warm naan, and two mango lassi.

Her name was Priya, just Priya. She didn't give him any other and he didn't ask. She was from Chennai originally, but had just a slight accent as she had been in the U.S. since she was a child. That was all he could get out of her. Mostly, she wanted to know about *him*. She knew about his cybersecurity company in Boston, of course. She was the one who had rescued him after that disaster and had brought him into the group. But she didn't want to talk shop. When she asked if he already had someone in his life, he just laughed and said, “no one real”.

The meal was a delight to the senses, enhanced as it was by the hormones coursing in his veins. Afterwards she put on her Bollywood playlist and got him up and dancing to the kinetic rhythms of Dev Negi, Bappi Lahiri, and Mohammed Rafi. Exhausted and delirious, they fell to the floor, then undressed each other and made for the bedroom, where they copulated their brains out until morning.

Room service brought them their breakfast, but after that she explained that she had a flight at eleven. So he left, after a long, wet kiss that he wished could have lasted much longer. There was no

discussion of what might come next. He very much hoped there would be a next time, but if not, the one glorious night was more than he'd had in quite a while and his head was humming. Strolling out into the crisp morning air, he felt truly alive.

As he stepped back into his apartment, a jolt of panic shot through him like a lightning bolt, cooking his insides. The first image that assaulted his vision was the sight of his computers lying disemboweled, the hard drives removed. Then he noticed the door to his safe hanging open. Instinctively, he reached for the flash drive on his keychain. It now contained the only remaining backup of his software, his bitcoin, his encryption keys and passwords.

The weather was cool, but he was perspiring heavily as he rushed from the apartment and took a cab to Best Buy, bought a laptop, then headed to Weaver's Coffee & Tea, a good place to boot up because they had excellent wi-fi and plenty of outlets. He no longer trusted anything in his apartment, including his internet connection. The thirty minutes it took to unpack the computer and plod through the initial setup seemed to take forever. Finally he held his breath and inserted the USB flash drive.

The backup protocol he used was thorough and bulletproof. He had tested it on a regular basis by resetting one of his laptops to factory condition, which erased everything on the hard drives but the operating system, then restoring from the backup. It had never failed. It always produced a fully functional clone of his software, data and keys. Still, the fear was ever present that this would be the one time that it would go wrong.

He opened the Nautilus file browser and selected the flash drive. At first, he assumed that in his agitated state, he had done something wrong, because no files were displayed, so he closed it and tried it again, but still nothing showed. He still couldn't believe what he was seeing, so he opened a terminal session and used the "ls" command to display the files. Nothing. As a last resort, he installed the Linux testdisk application which could recover deleted or damaged



files. It was no help. The drive had been wiped clean. It contained nothing but zeros.

This was impossible. He always had his key ring with him with the drive on it. He was sure he had backed up correctly to it. But then it hit him in the gut. How did *ellapr* know he was in San Francisco? He had never told her. He never told anyone anything about where he lived. He used the “onion router” exclusively so that his IP address could never be traced to a physical location. So how did she know where he was? He had been stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. At the very apex of his success he had suspended his vigilance and it had cost him everything.

She must have erased his USB drive, there was simply no other way, but how? When? Why? They had been together the whole time. Was she up in the night while he was sleeping? Did someone else come into the suite?

He recalled the words of Arthur Conan Doyle—“when you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth”. Was it possible that *ellapr* was part of a conspiracy to destroy him? He turned that idea over in his mind until he was dizzy with it, then concluded that it could not be. The *ellapr* he knew had not done this to him. There remained only one possibility. The woman he had spent the night with was not the person he knew as *ellapr*. Someone had taken over her internet presence.

He had never been raped, but assumed that the debasement enveloping his being must be something like that—to be alive, but wanting not to be. Someone had entered into him and had their way with him, and if they could crack his encryption, that person was now likely cloaked in the aegis of Haiden Stills, just as they had somehow assumed the identity of *ellapr*.

The master hacker known to the world as Haiden Stills was gone to him. The group was gone. The bitcoin was gone. Gone, all of it gone. He was no longer the leader of one of the world’s most ascendant hacker groups. He was just Harold Brackin, the name printed on his birth certificate. A nobody.

He went to the counter and ordered a latte, then resumed configuring his new computer. He would need to break something, maybe a lot of things, to vent the rage searing his psyche, but that would have to wait. One thing for sure, he would need a job. He was in the right city for that at least. He did some looking and found an autonomous car startup needing a software engineer with security experience, then began drafting a resume.



The President scowled at the official document laid out on the desk for his signature, then turned to his Chief of Staff and grumbled.

— Is this fucking necessary?

The tanned, white-haired man holding up the Presidential pen on offer to his boss had long since ceased to be offended or even surprised by the crude and resentful outbursts of the Commander in Chief in response to impositions of any kind upon him. He replied calmly.

— Yes, I believe it is, sir. It's the military guys, the ones who know about it, of course. They're all into this army way of looking at things, procedures and so forth, and they think that normally, after such a heroic...

— Heroic? Shit. She didn't shoot any terrorists, did she? She didn't even touch a gun!

— I know it's not really, heroic, or anything like that, but that's how they see it, and well, I think that it might not be wise to go against them on this.

The President showed no sign of taking the pen held out to him by his aide, ready to be grasped if the presidential mood should favor it. The leader of the free world had ideas of his own.

— Let's just wipe the bitch off the books. Can't we do that? Nobody knows anything about it and I never wanted all this mumbo jumbo anyway.

— Some people...

— Some people are pussies!

The aide nodded and took a breath.

— Yes, pussies, but so what? She gets the Distinguished Service Cross, on paper. The medal itself is kept in a locked box somewhere. Nobody knows about it. It's no biggie.

Aggravation showed in every fiber of the chief executive as he grabbed the pen and applied a sequence of grand strokes that served as his signature.

— Oh screw it. What the hell do I care. Just no more of this bullcrap, OK?

— Yes sir. There's one more thing, though. She was just on TV. She says she's become a Muslim.

The President slammed the pen on his desk, splattering ink on the document he had just signed.

— Fucking bitch! Why do I have to put up with this?



A crescent moon cut the coal-black tropical sky like a scimitar. For Captain Ndoye, comfortably couched alone and inert in his favorite chair, the coming of night offered blessed relief from the obstinate sun, whose indifferent rays brooked no dissent from the realities defiling the city and the country that he loved.

The relative serenity of his refuge by the ocean allowed him to disregard, for the moment, the dead and buried, and to indulge instead in the idle conceit that he had saved, or helped to save, *bifadl mmin Allah*, one solitary person from the perfunctory violence of the tentacled state and its enemies. The fact that it was a foreigner, one he had never met, and a spoiled, rich, overfed, imprudent woman at that, did not take away from the victory, according to his reckoning. He chalked it up as a win, one for the good guys. That the Americans seemed annoyed by her rescue, while a mystery unto itself, didn't detract from the achievement either. He kept his own score in the war between good and evil.

He scanned his bookshelves by the faint light filtering through his shuttered windows, listening to the sound of the evening call to prayer that drifted through the air from a distant mosque, soothing and reassuring. One of the books on one of those shelves was the Quran, but he hadn't opened it in a very long time, nor attended mosque. A religion that rejected him, what he was, who he was, he couldn't reconcile with the promised mercy and compassion he presumed of any God he would believe in.

He clicked on his reading light. Sitting on the side table was a book whose cover bore the picture of a bird with long legs and spider-like toes striding across a lily pad. The woman had called to thank him and asked whether there was anything she could do for him, and he had replied that he would like an autographed copy of her book. She'd been surprised by this, but the hardbound deluxe edition had arrived within two days via diplomatic courier. It was sitting there, next to his chair, waiting for the right moment. He picked it up and opened it to the inscription. It read, "To Captain Yusuf Ndoeye, who bravely performed his duty and saved my life. You have my eternal gratitude."

Duty. He had performed his duty, yes. A writer, that she was, for she had found just the right word and he appreciated that. There was nothing he would rather hear from anyone.

He turned the page and began to read.

*The Prancing Jacana*  
*A Novel*

*by Mable Pembrose*

*Chapter One*

*On the western edge of a continent seven thousand kilometers east to west and another seven thousand north to south, home to a billion people whose skin we call brown or black but whose differences as among themselves are as great as the differences*

*between us and them, lies a country, a French colony only recently wrested from the hands of its European rulers. That country's thirteen million inhabitants, themselves highly diverse, speak the many languages of their various cultures—Wolof, Fula, Toucouleur, Serer, Jola, Mandinka, Maures, Soninke, Bassari and others, and at the westernmost point of their nation, they gather together in a city of a million people, living, working, laughing, worshiping, loving, hating, and dying, their sometimes wet, sometimes dry, sun-drenched existence cooled by the breezes of the ocean. In that city by the sea, one person lives a solitary existence, his sworn mission to ease the lives of the afflicted and afflict the lives of the iniquitous. And despite the myriad souls that enveloped him, jostled him, sought his aid and evaded his justice, it could truly be said, without exaggeration, that there was no one in the city called Dakar more lonely than that singular individual, Detective Salif Bampoky of the Police Nationale.*

## Epilogue

From *The Duck Who Couldn't Walk Straight* by Robert Bersley

*... Then Duck watched sadly as the other ducks marched stupidly forward in a straight line towards the cliff, one after the other stepping off the edge and crashing onto the rocks below. Suddenly Duck thought of something. He started jumping up and down, running back and forth along the line of ducks, quacking and quacking. "You're birds!", he shouted. "You have wings! You don't have to fall to your death! Flap your wings! Flap your wings! Fly! Fly!"*

## ***About the Author***

*Steven Jon Halasz has been telling stories and writing fiction for friends and family for over thirty years. He grew up in Cleveland, Ohio and attended Mayfield High School, Hiram College and Case Western Reserve University Law School. He's retired from his career as a software developer and lives in Sarasota, Florida.*

## ***Other books by this author***

*Almost Love*

*Space Cadets: Moon Calling*



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