

GEORGE PAXTON

CAMPBELL'S FAB STORE

A BEAT LIES NOVEL

This is a work of fiction. Although it refers to facts and incidents in the real world, the reader should not assume that the persons mentioned - if they exist at all or have ever existed - would have acted in such or a similar way.

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"Why do the rumors come about? Because Paul McCartney is dead, of course."

- "Paul McCartney"

"Hello Billy, how are you?"

- Olivia Harrison greets "McCartney"

"All our messages were subliminal, you know, meaning, we were sending messages out."

John Lennon

"Hello William, how are you?"

- George Harrison addresses "McCartney"

"I am the last remaining Beatle."

- Ringo Starr

"Letting this material sink in may create a struggle between wanting the truth and an ego not wanting to be proven wrong. The absurd ego willfully rejects all that is outside of its narrow vantage point. It chooses to be limited. I do not. You are free to re-think any position and are free to know that this book exposes the truth that 'Paul is dead! ... Really dead!""

- The Memoirs of Billy Shears

"No, I am not actually dead; just a good replica."

- "Paul McCartney"

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1: Paul is Dead

ach drained the cup labeled "Black Death" of its steaming contents in one go, as usual. "Damn!" he grumbled. "Almost cold." Then he turned his attention back to a batch of letters, studying the address fields of each briefly before depositing them in one of two piles.

Veronica, watching him over the edge of her cereal bowl, raised her right eyebrow. "I'm terribly sorry."

Zach was about to set aside an official-looking envelope. Then he hesitated. His brow furrowed as he eyed the label again. He looked up. "What are you sorry for?"

"Your coffee." She brushed a strand from her face with the handle of her spoon and regarded him with amusement.

"You should be!" the private investigator rumbled. "How's a man supposed to work if he can't get a decent breakfast?"

"If you teach me how to keep water above boiling point liquid... Aren't you going to open it?" she asked. When he looked at her in irritation, she pointed to his hand with the spoon and added, "The letter. I smell a new case."

He looked searchingly around the table, then reached for his daughter's butter knife, put the blade in his mouth, and slowly pulled it out between pursed lips. He turned the envelope over again to take a look at the back, then inserted the edge into the top fold and cut through it briskly, ignoring Veronica's disapproving flick. He pulled out the document, a single sheet that, when unfolded, revealed a professional letterhead. As Zach's eyes flitted nimbly over a few printed lines, all color drained from his face. He lowered the sheet. "Paul..." was all he said.

"Paul who?"

"Uncle Paul, my stepbrother."

"You have a stepbrother? How come I don't know about him?" She took the letterhead from her father and read under her breath, "...sorry to inform you that your relative, Paul Campbell, born in... blah... passed away last Sunday... blah...

blah... instructed to invite you to the reading of his will. Please come to the... blah blah... Dr. Jules R. Miller, Notary Public."

"Your grandma Lana's son from her first marriage. We..." He was silent for a moment, his eyes downcast. "We haven't seen each other in almost twenty years."

"Oh, Dad!" She put her hand on his. "I'm terribly sorry," she said again, but this time without the flippant undertone, "but I don't remember him at all."

"You were too young; only two or three years of age."

"Why didn't you ever talk about him? Why didn't you visit each other?"

Zach withdrew his hand from his daughter, rose, and walked heavily toward the door of his office. "I... need a moment."

The door slammed shut behind him. There was the groan of a chair, then silence in the other room. Veronica now rose as well, began loading the remains of the prematurely finished breakfast onto a tray and carried it into the kitchen.

* * *

The orange Opel GT was speeding north along the M1 toward Liverpool. Veronica, who like her father had a weakness for technology from the preelectronic era, had discovered the car by chance while investigating a case. They had just managed to track down the marriage swindler they were looking for in a Hamburg love hotel, where they were able to collect the evidence their client wanted. After the man had left the room in a hurry, Veronica had gone to the window. She had looked from the third floor into the backyard of that establishment and had seen the sleek car standing there. At the time, it had been a dull white; a dent had marred the passenger door and the rims were badly rusted. And yet the vehicle, with its elegant shapes and retractable front lights, was a sight that had immediately captivated her.

* * *

The make was foreign to her – perhaps the prototype of a Corvette series that was never built? She would find out. The young woman's nagging ("Sammy," she stated with a suspicious look) had died down. Instead, she now heard her father speaking soothingly to her. Veronica turned around. A bill was visible in

Zach's outstretched hand for a brief moment before Sammy's fingers closed around it in a flash and tugged. Zach smiled; she wasn't going to cause a ruckus.

"Sorry to bother you," Veronica said kindly. "we'll be right back out." She now had her first opportunity to look more closely at the girl; Slavic features, shoulder-length blond hair half-hiding a bruise on her left temple; a wide mouth, a graceful neck; beneath the linen that covered her, a very femininely shaped body stood out, and yet: not an adult woman. Her eighteenth birthday definitely lay more than a few weeks in the future. Not good. Veronica frowned.

Sammy nodded uncertainly. "Sure... hmm, never mind." Her accent confirmed the suspected origin.

"Say, you must know whose sports car that is down there?"

"The white one?"

"Yes."

"It belongs to Hannes. The boss. Why do you want to know?"

"Where can I find that Hannes?"

Heavy footsteps thumped in the hallway, then the door was yanked open. "What's going on here?" growled the lummox who had appeared in the opening. Suit, open shirt, no tie, skull better shaved than chin and cheeks. "Where do you get off scaring away our customers? Get out, and get out fast!"

"We're... looking for Hannes," Veronica crooned, putting her hands on her hips.

"Lucky luck, girly-girl! He's right in front of you, and the store" – he pointed to his groin – "is open right now." In fact, that was true. The pimp eyed Veronica up and down, then said, "Hot thing, perhaps a little too old."

She cast a quick sideways glance at Sammy, looked Hannes cheekily in the face again, and let her brows dance. "Yeah, I've noticed that, too," she countered. "I bet it wasn't easy to get a license for that." She tilted her head.

The lug took a step closer. "Are you threatening me, kid?"

"Not so fast!" shouted Zach, pulling his right hand part-way out of his jacket pocket. The handle of a Walther became visible.

The pimp stopped. "What do you want here?"

"That hot thing down in the yard, is it yours?" asked Veronica.

"Maybe it is. Maybe not."

"Very well, we can check with the precinct; wanted to exchange some words with the guys anyway..."

"What if the bitch tug was mine?"

"Then, maybe, we can do business," Veronica replied.

* * *

Her father had paid for the car in cash, arranged for its restoration and transfer to the Isles, and given it to Veronica as a nineteenth birthday present, complete with driver safety training. "It's not really a car for a young woman," he had said, "but you've clearly inherited your good taste from your old man, and he's very, very proud of you."

For the first hour, as they struggled out of the heavy London traffic, they had been silent. The congestion began to thin out ever so slowly. Veronica had the GT flex its muscles. She skillfully used gaps to work her way forward, and when there was finally open road ahead of them, she gave it a good throttle.

"What actually happened between you guys back then?" she finally inquired. The question had been nagging at her all week, but Zach had never quite been in the mood to talk about Paul. Now that they were on their way to notary Miller's office, with nothing else to do or talk about, she couldn't contain her curiosity any longer. She saw that her father seemed inclined to ignore the question, but she didn't let up, "I mean, the both of you certainly didn't just drift apart."

He grumbled, thought for a moment, and said, "No, we didn't. It's a long story." "Two hundred miles to go, still."

He sighed. "All right." A few seconds passed. "I was five years old when my stepmother moved in with us. Paul was six. At that age, a year seems like a big deal, but we became friends right away. He showed me a lot of cool tricks in soccer. He was quite a bit taller than most of his age and would get in the way of the other boys when they tried to pick me off. They often did; they thought I was a weirdo. I was more interested in books than sports, cigarettes, or in later years, girls. One time, they had caught me alone. They cornered me and were about to start 'working' me over, when Paul came upon them like a force of

nature. There were four of them, but he beat them up so badly that one of them lost a tooth. He was actually a peaceful person; but when he saw something he thought was unfair, he could get energetic."

Zach paused for a moment. He smiled. "When you were born, he immediately offered himself as godfather. Paul never married, if you know what I mean, but he liked kids, and he was always teaching them tricks they didn't know yet. He was the one who taught you to walk, while your mother and I..." He snorted. "...While your mother and I were busy with our careers. Just like your grandparents far too rarely had time for me and Paul."

Again he paused. Then, "You probably don't remember the Jimmy Savile scandal."

"Nah, I was just twelve when the documentary about him came out. I watched part of it, though. That old pig!"

"Yeah, Savile was a pig. He wasn't the only kids' fucker in the country by any means, though. There was a whole gang of other well-known BBC radio presenters and musicians on the loose, using their celebrity status to get their hands on 'supplies'. The police had concrete suspicions against well over 200 such people in the music biz. No one can tell me that people in high places didn't know that benefit galas for children in need, youth talent shows and similar programs were being abused for pedophilic purposes. We knew about it, damn it, and we got alert when we learned that Uncle Paul was taking you to his workplace on a regular basis - to the BBC. You were going through a rough patch at the time. A child psychologist we consulted suggested there might be someone in your immediate vicinity who was abusing you. We confronted Paul. He admitted to working on Savile's team and dealing with people like this Gary Glitter. He called them 'a bit eccentric' but vehemently denied knowing about any irregularities. Your mum was extremely upset. She didn't believe a word he said, kicked him out of the house and forbade him to ever come near you again. I knew him better than that. Still, I was unsure, so I let it happen."

Veronica looked at him in shock. "Does that mean...?"

"No. You have not been harmed in any way. We consulted a trauma therapist, with whose help we found out relatively quickly that we ourselves had been your biggest problem. You felt badly neglected because of our constant absence.

When I realized what a great wrong I had done, I wanted to re-establish contact with Paul. But he was untraceable. He had quit his job at the BBC and moved. I learned years later from a mutual friend that he had done research on the pedophilia swamp in the music business right after our argument. His findings must have contributed quite something to the revelations that were published after Savile's passing." He looked out the passenger window. "Paul was innocent."

* * *

They reached the hotel they had booked on the outskirts of Liverpool shortly before eight o'clock in the evening. Tired from the long drive, they went straight to bed. Sleep, however, did not catch up with them right away. The roar of the GT engine was still ringing in their ears, and the ghosts of the past haunted their thoughts.

The next morning, bright sunshine woke them up. Veronica was the first to hop into the tiny bathroom, took a quick shower, scrubbed her teeth, and put on a comfortable dark dress. When she returned to the room, Zach was lying in bed with his hands clasped behind his head. He looked better than he had the day before. "The bathroom is yours," she called to him. "Hurry up. I'll go right down and secure us some breakfast. I'm starving to death!"

"Don't you dare!" he grumbled, when she was already out the door. "One dead person is quite enough for me."

The breakfast room was actually quite crowded when Zach finally arrived showered, shaved, combed, and dressed in a fresh dark suit. Veronica had secured them a seat at the counter so that the coffee would lose as little temperature as possible on its way to him. The innkeeper, a woman in her fifties, beamed at him. "Good morning, Mr. Ziegler. I hope you slept well."

"Perfectly," he replied. "Like I was bedded on clouds."

She smiled. "What would you like? Coffee? Tea? Cocoa? Juice?"

"Coffee, please. Black."

"Coming right up." She turned to an old-fashioned coffee maker, which was rattling as it spat the last drops of hot water into a filter, which released jet-black brew into a glass pitcher standing below it. The landlady removed the pot,

turned back to Zach, and filled a white cup – quite small by his standards – standing in front of him. The P.I. didn't hesitate for a second, brought it to his mouth and quickly emptied it with his head tilted back. Then he slammed it down on the counter like a shot glass. "Rah," he snorted with satisfaction. "Another!"

The landlady stood before them with her mouth open. Veronica didn't need to look. She knew even so that some of the other guests who had happened to observe the scene were now nudging their neighbors and pointing their fingers at Zach. The room grew quiet. She was familiar with this. So she calmly spooned her yogurt while her father pushed the cup toward the hostess. "Well?" he said.

Puzzled, she filled it again. Once more, Zach downed the steaming contents in one fell swoop; once more, he thumped the cup on the wood. A choir of gasps responded. No one spoke a word. After a few seconds, the P.I. turned to the room full of people staring at him with wide-eyed and open-mouthed, grinned wryly, and said, "Allow me. Leon Leatherthroat, fire-eater and sword-spitter."

That broke the spell. Everyone started chattering at once, some laughed, others hooted. Zach winked at them, then turned back to the landlady. "What's for food?"

* * *

"You really can't resist it," Veronica complained as her father took a hearty bite from a slice of farmer's bread. "No sooner do we arrive than you make us the news of the town."

"Oh don't be touchy, you enjoy the attention too, don't you?"

"I'm not sure our celebrity-status is compatible with what we do as private investigators."

"The biggest secrets and the most personal things are safest hidden on a platter," Zach countered. "Savile had his victims delivered live on television, under the eyes of the entire nation. Who would have guessed..."

"Yeah right. So there's nothing in the way of my backup career as a model." Veronica shook her shoulder-length blonde hair, put on her sweetest smile, and batted her eye lids.

Zach laughed out. "You're a quick learner. The catwalk will have to wait until we get this Paul thing over with, though. Besides, I'd love to see a grandson or two someday. I'm asking you to factor that into your life plans."

Veronica slapped him on the back of the head with the flat of her hand. "You must be out of your mind!" she exclaimed in mock indignation. "Stop chattering and finish your plate. We have to be at the notary's office on Yewtree Road in less than an hour."

"Yes. ma'am."

* * *

As it turned out, there would have been no hurry. Dr. Jules R. Miller, the notary public, had been preoccupied with other business for longer than expected. His secretary directed Zach and Veronica to a tastefully decorated waiting room overlooking Calderstones Park. They had the room to themselves. There was no one in it but them. Hanging on the walls were two rows of framed pictures. The top one consisted of watercolors modeled after well-known photos of the Beatles: the Fab-Four with umbrellas, the cover of the *Beatles For Sale* album, the band traversing a crosswalk, or John Lennon and Paul McCartney sharing a microphone. The paintings each bore the words 'Donna.' in the lower left corner. The artist had captured the musicians' characters quite well. The fresh colors gave the waiting room a cheerful feel – until one took a closer look at the lower row of images.

They were black-and-white photographs of much smaller format. They hung directly at eye level. To dampen his nervousness, Zach paced along the wall, from one shot to the next. He had little interest in art, but the photos fascinated him. He had grown up listening to the music of this group, as his mother had been a big fan of theirs. The Beatles had disbanded the year before he was born, but had never completely disappeared from mainstream publications. Newspapers occasionally reported new revelations or printed stories about lost tapes; television showed retrospectives at every available opportunity: packed stadiums, screaming fans, waving Mop Tops. The scenes in the photos, however, were quite different from the paintings or newspaper illustrations. A somber aura emanated from them: Paul forming a circle with his thumb and forefinger, the rest of his fingers splayed; Stuart Sutcliffe sitting in an armchair,

his hands clasped together in a rhombus; Ringo covering one eye; John presenting the Devil's horns behind Paul's head; George Harrison standing beside an anonymous grave. So it went on, image after image after image. Throughout, these were world-class aesthetic motifs, yet Zach was certain he had never seen any of them.

He was about to call Veronica's attention to it when the door opened. Dr. Miller's secretary stood in the frame and motioned for them to follow her. She led them down a short hallway to another room, where the notary, a slender older gentleman, strode toward them with his arm outstretched. He had half-length gray, slightly wavy hair and wore glasses with small round lenses on his slightly curved nose. With a little imagination, one could imagine oneself facing a sixty-year-old Lennon. Miller shook Zach's hand and said in perfect Oxford English, "Glad to see you, Mr. Ziegler. Be assured of my heartfelt sympathy for your loss. Your stepbrother was more than a client; he was also my friend. I will do my utmost to help you complete the formalities and do my part to make your stay in Liverpool a pleasant one."

"Thank you very much, Dr. Miller. This here" – Zach pointed to Veronica, who had stepped into the room behind him – "is Mr. Campbell's godchild, my daughter Veronica."

"Ms. Ziegler, it's an honor." The notary indicated a kiss on the hand. Only after a prolonged scrutinizing look in her eyes did he let go of her hand. "Won't you sit down?"

He gestured to two chairs in front of his sprawling desk and moved opposite to a tall swivel chair upholstered in green leather. Father and daughter sat down, then the notary did so as well.

"Will we have to wait for the others, or do they not wish to attend the reading of the will?" inquired Zach.

The secretary came in again. She held a tray on which a teapot, three cups, and some pastries were placed. She set the tray down on a small side table, distributed the cups, and poured Ceylon tea. Then she left the room. Veronica gave Zach, who was preparing to reach for his cup, a warning look. The notary sat back. "Mr. Ziegler, you are the only relative and also the sole heir of the

deceased. Therefore, I won't have much more to do than read Mr. Campbell's last will and testify to your decision to accept or reject the inheritance."

"Oh," Zach said. He sipped some tea, then put the cup back and nibbled on some pastry.

Miller removed a few stapled-together pages bearing a notarial seal from a thin dark gray legal pad he had on the desk in front of him, and began reading:

Last Will and Testament

I, Paulus Martin Campbell, born in Liverpool on April 8, 1970, in full possession of my faculties, do hereby declare my last will and testament. I act under no pressure or duress and am aware of the character and extent of my estate.

I direct that my stepbrother, Zachary Archibald Ziegler, born February 23, 1971 in Stuttgart, Germany, presently residing in London, shall be the sole beneficiary of my estate. These consist of a store including furnishings and goods in Liverpool, my apartment including contents, my car and my bank accounts including contents.

The document further designated Dr. Miller as executor of the will, stated that there were no debts or outstanding accounts, and listed a number of legal caveats. Paul's signature was followed by the signatures of two witnesses and that of the notary.

When Miller finished reading, he set the document aside, opened the binder again, pulled out a paper, and handed it to Zach. It was a list of the assets and other items in Paul's estate. The store mentioned in the will was a music antique store on Rainford Gardens. Paul's apartment took the two floors above. His car was an Austin, built in '65, and there were 2.4 million British Pounds in bank accounts. All told, the inheritance was worth more than seven million Pounds, according to official estimates.

"Holy cow!" groaned Zach.

"Oh Gee!" breathed Veronica, who had been reading along.

"The goods and furnishings of the store are listed in the inventory," the notary explained. "Would you like to take a look?"

"Thank you, no. Rainford Gardens sounds idyllic. Is it a good neighborhood?" her father wanted to know.

"The best; Cavern Quarter; a short side street off Whitechapel that runs into Mathew Street. There's not a blade of grass there, but plenty of must-see places, pubs and stores in the neighborhood. As you may know, Mathew Street is a mandatory part of every visitor's itinerary in our city."

"The Beatles Museum!" interjected Veronica enthusiastically.

Miller smiled. "And the Cavern Club, where it all started." He cleared his throat. "Now I have to ask you whether you would like to accept your stepbrother's inheritance, Mr. Ziegler."

"Who could say no to that? I accept it, of course."

"Then please sign this statement – yes, there on the line." When Zach had put his scribble on it, the notary took the sheet, signed it sweepingly, and pressed his seal on it. He put all the papers back in the folder. "I'm sure you have many questions," he said.

"My brother and I haven't seen each other in twenty years. I have no idea what he's done since then or how he lived. I don't even know how he died."

"I would love to talk to you about Paul Campbell. We were quite close, as I said. Unfortunately, other commitments await me now. Please come back here tomorrow around one o'clock. I will then turn over all the documents to you. After that, we'll go to Rainford Gardens for the handover of the store, apartment and vehicle." He pressed a button on his intercom, "Mrs. Jones."

He rose from his chair. Footsteps sounded outside the door, then the secretary entered. "Sir?"

Miller handed her the folder. "Please show the guests out and have the Campbell documents ready by noon tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." She nodded to father and daughter, then started toward the door.

Zach shook the notary's hand. "Thank you very much, Dr. Miller. See you tomorrow afternoon!"

Miller nodded curtly. "Young lady," he said, turning to Veronica, "I hope to meet you again as well."

Once more, that piercing gaze. Veronica looked back, unabashed, smiled, squeezed tightly, and promised, "Tomorrow afternoon."

* * *

"Pinch me!" said Veronica as they sat in the car again, exiting Yewtree Road and heading south to their hotel. "Ouch!" she screeched. The GT performed a minor swerve. An oncoming car flashed its headlights. "This is completely unbelievable."

"Before today, you've been walking around in worn-out tennis shoes, and suddenly you can afford as many stilettos as once Imelda Marcos," Zach laughed.

"And just as undeserving. I didn't know Uncle Paul until last week; you broke up with him in anger, haven't seen him in twenty years, don't know how he died or where he's buried, but overnight he makes you a millionaire. That's a little bit unsettling, isn't it?"

"Only until these questions are answered. Dr. Miller will tell us all about it as early as tomorrow, and then - "

"And then what?" Veronica asked. "Are you going to ditch our detective agency to sell old autograph cards of famous musicians to tourists in T-shirts?"

"Hardly. I don't have the patience for that. On the other hand..." He pondered. "Paul certainly won't have made his fortune on petty stuff. The property in the middle of the city center must have been enormously expensive. Buying it would only have been worthwhile if the store also promised to turn a profit on a large scale. He will have traded rarities and unique items: Cobain's last guitar, the backdrops from the Beatles' *Peppers* album or some Beethoven manuscripts. This is also supported by the fact that the estimated retail value of the remaining goods amounts to over three million pounds."

"You have to be well versed in the subject matter to make money out of old junk," Veronica objected. "Unlike stamps, there are certainly no catalogs or price lists for rare memorabilia. You need a good nose to track down suitable material, and you need to cultivate contacts with collectors to estimate what can be flogged on to whom for how much dough. Uncle Paul certainly had first-class connections into the scene from his time at the radio station. We, on the other

hand, will have to hire someone to run the place or wind it up, otherwise this goldmine will turn into a black hole."

Zach nodded. "You're probably right about that. But let's take a look at it before we jump to conclusions."

"Yep. I'm all for stopping at the next pizza place and picking up some serious ballast. I feel like I'm floating several inches off the ground. My head is spinning."

"Guess whose else," Zach grunted.

* * *

The next morning, the two slept late. To the disappointment of all those who had hoped to see another Leon Leatherthroat performance, they skipped the hotel breakfast and instead went to a pub that served brunch. After they had dined extensively, Veronica steered the car back into Yewtree Road. Mrs Jones let them in and handed them a folder of documents and an inventory list labeled 'Campbell's Fab Store'. "Why don't you have a seat for a moment?" She pointed to the entrance to the waiting room. "Dr. Miller will be arriving in a few minutes with the building's keys."

Zach placed the papers on a chair next to Veronica, who had already sat down. Again, a strange restlessness gripped him. He began, as he had the day before, to inspect the photographs, which stood in such sharp atmospheric contrast to the cheerful paintings displayed above them: One showed the four Mop Tops dressed in black cowls, their faces largely hidden in the shadows of their hoods. In the next, a man with his face covered in bandages stood against a backdrop of exotic plants with a person wearing horn-rimmed glasses who towered over him. In another photograph, a formally dressed older gentleman presented a historical weapon, perhaps a battle axe or war hammer, resting on a velvet cushion. Opposite him stood John Lennon, shoulders slumped, visibly tired.

Zach was about to ask his daughter what she thought of the scenes, but was interrupted, just as he had been the day before – this time by Veronica herself, who was studying the inventory book. "Fantastic! You'll be amazed at all the things Uncle Paul offered in his shop," she said excitedly. "The wreckage of the guitar Jimi Hendrix played at the Isle of Man festival; a zombie costume named

Eddie that someone staggered across the stage in on Iron Maiden's *Killers* tour; a Tina Turner wig from her time with Ike. And yes, thousands of autograph cards, back issues of music magazines, signed picks, vinyl records and other knick-knacks, but almost all of the most valuable pieces came from the Beatles. He acquired them to order. Here, these are the names of the buyers, behind them the agreed price. If we weren't such brainiacs, I'd say we're more lucky than smart." She grinned. Then she noticed this expression on his face. "What is it?"

The door opened, and Dr. Miller entered.

* * *

They followed the notary's SUV into downtown Liverpool. The streets were only moderately busy at this time of day, so they made it in three quarters of an hour. Instead of just handing them the keys to the store, the apartment and the vehicle, Dr. Miller had offered to open the premises for them. There were things to consider, he said, that he would show them on the spot, and he also wanted to fulfill his promise to tell them something about the circumstances of Mr. Campbell's death. And so they finally turned onto Victoria Street, rolled down a steep ramp into an underground parking garage, and threaded their way into its rather narrow alcoves. There were only a few empty spaces, so the two vehicles parked some distance from each other. Parking spaces, Dr. Miller explained after they finally returned together up a flight of stairs to street level, were in short supply so close to the tourist center. There were, however, reserved bays for residents, he said. Mr. Campbell's car was parked in one of those. He wondered if they wanted to see it right away.

"Is it far?" asked Veronica.

"No, it is on the way to the store," replied the notary.

"Then show us the car," Zach suggested.

Through the nondescript side entrance of a restaurant, they entered a stairwell that led them back underground. Opening a steel door they stepped into another parking deck – exclusively for residents – in whose remotest corner a locked garage awaited them.

Zach looked at Miller questioningly. "Isn't that a little excessive for an old car?"

Miller laughed. "Not just any old car — one of the *Austin Mini Cooper Ss* that Epstein got for the Beatles in 1965! The car was customized by Harold Radford to meet the buyer's specifications and, for that reason alone, would not be a possession to leave unattended on the side of the road." He pulled out a set of keys, opened the garage lock, turned the knob, and yanked open the roll-up door. Without any noticeable noise, the door slid upward until it came to a stop. Behind the opening, a series of sconces had automatically come on. They bathed a boxy small car, its sage-green rear facing them, in warm light. The cream-colored paint on the roof gleamed like new.

"Nice," Zach let out in a voice that belied some disappointment. "Didn't the inventory say 'Aston'?"

Miller laughed again. "No, *Austin*. You were expecting an *Aston Martin*, a *DB5* like James Bond drove in 'Goldfinger,' only silver blue? McCartney's Aston Martin?"

"Something like that," Zach returned.

"I'd like that one, too. It's been in steady ownership, unfortunately, since it changed hands at an auction four or five years ago for nearly a million and a half Pounds. I admit it would suit you – and the sports car your daughter drives." Again the notary gave Veronica that penetrating look. Veronica stared back.

"Do you know which of the Beatles owned the *Mini*?", Zach interrupted the eyes duel.

Miller studied him for a few seconds straight, without bending a brow. "Among collectors" – he emphasized the word in a way that implied a much smaller group of people than it usually denoted – "the number 'LGF 696D' refers to a car that disappeared from the scene without a trace many years ago; well, not quite without a trace. Mr Campbell pulled strings and found it again three years ago. It sits in inventory with an estimated value of £183,000 – based on the proceeds of the auction in which McCartney's specimen sold in September 2018. But Mr. Campbell was neither stupid nor impatient. He could wait..."

"Wait? For what?" interjected Veronica.

"For the right person to come into his life," Miller explained. He sighed. "The world has become so short tempered. For a quick crack, people discard their entire future. And when they've squandered the small advantage they could

have gained at the expense of long-term prosperity, they find themselves alone and empty-handed. Paul Campbell was not like that. He was part of something bigger, and he acted with foresight. And he knew one just had to wait long enough for the right collector to appear at the right time – someone who takes a media event or anniversary as an ocassion to afford John Lennon's *Mini Cooper* at the same price others paid for *Paul McCartney*'s Aston Martin DB5."

"You must be kidding, right?" Zach skeptically raised an eyebrow.

"It was Mr Campbell's secret to success. It worked for every single piece he tracked down for resale."

"Except this time he waited too long."

"Well, he couldn't have known he'd be ripped out of existence so quickly. And if he'd known he was going to be murdered, the proceeds from a quick sale wouldn't have done him any good either."

"So of course you ri... I beg your pardon? Did you just say 'murdered'?"

"My condolences, Mr. Ziegler, I'm afraid that's the fate the Lord has dealt your stepbrother."

2: Rainford Gardens

When Zach and Veronica regained their composure, they asked Dr. Miller to explain the particular circumstances. The notary carefully locked the garage, then led the Zieglers through the stairwell back into the pedestrian zone. On the way to the store, he explained to them what had happened.

"Mr. Campbell closed the store for the last time shortly after eight o'clock in the evening on April 30, a Saturday. He settled the cash register, updated the sales journal, and then made his way up the internal staircase to his apartment. As far as police could determine, it was an uneventful day with no major business. He sold a few vinyl records and souvenirs. In the early morning hours, an altercation occurred with an unknown person. Mr Campbell suffered a number of stab wounds and fell to the floor at the foot of the stairs, where he died. There is no trace of the perpetrator. Police believe your relative surprised a burglar."

Miller stopped in front of a narrow building: a five- to six-yard window with the words "Campbell's Fab Store" above it and an entry door next to it, both framed by handsomely carpentered wooden frames painted maroon. "Here we are." He pulled out the set of keys they'd already seen in the garage.

Veronica superficially examined the window and door frames. "It doesn't look like anyone broke in here recently. The paint is old and just shows expected signs of wear and tear. How did the perpetrator get in?"

"That's unclear. I suspect he will have used special tools."

"What about the video surveillance and the alarm system?" Zach pointed to technical installations above the door.

"No usable footage. A shadowy figure stepped into the entrance where they escaped the field of view of the exterior camera. No alarm was triggered. Twenty minutes later, the figure exited the establishment the same way."

"That means, in principle, Mr. Campbell could have let the person in?" inquired Veronica.

"I'm out of my depth on that one. Perhaps," Miller mused. "The best advice I can give you is to ask to see the police report. I only read the newspaper reports, because I was too upset by Mr. Campbell's passing and, moreover, busy arranging all the things required in the event of a demise."

Zach nodded understandingly. "I can fully sympathize with that. I'm shocked myself."

The notary had identified the appropriate key, inserted it into the lock of the store door and opened it. A bell jingled. "Here you go. Please step inside," he said as he proceeded.

Veronica and Zach followed him into the salesroom. The daylight that the store window let in gave way to a dim twilight after only a few steps. Miller flipped a switch, lamps flared. Now they could see that at most sixteen yards separated them from the far wall, into which a massive-looking door was set. There were no other openings. Directly behind the entrance stood a small wooden counter, on top of which sat an antiquated cash register, a clunky black telephone with a dial, and an expensive record player. The rest of the store was also furnished with wooden furniture that looked old but in good repair: bulging bookshelves, file boxes full of records, a coat rack hung with extravagant stage clothes, tables full of odds and ends that turned out to be musical accessories, two postcard racks... The rustic décor reminded the both of them somewhat of the general store in the television series *The Waltons*, which they had watched together in Veronica's childhood.

"I'm not in the business, but all I see here are common musical antiques," Veronica noted. "Hardly worthy of a crime, if you ask me."

"Make no mistake about it. The value of the items contained in this room probably exceeds several times your combined annual income. But you're right, of course, in that if you lack expertise, you'd probably have to be hauling quite a lot of stuff to make the crime worthwhile. You really would have to know where to grab."

"So where are the extraordinary pieces listed in the inventory stored?"

"There's a steel-doored alcove in the back room, a former broom closet, I should think. That's also where the stairway to the apartment is located."

"The stairway where Uncle Paul was found?"

Jules R. Miller nodded.

"In other words, the nocturnal visitor not only picked the security lock on the front door, but also unlocked the back door," Zach concluded. "Does the same apply to the broom safe?"

"Mr. Campbell must have caught the guy before the burglar could open the safe. If the inventories were up to date – and I have no doubt they were – the perpetrator went home virtually empty-handed. The only things missing are about two thousand Pounds from the day's cash, change, more or less, and some old manuscript that must have been lying on or under the counter."

"I don't know," grumbled Zach, "it all seems Greek to me. Does it make sense to you, Veronica?"

"One can make up many a story that would make sense. How about this: The perpetrator fakes an emergency to gain entry to the salesroom. The door to the back room was open because Uncle Paul had walked through it on his way to the front. The perpetrator tries to force him to open the safe, and a struggle ensues. After that, the perpetrator panics, grabs the money and pockets the manuscript, which he happens to notice, but without knowing exactly what it was. Then he flees. Such things usually happen at gas stations or liquor stores, and instead of a stack of papers a carton of cigarettes leaves with them, but people have already been killed for less than two thousand pounds."

"It's all speculation. Let's better pay a visit to the police station."

Miller, who had followed the exchange of words with a deadpan expression, spoke up, "Fascinating. You have a sharp mind, young lady, and I would be only too happy to talk with you for a while longer about the matter. Unfortunately, my time is limited today as well. May I suggest that I show you the rest of the building?"

"Of course," Zach agreed. "Where is the safe room located?"

"Follow me."

The notary escorted them through the back door into another windowless room. After he flipped the light switch, they saw that the room contained a two-seated sofa, a matching armchair, a coffee table, and a small bar equipped with a refrigerator and a coffee maker. In one corner, a steep wooden staircase led to

the upper floor. Another corner was walled off and closed with a sturdy metal door.

"The recreation room. Your relative has been receiving guests here – friends, potential clients, salesmen." Miller stepped up to the metal door, selected a key and inserted it into the lock. After two turns, which made soft confidence-inspiring noises, it clicked with a full sound. Miller pulled on the handle. The weighty and indeed impressively massive door swung open. The items of special value mentioned in the inventory – wig, guitar, and zombie mask, as well as some records, reels of tape, clothing, and manuscripts – lay on shelves surrounding a chamber of less than thirty square feet. Alongside them they saw smaller pieces that must have been the personal possessions of famous people: an ornately chiseled gold ring, a mother-of-pearl-studded cigarette box, two meerschaum pipes, a tea set and more. "This is where Paul... Mr Campbell kept objects that he was commissioned by his clients to obtain."

"...as well as such pots as waited patiently for the arrival of the proper lid."

"Such an excellent metaphor; quite so, Ms. Ziegler. The sales journal will tell you what each is about. You will find the names of the buyers, if such exist, listed in the book. I recommend that you contact those clients to liquefy the capital and minimize the risk of theft. The burglar might come back after some grass has grown over the matter. Unfortunately, Mr. Campbell noted orders from regular customers without address information, and to top it off, under their pseudonyms."

"Pseudonyms? What's the point of that? Are those stolen goods?", Zach wanted to know.

The notary grimaced. "As far as I knew Mr. Campbell, he operated honestly. Of course, there are collectors whose enthusiasm for their hobbyhorse is... shall we say, accompanied by a rather liberal interpretation of British legal norms. But that, as I mentioned, was not his metier."

"What was his metier, then?" echoed Veronica.

"Liverpool's music scene, Mersey Beat, the Cavern district, and above all, the Beatles. Mr Campbell made a small fortune through skillful buying and selling of unusual Beatles finds. He had a reputation within the scene for being able to procure almost any item on demand, moreover. Here in town, we take pride in

the Mop Tops; we try to keep the best pieces in the bosom of the family. Paul... Hmm... Mr Campbell has been instrumental in making that possible. The competition internationally is tremendous, as you can see from the auction prices. Still, you can find half a dozen of the most remarkable Beatles collections in Liverpool and the surrounding area. The owners know each other and meet regularly. They identify with their idols and have acquired nicknames to match."

"Were you a customer of my stepbrother? Are you also a collector?"

"On a very modest scale. We all cultivate our nostalgia here. To me, talking shop with Mr. Campbell meant more than owning material trinkets. It was particularly exciting to follow his steps as he tried to find one of those extremely rare objects." The notary seemed to reminisce for a moment, then said, "Let's take a look at the apartment. It will soon be time for me to make the return trip."

On the way up, the three had to cross a larger patch of congealed dark liquid at the foot of the stairs. On the ground and on the first three steps, the outline of a person had been marked with white chalk. They stalked past it with long strides, then hurried up the rest of the way. The apartment spanned two floors. It appeared as unspectacular as the store below. The rooms were wallpapered in pleasant pale pastel colors, the furniture looked simple but elegant. Neither did the apartment seem cluttered nor did it appear spartan; in its unassuming beauty it represented a masterpiece for which the world of stainless-steel-framed glass on the one hand and cheap Scandinavian furniture on the other had no senses. Zach and Veronica looked around self-consciously while the notary opened one door after another so they could have a glimpse inside. Then he apologized to them again; he was called by duty now. Together they made their way back down to the store.

"We thank you for your efforts," Zach let him know as he shook his hand. "I really don't want to keep you any longer, but I do have one more question: where did they bury my stepbrother?"

"Mr. Campbell's body remains in the forensic pathology laboratory. I received word from Homicide yesterday that he was cleared for burial now. In accordance with his instructions, I have arranged for cremation and subsequent interment at Toxteth Park Cemetary. May I send the invitation to you at this address here, or do you intend to return to London?"

Veronica and Zach looked at each other. At a discreet gesture of his daughter's hand, the detective explained that they would stay in Liverpool for the time being and let him know in case they changed their minds. "May we bother you again with further questions, if any? You know... it helps to have somebody who is familiar with local customs."

"Of course, Mr. Ziegler. Anytime. Goodbye. Goodbye, Ms. Veronica."

The notary raised the keychain to eye level, then placed it on the counter. He walked through the front door, turned to the right, and within seconds merged with the pedestrians, who had grown noticeably more numerous since their arrival.

Silence spread. Veronica eyed a postcard rack briefly before wandering over to the bookshelf to inspect its contents with a tilted head. Zach flipped through the vinyl records in the file boxes without much interest. After a while, he said, "Are you just as thirsty as me? Come on, let's go somewhere."

A broad smile settled on Veronica's face. "Two fools – one idea," she agreed. "I saw an Irish pub on the way in."

* * *

It wasn't the pub after all. They let themselves drift through the Cavern district's pedestrian zone, past restaurants, souvenir stores, fashion retailers and night clubs that were closed at this time of day. Finally, when they had had enough fresh air, they entered an Italian restaurant. They took a table right by the window front, from where they could continue to watch the activity outside.

"I like the atmosphere in Liverpool," Zach announced.

"Yeah, one could get used to it. Here in the city's old town, though, you get rid of your money faster than new money comes in," Veronica replied.

"This is literally a luxury problem now that we have years to solve."

"If we're staying in hotels like rock stars and going out to dinner on a boulevard every night, it's not going to take an inordinate amount of time, Pop. We should be cautious about it and think carefully about what we spend it on."

"I feel very fortunate to have raised such a conscientious daughter. But we've only just arrived. Your Uncle Paul has left us an incredibly generous gift. At the

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same time, it comes with a whole range of responsibilities and problems. I think it befits us to combine the necessary with the pleasant."

A woman of about fifty appeared with a water carafe and glasses, poured and handed them the menu.

"I wonder if they have Swabian cheese spaetzle, too?" joked Zach in German.

"Dad. Don't get silly now. We've had enough excitement."

"No, we don't have those," the waitress interjected in the broadest Swabian dialect, "but you should try our cheese spaghetti; they're just as good."

Father and daughter looked at her face in amazement, then burst out laughing. Guests at neighboring tables turned to them curiously.

"From Timbuktu to Tokyo – the Swabians show up everywhere," Zach chuckled. "Unfortunately, I'm not one myself. Just born in Württemberg, that's all. We'd better talk in High German."

"I can't," the waitress returned in put-on royal English. She grinned broadly. "I'm not a Swabian either, by the way. My grandparents came to Sindelfingen from Milan as *gastarbeiters* in the 1960s."

"And so now you are not an English woman," Veronica continued the thread.

"That's right. In Liverpool am *'the Kraut,'* but that makes me something lovable in people's eyes. In Württemberg, my children would have grown up as comehere. By the way, Liverpool lies not exactly in Africa. People live just as well here as in Swabia."

Zach nodded knowingly. Veronica gave the woman a warm smile. She now struck a pose, brought her order pad to bear, and inquired in stilted English, "Would our esteemed guests like to order the cheese spaghetti?"

"Gladly. With roasted onions on top, please. And a beer to go with it."

"Very well, sir."

Veronica ordered lasagna and had wine recommended. The waitress then left the table.

Zach changed the subject. "What do you think of the good doctor?" he inquired.

"Miller? Dunno. Have you noticed the way he looks at me?"

"He seems like a person who knows how to look behind facades."

"That went a little too deep for my taste."

"Come on, he stayed strictly fixed on your face. And you held up very well. I think you passed the test."

"The test?"

"I suspect he's trying to find out if we got what it takes to fill Paul's shoes."

"I have my doubts about that," Veronica said. "None of us can tell a mass-produced record from a rarity, let alone give a full history of the Beatles. 'Among collectors the number LGF 969D refers to a car that disappeared from the scene without a trace many years ago" she mimicked the notary's lecturing tone.

"696, Lennon's registration was LGF 696D."

Veronica rolled her eyes.

"Give the man a break. The loss of Paul was a bigger one for him than it was for us, but the consolation prize was significantly smaller. And don't underestimate your old man. Maybe I can find a way to keep this place running. In its own special way, it seems to be as important to the cultural life here as the Cavern Club."

"I can't explain why, but I have a funny gut feeling about Miller."

"I'd like to talk to him about Paul in a little more detail soon. Maybe after the funeral. I still have no idea how he became the man he died as, what made him tick, who his friends were and all that. What we have learned about how he died isn't much either," Zach lamented.

Veronica reached for his hand. "Well, let's talk to the police in the next few days. I'm sure they can tell us more."

"Good idea."

The waitress served their drinks, smiled at them, and announced that dinner would not be long in coming. The mood recovered considerably. They dined with relish and talked until late in the evening. As they made their way back to the hotel, Liverpool's alleyways were already buzzing with the party crowd.

3: <u>Henry the Horse</u>

They had decided that in the matter of whether to keep Paul's apartment and store — or even just the apartment — they needed to get a feel for what that meant in practical terms, so they would have to spend more time there. They would sift through the stock, hang out in the back room for a bit, or sleep upstairs for a couple of nights at some point. So they headed downtown shortly after eight in the morning. It was relatively quiet in the alleys of the Cavern district. Mathew Street gave off the feeling of a concert venue the morning 'after.' A street-cleaning crew swept up broken glass, wads of paper, napkins and cigarette butts. Rainford Gardens lay similarly depopulated. They opened the store's door, flicked on the lights, and tossed their coats over the counter.

Veronica looked around, "Where do we start?"

"The unpleasant stuff first. I'm a little dreadful of the stain on the floor, but if we're going to spend more time here, we'd best remove it as soon as possible."

Veronica nodded. "I wonder if Uncle Paul used to do the cleaning himself." She removed a notebook from her jacket pocket, pulled open the top drawer at the counter, rummaged around in it, and produced a pencil. As she wrote, she proclaimed, "First of all, cleaning lady..." She pondered. "While we're thinking about staff – second, sales help?"

"Yep. Very important: How do we get in touch with Paul's regular customers?" added Zach.

"Noted. While you're thinking about it, I'll do a quick inspection of the kitchen and bathroom cabinets. Hopefully, I'll find some cleaning supplies."

It actually did not take long. A locker in the back room contained all the necessary items. Instead of calling her father, Veronica immediately set to work herself. The chalk outline gave way to her attack instantly. With it, the strange feeling that there was someone else in the room besides her also passed. The urge to look over her shoulder subsided. The bloodstain, of course, resisted more stubbornly. After barely fifteen minutes, however, it had lost most of its

intensity. Only a fuzzy dark shadow suggested where Paul Campbell had lain. She covered it with carpeting.

Veronica deposited brushes, bucket, and stain remover back in the locker. She opened a Coke from the bar's cooler. The fruit juice was already spoiled, unfortunately. She put the half-empty bottle with its moldy contents in the wastebasket, then went to the sofa and dropped into it. She looked around. Everything appeared normal. There were no signs of struggle, no broken objects, no deformed railings or anything like that. Everything had to have happened very quickly... or the victim had known his killer and had approached him with no suspicion or had unsuspectingly turned his back on him. Was it about money? Valuables? Or had there been an argument... about what? She shook her head. All speculation. She knew too little to be able to comprehend the course of events.

Her gaze fell on a small circular black-framed picture next to the door to the salesroom, just below an autographed portrait photograph of the young Paul McCartney. It might have been six to eight inches in diameter. The motif looked familiar to her. A lettering that followed the top arc read "Sgt. Peppers." Aha, she thought. A cutout of a Beatles album cover. Of course she knew the LP from her father's record cabinet. Here in Liverpool, the sight of it was ubiquitous. The rest of the picture, however, made no sense to her. The lettering was repeated in mirror image at the bottom. In between, at the widest point, framed by ornaments, it said:

I ONEI X HE ◊ DIE

What was that all about? She jumped up from the sofa and stepped close to the picture. No, she hadn't read it wrong. At the same time, she was sure that this phrase was not exactly the one printed on the cover. But what did the original text say? She could only remember vaguely. Veronica narrowed her eyes. A hair-thin line divided the inscription horizontally right in the middle. The lower half of the image looked slightly blurred. So it was indeed a photograph of a mirror reflection. How strange. She couldn't make sense of it. 'HE ϕ DIE' sounded somehow sinister, though. The rhomb-shaped symbol between the two words seemed to point upward like an arrow, where a slightly chubby-cheeked Paul smiled down at her from the much larger photograph.

"You must have been about my age then, a year or two older at most," she thought. "Good thing you didn't die, sweetheart," she murmured, "or the world would have missed out on so many great songs." Her uncle's name was Paul, too, she remembered. Few mourned him. The world was unfair, but it was full of good music.

Veronica broke away from McCartney's face, then opened the door to the sales room to go look for a *Sgt. Peppers* album. She wanted to know what the bottom half of the original picture, obscured by the reflection, showed.

* * *

After his daughter had closed the door behind her, Zach tried to look at the room through the eyes of a businessman. What was the concept here? References to 1960s music and the Beatles stood out abundantly, as expected. Much of the activity in the heart of Liverpool, most notably themed pubs, kitsch stalls and retro clothing stores, made their money off this. Sculptures of John Lennon, Brian Epstein, Cilla Black and even the fictional Eleanor Rigby from the Beatles song of the same name transformed the pedestrian zone into a theme park, and Campbell's Fab Store perfectly matched it. The brick façade with its wood-framed storefront gave the place that historically correct look that was equally appropriate to its interior wonders and its wider neighborhood. As a souvenir store for Beatles fans wandering the streets, however, it seemed too colorless and bland; as an antique store, on the other hand, it displayed too few large-format pieces. Zach knew of a few Beatles stores, such as the one on Baker Street in London; he had discovered a few others in the immediate vicinity of the Fab Store. They cluttered their windows with small-scale, industrially produced kitsch, while inside there was barely enough room to walk between the racks, tables, and shelves densely laden with merchandise.

Paul's shop window, in contrast, presented itself spartan. Only a life-size wooden statue of McCartney in his *Peppers* uniform stood to the left, its back disconcertingly turned to the street; in the lower right corner of the glass front his step brother had attached the slightly distorted likenesses of the Fab-Four from the *Rubber Soul* album. That was all there was to see. Passersby could therefore look inside the store without effort – the whole, very tidy-looking store. Sure, it had class, but the lack of glitter would have equaled a lack of change

flushed in, he calculated. So, just as the notary had described, Paul must have made his living from frequent customers. The impression of respectability could only be useful. Trifles like the autograph cards, guitar strings ("as George Harrison used them") or brochures on the musical history of the city probably served rather to offer an alibi purchase to souvenir seekers who had come in by mistake, allowing them to make an honorable retreat.

Zach's train of thought was interrupted by the jingling of the doorbell. An elderly gentleman entered. He wore a long gray felt coat, dark pants with creases, shiny black patent leather shoes, and a wide-brimmed hat, which he removed as soon as he passed through the door. Underneath, his thinning gray hair appeared, combed to the side.

"Top of the morning to you, sir!" the man greeted. Zach estimated him to be in his early sixties, well-to-do, educated. He noticed that the newcomer did not look around, but directed his curiosity squarely at him. Not a souvenir hunter, he guessed.

"Good morning," he greeted back in a friendly manner. "Out and about so early? There's hardly a store open yet, is there?"

"Aye, regrettably, the rock discotheque hath closed," the man replied with a smile, "All the more delightful to see this fabulous store illuminated once more. I was beginning to fear it belonged to history."

"Well, actually, it is closed at the moment. We are merely conducting an initial inventory."

"May I ask your esteemed name, sir?"

"Zachary Ziegler," Zach replied. "And you are...?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. How rude of me. My name is Bishop. Thomas Henry Bishop. Mr. Campbell's store was a fixture of mine whenever I came downtown from the moment it opened. Paul – Mr Campbell – was a master at retrieving lost treasures. There were few requests he could not fulfill for me. I also appreciated him as a fine, intelligent person who was always up for a thoughtful conversation. What a loss..."

"My condolences, Mr. Bishop," Zach said awkwardly for his own mixed emotions.

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"Poppycock!" boomed Bishop. "It is for me to express my condolences to you. After all, he is... was *your* brother, Mr. Ziegler. He used to talk fondly of you sometimes. Only in a kind way, as a matter of course."

"I'd find that amazing. A lot of water has flowed down the River Thames since we last spoke. Still..."

"If you will allow a stranger to give you his best counsel: Do not be distressed. The reasons for his disappearance lay in his own failings more than in any supposed fault on your part." Bishop looked earnestly but kindly into his face. "May I offer you a suggestion, Mr. Ziegler?" he asked, and continued without waiting for a reply, "First come to your senses, find your comfort in your new surroundings, and let's talk about dear Paul over a cup of tea when the time comes."

"Best thanks, Mr Bishop. You're the second friend of my brother's I've met – and the second to so offer."

The elder smiled again. "Since so many have felt connected to him, as well as indebted, I probably won't be the last. But pray: Accept my offer. It truly would be my great pleasure!"

An impulse urged Zach to reach out his hand to Bishop, and he took it. "It would be my pleasure, too. I'll certainly take you up on it. Will you be back in town soon, Mr. Bishop?"

"Call me Henry, please."

"Agreed. I'm Zachary."

They shook hands again.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Zachary. As for your inquiry, yes, quite frequently, actually. Indeed, I take my breakfast every Monday at the bistro over there on the corner."

"Then what brought you here today?"

"As indicated, the store is very close to my heart. Another... friend alerted me to your arrival. So I thought I'd take the opportunity to have a brief chat with you."

"Well, word got around pretty quickly. I was under the impression Liverpool was a little bigger than a village."

The older man grinned. "A big city, no question, albeit far behind London. However, the collectors scene resembles a family."

"I see. Unfortunately, I can't promise the Family that the Fab Store will continue. As I said, my daughter and I are just beginning to assess the situation. I must also confess to you that while we are certainly friends of analog technology, we are hardly familiar with my brother's line of work. We are private investigators, not music experts or businessmen. We would have to rely on expert help."

"One could also call Paul without qualification a kind of private investigator. Rather than people, he just ferreted things out. If you run your own detective agency, you have enough business knowledge to produce a clean accounting. As for professional expertise, no better place to get your hands on that. Perhaps I can help. Did I mention that your brother had friends?"

"As an aside. Let me think about it. I'm sure I'll see things more clearly in a few days."

"Needless to say. May I pose one last query to you – as a customer?"

"How can I help you?"

"The day before he passed away, I received a call from Mr. Campbell regarding an order that I... that we had placed. He informed me that the items had arrived."

"What items had you ordered?"

"We - some other collectors and I - had had a search made for a suitcase with a variety of objects in it. I am interested in the tape reels in this case."

"I saw some in the storeroom. Let me check the inventory register." Zach went behind the counter, pulled out the ledger, and ran his finger over the latest entries. "The only tapes listed here were ordered in the name of 'Horse' – Horse as in equine. No entries for Bishop. Is Mr. Horse one of your colleagues?"

"No, as a matter of fact, that is me. Paul called me that."

"How inventive. Bishop the piece, Horse the knight – do you play chess?"

Thomas Henry Bishop chuckled gleefully. "Mr. Kite pinned the moniker on my lapel. Do you need another clue or is that enough?"

Zach stared at the older man, perplexed. Bishop snorted.

"...and of course Henry the Horse dances the waltz...", he sang in a brittle voice. And when Zach still failed to comprehend, he added, "Being For The Benefit Of Mr Kite!" one of my personal favorites as far as Beatles songs go." He approached one of the sorting boxes, from which, after less than three seconds of searching, he pulled out a thirty-inch record wrapped in transparent plastic. "Voilà – Sgt. Peppers. I suppose that means something to you." At an affirmative gesture from Zach, he flipped the record over, tapped his index finger right in the middle of the bright red text-covered surface and handed it to Zach.

The detective smacked his forehead with the flat of his hand. "But of course! Everyone in the Family has adopted a pseudonym. I got warned."

Bishop, alias Horse, nodded but did not say a word. He tilted his head slightly, like a teacher waiting for further elaboration from the student.

"So you are the waltzing circus horse...," Zach stated. He pondered for a moment. As he did so, he let his eyes wander around the room. Suddenly, he turned them back to his vis-a-vis. "Who is Mr. Kite?" he blurted out.

"Splendid! You are posing exactly the right question. Who is this Mr. Kite for whose benefit we are here? It's just like I was saying: basically, you already possess the necessary qualifications to run this store."

"Well, then, who is Mr. Kite?"

"That's the name of the owner of the most important and expensive collection of Beatles memorabilia in the Kingdom – excluding the producers of those items."

"By producers, I assume you mean the band members themselves."

"Indeed. And the only Beatle still alive and resident in the country – apart from Pete Best, who doesn't really count – goes by the name of Sir James Paul McCartney. Imagine being a relative of his; do you suppose that would have any impact on the size of your collection?"

"Are you implying that Mr. Kite – or whatever his civil name is –"

"Mr. Kite does not sport a civil name," Bishop interrupted him, "but of course he uses a plain name... which I will leave to him to disclose. You will get to know him soon enough. Kite was one of the parties to our wee commission. He reserved the most significant object from the case for himself."

"Now you are making me curious. What's the deal with this suitcase?" inquired Zach.

"Well, let's go to the the backside room. It is a rather lengthy story, and I need to have a seat; my legs are getting a bit tired."

"All right. I'll just lock up the store."

Zach strode to the front door, locked it, hung the 'Closed' sign that had fallen to the floor back on the hook by the window, and led Bishop to the doorway in the back. Just as he was about to reach for the handle, the door opened and Veronica, seemingly in a hurry to get into the store, bounced against his chest. She squealed in fright and he gave a breathless "Whew!".

"Where are you going in such a hurry, young lady?" asked Zach.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, sir?" she retorted. She eyed her father up and down; then noticed the older man standing behind him. She nodded to him in greeting. Turning to her father again, she pointed to the record he was still clutching. "How did you know I was looking for this very record?"

* * *

Zach introduced Veronica and Bishop to each other. The collector explained his concern to her as well, saying he was willing to help the Zieglers handle Paul's final commission. He knew the customers in question, he added.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea, coffee, Coke, water? I'm afraid there's no juice left in the house," Veronica said.

"A latte, if you don't mind, Miss Veronica. I may call you that, mayn't I?"

"No problem, Mr. Bishop."

"Henry. I insist."

"Agreed. Dad, would you like some coffee too?"

Zach, only now realizing he had led their guest into the room marked by his brother's blood, nodded absently. His eyes searched the spot on the floor. He was relieved to see that Veronica had done a good job in that short time. A doormat lay on the first step, a small rug in front of it. There was nothing left of the white traced outline of the body.

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Henry – the Horse, flashed through Zach's mind again – seemed carefree. He let himself sink into the armchair Veronica had offered him. The young woman moved to the bar counter, got the coffee machine going, and then settled down on the sofa next to her father.

"Am I understanding this correctly?" the detective queried. "You and several other people sent my stepbrother in search of a suitcase that contained various objects of your interest."

"Correct, Mr. Ziegler...Zachary."

"You want to acquire these separately. Your part of it is the tapes I saw in the safe, yes? This Mr. Kite is in on it and — " He skimmed the lyrics. "The Hendersons? Who else?"

"Not the Hendersons. Mr. Kite and Mr. Mustard will take the manuscripts, Molly Jones wants to acquire the case as such. In addition to his compensation, Paul would have been allowed to keep any remaining contents. We do not know exactly what these consist of. There was talk of hundreds of signed autograph cards, plus photographs, concert programs and some vinyl records."

"What's the deal with this suitcase? Who packed it and where did it go missing?"

Bishop took a deep breath, thought about it for a moment, then began to tell the story: "In July 2004, a report went through the press that the so-called 'Mal-Evans Archive' had reappeared after almost thirty years. An English tourist had picked up an old suitcase for little money at an Australian flea market. When he opened the case, it turned out to contain Beatles rarities, including recordings of songs that had never been released. Papers found inside also suggested that the suitcase must have belonged to Mal Evans, the Beatles' road manager and close friend. Several experts immediately expressed confidence that it was authentic memorabilia, but days later newspapers published statements to the contrary. They printed statements that the suitcase contained only a collection of worthless reproductions; the sound recordings were common bootlegs. The pundits refused to give further interviews. The English tourist also never made another appearance. There were no findings about the further whereabouts of the suitcase or its contents."

Veronica, who had gotten up in the meantime, returned with a pot of coffee and three cups. "Unfortunately, we don't have fresh milk in the house. Would you like powdered milk or do you prefer to drink it black, Henry?"

"Black, if you please."

After Veronica poured, he thoughtfully stirred some sugar into the steaming broth. As a result, both the swift movement with which Zach emptied his cup and Veronica's resolute grasp, which prevented the porcelain from subsequently being knocked onto the table, escaped him.

"There were some odd aspects to this story that struck us as Greek," the collector continued, "particularly the prompt advance confirmation of the find by people who had reputations to lose. That's unusual – especially in light of the later report that there was no previously unpublished material among the items. What exactly delighted the so-called experts so much about the first samples that they forgot their professional ethics?"

"I find that dubious, too," Zach interjected. "Since you had Paul track down the case, I assume that, unlike the experts, you assume that it is genuine. So if those people understood their subject, their final verdict must have been a false statement. I wonder why."

"It would seem to us that they were called off. One can speculate at length about the reasons, but we suspect that confirmation of the authenticity of the tapes would have raised the awkward question of why no mention was made at any time of the real sensation in the suitcase, the manuscript of Mal Evans' memoirs."

"Wait, wait," Veronica exclaimed at that. "This is moving a little too fast for me. How do these memoirs suddenly come into play?"

"Mr. Evans was a Beatles fan from the very beginning. After having seen the band live, he first worked for them as a doorkeeper. He soon made himself indispensable as a gofer, roadie and dogsbody. Moreover, since he spent a lot of time with the four guys, who were all considerably younger than him, he became a close friend to whom they confided their troubles. This afforded him insights that few other people had the privilege of besides himself. Their close relationship lasted well beyond the breakup of the band."

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Zach cradled his head. "So the man had things to say that you can't read in any ordinary Beatles biography. Has his book actually been published, or did the guys sue him?"

"Neither. Malcolm Frederick Evans was shot dead by police in his own L.A. apartment on January 5th, 1976 – only days before he was to deliver the manuscript of his memoirs to the publisher. In the ensuing chaos of investigations, funeral preparations and household clearing, not only was a suitcase full of Beatles memorabilia lost, but so was the manuscript. Even his ashes temporarily disappeared while being transferred to Britain. The closer circumstances of this tragic story turn out to be dubious as well. Various reports reveal small but crucial inconsistencies about the course of events. Whether the manuscript was in the lost suitcase remained unclear, however, it seemed probable. Certainly, the timing of the incident aroused suspicion that there might have been a sinister connection between the imminent completion of the memoirs, the violent death of its author, and the disappearance of the manuscript."

Silence hung thick in the back room of Campbell's Fab Store. For a few moments, no one stirred. Father and daughter looked at each other, puzzled. Bishop sipped his coffee cup. The soft slurping sounded like the rumble of engines across the room. Zach cleared his throat. "I must say... your story is not lacking in drama by any means. To me, the Beatles have been nothing more than four brilliant musicians. Who would have thought that after more than half a century there were secrets left to unravel? Slowly, I'm beginning to understand your fascination with this band."

Henry the Horse flashed his teeth. "I have no wish to discourage you from entertaining the idea of continuing to run the store, but let me inform you that this tale is neither the beginning nor the end of the myriad irregularities surrounding the group. If you stare into that abyss a little longer, Zachary, something will soon return your gaze."

Veronica's hackles rose. The cryptic writing she had studied before the two men came in climbed back into her consciousness; her eyes searched the small circular frame next to the door, then drifted to Paul McCartney's youthful portrait above it. Involuntarily she had to think of what her father had said about the other Paul, her uncle, and the reasons for his vanishing from London. Had he

really only fallen victim to unfortunate events, or was there a more sinister connection?

* * *

Someone called her name.

"Veronica? Earth calling Mars, do you copy?" Her father.

She shook her head. "Sorry. I was just lost in thought."

"Would you mind bringing in the inventory ledger? Henry will help us identify the customers who haven't picked up their orders yet."

"On my way."

When Veronica returned to the back room after half a minute, Henry and Zach were standing in front of the open safe. She handed the book to her father. The two men went through the entries one by one, comparing them to the items in the safe. Her father pulled out a small notepad and a ballpoint pen that he always carried in his shirt pocket. He wrote down the plain names Henry gave him. Next to them, he jotted down other details that seemed important to him. When they finished the inventory, the tension on the detective's face had given way to a certain satisfaction. Veronica could imagine why. They would not be left high and dry but would be able to turn the items into cash – one less thing to worry about on their list of things to do. They had achieved a small success and gained a bit more clarity regarding the milieu they were unawares immersed in.

The elder now pointed to a flat square case of gray PVC measuring about twelve inches. "This might have been deposited for me," he guessed.

Zach took the plastic cassette from the shelf. On one of the narrow sides was written in black felt-tip pen: 'Abbey Road – not for publication'. He opened the shutter and peered inside. As expected, the case contained a reel of tape. "How much playing time is that – four hours?"

"Four and one half," Henry replied, "The reel dates from August 1969, from one of the Beatles' last studio sessions, and I have no doubt that never-beforeheard music and conversations have been immortalized on it."

"What makes you so sure?" Veronica asked.

"Because the 'experts' kept quiet about the Evans manuscript, which was actually there with them in the suitcase. They declared the find to be junk to prevent questions about a man's dangerous memories that would have exposed the Beatles myth as a Cinderella story."

"That's one bold proposition. How many British Pounds are you betting on that?"

"One hundred and eighty thousand, as agreed with your uncle."

Veronica whistled through her teeth. "Won't you at least listen in before you spend that kind of money, Henry? We have a tape machine sitting under the sales counter."

"That's unnecessary, thank you. As a friend and as a gentleman, I am absolutely true to my word – even if the tape were blank."

"I wouldn't mind lending an ear," Zach cut in.

"Allow me to propose another suggestion," Henry rebuffed. "What would you say if I invited you to our next gathering, at which I shall bring the most interesting passages to the Family's notice for the first time? It might also be a splendid opportunity to meet your future patrons and introduce yourself to Liverpool's society."

Neither Zach nor Veronica showed any enthusiasm. They had to admit, however, that a man who spent so much money on one thing had a right to enjoy the piece all by himself first. Bishop accompanied the two Zieglers to the cash register, where he explained to them how Paul usually completed his transactions.

"There's a pad of contract forms in one of the compartments on the left. We'll need that."

Veronica rummaged in the dark shelves under the counter. She unearthed the pad. The topmost copies had already been filled out, she noticed as she flipped through them. On the third sheet she found the name she was looking for, Thomas Henry Bishop. Paul had entered "I tape reel Abbey Road from Cvano archive" as the subject of the contract, and one hundred and eighty thousand Pounds was indeed written in the corresponding form field as the purchase price. Buyer and seller had concluded the contract for the acquisition of the

object by their signatures. Two further signatures were still pending: 'Goods received' and 'Amount received'.

Henry confirmed receipt of the goods. "I shall transfer the amount to Paul's business account within a month. I do hope you will already be able to access it."

"The notary has set everything in motion. I just haven't had a chance to contact the bank yet. Of course, that shouldn't be your problem, Henry. We owe you gratitude for all your help."

The elder man indicated a bow, shook hands with father and daughter in farewell, and put on his hat. Zach unlocked the door for him. Henry the Horse stepped out onto Rainford Gardens, a tape worth one hundred and eighty thousand Pounds tucked under his arm, and disappeared into the sunshine of a morning now well advanced.

* * *

The visitor had affected their planning as well as their concentration. Zach therefore decided to take a little stretch of the legs to clear his head. When he left, Veronica considered tackling one of the items from her bucket list, but didn't really feel like it. Instead, she climbed the stairs into the apartment to take a moment and look around. It was quiet up here. Almost nothing could be heard of the activity on the streets in front of and behind the house. If they moved in here, they would be able to work and relax without disturbance. There were two bedrooms furnished with double beds. She opened the one she had identified as Paul's room because of the personal items in it. The bedding appeared clean, but showed subtle signs of use. Veronica checked the closets. Looking for fresh sheets and covers, she let her fingers wander over Paul's clothes: Underwear, socks, ties, shirts, pants, suits – everything had an elegant, if slightly old-fashioned, look. A glance at some labels confirmed her assessment that the deceased had worn the same size as her father.

The chest section of one of the coats was bulging. She put her hand into the inside pocket and pulled out a long burly purse, the kind merchants at the market usually carry. She hesitated. Was it indiscreet of her to invade the privacy of a man she didn't personally know in such a way? Nonsense, the

detective within scolded angrily. Her uncle was dead and her father had not yet actually taken possession of the household that was now legally his. For a moment she stood irresolutely before the open closet, but then her good manners prevailed. Her father had taught her the Golden Rule, which they lived by as best they could in this crazy society. They treated others as they wanted to be treated, and they refrained from whatever they did not want to suffer in turn at the hands of another. They had done quite well thereby up to now. You didn't get rich that way, but you could go to sleep every day with a clear conscience.

Speaking of going to sleep. She put the wallet back into the inside pocket of the coat without opening it. Then she grabbed two sets of fresh sheets and replaced the old ones. She repeated the same in the guest room. Where a wall of cabinets dominated the scene in Paul's room, here a custom-made shelf that was almost entirely filled with books stretched before her. Numerous paperback novels with all sorts of classics from Asimov to Zola made up the main population. Next to them were leather-bound and board-covered hardbacks. She recognized the Britannica and other reference works. Some volumes dealt with religious studies topics. Some very old-looking tomes carried Latin titles or cryptic symbols. And, of course, there was an entire section related to music. She planned to take a closer look at the collection once she had settled down a bit more. Between the two windows that let warm light pour into the room through the front exterior wall of the building stood a simple secretary that Veronica liked immediately. The many drawers, little doors and sorting compartments of the piece of furniture cast a magical attraction on her. She had made up her mind: she would suggest to her father that they move downtown from the hotel, and she would ask him to let her have this room.

The icing on the cake, however, would be an Internet connection, she thought to herself. Her uncle may have had an extensive network of personal contacts. But she doubted that this alone had been enough to work the miracles he was said to have performed. Had they even seen a computer when Miller, the notary, showed them around the apartment? It had been only yesterday, but they had had to absorb so much exciting information in the last few days that the memory of their tour seemed as if viewed through a patterned chiffon cloth: just as colorful as it was blurry.

Directly across the hall, she found what she was looking for. A large room, its walls covered on all sides from floor to ceiling with bookshelves, must have been the study. A window occupied the middle of the narrower side, in front of which stood a modern recliner. A huge desk dominated the center of the room. The legs and frame were made of bold red wood, and the tabletop was made of milky white glass, with a retractable 28-inch flat-screen monitor set into it on the left side. For the second time that day, Veronica let out a low whistle.

She sat down in the futuristic swivel chair in front of the screen and took a closer look at the workstation. She did not see a machine. Perhaps there was a compact device installed inside the screen or on its back, or the computer stood in another room. Conveniently, it should be possible to turn it on here, from this place, she reasoned. Where was the button? She let her fingers slide over the wood. On the underside of the tabletop, she felt two small bumps. She bent down and found what she was looking for. She pressed the right-hand button. Light flared up under the milk-white glass of the surface. Uh-huh, she thought. Uncle Paul must have been looking at blueprints, slides, or the like quite often. This table would certainly have been a great help.

The other button had to be to start up the computer, she guessed.

* * *

Zach didn't return to the store until late afternoon. Heavily laden with grocery bags, he stomped into the back room, where Veronica had made herself comfortable in the armchair with cookies and green tea.

"Lazy little lassie!" he rumbled theatrically as he set the bags down on the bar. "Not a step did you make while your old man heroically entered the urban jungle to kill a tiger with his bare hands for your dinner."

"Yuck!" exclaimed Veronica, "You know I don't like tiger. Besides, I ordered tarantula."

"As long as you put your feet under my table, you'll eat what I haul in."

"As long as I cook, we eat what I ask for. By the way, I wasn't quite as lazy as it might seem to you."

"Oh really? What did you get going?"

"Myself. And then I carried myself from the front door to the armchair here."

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"All right. I'll let that slide for this time," Zach relented. "Look what I captured." He pulled milk and juice bottles from one of the bags, and from another an iceberg lettuce, broccoli, beans, leeks, onions, potatoes, a block of butter and a few apples. "The lettuce put up a particularly fierce fight. It almost escaped me." Veronica clapped her hands. "You're my hero, Pop. When I grow up, I really wanna be like you."

Zach simply turned another bag upside down and then yanked it up by the corners. Chocolate bars, cookies, potato chips, caramels, popcorn, marshmallows and other snacks clattered onto the counter and from there onto the ground. "Everything a thinker's brain could possibly ask for," he proclaimed.

A can of salted nuts rolled across the floor to Veronica's feet. She picked them up. "You want me to get fat and die of arteriosclerosis?" she lamented.

"That was the plan. But before that... What did you find out? Come on, I can tell you're about to burst if you can't get rid of it."

"First things first: we agree we're staying at Uncle Paul's place instead of the hotel starting today. I've already chosen a room for you. The princess suite is mine. No point in arguing."

Her father shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I'm powerless in that regard. Go on."

"I was preparing the apartment for our move-in. In the process, I came across Uncle Paul's study, which contains the fanciest workspace in all the kingdom. You're going to be in for a stunner. The internet line – awesome. Results come up on the screen faster than you can begin typing the search query."

"Yeah, yeah," Zach croaked. "As long as it spits out the result faster than you do I will be content. Get to the point already!"

"Tsk tsk," clicked Veronica. "Modern-day youths have no patience any more....
Terrible!"

The detective bared his teeth. His hands formed into claws.

The young woman giggled. "All right. I fed Henry's information into various search engines to see what the world wide web had of them. And lo and behold, it's all publicly available." She picked up a stack of printouts from the side table, blew away some cookie crumbs and declaimed, "The Times of London reported

on July 13, 2004, that an English tourist named Fraser Claughton from Tankerton in the county of Kent, then 41 of age, bought a worn suitcase for his clothes at a flea market in Lara, near Melbourne, Australia. When he opened it, he found — quote *Times — 'one of the most important collections of Beatles memorabilia*,' the *'holy grail*,' for which everyone had been searching for almost thirty years: the so-called Mal-Evans archive. The author of the news item did not hint at any reservations in his headline or text, but was quite specific about the contents of the suitcase: photographs — four hundred in number — vinyl albums, concert programs, and sealed tape containers bearing the inscription *'Abbey Road ... not for release'*. The tapes would contain alternate versions of *'We Can Work It Out' and 'Cry Baby Cry,'* acoustic and electric versions of other songs that were later discarded, and conversations between McCartney and Lennon.

Peter Doggett, a consultant at *Christie's* auction house, confirmed, that, with the exception of two pieces, everything 'sounds very exciting indeed' and that it's possible that they were Evans' belongings. John Read, a children's book publisher who represented the lucky finder in the matter, based on the studio documents found in the suitcase bearing the roadie's name, thought it might have belonged to Evans. An employee of the Beatles label *Apple*, Mark Lewisohn, was the only one to be more cautious, since he had only heard the tracks on the phone, but he was prepared to be excited. *Harmony Central* reported the next day that a four-and-a-half-hour tape was with *Apple* for verification. All the facts presented are concrete enough that one can rule out any misunderstandings."

"But?" Zach prodded.

"But on July 18, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Peter Nash, head of the British Beatles fan club, had heard the tapes on the 15th and classified them as just another false alarm. A month later, on Aug. 18, *Yahoo News* published a lengthy *Associated Press* report that the supposed Beatles treasure was 'fake;' the original remains lost. Peter, Nash, who investigated the find on behalf of a British broadcaster, now called the matter a well-publicized hoax. He had seen photocopied ticket stubs, and the photos were merely laser scans from the 1990s; the material on the tapes, he said, were 'very common tracks that most Beatles collectors would own.' There was also nothing to the suitcase to

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suggest that it was Evans', he claimed. *Apple* spokesman Geoff Baker said he thought the find was a hoax.

AP stated Claughton, the lucky tourist, could not be located. The Times and Jack Malvern, its reporter, would not be available for comment. John Read, dubbed here as a pop memorabilia dealer, was not taking calls. Best of all, Christie's auction house indicated that no one had contacted them for an appraisal of the items, nor had any of their experts seen them."

"I'll be a monkey's uncle!" groaned Zach. "So, either this fan club leader, the press agency, the *Apple* spokesperson, and *Christie's* are all lying, or..."

"Or the English tourist, his representative, the *Times* reporter, and the *Christie's* consultant all lied, and our new friend spent one hundred and eighty thousand British Pounds on a newspaper hoax today," Veronica concluded. "No matter how you twist or turn it, you can't help but talk about a conspiracy."

Zach pondered quietly for a while before saying, "Based on the newspaper reports alone, we could do little more than assess the credibility of the statements. However, since we have the object in dispute – more so, since we're in contact with knowledgeable collectors willing to shell out tidy sums for it – the group of people screaming 'Fraud!" quite loudly seems to be a gang of frauds themselves trying to keep the lid on the case."

"Unless there was more than one suitcase," Veronica interjected. "I found evidence of that, too."

"As if the whole thing wasn't complicated enough already. All right, hit me with another suitcase story."

"Which of them?" Veronica dropped the papers she had been quoting from next to the armchair and picked up another stack of printouts from the table. "Stories abound. Mal Evans, at least all sources agree on this, was probably the one who had the most complete and deepest insights into the Beatles' thoughts and actions even before the band's girlfriends, wives and managers. As their dogsbody, he hauled suitcases, steered the tour bus, set up instruments, supplied meals, and looked after the musicians' personal well-being. He even procured their underpants and washed their socks. Sometimes he was allowed to contribute simple sounds and noises to the recordings, gave cues for some lyrics, and appeared in minor roles in their films. Through it all, he always

remained modest and discreet. Although he kept a diary from the beginning, he never revealed any details. It was not until the end of 1975, five years after the band's breakup, that he made a name for himself. In a television and several radio interviews he told of his memoir project, which was initially called '200 Miles to go', later renamed 'Living the Beatles Legend'. He was supposed to deliver the finished manuscript on January 12, 1976, but there are also sources that say he had six months more time. Be that as it may, there came the evening of January 4, 5, or 6, 1976 — depending on which source one consults..."

"That's beyond believable!" rumbled Zach.

"...But true. In the issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine at the time, Patrick Snyder cites January 4. *Wikipedia* cites the 5th, but refers to a *Los Angeles Times* story of the same day, that is, the edition reporting what happened on the 4th. A Sunday edition of *The Times* of London, commemorating the anniversary, claims Mal Evans' wife was informed on the morning of the 5th that her husband had died the night before. In a blog from 2012, I also found January 6, but that may likely have been a typo.

Whatever the date, he was shot by two, three or four named police officers, again depending on which source you choose to believe. His girlfriend at the time, Frances Hughes, with whom he lived, probably called the ghostwriter of the memoirs, a certain John Hoernie, because Mr. Evans was psychologically devastated that evening. He allegedly was under the influence of Valium and alcohol. The conversation between the two men appears to have gone awry, as Evans picked up a weapon, which, depending on the source, is said to have been either a pistol or a rifle, and either an air gun or live. The girlfriend alerted police. The officers allegedly asked Evans to drop the shooting iron, which he refused to do, and so they fired six shots at him, four of them fatal."

"Maybe you should have the police report sent to you," Zach interjected.

"A certain Tina Foster already tried that, but was turned down."

Zach shook his head.

"Anyway, this is where the story about the so-called memorabilia archive begins. The police took those present as witnesses and seized some items. From that moment, the memoirs disappeared. According to one version, the

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authorities misplaced the suitcase, according to another, a close friend, the singer Harry Nilsson, packed Evans' things and sent them with his ashes to London, to the roadie's widow Lily. Both items were lost. The urn turned up a short time later at the airport lost and found. A chest full of personal belongings, including his diaries, was not found until 1986 in the basement of the New York publishing house *Grosset and Dunlap*, where the memoirs should have been published. They informed Yoko Ono, who kindly forwarded the items to Mrs. Evans."

"How did this stuff get to New York if it was sent to London? Why should personal effects come to a publishing house? And why would the publisher give it to Yoko, of all people?" interjected Zach.

"That's just how life plays out sometimes." Veronica squinted one eye. Her father snorted.

"The way I see it, we're dealing with two, maybe even three, batches: possibly a suitcase that was lost by the Los Angeles police, a box that, for whatever reason, bogged down at the publisher's for ten years, and another box that went missing on its way to London."

"And which one contained the manuscript?"

"Could have been in any of the batches. Until recently, the widow claimed not to have the memoirs, but now she's hired Ken Womack, a well-known Beatles specialist, to publish them; likewise the diaries."

"Just like that? Oops, I was wrong? Here's the thing the Beatles crazies of the world have been chasing after for forty-five years? Ridiculous!" the detective erupted.

"All the more ridiculous because we know for a fact that it was in our suitcase, not in the New York box that Yoko Ono sent to Lily Evans. So what is this Womack guy publishing?"

"Hoernie's copy, could be an innocuous answer. Somehow, though, there are too many inconsistencies and strange coincidences in the whole affair for me. Why did Mrs. Evans keep the manuscript a secret so long instead of turning it into money?"

"Perhaps Yoko withheld it until now? Or one of the Beatles threatened lawsuits?" suggested Veronica.

"In other words, because Mal Evans had something to say that could throw the world's most successful band into a new light. It would explain why this gang of 'experts' so vehemently denied the authenticity of the suitcase. Frankly, at this point, I no longer believe in coincidences. What did Henry call this?"

"Cinderella stories."

"Cinderella stories, that's what it is. While I cannot yet determine exactly what the truth is, I can say with a high degree of probability that it will not be as innocuous as it appears on superficial examination. There is too much misinformation and inconsistency about normally easily determinable facts for that."

"Do you see a path in all this mess yet, Pop?"

"There is something that worries me. Someone announces that he's finally going to talk about his time with the Beatles, and then suddenly he dies – not just like that, but under unusual circumstances. Stupidly, his memorabilia collection disappears, but not just one part of it, all of the parts at once by different routes – including the infamous memoirs. Decades later they turn up here with us and at the same time with the widow – and again a man dies under strange circumstances, again at the same moment the manuscript disappears..."

Veronica listened up. "Huh? What?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I haven't had a chance to tell you yet. When Henry and I checked the inventory, we found all the items as listed in the book – except for the memoirs. Miller even told us about it, remember? He said Paul's murderer had cleaned out the cash register and bagged the manuscript with it on that occasion."

"You've got to be kidding!" exclaimed Veronica.

4: The Bouncer

They sat at the breakfast table in a kind of hangover mood. Neither of them had slept well that first night in their new domicile. Zach had dreamed of riptoothed suitcases grabbing at his sleeves and cuffs, trying to drag him in various directions at the same time.

Veronica had brooded for hours over the question of how to distinguish everyday coincidences from deliberately staged events before she had sunk into a dreamless sleep. "Cui bono," she said into the silence of the Campbell kitchen.

"I beg your pardon?" her father inquired, his gaze returning from far away.

"Who benefits - *cui bono*," Veronica explained. "Old Latin phrase. Today we would say follow the money. By itself, a strong financial incentive is not proof of guilt, of course, but it can be a promising investigative angle."

"Opportunity and capacity to commit the crime also have to be given if you are to convince a jury," Zach added. "Moreover, there may be motives other than money."

Veronica nodded. "And you'd have to have proof that the suspect actually did it. A recurring pattern, a repeating element, could help us get on his scent."

Zach frowned. "You see a case here?"

"You don't? Uncle Paul was murdered; a potentially explosive document in his possession disappeared the same night. There's a million pounds at stake. Of course it's a case."

"Which the local police or Scotland Yard will take care of."

"That may be true. However, I dare to doubt that they take into account the undeniable parallels with the Mal Evans case."

"That one looks really weird, but you can't completely rule out the possibility that most of the inconsistencies in the reporting about Evans are due to communication errors. Coincidences happen."

"Who keeps saying, 'One time is coincidence, two times is stupidity, and three times is intent'?"

"Zachary Archibald Ziegler."

Veronica nodded. "He's a smart man. Would you like to hear what his even smarter daughter thinks?"

"Educate me."

Veronica giggled gleefully.

"What's there to laugh about?"

"Daughter educates father' – wouldn't that make a cool headline in *The Sun*?"

"In these times of rampant gender confusion, this is not a joke, but a tear-jerking necessity. I'd therefore rather read 'Man bites dog'; that would give me back a long-lost sense of normality.... What are you getting at, dear?"

"Do you know how the people at SETI try to distinguish alien signals from cosmic background noise?" asked Veronica back. Without waiting for an answer, she explained, "Communication can always be recognized by the fact that it leaves patterns in the 'text' that can be detected or represented with statistical graphs or arithmetic formulas. It doesn't matter whether it's Egyptian stone tablets, Victorian novels, Mongolian radio broadcasts, Italian schmaltz movies, or coded KGB messages. One does not have to be able to understand the message contained to recognize that most likely a meaning-bearing signal is present. A statistically significant clustering of certain markers tells us we're dealing with more than mere coincidence."

"I see. And now you want to apply that to events?"

"How do homicide investigators come to the conclusion that they are dealing with a serial offender?"

"Based on identical leads at different crime scenes."

"Exactly. A single murder does not constitute a series. A first additional murder with identical traces may just happen to look like it belongs to a series. However, the more such cases you have, the more clearly the intent behind them emerges. What we need is more data!"

"I was actually planning to pay a visit to the police station only next week..."

Veronica put on her most charming smile and batted her eyelashes. Zach grumbled, then grabbed a white napkin and waved it over his head.

* * *

Zach steered the GT out of the underground parking garage into the morning rush hour. The parking fees for two days had already cost a small fortune. He was happy he didn't have to worry about that anymore. Thanks to the inheritance, he'd be able to keep it up for years. But if they stayed here, he would buy a permanent lot; or sell the Mini Cooper to park the Opel in its place.

Since it was still quite early, he decided to go to the hotel first to give notice of the room and move their things to Rainford Gardens. Then, at about ten o'clock, he entered the police station, where he demanded to speak to the head of the Campbell murder investigation. He was led to an office door and asked to take a seat in one of the chairs in the hallway. Inside, he heard a man talking on the phone. He couldn't make sense of the content of the conversation, but he found this voice impressively powerful. A few minutes later, a receiver fell on the fork, and shortly after, footsteps approached. The door was yanked open.

"Mr. Ziegler? How do you do? Come in."

Zach was a little disappointed by the discovery that the bear voice belonged to a man of average height, medium build, and unremarkable features. He took care not to underestimate him, however. The lead-gray brush haircut gave the impression of a strong will. He eyed the name tag, according to which he was speaking to D. Wickens. He said, "Good afternoon, sir, and thank you for taking the time to explain the circumstances of my stepbrother's tragic death."

"Please do. As a relative, you have a legitimate interest in this information. As far as the investigation allows, I'm happy to tell you what we found out... Please sit down." He pointed to a chair in front of his desk. "Frankly, I also hope that something has occurred to you or come to your attention that might help us."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you. My stepbrother and I haven't seen or spoken to each other in decades. Neither am I familiar with the reality of his life, his attitudes, habits, or personal relationships. Except that he seems to have become one of the leading authorities on The Beatles, I know practically nothing at all about the man he has most recently been."

"That's unfortunate. Still – if you find anything among Mr. Campbell's effects that might possibly provide a clue to the murder, call me anytime." He slipped Zach a business card.

The detective nodded and, after a cursory glance, slipped the card into a coat pocket. "Will you be so kind as to describe the final hours of Mr. Campbell's life, insofar as you have been able to reconstruct them?"

"There's not much to tell. According to the testimony of a neighbor, one last customer left the store shortly before eight o'clock in the evening. Mr. Campbell locked the door from the inside and turned out the lights. He went upstairs to have a meal. About eleven o'clock the lights went out in the apartment as well. At 3:15 in the morning, the exterior camera registered a figure vanishing into the doorway. The quality of the footage does not reveal any details. The store light did not come on. At 3:40 a.m., the figure re-emerges onto the street and turns toward Whitechapel. The autopsy report states that Mr Campbell died between three and four o'clock of six knife wounds to the chest area. One struck the carotid artery, another the heart. If there is anything positive to be taken from this it is only that your relative did not suffer."

"Was there any evidence of a struggle? Didn't anyone hear anything?" poked Zach.

"No indications, and everyone was fast asleep – or so they claim."

"How does the crime present itself to the police? Do you have any clues as to a motive? In what direction are you investigating?"

"Although we found the door lock undamaged, we still believe it was a burglary. Mr. Campbell probably surprised the person and was attacked by him in some sort of panic reaction."

"You conclude that from what?"

"That the perpetrator took money from the store, but hardly any valuables."

"By 'valuables' I assume you mean the Evans manuscript. Was anything else missing?"

Wickens smiled pleasantly at the detective. "You see? You actually know something we didn't already know."

"I thought you were aware of the missing manuscript."

"Yes, after all, it is listed in the inventory book. Unfortunately, the entry does not name the author of the document. How do you know that name?"

"Yesterday a customer came into the store explaining that the manuscript was part of a collective order he had placed with other Beatles enthusiasts. It was, he said. Mal Evans' memoirs."

The commissioner looked perplexed. "Who was this man? Can you remember the name?"

Zach wasn't sure he should reveal Bishop's identity. It might cause a lot of trouble for the person who had become his first friend in Liverpool. He decided to think about it and perhaps tell Wickens more later. He pondered. What could he tell the Commissar? "I remember his first name. It's Henry."

Wickens' face told him he smelled a lead. "Henry? Are you quite sure? Anything about the last name stick in your mind – initial, length, ethnicity?"

Zach shook his head. "Sorry. Everything's all over the place right now. I have to think of a hundred things at once. It was an English name, if I remember correctly."

"What did the man look like? Can you describe him?" Wickens seemed agitated.

"He looked a bit like that famous producer from the 1960s... What was his name?"

"Phil Spector? Quincy Jones? George Martin?..."

"George Martin, that's him. Very well-groomed, maybe just retired. Does that help you?"

The commissioner had regained control of himself. His expression was now closed. "We shall see. Of course, I can't tell you anything about the progress of the investigation. Personally, though, I don't think this manuscript has any particular role to play."

"If it does, my stepbrother is at least the second murder victim in connection with the damn thing."

"You're alluding to this conspiracy theory that the L.A. Police were set on Mr. Evans to prevent him from exposing McCartney's double?" Wickens began to laugh heartily. "Forget it. The people who say things like that are one Beatle

short of a full band." He laughed again. "Just think how many people know Sir Paul personally; he has family here in Liverpool. What do you think would be going on if a stranger suddenly showed up at the door and said, 'Hey, here I am'?" He must have seen that this reaction pissed Zach off. He relented, "No offense, but to some, the most exciting band in the world, is not exciting enough it seems. There are so many of these urban legends floating around that no one takes them seriously anymore."

"Maybe so," growled Zach, who by now had grown to resent the officer's powerful voice. He just wanted to get out of here fast. So he asked his last pressing question, "Can I see my relative in pathology?"

"The body will be turned over to a mortician hired by Mr. Campbell's attorney shortly. After that, it should be possible."

Zach rose unsteadily from his chair. He shook hands with Commissar Wickens and promised to get back to him if he remembered anything else. The policeman assured him that he would keep Zach informed of new information. The latter left the room and headed singlemindedly for the coffee vending machine in the hallway. A paper cup of colored water disappeared down his throat in seconds. Zach fired the empty container into the bucket standing next to the machine. This slop didn't warrant another visit, he decided.

He didn't know what annoyed him more: that he had allowed himself to be ridiculed, or that this incredibly self-convinced person had not even considered looking at the circumstantial evidence, but instead just put it in a box labelled "silly stuff", along with all the other things that "everyone knows" can't be true. The majority of people went through the world blindly, believing what they saw was self-explanatory. Yet what they saw was shown and explained to them – by media that served quite different purposes than reporting the truth. As if it were so outlandish that those who were rich and powerful would like to remain so. "If I had made billions in fraud, deceit and murder, I would likewise do whatever was necessary to ensure that people heard my innocuous explanations, not the squawking of those affected or the reports of the investigators," Zach grumbled into his three-day beard.

Because most people could not distinguish truth from the media-produced theatrical backdrop, Tony Blair had succeeded in rushing Britain into a war against Iraq. Young soldiers had thrown their lives away helping to search for weapons of mass destruction that had been made up... to mention just one provable recent example of established media willfully painting a false reality in its entirety. Not an exception, but the rule. There were major crimes - even of breathtaking dimensions - happening right here and now in front of everyone's eyes, but one was not allowed to mention the bare facts, either matter-of-factly or in jest, if one wanted to keep one's income, home, friendships, freedom and health. As a private investigator, he knew only too well how that went. The worst injustices happened with the knowledge and approval, often even with the participation of the authorities, covered up by 'journalists' who knew when to look the other way and who to denounce. That is why he was not at all surprised that at least one of the two groups of people – the confirmers and the deniers of the authenticity of the Mal Evans Archive – had allowed themselves to be used to convey a certain impression. Resourcefulness was punished while the dog's obedience to the master paid off. And the master wanted the unanimous display of professional or administrative authority. When everyone said, "Listen to the experts; there's nothing to be seen here!", only a few dared to risk a second look. Peer pressure was an effective way to drive free-grazing sheep back into the fold.

Zachary Ziegler owed his success as a detective to the fact that he did not give in to such pressure when it came to the truth. No one was immune from deception, but one had to retain the freedom to consciously perceive and admit one's mistakes. Those who remained glued to the theatre chair – be it a chair in the stalls, be it a box seat – out of comfort, fear of standing out from the crowd or for the sake of feeling good would never know who these people on stage really were or what they were doing behind the scenes. They lived in an elaborately constructed world of make-believe. After a while, they forgot that it was artificial; it became the world as such, no matter how absurd it might get. That's why people like Commissar Wickens disgusted Zach. They acted as bouncers, as doorkeepers, dictating to others the spaces in which they could mentally move, what they could or could not do, think or ignore, under penalty of social ostracism.

For someone like Zach, the taboos postulated by people like Wickens raised questions. The detective had feared he had revealed more than he had learned until the commissar had sort of poked his nose at something: the motive for the two violent deaths related to the Evans memoir – and for the disappearance of the manuscript – might have been the looming exposure of an impostor in the ranks of the world's most successful rock band. If second-tier acts like the Monkees or Milli Vanilli had been already punished with commercial annihilation for merely pretending to be musicians, the same accusation would cause an earthquake in the Beatles' case. It would overshadow the cherished memories of untold millions of music listeners, undermine the credibility of internationally important personalities and ruin the image of a country and an industry. Not least, billions of British Pounds were at stake. Compared to that, what was a paltry million for the yellowed manuscript or the lives of two small characters who had made their income from the waste of this Beatles machinery?

Zach wanted to see if the trail Wickens had tried to throw him off of might lead him further.

* * *

When he returned, he found the ground floor empty. An appetizing smell of vegetables and spices hung in the air at the foot of the stairs. Zach climbed up. In the kitchen, he stumbled upon Veronica, who was taking a kettle full of stew off the gas stove.

"Oh, how nice. You're just in time. Dinner's ready."

"Heavens, Veronica, how many visitors are you expecting?"

"You. Sometime today. Hot and spicy stew can easily be stored for a couple of days, and it's hot again in minutes if needed."

"Anyway, I'm tremendously hungry and I love stew! The first plate goes chug-alug."

"Don't you dare! We'll sit down comfortably and you'll tell me how it went at the police station. After that, I'd like your opinion on a few more anomalies I've noticed with the Evans archive."

Zach carried the kettle to the dinnertable, and Veronica arranged two place settings. They quietly slurped down the first three servings before the detective began to report on his encounter with Commissioner Wickens.

"It's really not much news," Veronica remarked as her father turned his attention back to the food. "What I find strange is that on the one hand he showed such interest in Henry, but then immediately brushed it off as soon as it came to the manuscript."

"Yeah, that was really striking. I'd almost like to call it the third instance where the book as a source of information was meant to be taken out of the way, so to speak, if only verbally."

"I wouldn't go so far as to accuse him of intent. We have no evidence of that. He might even have been entirely free of ulterior motives in responding to your suggestion in such a condescending manner. If that adds another pixel to our pattern, it's a pretty weak one."

"Granted. I'll take that into account." He spooned his stew in silence. Then he said, "The Beatles were in the headlines constantly all through my youth with all kinds of stuff: George on tour, Ringo taking pictures, another McCartney album, John getting shot... I remember these things rather nebulously. And then there were the perpetual rumors about the secret lives of the stars. The media seemed to have a competition for the most grotesque news. I could swear I never heard of the doppelganger theory, but that's pretty unlikely. Rather, I simply dismissed it as a newspaper hoax and banished it straight to the memory hole. Elvis is alive, Paul is dead, and the Earth is flat, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah sure. You felt the same way as that Commissar what's-his-name."

"Wickens. I can well understand him. Without strict mental hygiene, our image of reality would become worse than the caricature it already is. However, one should be open to new information in order to be able to correct erroneous views; at least that is what I would expect from an investigator. Picking apart deceptions is our business."

Veronica shrugged. "We all have blind spots."

"With a murdered stepbrother and a stolen million dollars on my plate, I don't want to afford that exact blind spot. Kindly, Wickens put the manuscript into a new context that might explain where the motive for the crime might have been.

Suppose that the Beatles' dirty laundry included a double, an impostor who could neither sing nor compose nor play; suppose that this Evans wrote a scandal story to make one last handsome buck after it was clear that the band had broken up for good – the damage could have been so huge that not even a corporation, let alone one individual, would have been able to compensate for it. In other words, legal action would have promised less success in this case than ... robust intervention by the parties concerned."

"You can bet your butt on it. However, before I allow you to do that, we have to turn assumption into certainty."

"Difficult. We'd have to read the manuscript to understand whether it was withdrawn from circulation, and why."

"Not necessarily," Veronica objected. "It's enough that those behind the crime – if there was a crime – knew or believed Mal Evans was going off the rails. That implies they had reason to be concerned – skeletons in the closet."

"Not sure... slander can have the same effect as genuine scandals. Unless we find out something more concrete, we're stuck for now."

Silence descended over the table again for a few minutes.

"Aren't there any copies anywhere, excerpted pre-releases, or anyone who has read the original? What did Mal Evans himself say about it? You mentioned yesterday that he promoted his book over the air."

"I haven't found any quotes from the memoirs. In 2005, a few innocuous entries from his diary appeared in the *Sunday Times*, released by his widow, Lily. The family seemed chronically short of money. Evans earned little and was rarely home. Lily let slip that this weighs on her to this day and that she thinks the band treated Mal badly. He himself, the quotes clearly show, had less problems with it. He saw himself as a close friend of the four musicians until the end and remained a fan of theirs. That he really wanted to cash in on his insider knowledge for once doesn't quite fit into the picture I've gained of him. You should listen to the interviews from the end of 1975. He made no attempt to sensationalize or to advertise scandal. He talked about the Beatles exclusively in a respectful tone – and they about him: they called him the 'gentle giant'."

"There can be worlds between the speeches and the deeds," Zach interjected.

"With some people more, with others less. I would count this man among the latter. He has acted as an enthusiast all his life. But as I said, make up your own mind."

"This very day. Your account sounds like this trail leads to a dead end or down a wrong track. However, the innocuous image is offset by the man's violent death and the many inconsistencies surrounding his estate. Shall we get started right away? While we're at it, you can finally let me in on the mysteries of Paul's study."

They cleared the table and carried the dishes back to the kitchen. Veronica insisted that her father do the dishes while she packaged some of the stew into portions to freeze later. Twenty minutes after they entered the room wallpapered with books, in the center of which stood the sci-fi workstation. Zach showed himself impressed. Before he let the volumes on the shelves transport him to other worlds – she knew his weakness for printed matter all too well – Veronica moved a second chair next to her pilot's seat and gestured for him to sit down.

"Okay, how do we dive in?" asked Zach.

"I'd suggest I play a couple of passages from the *KSCN* interview of 11/29/75. He's talking to Laura Gross about his life, career and, of course, the Beatles. Gross is a young journalist and a family friend. Pay attention to the tone of voice. Also, of course, what he says about his memoirs is most interesting... Are you ready?"

"Can't wait!"

Veronica clicked on the bookmark under which the audio recording of the interview was saved. She let it run for a few minutes to give her father an impression of the exchange between the two people. Then she skipped to the middle of the recording. Mal Evans emphasized that he had loved being able to work as the Beatles' tour manager. He said he had three sisters, but no biological brothers. He referred to singer Harry Nilsson as his blood brother, but also the four Beatles. Then he expressed his hope that they would like his book, which was soon to come out. They heard Laura Gross say, "I know that you would never write anything terribly negative about them." Mal Evans replied, "Well, I could. I talked to Ringo about the book. I said, 'I wouldn't want to put you down.' And he said, 'Look, if you don't tell the truth, don't bother doing it. You of

all people have to tell it like it was.' And there are a few things I'm sure they'll get mad at me about." However, he said, he had a lot of fun and a good relationship with those people. Therefore, he could not say otherwise now. What he does remember, he said, is having had a good time.

Veronica skipped to the end and let the last few minutes play. Zach said, "Hmm, That really doesn't sound like he was planning a lurid publication, but at the same time he was aware that it would have been pointless to cover only the pleasant moments."

"Did you notice what a confident mood he was in?"

"Yes, the man seemed to have more plans than worries."

"Well, take a look at what major publications are writing about him." Veronica called up a text file from which she began to read aloud, "*Beatlechat* confirms our impression. Evans had spent the last two years of his life mostly in the States, partying with John, Ringo, Harry Nilsson, Keith Moon and other musicians. In September 1975, he presented himself at a Beatles fan meeting in New York. But then the report switches and paints a very different picture. Badfinger, a successful band he had discovered and produced, broke up in April – long before the fan meeting – because the singer committed suicide. Evans, however, was soon working on their guitarist's follow-up project. Allegedly – here the report contradicts itself – contact with the ex-Beatles also dwindled. However, it is known from other sources that it never broke off; for example, he met McCartney in L.A. when the latter was performing there."

Veronica scrolled on. "Hooks and Harmony says, 'The downward spiral continued. Mal Evans separated from his wife, Lily, and moved to Los Angeles to seek work in the music industry. His wife filed for divorce in December 1975." She looked up. "Most accounts of the period between the Beatles' breakup and Evans' death emphasize the failures and downplay the man's happy moments, if they mention them at all. Often I get the impression they're all copying each other. And this started immediately after the tragic event. Supposedly he was unemployed and had relationship problems with Fran, his girlfriend. Laura Gross, who as I said had direct insight into his personal life, calls these reports 'blatant lies'."

"Are we seeing the two camps emerging here that we encountered in the Australian suitcase discovery?" pondered Zach.

"Now that you mention it... The party that painted Mal Evans in an unfavorable light got the far greater attention, as did, thirty years later, the faction that labeled the Australian suitcase a 'fake'."

"Do you have any more audio or video, or is that it?"

Veronica brought another browser tab to the forefront. "This one..." she pointed to the screen, "...is a discussion by several Beatles luminaries, including Ken Womack. the man writing the ultimate Mal Evans biography. You remember?"

"I memorized that name. I'd really love to look into his cards sometime."

"Guess who else. The recording was made on the sidelines of a Beatles convention. Some of the background noise was pretty loud, but you can understand what people are saying well enough." She clicked the play button and then they listened until silence returned to Paul's study an hour later.

Zach groaned. "Fascinating. Still, why do I feel cheated out of valuable life time?"

"Maybe it's because he's merely serving the official narrative of the tragically deceased lucky man. He lets just enough slip to keep you hanging on his lips, but all he's really saying is, 'Move along, there's nothing to see here."

"Right. Same shtick as on *Beatlechat*: He admits there were a few bright moments – Evans continued to draw salary from the band after the Beatles split, worked on their solo projects, landed production jobs, met McCartney in L.A., talked constantly on the phone with Lennon and Harrison, dined with Ringo Starr at Christmas, had his nearly finished memoir in his pocket and time to polish it beyond Jan. 12. The publisher paid advances and the project had the blessing of all four Beatles. No wonder he sounded so confident during his interview with Laura Gross," Zach recounted what he had picked up from the podcast. Sarcastically he added, "Reason enough to get high on booze and Valium, whine all over his friends, and brandish a gun for no reason until they shoot him."

"I see two possible explanations for this inconsistent behavior: Evans lived his life in neat compartments that he encountered separately, as Womack puts it.

Or the story that he was psychologically disturbed, drugged up, and practically committed assisted suicide is not true."

"What if he was drugged without his knowledge?" speculated Zach.

Veronica mused. "Since we know, thanks to Uncle Paul's legacy, that the manuscript is worth its weight in gold, we can assume an interest in preventing its publication. However, we are still unable to confirm or refute the various accounts of Evans' end."

"What were the police doing in the house? Who called them in?"

"His girlfriend, Fran Hughes, was reportedly so concerned about his mood that she called his ghostwriter, John Hoernie. The latter reported finding Evans crying, 'really doped up and groggy.' Evans reportedly asked Hoernie to make sure the memoir was actually going to be published. A verbal dispute then ensued, he said, during which Evans picked up a firearm. The ghostwriter reportedly tried unsuccessfully to wrest it from him. The girlfriend then called the police. Evans reportedly refused the officers' request to put his gun down, so they shot him."

"Okay...the man has lost control of his emotions – shit happens. His girlfriend calls the police and makes the mistake of her life – how could she have known: shit happens. The officers lose evidence; it occurs now and then - shit happens. The estate disappears while being shipped to England – shit happens. The ghostwriter doesn't fulfill the deceased's last wish because he either didn't keep a copy of the manuscript or there were legal hurdles; shit happens again. The publisher mothballs Evans' diary and forgets it in the basement for ten years – yet another glitch, shit happens. When it reappears together with other papers, it is not his wife who gets informed but Yoko Ono procedural error; shit happens. It is not until 35 years after the rediscovery that Lily Evans admits to possessing her husband's memoirs. At least in this one case, I would plead premeditation," Zach summed up. "Taken individually, each of these events may have been the result of simple human error, but when viewed in the aggregate, I think that this many accidents are highly unlikely. If Mal Evans was intentionally taken out, Fran Hughes is at the top of my list of possible accomplices, then the ghostwriter. Who broke up the household, the girlfriend again?"

"No, his friend, the singer Harry Nilsson. He was the one who sent the urn and the estate to England."

"I like his music," Zach said.

Veronica looked at him from the side teasingly. "Even if I told you that, two years before, Mama Cass of The Mamas & The Papas was found dead in Nilsson's London apartment in 1974? And that two years after Evans, in 1978, Keith Moon of The Who was found dead in the exact same room as Mama Cass, in the same bed even? Both were thirty-two years old, by the way... Oh, and the post-mortem has been performed by the same doctor. What a coincidence!"

"Then Nilsson belongs on the list."

"If you wish so. I don't see any current connections of these people to Liverpool, though."

"Nor is there any need of such. We're interested in the one who hired them, if he exists, because that would probably be the one who was also behind Paul's death. It would have to be someone with the financial and human resources to follow Uncle Paul's transactions, and who could accomplish the same thing almost fifty years ago."

"And who had and still has an interest in it." Veronica added.

"Goes without saying. But it narrows down the circle of people considerably: two Beatles still alive, a Beatles widow or two, and perhaps close friends of the band, such as Donovan or the Stones; although I think it rather unlikely that they knew what was in the manuscript. The ex-Beatles, on the other hand, had approved the release, according to Womack – certainly not without seeing the pig in the poke."

"Why would you give someone a permit and then kill him; especially a close confidant and loyal servant with whom you certainly could have negotiated? They could have simply issued a gag order, either in person or through the courts; they did that against their bandmates, didn't they?"

"Because the man, with his immense inside knowledge, was probably a walking time bomb. And to deflect suspicion from themselves."

"Fine. We're still deep in the land of speculation about possibilities and probabilities, but the picture is at least coming into sharper focus."

"You think so? We're groping through a forest of conflicting information. Besides vague suspicions, what do we have in hand as a basis for further investigation?" her father complained.

"More than the police with their useless videos and mental blinders. At least we have an investigative hypothesis."

"I have a head that's about to explode. And I don't know if I like the direction this is all going. Have you thought about what should happen if we can substantiate evidence against a Beatle?"

"The answer to that question will have to wait until that happens, but don't you want to know..." Veronica faltered, restarted, "Don't you want to know the truth?" Zach took a deep breath. In a trembling voice he answered, "I fear the abyss that is opening up before us.

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5: <u>Sheeplosophy</u>

When Veronica went into the store on Sunday morning to check out the *Sgt. Peppers* album, she saw a woman standing in front of the outside door. At first she wanted to ignore her, because they hadn't reopened for business yet. However, the face looked familiar to her. She stepped closer and recognized the waitress from the Italian restaurant they had visited three days ago. The waitress waved and indicated by hand signals that she would like to come in. Veronica unlocked the door and opened it.

The woman smiled broadly. "Grazie. How nice to see you again, signorina. Only here of all places...are you buying the Fab Store?"

"Good morning, Mrs... uh..."

"Borghese. Maria Borghese." She wore a simple black knee-length dress, a small black hat, and carried a handbag.

"Won't you come in, Mrs. Borghese? My name is Veronica Ziegler, by the way. I am the niece of Mr. Campbell."

"Oh, then you are the heiress?"

"No, my father is. You have already met him."

"Si, si. I don't forget friendly people so easily. Is he around as well?"

"Yes, but he still sleeps. Can I do something for you, Mrs. Borghese?"

"Possibly. I come to you with several requests. First, I would like to express my condolences for the loss of your relative. Signore Campbell was a fine man, always correct and committed to the truth. I, too, grieve for him."

"Thank you for your compassion. The circumstances of his death are shocking. We feel very disturbed."

"I can relate to that. We all feel that way."

"Did you know him personally, Mrs. Borghese?"

"Everyone here in the neighborhood and everyone in Liverpool who is proud of our Fab Four knew him. But yes, I knew him more intimately. We worked together on several levels. That's one of the reasons I came here."

"Oh? I thought you made your living in the restaurant."

The woman shook her head. "Signorina, no one earns their income in a restaurant, often not even the operators. I used to mop the store daily for Mr. Campbell and clean the apartment weekly."

"That sounds like anything but a lucrative job."

"A little bit and another little bit add up to a whole bite. Signore Campbell paid handsomely, and he sometimes gave me more challenging jobs that we could make a good living on."

"Your children and you? What kind of jobs are you talking about?"

"My children have long since gotten on their own two feet. Signore Campbell and I did the archival and Internet research together that made it possible to obtain memorabilia."

"And you are visiting us today because you hope to resume your work, I assume."

"This will not be easy even under the most favorable conditions. No one can replace Signore Campbell's instinct for this business and his personal relationships. But I know my part in the Fab Store's success," she said proudly. "Therefore, I harbor the hope that a new tenant who is not completely out of touch with the real world may be able to learn the ropes."

"We've had similar thoughts. My father and I run a detective agency that, while not making us rich, generates a sufficient income. If we are to keep the store going, we need expertise: details of the lives of the Beatles, or knowledge of the collector scene and auctioneering, to name just a few points where we are at a loss. A certain Mr Bishop, whom you should actually know as well, has nevertheless tried to encourage us. To be honest, we are realistically skeptical."

"Oh, you already know Henry the Horse? I regard him as a most honorable man. He has consistently kept every agreement, paid on time, and I have never caught him in a lie. Some people don't take the truth too seriously, as I'm sure you've had to learn in your line of work." Maria Borghese winked.

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Veronica moved her hands in a way that signaled it was part of her daily routine. "Separating the wheat from the chaff is part of our business; apparently it was part of Uncle Paul's, too."

The woman nodded eagerly. "That's right. We used to know our customers well, but we also had to separate the wrong leads from the right ones. There are a lot of people out there who want to make themselves look important by making unsupportable claims. For example, there is someone in Hawaii who is offering an Austin Mini Cooper supposedly owned by John Lennon for \$250,000 – including documents. Allegedly, the car is largely in its original condition. Even those who know a little about the subject can quickly see that something is wrong. If you trace the page back through the *Internet Archive*, you'll notice that no papers were mentioned at the beginning."

"I see, so you were involved in the acquisition of LGF 969D."

"696. The number of the original is *LGF* 696D," Mrs. Borghese corrected.

".... as is well known *among collectors!*" added Veronica, giving the tone of voice of the notary Miller.

Maria Borghese laughed dryly. "You've obviously met that gentleman, too. Well, Signore Campbell and I were able to trace the car. It has since been repainted – by John himself, still – but it has retained its number plates all these decades. The car in Hawaii, on the other hand, bore a previously unknown plate."

Veronica was impressed by the woman's command of detail and alert mind. She felt there was little to think about here. Fate had sent this Mrs. Borghese to them. Of course, only her father could give a final answer to the question of permanent employment, but she had a good feeling about this woman. She said, "Whether we will hire you is, of course, for the boss to decide." She grinned wryly. "And it depends first and foremost on whether we keep the store. But we've already discussed cleaning help. I think you can come back tomorrow at the same time to clean 'on trial'; fully paid, of course. We'll discuss everything else later. What do you think?"

"Signorina, I am very pleased. Give my regards to your esteemed father. I hope he will accept my services – at least until the decision about the store is made. You do have a say in the matter, I presume?"

She was terribly quick on the uptake and had a feel for the interpersonal, Veronica thought admiringly. Moreover, she felt taken in by the woman's sympathetic nature, as she had at their first encounter in the restaurant. This could be masquerade, of course. Dyed-in-the-wool con artists or psychopaths, for example, often possessed the gift of manipulating their victims by ferreting them out, then telling them exactly what they wanted to hear. Veronica's bullshit detector hadn't gone off. That could be a good sign – or a dangerous lapse in her vigilance. She decided to trust appearances for today, while making a mental note to herself not to push it too far. Her father also had a good nose for difficult people, as he euphemistically called them. He would quickly put a stop to any attempt to pull them over – if there was one. If Maria Borghese was who she seemed to be, then... "Yeah, sure," she said. She had a say in the matter. Very definitely.

* * *

She had just set her foot on the first step of the stairs when she remembered why she had actually gone to the sales room. Two days ago she had already wanted to take a look at the *Sgt. Peppers* cover, but there was always some distraction arising before she could carry out her intention. On Friday it had been Henry, on Saturday it had been the suitcase research, and today it was Mrs. Borghese. To remain flexible in the light of new facts was a strength on the one hand, but on the other it tempted her to let herself be driven into hectic activity by events. What they had learned since their arrival through conversations and research had been very enlightening, in fact even breathtaking, like an intellectual paper chase that led from one clue to the next while the rest of reality remained almost completely blanked out.

Veronica had to smile, because it reminded her of a cartoon she had seen: A *Pokémon Go* player followed the clues on his phone's display with his head down – right over the edge of a cliff. Accidents had indeed happened; someone had then developed an app that overlaid the camera image semi-transparently so that its user at least wasn't brought down by a common banana peel or curb. However, the narrowing of the visual and mental horizons by the game app also diminished the users' attention in other ways: literally under their noses, their movement information, consumption preferences, perceptual habits and other

personal data were siphoned off in order to then feed their cell phones with subtle consumer marketing that matched their tastes. In this way, players were specifically steered to a snack bar here, a clothing shop there and a music store elsewhere, in which they kindly left a few Euros, Pounds, Dollars or Yen, often despite their regular habits. *Google* advertising pays for itself in more ways than just clicks on a search results page. And the camera app had enticed users to keep playing where a painful bruise would have been in order to bring them back to themselves....

But what was this young junior detective complaining about? She too was again following breadcrumbs in her thought and was about to lose sight of her intention. The human mind was a bag of fleas, Veronica mused. How had her father once characterized it? It took some practice and tricks to keep them together, so that they performed feats instead of distracting you with annoying itching.

So, now she would...

"Good morning, Veronica! You know the penalty for getting up early on a Sunday!" her father thundered from upstairs.

"Yes, Dad. First one up serves breakfast."

"Hurry, to the kitchen! Make sure the coffee is steaming decently."

"Be nice to your daughter. I'm going to look after you someday."

"I don't plan on exceeding my expiration date. Besides, I'm the one who's going to go buy the rolls. Do you want me to get you something special or not?"

"Pretzels, if you can find any in that northern English kraal. Other than that, I'll take what you shoot. You're the hunter in the family."

"That's right. Now get off the stairs so I can leave."

"You're not leaving the house like this, Mr. Ziegler."

Zach looked down at his rumpled pajamas. "What...oh my! All that's missing are the curlers!"

Veronica snorted with laughter. Pushing past him, she recommended he consider using a comb and razor. Alluding to a passage from Malcolm Evans' diary, she called out, "Socks, Mal." A slipper flew past her, missing her by a hair's breadth. Giggling, she hurried to the kitchen, slammed the door, and

turned the key. A dull rumble announced the impact of the second slipper. Then it got quiet and the household went about its Sunday morning duties.

* * *

"No pretzels," Zach announced the bad news after returning from the hunt. "As far as Swabian specialties go, Liverpool lies in Africa after all."

The table was set for two, coffee bubbled on its hot plate, and the sun shone in the window, bathing the room in a warm glow. The scene made one want to spend a leisurely day. Daughter and father sat down across from each other.

"Speaking of Africa," Veronica began the conversation as she poured black brew into Zach's preheated cup. "Guess who showed up in front of the store this morning?"

The detective sipped for a moment, then tossed half of his tankard's contents down his throat. Veronica had found a colorful collection of motif mugs of all sizes in Paul's kitchen cabinets, most with Beatles or other music references. The largest of them, which she had put at Zach's place setting, bore on one side a photo of the middle-aged Paul McCartney; he was looking directly into the camera, eyebrows raised, mouth half open, lips parted; a caption announced what the picture seemed to be saying almost on its own: "Baaa!" She suspected something more than claptrap was going on, but she found the motif hilarious even without having inside knowledge.

"Is this another one of your guessing games you love to torment me with in the morning?"

Veronica let a moment pass as she looked at him challengingly. "Yeah," she said slowly.

Zach sighed. "Africa-related, then. Someone I know, of course."

"Yes."

"From London?"

"No." She butchered the bakery bag that held six rolls. She pulled one of them out and ostentatively placed it on her own plate. "You've got five more misses, then I'll heat up some stew for you."

Zach smirked. "From Liverpool then?"

"Yes."

"Was Henry the Horse here again?"

"No. He said he always has breakfast in town on Mondays – not until tomorrow." She pulled a second roll from the bag and again deposited it on her plate. "That was a stupid mistake, Mr. Ziegler."

"Miller?"

Veronica wordlessly grabbed another roll from the bag and added it to the others.

A growl fit to instill inferiority complexes in a pit bull sounded from Zach's throat. "I don't know anyone from Africa. None of our acquaintances have been there. Is this another Beatles-related thing?"

Veronica pondered. "Yes, but you can't know anything about that. Therefore, no!" She grabbed a fourth roll from the brown paper cone.

"Put that back! You're breaking the rules!"

"Sue me, why don't you? Would you like to buy a clue?"

"Yes; and don't you dare take me for a ride..."

"Wouldn't think of it." She cashed in the second-to-last roll from the bag, grinned. "She speaks Swabian, but not High German."

Zach slapped his forehead with his hand. A groan escaped his chest. "Oh, sure. The come-here – the Kraut with the Italian roots. She came by this morning? Did you talk to her?"

As Veronica reached for the baker's bag to hand him the remaining roll, he snatched it himself in a flash and yanked it close. She shrugged. "Yeah, that's the one. See – no Beatles reference as far as you're concerned. I played completely fair and square."

"Don't make me drag all that blood from a stone. What's a Catholic woman doing in a rock music store at such an ungodly hour? What did she say?"

Veronica recounted, verbatim, her conversation with Maria Borghese.

Zach spread butter and jam on his solitary roll and chewed with relish on the large bites he took of it while listening to his daughter. "So that's her name. Maria," he commented when she had finished. "It's a pretty name; it suits her."

"That's all you can think of for her? A pretty name? Being in love must be wonderful," she teased good-naturedly.

"Now, one will be permitted to notice, ..." He puffed, then looked yearningly at his daughter's plate and asked, "Could you lend me one of those?"

Veronica smiled warmly. "Take as many as you like. I can't handle more than one or two anyway." Then she continued, "I found she was well dressed, looked confident, and she made a mentally alert impression on me. I also think she has some people skills and compassion. She shows a sense of humor, must have detective instincts if she helped Paul's searches succeed, and seems to be able to perceive and remember crucial details in great volume."

"Almost too good to be true," Zach agreed with her, chewing contentedly. "Are you perchance the one here who has a bit of a crush?" He winked when she snorted indignantly. "That's okay, I'll talk to her tomorrow. If she's even half as competent as it seems, she can stay with us. We really need help as soon as we reopen the store."

"Wow, this comes as a surprise. You decided to keep it?"

"For now. With Maria's help, we'll manage the sell-off of some of the inventory. If that works out, we might take on a customer order to see if we're able to keep the Fab Store running profitably. I don't even want to think about possible ventures beyond that at the moment. The big challenges are only just beginning from there. On the one hand, the store only has a chance of success with your support anyway; on the other hand, we have to include the detective agency in our planning. For you as co-owner, it could be the backbone of your professional future. So we should move toward a final decision in the coming weeks and months with pronounced caution."

"Or, with all four hands, courageously seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Thanks to Uncle Paul's cash assets, we have sufficient resources to begin something new somewhere at any time, if necessary. We'll never get better starting conditions again. Come on, let's do it!"

* * *

They had toasted their daring with coffee cups, congratulated each other, and then discussed what to do with this Sunday. They agreed on 'no work,'

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'watching a movie,' 'taking a nap,' and to end the day, 'examining the book collection.' Veronica retrieved her laptop from the 'princess suite,' the former guest room that had just become her personal space by family council decision. She carried it down the stairs into the back room of the store and set it up on the coffee table in front of the sofa. She adjusted the armchair so that she could comfortably watch both the screen and the street in front of the store, which she could see through the open door. She wanted to get a better picture of the cycles of activity in the Cavern district. She was interested in what kind of people populated Rainford Gardens at what times. Also, on the fourth day of her stay at the Fab Store, she still didn't know the stores that existed next to and across the street from theirs, or who ran them. She would perhaps take a tour of the neighborhood tomorrow morning, after they had talked to Maria, to introduce herself.

The mobile computer's fan worked audibly strained in order to provide the CPU with enough cooling for it to boot up the overweight operating system. The poor thing was heaving module after module into memory while Veronica boredly counted the heads that passed the store on the street. Zach came down the stairs. He slouched himself on the sofa. "Okay, what are we watching?" he asked.

"Do you like to pick the genre or the title?" she asked back.

"The title. Tell me, what are you in the mood for?"

"Give me something fun."

Zach's eyes seemed to scan the ceiling for appropriate movie titles. After a few moments, Veronica could tell from his expression that he had found what he was looking for. He let out a barking laugh.

"Yeah, I think I'm going to like that movie," she said mockingly. "What's it called?"

"Dark Star' one of John Carpenter's early works."

"Stars, spaceships, aliens. Yawn!"

"Carpenter used an electric iron for a spaceship, a beach ball for an alien, and there's a philosopher bomb on board, too..."

"Alright, my interest is piqued. Turn it on."

Half an hour of amused utterances later, Veronica had forgotten why she had left the door to the adjacent sales room open. The B-movie drew all her attention to the screen. Her father and she shot comments back and forth, giggling. Then a knock on the front door brought her back from the space between the stars to the back room of their Liverpool store. At first the sound was lost in the soundscape of the movie, but its more forceful repetition finally prompted Veronica to look outside. A man dressed in the traditional attire of English senior office workers – complete with briefcase, black coat, vest, white shirt and bowler hat – had positioned himself in front of the entrance. He was about to start working the door again with his knuckles. Veronica stopped the movie, much to the annoyance of her father, who had been deliciously amused by Sgt. Pinback's caprices in recapturing the runaway alien. He drew his eyebrows together. A steep wrinkle formed above the bridge of his nose. "What is it?"

"Visitor. Looks official."

"On a Sunday?" he squawked. "Tell him to get lost!"

Nevertheless, he stood up, slipped on his galoshes and shuffled through the semi-darkness of the unlit salesroom to the front door. In the process, he bumped a table leg with the toes of his right foot. He cursed softly and hopped on the other leg toward the door. The visitor had now noticed him and stopped knocking. Patiently, he faced Zach, who struggled to move with more dignity. The detective reached for the key he had left on the counter when he returned from the bakery. Briskly he unlocked the door, opened it, and snapped, "Yes? Can I help you?"

"Mr. Zachary Ziegler?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm looking for you on behalf of Mr. Kite. He's a regular customer at Campbell's Fab Store and..."

"I do know who Mr. Kite is," Zach barked, albeit less forcefully than he had intended. His annoyance at the intrusion was already beginning to dissipate. As a full-blooded detective, he was constantly itched by curiosity. And so it was now. What an oddball appearance by this guy, who gave no name of his own, but seemed to regard himself as the property of a much more important

commanding authority — formally dressed, but merely the dog of a master, whom he undoubtedly had to imagine as an awe-inspiring presence. Since Paul had shown him how to break the invincible aura of the seemingly omnipotent, however, outward appearances such as dress, poses, or wordiness no longer impressed him at all. He would explain the rules of the house to this woof and then kindly allow him to present his master's wish. "On the seventh day, even the Lord Almighty rested, and I have no intention of changing any of that. On Sundays, this store remains closed. I wish you a pleasant day."

He pretended that he was going to slam the door in billycock's face. The man opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water, quickly raised his hand and choked out a croaked, "But...!"

"Is there anything else?" asked Zach.

Billycock reached into his lapel with his right hand, fumbled around in it for what felt like an eternity, and finally produced a business card, which he wordlessly extended to the detective. Zach eyed the man up and down before accepting it. He casually twirled it between his fingers, then looked down. He read:

'M. Kite, beneficiary. The Wallace Castle, Lancashire,' and a phone number.

"Mr. Kite, yes. We've been that far."

Again he had caught Billycock on the wrong foot. His eyes widened, his mouth formed an O through which air audibly gushed inward. For a moment it seemed as if he was going to start crying, but then the man began to regain his composure. He cleared his throat and said, "Mr... hrm... Kite wishes to speak to you, and suggests a meeting at his castle first thing tomorrow. Is that convenient for you?"

Zach mentally went over their plans for the coming day. "No," he replied. They would speak at length with Maria Borghese. Possibly Henry would drop in as well; who could say how much time they would need afterward to process everything, or what errands would need to be done immediately. "There will be no time for additional appointments tomorrow," he continued. "What do you think Mr. Kite will think of the suggestion to postpone the meeting for a day or two?"

The man pulled out a handkerchief, took off his bowler hat and dabbed his brow. This conversation seemed to be draining the last of his agency. Zach

almost harbored something like sympathy for him, but sorry as he was, you had to drive your stakes in soon enough or you'd get run over mercilessly. He wasn't going to play errand boy for the local chic, and he'd let them know it from day one.

Billycock had finally gotten around to answering. He said, "I...uh, consider Tuesday confirmed. Please be at Wallace Castle at 11 a.m., noon, sharp. Your companion is also welcome." He dabbed sweat from his forehead again.

Zach nodded at him. "Agreed. Pass on my thanks to Mr. Kite for his kind invitation. I look forward to chatting with him." He reached into the back pocket of his pants, pulled out a ten-pound note, and slipped it into billycock's breast pocket. He smiled graciously at the man, then turned, walked back into the store and closed the door. Without looking over again, he strove toward the brightly lit door of the back room, this time careful not to collide with any obstacles. On his way to the back, all his countenance derailed; he forced himself to keep a steady but brisk pace. But as soon as he had slammed the door behind him, he burst out laughing uproariously. Veronica, who had been following the strange conversation, immediately joined in. They snorted and gasped and writhed for several minutes. Each time one of them tried to calm down a bit, another volley of laughter overwhelmed them. Tears streamed down their cheeks. They patted each other on the back, stomped their feet, and some time later finally dropped into their seat cushions, almost exhausted.

"Should I have asked him if he wanted us to bring something from the chips stall for lunch?" resumed Zach. The question triggered another round of amused cackling.

"That's enough, I can't take it anymore!" yelped Veronica.

"Put the movie back on," her father roared, "I have a longing for real people."

"As I yearn for authentic aliens," she complemented.

* * *

The movie distracted them for an hour from the encounter, and from all that was connected with poor Uncle Paul's murder. Neither Zach nor Veronica felt comfortable thinking about the circumstances that had brought them to this Liverpool place. Their flippant conversations, through which they were importing

a piece of their London normality into this unfamiliar room, and the hysterical laughter of just now, which owed much to their irrational play with dangers that were difficult to assess, lay like a thin varnish over the deep-seated sense of impending trouble that had crept up on them. They had arrived here only five days ago, but Thomas Henry Bishop's warning that the abyss into which they were gazing might look back at them haunted them even into the uneasy dreams of the long nap they were affording themselves today. When they awoke around three in the afternoon – with a pain in their butts, broken backs and wrinkled faces – their mood had turned into the opposite of what it had been in the morning. Veronica put on a fresh pot of coffee, then the two of them made themselves comfortable at the kitchen table in some sort of a hangover.

"What's been irritating me for days," Zach began, "is this strange emptiness where Paul should occupy a place in my heart. He was my best friend when we went to school, and a great support at the time you were born. He deserved a thank you and an apology, but he never let me express them. For twenty years he kept himself hidden from me, and then suddenly this violent death that finally burned all bridges between us. It was this realization of irrevocable separation that shocked me at first. I should be sad or angry in a self-centered way because he took away every opportunity to mend our severed relationship. But: nothing. There is nothing. I feel — nothing! He died as a stranger, as the condensation nucleus of a community of shadowy others, as a connoisseur of a vanished culture who made it rich by dragging its artifacts out of the darkness of time into the light of the present. Neither to the man nor to what he has left us can I relate...do you understand what I am saying?"

Veronica, bent over her mug, which she held with both hands, raised her gaze to look her father directly in the eye. "I can only guess what you feel – or rather, what you don't feel," she replied slowly. "Perhaps it is more difficult for you than for me, because you once knew him. To me he has little more substance than the king in a fairy tale or some stranger reported on in the newspapers. I feel no grief because Uncle Paul has never occupied a room in here" – she tapped her chest – "ever." Veronica considered for a moment. "Totally freaky! I mean, from one moment to the next, someone comes into my life who has the power to turn it completely upside down, and I don't even know what he looks like...looked like. I get to know him by scraping his remains off the floor, sleeping in his

home, picking up the thread with his business partners, and becoming interested in the things that had meaning for him. All of this seems more like an adventure than something sad to me."

"Baaa!" – the bleat of a sheep.

Veronica looked at her father as if he had lost his mind. "What did I do to deserve such a comment, Mr. Ziegler? One minute I think I'm having a serious conversation, and the next you're speaking in tongues."

"Thanks to your explanations, it just occurred to me that Paul here" – he turned his mug so his daughter could see McCartney's photo and tapped it with his index finger – "is not giving his opinion on the quality of the mug's contents, but has an important message for us."

Veronica shook her head in irritation. "Which is?"

"Read it right there."

"Baaa!? That beats me."

Zach let out a barking laugh. "If we want to know the real Paul, we have to learn to see him in a completely new way," he said. "Not as others portray him to us – the kind man who always pulled something nice out of a hat for people – but also not as he understood himself: as the shepherd of a flock too stupid to recognize his true function."

"Okaay..." said Veronica, stretching. "And how do we go about that?"

"By observing him, outright spying on him – the way we normally would on a job. We read his emails, scan his hard drive, follow his financial transactions, look in his coat pockets," – Veronica gulped; – "search his furniture, shine a light into the dusty corners of his apartment, look for hidden cavities, reenact his daily activities. We compare what we find with what he has told about himself and what others say about him."

"That's labor for one who has slain her father and mother... Well, all right. Our plan to inspect the house libraries fits perfectly into that program. Are we looking for something specific, or do we want to get a general idea of the collection first?"

"Let's look at what he was occupied with, what subjects and topics interested him. We may already notice something that can be followed up on: much-used

books with markings, dedications, or marginal notes; letters and photographs inserted as bookmarks – that sort of thing."

* * *

They went first to the guest room taken possession of by Veronica, since the smaller stock of books seemed manageable to them despite the advanced hour. "Have you checked the drawers in the secretary yet?" the detective asked.

"Not all of them. Shall I take a look at it?"

"Absolutely." He stepped up to one of the custom-made shelves and tilted his head to read the titles on the spines. There might have been as many as two thousand volumes in this room alone. The spaceship control room, as Zach thought of Paul's study room, might house three or four times that number. Veronica was right. The task of examining Paul's life in detail would be an appropriate punishment for the criminal who had murdered him. This matter had the potential to keep them busy with inane details for years to come. For the moment, however, they were only interested in the broad strokes, and they were on the lookout for anything that stood out. He wanted to get to know the man to whom he owed his undeserved wealth, not just be its beneficiary. There it was again, that word. It carried connotations of the parasitic. Who was it that had made it their banner? Zach pushed the thought to the edge of his consciousness and focused again on the wall of books in front of him. He liked the literary taste that manifested itself here. Paul had provided his guests with a wide range of classics, interspersed with some little-known gems like John Christopher's "Empty World" or Daniel Quinn's "The Story of B."

Veronica addressed him. She had swiftly completed her inspection of the secretary and now reported that she had found nothing worth mentioning except for rose-water scented stationery and some hair ribbons. She suspected that female guests had been staying here. Zach grumbled. Veronica walked over to the bed, sat on the edge, looked around.

Zach resumed his examination of the book collection where he'd been interrupted. "The Three Suns" by Cixin Liu; Simmel's "To the Bitter End," B. Traven's "Death Ship." He pulled out the volume. A postcard was stuck in it as a bookmark; the motif showed the port of Lisbon, the message on the back was

difficult to decipher. He put the card back in the book and placed it in its spot on the shelf. More book spines, and yet more. He pulled out a thick tome. A split in the top cut revealed that something hid between the pages. "The Brothers Karamazov" he read on the cover. He opened the book. A photograph that looked familiar. At first, he didn't understand. Then the realization hit him like a shock: that was him and his stepbrother, exactly twenty-two years ago. They were standing outside the church, Paul holding Veronica, his godchild, in his arms, shortly after her baptism.

Zach turned to the young woman she was today. "Look, this is Paul..."

She lay on the bed, her eyes closed, her feet still planted on the floor. Her breathing was steady. Her father looked at her; a gentle expression settled on his features. He took a deep breath, flipped a corner of the bedspread over her, and placed the picture on the secretary so that she would notice it on waking. Then he read the place where he had found it. It seemed meaningless to him. So he slammed the book shut, put it back on the shelf, and left the room. Quietly he closed the door behind him.

* * *

Veronica awoke sometime during the night. Her eyes opened twitching. It was pitch black. She felt as if every single vertebra was aching. Cautiously, she propped herself up on her elbows at first, then carefully straightened into a sitting position. Where was she? Faint light filtered through two windows. A small room. After she adjusted to the darkness, the rough silhouettes of the furnishings peeled out black on black. Shelves. Books. A small cupboard... a secretary! Oh yes, the guest room...no, her room in her new home, she corrected herself. The memory of the early evening returned. She had fallen asleep, just like that. Too much information, too much emotional roller coaster. "Baaa!" bleated a sheep in one corner of her mind. Veronica couldn't help but laugh. "Thanks for waking me up," she said. She rubbed her eyes, then groped her way to the door and the switch next to it. When the light came on, she squeezed her eyelids tightly shut. Man, was it bright. Through narrow slits, she looked over at the secretary, on which stood a pocket alarm clock. Almost twelve o'clock! So she had brilliantly wasted Sunday in sweet idleness. "Well

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done, Veronica!" she scolded herself. "You've come a long way with your research."

She felt awake and listless at the same time, so she sat down on the floor, leaning her back against the bed. What now? Take a shower? After that, sleep would probably be out of the question; it was going to be a long, long day, this Monday. Her eyes roamed over the lower compartments of the opposite shelf, not realizing what she was seeing. "Bha-qa-vad-qi-ta," she idly spelled the title of a thick book. "Christian Rosenkreutz," she read on the spine of the next book. This was followed by "The Egyptian Book of the Dead," several volumes from the hand of Aleister Crowley, three volumes of Helena Blavatsky's "Secret Doctrine," "The Teachings of Hermes Trismegistus," "The Perennial Philosophy," "Kabbalah for Advanced Students," and this strange volume with the symbols on the spine that were unknown to her. She pulled it out and opened it at random: the facsimile of an ancient manuscript, pictures of strange plants and animals she had never seen, framed by hard-to-read gibberish she couldn't decipher. Beautiful but quirky, she thought, and put it back. An "Introduction to Numerology" was next to it on the right. Frought with meaning, she noted, difficult to grasp at this moment. She would ask Maria if she knew what it was all about. Fatique threatened to overtake her again. In order not to have to wake up in rumpled clothes again, she undressed, simply let everything slide to the floor, slipped under the covers and fell asleep again in no time.

6: Maria Borghese

Six o'clock in the morning. Once again, she was the first to embrace the dawning day. This was becoming a habit. Outside reigned a foggy gray that made any move to leave the warm bed seem absurd. "Why don't you stay a little longer," it suggested, "close your eyes and enjoy the hazy realm of half-sleep." But Maria Borghese would audition again today. Veronica wanted to be better prepared for it than she had been the day before, when the sudden reencounter with the pleasant waitress from the Italian restaurant had taken her completely by surprise. The revelation that, with Maria, an opportunity had opened up to continue Uncle Paul's work instead of having to start from scratch or simply close the store had hit her just as unexpectedly. She considered how she could put Maria's talents to the test. A vague idea or two began to take shape as the young detective flipped aside the sheets, put her feet on the soft carpet, and made her way to the shower.

Refreshed and far more successful than she had been in her nightly attempt to restore her waking consciousness, she grabbed a pocket mirror from a bathroom shelf ten minutes later. She hurried down the stairs, where she caught a glimpse of the round picture beneath McCartney's vouthful face. Spontaneously, she took the small frame off the wall, then opened the door to the salesroom, turned on the light, and searched for where Henry had pulled the album from the LP cases. She flipped through nearly two dozen Beatles records before finding what had been subliminally preoccupying her for days: the cover showed numerous familiar faces - from Cassius Clay to Lawrence of Arabia and the Monroe to Karl Marx – against a blue background. Its colorful intensity was only challenged in its dominance by the four figures in the foreground of the diverse crowd. The wind instruments they held in their hands and their pseudomilitary carnival uniforms identified them as a marching band. Their mustachioed faces looked confidently at the camera - in stark contrast to the four childlike dark-clad Mop Tops next to them, who stared at a freshly raised mound of earth at the bottom of the picture. Red flowers formed the word "Beatles" on it. Above it, right in the center of the cover, at the feet of the

marching band, the most striking element of the whole scene captured the viewer's gaze. The large bass drum bore the inscription "SGT.PEPPERS LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND".

"Well, I'll be damned!" thought Veronica, who had of course seen the cover countless times in her life, most recently on several occasions as she walked through Liverpool's Cavern district – just never through the eyes of a detective trying to solve a mystery. It was so obvious. Still, it had never occurred to her before that it might show a funeral scene. The bright colors and the many confident, sometimes smiling faces of the assembled celebrities had made her think it was a happy event, with everyone posing for a photo. But the marching band was not called "The Beatles"; those were buried under a bed of flowers. In their place came Sergeant Peppers' Lonely Hearts Club Band, a new star in the British rock music scene.

Veronica went to the counter, placed the record on it and the round picture right next to it. She pulled out the pocket mirror and held it horizontally exactly centered over the words "LONELY HEARTS" so that it reflected the top of the bass drum. She had begun to hope that Uncle Paul's mysterious wall decoration was merely a quirky piece of visual art in which the person who created it had tweaked reality a bit to make his work interesting. But what her mirror showed was completely identical to the picture in the black round frame. Instead of "LONELY HEARTS," she now read:

I ONEI X HE ◊ DIE

What did it mean? She had absolutely no clue what the left side of the cryptic lettering said. It had to be some kind of code. The statement on the right seemed all the clearer though. "Oh shit!" she hissed softly. The small rhomb turned out to be an arrow. What could not be seen in the picture of her uncle: It was pointing at the man in the bright blue uniform. It was pointing to McCartney – *Paul* McCartney.

Wait, Veronica interrupted herself. The connection was also made in the back room. There, the rhombus pointed to the portrait of the youthful Paul McCartney which hung above the small round frame. A storm of numerous voices erupted in her mind, all vying for attention at the same time: What was this about? Was

the band trying to communicate that the musician had died? Did the cryptic part of the code somehow encipher the event, the date, or the reason? Who was playing in Paul's place?, some rattled off their long list of questions, while others, without giving a conclusive answer, declassified any doubt about the continuity of the band's history as nonsense; the mirror image had to have come about by pure chance, they claimed. It was a technical artifact into which people read garbage, they said.

"But why did Uncle Paul pin that artifact to the wall?" more voices croaked. "Surely not because he thought it was garbage. And if that other, that more famous Paul is deceased, did that play a role in the murder of the shopkeeper of the same first name?"

Veronica had the impression of attending a press conference or a heated parliamentary debate that had been turned into a lion's den where tempers had been stirred by someone's provocative statement — except that the "debate," if that's what one wanted to call the agitated shouting, was taking place in her mind. She rubbed her temples, took a deep breath. The cacophonous cackling and chatter quieted and, after a minute of regular breaths, finally died away altogether. She would follow it up — but not now. Now she would serve breakfast for her father and herself, then prepare a snack for three.

* * *

Zach breezed into the kitchen at seven, where it smelled pleasantly of a warm morning meal. Contrary to his usual mood at this hour, he greeted Veronica cheerfully. "Well, the first one again? Didn't you sleep well?" he asked.

"Maybe a little too long," she replied, "but otherwise okay. How about you? Why are you so chipper? You haven't yet eaten that clown I was going to serve you for breakfast, have you?"

"Me? Chipper? Tosh. I just can't wait to dive into this busy week."

"Which just happens to start with an attractive lady visitor."

"Nonsense!" he rumbled.

"See how he squirms. Cute!" She winked. Zach grimaced and emitted a sound that was like, "Hrmpf." Then they let the subject rest and sat down. Veronica explained the questions she thought they should ask Maria Borghese. She was

interested in clarifying some connections that could lead to troubling conclusions. If Maria had given a truthful account of her work for the Fab Store, she must have come across the same irritating facts at some point. She should at least know which threads the Zieglers could follow to get closer to solving the mystery of the missing manuscript and Paul Campbell's death. Zach agreed.

Around eight o'clock, they descended the stairs. The light in the back room was still on and the door to the sales room, which was also brightly lit, stood open. Her early-morning self had paid little attention to detail in retreating from that storm of thoughts, Veronica admitted to herself. Even the record, the pocket mirror, and the small round-framed picture still lay where she had last looked at them. Her father's sidelong glance and mocking "Tsk tsk!" annoyed her. She was proud of her cool head, which she usually managed to keep even during emotionally exhausting phases of her detective work. She considered the shock she had felt in the face of the *Peppers* code and its implications as an embarrassment. She would do everything in her power to wipe the slate clean.

Maria stood already in front of the door. She was talking with another woman. When the doorbell rang, the women interrupted their conversation and looked over.

"Bongiorno, Signore Ziegler!" greeted Maria Borghese in typical Italian melody.

"Good morning," said the other lady as well, a blonde perhaps forty-year-old whose voice and demeanor were reminiscent of a small bird.

"Good morning, ladies!" greeted Zach back good-humoredly. "At last we have proper British weather," he continued after a quick finger point at the murky soup above their heads. "The perpetual sunshine was beginning to get on my nerves."

The women laughed cheerfully and nodded.

"Do not feel disturbed. I just want to let you know that we are now ready. You may come in at any time, Mrs. Borghese."

"Grazie. There is nothing important. We just ran into each other and exchanged a few words. I'll be with you in a moment."

The women said goodbye kissing cheeks, then the Italian took the three steps to the store in a rush. Once inside, she greeted both Zieglers again. She shook

hands first with Zach, then with Veronica. "Signore Ziegler, how nice to see you again."

"The pleasure is all mine, Mrs. Borghese. The cheese spaghetti tasted excellent. But who would have thought you were capable of so much more than cookery?"

"Although I gave the chef a few recipes, I bear no responsibility for the quality of the food in the restaurant. If I may, I will cook original Swabian food for you both here one evening."

"We will take you at your word," Zach announced, "but first let's talk business. If you'd like to work for us as a cleaner, you can start immediately on the same terms as Mr. Campbell – or would you like to renegotiate?"

"Very kind Signore Ziegler. I am satisfied with the old contract. Signore Campbell adjusted the pay once a year for inflation. I will mop the shop's floor daily, clean the front window when needed, and dust the furnishings. On Mondays I clean the back room and the apartment."

"Quite wonderful, Mrs. Borghese. Do you happen to have a copy of the contract with you? I'll redraft it in my name."

The Italian woman opened her purse, pulled out a double-folded letterhead, and handed it to the detective. Zach noticed the precise, elegant movements of her hands. He accepted the paper and passed it to his daughter without looking inside. "Will you take care of this, please?"

"Sure." Veronica winked at the both new and former employee. Maria Borghese returned the gesture with a warm smile.

"Mrs. Borghese," Zach continued, "Veronica told me that you mentioned you were familiar with the Fab Store's regular customers and had been involved in researching the acquisition of memorabilia. Did we understand you correctly there?"

"Si, Signore Ziegler. I wrote the accounts for Signore Campbell and kept his records in order. I have also met all his clients personally. Sometimes they use my investigative skills directly. I am invited to collectors' meetings. So I know people's habits, interests and reliability very well."

"What was the process like when you helped Mr. Campbell locate an object? How am I to picture that in practical terms?"

"A client or Signore Campbell would come to me with an idea and ask my advice. Most of the time I could tell them something about the chances of success or even a possible search path. If they had difficulty locating the object, I would sit down with Signore Campbell at the computer in the study room. We complemented each other very well in finding more information about objects. Sometimes I had to visit a library or an archive. Once we got close enough, Signore Campbell would contact the owner or use his connections to reach him. Not everyone is open to such inquiries, you must know."

"What was in it for you?" Zach wanted to know.

"I got five percent of the profits, and he gave me access to any source of information I asked for."

"That doesn't seem like much, considering your part in the success."

"He offered me more, but I didn't want it."

"You didn't want it???" interjected Veronica, astonishment written all over her face. "You work two small jobs that barely pay the basic necessities, and you're turning down the opportunity to get rid of your worries?"

"What worries? I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't have expensive hobbies. For the few obligations I can't avoid, the money is quite enough. More of it only spoils the character. I have arranged my life so that the body as well as the mind and soul may be content. If you want to be happy, you should know when enough is enough."

"Forgive my incredulous question. It is very rare to meet people like you. As I told you yesterday, my father and I have lived similarly modestly. We are going to get along quite well, I think."

"I think so too, signorina. You can tell how people feel about material things. That's why I took an instant liking to you when you came into the restaurant."

"The feeling is mutual, as I'm sure you know," Zach interjected, and Veronica nodded in affirmation.

"Would you say you're particularly knowledgeable about the music scene, especially the Beatles? Or is your success rather based on your research methodology?"

"Both apply. The subject interests me more than any other. Most of the facts about the group are still hidden in an almost impenetrable fog of half-truths, silence and myths, but that makes it especially appealing to me to poke around in it. I've probably read every book, website and article that exists in English, Italian or German – and I don't forget anything I've read once. That's why, by the way, I could answer customer questions – like that one, for example." She pointed to the items Veronica had left next to the cash register.

The young woman's face reddened. On the one hand, she was again annoyed by her lack of caution; on the other, she found the sharpness of Maria's mind terrifying. But since she had resolved anyway to make the *Peppers* code the touchstone of the Italian's abilities, she now took the opportunity to learn more about its meaning. "I have two questions," she said, "What does the writing in the mirror say, and why did Uncle Paul put it on the wall?"

Maria Borghese was silent for what felt like an eternity, studying Veronica's face. The young woman was far from avoiding this look. After a week of researching one absurdity after another, she wanted answers. The tension in the room became almost palpable. When the Italian finally began to speak, her voice was serious and unusually deep: "We are about to enter the gates to the First Circle of Hell. So I suggest we go to the back and sit down."

* * *

The Italian's words had thrown Veronica back into that confused state she had been in when she discovered the *Peppers* code earlier that morning. The cacophony of voices in her head deafened her and prevented her from forming a clear thought. As if in a trance, she packed up the record, the small round frame, and the pocket mirror and followed her father and Maria to the back of the room where her uncle had been murdered. She closed the door. A round stain on the wallpaper beside it marked the spot where the round frame had hung. For a moment, her mind went completely blank. Then she looked down at her hands. She saw the little picture.... What now?... She hung it back in its place. Her eyes read the writing: "I ONEI X HE ◊ DIE", read it again: "I ONEI X HE ◊ DIE", again: "I ONEI X HE ◊ DIE", again: "I ONEI X HE ◊ DIE."

She turned around. Maria Borghese was just sitting down in the armchair. Her father settled himself on the sofa. His joyful mood had completely vanished

within seconds. His face looked ashen. Veronica thought she knew what was going on inside him. They were again standing by that dark abyss of which Henry had spoken, and he dreaded what they might discover in its depths.

"Signorina, Signore Ziegler," the Italian began to speak, "I regard myself as a person who tries to look at things realistically. I refrain from exaggerated representations. The success of my work depends on it. Therefore, do not take what I have to say now as pompous bumbledom. These are highly explosive facts. When you have grasped them in their full significance, you will never again be able to see the world as well over ninety percent of the people out there do."

Awkward silence.

"I would have liked our first day of collaboration to have been more lighthearted. What a misfortune to have to go like a bull at the gate. Perhaps it is best this way, however, since you will be dealing with these matters almost daily from now on anyway." Maria Borghese paused again. Finally she leaned forward. Looking from one to the other, she asked, "Have you ever heard the rumor that Paul McCartney is dead?"

Veronica groaned under her breath. "I suspected as much!"

Zach's head bounced up and down several times. "It was only the day before yesterday that the head of Homicide pointed it out to me. I'm almost sure I heard it decades ago but didn't take it seriously."

"Did he?" asked Maria in amazement.

"Yes. He dismissed the idea as urban legend."

"Good Desmond is one of those who should know better. I maintain, moreover, that he does indeed know better."

"Wait a minute, you're saying there's more to the rumors than sensationalism?" Veronica.

Instead of an answer, the Italian slowly closed her eyes and then just as slowly opened them again.

"But... how does it work? We've been toying with this notion because, of course, its revelation would have given the best reason to shut down Mal Evans and other blabbermouths. But when I think about the practicalities of replacing a

global superstar with a double, my imagination fails me. Billions of people would turn their eyes to this person every day. Someone would have raised the alarm." "Are you sure they would? Billions of people turned their eyes to media images that had 'Paul McCartney' printed underneath them. They saw what they were told to see. Although various images of Beatle Paul can be laid side by side, proving that multiple doubles have been used over the years, to this day people see what they expect to see. The use of doubles has long been common practice in politics and entertainment. Stalin and Saddam may represent the best-known examples of this. Doctored movie footage and photographs are also neither a rarity nor a novelty. Think of all the celebrities who look very different in real life compared to the glossy pages of fashion magazines. In the age of *Photoshop* and deep fakes, authentic photographic documents are quickly becoming a scarce resource. Very, very few people, on the other hand, get close enough to the physical person to be able to perceive subtle differences."

"Okay, but why are those same few all playing along? Why doesn't anyone say, 'That's not our son'? 'That's not the person I interviewed last year?"

"The answer to this may be different for different witnesses. Evans' fate is perhaps the most extreme version of how someone can be silenced. It is important to remember that influential people often prefer to remain among their peers, in a kind of closed community, where everyone knows when to keep their mouth shut. Financial control over news publications can prevent unwelcome stories from spreading. Family members will not want to tarnish their relative's memory with scandal. Business partners will fear losses if it becomes known that the goose that laid golden eggs for them has died. The government might fear riots and suicide surges. So there are plenty of reasons to play along. What I find much more fascinating is that both the band and people close to it have made countless discreet references – like the ones on the cover of the *Sgt. Peppers* album – that have either never been picked up by the mainstream or have simply been dismissed as nonsense."

Zach straightened up. "That's a point that seems contradictory to me. I find it illogical that on the one hand they're pulling off a change of players in secret, possibly involving the elimination of unwanted witnesses, and at the same time, literally with drums beating and trumpets sounding, they're breaking the news."

"There may also be various reasons for this," Maria Borghese explained. "One may have hoped to slowly prepare the public for the bad news. Or it may have been a cat-and-mouse game to prove what could be pulled off in plain sight. The band will have been sworn to secrecy, but exploited every opportunity to blurt out the truth under the guise of art and fiction. And perhaps the vanity of the stand-in played a role as well, wanting posterity to know who was really behind the brilliant music of The Beatles' late period."

"All those many 'maybes," Veronica complained. "Don't they know anything for sure? When and how did McCartney supposedly die? Who is the man supposedly replacing him?"

"Well, the standard biographies feature all the undisputed facts. The Beatles gave their very last live concert at Candlestick Park in San Francisco on August 29, 1966, and returned to London the following day. On their way home they already let it be known that they no longer wanted to perform live. The four musicians immediately devoted themselves to different solo activites. Until the release of the *Sgt. Peppers* album in May 1967, they gave very few interviews, and never as a group. They also appeared so rarely on television that a rumor came up that the Beatles had disbanded. Fan magazine *The Beatles Book Monthly* responded to another rumor in February 1967: that Paul McCartney had died in an accident on the icy M1 motorway on January 7 was completely untrue, they wrote. The Beatles press officer had announced that he had spoken to the musician on the phone. Paul had let him know that his black *Mini Cooper* stood safe and sound in the garage."

"And that was a lie," Zach interjected, half questioning, half stating.

"Oh, no, the report was factual. It is a prime example of gaslighting, a red herring right from the textbook. It did not happen on January 7, 1967 as reported, but on September 11, 1966, less than two weeks after their return from the US. Paul McCartney did not own a black but a lime green *Austin Mini*, furthermore a silver blue *Aston Martin DB5* and a dark green *Aston Martin DB6* – the car involved in his accident. He did not crash on the M1, but on Dewsbury Road, a winding country road. The rumor of Paul's death on Jan. 7, '67, on the M1 in a black *Mini Cooper* is truly made up out of thin air."

The PI snorted. "Brilliantly stated, one has to concede. Now what makes you so sure that your version of the story is the correct one?"

"We have the man who replaced the deceased."

"Now it gets interesting," Zach said. "What's his name?"

The Italian grinned. "He calls himself Sir Paul McCartney."

Zach let out a barking laugh. Veronica giggled. "No kidding!" she quipped.

Maria Borghese joined in their laughter. Then she continued, "The title track of the *Sgt. Peppers* album gives us his name: Billy Shears. At least that's one of his names. Not only is he 'the man of a thousand voices,' as we learn from the song '*The Fool On The Hill*,' a great voice impersonator, but he is also a man of many names, including William Wallace Campbell, William Shepherd, Billy Pepper, Apollo Wermouth, Vivian Stanshall and Phil Ackrill. Later, in addition to the persona McCartney, others were added, for example, Percy 'Thrills' Thrillington. In the movie '*Magical Mystery Tour*', he reveals to us that he was born in 1937, which makes him five years older than the real Paul. To say the least, Billy makes little secret of the fact that he was standing in for a dead man. It starts with the funeral scene on the *Peppers* album that was directed by him – you've already discovered the code with the date of death, signorina – , runs like a thread through hundreds of passages of song lyrics from that point on, comes out constantly in ambiguous interview remarks, and culminates in a nearly seven-hundred-page autobiography that's hard to beat for candor."

"You must be joking!" marveled Veronica. "One of the most famous men in the world writes his memoirs, but no one takes any notice of the confession that Sir Paul's real name is Billy Shears – or whatever?"

"Signorina Veronica, he is not selling the book under his Beatles name, of course. That would certainly get him into big legal trouble, as he points out in the text. The title is *'The Memoirs of Billy Shears'*, was 'encoded' by a certain Thomas E. Uharriet, and claims in the imprint to be a fictional historical novel. In the book, however, he refers again and again to 'this so-called novel', a literary form he had to choose in order to be able to talk straight. Thanks to this construct, he can always credibly claim that it's all fictional – a pure fabrication."

"Well, maybe it is. How do we know that the *Memoirs* are not an invention of this self-styled encoder?" Zach interrogated.

"The book has appeared in a handful of editions since 2009. It bears McCartney's likeness on the cover, puts words in the musician's mouth,

accuses him of complicity in a crime, and quotes more than is lawful from the lyrics of his compositions. In fourteen years, Sir Paul has never taken legal action against it. The publisher's trade name is *Peppers Press*. With a little research, one quickly learns that it is one of the many subsidiaries of *Macca Corp*, the holding that manages Sir Paul's personal finances and investments. The coder is the managing director of the publishing company. The book was first released on the same day as the Beatles remasters, on 09/09/09, and is being promoted by Uharriet along with Sir Paul's official memories, *'The Lyrics*,' which was published in 2021."

"Okay, strong indicators to suggest that Sir Paul and Billy Shears are the same person," Veronica conceded. "What about solid evidence?"

"McCartney's facial geometry changed dramatically from mid-1966 to early 1967. One could perhaps attribute some of it to surgery and implants, but some of it definitely not. His face has grown longer, as have his ears; they now stick out less, are no longer connected to the cheek at the lower end, and differ in other details that cannot be reshaped. His overall height has become longer by quite a few inches. His girlfriend Jane Asher's eyes were previously above the level of his mouth, and later at chin level. Compared to Mal Evans, he was originally half a head shorter than the roadie, later little was missing and he would have been his equal. When the Beatles were still performing together, George, Paul and John were about the same height. Later photos and films show clear differences in size between the fake Paul and the others. It starts with the front and back of the *Peppers* cover. See for yourself!"

Zach picked up the album to study it in detail, turned it to look at the other side as well, then nodded. He passed it to Veronica. She, too, could not help but agree with Maria Borgheese's descriptions.

"But that's not the whole story by a long shot. Hold on: a DNA sample of Sir Paul taken for a paternity suit from Germany did not match a sample from the early sixties. A handwriting analysis proved that the signatures from the sixties and the eighties did not originate from the same person – the later one was drawn by a right-handed person; Paul, however, was left-handed. A voice analysis came to the same conclusion: not the same man. When Sir Paul was arrested in Japan in 1980 for drug offenses, officials found that his fingerprints

did not match those taken in connection with an arson charge in Hamburg in 1960."

"Stunning. So why is the man still at large?"

"The case in Germany was dismissed as time-barred. In Japan, the British government intervened in his favor. The independent investigations into voice and physical appearance were only selectively picked up by the so-called quality media and quickly dropped again. All those who still won't let up are done in by the little word 'conspiracy theory'."

"We've been very familiar with that since 2020 at the latest. It's infamous, but you're right," Zach agreed. "It doesn't matter anymore what you can prove and substantiate. As soon as you contradict the majority — who believe unquestioningly what the mass media tells them — you're labeled a crank; as if truth were the result of popular votes."

Maria Borghese had been looking intently at the detective as he spoke. She asked, "And what about you, Signore Ziegler? Which side are you on? Does your heart beat for the majority or for the minority? Is the official story true or are the infowarriors right with their alternative view of things?"

"I have no stake in this game. I'm interested in the truth, no matter where it leads me. It has no two sides, it does not compromise. We all see reality through our personal lenses and communicate what we perceive of it as long as it furthers our personal agenda. It is inevitable because it is human. Therefore, the responsibility for my mind – for perceiving, processing, remembering, and communicating sensory impressions – can only ever, without exception, rest with myself. My heart beats for those who make a sincere effort to live according to this insight. The rest of them can go to hell with their faith in authorities for all I care."

"That's exactly where they'll go, believe me. That's precisely what they do. But let's save that subject for another day. I am most pleased to have found in you brothers and sisters in spirit. I have no doubt that we will work together excellently. You are worthy successors to Signore Campbell."

"Thank you Maria – I may call you that, mayn't I?" said Veronica. "We feel a similar connection to you. I will have to do my own research, of course. If what

you just told us is true, that changes everything. However, the answer to my original questions is still open."

"Sure... Veronica," the Italian replied with a gentle smile. "You want to know what the code on the bass drum says?"

"Yes. And why Uncle Paul put it on the wall."

"Under the portrait of the young Paul McCartney, mind you. 'I ONEI X' stands for 11 IX, the eleventh of September – an important date in dark Masonic numerology. Coincidences don't happen in their world. These people plan for centuries in advance. A death on 9/11 or 11/9 indicates a ritual sacrifice. 'HE ⋄ DIE' explains itself, but is slightly incorrect. The rhombus points to Billy Shears, the living McCartney performer, not the deceased Paul McCartney – quite the opposite of your uncle's arrangement." She pointed a thumb over her shoulder at the wall next to the door. "Signore Campbell worked under the premise that the *Peppers* code was telling the truth. That made it easier to fulfill the outlandish requests of his customers, almost all of whom are convinced that Paul McCartney died in 1966. He never told me why he put the picture up, but I think it was to give him a daily.... pinch."

"I remember you saying McCartney died in a car accident. How does an accident fit with a scheduled sacrifice?" interjected Zach.

"When I was at school in Germany, we went through traffic training for cyclists. A couple of policemen showed us how to avoid accidents. I still clearly remember the title of a brochure they handed out at the time: 'Accidents never happen by accident!' That's all the more true because the driver of the DB6 believed his fate was sealed, and as his lot may have been assisted, as the Shears memoirs suggest."

Veronica shook her head. "For all my love of the truth, I think we learned more this morning than we can process in such a short time. I have a thousand new questions, but the top of my head is about to burst off. Let's change the subject and have a snack."

The PI and the Italian woman agreed. While the two discussed details of the collaboration, Veronica fetched juice and sandwiches from the kitchen. When she finally sat down again, she merely grabbed a small corner of cheese, which she began to nibble on. She followed the conversation with only one ear. Her

thoughts were hundreds of miles away, on a moonlit winding country road lined with old trees.

7: Baaa!

Shortly after ten o'clock of that same Monday morning, Thomas Henry Bishop alias Henry the Horse also snowed in, as expected. Maria Borghese was cleaning the back room. The floor of the store, which the Italian had mopped, was still shining with dampness. Henry took off his hat, greeted the two Zieglers good-humoredly, and noted, "I see you found a cleaner."

"We got lucky and were able to take over the contract with Paul's cleaning lady," Zach replied.

"Oh, so Semolina is continuing to work here? I'm very happy for her. You'll see, the woman is a treasure!"

"Semolina? Who's Semolina?" asked Zach in amazement. "Our helper's name is Maria Borghese."

Henry laughed sheepishly. "I apologize for causing confusion. Maria is, of course, a valued member of our Family, and as such goes by the name Semolina Pilchard. You haven't had a conversation with her about the Beatles yet?"

"You have no idea... well, you probably do have more of an idea than we do, after all, you warned us about the dark corners of the band's history. However, we haven't gotten around to talking to Maria about the collector scene in Liverpool in the short time we've had."

"Do that, Zachary. I trust Semolina's judgment completely. Since I'm here right now, I'll be happy to provide information myself."

"Well, we had the dubious pleasure of meeting one of Mr. Kite's creatures yesterday morning. He invited us to Kite's castle today."

"Then I shall not trouble you any further. I have just returned from my Monday breakfast and merely wish to acquaint you that the sum for the tapes has been instructed."

"Very kind of you, thank you!" replied Zach. "Were the recordings able to meet your expectations, then?"

"Beyond measure. I found the conversations between the musicians to be most entertaining. They actually worked on two unheard pieces. The decision not to include them on the album was justified, but who knows what would have been the result if the guys had polished them a little longer."

"The Beatles were genius. I can't think of another word to describe the music."

"The music is undoubtedly splendid, but writing songs did not come easily to the lads. There's plenty of evidence that a lot of it has been penned by ghostwriters, and a good proportion of the recordings have been recorded by session musicians."

Zach groaned. "Henry, don't take offense, but we got a full broadside from Maria – Semolina – today. Veronica and I will have to verify and process this before we can get into any more bad news."

"Of course. Take all the time you need, Zachary. If you continue to run the Fab Store, there will be plenty of time to explore the less pleasant sights behind the beautiful backdrop. So what have you decided? Are you going to reopen the store?"

"Yes, we will be able to make the attempt with Semolina's help and thanks to Paul's basic stock of goods and savings. After all, we've already met three members of the Family, and tomorrow we'll meet the fourth."

"Oh tomorrow only? I understood you were invited for today. When are you expected to arrive at Wallace Castle?"

"I've rescheduled for tomorrow at eleven."

Henry showed an impressed face. "You have a most courageous spirit, Zachary. I like that. However, don't try the maestro's patience too hard. His sense of humor has its limitations."

"Maestro? Rather a circus ringmaster, judging by the clown he sent ahead."

"As I indicated, Kite enjoys family connections and financial wherewithal that make it advisable not to irritate him unnecessarily. Keep in mind that he probably generated most of Paul's turnover with his commissioned pieces. And he occasionally assists other collectors, which ultimately benefits you as well."

"That's all right. I just don't like being intimidated and bossed around."

"Did the envoy tell you what the reason or occasion for the invitation was?"

"No. However, we can be sure that he will want to talk about the manuscript."

"He may also want to know how things are going with the Fab Store. If I were him, I would try to extend my feelers to figure out who I am to deal with from now on."

"You would. Uh, huh..." Zach winked. His right index finger pointed at the older man, his thumb descending like the cocked hammer of a revolver.

Bishop's eyes widened. " You got me there. Admittedly, I am ahead of Kite by the length of a nose for once."

"And you're putting on a little more skill. You know, Henry, I have no problem letting clever people reap the rewards of their efforts. However, it goes decidedly against my grain when someone pulls an Agent Smith act."

* * *

After cleaning the back room, the Italian climbed the stairs to clean the apartment. In the kitchen she met Veronica, who was sitting at the table with a cup of tea. She apologized for the disturbance and let her know that she would continue her work in the other rooms. Veronica, however, shook her head and invited her to join her. "Would you like a Darjeeling, too?" she asked. She made a move to rise to get a cup from the cabinet.

"Stay put, Veronica." Maria opened the compartment with the glasses and cups and took out one of the mugs. It showed a caricature of Ringo; written underneath it read, 'The Last Beatle.' "Mine," she said, and when the young woman looked at her in surprise, she added, "Your uncle and I got along very well..." She seemed to test the words in her mind for effect. "I came here every day to clean. We'd sometimes spend hours discussing possible search paths to retrieve an object – often enough right at this table."

A sympathetic expression settled on Veronica's face. "Keeping your own cup in your workplace does not constitute a crime." She poured tea into the Ringo mug. "You miss him, huh?"

Maria Borghese closed her fingers around the heating vessel. She nodded, but said nothing more. The two women sipped their cups in silence for a while. Finally, the Italian began, "I was about your age, in my early twenties. I had a daughter, just one year old, and a boyfriend I was going to marry. He was from

rural Swabia. We were studying in Tübingen, he medicine, I librarianship. His family constantly made me feel that, as a Catholic and a child of guest workers, I didn't belong. People complain that the Catholic Church is terribly old-fashioned, and there is no doubt about that; but compared to the narrow-mindedness of many Protestants in Germany, Italian Catholics are downright liberal. I could only stand it with difficulty and wanted to leave, but I stayed to finish my studies and, of course, for the sake of my boyfriend. As time went by, I realized that he avoided talking about our future together. He was especially evasive about discussing our marriage. At some point, I confronted him. He confessed to me that his parents were opposed to me and that he simply wanted to continue our informal friendship. I said that I didn't think that was fair to our daughter. I had a job lined up with a documentation project in Liverpool; so I suggested we could go to the UK, he could finish his degree there, and then we could get married."

The Italian looked at her rocking reflection in the cup for a while. Then she looked up. "He refused. So I just packed my bags and left. I took the job on the project; they were putting together a book on the history of popular music in Liverpool. I was to compile the bibliography. I produced a list of journal articles for them that I think was second to none, but unfortunately the project leaders fell out before the work could be published. One day I received the termination letter, but the Beatles virus had long since infected me. The contradictions in the official story fascinated me beyond measure, so I began to read about the band's history some more. Most book authors indulged in uncritical hero worship. The Internet was just beginning to come on the scene. There was also very little to be found in there. The information was more often based on enthusiasm than on factual knowledge. So I looked for historical witnesses."

Maria took a sip from her cup, raised her eyes to the ceiling. She continued: "There, too, I mostly encountered people who put the Beatles on a pedestal or even elevated them to gods of rock'n'roll but there were a few whose memories seemed more profound. Slowly, a picture began to form that painted the sixties in a less glamorous light. I began to understand that music was as much a part of showbiz as the movies. That's still true today. The attitude conveyed is what matters. The vast majority of groups and solo musicians got their contracts with labels for their looks and appearance, not for their qualities as songwriters or

performers. Companies at the time hired professional songwriters and session musicians to make records. All the professionals from the era confirmed that very few major bands played on their own albums. Behind most of the big names of the sixties and seventies were studio orchestras like the Wrecking Crew or session musicians like drummer Bernard Purdie, who claimed to have played on over 20 Beatles tracks. Ringo Starr, he says, was not involved in the band's first albums at all."

"You mean the Beatles were fake from day one?"

"That's a harsh word. Within the scene, musical acting was not seen as something disgraceful, it was the norm. Most consumers desired pretty appearances, and a variety of styles and forms of expression. They identified themselves with Elvis Presley, Fats Domino, the Beatles or Aretha Franklin, but in the end they kept listening to the same hired musicians in ever new packaging. The sleeve of a record performs exactly the function that the word 'cover' indicates: it conceals the real production process and coats it with an 'image,' a make-believe reality."

Veronica sighed. "So it worked like in politics. Whoever promises a flourishing economy gets elected. Those who truthfully report what it really requires to achieve progress end up on the sidelines."

"The Monkees' fall was a warning to the entire scene to keep up the appearance of gifted talent at all costs. Purdie mentioned that he had been paid princely not only for his technical skills but also for his keeping his mouth shut."

"Okay, but what set the Beatles apart from the rest was, above all, their ability to write great songs that even fifty to sixty years later still inspire people. To this day, many bands say the Mop Tops influenced them the most."

"When your Uncle Paul arrived in Liverpool in the early 2000s and opened his store, I immediately became friends with him. Unlike all those souvenir stores and rock venues in the Cavern district that cater to the idol worship of their tourist clientele, he followed a completely different concept. He wanted to know what was really going on at the time, because that opened up new leads for him that helped unearth unique items that had been thought lost. The pedophilia scandal at the BBC had sharpened his eye for the hidden depths in the music industry. He always had his doubts about the claim that someone could record

an entire album with over a dozen tracks in a few hours ready for broadcast. He knew how much work it took to produce professional-sounding arrangements. But the proof that the official story of the supposedly brilliant Beatles was just a Cinderella story was provided by others, and only much later. A certain Mike Williams picked apart the official chronology of the recordings for the album *Rubber Soul*. According to his experience as a musician, the claim that the Beatles wrote, rehearsed, recorded, mixed and produced sixteen top-notch songs in thirty days is completely implausible. The story becomes technically impossible when you consider that, after the studio work was done, there remained less than three weeks until the initial release. That was only feasible if there was nothing left to do except pressing and packaging the vinyl discs. That meant the artwork, labels and cover printing had to be finished by the time they left the studio, and that required for the titles of the songs, their playing time, and sequencing to be known – weeks or months before the Beatles went into the studio, supposedly empty-handed."

"Huh?" Veronica shook her head. "Then who's playing on the album? And if it's all fake, why bother entering the studio at all? Why didn't they give a more believable chronology up front?"

"The Beatles recorded the album *Help!* in 1965, went on tour and posed in front of the camera for a movie of the same title. The yellow press made sure that the public was aware of where they were at any given moment. During the film shooting they were constantly stoned. They also had no time for songwriting and recording after their tour, because their next record had to be in the stores by Christmas to exploit the Beatles brand commercially to the max. They themselves said they were burned out and had no songs in spare that they could have brought in. The Christmas date could only be kept if the songs were written and the instruments largely recorded when the Beatles entered the studio. Very likely they did little more in there than record the vocals. They had just a day or two per track to get it perfect, and they did it supposedly in less than five takes each."

"What about the credits? Lennon-McCartney?"

"Let me quote from a *Mersey Beat* article that appeared just before the sessions for their first album in September 1962: 'The Beatles will fly to London to record at EMI studios. They will record tracks given to them by their recording

engineer, George Martin, and written especially for the group.' The same George Martin later told in interviews that he didn't see the band as having either the artistry or the craftsmanship he thought it needed to succeed."

Veronica's mouth dropped open.

Maria Borghese smiled. "None of this is court-proof evidence, of course, but it is strong circumstantial evidence. The grandiose claims of the official story, on the other hand, are not supported by anything at all. No one has testified to seeing the boys writing songs. There is no footage of the recording sessions. The few photos look staged. Of the one hundred songs they claim to have written by the time of their first album, only a handful have been used; of the rest, not even the titles are known. A third of the material they performed live and on record consists of cover songs, and it remains that way right up to the last concert in 1966. Things only changed when Billy Shears, a trained, experienced studio musician, took McCartney's place. That's why Signore Campbell had put the *Peppers* sculpture and the *Rubber Soul* image in the store window. They symbolize the two big lies surrounding that band: that they were exceptional talents who could pump out hits on cue, and that they remained the same four friends throughout their career. The Beatles were the product of an industry that sold mass-market compatible illusions."

"So there was a virtual assembly line that produced hits on schedule, and the bands served as sales fronts." Veronica continues the thread.

"Not was — is!" the Italian replied. If young musicians, actors or even athletes today wonder why they don't get ahead despite undeniable talent, it's because it's usually more expensive for industry to foster natural talents than it is for them to breed the next generation themselves. The former are hard to control because they have creativity and a will of their own to develop it; the latter are submissive, dependent tools in the hands of a machinery that can cast them into prefabricated molds and imbue them with a contrived image."

Veronica pulled a sour face. "I prefer the sixties as I've seen them on TV." She emptied her cup, looked at the picture of McCartney thereon, and said in disgust, "Baaaah!"

"Ba-a-a!", Maria corrected her in the tone of a bleating sheep.

The two women looked at each other, then began to laugh.

"Really? Ba-a-a? What makes you so sure?"

"I had the mug made for Paul. It was my last birthday present to him..." Maria sighed. "You don't recognize the scene depicted?"

"Would I ask then?"

"Sir Paul was facing questions from some reporters at an event in Moscow. Someone wanted to know if he was real or a double. He replied that he couldn't say because it was a secret. When he left the place shortly after, he turned around again and bleated into the microphone quite convincingly."

"Bizarre! And what was that about?"

"Some think it was a condescending gesture toward the sheeple, folks who let themselves get duped by the mainstream media, but that doesn't make sense. If you know that one of the double's names is Billy Shepherd you get a definite answer to the reporter's question."

Veronica still looked doubtful. "Maria, listening to you, I feel foolish not to have discovered these things myself already. My father and I tried to find out some more about Mal Evans's archive a few days ago, and we came across similarly outrageous ambiguities. On the one hand, it looks very much like a disinformation campaign; on the other hand, that impression could be due to a series of misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and clumsy statements. This thing is really huge when you think about all the implications, if you know what I mean."

"How many statements like the one in Moscow do you need before you come to the conclusion that he didn't merely behave clumsily? Three? Six? Ten? I can show you at least a dozen. Sir Paul has often been queried on the doppelganger issue. On each occasion he gives an ambiguous answer, rather than clearly distancing himself from the claim that he is Paul's double. There are almost as many documented statements from close friends and colleagues who call him 'Billy' or 'William' or speak of McCartney in the past tense. This guy here —" she pointed to the Ringo caricature on her mug, "claims to be the last remaining Beatle. McCartney's brother Mike once said he last saw Paul at his funeral. At what point do supposed misunderstandings become realizations? I understand your worries only too well, Signorina. We are not talking about the John White Band from Podunk, but about the greatest and to this day most

influential musical group in all history. It is 'merely' entertainment, but if these kinds of stunts could be pulled off right here under the eyes of the curious world public, what is happening in less noticed places of real significance? The answer to this question shakes one's entire worldview. I know it shook mine. It hurts; believe me, I do understand that. But you have to decide what's more important to you: the pretty facade of your mental edifice or the integrity of its substance."

8: Maxwell's Silverhammer

When they had left Liverpool behind and were following a winding road in a northeasterly direction, Veronica had greater pleasure at the wheel again. She didn't like city traffic at all. Country roads and highways gave the GT more opportunity to show off its driving qualities. Some called it a tail skidder, but Veronica thought those people lacked sensitivity in playing with the steering wheel and pedals. Every vehicle had its own physics and every road its own challenges. It went without saying that the characteristics of a road had to be taken into account when driving. So what was the problem with considering this car's specific characteristics? Spotting a tight bend some distance away, she eased off the gas and shifted down a gear. Curves could kill. As she rolled through the turn at just the right speed with only the suggestion of squealing tires, then immediately accelerated again, she thought that she would rather trade this feeling of real-life travel that the GT afforded her with a bicycle than with electronically assisted driving.

With few exceptions, people considered her and her father oddballs because they liked to do things themselves, preferred to repair objects themselves, and figured out complexities themselves as often as possible. The two detectives felt uncomfortable when screens or government-certified experts kept them away from the screws and gears of a mechanism. Putting themselves under outside control, no matter how minimal, made people lazy — and fuzzy-headed, Veronica found. Electronic assistance, health insurance, wage labor, expert judgment, or public opinion could create a dependency as irresistible as tobacco, alcohol, or drugs. Ultimately, any such addictive relationship produced an inability to subsist under one's own steam and thus led the individual directly into the chains of money- and power-hungry structures. How many people understood that the journey to a desired destination was just as much a part of life and provided at least as much pleasure as having arrived there? How many were able to disregard the ringing of the phone? How many could go weeks without the Internet? Who dared to believe their gut feeling over a doctor's

diagnosis? Who afforded to disagree with their boss, their neighbor, their life partner, the popular opinion, when it potentially entailed sacrifice? – Exactly!

"I think we're getting close to our destination. That building over there on the hill should be Wallace Castle," her father interrupted her train of thought. "Gee, it's actually a palace."

The façade of the three-winged complex in neo-Gothic style consisted mainly of large traceried windows and was crowned by battlements. Filigree oriels jutted out on all corners of the masonry, continuing tower-like above the height of the eaves. Numerous chimneys rose above the gleaming roof tiles. The building was surrounded by a park, the park by a grove, and the grove by a high wall. Wallace Castle overlooked the valley through which the old trade route from the Midlands to the Scottish Highlands ran, and along which they approached it. It took them more than five minutes to reach the elaborately forged gate in the wall through which the road led to the castle. When the car came to a stop in front of it, Zach got out to call attention to their arrival, but he could detect no bell. A flashing red light diagonally above him revealed the position of an active surveillance camera. The detective had barely spotted it when the gate's two wings retracted to the right and left.

Zach got back in the GT. He and Veronica glanced at each other. She shrugged and slowly steered the sports car through the opening onto a cobblestone road that wound upward in a curved stretch through the woods. As they passed the last trees, the scenery took their breath away for a moment. Low, precisely trimmed shrubs, in association with flower banks, formed a park full of mazes, patterns, and symbols. But the awe-inspiring façade of Wallace Castle, which they were now approaching, did not allow more than a fleeting glimpse of the French garden. The driveway now led right toward the central court of the castle. Between the two wings of the building, the road divided into two arms that joined again under the roof of a porchway. Veronica took the lefthand path and brought the GT to a halt directly in front of the porch's façade. The space beyond the pointed-arched passageway, directly in front of the main entrance, was already occupied by a car that, because of its completely unseemly appearance in this place, she would not have expected. Judging by the Volkswagen's immaculate white paint, polished to a high gloss, one might have

suspected a vehicle fresh off the assembly line, but of course Beetles were no longer being manufactured these days.

Again, the detective and his daughter looked at each other. "He must have another visitor," Zach guessed. Veronica removed the ignition key. She opened the driver's door and got out. Zach got out as well. They walked along the sleek hood of the GT toward the entrance. Amused, they looked in passing at the egg-shaped vehicle, because of which they had to have stopped outside and which looked so completely out of place here. Routinely, Zach eyed the yellow license plate – a quirk that had helped him solve cases more than once. "LMW 281F," Veronica pronounced what his mind was about to store.

It pleased him how well she had mastered her craft. When he himself had been twenty-two years old, he had not only forgotten a good part of his school education; he had been more interested in daydreams, literature, and nightly discussions with fellow students than in his studies. He had enjoyed his youth as it happened to cross his mind: oblivious to duty. Sometimes he feared that by involving Veronica in the detective agency at an early age, he had deprived her of the opportunity to develop like other girls her age. But as little as he himself had cared about sex & drugs & rock 'n' roll as a young man, she cared about boy groups, girls' nights out, or sharing cooking recipes. She had enjoyed cracking logic puzzles, wrenching on motorcycles with the Harley freaks down the road, and relieving her father of some routine business. She had talent, he had quickly noticed. Once she got past her adolescent insecurities, she also developed an easygoing manner that made others feel comfortable near her.

Side by side, they now approached a heavy wooden door ornamented with elaborate carvings. Zach operated the knocker attached to it at chest level, a thick bronze ring held by an eagle's beak, which he hammered against a metal pad. A few seconds later, they heard a latch being pulled back. Slowly, the door swung open. Standing in the opening was a person they identified as a butler. "Sir, Madam, how may I help you?"

Zach replied, "We are Veronica and Zachary Ziegler, owners of Campbell's Fab Store. Mr. Kite invited us for eleven o'clock." He pulled out the business card 'Billycock' had handed him and held it under the butler's nose.

The latter nodded. He motioned for them to enter. As they strode into a large entrance hall populated by numerous columns, the butler bowed slightly. Then

he closed the door again. "Please follow me," he said, leading them across a checkerboard-patterned floor to an ornate staircase, which they used to climb to the next floor. He admitted them directly across the hall into a drawing room whose walls were covered with old veduta. In the center stood five comfortable-looking armchairs with black silk upholstery around a pentagon-shaped table. On the narrow sides to the right and left they saw fireplaces, and next to each was a small door. Opposite the entrance, large tracery windows afforded a view of the roof of the porch, the garden, and the forest beyond. Across its tops, the detectives could vaguely make out a town on the horizon in the atmospheric haze. "Please take a seat," the butler offered. "The master of the house will call you to him as soon as he has attended to some urgent business. May I get you something to drink?"

Zach and Veronica exchanged a quick glance and nodded to each other. "Fruit juice, please," Veronica ordered. Zach indicated by a hand gesture that he concurred with his daughter's request. The man bowed again and then strode out stiffly. Zach raised an eyebrow and stepped up to one of the windows. Veronica joined him. "Will he keep us waiting?" she asked as she tried to make out the symbols in the garden. Her vantage point was unfavorable, the window situated too low, the terrain slightly sloping away. She could make out a labyrinth in the shape of a Celtic cross.

"After my showing a lack of respect on Sunday, we must expect it. Besides, distinguished gentlemen are seldom in a hurry to see the common folk. I hope it doesn't mess up your schedule too much," Zach quipped.

"Not at all. The view is better than in the back room of Rainford Gardens, and the chairs look more comfortable than those in my dentist's waiting room. I can stand it here for a while." She signaled by blinking four times that they were being watched. Zach tilted his head, looked down at the floor, then at her hands. The young woman's fingers went through some quick but unobtrusive motions, indicating, "One camera; above us; in the window." She leaned against one of the window's stone tracery supports and looked down, seemingly unconcerned, at the roof of her orange-painted sports car. She angled her right leg, the toe of her cowboy boot planted on the ground: an inaudible "Here."

Zach unabashedly let his gaze roam the entire room. "Very tasteful!" he said as he stared at one of the old paintings. His head bobbed as if confirming what he

had said, but signaled to Veronica that he had now spotted the camera as well. It was located at one of the branch points of the tracery, so it was barely visible in the stark backlight of the sky over Wallace Castle. Usually the attention of visitors would be distracted by the wonderful panorama anyway. The trained eye of the junior detective, however, was not so easily fooled. She knew most of the tricks that he knew, too. Inwardly, he grinned. Where a camera hung, a microphone could not be far away. Maybe there were some near the open fireplaces, but the most promising location was obviously the pentagonal table in the middle of the room.

Veronica seemed to agree with this opinion. She sauntered toward one of the armchairs and plopped herself into it. Her short canary yellow jacket and equally yellow knee-length skirt contrasted so starkly with the black upholstery that it almost distressed the eye. Zach, with his dark blue tailored suit, fit the scene better. Leisurely, he settled down two seats away.

The door opened. The butler entered. He carried a tray, on it a crystal decanter full of juice, two glasses and two small bowls, one with tiny salt crackers and another with fine chocolates. He set the tray down at the opposite corner of the table from them, poured the glasses half full each, and served them along with the snacks. Then he left the room again.

The juice resembled her car in color, but not strong enough to actually come from oranges. Veronica smelled it. Her brows shot up. She sipped a little and bared her teeth, but made no comment. She took two of the crackers and sat back. Zach, curious by nature, had to taste the drink immediately. "Wow!" he uttered softly after the first sip. "Awesome blend! I taste strawberries – and..." Now he sniffed at it, too.

"Passion fruit," Veronica added when her father offered no further assessment. "Freshly squeezed. This time of year. Still: a great combination," she said so softly she could barely be heard. She formed a fist with her right and pounded her knuckles forcefully on the tabletop. Zach grinned broadly. Whoever was on the other end of the line had probably just ripped the headphones from their ears.

They lapsed into silence. Zach sat down more comfortably. He gave Veronica the hand signal for 'play' and raised a brow. She affirmed. He indicated, "Five."

She continued to nibble on crackers – producing the only sound that could be heard in the room – but otherwise remained seated motionless. After four minutes and fifty seconds, she signaled, "Time's up."

Zach looked at his watch. His fingers answered, "Ten seconds left."

She, "Good enough. Now you." She pointed, "Eleven."

Zach stirred again after exactly eleven minutes and one second. Veronica announced the difference to him. She saluted his precision. He gestured past her to one of the fire pits. She turned her head and looked over. On the ledge there was a kitschy porcelain figurine holding a clock. Incensed, she looked back at Zach. The latter opened his mouth to a silent laugh. The lesson had sunk in. The fact that she had discovered the camera had been a masterstroke. But even less sinister things could take on significance. It was better never to congratulate oneself too soon.

After a little more than another five minutes, the door opened. An athletically built figure in his mid-thirties, about six foot two, clean-shaven, with shoulder-length reddish-blond hair, stepped through the opening. Briskly, he approached the table and greeted, "Mr. Zachary Ziegler! How nice to meet you!"

Zach rose from his chair and reached for the giant's outstretched hand. He marveled at the man's unusually high-pitched voice, which contrasted not only with his figure but also with his vicelike grip. "The pleasure is all mine, Mr... Kite!" he replied.

"Mr. Kite suits quite handily, Mr. Ziegler. My name is actually William Wallace Campbell – the thirtieth of that name – but since we're going to be talking collectors' business, let's use the pseudonyms. Am I correct in assuming that you have not yet adopted one yourself?"

"Very correct. We arrived in Liverpool only a few days ago, and we are not really collectors. I do, however, possess something of a stage name: Leon Leatherthroat."

"I've heard of that! Impressive! You really must show me your art."

Veronica, who had remained seated in her chair until then, had listened to the dialogue with rising amusement. She stood up and said "He only performs in front of paying audiences."

"Says who?" inquired the giant, now facing her.

- "His manager." She extended her right arm to him as if expecting a kiss on the hand. "Veronica..."
- "...Mars!" he added. "What an honor to finally meet the famous lady detective in person."
- "...Ziegler!" corrected Veronica, while William Wallace Campbell actually took the opportunity to breathe a kiss on her knuckles.
- "I do recognize an iron fist when I see one. We'll need a collector's name for you, too, Ms. Ziegler."
- "Hopefully, it looks less hard than it sounds," she replied with a wink. "As for names we certainly do appreciate suggestions."

Zach signaled Veronica to hand over their guest gift. The young woman reached into the inside pocket of her jacket and pulled out a flat, paper-wrapped bundle. She handed it to Mr. Kite.

"Ah, I love gifts that come from the heart!" exclaimed the giant with his strangely high-pitched voice. "It's so warm, even." He fiddled with the knot of the golden silk ribbon that encircled the bundle. When he finally opened the ribbon and paper, he pulled out a stack of autographed Beatles postcards of various designs. "Thank you, Mr. and Ms. Ziegler, for your kind gesture. By the way, did you know that a great many, possibly most, of the autograph cards were signed by Mal Evans, the Beatles roadie? The guys wouldn't have gotten around to performing otherwise because they'd have been busy signing."

"You live and learn," said Zach, who found the remark tactless and ungrateful. "By the way, they originate from the case you and other collectors ordered with my stepbrother. As you know, some people think the whole Evans archive is a hoax."

"Not so your relative, and neither do we. We have reason to believe that we have tracked down poor Malcolm's real effects. Come, let us go into the dining room and discuss the matter sitting down. I've had lunch prepared for us."

Kite led the Zieglers through one of the side doors next to the fireplaces into the nearest room. A long table, surrounded by dozens of chairs, dominated the hall. At its far end, it was covered by a tablecloth. Place settings were ready for the seat at the head of the table and for the seats to the right and left of it. Three servants adjusted the chairs for the two guests and the master of the house. A

fourth servant poured champagne. A few minutes later, the staff withdrew. Kite raised his glass, "To the Fabulous Seven!"

"Seven." Veronica asked the question in the tone of a statement.

"John, Paul, George, Stu, Pete, Ringo, and Bill."

Zach and Veronica raised their glasses. They all took a sip.

"Wouldn't we have to drink to a much longer list of former band members, then?" noted Zach as he set his glass down.

"The members of predecessors like The Quarrymen or The Silver Beetles never performed under the magic Beatles label."

"Andy White did, though."

"Andy was not a permanent member. George Martin just hired him as a session musician to do a job. That's also true of a whole bunch of other people like Billy Preston and Eric Clapton. Let's not quibble over details."

"Details like replacing Paul McCartney with Billy Shears? To my knowledge, that was never part of the official story," Veronica huffed.

"The change was made known to the public through hundreds of clues, but was taken for serious by very few," Kite replied with a smile.

"After getting at least as many denials and an estimated fifty times as many misnomers of the successor as 'Paul' thrown at them."

"What were the boys supposed to do? When William initiated the hysteria in the US of September 1969 – you know, that campus news story and Russ Gibb's radio show shortly thereafter – no one except a few freaks picked up on the references to Paul's death explained there. Where the story landed in the mainstream, reporters ridiculed the 'weirdos' in whose eyes alone it made sense."

"How about a direct, honest, unambiguous statement from the band?"

"Don't be naive, Veronica. John and Paul had made a Faustian bargain, and Paul paid the price. Aside from the upheaval a confession would have created for the band, possibly for the whole music scene, the mass of people would have thought the whole thing was just a marketing stunt."

Veronica stared at Kite's face in disgust. Zach seemed to be studying the color of the champagne. Silently, he twirled his glass between thumb and forefinger.

When no one objected, the giant continued, "The remaining three Beatles and my grandfather have given enough hints to those who want to hear the truth without delivering themselves to the knife. And the rest of humanity retains the freedom to cherish the family-friendly version of the band's story. Everyone is happy, especially the Paul-Is-Dead folks, who can continue to look under every rock for evidence and try to convince others of their theories."

Once again, the detectives did not argue. After all, Kite was right. Before the silence hung over the small group for too long, the servants entered again, this time with the first course of the meal. All indications were that this bore some highfalutin French appellation; to Zach, it was simply soup. He preferred Veronica's stew, whose remainders stored in the fridge were still sufficient for a meal, but they hadn't come here for a cooking contest, after all. They were trying to reestablish his stepbrother's business relationships. Regarding their goal, it had been a mistake to get into this bilious discussion with Kite about morally correct behavior. Then again, the man had revealed some information that might be valuable – about Paul McCartney and Billy Shears, but also about himself and his character. Zach had noticed that even Veronica, who had started the trip with less preconceived notions, was now developing a dislike for the lord of the castle and beginning to share her old man's view. She acted as a corrective, indicating whether he had gotten caught up in prejudice or had appropriately assessed the man: as an uncouth cynic whose put-on noblesse could hardly conceal the fact that the only yardstick he knew was himself and his desires. One had to show him the limits first before entering into obligations. His lordly ego, if disappointed, might follow dangerous impulses.

"Mr. Kite," the detective resumed the conversation, "my understanding of my stepbrother's papers is that you helped commission the search for the so-called Mal-Evans archive because you harbored the belief that the manuscript of his memoirs would be found in it."

"That is correct," the giant confirmed.

"Both the police and ourselves have made an inventory of the stock. The manuscript must have been in the suitcase Paul acquired – at least some manuscript of unknown title and size was in the suitcase. However, it could not be found after the murder. The police assume that the perpetrator took it with

him, hoping to turn it into money. I must therefore inform you that we will not be able to complete your commission."

William Wallace Campbell laughed heartily. "My dear Mr. Ziegler, I can assure you that there is no problem between us in this regard. PC31 informed me as early as Friday, the day the shipment arrived, of the happy news that our gamble had been crowned by success. I went to the Fab Store on Saturday to pick up the manuscript in person."

"Wait, wait! You did – whaaat?" the PI interrupted the collector's flow of speech.

At the same time, Veronica had also raised her voice: "Who the hell is PC31?"

Kite raised his hands placatingly. "Take it easy. One of the reasons I called you in was to update you on the status of the contract. There is no cause for alarm. I am in possession of the Evans manuscript and will, of course, fulfill my part of the deal with PC31 – your relative Paul Campbell."

Again, both Veronica and Zach simultaneously rushed forward with questions. "What kind of name is that, PC31?" the young woman groused, while her father demanded to know when and in what form the lord of the castle intended to repay the million Pounds Sterling recorded in the inventory book.

"The easy question first: there may be more enchanting names, sure. Since Mr. Campbell's initials, as well as his investigative activities, matched those of Police Constable No. 31 from 'Maxwell's Silverhammer,' the moniker remained attached to him; to his credit, I think. You shall, of course, receive the million Pounds – in cash. I am almost convinced that the book is worth many times that. But a deal is a deal. Part of it, by the way, was that the work would not show up in the store's paperwork. Unfortunately, PC broke that agreement; luckily, he did no damage in the process, because, to his credit, he refrained from describing the nature of the item. Without the burglar, however, we would have had to come up with a story to explain the document's whereabouts."

"You expect me to accept one million Pounds in black money? After all, I can hardly declare it if you refuse to sign the receipt for the object. Quite incidentally, you entangle me in obstructing official investigations, because the police still think the manuscript has been stolen."

"I expect only one thing from you: that as far as third parties are concerned, you treat my explanations as not having been said. Mal Evans' memoirs would develop tremendous explosive power if they ever came to light. They'd be better left out of the public eye forever – or at least until everyone involved has gone to heaven."

"Or to hell," Veronica couldn't help herself.

Kite laughed heartily. "I like your quick tongue, Veronica. Just be careful you don't burn it one day. I can only urge you once again not to go around peddling the story," he said. After a second, "The Family is exempt, of course. Desmond, by the way, is one of us."

"Desmond?" asked Zach, who involuntarily thought of Maria Borghese. Yesterday, she had referred to the head of Homicide as Desmond. On the latter's chest badge, it had read, 'D. Wickers', Zach recalled.

"Desmond Jones, also known as Donald Wickens, longtime chief of the police district and currently head of the homicide division as well," the giant confirmed the detective's train of thought. "Good man."

"Who else is a member of the Club?" inquired Zach.

"Have you met Horse and Semolina yet?" Zach nodded, Veronica tilted her head. So Kite continued, "The gentleman and the super-brained cleaning lady. He collects audiophile material, she is always on the lookout for books and articles; good people too, but unfortunately not morally flexible enough. Then there's Dr Robert, Paul's lawyer; I think you should know him as well." Again Zach nodded. "He collects rare photographic material. Molly Jones; she specializes in items owned by the girls in the Beatles entourage. Rocky Raccoon looks for the musical instruments of all kinds of well-known groups. Mr Mustard loves autograph cards, tickets, handwritten track lists and that sort of thing; he helped fund the search for the suitcase, as there should have been plenty of material for him to collect. Be sure to inform him of the entry. Is anyone else missing?" Kite thought for a moment. "Ah, of course! The Duchess of Kirkcaldy. She's just starting to get into collecting. Rare vinyl, clothing items. She doesn't have a clear profile yet. I'm helping her out where I can."

While Kite spoke, the servants were already serving the main course, whose elaborate arrangement Zach tried to dissect in his mind into meaningful

components. He could identify stuffed dumplings, a mash – probably potatoes, perhaps enriched with carrots and melted with onions –, a sauce – *velouté*, he corrected himself – that may have been dressed with cranberries, as well as various lettuce leaves of different origins. Blessed be that which filleth the stomach, he thought to himself, reluctantly coordinating his mouth and hand movements for food intake.

After finishing the course, everyone relaxed into a more comfortable position and drank from the red wine that had also been served up. This time it was Kite who ended the silence, inquiring about the Zieglers' plans. "You're planning on keeping the store open, aren't you?" he asked. "It would be a shame to see it close. From my point of view, it is as important a cultural institution as the Museum. It's already done a lot to bring back, or keep in town, the heritage of the city's most famous sons."

Zach cleared his throat. "We have been seriously considering this option since Mr. Bishop and Signora Borghese assured us of their active assistance. The benefit of our business to Liverpool, on the other hand, is beyond my comprehension. What does the city gain from valuable cultural assets disappearing into the private collections of a few wealthy citizens, where no one but the owners can enjoy them?"

"My dear Mr Ziegler," Kite replied jovially, "you are looking at the matter through the lens of the vulgar. The upper classes are interested in culture, too; in fact, I would like to think: disproportionately more so, and tremendously more aware of the importance of the objects. Your 'business' as you put it generates revenue that generally boosts local commerce and, through tax contributions, helps to fund public institutions. In a few decades, many of the collections will be transferred to the state, which will use them to document the history of the country. Cultural assets thus pass through the layers of society in much the same way as the blessings of trickle-down economics."

Veronica, who appeared calm on the outside but was inwardly seething, as was by no means lost on her father, said coldly: "When a country's security apparatus locks away files for fifty, seventy, or even one hundred and twenty years, as happened only a few years ago in Germany in connection with the extremely explosive NSU trial, the period of time the files are locked away is measured by when the documents' contents lose relevance. In other words:

When no one can derive any significant benefit from the gathered facts any more, historians are getting served the gist of it; that is, in the end, virtually nothing of it gets through to the reader of history books. The comparison with trickle-down economics may not be such a poor one. I would just call it something else."

"Oh yeah? Should there actually exist a better name for it?" teased the giant.

"Oh, yes. I'd call it the piss-on-you economics. You pour in the fine wine in at the top, and after some time of waiting a fraction of it comes back to light at the bottom – yellow and smelly, but still..."

Zach almost choked on the wine he had just sipped. Their host burst into his strangely high-pitched laughter again. 'Hyena-like' was the word Zach had been looking for. Hyena-like.

"Brilliant!" said Kite. "Let me adjust your statement in one tiny nuance. While it de facto correctly describes what usually happens, the intent behind it is not to deprive the common people of anything, but to avoid harm to their leadership."

Veronica's father admired the razor-sharp rhetoric his daughter was displaying today. Whether it took courage for her to go into confrontation like that, he dared to deny. She was still young and idealistic. Someone like that filthy rich Kite, who considered himself above the rest of society, could only be perceived by young women as either highly erotic or outright repulsive. Was the giant impressed by her hostility? Zach doubted it. Nevertheless, he took the opportunity to present himself as the friendlier part of their team. Possibly he could elicit more information from the man. "Could we perhaps have a look at Evans' work? After studying the adventurous story of its disappearance, I must admit that curiosity is eating me alive."

"I'm sorry," Kite replied, "I can't do that. As I said, it must remain disappeared."

"For the rest of the world, sure. But we do have knowledge of the object's whereabouts. And aren't we part of the Family? I would find it tremendously motivating for our work to hold the manuscript in our hands for once."

Kite pondered. "I have an idea..."

Again, four servants entered the room, this time to serve dessert. Zach cringed at the *mousse-au-chocolat*, which he thought he had identified at first, but the brown mass then turned out to be German-style chocolate pudding. The

servants topped it with strawberries heated in their own juice and placed three small glasses of different fruit juices next to each of those sitting at the table.

After they left, Kite said, "Whether you become a member of the Family, the Family decides. I would describe your relationship with it as 'affiliated, and in the process of admission.' Since you, just as your late relative, are not collectors, I would base approval on two conditions: First, you accept the agreed sum for the manuscript as discussed; second, you reopen the Fab Store. It also goes without saying that your affiliation comes with obligations. Be informed of these by Semolina or Horse."

"I was not aware that it required a formal act. I thought you shared a certain... love for the common cause."

"Without question! Only it is not a matter of romantic feelings that come once and then fade away, but of agapé. Agapé stays with us for a lifetime. And we prove our commitment from time to time." With an ironic grin in Veronica's direction, he added, "Noblesse oblige."

The young woman ignored the teasing. With no sign that she had even noticed it, she spooned the pudding, occasionally glancing at her father.

"Mr. Ziegler," Kite continued, "perhaps you can be of some assistance to me in your capacity as a private investigator."

Zach looked up in amazement.

"I have made inquiries about you, of course. Who likes to buy a pig in a poke?" "People who shop for manuscripts in suitcases?" Veronica punned.

"Inquiries, I see," Zach said. "Well, it depends on the nature of the case. What is it about and what do you want me to find out?"

"It's about a missing document," he said.

"I'm not sure we're ready to track down memorabilia just yet..."

"It is a photograph that was stolen from me in the course of one of our Family reunions; presumably a practical joke that overstepped the bounds of what is permissible and is therefore unlikely to dissolve on its own. The circle of primary suspects thus consists of the persons I have previously named. Make inquiries and procure either the photograph or a useful clue."

Zach ran through the list in his mind. "Including you, the family consisted of ten people until my stepbrother's death, right?"

"Correct. We can exclude him and myself, so that leaves eight."

"Who we can exclude, you'll have to leave up to me, or else I'll decline the assignment. I also need more information: What location, what date, what time frame, what photo subject are we talking about? What were the security measures for the object and how were they overcome?"

The giant fell silent for a moment. He grimaced, scratched his nose with a perfectly manicured finger, then replied, "You will not be investigating me. PC31 is ruled out because the crime happened on the very night he died. I had arranged a meeting here at the castle at short notice on the occasion of the successful treasure hunt. He was supposed to bring the suitcase, but he never turned up. We showed each other some other pieces we had acquired recently, including the photograph — a subject from the pathology department that is usually kept in a safe; that is all I want to say about it. The planned celebration turned into a wine-drunk party that lasted into the wee hours of the morning. Shortly after one o'clock, Kirk and I headed upstairs. When I awoke again about ten o'clock, all the guests and the photograph were gone except Kirk."

"Kirk?"

"The Duchess of Kirkcaldy."

"I see. If I'm judging the situation correctly, you probably won't care to elaborate on what happened upstairs either."

"How particular do you need to know?"

"Never mind. I might come back to it if the investigation gets bogged down. What's my work worth to you?"

"Calculate your usual rate. If, with your help, the photo can be recovered, that will double your salary."

Zach and Veronica wordlessly came to an understanding. Then the detective reached out to Kite and said, "Agreed. I'll keep you updated on a weekly basis."

Kite firmly shook Zach's hand. "Daily," he insisted. Give it top priority. I expect the issue to be off the table in a week."

"As you wish."

The lord of the castle showed a pleased expression. He raised his last remaining glass of juice. "Here's to you."

Veronica and Zach toasted back. "To you."

Kite rose. "To mark the occasion, let me fulfill your wish. Follow me."

He led them back through the parlor with its pentagonal table and black armchairs to the door beside the fireplace on the opposite side. They stepped through. The layout of the room matched that of the dining room, however, it was used as a library. "Make yourself at home," Kite said. His left hand gestured in a semicircle to the room. "I'll be right back with you." He left through another door at the far end. Zach and Veronica ignored the urge to discuss what they had heard during dinner, or even to puff up their cheeks. They had to assume that there was another set of instruments pointed at them here, just as there was next door. The two of them examined the floor, walls and ceilings in a mock bored attitude, pretending to inspect some painting or book more closely.

Without any particular hurry, Zach strolled over to a piece attached to a wooden paneling between two cabinets of books. He had recognized the shape without being able to immediately place it. The thing looked like a medieval battle axe or some kind of halberd. Mounted at the top of an arm-length handle stuck a cross-shaped tool. One side, cone-shaped, accommodated the slightly tapering handle; the left wing consisted of a pointed, span-sized thorn; at the top, the object tapered into a dagger-like point. Instead of an axe, the right wing formed a hammer with splayed corners. The wings of the cross were attached to a die, which, like the rest of the weapon, was probably made of silver or silver-plated metal. The handle of the weapon consisted of noble redwood – not a weapon of war, but made for ceremonial or symbolic purposes. It looked dangerous enough. But who knew what damage could be done with a serious equivalent?

Zach's gaze slid down the exhibit. Below to the right, at about the level of his shoulders, hung a framed black-and-white photograph. It showed a subject he had seen before, in another waiting room, just a few days earlier. After all the disturbing information he had absorbed since then, it seemed like half a lifetime away. A formally dressed older gentleman held a historic weapon bedded on a velvet cushion, perhaps a battle axe or war hammer. Across from him stood John Lennon, shoulders slumped, visibly tired. Upon closer inspection, it could have been the same object hanging above the painting. It was even likely, or

else the combination of photo and exhibit made no sense. His thoughts were confirmed by the discreet text panel that was placed on the left, opposite the photo, below the weapon. It read:

Sir Maxwell Knight hands

John Lennon the McCartney biétl.

9 November 1966

Zach's jaw dropped.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" the giant's hyena voice asked from behind his left shoulder.

The detective winced. He turned and took a step to the side. His right index finger pointed at the weapon. "What the hell is that?"

Kite put on a sardonic smile. "As the inscription indicates, it's a *biétl*. The word originates from Old English and denotes a hammer; in this case, a ritual object that represents something like the Holy Grail for Beatles collectors with esoteric knowledge of the band. Did you notice the date?"

"Ninth of November... 9-11, are you suggesting the arm is related to McCartney's demise? I thought he died in a car crash on 11 September 1966?"

"This is what they say. You are relaying the official version of the Beatles story for those who have reasons not to believe the official story for the masses. The combination of eleven and nine has a very special meaning numerologically. If you scan world history for it, you will see many of the most important events take place on that date: On Nov. 9, 1918, the revolution against the German emperor that ended the war in favor of the Allies; on the same day in 1989, the opening of the Berlin Wall, which was of particular importance for the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe; on Sept. 11, 1973, General Pinochet's coup against Chilean President Salvador Allende began the takeover of the world by neoliberalism. This is just to name a few of the better known examples."

"How does a musician who is insignificant compared to all that come into play?" asked Veronica, who had joined the two.

"The most popular musician within the most successful musical group in the world," Kite corrected her, "and thus an essential element in the transformation

of family-based nations into the collections of hyper-individualistic atoms we know today. The corrosive effect of rock music, most notably that of the Beatles and the Stones, on conventional morality has been widely underestimated, even by their worst critics. These bands propagated the slackening of sexual ethics, undermined faith in God and state institutions, popularized the abuse of pot and LSD, set youth against their parents, trivialized Satanism, pulverized any clear notion of what ethics, philosophy, or art were supposed to accomplish, and they influenced an audience of billions. Paul McCartney deserved to be delivered to Lucifer on that particular September date."

"So it wasn't an accident," Zach concluded. "He was simply murdered."

"Let's put it this way: when it comes to historical dates, nothing is left to chance. Maxwell's silver hammer made sure that Paul was dead."

Veronica turned her head toward the weapon and pulled a face in disgust. "I think I'm going to puke!" she mumbled almost inaudibly.

"Max Knight gave the good piece, disinfected and cleaned of all residues, to John two months later... as a souvenir, or rather as a warning. But who knows: maybe this, too, is just a well-fabricated story, a facade before a facade before a facade... Now, come on, I'll show you what you asked to see."

Kite placed the thick leather folder he had been holding on a reading desk two shelf sections away. He opened it at a spot marked with a silk ribbon, about a third of the way through the volume. "Don't touch it! Read at your own pace, carefully, but you won't get to see another page. Facsimiles of this portion of the text can be found at several addresses on the Internet if you know what to look for. It should prove sufficiently that we have the original document before us."

Zach stepped closer. The page was tightly covered on one side with typewritten lettering. He estimated the text to contain about five hundred words. The paper was stained and yellowed. In the wide top margin it bore the handwritten inscription '146 – '. More than one third of the lines lay within a hand-drawn box which was crossed out twice. Further additions and deletions in handwriting gave the page the draft character one would expect of a book manuscript.

The detective began to read: A certain George Kelly and his wife were unhappy because of something Evans had told them on behalf of Brian – Epstein? – and left Cavendish, which was, he remembered, McCartney's home address back

then. The following day, Paul had arrived; everyone had been present – a list of first names followed – and had been amazed and excited... 'They did a good job in Nairobi,' he read, 'it was really happening, it was like we had known him forever.' This was followed by the crossed-out box of about twenty lines, reporting other reactions from those present. Among other things, Mal marveled over *'Strawberry Fields Forever'*, which John, later probably, had played backwards to him. 'What a way to tell a story,' Evans enthused.

The crossed-out box was followed at last by seven lines. Here he mentioned a clinic in Kenya to which he had accompanied Paul, and that the latter now needed a false moustache. Then the text broke off in mid-sentence, to find its continuation on the following page. Without thinking, Zach raised his hand to turn the page. Gently, the giant pressed his arm down.

"That should motivate you enough to reopen the Fab Store, Mr. Ziegler. Accept my offer; one million Pounds, cash, tax free." Kite looked him emphatically in the face. "Come on, you've learned an enormous number of new things today. Let's meet again in a week or two when you've processed it all. Moreover, we'll know more about what happened to the missing photo by then." He put one hand in Zach's back and led him to the main door in the middle of the long side of the hall. The investigator, shaken, offered no resistance.

9: <u>Beyond 1984</u>

The egg-shaped white Beetle was still clogging the passageway under the portico of the main entrance to the castle. While Veronica clumsily tried to unlock the GT's door, Zach eyed the Beetle's license plate again as he planned to search for it in various databases. Finally, the passenger door was unlocked from the inside. As he climbed in, the engine roared to life. The sports car backed up until it reached the point where the two branches of the driveway rejoined. Then, at the behest of Veronica's boot, it shot out of the courtyard of the castle, through the park and the small forest toward the wall. The gate stood open. Without hesitation, the driver steered the orange vehicle onto the country road toward Liverpool.

For quite a while, none of them said anything. Veronica was unsettled by the frequency with which she had been shocked lately. Zach worried about the dark scene that was beginning to emerge from the new information. If he accepted the million in cash that Kite had offered him, he was clearly entering criminal territory. The royal treasury showed no mercy to those subjects who withheld taxes from it. The state was no threat to the likes of Wallace; the man belonged to that fine stratum of people who bent the institutions to their will. Zach, however, became susceptible to blackmail. If, on the other hand, he refused the money, he remained an outsider and was basically out of business in Liverpool. He might as well abandon the Fab Store right away. The two conditions Kite had set for their admission into the Family were in effect one and the same. Cleverly set up. So that's how you became a member of an elite club - and stayed chained to it for life. Politics, the judiciary, the police, trade, industry, the aristocracy, the secret services; already here in this pompous middle-class town in the English countryside, a holographic image of the mafia-like penetration of all leading positions of society became visible, which clandestine groups tirelessly continued to work on.

Deep state, Freemasonry, Mafia, governments, financial krakens and the industrial complexes, of which they talked everywhere in social-critical circles,

represented only differently named segments of one and the same network, which enriched itself under complete exclusion of the far more than ninety-nine percent majority at the goods of the earth as well as the labor power of humans, animals and machines. If he accepted the money, he was helping to build their 'New World Order', a project which would result in a global genocide and the complete enslavement of the majority of survivors. Most people thought the NWO was a paranoid conspiracy theory. Yet those who aspired to it made no bones about it at all. If they were to be taken to court, there would be no lack of evidence. But, of course, the higher judges lay in the same bed as those who would never be indicted.

The latter were a tiny minority, numbering at most one in ten thousand. Unfortunately, over the centuries and millennia, they had managed to shape the perception of their flock of sheep at will with increasing success, so that the majority took the interests of their owners, the shepherds and the sheepdogs for their own as a matter of course. Much worse, people were not even aware that they had any owners at all. Those who awoke from blissful ignorance found themselves faced with a tough choice: either forego the 'blessings' of being embedded in the feedlot and thus largely fall out of their social context, the flock, or willfully commit treason against their own species by preventing other sheeple from leaving for the sake of their own advancement. Those who desired professional or social success bowed to pressure. The whole world was a damn sheep farm, fenced off into national pens of various sizes.

Did Kite belong to the caste of owners? Rather unlikely, Zach guessed. 'Beneficiary' had been written on the business card of the lord of the castle. His family had to rank relatively high among the shepherds. As a thirtieth-generation descendant of William Braveheart Wallace, he had claimed old Scottish nobility. He had spoken of his 'grandfather and the remaining three Beatles,' thus also claiming to be the grandson of Sir Paul, more specifically Billy Shears aka William Shepherd. Names weren't necessarily just smoke and mirrors.

"Dad?"

Zach jolted out of his thoughts. Through the windshield he saw the first buildings on the outskirts of Liverpool. The countryside had passed before his open eyes without him noticing it. "Yeah, what's up, Kiddo?" he asked back.

"Who is this Maxwell Knight?"

"If my memory doesn't deceive me, he was the head of MI5, domestic intelligence of Her Majesty the Queen of England. He is said to have been the model for the M persona in the James Bond movies. It seems he was also immortalized in song by the Beatles."

"Do you think that old geezer in the photograph could have cracked Paul McCartney's skull with that hammer?"

"I think that's the least likely course of events – unless he had helpers holding Paul down. Paul may have been dazed from the accident, but he was a strong young man in his mid-twenties." Zach pondered for a few moments before continuing. "I'm getting more and more uncertain about which of all the... facts... has any connection to truth at all. In a sense, we find ourselves forty years beyond '1984'. The Ministry of Truth was continually changing the historical record, but there was only one valid version of it at any given time in Orwell's dystopian society. The power over an official narrative about what's true and real was the foundation of the Party's rule. In our world, by contrast, there are so many co-existing perceptions and superimposed layers of realties that no one can say what actually happened."

"Yes. For all we know, no source says 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' Does truth exist at all?"

"Sure, and with the proper mental tools, it can often be found. That involves distrusting your own perceptions, in addition to the media, because they are shaped by the ocean of ignorance, filters, lenses, misinformation, dysfunctional thought patterns, and lack of understanding in which we all swim. However, if you try it in an ignorant way, without the tools, you become paranoid. Then you run up against the walls of a maze built of propaganda, conceit, and conspiracy theories. You cannot live like that and stay mentally healthy."

Veronica chuckled as if she had heard a particularly cynical joke. "That reminds me of a quote by Robert Anton Wilson from the introduction to his book 'Everything is under control.' He describes something like what you just explained, and concludes that dogs are probably the only folks who still trust humans, but he'd even noticed that some dogs were having doubts about us lately."

Her father threw back his head and laughed uproariously. Veronica joined in. It was that time again: they both saw the absurdity of the world simultaneously in all clarity. The emperor was naked, a buffoon with a chicken breast, bandy legs and a tiny little wiener. She steered the GT to the side of the road so they could yield to their hysteric amusement. Humor liberated their beleaguered souls.

* * *

Upon arriving at Rainford Gardens, Veronica purposefully climbed the stairs. A thought haunted her mind, which she sought to verify at the table in Uncle Paul's study. The speed at which the computer was operational still surprised her, but she did not allow herself to become distracted. She called up sources on Freemasonry and numerology to get an overview. The accounts confused her more than they provided guidance. Some described the Masons as a club of quirky men who collected money for charity and helped old ladies across the street. Others portrayed them as sinister mystery-mongers who infiltrated governments and other powerful organizations. Still others saw them as servants of Satan who sacrificed little children in black masses. They were organized in orders and lodges, respectively, but she also found numerous groups and corporations that were said to be Masonic front organizations.

She searched for ties to the Beatles, was showered with hits, but found little that gave concrete evidence of lodge membership. Masonic symbolism, on the other hand, was blatantly pervasive with conspicuous frequency from the earliest days to the present. Album covers and photographs were literally peppered with these. Time and again, connections to the founder of the esoteric *Ordo Templi Orientis*, Aleister Crowley, also surfaced. When she discovered that he was represented twice on the cover of the *Sgt. Peppers* album – once hidden behind other cardboard displays – she snorted, partly amused, partly alarmed. This album really seemed to act as the linchpin in the whole Beatles story.

Then she tried once more to get the hang of numerology, but again she got stuck. There were different systems in different cultures, some of which overlapped, and they could not be separated from esoteric traditions such as Kabbalistics, Astrology, Tarot, Hermeticism and of course Freemasonry. The matter seemed anything but trivial to her. Without concrete clues, it would take her months to dig deep enough.

She reconsidered. It took a lot of effort to start the research she was about to undertake. Veronica suspected that this was the most direct access to the question which occupied her: Had the switch been planned, and if so, why? Only yesterday, Maria had mentioned several times that coincidences basically did not exist – especially with the Freemasons. She had explicitly pointed out that the death of a celebrity on 9/11 made a ritual sacrifice highly probable; Billy Shears had also suggested this. Still, she had been struck by Mr. Kite's words today as if by a hammer blow: "John and Paul had made a Faustian bargain, and Paul paid the price."

The young detective took a deep breath. First, she had to stake out the field. What specifically were they talking about? What was the meaning of a 'Faustian bargain'? The search engine hits provided several alternative terms to her search term, including 'Faustian pact' and 'Devil's pact'. She skimmed the *Wikipedia* article, of course. The fourth scene from Goethe's drama 'Faust' was also high on the list. Veronica read it more carefully. Faust, a man of great curiosity and even greater ambition, but plagued by all kinds of anxieties, renounces God, by whom he feels abandoned. He pledges his soul to the Devil, who has entered his house in the guise of the demon Mephistopheles and promises him:

I'll be your servant here, and I'll Not stop or rest, at your decree: When we're together, on the other side, You'll do the same for me.

Veronica did not believe in the Devil. She suspected him of being a bogeyman used to teach children to behave well or to teach fools the fear of God. Nevertheless, a cold shiver ran down her spine when she read the lines. Goethe's detail-obsessed observation of the human psyche gave the work its enduring power of fascination even two centuries after its publication. Had he believed the Devil to be real? Or was Mephisto merely an allegorical figure, a symbol of... what?

She noticed that Mephisto claimed Faust's soul, not his life. That might represent a perhaps decisive difference from the McCartney case. Mephisto could wait, because no matter how many years Faust remained alive, in

comparison to the eternity of the afterlife, time remained short and insignificant. Paul's murderers, on the other hand, seemed to have been in a hurry. The victim was allowed to live only 24 years. Veronica now fed the search engine 'Beatles & Faust', then 'Beatles & Devil's Pact'. She came across an article that really electrified her. With a clarity that left little to be desired, it put the words in John Lennon's mouth, "I've sold my soul to the Devil." As a source it cited 'Joseph Niezgoda'.

It took only seconds before she came across a more detailed reference: 'The Lennon Prophecy,' a book offering "a new examination of the death clues of the Beatles". This actually had to be in the store's inventory or one of the two house libraries. She looked around the room. Where was the music section? Ah, over there. She went to the shelf, skimmed the titles on the spines, and quickly located the two-hundred-page volume. She hoped it had an index — Whew! Good fortune. The number of references to the Devil, Satan and Faust was high, but she was lucky again. One of the first index entries she looked up led her to the citation. According to Niezgoda, John Lennon had uttered it to his friend Tony Sheridan in the mid-1960s at the height of Beatlemania. The author even cited a source: Ray Coleman's definitive 'Lennon' biography, page 348. A scavenger hunt, indeed! If her uncle's library were not within reach, a proper search could have taken days or weeks. She put the Niezgoda back in its place and skimmed the spines again.

There! She pulled out the Coleman, opened the indicated page, and... couldn't find the quote. She read the entire page several times, also went over the text before and after — nothing! So now? Had Niezgoda fantasized? She checked the imprint of the book. After a while, she finally noticed that she was holding another publisher's edition. Next, she glanced at the index; the reference there took her to an entirely different page number, but here it was: to explain his band's incredible success, John told Tony, "I've sold my soul to the Devil." He supposedly uttered the phrase offhand, but Tony immediately understood what John meant. Where the quote came from, Coleman did not specify. It was clear from statements elsewhere that the author had frequently met the Beatles in person, and so Veronica could only assume that Coleman was reporting as an ear witness. Moreover, the six-line paragraph describing the incident was not in any continuity with the surrounding parts of the chapter dealing with money.

Whether John Lennon mentioned the Devil as a joke, figuratively or seriously she could not determine. Only in connection with the other circumstantial evidence did this isolated data point contribute to the emergence of an image. The fact that numerous other musicians and actors from Bob Dylan to Jimmy Page to James Hetfield to Katie Perry to Eminem named the source of their success, sometimes in identical words, as Veronica found out, gave John Lennon's quote greater weight, however.

Lost in thought, she sat in the sci-fi chair at Paul's work table and considered how to proceed. Then she heard a voice from downstairs whose cheerful sound seemed to mock her sense of gloom. Therefore, at first she did not understand what she was hearing. As she focused on the sound, it finally filtered through to her that someone was laughing; laughing completely hysterically.

* * *

Zach sat down in the armchair in the back room. He put his feet on the little table, put the laptop on his thighs, opened it and turned it on. While Veronica tried to banish the evil spirits by dragging them into the light of knowledge, the detective chose a different method: he answered the call of duty. His list of things to do had grown into the gargantuan since he had arrived in Liverpool. The time pressure felt brutal. In no small part, he owed it to Mr. Kite's assignment. At first, it had seemed like a good idea to do the head of the family a favor. He was showing his willingness to help, finally had a good reason to personally contact the other members, and was earning a chunk of money on the side. Now, however, he had to interview eight people in as many days, and he could already figure out that it would hardly stop there. The best thing for him to do was to get to work immediately. Before that, he wanted to cross one item off his list that he thought he could handle quickly: finding the owner of the white Beetle that had been standing in front of the entrance to Wallace Castle. He dialed up the British keeper database. He typed in LMW 281F, then sent off the request. No registration available. "Oops?" he thought, "Did I mistype?" He mentally replayed the scenes as he had entered and exited the building, respectively. He had taken no notes, but clearly remembered Veronica reading out the letters and numbers. Should he ask her? He decided against it; he was just sitting so comfortably.

Following an intuition, he entered the registration number into a web search engine. Zach had expected little more than nonsensical results. He was all the more surprised at the number of hits that immediately established a Beatles tie-in. Judging from the pictures supplied, he had hit the bull's eye: The first showed the rear of a VW Beetle parked on the side of the road, almost exactly as he remembered the scene in front of the castle. Another picture showed the same Beetle in context: on the cover of an album he had known since his youth – 'Abbey Road'. He grinned. Of course! he thought. How could it be otherwise? In all languages, the car was nicknamed after the insect. It was not the official model designation, but the presence of such a vehicle on a Beatles album elevated the object almost automatically to the status of a sought-after collector's item.

Now all he had to do was find out who had last purchased the car in order to learn the name of Kite's mysterious visitor. First, he found a newspaper report from 1986. A certain Peter Gent had seen the Beetle in the vard of a used car dealer and bought it for 450 Pounds. In 1999, the Automuseum Wolfsburg bought it at auction for 34,160 Deutschmarks and put it on display in the socalled ZeitHaus. The market value was only 1,500 Deutschmarks, but for a car believed to have belonged to John Lennon, as Wolfsburg thought, the museum's owner Volkswagen AG was willing to fork out up to 50,000 Deutschmarks. Later, the museum announced that the Beetle had never belonged to Lennon but to a resident of Abbey Road. The VW 1500 model was built in 1967 and first registered in 1968. In the seventies, a Beatles fan had acquired it, the German-language Käferblog claimed. How it got out of his possession into the hands of an unsuspecting cheap used-cars dealer, Zach could not understand. It felt also insignificant to him, because he was interested in the current owner. Beyond Wolfsburg, the web recorded no other changes of ownership. The license plates were said to have been stolen several times; then the car disappeared from the museum's showroom. It was "currently parked in a side hall and not accessible to visitors," the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung was told in 2009. Visitors to the Museum reported as late as 2022 that they hadn't seen it on display.

The PI thought that was unusual. Why would you acquire an iconic pop culture object for twenty-two times its fair value, and then put it in storage for more than

a decade? How did the thing end up on Kite's doorstep? Was it a replica or the car from Wolfsburg, and if the latter, had it been stolen or bought? Or had the museum been cheated and consequently removed the car from its showroom? Zach realized that the question of provenance, that is, who had owned the car and when, was by no means as insignificant as he had believed in his impatience. He did not have the time to research vehicle documents and purchase contracts, if they were available at all. Kite's visitor might be unimportant. He merely noted that he was once again dealing with a riddled story for which there were alternative narratives. And that could well be because Abbey Road, like Sqt. Peppers, had been loaded with clues to Paul's demise starting with the license plate. That LMW should stand for 'Linda McCartney Weeps,' as some claimed. Zach found illogical. Paul McCartney was engaged to Jane Asher at the time of his death – if it did actually occur. Linda's entry into Beatles history did not take place until six months later. 281F, which looked like 28 IF because of the sign's typeface, supposedly named Paul's age IF he had not died. The flaw in this, Zach had to note when checking the release date of the Abbey Road album, was the fact that McCartney would have been only 27 years old in September 1969. If the car was intentionally placed in the frame. another explanation for the plate number had to be found. Zach seemed more convinced by the assumption that the crossing of the road symbolized the passage across the River Styx into the realm of the dead; the funeral cortege consisted of the priest in white, John, the undertaker in black, Ringo, the barefoot dead man, Paul, and the gravedigger in blue, George.

Only Paul smoked a 'coffin nail', only Paul put his right foot forward, only Paul had no shoes on. All these details might seem negligible, probably accidental, at first glance, but it was a common thread throughout the band's history since 1965 that Paul McCartney almost always occupied a peculiar position in images, and that he was surrounded by death symbolism. The frequency and regularity with which it applied forbade coincidences. One also had to consider that photographic representations were intended to shape public opinion about those depicted, and that album covers served as advertisement boards, Zach reasoned. Still, the detective, like most people, had previously thought of the scene on *Abbey Road* as a snapshot taken from real life. The picture, of course, was anything but. The Beatles had to cross the street multiple times to produce a desired outcome. It was a hot day in August. Three of the four musicians

were wearing suits and proper shoes, so they were correctly dressed for a festive or formal occasion but too warm for the weather – even George, the gravedigger, in his longsleeve denim clothes. And what was Paul doing dressed so oddly anyway – barefoot in a suit – at a photo op? Consciously viewed with a healthy sense of practicality, this image seemed more bizarre to Zach with each passing minute.

The matter became completely crazy and unbelievable to him when in his further research he followed the reference to a TV recording in which Sir Paul explained the photo scene. McCartney claimed that on the day the picture was taken, he had shown up in sandals, or more precisely, flip-flops. It was so hot, he said, that he took them off. "It's hard to do anything more stupid on a heated-up road," Zach rumbled. Without footwear, McCartney's soles were certainly burning from the hot asphalt, and not just once, as the Beatles had had to act out the scene several times. That he had left the flip-flops — or whatever footwear — on the side of the road had thus definitely not been a spontaneous act. Why was the musician lying about this incidental matter from four decades ago? He could have said it was in order to make the image more interesting, for instance. The answer came to the detective between the lines of the TV show. An incredulous expression first appeared on his face. "You wily bastard!" he murmured appreciatively when he had watched the exchange in its entirety.

By now, there was no talk of working through his to-do list. He went back to the beginning of the conversation and watched it again, mulling over every word. Damn, the man was clever, he thought. Then he watched it again, this time to focus on the facial expressions and gestures of the two people. He began to laugh hysterically.

* * *

He was still laughing when his daughter came down the stairs. He sagged in his chair, his head thrown back, his right hand on his chest, neighed as if he had heard the best joke of his life.

"What's so funny, Dad?" asked Veronica.

Zach rubbed his eyes, gasped for air, and tried to formulate an intelligible sentence. "Ha-ha, sit down. You have to see this!"

"See what?"

He pointed to the sofa. "Sit down."

Veronica obeyed. Zach plopped down in the seat next to her and set the laptop on the small table in front of them. Then he reset the video to the beginning of the conversation. "Ready?"

"Play it already. I could use some cheering up right now."

Zach clicked the play button. Then he leaned back, relaxed. Veronica sat bent over next to him, her forearms resting on her knees.

David Letterman and a noticeably aged Paul McCartney appeared on the screen. The talk show host addressed his guest about the late sixties, the time when rumors of the musician's death had arisen, and wanted to know how he had felt about it.

Sir Paul said, "The idea was to walk across the crossing, and I showed up that day with sandals; flip-flops. And it was so hot that I took them off and walked across barefooted. So this started some rumor that because he was barefooted, he is dead. I couldn't see the connection."

"It seems like a long, slow difficult death to me. Being barefooted will kill ya," Letterman chuckled.

"Scorched feet'..." added Paul.

"Ha! He admits it himself!" triumphed Zach.

"Shhh!" hissed Veronica.

Letterman inquired of McCartney how he had handled it, because, after all, it had become the a global rumor.

He just laughed at it, Sir Paul replied. It was still a little strange, he said, because people looked at him inquiringly, as if asking, "Is it him or a very good double?"

"That was the idea, that was the other part of it," Letterman continued the thread, "that there was a guy who looked like you taking your place."

At that, Sir Paul pointed vigorously to himself and said, "Oh, well, this is him."

The answer elicited laughter from the talk show host and the audience. McCartney, grinning at his own joke, suddenly looked around nervously.

"Or isn't," Letterman added with a grin after a dramatic pause, whereupon Sir Paul put his index finger to his lips.

Zach stopped the exchange, which had lasted less than two minutes, by pressing a key.

"Oh, my God!" Veronica exclaimed. Her mouth remained open. "He didn't really say that, did he? When was the recording made?"

"Yes, he did, and millions of people were watching it on screen in 2009."

"He's so slick. Every time he mentions the deceased, he switches to the third person and talks about 'him.' If you suspect no malice, it sounds like he's denying the rumor. On the other hand, if you take him at his word, he virtually confirms it."

"Did you notice that Letterman seemed to be in on it? He's talking about the 'idea' of Paul's death and its second part, the double, as if the switch in the band lineup had been the plan from the start."

"Yes. The two of them got along great. Billy then totally took the biscuit with the confession that he himself was the double. Everyone thought the joke was great, but for a moment he felt queasy that he might have gone too far."

"And so he ended the subject when Letterman was about to go one better," Zach concluded.

Veronica nodded. "The hand sign comes from Freemasonry. Of course, practically everyone uses it today, but I have a feeling that's two people belonging to the same club."

"Two masters, if you ask me," Zach said.

"Come on, let's take another look at it."

"With pleasure!"

He had to reset the recording three more times.

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Late that evening, Zach had finally managed to prioritize his to-do list and assign a time budget to each item. Since Semolina would be arriving at the store bright and early tomorrow morning to clean, her interview was at the top of the list. He found this favorable because he trusted her; he believed she would answer truthfully to his inquiries. Moreover, she possessed sharp powers of observation. Therefore, he hoped that her statements would facilitate his entry into the case. He could hardly find a better interview partner.

What she had to say would possibly, if not probably, change the order of his list. Still, he needed to approach the investigation in an orderly fashion. He needed a list of opening questions, and while he was at it, he would also create an index card for each witness or suspect. On it he would write the known information about the person and note any open questions. This was a mechanical, undemanding process, but it helped to keep order in the jumble of data that experience had shown would quickly accumulate, thus saving time in retrieving collected information.

He began to create the index cards using the inventory book, the notes from the conversation with Henry, and the recollections of Mr. Kite's statements.

* * *

A quarter to eight the next morning, Zach went down to the store to intercept Maria before she began her work. She had her own key, so she could come and go at any time without depending on her employer's presence. The Zieglers saw no reason why they should change the arrangement. If Paul trusted her, they could too. As on the previous two days, the Italian woman arrived ten minutes early. She had a friendly smile on her face and greeted Zach cordially rather than politely.

"Signora," the detective said in a faux Italian accent, emphasizing the second syllable of the word, and with that exuberant Mediterranean intonation he had picked up from Maria. "Whaat can I doo for yoo?"

The cleaning lady gave him a pat on the forearm and eyed him impishly. "Oh, you! Don't abuse my parents' language. Otherwise I'll only speak to you in Swabian dialect in the future, Signore Ziegler."

Zach acted startled. A rueful expression appeared on his face. "Oh no, please don't. I'd miss your Italo-colored English."

"Well then – do you have a special request for me to do today, or do I reel off my normal program?"

"I didn't get the impression that you were working your job like a robot, Maria. But I actually do have a wish. Come to the back. Let's sit down. It's a grave matter."

When they were seated in the back room, Zach in the armchair, Maria Borghese on the sofa, the detective said, "Veronica and I visited William Wallace Campbell yesterday..."

"I know," the Italian woman replied blithely.

"You know? How?"

"Henry told me about it. What goes on in the Family stays in the Family, but it propagates at supersonic speed."

"Fine. First, I'd like to know if there are any family ties between my stepbrother and this... Campbell clan."

Veronica came down from the apartment, greeted Maria warmly, and fired up the coffee maker. Then she sat quietly on the stairs, following the conversation from the background.

"Not to my knowledge," the Italian woman continued. "Campbell is as common a name here as Müller, Meyer or Schmidt in Germany."

"Reassuring. He acted as if the Fab Store was named after him."

"Si, he's good at that."

"I have a thousand more questions, related to the things he said. I'm afraid I'll have to put those on hold, because Mr. Kite has given me an urgent assignment. I hope you can help me with it."

"Certainly, signore. Now, what object shall we find for him?"

"A... photograph. However, it is not an assignment for the store, but for me in my capacity as a private investigator."

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"Oh, really? How can I help?"

"Kite told me that on the evening of April 30, there was a Family reunion at his castle. Everyone except my stepbrother had been in attendance. That evening, he said, a photograph from his collection had gone missing. Can you tell me something about the object? And how did the meeting go?"

The Italian woman's eyes had widened in surprise during his words, but she quickly regained her composure. She replied, "We usually get together every six months to show off our latest trophies. Usually, we also coordinate further treasure hunts there to specifically fill gaps in the collection. This meeting, however, was about the suitcase that Paul and I were finally able to bring to Liverpool after months of tricky research and endless negotiations. Everyone was quite excited about it. The object has a certain cult status after being lost for so long, as well as because of its contents."

"What do you mean by gaps in the collection?" asked Zach.

"While the items belong to individuals, we see our collecting activity as a joint effort to build some kind of virtual museum or documentation project."

"There's already a Beatles Museum in Liverpool, isn't there? Wouldn't that suffice? What's wrong with contributing to what is already established?"

Maria Borghese grimaced. "Signore Ziegler, after all you have learned, do you really believe that the Beatles Museum of Liverpool has any interest in our memorabilia? They are playing Punch and Judy for families with children. To the hippies they present the ideal world of the sixties, when the village policeman did not recognize the smell of dope and had no idea what an LSD trip looked like."

"And what do you play? Shadow boxing?" exclaimed Zach, but he was immediately sorry. "Excuse me, signora. I don't mean to be rude. To me, this – what did you call it? – virtual museum gives the impression of an elitist ego trip of rich sods like this Mr Kite. It's beyond my understanding what a woman of integrity like you has to do in it."

"It's okay. A few of us are like Kite, others actually dream of a documentation center where one day the dark sides of the music industry will be addressed. Both your stepbrother and Henry and I are aware of the same. The time when we can share our knowledge in a formal way may lie in the distant future. For

now, unfortunately, we have to live with the same limitations that affect 9/11 truthers, 'covid deniers', 'NWO nutters' and other so-called 'conspiracy theorists'. The safest place for research and collections, therefore, is in private hands."

"The way you explain it, your concern becomes more understandable to me," Zach relented. "You may even be right. Some of the other sciences have come up that way, too. Some morbid folks collect mummies, a few idealists sift the sand for ancient bones, a few thieves loot burial grounds, a few romantics revisit ancient texts, a few imperialists adorn themselves with the jewels of foreign peoples. More got destroyed than preserved, but in the end we had archeology, anthropology, ethnology, historiography, and sociology as proper subjects, and the great cataloged and documented collections in the British Museum." He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "So what was in the photograph that Kite claimed was stolen?"

"Didn't he tell you?"

"You tell me what it represents," he evaded answering her counter-question.

The machine scoffed and spat out the last drops of boiling water over the coffee powder. Veronica poured three cups, served one each to her father and Maria, and sat back on the stairs with the third.

"It is a photograph from the pathology department. You can see a dead man's bare shoulders and head – that is, what's left of the head. He has light skin, dark hair, no beard. He gives the impression of having died young, but of course his age was hard to determine without a face..." Slowly, she added, "The skull was split from the blow with a blunt object down to the roof of the mouth."

"Uh, gruesome. Could you tell from anything who the dead man was?"

"No. The body had been cleaned of most of the blood and brain matter, but I discovered no clues for identification. There are two data points that support a certain hypothesis..."

"You think that it's *him* in the picture?"

"Kite is focusing his collecting activity on Paul-is-dead material; point one. Point two: you can see the same image for a split second in one of the video clips for the song '1882' – McCartney's song '1882'."

"Billy showed an autopsy photo of a man with a split skull in a promo video?"

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"Si. Until it was taken out of circulation. You have to watch the 2:31 long version. At 1:59, the photograph flashes briefly. Before you realize what it represents, three more images flicker across the screen. The whole clip is full of strange, seemingly unrelated images and symbols. In that respect, it's no different from the music videos of numerous well-known colleagues that they pump into the subconscious of MTV kids."

"I don't even want to think about what this is doing to their minds. How did you know about the photo? Did Kite show it around at the meeting?"

"Most of us knew it from the clip. Since we take the death of the biological Paul McCartney for granted, we are tapping every new release related to the Beatles for clues. Kite obtained the original print of the photo years earlier, he says. He likes to brag about it, but has never granted us a glimpse."

"Didn't you and my stepbrother retrieve it?"

"No, he put Desmond on it."

"Desmond Jones? Donald Wickens, the policeman?"

"That's the one. He's got contacts all the way to the top. He probably even knows where Paul McCartney had the accident."

Zach snorted. "He tried to convince me I was pretty stupid to believe cock-and-bull stories like the doppelganger theory."

"Of course. It's his job."

The detective considered for a moment whether he ought to be shocked or surrender to Maria's serene 'of course'. He decided on the second option. He had experienced too much during his career as a private investigator to harbor illusions about the good in people. He believed in that good, oh yes. Every new human being came born with it; and then, day after day, he or she was relentlessly beaten into forms with words like 'worker,' 'consumer,' 'taxpayer,' 'citizen,' or 'cannon fodder' written on them. He was clubbed all the way until every bone in his spine was broken and he was too dazed or soft-boiled to stand up for anything short of pain avoidance. Few people were capable of more these days.

Through the findings from his research on Fab-Store-Paul and Beatle-Paul, the disillusionment about the state of the human race had taken on a new dimension. He now knew with certainty that evil existed. Disney comics would

have us believe that evil was an ugly gnome who rubbed his hands together with a nasty grin when he got to kick someone's ass. Evil was more mundane. It was more commonplace. It thrived in the lack of care for our neighbor, the 'healthy egoism', the materialism, the apathy, the kowtowing to rules and authority. There was, however, a level of evil that took advantage of these tendencies, even cultivated them, a level that profited from them and relied with cold, callous calculation on the weakness of hearts and the lack of backbone. This level was populated by psychopaths, people who sought power over others – and they had found it. No one hindered their quest, especially those who avoided the pain or, if that failed, numbed it with alcohol, music, television, hobbies, work, sex, shopping, or other drugs. The psychopaths lacked any empathy. They did not care about the suffering of others. They used them as a means to an end. Corruption and mismanagement were the least of their offenses.

"It's true. I was pretty stupid," Zach finally confessed. "I once was stupid enough to believe the accepted tales of mainstream culture: that the police are at our service; that in school we learn something real; that elected governments protect our interests; that the market will take care of everything; that news programs cover important events; that novels, music, movies, and computer games are just entertainment. Yadda yadda yadda. I should really stop wondering why the problems in our society never get solved, but instead continually grow in magnitude."

Maria Borghese nodded knowingly. "People like you and I have to endure the tension between what is told and what we know – simply because we are aware of the difference between the two."

"I find living with that awareness quite difficult at times," he said.

"Waking up doesn't make life more enjoyable, just more interesting." She laughed dryly. "I know you're one who wants to give truth its due. Some of us want that, as well. Actively doing something about it increases your sense of well-being quite a bit."

"Do you think you're doing enough?"

Maria looked at him for the first time with her eyebrows furrowed. "Am I God Almighty? What a single woman or even a group of people can achieve will

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never be enough by itself to make the machine tumble. What matters is our lives – who we are and what we do. And as far as action is concerned, I do what I can. The rest is taken care of by a higher power." After a brief pause, "Kite is gathering evidence of the death of biological Paul McCartney. If he's part of Billy Shears' clan, as he claims, he intends to take the material out of circulation for good."

"Educating the common people does not seem to be an item on Kite's agenda," Zach said.

"Si. So Mr. Mustard, Dr. Robert and Rocky Raccoon decided a while back that they would at least take photos and videos, or make prints, of the evidence. Last month they were able to convince young Kirk to help them. Several days before the meeting, they also let me in on it. Since the arrival of the suitcase with its explosive contents was expected, they wanted to take the opportunity to photograph the manuscript before it disappeared into Kite's safe. They planned to either drug Kite or distract him for an extended period of time."

"They could have copied the thing directly at Paul's," Zach interrupted her flow of words.

"No, we didn't want to involve Paul. He was just too important as a supplier for us to compromise him. As it happened, everything turned out differently on D-Day anyway."

"Tell me about that night. Who was in attendance?"

"It was a Saturday. I collected Kirk and drove her to the castle. We arrived about seven thirty. Except for Henry and Robert, who arrived half an hour later, and PC31 – Paul – everyone was already there."

"Everyone meaning – who?"

"Desmond and Molly Jones, Mustard, Rocky, and of course Kite. Kirk told me on the trip there that everything was in place for the coup. The group thought it was too risky to put Kite to sleep by using alcohol or recreational drugs. The risk of discovery or the host ending the meeting prematurely seemed too great to them. Plan B called for Kirk to seduce him. It didn't involve much. It was all too obvious to everyone that he wanted her. She was to agree on the condition that she be allowed to look more closely at the manuscript. Then she was to slip knockout drops into his drink, hand the manuscript out to be copied, and, after

processing, take it back in. At the end, she was to take the drops herself so as not to arouse suspicion."

"What a pile of crap for a plan," Zach commented.

"I said the exact same thing, but she wouldn't be dissuaded. Since we were only a few minutes' drive from the castle, there was no time to talk her out of her foolishness. All I could do was give in to her request to play the contact person outside the bedroom door."

"So far, so bad. But then events got out of hand." Zach phrased it more as a statement than a question.

* * *

At an advanced hour, the host and guests had reached an equally advanced stage of drunkenness. Impatience was spreading. Again and again, one or the other of the guests suggested that Kite should call PC31, but the lord of the castle refused. The store owner had his reasons, he supposed. Probably late, he said, an important contact had been made with a source. He had heard that PC31 was close on the trail of a major target. So they waited and drank, and Kite had the next course brought up. The collectors began to present their latest acquisitions. They recited long, convoluted stories of how, against all odds, they had managed to track down their prize. The insiders of that part of the Family who had devised the plan to deprive Kite of the exclusivity of his collectibles began to cast nervous glances at each other more often.

Duchess of Kirkcaldy, wearing a strapless tight one-piece of red leather that ended just below her buttocks and nothing but red stiletto heels below, took every opportunity to draw attention to herself. While spreading the latest gossip about the love lives of stars and starlets of the music scene, she kept throwing challenging glances at Mr. Kite. He just smiled, didn't say much at all, but from time to time dropped in a remark that let her know he had been listening attentively. After they finished dinner and left the dining hall to make themselves comfortable on chaise lounges and divans in a comfortably furnished room in the rear of the castle, Kirk launched into an overt attack. While the other collectors loudly discussed Yoko Ono and her role in the Beatles' breakup, she

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sat down close beside Mr. Kite on one of the windowsills padded with thick pillows.

"You haven't even wished me a happy birthday yet," she complained to the lord of the castle. She lasciviously brushed a long black curl from her face.

"Oh?" Kite's vocalization sounded as if he had just received an interesting but incidental piece of information. "How long am I overdue?"

"You have about two hours left to prevent the worst from happening, and you know it very well, you scoundrel! I was supposed to be sitting at the *White Star* with my girlfriends, celebrating really big. I mean – how often in life do you come of age?"

"Is that true? You're celebrating your eighteenth birthday today?"

"So far, there's been not much of a celebration going on. I'm sitting in an old hovel, surrounded by old geezers – present company excluded, of course – we're talking about what we always talk about: the bloody ol' Beatles, and the man who compelled me into this situation isn't doing a damn thing to satisfy my needs." She threw up her fiery red lips into a pout.

"Well, first of all, no one forced you. You came here of your own free will, and you even dressed up all pretty." He eyed her demonstratively from head to toe and back again, letting his eyes rest upon the more prominent features along the way. "Perhaps I haven't shown off my qualities as a fairytale prince enough so far, but I can assure you, I really am one, after all, I live in a fairytale castle." He pointed to the walls around them. "And I vigorously object to calling it an 'old hovel'!"

Kirk, who was more than a head shorter than the giant, smiled up at him. Then she leaned against his shoulder. Kite put an arm around her. " Not an old hovel, then," she said in a more gracious tone, "but don't the maidens in fairytales get three wishes?"

"Three? Are you trying to ruin me?" asked Kite in mock indignation.

"Well, two, then."

"One. That will have to do."

"Just one?" flared Kirk. "One, like I was sentenced to death?" She sighed, put one hand on her heart, the other on his knee, considered for a moment, then said, "If I had to die tomorrow..." She paused.

"Yes?"

"If I had to die tomorrow, my last wish would be to get certainty about whether HE died, as well. You know: him, Paul. Please, let me read the manuscript or see some other proof of what happened to him." Duchess of Kirkcaldy looked Kite half pleadingly, half coquettishly in the eyes.

The erection she had observed developing in his crotch was receding. Instead, she noticed a greater steeliness in his voice as he replied, "No humble request; I hope you know what you're asking."

"Don't you act so terribly Scottish," she cooed. "If you would grant a girl three modest wishes, she wouldn't have to voice an extraordinarily large one. Oh, please, do me the favor."

"If you were to die for the fulfillment of your wish, what else would you be willing to throw in?"

"Anything you ask for," Kirk breathed.

"You'll get what you demand," Kite ended the conversation, rising and sauntering over with his champagne glass to the group of chattering collectors standing in a semicircle around a painting of John Lennon, still engaged in heated discussion. While the girl remained seated on the windowsill – trembling, not knowing whether from fear or from lust – the lord of the castle toasted Paul Campbell with his alcohol-fogged guests. Most of them missed the shop keeper sorely, especially those who, in their dreams, had already laid their fingers on the Evans manuscript. Except for Semolina Pilchard, no one had noticed the scene on the windowsill.

* * *

"Could you hear what they were discussing?" inquired Zach.

"No, but it was obvious Kirk was playing her part. She fired the one shot she had in the barrel with no guarantee the plan would come to fruition. If Paul didn't show up with the manuscript, there wouldn't be another opportunity. Her ploy wouldn't work a second time."

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"And he never showed up, right? Instead, he was murdered that same night and the manuscript disappeared."

Maria Borghese nodded wordlessly.

"What happened next?" asked Zach.

"Half an hour before midnight, Kite whispered something in the girl's ear. He left the room. Ten minutes later, she followed him. I gave Mr. Mustard the agreed-upon signal that the hot phase of the plan was now underway and followed Kirk. I signaled her that I was close by. We climbed two flights of stairs, then she turned to the right wing of the castle and followed the corridor to its end by a door in the wall. There are many niches, columns, vases and sculptures there. I hid behind a column near the door. She gave me a thumbs up before entering. I had to wait for over an hour before I saw her again."

"Did Kirk tell you what was going on? Or did you hear what happened inside during that time?"

"The latter, much to my chagrin." Maria rolled her eyes. "He gave her a pretty good time. They didn't bother to be quiet, either. I would have preferred to sneak away again, but I had given her my word. I was also afraid something might happen to her. On occasion, Kite would lose control."

"In what way did he lose control sometimes?"

"I mean, he... he sometimes slaps a bit too hard." She looked down at the floor.

"Did he slap hard that night, too?"

"I don't think so, but he did treat her a little coarse, I'd say. When she opened the door, she looked ruffled enough. I also saw bruises on her thighs and shoulders, but none on her face."

Zach shook his head disapprovingly. "So Kirk had no clothes on when she came back out. That will have been when? One o'clock? Later?"

"Yes, she was stark naked, to be sure, but didn't seem to be aware of it. It was a little before half past one. She handed me a clear plastic envelope. It contained the photo from the morgue. She told me to hurry up. I asked her what was up with Kite. He was asleep, she said. She had given him the knockout drops, but he let her take a sip from his glass and she felt incredibly tired. Then she went back inside."

"Go on. What did you do?"

"I hid the envelope in one of the decorative vases. Then I went down to the salon to join the others. Desmond, Molly, and Henry had already left the house, having given up hope that Paul would arrive. Robert, Rocky and Mustard returned with me to the corridor outside the bedroom. I showed them what Kirk had gotten hold of. 'That's damn little,' Mustard complained. Rocky seemed to agree. Robert snarked that they had no idea and were probably too drunk to realize what had fallen into their hands."

"And then Dr Robert took the photograph?" Zach guessed.

"I don't know anything about that. I have no idea who took it, and it wasn't intended to be taken. I only learned from you today, signore, that it went missing in the first place."

"Kite didn't ask about it? Didn't he try to find out if you knew anything, or even threaten you?"

"No."

"If you didn't want to steal the photograph, what were you trying to accomplish with all this brouhaha?"

"The men took microfilm shots of the front and reverse, then went back downstairs. I put the photo back into its plastic envelope and then into the vase. I knocked on the door. No one answered. So I went inside."

"What did you find?"

"Kite was lying prone on the mattress, probably unconscious. I saw two legs sticking out from behind the bed, rushed over and saw that Kirk had collapsed before she could crawl back in. I threw a sheet over her, brought in the photo, and put it on her bedside table. I wanted to make sure it was in place so Kite wouldn't suspect anything. Then I got Mustard, who helped me lift the girl onto the bed. Afterwards, we went downstairs. Robert insisted that we celebrate the success. So we drank another glass of champagne. Eventually I said goodbye. It took me two hours to get back home because I was driving so slowly."

"What time did you arrive?"

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"Exactly at four o'clock. I know because I accidentally hit the horn while parking in front of my apartment. As I got out, a neighbor shouted from a window that it was four; he wondered if I'd never heard of nighttime rest?"

"So there were witnesses to your return. What time did the men and the girl leave the castle?"

"I don't know. We have avoided the subject ever since. I tried to reach Kirk by phone several times on Sunday. She didn't answer. I didn't succeed until Monday evening. She sounded hoarse and answered only laconically."

"What did she say?"

"She said she was okay. She had been sleeping a lot, she said. She might go to Bath to the beach for a few days to recuperate, she said."

"That was all?"

Maria twisted her mouth. She swept her palms upward, then dropped them back into her lap.

"Did Kirk's behavior seem conspicuous to you?"

"Yes and no. Under the circumstances, I found it understandable that a sixteenyear-old would sound taken or shocked. She wasn't a virgin, I suspect, but I doubt she'd had any experience with rough intercourse."

"Sixteen, for God's sake!" Zach put a hand to his forehead. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. "Where do I find this girl?"

"Like I said, she may have left the house. I haven't been able to reach her since, and she hasn't contacted me." She pulled a purse from her handbag, removed a business card from it, and handed it to the detective. "Here, her contact information."

He emptied his cup in one go. That its contents had gone cold escaped his waking consciousness. Trained reflexes deformed his features disapprovingly anyway. He eyed the colorfully printed little strip of paper. "Would you happen to have a picture of her, too?"

Maria pointed to the card. "The web address links to her Facebook profile."

* * *

Glorious sunshine streaming in through the large tracery windows pleasantly warmed her back. She lay on her stomach, stretched out to full length. The daylight blinded her when she opened her eyes. It might have been ten o'clock or later. Something heavy, which she guessed must be a Mr Kite lying across the bed, was pressing on her buttocks. She tried to pull her arms toward her to raise her upper body for a backward glance – to no avail. Her hands were tied to the frame of the bed. As she tugged on it, his voice said softly, "Good morning, princess. Did you sleep well?"

He was sitting astride her bottom, she now registered, and the memory of the violent treatment during the night elicited a moan from her. "Will you massage my shoulders?" she asked him, hoping to receive gentler touches today.

Kite remained sitting motionless. A moment later, he asked, "Where is it?"

Kirk didn't understand what he meant. "Where's what?" she asked back.

"Where is the photograph?" His voice, still low, now sounded sharp.

"On the bedside table, I think," she said sleepily.

A brutal fist blow to her right ribs drove the air from her lungs. She cried out loudly. "Wrong answer," he replied. "Again, where's the photo?"

Kirk tossed her head. Her gaze sought to grasp what little her prone position allowed her to see. "I don't know," she coughed, "it should be here."

Another punch hit her, this time on the left side. She screamed, then whimpered, "I don't know, I don't know. Please don't hit me, please..." The next fist landed on her spine. She threw her head back, mouth wide open as she gasped.

His left hand went into her hair, pulling it roughly, while his right appeared in front of her face. It held a short double-edged dagger, its blade bearing some symbolic engravings. Then he put the dagger to her throat. "What have you done?" he roared at a deafening volume.

She told him.

11: Molly Jones

Thanks to Maria and Henry, Zach now knew the address details of all the I members of the 'Family'. The term, which he had initially found strange for a group of memorabilia collectors, now took on sinister undertones in his ears. The supposed hobbyists with their slightly oversized budgets turned out to be a kind of secret society in the light of his latest findings. The group possessed an authoritarian leader who could demand duties of an unspecified nature, and it pursued an agenda divorced from the public interest. As recently as Sunday, the detective had believed he could prescribe conditions under which the Fab Store would cooperate with the Family. Three days later, it looked like Henry's warning proved true, that it was Kite who was calling the shots. Zach could either stay true to his principles, which would result in the lord of the castle taking away the store's clientele and thus its economic base; not to mention that Kite would refuse to pay for the manuscript, since he had never officially received it. Or Zach collected the million in black money, was accepted into the inner circle, would probably earn a fortune - and gave the godfather himself the means to blackmail him for the rest of his life.

He found this decision surprisingly easy. He didn't need Kite's money. He could simply pocket Paul's million-Pounds inheritance and return to London. The question of whether he was hurting the royal treasury by taking the black money didn't matter; the only difference between taxes and racketeering, in his view, was that the state maintained more armed gangsters. But he would rather forgo any gain than dance to the tune of other people – especially people of the ilk of this William Wallace Campbell.

That led Zach's thoughts back to the investigative assignment the lord of the castle had given him. Kite had had the photo stolen from the files of some authority – and had then in turn been stolen from by people seeking a revision of the fake band story, if Maria was to be believed. Both the authority and Kite had acted immorally, thus violated Natural Law. The former had lied to the population about the identity of the dead man, the latter had appropriated what

was not freely given to him. The group to which Maria belonged also had no right to take the object for the same reason, unless they were considered part of that population deceived by the authority; then they could be credited with restoring their violated rights. His heart went out to their cause, even though he found what had happened between Kirk and Kite appalling. He admired the willingness of these people to freely accept personal sacrifice for something they believed in. It was the conformists, the cowards, and the yes-men that paved the way for tyrants like Kite and kept them in power.

But Zach had accepted Kite's assignment. He would investigate – and he would decide how much of it the head of the family was allowed to know. The detective checked his list of priorities. As expected, there were some shifts. He had planned to invite Henry, in whom he had a certain amount of trust, just like with Maria. But the older man had left the castle before Kirk handed the autopsy photo to her aides. Presumably, he could contribute little to clarifying what had happened that evening. Instead of Henry, Zach would now call Dr Robert – the notary public. He reached for the black, shellac-covered telephone and used its dial to enter the number of Miller's office. Fascinated, he watched as the dial slowly slid back to its original position after each digit, driven by a spring. It reminded him of honey dripping from a spoon.

"Notary Dr. Jules R. Miller; Wickens speaking. What can I do for you?" the secretary's voice announced.

Wickens? That was the name of the head of Homicide, the PI wondered. Miller had called the secretary 'Mrs. Jones' when he handed her the heirship papers. What was going on here? "Good afternoon, Mrs. Jones," he tried his luck, then. "This is Zachary Ziegler, the heir to the estate of Paul Campbell."

The woman on the other end of the line gave no indication that his appellation might be incorrect. Instead, she piped, "Good afternoon, Mr. Ziegler. Is everything to your satisfaction?"

"Thank you for asking. My daughter and I have remained in Liverpool to study the conditions for continuing the store. We are enjoying ourselves exceptionally well in the city."

"I'm very glad to hear that. I guess I'll have to pay you a visit soon to pick up the case I ordered."

Zach paused. Then he inquired, "Are you Mrs. Molly Jones, by any chance?"

The voice on the phone laughed in amusement. "I'd rather say, on purpose. After all, I chose the name as my collector's alias."

Zach joined in her laughter. "Oh, I see. Well, that's certainly fortunate. I've been meaning to approach you for a few days, but you know how it goes when you're confronted with a situation like mine..."

"Why yes, I do, Mr. Ziegler. I understand you absolutely. If you need more time..."

"Not at all. Please come to the store as soon as possible. I'd like to have a little talk with you anyway – about Paul and the Family."

"Gladly. If you'd like, right after work today, say six o'clock. I have things to do at the center."

"Excellent. There is one more request, if you don't mind. Although I enjoy chatting with you immensely, I actually called for another reason. I really need to speak with the notary. Can you set up an appointment for me?" Zach heard the rustle of turned pages; forth, back, and forth again.

"Does Friday, 2 p.m. suit you?"

* * *

A quarter past six in the evening, the electric bell rang. Veronica went down the stairs to see who was standing in front of the store door. She immediately recognized the figure of the notary's secretary and hurried to unlock it. "Mrs. Jones, good evening to you. What brings you here?"

The woman in her mid-forties entered. Veronica immediately relocked the door.

"Good evening, Miss Ziegler. Your father called the office this morning. We took the opportunity to arrange for me to come by right today to pick up the merchandise I ordered."

The woman's attire – a lace-length dress of light pale yellow cotton showing a lot of collarbone, large-sized costume jewelry in her ear, and moccasins on her feet – was decidedly pleasing to Veronica. At the same time, she had the impression of facing a not quite contemporary appearance. The hair braided

into a wreath also contributed to this. "You're a customer on our store?" she asked, surprised.

While Veronica went behind the counter to retrieve the inventory book, Mrs. Jones said, "And hope to remain so. Mr. Campbell's services beat any mail-order catalog. I wouldn't know what to wear without the Fab Store."

The young woman paused in amazement. "What do you mean? You look wonderful, don't you?"

"Thank you," the visitor replied with a grateful smile. "I told you so. Mr. Campbell got the dress and the jewelry after I saw the things on an old news program. They belonged to Pattie Boyd, George Harrison's girlfriend.

Now the penny dropped for Veronica. "You collect clothes from the sixties," she said.

"Most of it is from the sixties, but I actually have all sorts of things obtained that have to do with the girlfriends and wives of the four ex-Beatles: jewelry, caskets, wigs, household items, clothes – just about anything. Instead of the mall, I came to the Fab Store when I needed something. My household is largely stocked with items like that."

"How original. I would imagine, though, that over time, it gets expensive."

Mrs. Jones shrugged. "What else is there to spend our money on? When the time comes for us to leave, we'll just be taking our souls with us."

Veronica, who by now had found the inventory book and placed it on the counter, refrained from comment. Who knew what tragedies had led to the Jones's having no one to pass on the wealth of a successful professional life to? Instead, she asked, "What did you order, and in what name, please?"

"A suitcase; for Molly Jones."

Veronica's index finger ran along the last few entries. "Ah, here." She stumbled, surprised again when she realized that it must be Mal Evans' suitcase that was meant here. "There must be some mistake," she muttered.

"Why, what is it?"

"We only have one suitcase in stock at the moment. It belonged to Mal Evans, the roadie."

"That's the one. Mal 'inherited' it from Jane Asher. She left it behind when she moved out of McCartney's household."

"How do you know that? The suitcase has been lost for so long that everyone thought it was a myth."

Molly Jones smiled. "Not everyone thought so, and definitely not so since it resurfaced in 2004. Look at it: Jane's initials are on the buckles."

Veronica stared into the secretary's face for a moment, then grabbed the inventory book and contract forms. "Come with me." She walked between the merchandise tables toward the back room door and through it. Molly Jones followed her. Veronica opened the safe. The suitcase – more trunk than case – stood centered on the floor. She pulled it out and inspected the clasp, which consisted in fact of two buckles, next to which she saw a 'J' engraved on the left and an 'A' on the right in squiggly script. She laid the whopper flat on the ground. It offered no resistance when she pulled on the buckles. The lid opened without a struggle. Inside, the case was lined with velvet upholstery that must once have shone golden, but had now faded to a dull yellowish brown. Inside as well as out, it bore clear signs of wear and tear: scuffed corners, dents, cracks, and stains made it look rather shabby.

"If you didn't know what a colorful history it's had, you might put twenty Pounds down for it at the flea market," Molly Jones said, as if guessing Veronica's thoughts.

"Including the old junk in it," Veronica added. "And now the container alone changes hands for twelve thousand Pounds Sterling."

"Chicken feed compared to the value of some of the objects it conserved over the decades. Crazy, right? Say, Veronica, do you mind if I take a look at the items?"

"That's not for me to decide, Mrs. Jones. Some of your colleagues objected to such requests."

"Too bad, really."

"Uh-huh. But I hope the case is to your liking. Will you adopt it?"

"What a question."

"Just for the sake of fairness. After all, the real item might differ from the specifications of the one you ordered."

"No, it fully meets my expectations."

"Help me; I'm new to the trading business. How long may customers lawfully return purchased goods without giving any reason?" inquired Veronica with a wink

"And thereby risk that the good piece disappears in the basement of a freemason for another fifty years?" the secretary countered dryly.

Veronica laughed out loud. She stepped to the stairs and called for her father. "Mr. Ziegler will make the delivery. Why don't you sit down?"

The secretary had barely made herself comfortable when Zach's footsteps sounded on the steps above them. "Mrs. Jones," he called to her from halfway up the stairs, "how nice of you to drop by so quickly."

"The pleasure is mine," she replied. "It took an excruciatingly long time to track down that suitcase. I couldn't wait to finally touch it."

"It's big enough to curl up in for a nap," Zach joked.

"Now that you mention it — it looks a bit like the one on *'Yesterday and Today'.*" Her body shook like a dog's climbing back to the river's shore.

The Zieglers glanced furtively at each other. "No idea," they signaled to each other. Veronica handed her father the pad of contract forms. He opened to the page where the procurement of the suitcase was agreed upon. He placed the document on the coffee table in front of Mrs. Jones. She signed the receipt.

"How will you be taking it home? Do you want me to hire a transportation service?" asked Zach.

"Yes please. Put it on the bill."

"It's on the house," Zach warded off. "I do have a couple of questions I'd like to ask you, though."

"What are they about?"

"Yesterday we paid Mr. Kite a visit. We talked about this and that, among other things he mentioned the last Family reunion. Do you recall that event?"

"Why, yes. We had a very good time. So what do you want to know?"

"Mr. Kite has asked me to undertake some research regarding an item which went missing that evening. Can you say a word or two about it? Did you notice anything, for example, unusual behavior by one person or another?"

"Are you talking about the manuscript? PC31 should have brought that, but then he didn't show up. He probably thought the meeting had been postponed."

"What makes you think he thought that? Did he say anything to that effect?"

"I... don't know," the secretary stammered. "What are you asking me about? Am I under suspicion?"

"No, not at all. You left the castle before the object went missing. By the way, it's about a photograph. Was there any talk of such an item in the course of the evening?"

"I am not aware of such talk."

"Then what has been discussed? Was there any argument? Covetousness?"

"On the contrary. Except for the shameless behavior of that girl, Duchess of Kirkcaldy, it was quite harmonious. We talked about objects we wanted to secure for our collection in the future, and we exchanged anecdotes about McCartney, Lennon, and so on. Only this... floozy! All she wanted to do the entire time was talk about naughty things. The way she was dressed! I had the impression that she would have preferred to show up completely naked."

"What did you dislike about her appearance?"

"She had stuffed herself into a bright red dominatrix costume, not half an inch longer on the top or bottom than absolutely necessary. My mother would have spanked me for parading about like that at such a young age."

"Maybe she was eager for one of the men to do just that? Did you get the feeling she was after one particular person?"

"No, she was flirting with all of the men - unpleasantly pushy so."

"Did some gents respond to her?"

"They all remained polite but distant. Thank God."

"So you didn't notice that she would have disappeared with someone at some point – say, to the bathroom?"

Molly Jones scratched her cheek. " Umm, no. I'd think that was too ridiculous, too. She's still mostly a child, after all."

"Do you know how old?"

"Not exactly. Seventeen? Not of age at all."

"Where did she come from, anyway? Who introduced her to the group, or how did the contact come about?"

"Who she is, no one really knows. Henry, perhaps. He brought her to the store last year. They say she's the illegitimate scion of a nobleman and lives off his generous alimony."

"When did you leave the castle, and who else was present at that time?"

"Phew, hard to tell. Except for my husband, we were all pretty merry by then. I didn't pay attention to the clock. Maybe between twelve and one o'clock? By the time we were certain that PC31 wasn't about to come around. Poor man. If he'd gone to the meeting, he might still be alive." She pondered. "Strange. Now that you ask, it occurs to me that only a few family members were still present when I said goodbye: Dr Robert, Mr Mustard, Rocky Raccoon and Henry the Horse. Henry also looked like he was about to leave."

"Where do you think the others were?"

"Mr. Kite withdrew an hour early. He said he was a little tired and was going upstairs. I didn't pay any attention to the others."

"Do you think it possible that he went 'upstairs' with Semolina and Duchess?"

Molly Jones looked at him as if the thought was occurring to her for the very first time. She remained silent, but grimaced, suggesting she didn't know and didn't want to know.

"One last question: did you drive straight home, or did you stop somewhere along the way?"

"We drove through the center. My husband wanted to clarify something with colleagues at the police station. Then we went home."

"How long did the conversation last?"

"About half an hour. I fell asleep in the car as soon as we left the castle, and woke up only briefly when he stopped near the station."

"What time did you arrive home?"

"About four o'clock. Listen, that was the third 'last question' now," Molly Jones complained. "Do you mind if we talk about more pleasant things?"

"Not at all. I apologize for my intrusiveness. By the way, I haven't told you how much I like you in your dress."

The secretary blushed and looked down at the floor. "Thank you."

"She bought it from Paul," interjected Veronica, who had sat quietly on a stool next to the small bar throughout the interview.

"Is that true? And I thought we were dealing in musical memorabilia."

"In the broadest sense, the dress is part of the Beatles' history," Molly Jones said. "It belonged to Pattie Boyd..."

"...George Harrison's ex-girlfriend," Zach complemented. "It looks equally as good on you, at least."

Jones blushed again. Unnoticed by her, Veronica's eyebrows danced. Zach winked at his daughter. He said, "Would you mind letting your husband know that I'd like to talk to him?"

"Donald? I'm sure he cannot tell you any more than I do."

"Even so. Then we'll just have a chat over a cup of coffee about life in Liverpool or the latest investigation into my stepbrother's murder. I can assure you that Veronica's coffee beats the hell out of the one at the Bureau. Would you like to try it?"

"Hear, hear!" his daughter scoffed.

"Convince me," Molly Jones replied.

And so Leon Leatherthroat received another opportunity to show off his skills, albeit unpaid.

* * *

Very late in the evening, the phone rang its classic metal bell clanging, causing the whole table to vibrate. Veronica picked up the receiver. "Home of Paul Campbell, Ziegler speaking."

"Good evening, Veronica. Get me your father," said a hyena-sounding male voice.

"Who is this?"

"You know exactly who is speaking."

"All I know is that your upbringing leaves plenty to be desired. Who is speaking?"

"Get your father on the phone for me!" the voice said in a threatening undertone.

"Call back when you've learned some manners." Veronica hung up.

Zach stuck his head in the door. "Who was that?"

"How should I know? He wouldn't give his name. Probably our special friend, the castle owner."

"You really got hair on your teeth, hanging up the phone on that man. I owe him a call; first report."

"Castle owner or not – if he thinks he can boss me around, there's only one answer: kiss – my – arse. You don't put up with his Gestapo manners either."

Zach rolled his eyes. What did he expect? He'd raised her that way – and he was pleased. He laughed. "Well, let me make a call to collect the spankings."

"Don't you back down. I'll stand for my own behavior," Veronica said energetically, her eyebrows drawn together.

At the exact moment Zach's hand hovered over the receiver, the phone rang again. He plucked it off the hook and said gruffly, "Yes!?"

"Mister Ziegler," said the voice on the other end, "is this your way of handling an assignment?"

"What is it you don't like about it?"

"Your tone of voice, for example, or that your daughter just hung up on me. Besides, what happened to the daily report you promised?"

"If you want a different tone of voice, you'll get it as soon as you start treating your interlocutors respectfully. I'm not one of your lackeys." The detective spoke slowly, calmly and rather quietly. He heard no sound from the other end. When the caller took a breath, he cut him off, "As far as your assignment is concerned: I was busy today with preparatory work, without which further investigation is just poking in the fog – and I heard two witnesses. It is in the nature of things that their statements can only be interpreted in the light of further findings. If you can expedite the investigation with any pertinent information – of the sort that

the missing object was lying around unattended outside the safe all night, for example – I'd be very grateful."

"I told you not to investigate me!" barked Kite's voice from the receiver.

"And I told you it doesn't work that way. You're going to let me do my job my tried and tested way, or you're going to find some other fool to correct your blatant violations of reason and decency."

"Who did you talk to?"

"It'll be in my final report next Tuesday."

"You're fired!" yelled Kite at him.

"As you wish. I'll ready the bill right away," Zach replied, dropping the phone on the fork. The sound and vibration of the old, heavy landline phone satisfied him deeply. The physicality of the process fell only slightly short of the feeling of having actually slapped the insolent caller across the face. The day an app was released that could realistically emulate it, perhaps he would revise his dismissive attitude toward smartphones.

Veronica puffed out her cheeks and let the air escape slowly from between her lips. "I'm afraid we can put the big jobs out of our minds, not to mention our joining the Family."

"Quite so. But nothing would have come of it anyway, because I never intended to take his black money. Besides, I'm getting more and more suspicious of this strange club with its elastic morals. What did Kite call Maria and Henry – not flexible enough?"

"That he won't hire us to find stuff – that's okay. With our modest expectations of income, I'm sure we'll get along just fine without him. For me, the distance to the guy can't be too large. The fact that we've now turned him against us, on the other hand, could mean the end of the Fab Store."

"And that's why I'll be damned if I'm going to stop the investigation. We need something on him. What we've heard from Maria and Molly may give us large-caliber ammunition."

12: Yesterday & Today

Veronica started the morning with a quick bit of research. Molly Jones had reacted very strangely the day before when Zach had joked that the suitcase was almost suitable for holding a human. The secretary had mentioned the words 'Yesterday and Today' and shook herself. Veronica didn't know for sure what they meant, but naturally assumed it was a Beatles record. She flipped through the store's LP cases. She found three copies of the album. One showed Ringo, John, and George clustered around a box case resting on its smallest face. The lid was open and inside squatted Paul McCartney. Although the looks of the four musicians did not express mourning, Veronica's imagination made the connection to a coffin or the burial of a corpse. She looked for the copyright date on the back cover. There, 1966. 'Yesterday and Today' had to have been one of the last releases the biological Paul McCartney was involved in. Unlike Molly Jones, she didn't think the suitcase pictured there resembled Jane Asher's, but understood her instinctive reaction to her father's joke.

The sleeves of the other two copies showed a completely different picture: The Beatles were wearing white work coats. They had been garnished with what looked like body parts at first glance. Upon closer inspection, she realized that they were animal slaughter parts as well as life-size naked plastic baby dolls with their heads no longer sitting on their torsos. The four musicians seemed to enjoy the butcher scene. They beamed and grinned as if someone had told them a good joke. McCartney sat right in the center. The motif stood out shockingly from the parade of staid sixties productions she was familiar with. The game with disgust and violence as a sales tool was actually played by punk and metal bands, ten and twenty years later, respectively. To her knowledge not even the Stones had dared to deliver anything like this.

Veronica noticed that Uncle Paul sold the record with the suitcase picture on it for comparatively little money, but for the butcher album he charged five-figure prices. She deduced that the suitcase adorned the regular version, while the

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butcher clique decorated a limited, censored or only regionally available, in any case rare version. She wondered again about the bizarre things that appeared everywhere when one scratched a little on the shiny varnish of the Fab Four.

A noise from the store front gave Veronica a jolt. Her nerves had suffered since they arrived in Liverpool, she realized. She saw Maria, who had put the key in the lock and was about to let herself in. Veronica waved at her as she moved to open the door for her. The Italian woman removed the key again. "Good morning, Signorina Veronica," she said gratefully.

"Good morning, Maria. Exceedingly punctual as always."

"Am I disturbing you?"

"On the contrary. I can use company quite well today."

"Did you dream badly?"

"Thank you for asking. I would have had cause to."

Maria looked at the records the young detective had left on the sorting boxes. "Well, it can give you the creeps when you start the day with that kind of images."

Veronica snorted. "Can you explain to me why a band that supposedly stands for peace and love would allow itself to be photographed in such a morbid getup?"

"Morbid? No way. It's avant-garde. At least according to the common explanation."

"Morbid and tasteless. What's the second most common explanation?"

Maria gave her a sly look and asked back, "What makes you think there is one?"

"Because what's in the magazines and books about the Beatles has more holes in it than a Swiss cheese, is riddled with more contradictions than a false confession, and because for every such story I've found so far, there is one or more that better corresponds to the facts."

"Nicely observed. Then how about this: The Beatles got fed up with having their albums hacked up for US releases by the record company. *Capitol Records* abridged them, rearranged them, and combined them with songs from their other works. In this case, the label mashed up some songs from the not-yet-

released 'Revolver' album with tracks from the previous two albums on 'Yesterday and Today'. The 'Butcher cover', as it is called by connoisseurs, was meant as the band's visual protest. The shot backfired; the batches already shipped had to be recalled and repackaged following massive complaints from retailers and customers. But the band at least managed to ensure that 'Yesterday and Today' remained the final such product."

"Grimm's Fairy Tales, Volume Two. As if the label's public relations peeps had no idea what a blatant breach of taboo they were committing! Were they aiming for shock effect? After all, even bad press is good publicity."

Maria cradled her head. "There are two very interesting circumstances here that speak against a simple PR action – and for some more profound manipulation. Ad 1: 'Yesterday and Today' was released on 15.6.'66. Let's perform a simple numerological operation: One plus five equals six, just in case you overlooked the other three sixes in the sequence. Four times six equals 24, two plus four equals..."

"Six again! What the hell."

"Just one of many examples where the release took place on dates with dark esoteric significance. Ad 2: In August, four days before the US tour began, both the album 'Revolver' and the single release 'Eleanor Rigby / Yellow Submarine' were published over there. Of the fourteen songs total, how many did they play live? What do you think?"

"The bands whose concerts I've been to have always played more than half, sometimes all, of the songs from their latest album."

"The Beatles didn't play a single new song. Instead, they gave two from the previous album 'Rubber Soul', and nine oldies, including two covers."

Veronica frowned. "I'm no expert in advertising, and perhaps the purpose of public relations was understood differently in the sixties than it is today, but from my point of view, the marketing of 'Revolver' was a mess. 'Yesterday and Today' stole attention and purchasing power. At the same time, the Butcher cover caused a scandal that surely cured some folks of their Beatlemania. And to top it off, the new material isn't being played live at all? What was the point of the tour anyway?"

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"Like I said, it looks more like mass manipulation. The Beatles were pushed into the consumers' consciousness for months. A compilation album, a single, a new LP, interviews, newspaper stories, scandals, tour... The simple melodies and silly teen love lyrics of the early albums went down well; 'Revolver' sounded less pleasing, the new songs were much more complex and were probably hard to rehearse for the boys. So they omitted them, to really heat up the atmosphere once more until 29 August 1966, the day of the very last concert in front of a mass audience. Thirteen days later McCartney dies; a new era begins in which the band writes psychedelic music whose lyrics consisted almost entirely of subliminal messages, and in which the Beatles encourage the use of pot and LSD quite overtly."

"I see," said Veronica, "The fans and the radio-listening public went along with the relaxation of moral standards, because if their favorites, the four clean boys from Liverpool, were into it, it had to be cool. Then came the Summer of Love, Flower Power, Vietnam protests, New Age – what's wrong with these? Wasn't all that an improvement over the calcified, uptight state of affairs of before?"

"Relatively speaking, yes, but the Olympians are not about reform. Billy Shears writes in his memoirs that their goal is to completely destroy the old order so that their New World Order can rise from its ashes like the proverbial Phoenix. Institutions, traditions, religions, nations and so on – concepts that give stability and a framework to the life people knew – were to be robbed of their foundations and to be dismantled. Next comes 'the Great Reset'. The entertainment industry plays an essential role in the destruction program, because on the one hand it is thought to be harmless, while at the same time it plants its contents deep into the subconscious of the human mind. Young people in particular, who are both malleable and happy to rebel against conventional norms, can easily be harnessed to the Olympians' cause in this way. Billy writes that the Beatles and the Rolling Stones were purposefully established and utilized to break down barriers."

"Who are those Olympians? Do they imagine themselves to be gods? What do they want from us?" wondered Veronica.

"The controllers call themselves that. They descend from ancient bloodlines, dynasties that go back thousands of years into the past, perhaps to the beginning of civilization. They utilize the Illuminati, the Illuminati utilize the

Masons, and the latter utilize the social hierarchies to control the ordinary population. Ultimately, it is about the creation of a New Man, an artificial super race – immortal, omniscient, omnipotent – that defies the gods, nature, indeed the entire universe."

"Textbook megalomania."

"Psychopaths and sociopaths, signorina, if you want to put it in psychological terms; Satanists, if you look at it from a religious perspective. If what Billy Shears writes is true, not only the upper echelons of the Masons and the Illuminati are Satanists. The Olympians themselves believe that Lucifer rules the world."

"Now I'm beginning to understand why Mr. Kite said McCartney deserved to be handed over to Lucifer. He literally meant a Satanic sacrifice, right?"

"Si. I hinted at it a few days ago."

"John Lennon's saying he sold his soul to the Devil must be taken literally then too, right?"

"That's right. Some believe it happened on 27 December 1960, when the first Beatlemania-like hysterical outburst occurred at one of their concerts; Billy gives the date as 24 October 1963. It doesn't matter. Paul and John, and perhaps George, were saying things the implications of which they could hardly gauge in their youthful recklessness. Money, girls, fame, influence – the Devil will give you anything if you promise him your greatest treasure in return: your immortal soul."

"I don't like the word 'God'; it's overloaded with ideas I don't share," Veronica said, "but I believe there is something higher, an ordering force that loves life. It's the soul which makes us alive, isn't it?"

Maria nodded.

"I doubt, though, that the Devil exists. He was invented to teach people obedience, wasn't he?"

The Italian laughed dryly. "I'd be careful not to underestimate the force he stands for. First of all, Evil has its own dynamic; it's a drive that opposes the Good, the Divine. Just as Christ incarnates Good in the flesh, the Devil personifies Evil. You may think of the two sides in entirely different terms, images, and concepts, but their existence as such remains unaffected."

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"I get it. Each culture forms its own myths to explain the forces that affect its existence."

"Si, Signorina Veronica. Therefore – secondly – it doesn't matter whether you think the Devil, Satan or Lucifer is real or not. Rather, what matters is that the Olympians and their subordinates believe in him, because it has implications for everything they do. Paul McCartney may have thought the Devil was a joke, but still fell victim to the silver hammer of Satan's agents. Since they globally control all power structures, Billy's statement that Lucifer rules the world is true; whether figuratively or literally, it remains the same."

The young detective's face showed dismay.

"There is a third aspect here, which, just like the other two, is denied by the majority of our contemporaries and does therefore not get considered at all. The rites, sacrifices and incantations of religious Satanism are not the core of its teachings. They are not in any religion. The rewards of the Satanist are power and worldly goods. In other words, he believes in radical materialism and therefore anchors man in the purely physical-rational plane that corresponds to his base ego-consciousness. If we consider how media portray reality, how money dominates all spheres of society, what people generally consider desirable and who plays the main role in their lives – namely only themselves – we can state without reservation that the majority of people are materialists and egoists. Regardless of what faith they otherwise profess or whether they claim to be atheists, *de facto* they act like Satanists."

Veronica felt shaken to her core. The information she received from Maria gave a completely new meaning to what she thought she knew. It dramatically changed the picture she had formed of the world. Of course, she could only dimly foresee the ramifications of this at the moment, but the extent of it already seemed monstrous. Something in her refused to accept what another part of her mind recognized as correct. She had long understood that reality was different from how officials portrayed it, thanks to long in-depth conversations with her father, but could everything be wrong, including her own explanation for why so much between people went awry, to put it mildly?

She made a feeble attempt to put Maria's explanations into perspective: "This seems to me to be an overstatement. Most people I know don't harbor evil

intentions. They only want the best for themselves, their family and neighbors. You can't blame them for wanting to have fun or keep their jobs."

"We all want that. It's perfectly natural. But if that's all there is – if there are no ethic principles, virtues or goals beyond I, me and mine, and if I'm not willing to subordinate my advantage to some higher Truth – then I renounce goodness. And I promote the disintegration of all community. Look around you. By now, it is not only our societies and families that are disintegrating, but also the individual as a person. Most people have no idea who they are or what they are here for. They no longer have an identity of their own and thus no will of their own. They become fair game for any pied piper with enough money and influence to instrumentalize them for his ends. Tell me: where do we stand today compared to the sixties? Does it look like the naive desire to see me and mine do well has led to a better world? Is there less crime, lies, wars, poverty, exploitation and strife? Or is the Olympians' plan to destroy trust in the old structures and atomize society at an ever-increasing rate working?"

Veronica shook her head. "You make it sound like this ominous... elite... is in control of everything. I just can't believe they could get away with such monstrous plans. People would fight back."

"Oh, the controllers had no need to hide their satanic goals for quite some time now. Everything I tell you, and more, can be found in publications of governments, globalist NGOs, transatlantic think tanks and so on. The head of the World Economic Forum, himself a puppet, boasts of having his creatures sitting in governments, parliaments and corporations around the world. Their names appear in publicised lists, but people continue to vote and go to work. Remember; it wasn't that long ago: How many heads of institutions, administrative bodies, organizations, media houses, trade unions, churches, associations, cultural societies, large clubs and corporations have you counted who have contradicted the narrative of the supposed killer virus? How many have expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the so-called measures? How many have gone on record with concerns about the blatant violations of law and the slashing of civil and human rights in the name of health, or condemned the massive assault on human dignity? How many 'covidiots' do you know of among your peers? - And what happened to the few individuals who dared to speak up?"

"I..." The young detective's voice failed.

"The Olympians have us right where they want us. Wake up, Veronica. The world we live in is not a product of coincidence. It's actively shaped by people who have motives, means, and opportunity to enforce their stated goals."

* * *

"Alright!" yelled John Lennon, then the last distorted guitar chord faded away. Zach, who used the early afternoon to dig up a few of the Beatles' greatest hit songs, in his role as disc jockey felt as if he had been rejuvenated by thirty years. Veronica gladly accepted the distraction. While her father loaded the record player at the sales counter, she danced along the aisles of the store to the rear and back to the front. Together they had sung along to 'Michelle' and 'All You Need Is Love' and rocked out to the aggressive tones of 'Revolution.'

"With everything I've come to know about them, I still like their music as much as I did when I was younger," Zach said.

"And yet it feels a little different," Veronica countered. "At least, it seems that way to me. What about you?"

"Sure. There's something resonating now that we didn't hear before – especially when it comes to the lyrics. Back then, when *'Revolution'* was playing, it appealed to my rebellious streak. The sound, the title... You know, it's only today that I realize that the song isn't really a rebel at all. John indicates that some seemingly revolutionary actions are going nowhere, and, well, we all want change; so what?"

"Yes. Maria mentioned something like that earlier today. Everyone is calling for a revolution without knowing what they want to achieve by it beyond the destruction of the old order. What sticks in the mind at the end is the song's title and the dissatisfaction with one's own existence. I suspect the Beatles would have washed their hands in innocence if someone had accused them of inciting rebellion."

"It worked great for me," Zach agreed with her.

"By the way, did you notice that John sings, 'But when you talk about destruction, don't you know that you can count me out... in'? What's that supposed to mean?"

Zach looked up in amazement. "Really?"

"Yeah, at the end of the first verse."

"No, I overheard." He started the record player again and placed the pickup arm on the disc's lead-in groove. This time he just gently swayed his head to the beat as he intently followed the lines of lyrics. "Indeed!" it burst out of him, when shortly after John's statement that he shouldn't be counted on, a tiny breathed word proclaimed the exact opposite. "Goddamn," he cursed, " can't we get one clear statement from these lads?"

Veronica grinned. "Perhaps you should switch to the Stones where they supply you with sex and shit and satanism without silly games of hide-and-seek."

Zach looked for something to throw at her, but found only a pencil stub. Veronica caught it out of the air. She tilted her head and giggled, "Well, keep getting bugged by your gang of insects."

* * *

Late that evening, Veronica poked her head into the study. Zach still sat hunched over his index cards, writing notes. "Don't you plan to finish soon? It's getting close to midnight."

"What are you? The Doomsday Clock?" the detective joked.

"No, your mother. Now off to bed!"

"Aw, already?" whined Zach. "Can I still finish this?"

"Zachary Archibald!" thundered Veronica.

"All right. It's all about little things anyway. Look, this is the plan for the interviews. I called up the remaining witnesses today." He showed her the schedule.

She read: "Friday, 2 p.m.: Miller; Saturday, 9 a.m.: Rocky; 1 p.m.: Mustard; Sunday, 9 a.m.: Paul; Monday, 10 a.m.: Henry. — Okay, so we'll get through'em all quickly, yet there's plenty of time for in-depth research... or for taking a break. What happens on Sunday?"

"The postman brought a letter from Miller today. Paul's cremation is scheduled for nine o'clock."

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"Oh..." She was silent for a moment. Then she asked, "I've never been to one of these. Is it scary to watch?"

"No. We'll be saying goodbye at the open casket – well, in this particular case, saying 'hello' first. Twenty years... that's what scares me the most."

Veronica nodded. She had already had experience with death, even touched corpses. The sight of Paul would probably not give her the creeps. But she could imagine that it must be especially distressing for her father to encounter only a dead body after such a long time apart.

"After that, they'll seal the box and it will disappear through an opening," Zach continued. "In a few days, we get the ashes delivered in an urn; all very clean and antiseptic. It's no comparison to what I saw in Varanasi. There they burn the bodies openly on wooden piles and then scatter the ashes in the Ganges. You can watch everything from up close."

"One day I will go and see it. But right now..."

"Right now we don't need anymore thrills. My sentiments exactly." He folded the screen back into the tabletop and rose. "Time to get some rest."

They left the study. Veronica paused outside her door. Without turning around, she said, "Good night, John-boy."

Zach smiled. "Good night, Elizabeth."

13: Dr Robert

Good morning, Signore Ziegler," Maria greeted her employer on Friday morning. "You're up early today. Do you have any appointments?"

"Good morning, Mrs. Borghese. Yes, I do indeed have meetings, but not until the afternoon. I slept a little fitfully. So I thought the day would take a better start if I did something instead of flattening my back. By the way..."

"Si, signore?"

"What do you say we dispense with the pleasantries and call each other by our first names instead of 'Signore' and 'Mrs.'?"

"Agreed."

"Me too," exclaimed Veronica, who had just joined them from the back room. "Veronica." She held out her hand to the Italian woman. She grabbed it, shook it once and said, "Maria."

"Call me Zach," the detective said, holding out his hand to her as well. Maria extended hers. The two looked into each other's eyes for a moment longer than etiquette permitted. A touch of blush flashed across Zach's face. Maria smiled dreamily. Finally, they disengaged their hands.

"Anything special coming up today?" inquired Maria.

"You make us all some nice strong coffee," Zach commanded. "And meanwhile, you're going to tell us how you got your curious nickname."

"Semolina Pilchard?"

Zach and Veronica nodded in perfect unison, as if following a choreography. Maria laughed in amusement. "That's quickly explained," she replied. "It's from the song *'I am the Walrus,'* and according to John, it spoofs the name of an English policeman who made it his business to catch famous musicians in drug-related crimes."

"Both you and Uncle Paul went by cop names. Coincidence?" inquired Veronica.

Maria shrugged her shoulders. "We were both the Family's sleuths, and like the two characters in the songs, we were good at what we did. It fit, in a way."

* * *

The orange sports car turned onto Yewtree Road. After a few hundred yards, it stopped in front of the office of Jules R. Miller, notary public. Zach and Veronica got out, walked the short flower-lined path to the front door, and entered the building.

Mrs. Wickens, the secretary, greeted them warmly. "Take a seat in the waiting room. Dr Miller will be out of his meeting in a few minutes," she added.

Father and daughter Ziegler knew the way. They sat down and looked at the paintings signed 'Donna' on the opposite wall. One showed Paul McCartney leaning against his dark green DB6, another portrayed John Lennon and Yoko Ono walking hand in hand, and on the flanks were pictures of George Harrison in a vogi position and Ringo Starr on his drums. Zach stood back up. He walked over to look at the black and white photographs mounted below, which he hadn't had time to look at on the other two visits. They showed snapshots and portraits of the four Beatles, corresponding to the paintings hanging above them. Each shot was from a different year, as Zach could easily tell from the lengthening hair. The changes in George and Ringo remained subtle. John's glasses, of course, changed his appearance much more. In direct comparison to earlier years, his face also appeared much narrower in the late sixties and after, and his nose seemed different. A figment of his imagination? A natural process? Or had John also been replaced at some point, temporarily or permanently... like Paul? The PI could only think of one word to describe Paul's series of photos: sensational. Every single picture was a really well-done portrait shot that fully brought out the character of the person. Viewed separately, the answer to the question of who the respective motif represented would undoubtedly always have been 'Paul McCartney'. And that's exactly what gave the series the power to shake the viewer up, because none of the four motifs showed the same man. Differences in age, lighting, perspective or expression could deceive the eye, without question. But those were not the deciding factors here. It was the facial shapes and identifying features

themselves that differed: the nose, the ears, the mouth, the eyebrows, the contours of the face.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" said a voice behind Zach. It belonged to Jules R. Miller, the notary known 'among collectors' as Dr Robert. "One keeps wondering which Paul McCartney is the real one. Do you have a favorite? Good afternoon, by the way."

"Good afternoon, Dr Miller. Does it matter? I'm beginning to think that probably all of them are actors. I mean, if there was a real one, an original McCartney, to a certain degree he was an actor, too, wasn't he?"

Miller nodded. "There is a lot to be said for that. It just makes more sense economically. The brand label draws the clientele, not the staff. And hand on heart, we all somehow know that we're just being played a make-believe show when we watch the stars on the screen or in the papers. Nothing is real. Yet we don't want to be pointed out. You'll look in vain for compilations like this" – he pointed to the gallery – "in the so-called heritage media. For all their love of sensation, journaillists never bite the hand that feeds them."

"Living is easy with eyes closed...," Veronica sang. "The Beatles gave the crucial clues themselves, after all."

"Correct. I don't think it can stay that way for much longer, though. The more the controllers tighten the screws, the more uncomfortable it gets for the regular folks – and the more people wake up from their slumber."

Zach put on a skeptical expression. "I've noticed that, too, especially since the Plandemic. The entanglements between politics, corporations, NGOs and the media have now become visible even to the blind. The only problem is that so few people are willing to adjust their lifestyles to the new information and risk their paychecks in the process."

The notary shrugged. "That's out of our hands. Besides, more people may have gone unplugged from the Matrix than we think. It's hard to estimate because they drop out of the system, which makes them largely invisible."

"Then what is in our hands?" asked Veronica.

"Our own awakening," Zach jumped in for Notary. "To consciously engage in the process of disillusionment and actively drive it forward. There's always another onion layer, hiding a deeper truth."

Miller nodded. "That's why, I think, the Beatles' story is such an excellent entry point into the exit."

"Or not. Who likes to see their idols knocked off their pedestals?" the young detective objected.

"Who likes to see that their pension is not safe? Who likes to see how civil liberties are misused to deny basic rights? Who likes to see that their trusted news magazine has misled them for decades? Who likes to see that Mother Church is run by Satanists, or that the country does not enjoy democracy, but is run by just another regime in a ten-thousand-year-old series of such regimes?", Miller challenged her. "No one chooses the event that causes them to fall out of the fabricated reality. But one thing is certain: the pain of abused trust and frustrated dreams teaches us to pay closer attention in the future."

Zach pointed into the room with an arching gesture. "Did you open the trap door to the outside world with this to many people?"

"Who can say? The impetus the images provide may not ignite until years or decades later. However, I am aware of numerous people in Liverpool – even outside the Family – to whom Paul McCartney's death has raised questions for our society; questions that official bodies either fail to answer or respond to with blatant lies. People may let themselves get misled for a few more years, but reality has gotten a foot in the door with them. Their departure is only a matter of time "

"I wish I could share your confidence." Zach looked thoughtful.

Veronica stepped close to the painting, which featured the dark green Aston Martin DB6. "This Donna who created the paintings, is she by any chance the woman who sat in McCartney's car?"

"If there was indeed an accident, and if McCartney had this hitchhiker with him, and if her name was Donna, then surely the rest of the story is true as well, meaning she died with him at the time," the notary speculated. "Donna is close to the Family but keeps her distance from Kite. She doesn't collect old things, she creates new ones. I like the contrast between the cheerful color paintings that cherish the myth of the pop idols and the somber real-world photographs. Unfortunately, far too many viewers see only the pretty colors."

"It takes both, doesn't it?" remarked Veronica.

Miller gave her his sharp, penetrating look again, the one that had annoyed her so much those times before. Then he relaxed his features, smiled at her, and said, "The wisdom of age coming from the lips of a youth... You're right: beautiful or not, we need to see what is, rather than what we believe, wish, fear, suspect, infer, read, or hear. Most people have a lot of trouble understanding that Truth is more real than anything going on in their heads."

"Mr. Miller," Zach began.

The notary raised both hands defensively in front of his chest. "Please call me Robert. We are members of the Family; more than that, brothers and sisters in spirit."

"Okay, Robert. Feel free to call me Zach. But members of the Family, I don't think we'll ever be."

"Kite?"

"Kite."

Jules Robert Miller sighed. "One of these days soon, it's going to come to a breaking point. Many of us have long since disagreed with where the ship is headed."

"We've already heard that. If I understand correctly, you took steps at the last meeting that seem likely to bring about such a rupture. Can you tell us anything about how that evening went?"

"Well, there is, as I said, a group of members who are cultivating different ideas about how the collected items should be dealt with. We would like to use the material to document the social history of the sixties. If necessary, some of it will become relevant for trials or tribunals if we succeed in toppling the controllers – not a development particularly likely to happen in the near future, but we want to stay prepared. It became increasingly obvious to us, however, that Kite was gathering evidence of Paul McCartney's murder in order to keep it from getting used against his grandfather's interests. Our plan for the evening in question was to weaken Kite's vigilance so we could produce copies of such pieces."

"This was specifically about Mal Evans' memoirs, right?"

"Right."

"How did you intend to 'weaken Kite's vigilance'?"

"Duchess of Kirkcaldy, one of our members, agreed to attract his interest."

"Are you aware that the girl is a minor?" asked Veronica.

"Sure. But it was her own idea. She insisted on this role, and none of us are in a position to give her orders."

"You could have called off the project," Zach said.

"A few minutes ago you were complaining that too few people are willing to sacrifice for the truth. Like you, I have my doubts about whether Kirk had enough life experience to foresee the consequences of her decision, but I admire her determination."

"She certainly has the necessary experience after that night. It must have been traumatizing. Was her sacrifice at least worth it?"

"I would want to answer in the affirmative. We were able to copy a photograph showing Paul McCartney on the dissection table."

"No judge would accept a copy as evidence. Not even you, as a collector, would find it sufficient. Surely the temptation must have been to pack up the original and take it with you."

"Tell me about it. I am a collector of rare photographs, but I am also friendly with the other collectors in the Family. Moreover, as a notary, I have to respect the laws of the Kingdom. If we had stolen the photograph, Kirk might have paid for it with her life, and I would be lucky if I merely lost my license."

"So you left the original in the castle?"

"We only took pictures of it. Semolina put the original back in its plastic envelope and returned it to Kirk. We men – Mr. Mustard, Rocky Raccoon, and I – then went to the salon to toast the success. Semolina called Mustard to help shortly thereafter because Kirk lay unconscious on the floor. He reported seeing the photo on a nightstand in Kite's bedroom. I'm sure Kite doesn't even suspect that it..."

"Wrong!" the detective interrupted him. "Kite knows about it; he told me that the photo was taken from him."

Miller looked shocked.

"Do you think it's possible that Mustard pocketed the print? Or Semolina? The two of them were alone; it was a good opportunity."

"I'd stake my life on Semolina. She would neither steal nor allow theft to take place in her presence."

"Could Mr. Mustard or Rocky Raccoon have gone back later to steal the photo?" Miller considered, then shrugged. "I suppose so. I left the castle twenty minutes after Semolina, just after two o'clock. Following that... who knows what may have occurred to them in their intoxication."

"Kite did not approach you about the photograph?"

"No. He has not made any attempt at contact."

"Have you met or talked to other members of your group on the phone since then? Has there been any talk about the evening?"

"No. Except for Molly, my secretary, I haven't seen anyone. She was exasperated with Kirk's getup. That was all we shared about that evening."

"You didn't try to find out how Kirk got through the night?" prodded Veronica.

"I dialed her number several times, but she didn't pick up the phone."

"Could she be in trouble?"

"If what you say is true: possibly in the very worst. I thought she might enjoy the amenities at Wallace Castle a little longer."

"Where did the girl come from, anyway?"

"I don't know. One day she was just there. I think at times she keeps an eye out for someone. But is that likely? She's still so young..."

"Who knows, anything can happen. Do you think it's normal to share a deep common interest and call it a Family but not know each other's name or where people are from?"

"You're right, of course. I had a much more intense relationship with your stepbrother Paul. Only – who could have an interest in us?"

"Kite's family, concerned about who he shares his dangerous knowledge with? A Masonic order that wants to keep Kite's activities under control? The intelligence agencies? After all, what we know about Kite is only what he tells us. He did, however, express astonishing concern that I might investigate him."

Miller smiled. "That someone might take action against him is something Desmond and I are supposed to prevent. I can't give you any details about his

legal affairs, of course, because of my attorney-client privilege, but I'm not giving away any secrets when I say we make a well-oiled and successful team." "Perhaps it's time to switch allegiances."

"Perhaps."

"Fine, Robert. Then I'll see you the day after tomorrow, Sunday, for the cremation. Anything you want me to bring or organize? Do you need assistance?" inquired Zach.

"Thank you, everything is taken care of. I will give a short speech. Anyone who wants may join and say a few words. Afterwards we will go to a bar to toast Paul. Between eleven and twelve o'clock the reception will be over. We will meet again on Tuesday morning at Toxteth Park Cemetary for the funeral."

"How many people do you expect to attend?"

"Only the closest friends are invited to the cremation. I anticipate ten to fifteen people. The funeral has already been advertised in the paper. There were many who knew Paul; let's see how many will pay their last respects."

* * *

"Mrs. Wickens, did you get your suitcase delivered?" asked Zach of the secretary as they passed the reception desk on their way out.

"Thank you, it arrived yesterday afternoon – intact, with no additions or subtractions."

"Good, you never know with this thing. It seems to like lost and found."

"From now on, it will sit nicely in my attic. No more trips to New York or Melbourne."

Veronica and Zach laughed. They said goodbye to the secretary and turned to leave. Then Zach looked back once more. "Oh, Mrs. Wickens," he said, "have you been able to pass on to your husband my request for an interview?"

"I'm glad you mentioned it. I almost forgot. He sent word for you to stop by the police station Monday at eight o'clock."

* * *

The GT engine roared, Veronica put on the blinker and steered the car into the evening rush hour. The traffic light at the end of Yewtree Road was set for long reds and short greens. They approached it at less than walking pace.

"Do you believe him?" asked Veronica.

"Do you still distrust him?" Zach asked the counter question.

"I've come to terms today with the possibility that your first impression was the more accurate one: Miller has depth, and that's why he likes to look behind the facade. He doesn't strike me as creepy now. His statements also fit Maria's account to a tee, which I found credible. And he answered the tough questions candidly."

"But?"

"But I find it hard to believe that the Family's photo collector, of all people, let the opportunity slip to bag one of the most interesting and important objects to him. Remember, according to Maria, he was the one who immediately recognized the importance of the picture. If the people interviewed so far have been telling the truth, that leaves only Mr Mustard, Rocky Raccoon and Duchess of Kirkcaldy in the circle of suspects – people with completely different interests. I'm inclined to exclude the girl because she must have realized that she would have made herself an obvious target for Kite." Veronica reflected.

The light turned green, allowing the last vehicles remaining in front of them to pass, and quickly changed to red again. Zach puffed and rolled his eyes.

"What if there had been no theft at all?" asked Veronica now. "Do you think it's conceivable that Kite is pulling the same trick he did with the manuscript – officially stolen, but long since stashed in Campbell's vault?"

"Brilliant. You're thinking like a real mobster. That would give us a plausible reason why he would want his own person excluded from the investigation. But why did he hire a detective to begin with?"

"First, that would make his claim seem more credible. He shouts 'Stop thief!" and thus puts himself in the role of victim, while the eyes of everyone present turn away from him searchingly. Second, with our help, he might be able to figure out if he actually fell for a plot, who was involved, and what the group accomplished so far."

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Zach grunted. Grimly, he stared at the traffic light still glowing red. Behind them, someone honked as impatiently as the detective felt. "Maybe we need to put in a coin to get this stupid thing to let us pass," he grumbled.

14: Here I Stand

The man in his mid-fifties sat reclined in an armchair, one leg casually crossed over the other. He had short black hair and wore a T-shirt and blue jeans that only looked like ordinary street clothes at first glance, but were in fact expensive designer garments. His demeanor gave Zach unmistakable notice that the man possessed a clear-cut vision of the world, that he knew what he wanted, that he was used to giving orders, and that he didn't beat around the bush. Rocky Raccoon refused to give his civil name.

"Since I was young, I've known nothing but music," he said. "My father was one of those star producers you called when you needed guaranteed hits. He made sure I got a solid education as a musician, sound engineer and economist, and used his contacts to place me in management at one of the biggest labels in the country. I ran the company for over a decade before retiring at fifty. This — " he pointed with a thumb over his shoulder to the door leading into the store, " — this is my private campaign, a self-imposed task that I keep strictly separate from my professional career. The two are mutually exclusive."

"I'm sure some in the Family see it differently. But I've come to understand that what your... group is trying to do is completely against the interests of the establishment, specifically the music industry. Is that what you're saying?"

"Quite. I've had the dubious pleasure of reproducing the scam by which the Beatles made it big with every single band they — " he pointed upward, " — wanted to place in the charts. Quality didn't matter; the fate of the musicians didn't matter; the good of the customer didn't matter; social consequences didn't matter. It was no different for me than it was for people in other professions. As soon as you understand that the gulf between aspiration and reality did not arise by chance, nor was it due to the incompetence of individual actors, you have to make your choice. It's the most important decision a person will ever face."

Zach nodded and then specified, "Whether to participate in their farce or to leave the theater."

Rocky Raccoon cradled his head. "Very bluntly speaking, yes. There are shades of gray, of course, but I want to emphasize that you can play active and passive roles on both sides of the pit. It wasn't enough for me to merely turn my back on the theater company. I cannot possibly rest on the wealth I have accumulated in the service of the machine. Now that I know what I know about it from my own experience, my only choice is to actively resist it."

"People like Kite sneer at your efforts, because he knows full well, more than ninety percent of all people don't understand what you're talking about at all. And the vast majority of everyone else will tell you that you're just burning your fingers."

Rocky snorted. "First of all, for me it's primarily a matter of ethics, of truthfulness, not success. It's a matter of principle. Secondly, I'm not trying to 'save the world' at all, merely doing my bit for a just cause, as I did before, as a label manager, to keep the machine going. Neither requires more of me than a human being is capable of doing."

"Don't get me wrong," Zach replied, "I'm right there with you. I'm just interested in how you see things. Where do you get the strength to stand up to a world-spanning ten-thousand-year-old pyramid of power?"

"Let me say it again in Martin Luther's words, 'Here I stand; I can't help it.' That entertainment eats up lifetime – fine. That canned entertainment destroys the capacity for our own creativity – fair enough. But that mass-produced canned entertainment increasingly alienates people from reality - the natural foundations of our existence, common sense, and even objective facts infuriates me. This alienation has always been part of our culture; today, however, it is being deliberately driven and promoted. You and I belong to the same generation. Just look at how much the level of human skills has fallen in the last fifty years, and it wasn't particularly exhilarating before: craftsmanship, art. technical understanding, logic, language, culture of discussion, togetherness, capacity for suffering, mental health - to name just a few of the most affected areas – have degraded so much in the course of our lifetime that we can hardly speak of it as culture anymore. Elements of intent should have become visible by now, even to those who have not been directly directed, as I have been, to set aside any concerns, to throw proven practices overboard, and instead to drive direct attacks against people's subconscious. But as the

standards drop, so does the ability to even perceive the decay. A brilliant plan, mercilessly executed."

"To what end do you think?" asked Zach.

"To bring about by force another era, the New Age, a Great Reset. Aleister Crowley spoke of the Age of Horus; his followers speak of the Age of Aquarius, to be ushered in politically by a New World Order; in principle, the establishment of the World State. Many fear the loss of freedom it will bring, but compared to the longer-term goals of the controllers, this is trivial stuff. Their masterminds imagine the superman, the übermensch, *homo deus*, a transhuman master race that is to rise in an alchemical process from the dust and ashes of the old humanity. It knows no fate, no chance, no higher forces — not to mention God — but only total control over all material, social and spiritual conditions of existence. Science is experimenting with electronic-biological interfaces and manipulating genes in order to breed an immortal hyperintelligent super race on the one hand and a species of degenerated slaves incapable of any thoughts of their own on the other. There may be less wordy definitions of Satanism, but as far as I'm concerned, the ideology of the rulers meets any one of them."

"You realize, of course, that your views will not win any popularity awards, to put it mildly. Your vocabulary alone will put off many."

"As I said, I'm concerned with principle, and with my own awakening process — with seeing things as they are, and then acting according to the truth I've recognized. It's not my job to take other people's blinders off; that's their own responsibility. I can only note that those who do not feel anger regarding the state of the world either do not look or refuse to think through the consequences of what they see to their logical end. As a species, we are already paying for the trivialization of evil. It hurts in many ways to live in the twenty-first century. But the agonies yet to come if we continue our collective ignorance, no one today can imagine."

"What do you mean it hurts?"

"How many things do we do merely out of fear of negative consequences? Or put another way, how much of what is part of your everyday life – paying taxes, commuting to work, complying with regulations, filling out forms, participating in protest marches, and so on – would you still engage in even if you didn't have

to fear punishment or loss of privilege? This fear is the most important indication that we have lost our balance as persons and as societies. It's all about pain avoidance for the small, vulnerable self. Where there was once room for something greater and higher, there is a huge gaping hole. Left alone with our fears, we lapse into compulsive behavior. This ranges from minor tics like obsessive hand washing to consumerism to drug addiction, psychosis, depression and suicide. All of these are pain avoidance strategies of the human psyche."

"It's got to be rock 'n' roll / to fill the hole in your soul," Zach sang an ABBA line. "By the way, I heard about a study last week that concluded that almost one-third of all citizens needed therapy. That sounded like a pretty big number at first. But you're right, we probably have to consider figures beyond ninety percent when it comes to culturally induced mental disorders."

Rocky Raccoon raised his hand in a gesture that indicated agreement.

"I thank you for your candor. I find it... well, refreshing is not quite the word, but I hope you understand what I mean. Let me get to the reason I actually invited you: the events at the last Family meeting. May I ask you a few questions about this?"

"Knock yourself out." Rocky smiled.

"Given your insights into the bigger picture, you decided you needed to shake things up in the entertainment industry. If I understand correctly, you're working on some kind of documentation project..."

"Well, that's one aspect of the undertaking: providing interested contemporaries with access to authentic objects and facilitating a reasonably accurate historiography. Another aspects consists in the legal processing. While I don't see any chance at the moment of finding an independent court to go up against the controllers, the time will come, and when it does, we want to be prepared."

"What did you hope to get out of the family meeting in that regard?"

"We thought we could bring about an opportunity to copy Mal Evans' memoir. We suspect his descriptions contain clues to further leads, such as how the songs were written and recorded, or how Billy Shears replaced Paul McCartney."

"Who came up with the idea of using an underage girl as a Venus flytrap?"

"The girl herself. Our plan was to take out Kite with alcohol or drugs. Kirk felt we underestimated his intelligence. She was to be proven right."

"Contrary to expectations, however, my relative stayed away from the meeting that night, and with him the manuscript. Why did you go ahead anyway?"

"Kirk didn't let anything slow her down. Maybe she cared more about the lovemaking than the evidence; maybe she enjoyed the thrill of danger; maybe she wanted to prove something to herself or to us. I don't know. From the moment she arrived, she flirted vigorously. I signaled her several times to let it go, but she just ignored me."

"So eventually, she went into bed with Kite. What happened next?"

"Semolina sneaked after her. At some point Sem returned to the salon to get us. She had received a photograph from Kirk. Mustard, Robert and I took pictures. Then we went back downstairs while Semolina tried to return the photo. But she found Kirk lying unconscious on the floor of the bedroom. So she got me to help her put her up on the bed."

"What did it look like in the bedroom? Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?"

"Utter disarray; pieces of clothing and other things strewn across the floor. Kite was in a deep sleep on the completely rumpled bed, Kirk on the floor next to it. She looked badly battered – covered in bruises, her hair disheveled. We hoisted her up, then left."

"Did you see the photo anywhere?"

"It was on one of the bedside tables."

"And it was still there after you left the room?"

"Of course! What do you take me for?"

"I am sorry, I had to ask the question. The picture was missing the following day."

"Pardon me?"

"Kite says it was stolen from him. He thinks it's a joke taken too far and asked me to start inquiries. Didn't he try to contact you?"

"No. I haven't had any contact with the others either."

"When Semolina and you returned to the salon, did you speak to the others about what you saw in the bedroom?"

Rocky Raccoon considered. Hesitantly, he said, "Yes. Since you ask that way, I remember describing the scene."

"Who was the last to leave the castle?"

"Me. However, everyone would have had the opportunity to go back to the bedroom. We all hear the call of nature from time to time, you know?"

"What do you think is more likely: that Kite is lying or that one of you secretly snatched the photo?"

"I think it's more likely that Kite is lying, but I don't want to rule anything out as a matter of principle."

"Which one of you do you think would be most likely to do such a thing?"

"Robert or Mustard."

"Why not Semolina?"

Rocky pursed his mouth. "If you'd known her for any length of time, you wouldn't have bothered to ask."

"What about Kirk? She seems to have just gone into hiding. Do you think it's possible she ran off with the photo?"

The ex-manager shrugged. "She would have to have woken up ahead of Kite and then walked back to the main road. She's petite built, so I suspect the knockout drops hit her harder. Kite must have been awake before she was."

"He was probably less than amused by the absence of the photo."

"And she at his reaction."

* * *

"I thought you and I had ventured pretty deep into the jungle," Zach remarked, while his daughter, who had been listening to the conversation from the minibar, puffed out her cheeks.

"Maybe a little too far to oversee," she replied.

"Yes. Mr. Raccoon formed a forest out of the individual trees."

"Raccoon *helped* shape a forest out of the many trees. Without the insights Henry and Maria shared with us, I would be much more skeptical about the veracity of what I just heard."

"I feel the same way. What do you think of his statement about the Family meeting?"

"He confirms what the others have told. Everyone including Kite thinks Maria is a woman of honesty and integrity. For her part, she trusts Henry and she would not have allowed Rocky to just pocket the photo either. That really leaves only the collector of photographs, Dr Robert, and the mysterious Mr Mustard as suspects — assuming Kite doesn't merely allege the theft. Miller seems trustworthy to me. Mustard... well, we'll hear his story this afternoon."

* * *

They wouldn't. Aaron Senfkorn, descendant of German-Jewish Holocaust survivors, known among collectors by his alias Mr. Mustard, called shortly before one o'clock in the afternoon to cancel the meeting with Zach. He claimed a last-minute appointment that could not be postponed, but appeared beyond embarrassed. Zach guessed that the collector was trying to avoid him, because the suggestion to reschedule the conversation for Monday also earned evasions.

"I could stop by your house if you'd prefer," Zach offered. "Mal's suitcase contained a nice collection of signed autograph cards that I'd like to show you."

"No!" it came hurriedly from the earpiece. Then, much more gently, as if to counteract the impression that he had something to hide, Mustard said, "No, uh, thank you, that won't be necessary. I'll take the, uh, first opportunity to call on you in the, uh, coming week."

Mustard's reply was preceded by a distinctly audible clicking sound that could have been caused by basically the switch on any piece of equipment. The hairs that stood up on the back of Zach's neck suggested something more specific. He couldn't say why, but he just knew it was the hammer of a revolver. The detective shook off the intuition as irrational. He was getting paranoid, he scolded himself. To Mustard he said, "Fine, please come to the store later in the

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week. Don't wait too long. There are some important developments to discuss. And, of course, I'm anxious to meet you."

"Hmm, yeah, sure. Goodbye."

"See you soon," Zach replied.

15: His Bare Feet

Springwood Crematorium was a modern functional building with clear contours of glass, steel and concrete. The hearse with the convoy of guests following it stopped under a canopy that offered slightly more space than its counterpart at Wallace Castle. Miller had ordered six pallbearers to pull the pine coffin from the vehicle and carry it on their shoulders into the building. At the far end of the small hall they entered – the funeral room – was a stage flanked by red curtains on the right and left. The left curtain had been opened. Behind it stretched a space measuring three paces by three paces, filled to chest height with a marble platform. A lectern stood in the center of the stage, and in front of it a long low table on which the bearers placed the coffin.

As the last bars of the Beatles song 'Long, Long, Long' faded softly from the speakers, Zach looked around. Of the people present, he knew only about half: his daughter, Miller, Maria, Mr and Mrs Wickens, Bishop and Rocky Raccoon. Five other faces he had never seen. Wait a minute, he had: He had met the older lady with the shoulder-length blond curls once before on the street. She belonged to the store across from the Fab Store, if he wasn't mistaken. If he had to guess, the other mourners were also neighbors from the Cavern quarter.

The notary now entered the stage. He stood behind the lectern and looked patiently into the room. Another minute or so passed before the last person was seated and all conversation ceased. Then Jules Robert Miller greeted those present and, in stilted words but not lacking in compassionate warmth, gave a brief summary of Paul's life. Except for the little he had been able to learn about his stepbrother in the past two weeks, it was the biography of a complete stranger to Zach. He looked over at the open coffin, the edge of which was surmounted by the corpse by only a few inches. The perspective was also awkward. His gaze fell on the underside of the chin, nose, and eyelids. Whether the casket actually contained his stepbrother Paul – especially since he had aged twenty years, scarred by a brutal murder and already defamiliarized by death – he would not have been able to tell. Zach's thoughts drifted back to the

Paul he had known at the turn of the millennium, and then even further back to the childhood friend he had met nearly fifty years ago on account of his father's second marriage. The end of Miller's speech got drowned out in the murmur of his memories. From the corners of his eyes, now veiled by tears, the detective noticed a movement. The notary stepped up to the coffin, quietly placed his left hand on the dead man's shoulder for a few moments, and then put a carnation on his chest. Then he nodded to Henry and sat down in one of the front row seats. Thomas Henry Bishop stood up. He went to the lectern to tell some cheerful anecdotes that paid tribute to the many talents of Paul Campbell, the store owner. Then he, as well, took one of the carnations that lay ready in a basket near the stage and added it to the flower that the notary had left on Paul's chest. One by one, the other guests did likewise.

Zach sat paralyzed in his seat. Someone put a hand on his shoulder. Hesitantly, he turned his head, tracking the arm upward with his eyes until he could make out a face. He knew those features. He considered. It was..., it was... who? Henry looked down at him kindly. "Would you like to speak a few words?" he asked. The sound of his voice shook Zach. No, he didn't. But without perceiving how he had gotten on stage, he now held onto the lectern with both hands, his mind simultaneously empty and filled to bursting with myriad thoughts. He opened his mouth. The eyes of the mourners in the rows of chairs in front of him were fixed on him expectantly. He spoke without realizing what he was saying. Two sentences, three perhaps; words of thanks to the surrogate family that strangers had been to his stepbrother in the second half of his life, Veronica would tell him later. Then he descended to the red carpet that lined the hall, took a carnation from the basket as he passed, stepped up to the coffin, and stared into the dead man's face for a long time. Finally, sighing, he placed the flower on his stepbrother's chest. He turned away. As he passed, he noticed the bare feet sticking out of the deceased's black suit, as was the custom of the Isles. "Abbey Road," a whimsical thought flashed through his mind, and, "Paul is dead."

'Golden Slumbers' began to play from the PA system. Before Zach could burst into hysterical laughter, the pallbearers approached with the lid. He stepped aside to allow them room. Now the other guests rose as well. When the wooden coffin was closed, they approached and grouped around him. 'Golden

Slumbers' was followed not by *'Carry That Weight'*, as on the album, but by *'Good Night.'* The bearers moved the casket to the opening to the left of the stage, placed it on the granite platform and stepped back. As the music faded, the red curtain closed. Two of the neighbors crossed themselves, but no one from the Family except for Maria. Then the first turned and left the hall.

Zach, still looking at the curtain, felt a warm hand gently grasp his. It was Maria, looking at him sadly. He turned to her. The next moment they were in each other's arms, sobbing, trembling, crying.

* * *

In a tavern not far from the crematorium, the mourners took a drink. Mr. and Mrs. Wickens, however, had already taken their leave in the funeral hall, Donald's official duties not allowing him to rest even on this Sunday. Crime doesn't take a vacation, the Commissar had said half-jokingly, and his wife Mary had pulled a sour face at that.

Veronica was chatting with the blonde woman who, just as Zach had suspected, worked in the store across the street. The young detective kept one eye on her father, who was sitting on a barstool at the counter a few steps away with Maria Borghese. They were talking quietly to each other, repeatedly putting their heads together or stroking each other's backs. Veronica was happy for her father, who seemed to have finally found clarity on how to deal emotionally with the loss of his stepbrother. Maria, who had never lived on the peninsula but had inherited some of the hot-blooded national character of the Italians from her family, must have been the catalyst. She wished that the 'cleaning lady', who had become so much more than a simple employee to them, would stay with them for a long time. Veronica had grown very fond of her, and if she interpreted the signs correctly, so had her father. She smiled.

* * *

"Do you think it's likely that she actually went to Bath, as she claimed on the phone?" asked Zach Maria. He looked over at his daughter, who was sitting at one of the tables a few steps away with this blonde woman. She looked at him smiling, then focused back on the person she was talking to. Veronica had

handled the turmoil of the last two weeks better than he had, it seemed, and he was glad for it. They could talk about anything together, which made emotional burdens much easier for both of them to bear, but he was currently making an effort to spare her the gloomy thoughts that often plagued him. Gratefully, Maria had now entered the Zieglers' lives. She was not only a good listener, but also a real support for them, as had become apparent today.

In answer to his question, Maria said, "Honestly, I don't think so. But who knows, maybe someone from her family lives there. We know absolutely nothing about them."

"Where else could she have gone?"

"That's what I've been wondering all this time. It's been almost four weeks since I last spoke to her on the phone. Last night an idea came to me."

"Which is?"

"The Family owns an old farm near the Scottish border. We have a big party there together once a year, but we also use the house for our individual purposes."

"What's the arrangement? Do all of you have a key?" asked Zach.

"One has to negotiate that with Desmond. He keeps the key and makes sure there's no overlap."

"In other words, if Kirk is actually staying there, Desmond would know." Maria nodded.

"Okay, that helps. I'll talk to him tomorrow morning about the Family reunion. I can take that opportunity to ask about Kirk too, while I'm at it. If she didn't go to the farm, he may have other means of tracking her down."

The Italian shook her head. "If she's in trouble, it's because of Mr. Kite, whom Desmond is loyally devoted to. You wouldn't learn a thing from him."

"I must try, if only to let him know that someone is keeping an eye on their activities. The days when they could do as they pleased in Liverpool are over as of now."

"Don't play *Don Camillo and Peppone* with them, Zach. Those guys are dangerous."

"I'm not made of chocolate, either."

"Too bad, really," Maria said, taking his hand in hers.

16: Lolita

bstruse dreams and repeated awakenings had ensured that they both got little restful sleep during the night. At six in the morning, Zach finally fought himself out of bed, went to the kitchen, and put on a pot of coffee. Veronica, who had heard his footsteps in the hallway, joined him a few minutes later. In the reddish glow of a dimmed lamp, they squatted at the table, warming their fingers on their cups – Zach on his already empty one, Veronica on one still full.

"The thought of the colored water at the police station makes my stomach revolt," the detective growled.

"That bad?" his daughter asked sympathetically.

"You got no idea how bad!" Zach sighed. "I lack any urge to attend this appointment. And that's despite the fact that it might be one of the most important in the entire series."

"Because Desmond originally obtained the photo?"

"That's only one of several reasons. He probably 'organized' numerous other pieces for Kite. He has his back, as we heard from Miller. He keeps the key to the Family's cottage, where Kirk may be staying. Most importantly, I want to find out if he was somehow involved in Uncle Paul's murder."

"I don't think he's going to just drop it on us like that."

"His wife thought the stopover in the city at the time in question was harmless enough. If he regards it differently, he will tell a conflicting story, or rather, he will get entangled in contradictions."

"Ah, now I see what you're up to," Veronica replied. "Look, I'll make you a deal: we work separately today. I'll take the Wickens interview and you quiz Henry the Horse. That way we can devote more time to the Commissar while we make sure Henry meets someone at the store. I know you've been looking forward to talking to him all week anyway. Also, he supposedly introduced Kirk to the family back in the day. If anyone knows anything about their background or whereabouts, it's him. There's no way we can miss him today."

Zach pondered for half a minute. He stared down at the empty cup, which he turned between his hands, first left, then right, left, right, left right. When he looked up again, he said, "As reasonable as your suggestion does sound, I have a bad feeling about leaving you alone with that man."

"You don't trust me to perform the job?"

"I trust no one better than you, but it looks like Wickens may be playing a double-cross. If he had anything to do with Paul's death..."

"Oh come on, what's the big deal? In a police station, of all places?"

"What could possibly go wrong in the lion's den – of all places, the one that people like Wickens have complete control over? With all those guys around you who have abandoned their moral competence to follow impersonal rules like robots and carry out their superiors' orders unquestioningly like slaves?"

Veronica gulped. "I've never looked at it from that perspective. I was of the opinion that a police building is an environment with more controlled conditions than most others, except perhaps military compounds and government quarters."

"Yes of course they are incomparably much more controlled, but surely not to protect you, rather to protect themselves. If someone clashes with them he's immediately in conflict with the law. When it's your testimony against theirs, are people more likely to believe you or the loyal servant of the state?"

His daughter grimaced.

"If one of them wants to put you out of circulation, he'll always find a reason to lock you up. And if he shoots you, it'll be because you resisted – just like Mal Evans."

"Do you want me to stay home?"

Zach hesitated. "No," he then said firmly. "Danger is part of our condition. To chicken out and go hide behind fortress walls can't be the answer."

"So...?"

"Just go there and try to detect potential difficulties early on. As for unpredictable moments: no one is safe from them anyway. You're better off welcoming surprise." After a brief pause, he added, "I think that's the most important difference between us and those who – on whatever level – take their

place in the power pyramid: They are control freaks. They hate anything natural, alive, born of the moment, evolving."

* * *

At eight o'clock sharp, the orange-painted Opel GT pulled into the parking lot of the police station. This was only a couple of minutes' walk from the Fab Store, but Veronica wanted to buy a few things for the household afterwards. She had herself presented to the head of the homicide squad. It did not escape her notice that the young officer who accompanied her to Donald Wickens' room was secretly admiring her figure. "Here we go again," she thought, "What a difference a snazzy black dress makes. If I had shown up in a sweater and jeans, he would have asked me for my ID. Now, however, he hurries to grant my every wish." She hoped she looked similarly attractive to the Commissar. In her experience, form-fitting clothes loosened most men's tongues guickly and reliably. But Wickens, of course, was an old hand at his business. He could possibly curb impulses routinely. His brisk voice invited them to enter after the young policeman had knocked. Wickens sat behind his desk, which had several stacks of files piled on its surface. When Veronica had almost reached him, he stood up and extended his hand to her across the table. Then he pointed to the chair in front of it. "Sit down," he urged her.

"Nice place you have here," Veronica said wryly. She noticed from his irritated facial expressions that she had caught him on the wrong foot with her remark. The room appeared as functional as it looked ugly, with nothing pretty or nice about it; an average office, so to speak.

"Really?" he replied. "Feel free to nominate us in the contest for the most picturesque police station in Britain. May I ask where your father is? Did you come here alone?"

"He's busy, I'm afraid, and furthermore, very sorry that your coffee dispenser... you know what I mean."

Again, that irritated look. "No, I don't understand. What's the problem with the coffee?"

"That... you'd best ask him yourself. But I hope we'll have a good talk anyway." She straightened her dress, then sat down. "Mr. Wickens, we requested this

interview because William Campbell - Mr. Kite - has hired us to determine the whereabouts of an item in his possession."

The Commissar raised his eyebrows. "Is that so?"

"The object was stolen the night of the last Family reunion," she continued, "the same night that Paul Campbell was murdered."

"Is that so!" the Commissar said again.

Interrogating this man would be troublesome, Veronica feared. He seemed determined to have every word pulled from his nose. "Can you tell me how the evening of April 30 went from your perspective?" she began her inquiry.

"Well, there's not much to tell," he replied predictably. "We had gathered at Kite's castle to celebrate the acquisition of Mal Evans' suitcase. According to the rumors that had been going around for decades, it held a number of valuable items that would probably be worth several million Pounds on the open market. Paul Campbell, who closed the deal for us, was supposed to have brought it to the meeting, but he didn't show up. So we just got drunk and talked about this and that."

"Didn't anyone try to reach him by phone?"

"Well, yes. Both Kite and I called him several times, but he didn't pick up."

"What do you think kept him from showing up at the party?"

"I don't know. A misunderstanding, perhaps?"

"Did you notice anything about the guests' behavior that was different from what you were used to? Were there allusions to things that went over the head of the uninitiated? Was there covetousness? Arguments?"

"Not that I know of."

"Are you aware of what item our detective agency is investigating?"

"Kite mentioned a photograph."

"He didn't ask you to help recover it?"

"No. He just mentioned it in passing."

"If you had to make a guess, who would you suspect?"

"I really don't have enough knowledge on the matter to form an opinion."

"You and your wife were the first to leave the meeting. What time did you get home?"

"Whew, I don't know. Early morning of May 1 sometime."

"Did you drive straight from the castle to your apartment?"

Wickens again showed signs of irritation. He frowned. "What's the point of that question? How does that have anything to do with the theft? Do you suggest that I'm involved in something?"

"Please just give me an answer."

"We were both pretty tired. My wife already fell asleep during the ride back. So no more parties that night."

"Well, you might have wanted to throw yourself right back into your work." Veronica made it sound like a joking remark.

"My colleagues are quite capable of holding the fort for a few hours of my absence. They enjoy my complete confidence," the man replied humorless.

"In the same way, you enjoy mine. As a new citizen of Liverpool, I feel reassured."

Wickens eyed her piercingly, as if to gauge whether she was being serious or ironic, but Veronica had a poker face on. He couldn't figure her out. She decided to draw him out. She claimed, "We found reason to believe that Duchess of Kirkcaldy has seized the moment. Several of the guests reported to us that she was flirting with the master of the house in a conspicuous manner. Do you share that assessment?"

Wickens laughed dryly. "Flirting, nicely put. She was begging him to get laid from the moment she arrived, if you ask me. None of my business, though."

"Witnesses tell that she not only accomplished that goal, but in the process gained access to the photograph. There has also been no trace of her since May 1. We now suspect that she has absconded with the loot."

The Commissar paused. Had he taken the bait? Veronica followed up. "We further suspect that she is still somewhere in the vicinity, perhaps with relatives or friends in the Liverpool area. Do you know anything about that? Have you perhaps even seen Kirk in the past month?"

Wickens put on a thoughtful face. Then he said, "I actually saw her. She came to me and asked for the key to the Family cottage. We've restored an old farm in the mountains north of here, you know. We use it as a place for special occasions. Kirk said she needed some time off."

"Do you think she's still staying there?"

"She certainly hasn't returned the key yet."

"How can we find the cottage?"

"It's pretty remote; so remote that even most route planners can't give you directions. You probably won't find it at all without help." Wickens looked inquiringly into Veronica's face. As she made moves to ask the logical next question, he beat her to it. "If you want, I'll show you the way," he said.

"You would do that? We'd really appreciate it. When would you have time?"

The commissioner shrugged his shoulders. "In a moment, if you like." He pointed to the stacks of files on his desk. "I'm looking for an excuse to get away from this anyway."

* * *

Veronica and the Commissar had already started hurrying north in the GT when Henry the Horse entered the Fab Store. Zach welcomed him like an old friend. They hugged and patted each other on the back. "Nice of you to make time for me," the detective said.

"Don't mention it," the older man replied, "you know that I am retired and come to town for breakfast on Monday mornings anyway. Frankly, I miss the long conversations here at the store."

"Well, let's resume the tradition." Zach pointed with his right to the door in the back of the store. "Come on, I'll make us some coffee."

Fifteen minutes later, when the aroma of the hot brew had lent the room a certain air of coziness, Zach pivoted to the topic at hand for the day. "Henry, I think the Family is in big trouble." The PI let the sentence linger in the air. He watched his counterpart's face looking for signs of agreement or disagreement.

The corners of Henry's mouth twitched, but he did not answer immediately. He took his cup from the table, brought it slowly to his lips and sipped carefully.

Only after he had put it back and made himself comfortable again in the armchair did he reply, "And not just since today."

"I have also come to this impression after talking to many of you. If I understand it correctly, there are two fundamentally different views among the collectors about where your activities should lead, resulting from incompatible outlooks on human nature. Would you agree with me?"

"Brilliantly to the point, my dear Zachary. On one side we have an elitist bunch who think they are superhumans, while viewing the rest of humanity as useless, stupid people who need to be told what to do and what not to do. On the other side – to which I count my humble self – are those of us who recognize the control and manipulation efforts of the former for what they truly are: self-fulfilling paranoid delusions. I believe... no, I *know* that people in full possession of their mental faculties are, as the phrase so beautifully suggests, capable of infinitely more good than we are seeing right now, if only they were allowed to. The modern world is not the result of a supposedly defective species, but bears witness to the failure of the delusions of control of a narrow circle of beneficiaries."

"I couldn't have put it more aptly," Zach agreed with the elder, "but my comment was aimed not so much at the latent potential for conflict in the Family as at an acute need. Your group has challenged Kite's regime in a way that the man takes as a declaration of war. He hired us as detectives to return a photograph that you guys stole from him."

Henry's eyebrows twitched upward.

"That led to a rift between us and Kite, as well. So don't worry about it. I'm certainly not going to turn anyone in to him. But I want to alert you that your usual routines might become a thing of the past for the foreseeable future. It is possible that the Family as such is on the verge of disintegration."

"Thank you for your frankness. I will, of course, remain loyal to you as a customer."

"Glad to hear it, Henry. Right now I have a whole other set of concerns bothering me. I want to get that photo tracked down; I'm trying to find my stepbrother's killer; I need ammunition to keep Kite off my back; and, most

pressing: I need to talk to Kirk. Unfortunately, she's disappeared without a trace since the Family meeting."

"I noticed that, too," Henry replied. " I have tried to call her several times on the phone, but she never answers the line. This is starting to get me worried."

"Let me ask you without beating around the bush, do you know who took the photo?"

"No. I would have advised anyone not to take it. It was far too dangerous. And I hope for Kirk's sake that she was not the one who did it, or she will have to deal with Kite's unrestrained wrath."

"Frankly, that's exactly what we fear, whether she actually did it or not. She just lent herself as a lightning rod after she weakened Kite's guard."

Again, there was silence in the back room for a few moments. Henry looked to the floor as he said quietly, "I probably ought not be talking about what I have to tell you now. Trusting in our friendship – and because I think you are an honest man and a professional investigator – I want to express my confidence that Kirk knows what she is doing. No harm will have come to her in the end."

"How do you come to that assessment? How long have you even known her?"

"She walked into the Fab Store about a year ago, just as Paul and I were chatting about Billy Shears. While we talked shop in our jargon, she browsed the displays. She didn't seem to be paying any attention to us. After a while, however, she stepped up to the counter with two albums, 'Rubber Soul' and 'Sgt. Peppers,' pointed to McCartney's face on each and said, 'You mean that's not the same man?' Her inquisitiveness, expressed without prejudice, prompted us to explain the Paul-is-dead theory to her. She asked the right questions, and so we talked to each other for several hours until she said, 'That's hot! You know what? You've convinced me. There ought to be all this evidence and clues collected somewhere...' – and that's how she got in touch with the Family."

Zach listened intently. When Henry seemed to be lost in thought, he said, "Go on."

Some more seconds passed, in which only muffled noises from the street were audible. Then Henry began to speak again. "She claimed to be fifteen years old at the time, and she appeared convincing. Baby fat, trendy clothes, naive notions, brash way of speaking – it all fit the picture. She asked question after

question, and we all felt called to answer them in more detail than she demanded. At first, she randomly collected what she thought was interesting; more or less the standard entry-level stuff: rare LP pressings, signed items, stage clothes. So Kite personally took her under his wing to help her find a focus for her collection. From then on, the two of them were constantly putting their heads together. She must have sensed relatively quickly that there were disagreements between us, because she kept steering the conversation in that direction. She was particularly enthusiastic about the idea of finding objective evidence of McCartney's death and Billy's joining the Beatles, in order to tear the mask off the music industry."

"You had the privilege of observing for yourselves how energetically she was willing to go to that end," Zach interjected.

"Undeniably. The question we should have asked was, why? Was it really just youthful idealism or was there more to it?"

"The suggestion has been made that it was for erotic adventure on her part."

"Ha!" laughed Henry. "I no longer entertain any doubt about this. It was, from my understanding, one of the preconditions with which she went on this mission – or should I say has been sent?"

Zach raised his eyebrows. "Been sent?"

"Have you ever traveled to Japan, Zachary?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"But maybe you've heard of the youth culture that's flourished since the 1980s called *visual kei?*"

"You mean the people with the colorful hair?"

"Yes, among others. It was popularized by a heavy metal group called X, whose members presented themselves in a very feminine way, in the style of traditional kabuki theater: makeup, lipstick, long dyed hair, even skirts in some cases – the whole works. One of them, Yoshiki, published a book of photographs entitled 'Nude', in which he simulated female eroticism. Visual kei is more than a short-lived trend, it is a way of life that has been practiced for decades, blurring not only the lines between rock, pop and manga, but also those between genders and age groups. In downtown Tokyo, there's a bridge where music and comic fans like to hang out — dolled up as these idols in their flashy outfits. But you

don't even need to fly to the other side of the world to see it for yourself. Just go to one of their conventions. Little girls as well as young women and even men dress as 'loli' as they call it." Henry now looked Zach straight in the eye. "You may already have an inkling of what I'm getting at."

Zach huffed. "Lolitas?" he guessed.

"Lolitas, yes; underage nymphomaniacs."

"And Kirk originates from that scene?"

"No. The lolis are just part of the *visual kei* and manga scene, albeit a significant one. I don't think Kirk has even heard of them, but she's definitely a convincing Lolita performer. Kirk wasn't fifteen years old when I met her, she was twenty."

"What?" exclaimed Zach in amazement. "That would mean she'd be twenty-one today. Are you sure? She hardly looks older than sixteen or seventeen in her Facebook photos."

Henry nodded grimly. "One day, when I was talking to Paul again – we were at the sales counter – she stood next to me to pay for a book she wanted to buy. She opened her purse and her ID fell to the floor. I picked it up for her. My eyes caught the date, and that's when the card almost slipped from my hands as well."

"Did you ever call her on it?"

"To her real age? Yes. I told her to her face that she was not the person she claimed to be."

"And her response?"

"She seemed to have misunderstood me. 'I'm afraid I'm not allowed to tell you who I am,' she said. 'Why not? Who stops you from it?' I asked. She just shook her head and replied, 'I'm not allowed to tell you that either."'

Zach pondered. "Do you think someone sent her to Liverpool to set her on the Family?"

"Yes, the conclusion suggests itself. And who could that be? She has to come from either a fairly high level government agency, such as the upper echelons of Scotland Yard or MI-5, or she works for upper Masonic degrees, perhaps even the Illuminati. In any case, I think she knows what she is doing. She is clearly not an inexperienced teenager anymore."

"That opens up the option that she accomplished what she wanted and returned to headquarters to report back," Zach mused.

"It looks that way to me, too ... "

At that moment, footsteps rumbled on the stairs. With hurried steps, Maria rushed down to them and called out, "Mr. Mustard is dead. They just broke the news on the local radio."

Henry and Zach jumped up from their seats, startled. "What are you saying?"

The Italian woman placed the portable radio she had brought with her on the bar counter and turned up the volume. "... Neighbors heard several gunshots from the adjacent house last night. They saw an unlit white van driving away. According to eyewitnesses who entered the house through the open front door, the owner, Aaron Senfkorn, was lying dead on the ground with a bullet wound to the head. Police were immediately called to the scene. They cordoned off the property. Officially, the homicide squad has not yet issued a statement, but they announced a report for the morning. We expect their statement any minute and will keep you updated as soon as we have further details."

Henry sank back into the chair. Zach had gone white as a ghost, Maria noticed. With a worried look, she sat down on the sofa and pulled him down to the seat next to her. She put an arm around him. It took the detective a few minutes before he could speak again. Then he told them about his phone call with Mr. Mustard. "You must have been mistaken, Zach," Maria said.

"I am certain it was just a rather curious coincidence," Henry agreed.

Zach didn't believe it for a second, but what good did it do? If he had been granted a preview of what was going to happen, he had missed the opportunity to save Mustard from his fate. For the collector, any help came too late. Unable to react in any meaningful way, the three of them waited for the promised radio announcement. But neither at eleven nor at twelve, nor at one o'clock, did they broadcast any news about the Mustard case.

17: New Moon

edges and rock walls restricted the view. The road was a single lane over bumpy tractor trails for several miles. Little of the landscape was visible in the low-lying GT. Moreover, because of its insufficient ground clearance, it rolled toward its destination only at bicycle speed. Whoever lived out here had better not get into a situation that required quick outside help, Veronica thought. By the time ambulance, police or fire department arrived, the problem would have taken care of itself, though not necessarily for the better. But finally Desmond pointed to an opening in the rampart they had been following for several minutes. They turned, and there it was: the Family's cottage.

Its shape betrayed a historic farmhouse whose builders must have been wealthy, for it had both a spacious footprint and a second story. It had been well maintained; the roof trusses were not sagging, the shingles gleamed in the sunlight, the walls stood straight and were neatly plastered. But the building looked abandoned. The wooden shutters on the ground floor windows were all closed. No laundry was hanging on the line to dry, no vehicle parked in the yard. The feeling of solitude was palpable. If one needed a little distance from civilization, this place could offer balm for the battered soul. But they weren't looking for solitude, after all, they were looking for a young person who had been missing from Liverpool for a month. If she was out here, she hid her presence even from those who happened to stray into this godforsaken spot. And anyone who covered their tracks in a place that was already hidden had

They did not open the vehicle doors immediately, but remained seated for a moment. listening to the sounds coming in through the lowered side windows. Apart from the crackle of the engine beginning to cool, all they heard were a few songbirds and the whisper of a light breeze. Their eyes searched the front of the house and the immediate area, but the impression of abandonment did not

reason to fear. Veronica felt tingling in her stomach, the tickling of an intuition that did not bode well. She was unable, however, to pinpoint a cause on the

short distance it took the GT to coast to a stop. She turned off the engine.

change. Veronica looked questioningly at Desmond. He looked back, then indicated with a motion of his head that they should go to the front door. So they got out. Veronica smoothed out the half-length black dress again that was wrinkled from sitting.

Slowly they approached the entrance door, which divided the long side centrally into two equal halves. Judging by the door's bulky frame and rough workmanship, it had to be able to withstand the onslaught of a battering ram. The cop reached into one of the pockets of his sleeveless cardigan. A security key appeared. He inserted it into the lock and turned it twice. A soft click announced that the mechanism was clearing the way. The door leaf immediately yielded to the pressure of the man's shoulders. It swung inward without a sound, revealing itself in profile to be just as strong as Veronica had suspected. Desmond entered; the young woman followed him closely. He shut the door again immediately. It latched with a rich sound.

They were in a hallway that, it looked to her, ran all the way through the house to the back outer wall and another massive door. To the right and left, two doors each led off. Between them, Veronica saw a staircase heading up on the left and one just opposite it going down. A thin layer of dust covered the floor. Nothing indicated that the house currently had an occupant. She was about to turn to Desmond to ask him why none of the doors had a handle, when a hard blow hit her on the left temple. She rolled her eyes upward and fell to the floor unconscious.

* * *

Around half past one, Henry and Maria left the store. They both hugged Zach again and offered him words of encouragement. The detective brooded over the story of Mustard's death for another twenty minutes before he remembered that Veronica had gone to the police station. She was supposed to have returned by now. Unable to endure being alone any longer, he grabbed a jacket and walked to the precinct. Thus, along the way, he might get a chance to exchange a few words with Wickens, who, if he was allowed to talk about it, could certainly tell him more about Mustard's death than the local radio. But at the reception desk, a young police officer informed him that the Commissar and Veronica had already left the building early that morning with an unknown destination. He was

not allowed to say anything about the state of the investigation into the suicide of the wealthy collector. However, there would be an official announcement after the return of the Commissar.

"Did you say 'suicide'?" asked Zach, puzzled.

"I'm sorry, I really can't give you any more information."

Zach looked doubtfully at the young uniformed man, then turned to go back home. A sense of trepidation settled into his mind. Where were Wickens and Veronica? Were they still talking? He rather believed they already went their separate ways. Wickens might be at the crime scene investigating; Veronica wanted to run some errands. She might be strolling downtown and could arrive back at the store at any time. He quickened his steps. But when he entered the Fab Store in Rainford Gardens, he found the building deserted. Zach decided to wait a little longer. He put on two cups of coffee, which, when the brew was through, he downed in quick succession. He went to the phone next to the cash register, picked up the receiver, and called Molly Jones, Wickens' wife, at her desk at Notary Miller.

"Mrs. Wickens, good afternoon. This is Zachary Ziegler."

"Good day, Mr. Ziegler," the secretary piped up. "What can we do for you?"

"Mrs. Wickens, I'm sorry to bother you. I'm looking for your husband. I'm told at the station that he left the building early this morning. Do you happen to know where he went?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't help you there. He rarely tells me what he does during the day. That comes with the job, if you know what I mean. You had an appointment with him, didn't you? Did he not show up?"

"Another commitment got in the way. Veronica went to the interview instead of me. Since then, the two of them have disappeared."

"Oh, they'll turn up again. Don't worry about it," the secretary replied good-humoredly.

"You're probably right," Zach replied. "By the way, did you listen to the local news today?"

"I didn't have time to. It's been busy at our place. Did FC Liverpool win?"

"I don't know. I meant the report about Mr. Mustard."

"Mustard? Is he making embarrassing speeches about Corbyn's alleged anti-Semitism again?"

"Hardly. He was shot last night."

"Shot?" squeaked the shellac earpiece.

Zach nodded. Then he remembered she couldn't see it. He said, "Yeah. It came on the radio shortly after ten o'clock. Do you know if he made any enemies?"

"Show me a Jew who has no enemies. But to shoot him right away? Who would do such a thing?"

"We'll find out soon enough, I hope. Turn on the radio. The police want to make a statement in a while."

"I will.' Mr. Ziegler, I'm afraid I have to end the call now. Customers have just entered. Give my regards to Veronica when she returns. Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, Mrs. Wickens." He hung up.

Zach gritted his teeth. "Damn it!" he growled. His two most promising attempts at finding out about Veronica's whereabouts and the Mustard case had come to nothing. What now?

* * *

A piercing pain in her head was the first thing that greeted her when she regained consciousness. Her eyelids felt swollen, so she decided she would keep them closed for now. She checked the state of her body by turning her attention away from her throbbing temple and slowly sending it down along her spine. She was lying on her side, a straw mat beneath her. Face and neck reported no problems. The right shoulder felt as if it had received a punch, but seemed okay aside from that. When her mind's eye arrived at her wrists, she realized something was wrong. She... was tied up! An alarm signal raced through her arms to her brain. The young woman awoke from her daze in shock. She wrenched open her eyelids and looked at her hands, which were bound together in a prayer position by a stout strip of leather. A calving rope knotted there wound away from her across the floor to rise into the air like a cobra about three feet away. That was all she could make out from her position.

A dim twilight prevailed in the room, whose wood-paneled walls loomed just a few steps away. What time was it? Veronica tried to make out the source of the light. Slowly she turned onto her back. She moaned loudly. Her head was about to explode. As the star-studded sky before her eyes dissolved again, her gaze followed the rope upward. What on earth was that? She saw that it looped around several reels hanging from a hook from the beam ceiling. Beyond it, it fell back toward the floor. The solution to the picture puzzle was within her grasp, but hidden by a fog of headache and disorientation.

The source of the light! She had wanted to find out where the light came from, hoping to estimate the time of day. Avoiding any other movement, she slowly scanned the room. There were two windows on one side of it. Dusk was well advanced, but the remnants of daylight in the black-blue sky bathed everything in ghostly gray. So she had been lying there unconscious all day... "Desmond!" was her next thought. He had lured her to this desolate place and then knocked her down. Why? Was he trying to kill her because she had gotten wise to him? Panic flared and immediately subsided. He could have taken care of that long ago. He wanted something from her, still needed her for something that would have required too much mental strength from her to fathom at the moment. She let the thought go and turned again to the problem of her bound hands. When she raised them in front of her face, she noticed a figure behind them at the place where the rope hung from the mysterious reels to the floor. Its outlines resembled those of the cop.

Until now, he had stood motionless outside the young woman's field of vision, quietly watching her slowly regain consciousness. When it became clear that she had noticed him, he raised his voice. "Ah, Miss Smart Arse has awakened. I was beginning to worry that the blow might have been a little too hard," he said with a sneer.

The voice exploded in Veronica's auditory canals like a brutally overdriven concert speaker. She grimaced. Slowly, she turned on her side and bent her elbows to straighten up.

"Let me help you," the voice said. It sounded like a roar. Hand over hand, the policeman pulled swiftly on the rope. Metal squealed above her. Then the rope tightened, wrenching her arms out from under her. Painfully, her chest and belly slapped the ground, but she was immediately yanked upward by her hands, her

back arching to the limit of what she could bear. For the second time in a few minutes, a scream escaped her. The rope dragged her forward a bit as it pulled her body into an upright position, first on her knees, then on her feet. Trying to find her footing, she felt that they, too, had been tied.

She now stood, hanging by her own arms, raised to almost full height. The upward movement stopped. Desmond had taken three steps back. He wrapped the rope around the wrought-iron fixture beside a chunky wall lamp. He approached again, circling her figure. With quick glances, he checked the fit of the leather strips around her wrists and ankles. "I like you better like this," he said. "I guess you thought you could nail me, huh? You'll have to get up earlier than that."

Veronica was silent. She still felt too weak to stand on her own two feet. The image her eyes provided kept getting blurry. The policeman put a hand on her left hip and began to circle her body, hanging like a sack from the rope, clockwise again, sliding his hand first over her belly, then her right hip, and finally her back. The fear that the molestation might turn into abuse shot more needles into her brain, but at the same time gave her the strength to regain control of her body. She pushed through her knees. Finally, she stood on the soles of her feet. To snap Desmond out of his fantasies, she addressed him, "Where's Kirk? What have you done with her?"

The Commissar, who was now standing to her left again, laughed, shook his head, laughed once more. "The good Duchess had a tryst with her Prince Charming," he murmured in her ear. "I think the two of them had quite a bit to talk about." His hand stroked her buttocks in an illustrative gesture.

"Is she here?" pressed Veronica.

"Never been." The cop pondered. "One of the things we've been trying to find out from her is the whereabouts of the photograph. Do you happen to know who stole it?"

"Yes..." said Veronica, a look of disgust running across her features.

"Can you be a little more specific, or do I have to pull it out of your nose with a fishhook?"

"You yourself, Wickens. You stole that picture from the police archives."

Donald Wickens, aka Desmond Jones, lost his composure for a moment. With a hate-distorted snarl, he spat, "The Devil told you that!"

It was inappropriate to her precarious position, but Veronica could not for the life of her hold back the laughter that escaped from her. Desmond's outburst was too reminiscent of the fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin. All that was missing was him stomping his foot and disappearing into the ground. "That's who did it," she snorted.

The fist blow that hit her in the kidney was unexpected, and it drove all the air out of her lungs. Her legs gave way, and she dangled again by her wrists from the calving rope. Enraged, Desmond stepped into her field of vision. It looked like he was going to work her over from the front as well, but he had already regained his bearings. "Keep your loose mouth in check or I'll forget you're reserved for the boss," he hissed. "Go on, tell me what you and your old man found out. Maybe then Kite will leave enough of you to crawl out of here under your own power."

"Otherwise... what happens?" she ventured to challenge him, since he seemed to have orders to leave her alone. Perhaps she could elicit some useful information from him.

"Otherwise, you come to lie on an altar. Or Kite will leave you to me when he's through with you. It will be my very special pleasure to keep you alive as long as possible." A wide-eyed grin and bared teeth flitted across his visage. The demon grimace went away as quickly as it had appeared. "Unfortunately, I was granted less time with your uncle. I had to make short work of him. Orders are orders."

Veronica, who had picked herself up, opened her mouth. "You...?"

"Yes, me. Kite told me to call Paul and tell him the meeting was postponed. For some reason the punk seemed quite happy about it. Then at 3:15 in the morning I went to the store and rang him out. He opened up and I said there was something important to discuss. As expected, he led me to the back. I put him down with six stabs in the shape of a cross, exactly at 3:22. Then I looted the cash register to create a false trail and went back to the car." The policeman seemed pleased with his performance.

On Veronica's dust-smeared cheeks, tears formed two rivers down to her chin. "Why?" she whimpered, "Why only?"

"What a stupid question. To Lucifer's glory, of course – and to shut that stupid bastard up about what's in the manuscript, or who owns it now."

"Damn swine!" the young woman pressed out between sobs.

"Doesn't look like I can convince you to go out with me." Desmond chuckled. "Anyway, I've informed Kite. He should be arriving soon. Let him tell what should happen next with you. I think we can make multiple use of you before we decide to dump you."

* * *

He taped a note for Veronica on the door to the back room, then Zach left the store. A cab was already waiting for him outside the Fab Store. Within twenty-five minutes, the vehicle reached the street where Mr. Mustard lived. Police cars blocked the driveway. Zach got out and walked to the barrier. An officer approached him. "You can't go any further here," he said, "we've closed the street for investigative purposes."

Did the man think he was blind? He would have preferred to just push him aside, but of course that wasn't advisable while you were fond of your freedom. Instead, he attempted a trick: "My name is Ziegler. I have an appointment with Commissar Wickens. I was told he was in charge of the investigation here."

The uniformed man's face suddenly turned into a stiff mask. "Papers!" he commanded the PI. Zach handed him his identification card. The policeman called a colleague over and showed him the plastic card. The two whispered to each other briefly, then the colleague walked over to one of the vehicles with the ID. "What do you want from Commissar Wickens?" the policeman asked.

"I'm sorry, but that's between him and me."

"He's not on duty today. Who sent you here?"

What's going on here, Zach wondered. A death in strange circumstances, the head of the homicide department not on duty, and then this quasi-interrogation – there was definitely something very wrong here. Without batting an eye, he said, "The young man at the station's reception desk. Well, if the inspector is already gone, nothing can be done. Do you happen to know where I might find him?"

"I'm sorry, I can't give you any information about that. Now leave the place. There's nothing to see here!"

Zach almost laughed out loud. That looked so much like the cops again. A man was lying in his own blood, but no, there was nothing to see here. "All right. Could I have my ID back, please?... Thank you, officer."

The detective strolled to the other side of the street, where a small crowd of people stood on the sidewalk. Some were engaged in animated discussion, most of the others were staring curiously over, hoping to catch a glimpse of what was happening at the crime scene. His little exchange of words with the policeman had been a welcome change, interrupting what had probably been hours of uneventfulness. Routinely, he checked the faces of those present, looking for any particular emotion, and stored his impressions in a specially reserved corner of his memory. He spotted Maria Borghese a little apart from the crowd. She was conversing with a small lanky woman of upper age. Both looked stricken. He stepped up and said, "Greetings, Maria."

"Zach, what are you doing here?" They hugged briefly.

"I'm looking for Veronica and Desmond, and I thought I'd try my luck here for once," the detective said, after they had stepped apart again. "What's going on here?"

"There's no news. They're not letting anything out," the Italian woman replied. Lowering her voice, she continued, "If it weren't for my friend here, one of Mr. Senfkorn's neighbors, I'd be completely in the dark." She introduced the two of them.

The elderly lady's name was Cilia Appleby. She wore thin-rimmed glasses with a silver chain around her neck and made a bright impression. Her cunning gaze slid quickly over the assembled people, probably to make sure no one was showing any interest in them. The reconnaissance seemed to have turned out to her satisfaction, for she started explaining in low voice, "I was one of the first to find the body. Mr. Senfkorn was lying on his side in his living room in a squatting position, a small hole in the back of his neck and another in the back of his head. Half his face was blown off..." She shook herself. "That's when I decided I wasn't going to be a witness. It's too hot for me. You know, young man, I used to be a war correspondent for the *Times*. I know an execution when

I see one, and I don't feel an urge to stand in the way of the people who did this."

"A wise decision. I inquired about the case at the police station about an hour ago. An officer answered me that he could not say anything about this suicide." He let his brows dance. Both Maria and Cilia Appleby's eyes snapped open. "Let's get out of here. My cab is waiting on the next street corner."

Maria hugged the old lady warmly, then they said goodbye.

* * *

Desmond had disappeared through the door without further comment. She heard him descend the stairs. Veronica was left to her own devices in the room. The rope leading to the ceiling kept her arms stretched upward so that she could neither sit nor lie down, but only stand or hang. Stand-up torture, she thought. But worse than standing, she felt the tingling in her arms and hands that she could do nothing about. She spun around on her own axis to take in the room. The stinging headache had eased somewhat and her vision was slowly stabilizing as well. Unfortunately, it was now dark night. Without the moon and without any artificial lighting nearby, only the band of the Milky Way provided a faint light that allowed the objects in her prison to be seen as indistinct shadows, black against darker black.

There was a small square table or cabinet under the right window; she saw only the top. To the right of it, in one corner of the room, a bed stood out a little brighter because of the presumably white sheets. Under the other window it looked as if a chair was standing there. To the left, on the wall leading inward, she saw the outline of the iron chandelier, next to which her rope was attached to a hook. At the other end of the wall hung another, she thought she recognized. It was followed by the corner of the room, the existence of which she could only infer, for the inner wall lay entirely in darkness. Except for the centered doorway she had seen when Desmond had passed through, she knew no details of its features.

She still did not know what time it was. When she had awakened from her unconsciousness, she had just experienced the last moments of dawn. How long had she talked to Wickens? It might have been fifteen or twenty minutes,

plus the time she had spent inspecting the room. She guessed it must be half past seven now. She turned to the window side. Her gaze wandered out to the starry sky. The position of the constellations above the horizon told her that her estimate had been well taken. From now on, her inner clock would keep time, which she had last practiced at Wallace Castle. This afforded her three conveniences: She would stay oriented, she would be busy, and it calmed her nerves. If she wanted a chance to get out of here alive and un... She shuddered as Maria's description rose from her memory of how Kite had treated Kirk.

If she wanted to get out of here alive, she resumed the thought, she had to stay fully focused. She had to use every advantage, no matter how small, to maximum effect against her captors. One of those advantages was that they were likely to underestimate her. At five foot ten, she was not overly tall; she was young and had a gentle face, and she had not yet had to use her knowledge of various types of martial arts in Liverpool. The element of surprise was on her side, but only once, of course. She would succeed or... The thought was idle.

* * *

"Is it possible that the officer meant Desmond was only absent for the moment?" asked Maria Borghese.

Zach shook his head vigorously. "No, he specifically said the Commissar was not on duty today. He was, however, at the station and, according to the lad at the front desk, left it in the company of Veronica. If he's not working on the Senfkorn case, where could he have gone?"

"Ask me something easier. The only place I can think of is our cottage on the Scottish border."

"You mean Kirk went there and they followed her? Do you have a phone in that house?"

"The building is so remote that we would have had to pay for several miles of cable out of our own pockets. It wasn't worth it to us, especially since one can carry a cell phone if one wants to remain available. As a rule, though, we just wanted our peace and quiet."

Zach suddenly straightened up in his seat in the back of the cab that was carrying them downtown. "Ha! You're a genius!" He pressed a kiss to Maria's cheek.

"I know," she said with a smile, "but what have I done to deserve your praise?"

"I could have thought of locating Kirk by cell phone tracking a long time ago." The detective was silent for the remaining minutes of the drive. He shifted uneasily in his seat. When they finally arrived in front of the store, he tossed a one-hundred-Pound bill on the passenger seat and hopped out of the car unceremoniously.

Maria thanked the driver. "Keep the change," she said. Then she followed Zach into the store. By the time she closed the door behind her, he was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

Time passed, her inner clock ticked along. Veronica began to make plans for several scenarios. When she was satisfied, she thought about her father. He must have been missing her since lunchtime. What would he have done when it was clear that she was probably in trouble? He certainly turned over every stone in search of her, but whether he was able not only to learn of her present whereabouts, but also to reach her in time, she had to doubt. So: no mistakes! She was on her own.

Veronica considered whether to relief her mind and legs by trying to sleep, or whether she should spare her hands and arms a little longer so that she could use them against Kite if necessary. It all depended on how much longer she was left in this torturous position. Her inner clock showed eleven. She heard a Volkswagen engine approaching outside. There was simply no mistaking the sound for anything else. It had to be Kite. He had made the choice for her: She would stay awake.

The rattling sound died away. A thin metal door slammed shut. A moment later, she heard the rich sound of the heavy front door slamming into its lock. A brief unintelligible exchange of words between two men. Then silence reigned again.

* * *

The laptop booted up at an unnervingly slow speed. Just before entering the password, it got stuck. Zach cursed and restarted the computer. Maria put a hand on his arm. "Maybe we should use Paul's main computer. It'll run a lot faster. Plus, it will be better secured against snooping attempts."

"I need some special programs. We can't go on without them." Zach pressed his lips together.

"Take the laptop with you. We can work in parallel," she replied.

Maria actually found some useful applications on Paul's computer before Zach managed to get the laptop working. The detective raised an eyebrow, wondering about the unusual software, but didn't ask any questions. To his disappointment, the results of their research provided no help. Kirk's mobile number had been offline for a month. It had last been registered at her home.

* * *

Half an hour after the car arrived, Veronica heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, then on the wooden floorboards of the hallway. A man cleared his throat. His strides stopped in front of her room. A bunch of keys rattled and clanked, metal scraped across the wood of the door. With a click, it opened. Light fell through the rapidly widening crack. It blinded her, as her eyes had adjusted to the deep darkness of the nocturnal room. She closed her eyelids just in time before glaring wall lamps came on next to the door. The figure she had seen in the frame moments before unmistakably belonged to the castle owner with his tall, sturdy figure. She still kept her eyelids squeezed shut when he addressed her.

"What rare little bird has caught itself in my trap? Well, well!" he teased in a snob's tone. When she didn't respond, he said, "You can open your eyes now. I'm not going to eat you – not right away, anyway." He laughed, but this time without the slightest trace of his usual noble affectation. The hyena had gained the upper hand.

Cautiously, Veronica peered out from eyelids narrowed to slits. The light still blinded her. Her headache flared up again, though with less intensity. Good. At least she would be able to focus when the situation called for it. Behind Kite, who had positioned himself directly in front of her, she saw Wickens standing in the doorway. Without turning around, the giant signaled for the Commissar to

leave them alone. Desmond obeyed. The door slammed shut. Like her sisters downstairs, it had no latches, outside or in, the young woman noted.

"Desmond reported to me that you were refusing to cooperate," Kite said.

Veronica noticed the blade in his right hand, a double-edged very short dagger. Her breath caught in her throat. She had expected a pistol and now would have to adjust her plans to the new situation literally off the cuff. She laughed uneasily.

"You'll stop laughing in time. Look, it's no big deal. Basically, I'm just plagued by curiosity about how far you've gotten with your silly detective game. I don't think you've managed to gather any evidence against me. In case you did – there is good Desmond Jones, who always diverts police investigations away from me." The dagger moved from his right hand to his left, then back again.

"What are you intending to do?" asked Veronica.

"Isn't it obvious? I'll get you out of the way first, then your father."

"That won't do you any good at all!" she cried. "The whole Family knows. Are you going to kill them all?"

"I could, of course. There are only a few left anyway. I had PC31 done first. My dobermans really enjoyed the taste of Kirk, and yesterday Mr. Mustard jumped the gun as punishment for stealing..."

Against the resolve to keep her emotions strictly in check, a shock ran through Veronica's every limb. Her lips formed an O. She turned as white as a sheet. Without the rope holding her in an upright position, she might have lost her balance.

"...But I don't even need to go that far," Kite continued. "None of these sissies will dare to raise a finger against me.... What's the matter? Are you getting sick? Shall I send for a doctor?" He pursed his mouth dismissively. "Nay, I can save myself the call. By the time he gets here, we're more likely to need a mortician." He chuckled.

Veronica spat in his face. For one thing, she was satisfying a deep need, and for another, she hoped to provoke him into thoughtless actions. But the giant only wiped the saliva from his cheek with his left sleeve. "Of course you're mad. What did I expect?" Then he put on his nasty grin again. "I like you, you know. Finally, one who resists. I love a challenge." His right hand drove forward, close

to her belly, and let the dagger circle between thumb and forefinger at breathtaking speed. The young woman remained motionless. She stared hatefully into his eyes.

"Fate has ordained that today we have a new moon night;" Kite remarked, "as if made for a little ritual. Are you up for it?"

* * *

Maria and Zach logged into several other online services to find out if Kirk had left any signs of life or clues as to where she had been over the past four weeks. Her accounts on various social media showed no activity throughout May. Finally, the detective and the Italian woman looked at each other in resignation. Silently, they asked the same question: what now? Finally, Zach was on his feet. "Let's go," he said.

"Where to?" asked Maria.

"North, of course. To your cabin, or whatever it is. In the absence of anything else to go on, I think that's better than sitting around here biting our fingernails."

"How do you figure that?" protested Maria. "There's no bus stopping in front of the house. It's half an hour's drive from the nearest town, and it takes at least three to four hours to get there from Liverpool by car – if you had one, that is."

"We do have one," Zach said. "Come on."

Maria followed him out of the study, through the hall and down the stairs. "I thought Veronica took the Opel," she called after him.

"She did," Zach replied, digging a key out of his pants pocket. He unlocked the safe, reached into one of the shelves and held a car key under Maria's nose.

"John's Mini Cooper!" she breathed, wide-eyed. "You can't do that."

Zach shrugged his shoulders. "When it comes to Veronica, I wouldn't hesitate to even wreck McCartney's DB5 if necessary." He cut off Maria, who brought up the high price of the car. "I'm a safety-conscious driver. Nothing will happen to the Mini. It's just too bad it can't go faster."

* * *

"They say the house was built over an ancient Druidic place of worship," Kite told in a chatty tone. "They also say they sacrificed people here. Excavations have actually found a ring mound around the house and an unidentifiable square foundation underneath." While explaining all this, Kite put his jacket down on the chair under the left window and undid the buttons of his shirt. He walked past her to the little cupboard – not a table – under the right window and took from it five candlesticks, a box of matches, a kidney dish of some sort, and a black hooded cape. He placed the utensils on the bed. He returned and pulled the straw mat from under her feet with a jerk.

"Hey!" cried Veronica, her full weight falling into the leather straps around her wrists. As she tried to get back to her feet, she noticed the carved symbols that the mat had previously covered. It stood, or rather hung, in the center of a pentagram.

Kite meanwhile proceeded to remove the shirt. "Tonight you shall be my bride," he said. "The ritual requires that we change attire to match — I dress, you undress." He chuckled his hyena giggle. "Don't worry, I'll help you, of course." He turned to the bed. The pants dropped, his underwear followed.

Veronica shuddered. The sheer force that the giant embodied suddenly seemed insurmountable to her at the sight of his muscles. For a moment she despaired, but immediately called herself to order. She would defeat him! She would defeat him because she had to.

He slipped on the black hooded cloak. Then he began to light the candles, distributing them at equal intervals around the pentagram. "I'm done," he announced cheerfully. "Now it's your turn." Kneeling in front of her by the last candle, he looked up at her. The flickering of the flames transformed his face under the hood for a moment into the grimace of a demon. "Hold it right there!" commanded Kite. "You look perfect." As if she had a choice!

Slowly he rose. Again he went to the cabinet, where he grabbed the dagger he had placed there. He stepped behind her and knelt down. Veronica felt a tugging at the bottom hem of her dress. A sound of tearing fabric. The pressure the dress had exerted on her thighs diminished. Kite slowly moved the sharp blade further up along the center of her body, only stopping the motion when he reached her neck. The black dress, hanging only from her shoulders, now merely covered her from the front. Kite pulled at the ties of her bikini top,

severing them with quick cuts. He repeated the same with her panties. Satisfied, he contemplated his handiwork. Fear rose in Veronica. Never in her life had she been so defenseless.

"Our... guests... are usually much younger than you," he said. His voice sounded predatory. "For your advanced age, you've kept yourself in pretty good shape. Just look at those beautiful muscles!" He said it almost admiringly. His fingers stroked her ribs. Then they slid along her spine. The young woman mustered all her strength not to cry out. Her fear almost overwhelmed her, but she knew what would happen if she gave in to it. The giant spoke it for her, "At the moment of my highest lust, you shall die." The index finger of his left hand passed over her carotid artery.

Please, please, don't stop there!, Veronica silently pleaded. Everything now depended on her being able to see him. If he just continued like that, she would be deprived of any possibility to finish him off.

He did her the favor. Kite paced slowly around her, reared up before her, and raised the dagger right in front of her eyes. In the candlelight, ornaments gleamed on the short and razor-sharp double blade. She did not dignify them with the slightest glance, however, but looked past them into the psychopath's eyes, which in the shadow of the hood could be made out almost only by a glint. Carefully she bent her knees until her body hung with its full weight on the rope. Her joints ached badly. Still, she assumed an S posture that artists of all eras had depicted in paintings and sculptures. She hoped it looked seductive enough to fool him over her tension.

Her plan worked. With the right hand of the giant, the dagger left the space between their faces. His other hand reached out for the neckline of the dress hanging loosely from her, while the man's matching foot brought him a step closer to Veronica. In a flash, she tensed her muscles to the full, jerked her tied legs into a squatting position, and rammed her knees into his groin with all her might. A hoarse scream escaped from her throat. Almost at the same moment, Kite collapsed. He hit his nose hard against her shoulder and went down with a raucous grunt, where he remained in the fetal position. Reflexively he had both hands clenched into fists in his crotch, in the left the remains of her black dress, in the right the dagger. He didn't seem to notice that the blade cut deep into the flesh of his thighs.

Glaring pain also flashed through the young woman. Her wrists were now bleeding, her shoulder was literally exploding in pain, and her knees were also complaining. It was hard for her to concentrate on the pendulum motion that the attack had put her in. She had to deliver another blow, and it had to come with precision. After what felt like an eternity, she finally stood still. The pervert turned his head to look at her. If she didn't act quickly, he would let the body follow and turn onto his back. After that, he would probably be out of her reach. Again she tensed her muscles, carefully drew her knees and remained in that position for a split second. She aimed - and she enjoyed the moment. Then her legs, laced together with a leather strap, shot vertically downward. Again she screamed. Her heels dug into his throat, which gave way with an indefinable sound. Kite wrenched his eyes open and his mouth as well, but vocalization was now beyond him. With his hands around his neck, he twitched for a few more seconds. A soft gurgle was to be the last thing the thirtieth descendant of William Braveheart Wallace uttered. Veronica's internal clock ticked for twenty more seconds before reporting 0:00. New moon.

18: Getaway

The previous owner had kept Lennon's Mini Cooper not only roadworthy but in good shape. The small car was humming along the M6 at ninety miles an hour, heading north toward the Scottish border. For almost two hours, the asphalt highway provided them with a free passage, but then the traffic thickened noticeably, became slower and slower, and finally came to a halt altogether. Since it was close to midnight, Zach turned on the old-fashioned radio, hoping the news would contain information about the extent of the jam. As they crept along at a walking pace, the speaker announced a news story on the death of Aaron S., a wealthy citizen and cultural patron of the city of Liverpool. Police in Liverpool, she said, had announced that, subject to final forensic examinations, they now believed it was 'almost certainly' a suicide. Mr S. had shot himself in the head with a small-caliber weapon on Sunday evening and died instantly. His motive was believed to be financial difficulties.

Zach and Maria looked at each other meaningfully. "In the back of the head, twice! I get it!" said the detective.

"There's no question of financial difficulties either. Mustard has supported the search for Mal Evans' suitcase with a hundred thousand Pounds in advance," the Italian woman remarked. "What's going on here?"

"Do you think he could have been the one who took McCartney's autopsy photo?"

Mary looked at him aghast. "I don't think much of Kite, and I don't trust him one bit farther than I can see. He's a crude and sometimes brutal man; but.... murder? I don't know."

"Regardless of his involvement in other machinations of which we know nothing – who else would have an interest in Mustard's death and be in a position to prejudice the police investigation?"

The Italian rubbed her hands together nervously. She frowned, looking into the taillights of the plodding traffic ahead of them. Just as she was about to start talking again, the detective interrupted her with a quick gesture. He turned the

volume knob of the radio, which by now issued more and more static. He readjusted the frequency until he was satisfied with the quality of the transmission, just in time for them to hear the traffic report on the M6. An accident had jammed both northbound lanes. Only the auxiliary lane remained available for the onward journey. Vehicles already queued up for almost ten miles. Drivers were asked to avoid the section of road as far as possible.

Zach cursed, then jerked the wheel around and shot past the idling cars on the side of the road. A concert of horns accompanied the Mini. Two hundred yards farther on, he squeezed into a gap at an exit between two other vehicles exiting the motorway.

* * *

It was the most delicate part of her plan, because her escape and thus her life depended on her getting the dagger in her possession. Therefore, a part of her consciousness followed with interest every change in its position.

The blade rotated slowly as it described a high arc through the air. It missed Veronica by a small margin. As Kite wrenched his hands from his hard-hit crotch to his neck, they took the weapon and released it midway. After reaching the highest point at Veronica's elbow level, its trajectory followed gravity again. Just behind Veronica, the dangerous tip bored into the wooden floorboards. While the young woman tried to stop its pendulum motion for the second time in a minute, she was careful not to get too close. On the one hand, of course, she didn't want to risk injury; on the other, she hoped to be able to open her foot tether with its edge.

First, however, along with the pendulum swings, she had to get her muscles and mind back under control. Her breathing went in heavy, throaty bursts, a half grunt that could possibly be heard in other parts of the house. Unfortunately, she couldn't avoid it. When her body was still again, she focused her attention on her lungs, taking regular deep breaths through her nose and releasing them in rhythmic bursts through her lips. She counted silently. After about thirty passes, she had regained enough control of herself to dare to make the acrobatic effort to cut her bonds. She scuttled to the dagger, which fortunately was stuck almost directly under her suspension, propped herself up on her right foot, and began a tiny up-and-down motion with her left. The leather strip slid

across the blade, but offered some resistance. For quite a while, only the rhythmic tap of the sole of her foot on the floorboards could be heard. Veronica had to shift her weight to the other leg several times until the shackle finally snapped in two.

Again she caught her breath for a few minutes. Her back ached, her feet, supplied with fresh blood, began to tingle, and her arms and hands were almost numb because of her unnatural posture. There were still two heavy tasks ahead of her. She had to, with the dagger clamped between her feet, cut her wrist cuffs. It would inevitably result in her falling to the floor in a fetal position, rump first. It would probably break her pelvis. She needed something soft to cushion the impact. The bed, unfortunately, was out of her reach, she realized. No chance of reaching the mattress, to pull it to the floor with her feet. Briefly, she considered using the tattered remains of the black dress Kite had ripped off her in the fall, but the fabric was too thin to significantly soften the impact. She should have dressed in something proper, an inner voice complained. Resolutely, she choked it off. It was no use mourning bad decisions; they could no longer be changed, and probably even a well-lined down jacket would provide insufficient buffering.

Then her gaze fell on the giant.

* * *

Of course, they were not the only travelers who turned their backs on the M6 to try their luck on country roads. There, too, the traffic was moving at a slow pace, but at least it was moving. Nevertheless, Maria and Zach were glad to be able to use the much faster motorways again beyond the accident site. They almost missed the exit due to the hypnotic effect of the strip of asphalt whizzing underneath them. Fortunately, the Mini had good brakes, and at the last moment they took the exit with squealing tires. The creeping fatigue evaporated in seconds. They would need that surplus adrenalin. The last stretch of road took the most effort, because in this rural area it was easy to get lost. Maria had never traveled the route to the Family's cottage at night and hoped that she would keep her bearings despite the adverse conditions.

* * *

Donald Wickens lay comfortably bedded on some pillows on the old-fashioned couch in the room directly below Veronica's prison. He looked up at the ceiling and listened to the sounds coming down through the planks to him. Wood was a good sound carrier. He had a beer in his left hand and a cigarette butt between his lips. While he regretted not being able to poke this nosey brat himself, he enjoyed the acoustic fun the boss was creating with her. He heard Kite's footsteps as he circled his victim, heard the rip of fabric as it was cut by the blade, heard the castle owner's comments about Veronica's body, and imagined the scene that had to unfold before him. His right hand undid the button and zipper of his pants, which quickly threatened to become too tight.

Footsteps above him again, silence for a moment, then Veronica screamed hoarsely, Kite grunted. A heavy thump on the floorboards followed almost immediately. "Yeah, give it to her!" growled Wickens, cheering on his boss. As if Kite had heard him, there was an immediate muffled thud and another loud scream from the girl as her tormentor produced nondescript beastly sounds. She gave a few moaning gasps. Wickens, highly aroused, listened eagerly for more stimulation, but silence had returned. He looked at the wall clock; midnight sharp. Was Kite just cutting her throat? Disappointed, he sighed and was preparing to sit up. It could be that the boss was about to call him to come and clean up the bloody mess. But then a soft rhythmic stomping sounded from above. The reprise. A blissful grin came over his face, while his right hand took over the rhythm as if by itself.

After a few minutes, another moment of silence. What happened now? Something heavy was dragged across the floor and released with a heavy thud. Grinding, thudding, grinding, thudding. Veronica grunted in unison, not unlike the sounds made during a ladies' tennis match. Suddenly a heavy thump; something crunched and splintered. The girl emitted a loud, hoarse scream; Kite's lungs escaped an ugly gurgle. Wickens lost control of his body and slipped into a trance-like waking dream. When his mind took the wheel again, complete silence reigned above him. The beer and the warm light of the candle carried him seamlessly into the deep sleep thereafter.

* * *

They had lost their bearings. It had been idle to hope for anything else under the circumstances. Was the dirt road that led for over half an hour to the house still ahead of them, or had they already missed it? Everything looked quite different in the darkness than she remembered, but Maria was almost certain that they had missed the turnoff. "Drive to the next town," she instructed Zach. "Maybe we can ask someone for directions."

"At one o'clock in the night?" the detective replied doubtfully. He was noticeably tired after the long journey. Nevertheless, he refused to let her take the wheel. "You may relieve me on the way back," he had said. However, he followed her advice. The village they had just reached consisted of only a few houses. There were neither side roads nor lanterns. All the buildings lay in darkness, nothing stirred. Only in a window of the last house, at the far end of the hamlet, the light of a television flickered forlornly. Zach stopped, got out, and walked to the door of the building. No doorbell. He looked around searchingly. There, a bell rope. He pulled on it. Loud metallic ringing, sure to be heard in half the village, drifted out from behind the door. A face appeared at the window of the room where the television was. It looked sleepy. Zach waved. The face disappeared again, then a door inside the building opened; shuffling footsteps on a floorboard – infinitely slow, it seemed to Zach.

"Who is it?" asked a sleepy-sounding voice.

"My name is Ziegler. I... we're looking for a certain cottage and we got lost."

The sound of a bolt being pushed back. The door opened halfway. A man, perhaps in his mid-thirties, dressed in suit pants held up by straps and fine-rib undershirt, looked at him wearily.

"I hope we didn't wake you," Zach inquired.

"No problem. I'm on driving duty and dozed off in front of the TV. Thanks for waking me up." A smile flashed across the man's face. "Where do you want to go?"

Now the detective noticed the aging black cab parked in an open garage next to the house. "Yours?" he asked, gesturing with his head toward the car. The man nodded. Zach said, "There's an isolated old farm around here that's used as a vacation home by our friends in Liverpool. Do you know it?"

"The one owned by the Beatles freaks?" the cab driver asked back, his face contorted skeptically.

"That's the one," Zach confirmed, relieved that luck had been kind to them on their first attempt.

"O, man, you city folks got some nerve!" came the mildly displeased retort.

The detective would have liked to know what the point of the remark was, but was afraid of triggering a tirade. So he asked for directions again, "We're really sorry for the disturbance. Can you tell us where to pull off to get there? I'm assuming the access road ends here on this street; right?"

The cab driver explained the way.

* * *

Veronica had managed to grab Kite's body with her feet and pull it closer, half a dozen inches with each pass. The night was cool, but the work was driving sweat to her skin. Fifteen minutes later, she had finally done it. The corpse lay directly beneath her. She wedged the handle of the dagger between her feet, pulled it out of the floorboards - this was harder than she had thought - and lifted her legs up. She aborted the first attempt before it reached the level of her head, because she held the blade at an awkward angle. On the second attempt, she managed to cut into the leather strip connecting her hands to the pulley rope a bit before she ran out of strength. Finally, on the third attempt, the leather gave way, and the last short piece snapped in two on its own, releasing Veronica into free fall. A split second later, her backside dug into Kite's stomach and chest. His ribs shattered with the crunch of a crushed bag of potato chips. Her weight squeezed the air from his lungs. It escaped through the constricted channel of his Adam's apple. Kite's vocal cords vibrated one very last time, emitting an ugly gurgle. Veronica, subjected to another flurry of pain from her rough landing, thought she heard a scream. Had Kite still been alive or had she emitted the sound herself? Hard to tell.

Slowly she rolled onto her side, off the giant. She just wanted to close her eyes, rest... sleep... No! She couldn't lose consciousness now, she had to leave the room, the house, the vicinity. With difficulty she got up. A man's groan could be heard from downstairs. Someone was in the room directly below hers.

Desmond? Or was there another prisoner? Had they caught her father? An icy fist gripped her heart at the thought. If her father was here, she couldn't just sneak away. She had to determine beyond a doubt whether or not he, too, was in this cottage. And that meant she had to take Desmond out.

With her muscles now relaxed, she began to feel the coolness on her bare skin. Once she stepped outside, she would freeze. And, of course, she felt not exacctly confident at the thought of stepping out of the car in her birthday costume after returning to Liverpool. Her dress had been ruined completely; she could forget about it. Kite's clothes had to be several sizes too big; they would handicap her in fighting Desmond. Her eyes fell on the bed. Without a second thought, she pulled off the sheet and fabricated a wrap dress out of it, leaving enough room for her legs to kick and run. She headed for the door.

Damn! She had completely forgotten that there were no door handles in the whole house. How had Kite gotten in? A set of keys rattled in her mind; Desmond, pulling the door shut again behind Kite. A moment of panic overtook Veronica. If she had to rely on the Commissar to get out of this room, her chances were about fifty-fifty. Hectically, she searched through the hunk's laundry, which had fallen to the floor as she pulled off the sheet.

There – in one of his shirt pockets, a single key with a plastic label. She fished it out. The label read: 'Country House General'. The young detective sent a prayer of thanks to heaven. Then she grabbed the dagger, quietly unlocked the door and stepped out into the darkened hallway. The scattered light from the room behind her revealed little. She groped next to the door for a light switch, but found none. So she went back inside. The candles the psychopath had used for his sick ritual had gone out in her struggle, except for one, which had burned down to a stub. She opened the cabinet under the window, hoping to find a flashlight. In the far corner sat a kerosene lamp. She checked the tank; it was filled to almost maximum. The wick gratefully accepted the candle flame and immediately burned brightly. Thus equipped, she went outside without further delay.

The corridor ended a few steps to her right at a window that opened onto the yard behind the house. In the other direction, the corridor stretched a good fifteen paces. Following an impulse, she decided to open the nearest door first to see if anyone was inside. Neither did she want to leave any more prisoners

behind, nor was she eager to keep any enemy at her back. She unlocked the door and shone a light inside. The room was furnished similarly to her former prison but was otherwise empty. Relieved, she returned to the hallway, followed it a few steps to the right and, as expected, saw a stairwell halfway down on her right. Veronica listened. Nothing moved downstairs. So she crept on to examine the rooms behind the two remaining doors. They looked like copies of the one where Kite's body now lay on the floorboards; they, too, showed empty.

Back in the corridor, she dared to look out of the forward-facing window. Since no light source other than the stars and the scattered illumination of the surrounding towns shone in the night, she could only dimly make out the driveway. Her GT was still parked exactly as she had left it. An egg shaped something stood slantwise behind it, which had to be Kite's vehicle. She turned back and headed for the stairwell. Again she listened, then slowly, step by step, she descended the steep wooden steps. She counted twelve steps before entering the last, the thirteenth. Up to this point she had managed to descend to the ground floor in complete silence, but just as she was about to tread on the stone floor of the entrance hall, the wood creaked. The sound exploded into the silence of the house like the opening chord of 'A Hard Day's Night' into the leadin groove of a record.

Veronica froze in place. Any moment, one of the four doors would open – she counted on the one on the other side, in the left half of the corridor, the door that led to the room below her prison – and then Desmond would rush out with his revolver drawn, to shoot her down unceremoniously. She held her breath to hear every little sound, but still nothing moved. Tiptoeing to said door, she put an ear to the leaf, listened. Silence. Slowly she inserted the key. Its soft metallic click grew to an unmistakable rattle in her mind. She could only hope that Desmond was too busy to pay attention. She commanded the inner voice to shut up for a moment. But what if his key stuck on the opposite side?" the tormentor whined. Then we'll lure him out, right into the blade of the dagger, she replied; and now shut up! The voice whimpered, but refrained from pointing out another dozen contingencies that could thwart her plans.

* * *

Their trot to the vacation home of the collectors — one could hardly call the 'drive' over the dirt road strewn with gravel and richly blessed with potholes otherwise — cost them another valuable half hour. The landscape around them lay in such deep darkness that one could get the impression of crossing one of the most remote parts of the world, even if the stars above them did not twinkle quite as clearly as one might have expected in such a case. Thanks to the cab driver's directions, they knew that they must have almost reached the destination of their journey. Surely it was only a few hundred yards to... There! Across the dirt track, bordered on the right and left by pasture fences, a locked gate loomed. Behind it, just dimly discernible in the light of the Mini's headlights, sat a low building. "That's it!" exclaimed Maria.

* * *

The key turned quite easily in the lock. A final resistance against a spring as the bolt slid noiselessly out of its groove, then Veronica was able to push the door open. Infinitely slowly, she opened it, listening for any movement that might have been audible from inside. When a crack formed, she saw that the room behind it seemed almost completely dark. Only the flickering of a candle flame cast moving shadows on the wall. Silence reigned. Courageously, she pushed the door open piece by piece. Stacks of newspapers, cardboard boxes, firewood, a chair, the edge of a low table, the back of a sofa came into view. It smelled of alcohol, cigarette smoke, and intercourse. A pair of boots sat on the armrest; legs protruded from them. Judging from the trousers they belonged to Desmond. Cautiously, she moved her head to the side to take in more of the scenery. The Commissar was lying on the sofa with his pants lowered halfway, asleep.

Veronica gripped the dagger more tightly, then entered the room. Cautiously, she worked her way toward her goal, careful not to bump into any objects. Halfway there, she set down the kerosene lamp. She might need a free hand. She approached the head of the sofa. Wickens was breathing steadily. She knew what she had to do, knew there was no way around it, and yet she had inhibitions... hesitated to cut his throat. Trembling, she brought the dagger to his neck. A hair's breadth separated the razor-sharp edge of the metal from the skin. She paused. A light touch only, but the policeman immediately jolted out of

his sleep, drove up and straight into the blade. A scream escaped him; with panicked movements he scrambled to his feet. The cut was not deep, but it immediately began to bleed. Veronica jerked back in fright, tripped over a chair, and landed backwards on the floor. The dagger slipped from her hand and spun into a corner of the room. Wickens, trying to go after her, took a fall from his pants suspended at half-mast. He landed on Veronica's legs. His hands reached for her neck, but when she managed to land a haymaker against his ear, he rolled off her. Hastily, Veronica scrambled backward away from him.

Then she realized her mistake. She had given the man access to her weapon. He did not hesitate one second. He pulled up his pants, dived for the dagger, then immediately wheeled around and rushed at her with incredible speed. The only object she managed to grab was the kerosene lamp. With an outstretched arm, she snatched the carrying handle, brought the lamp in a semicircle around her head and, as forcefully as she could, thrashed it against Desmond's temple. Shards of glass and kerosene splashed through the air; flammable liquid poured over the stricken man, whose head and shoulders immediately burst into flames. Wickens roared in pain. He staggered just past the young woman across the room, hands slapping against his face. Then he stumbled, fell head first against a wall, and collapsed unconscious in a corner. The magazines stored there greeted the lambent flames and immediately began to catch fire.

Veronica briefly considered putting out the fire, but then decided against it. She had come into the room to kill Wickens and she had almost achieved her goal. She didn't care what he died from. Either she killed her kidnapper, the murderer of her uncle, here and now, or he would kill her, her father and possibly other people. As a high-ranking police officer, there were numerous ways for him to achieve this, and he could effortlessly cover his tracks.

No, that he died now was but just, and it was better for that. She wanted to make sure that this room and the one above it with Kite's body burned out completely. Swiftly she piled up cardboard boxes, firewood and paper around the man and pushed the sofa and the two chairs close to it. Within a minute everything was ablaze. She opened a window. Then she hastily retreated, for it was getting uncomfortably hot in there. She quickly searched the three other rooms on the ground floor, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a storage room. It was dark all over, but there was clearly no one left in the house except for her. She

finally also looked in the cellar. She found a light switch. Shelves full of liquor and non-perishable food, but not a living soul. She hurried up the stairs, back into the entry hall. The room to the right had already turned into a flaming hell. The fire was hissing through the door she had left open and into the corridor. Heat, smoke and the stench of burnt flesh filled the air.

Veronica ran to the left, to the front entrance. The front door had no handle, just like all the other passages in the building. She needed a key! Where...? Did she perhaps...? She looked in the direction of the furnace, which would not allow her to return. The key stuck in the door opposite, where she had left it before descending into the cellar. She had to abandon the attempt to pull it out. Smoke and heat did not allow her to approach the door, but without the key she saw no way to leave. The windows on the ground floor were barred. She was trapped.

* * *

A chain with a U-lock prevented them from opening the gate. Zach killed the engine but left the lights on to illuminate the route to the house. In their haste to leave, they had forgotten to bring a flashlight. The detective and the Italian woman climbed over the low gate. The entryway lay deserted before them. Slowly they walked toward the building, whose single floor lay partially hidden behind tall grass. The windows were barricaded by heavy wooden shutters. Not the faintest ray of light could be seen. Zach and Maria listened into the deep, moonless night, but other than the thunder of the ocean crashing against the cliffs close behind the former farmhouse, they heard no sounds. Nothing indicated the presence of people. While Zach knocked on the wooden plank door, Maria walked along the front, loudly calling Kirk and Veronica's names. A few minutes later, they stopped trying. They circled the house. Maria took Zach by the hand and led him purposefully to a stone bench that looked out to sea. There they sat down, exhausted, put their arms around each other and fell silent, head to head.

* * *

Veronica limped away from the house toward the two parked vehicles. Behind her sports car, slightly offset, stood the white Beetle with the number LMW 281F. She looked through the side window. The key waited in the ignition. Had

she better take it off? No, rather not leave any traces of her presence. She limped to her GT. Its door was still unlocked; again, the key stuck in the ignition next to the steering wheel. She dropped into the driver's seat, threw the rope she had improvised from bedsheets and used to escape through one of the unbarred upper-floor windows into the footwell beside her, and started the car. Carefully she steered backwards, close to the white Beetle. She was scrupulously careful to drive only on the graveled path so as not to create tire marks. Inside the house, the fire would destroy her clothes and the DNA she had left behind. It would probably also prevent anyone from finding out that the two men had died from non-natural causes. She had no remorse about it. She had acted in self-defense and she also hoped that the two torturers would receive their just karma in the afterlife. But she certainly didn't want to get involved with the organizations that covered up the crimes of these men: Her Majesty's Police and perhaps the Illuminati. At under twenty miles per hour, she steered the car back to civilization over barely paved country roads.

* * *

They might have sat on the bench like that for about twenty minutes. A light wind, which was now starting, carried spray from the sea, which slowly drenched them. Maria touched Zach's cheek. Starlight shimmered in her eyes as time seemed to curdle. Their faces approached, cautiously, hesitantly. The tips of their noses passed each other, gently stroking the warm skin of their counterparts, until his lips rested on hers.

* * *

Only when she reached the M6 towards Liverpool did she allow herself to breathe a sigh of relief. Just about another hour and a half, then she would have arrived home. But slowly fatigue threatened to overpower her. She took the exit to the next parking lot and pulled the GT into a spot where dense bushes completely blocked the lights of the traffic whizzing by. She locked the doors from the inside, tilted the seat back and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

"Let's turn back." No one had spoken the words, and yet they had agreed that it was time to head back home. There was nothing more they could do for Kirk outside the locked front door of the old masonry. She was staying in another place. She had probably never been here, and the same was true of Veronica. Maria saw no sign that anyone had entered the property in the months since the Family's solstice celebration.

The *Mini* waited patiently beyond the gate for their return. Its front headlights burned just as brightly as they had half an hour ago when they had left it. It had been reckless to claim its battery in this remote location, but the car didn't hold it against them, jump-starting immediately when Maria turned the ignition key. She had to back up over a hundred yards before she reached a spot where she could turn the car around. From then on, apart from the pitiful condition of the access road, there were no further obstacles in their route. They quickly reached the motorway heading south, towards Liverpool. Halfway there, Zach asked for a short rest. Maria headed for the next exit, an unlit parking lot. While the detective stepped briefly between the bushes to relieve himself, Maria extensively stretched limbs cramped from driving. When Zach returned, he asked, "Should we rest for half an hour or can you make it the rest of the way?" "I'll keep going. Let's continue."

So they got back in the car. Maria started the engine, gently pressed the gas pedal, and steered the car back to the M6. "Stop!" shouted Zach suddenly. Hectically, she stepped on the brakes. With screeching tires, the *Mini* came to a stop. Zach yanked open the passenger door. He quickly covered the few steps to an orange-painted sports car parked on the side of the road, brought his head very close to its side window and peered inside. A blond young woman stared back, half sleepy, half startled: Veronica.

19: Aftershocks

Due to the emergency situation, John Lennon's *Mini Cooper* had suffered more than Zach had anticipated. The tires, flattened by abrupt braking and turning maneuvers, were the least of the damage. They could easily be replaced. However, the repair of stone chips on the paintwork and dents on the underbody caused greater problems. This, however, did not detract from the sentimental value, which was assessed only on the basis of the vehicle's famous first owner. Zach therefore saw no reason to show contrition, even if Maria would still tease him about the matter months later. She was attached to the small car that had taken so much effort and money to acquire. He, however, felt only glad that they had done what they could to get Veronica back. True, they contributed precisely nothing to freeing her from the clutches of Desmond and Kite; his daughter could pin the badge for this achievement on her own chest. But the kidnapping could have ended quite differently, and in that case he would never have forgiven himself for simply waiting for her at home in vain.

The fourteen hours in torture prison - a hideout where the Wallace scion apparently regularly indulged his perverse urges - had taken a heavy toll on Veronica's confidence in herself and the world. During the following weeks, she had barely spoken a word of her own accord. Her response to questions remained monosyllabic for quite some time.

All three of them had stayed away from Paul's funeral, which took place only a few hours after their return home. They felt infinitely tired. And even though sleep was out of the question because of the excitement they had just gone through, they could not possibly face the emotional strain at the cemetery. Their absence had led the mourners to make all sorts of assumptions that could only be dispelled with difficulty, as Henry later told them.

Desmond's disappearance triggered several aftershocks that repeatedly battered Veronica's psyche. The phone rang the afternoon of that day when she arrived back at the Fab Store wrapped in a bed sheet, almost without interruption until Maria simply unplugged it. Molly Jones, who had been trying in

vain to learn the whereabouts of her husband Desmond, then appeared outside the store the following morning. She pressed the electric bell until Zach finally let her in. Excitedly, she inquired every detail of Monday's occurrences, and with difficulty was dissuaded from wanting to speak to Veronica. By evening, the local station was reporting on the cottage fire; there had been at least one casualty, they said. "Lamentable are rather those who lament this man," Zach grumbled, refraining from further comment with regard to his daughter's wellbeing. In the days that followed, police released details of the number and identities of the victims, which generated some excitement among the public because of the high profile of the individuals. Questions were raised as to what a senior police officer and a member of the moneyed aristocracy were doing in such a remote location. For a long time, the forensic experts of the fire department did not want to make any assessment about the cause of the fire. In the absence of evidence suggesting the presence of a third party, they agreed on the hypothesis that careless handling of open flames - probably candles had cost Commissar Wickens and the philanthropist Campbell their lives.

In the course of the investigation, Veronica and Zachary Ziegler were also summoned to the Bureau; she as the last person known to the police to have seen Wickens alive, and he, Zach, because he had attracted attention when he inquired about the Commissar. The questioning took place more or less for the record, because there was no reason to suspect any involvement in the fire. Veronica claimed to have dropped the Commissar off in a parking garage before they went their separate ways. The memory of what the man had done to her fueled her anger, which helped her get through the witness interview without breaking into tears. Her father's warning of what would happen if they linked her to assaulting a public servant, let alone killing him, forbade any thought of reporting the injuries and humiliation the two men had inflicted on her. As far as humanity outside her household was concerned, such crimes had never taken place.

Officially, neither were the hundreds of bodies that had been found on the property near the burnt-down cottage. The oldest were estimated to be three thousand years old, and the youngest had been in the earth for just a few months, as Maria found out when she cautiously pulled strings to learn more about the progress of the investigation. Veronica, in light of this news, felt

confirmed in her decision to keep quiet about her near-fate as another victim of a ritual murder dynasty. That she had acted in self-defense when she killed the men would not otherwise save her from elimination. No one had any interest in the public learning that Satanism was not a niche phenomenon among heavy metal bands, but the creed of choice among people of distinction. Least of all, said public wanted to hear about it themselves.

In that sense, there was no urgency to move forward with documenting what some called entertainment crimes. It would be a long time before anyone could talk openly about the problem. Still, a sense of dejection was spreading among those Family members who had hoped to tap Kite's collection of evidence of biological Paul McCartney's death. The objects would remain hidden behind thick yault doors for the unforeseeable future.

It was with one laughing eye and one crying eye that the Zieglers, Rocky, Maria and Henry accepted the notary's admission that the autopsy photograph now rested in his possession after all. So, the good news was that they did not leave the fatally disastrous enterprise of using the Family reunion for their own purposes completely empty-handed. But the price they paid was the extensive loss of confidence in Miller, who admitted to having intercepted their loot on Kite's behalf. Although the notary had never made any secret of his legal support for the Billy Shears progeny, the disclosure of this detail caused great disappointment. Everyone agreed that the changed situation required new concepts on how to move the project forward.

* * *

She knocked a second time on her father's bedroom door. "Breakfast is ready," she called good-humoredly, waiting to hear if anything stirred inside. A slatted frame creaked, feet noisily placed on the floor. Veronica returned to the kitchen, sat at the table ready laid, and waited. In a matter of minutes, Maria and Zach entered and took seats across from each other. Every day since the Italian woman had moved into the house on Rainford Gardens with them, it had been up to Veronica to put the coffee on. To her amusement, the two of them behaved like teenagers who had just fallen in love. She made no comment on this, however; rather, she enjoyed her father's unusual vitality and the pleasant company of the new housemate.

And admittedly, they didn't just spend their days playing footsie, but worked late into the night on research for a project in which they also involved Veronica. Her role was to design the concept for a series of workshops on conscious media use. From observational skills training to methods for critical data analysis and conscious media consumption to discussions on the philosophy of knowledge, she would put together a broad-based program for aspiring freelance media professionals. It would help people step out of passive intake of infotainment products to regain dominion over their own minds... Her father had a real talent for putting red-hot topics into boring words that were sure to draw no one out from behind the stove. And that's exactly why she herself was going to be not only the author of this activity, but also its face.

Maria and Zach, meanwhile, were gathering material for a series of documentaries that would expose entertainment industry crimes, starting with the current state of *PID* research. They talked about this now at the table, barely having emptied their first cup.

"The changes between 1966 and 1967 could hardly have been more stark," Zach discussed. "I wonder why we, as fans, didn't smell a rat. It just reeks of new blood in the band. I think we need to emphasize that aspect more."

"Few people were willing to accept the changed reality back then – even when it was pointed out to them. I fundamentally doubt that people are capable of changing their mind simply on the basis of imparted information," Maria replied. "We have to connect new facts to everyday experiences if we want to have more success than the researchers of the late sixties."

"So what's the moral of the story, anyway?" Veronica plugged into the conversation. "Paul is dead, so what? What are you guys getting at with your films? I mean, how is this project different from normal infotainment?"

"The take-home message is not that Paul McCartney is dead," Maria explained. "We don't know which of the various stories is true, whether he had an accident or was sacrificed to Satan, whether he was driving an *Aston Martin DB5* or *DB6* or an *Austin Mini*. We don't know if other vehicles were involved. We don't know for sure where or when exactly it happened, whether he had a female passenger and if so, what her name was or whether she survived. We do not know the real name of his alleged successor. We cannot say with certainty which of the references to Paul's death in songs, films, photos, interviews, or on

album covers are real and which are imagined, or which of the many possible interpretations is the correct one. We don't even know if he's dead at all or just died a symbolic death in a rite of passage, or if it's a marketing stunt or a completely fabricated product of Beatlemania." She paused for a moment to think. "If something serious happened to Paul in late 1966, and all the clues in Beatles songs are real clues," she continued, "then no one beyond the inner circle was aware of it until three years later, in 1969, when someone pushed the story of Paul's passing into the media. After that, what people perceived as a result of media 'revelations' could no longer be made unseen. One can only comment on it since then."

Veronica shrugged. "Okay, the Beatles were creative about the truth – who cares? How does a fifty, sixty-year-old scandal affect us today?"

"Except that people close to these guys keep dying in strange circumstances and you almost became one of them? Sir Paul's ex-wife, Heather Mills, feels she has to protect herself by claiming she deposited incriminating information in a safe place that would be released to the public if anything happened to her."

"Fair enough. But how are you going to get your audience to understand the significance of the affair to anyone other than the people directly involved? I assume you're ultimately concerned with more than the Beatles, right? Else, what's the point of the workshop series you want me to plan and conduct for you?"

"You're right, of course," Zach interjected. "As I said, the point is not at all to convince people of *PID* – the theory that Paul McCartney is dead – but to open them up to the possibility that official narratives can, or even should, mislead. To get closer to what really happened, they should not strive to find majority views, but should undertake their search for truth as an individual journey. What actually took place we may never know, but we can get closer to it if we begin to perceive omissions, lies and contradictions in what is put before us. Always and everywhere."

Maria nodded. "This applies to all media events, every minuscule news report you read, every photograph you see, every song lyric you hear, every image that flashes for a split second in a music video. What do you really know about the man they portray as the new Hitler? Have you talked to him yet? What do you really know about viruses – have you ever seen any? What do you know

about the Rolling Stones or Madonna, about Keanu Reaves or Julia Roberts, about O.J. Simpson or Serena Williams? None of it comes from our own experience; everything people think they know has been pushed unto them by someone; usually the same types who want to sell us the music, the medicine, the politics, the war, or whatever else."

"So you can't believe anything at all," Veronica concluded.

"You can believe anything you want, but you can, in all honesty, really know very little of what you *thought* you knew before. That's the point, and you've probably suspected that for a long time."

She nodded. "But it's damned exhausting to live by."

Zach laughed. "That's the way it is with the truth. It's often unpleasant, sometimes painful, and that's why it rarely enjoys majority support. But without it, there is no freedom, no peace, and ultimately no happiness."

"It's still hard for me to accept the full extent of it, despite everything we've found out. I think I'm... afraid of the implications."

Maria put a hand on Veronica's shoulder. "I find it admirable that you are aware of them. Make it a little easier on yourself by welcoming them instead of trying to get out of their way. After all, if our changed understanding of reality isn't going to translate into a change in behavior, why bother trying to find truth?"



20: <u>Appendix</u>

Postscript

It was to be a novel about Truth, about the difficulty of grasping it, and how, for a variety of reasons, it frays into numerous personal "realities," most of which are based on belief rather than knowledge. I wondered what Zicke, who was the leader of our herd of goats, and whom I considered to be one of the most intelligent people on our farm, would say about all the things we humans take for granted? Which opinions would she hold if she understood what was being trumpeted in newspapers, TV programs, and podcasts? I found some of the imagined answers quite exciting and decided to put them into a picaresque novel, a donquichottery with the provocative title "Z". She would listen to my silly explanations and add her two cents in her mind. As the research led me first into the underbelly of the entertainment industry and then, with increasing intensity, down the unbelievably grotesque rabbit hole of the Beatles, the concept of the planned work also changed step by step. The title proved to be more sticky, though. It wasn't until a month after the actual writing began that I changed it to what the text called for.

This may sound a little strange, but it – the text – had a life of its own from the very beginning. I had established only a few cornerstones of the story: Names, characters, a few phrases and points of discussion – that was it. A number of characters I had planned for were rejected by the text. They never appeared at all. Instead, others emerged as the situation demanded. It was the same with the plot. What would happen next was often unknown to me until it occurred. It wasn't until the beginning of the second half of the novel, for example, that I realized who must have murdered Paul Campbell. It surprised me, because I had speculated about the involvement of the intelligence services or some old-boy network in the band's entourage.

Furthermore, some elements that were intended as vignettes developed into running gags. Sir Paul's sheep bleating, for example, which he dictated into the

microphones of reporters in Moscow, made several appearances in the novel, always shedding new light on the question of whether McCartney really died in 1966. I have an opinion on that, of course, but it doesn't matter to you. As Zach rightly notes in the last chapter, in search of Truth one embarks on an individual journey; it is solely for the purpose of a personal approach to reality. What came out of it for me with regard to *PID* is completely irrelevant to others.

I certainly hope that Veronica and Zach have succeeded in inspiring my readers with their deconstruction of the Beatles legend – a myth spun predominantly through media reports, the truth of which most of us have little chance of verifying. We can therefore only arbitrarily draw the line between fictitious and real events. This problem of discernment plays a central role in the novel. Here, in a form of narrative in which basically all elements may have sprung from the author's imagination, he is allowed to play freely with the "facts" in order to suggest a new point of view to his readers. Billy Shears points out that the same is true of biographies, news stories, research papers, or any other form of ostensibly non-fictional transmission of information. In his *Memoirs* he writes:

"Since time immemorial, the greatest manipulations have occurred by presenting fiction as nonfiction, and by presenting fact as fantasy. That perceived distinction always fools most people. The most absurd stories are seen as real merely because they are in the newspapers, on televised news, or on websites that pretend to be truthful even when those news outlets are controlled by those with incentives to promulgate the most dangerous lies "

'Campbell's Fab Store' refers to events that "actually" took place (in the media) and embeds them in a truly fictitious storyline. Anyone is invited to do his or her own research if the topic seems important enough to him or her to spend a few days or weeks on it. But nobody should claim that the advocates of the PID theory are misguided, if they have not examined the relevant evidence themselves. Those who see no attempts at deception must back up their position with just as strong evidence as those who see a conspiracy at work, if they want to be taken seriously in the debate.

Acknowledgements

'Campbell's Fab Store' owes its creation, among others, to Mother RosMarie, who inspired my childhood with the songs 'Revolution', 'I am the Walrus' and 'Eight Days a Week', which she held as vinyl singles; Michael Vogel, who got me hooked on the band and supplied me with audio material in the eighties, when our classmates danced to rap, acid, soul and disco-pop; Mark Devlin, who gave the impulse to write a novel, and who provided some material for it through his interesting lectures and books about the music business; Mike Williams (a.k.a. Sage of Quay), who presented many starting points for my story in his incredibly detailed background research on the Beatles; Clare Kuehn and her epistemological work on the Paul-is-dead theory; numerous other publicists who have brought hair-raising things to light – too many to mention; Mal Evans (1937 – 1976) & Paul McCartney (1942 – 1966) – rest in peace!; and of course John, George, Bill and Ringo!

Dramatis Personæ

- Zachary Archibald Ziegler: a private investigator born in Stuttgart, southwest Germany, whom his friends call Zach, and who is known to the admirers of his coffee-drinking ars by the name of Leon Leatherthroat.
- **Veronica Ziegler**: Zachs daughter and partner in crime investigation.

Members of the collectors 'Family'

- Paul Martin Campbell: in short: Paul; deceased owner of Campbell's Fab Store in Liverpool, known among collectors as PC31. Stepbrother of Zach, uncle of Veronica.
- Mr Kite: actually William Wallace Campbell, grandson of Billy Shears, castle owner and head of the 'Family'. Collects PID-related objects.
- **Dr. Robert**: actually **Jules Robert Miller**, notary-public. Collects photographs and images.
- Molly Jones: actually Mary Wickens, Miller's secretary, Desmond's wife; collects items from the former possession of the Beatles' girlfriends and wives...
- Desmond Jones: actually Donald Wickens, head of Homicide, Molly's husband.
- **Duchess of Kirkcaldy**: **Kirk**, for short; real name unknown. Youngest member of the 'Family'; her collection is unspecific.
- Semolina Pilchard: actually Maria Borghese. A German with Italian roots. Waitress, cleaning-lady, and a living walking Beatles encyclopedia; she collects books..
- Henry the Horse: actually Thomas Henry Bishop; collects rare recordings.
- Mr Mustard: actually Aaron Senfkorn. Offspring of German Jewish Holocaust survivors; collects manuscripts, letters, autographs and other written and printed material.
- Rocky Raccoon: real name unknown. Former director of a record label; collects musical instruments.

The Beatles

- **John** Winston Lennon (1940-1980). Singer, guitarist, 1960-1970.
- James Paul McCartney (1942-1966). Singer, bassist, 1960-1966.
- **George** Harrison (1943-2001). Guitarist, 1960-1970.
- Stuart Fergusson Victor Sutcliffe (1940-1962). Bassist 1960-1962.
- Randolph Peter Best (*1941). Drummer, 1960-1962.
- Ringo Starr (born Richard Starkey *1940). Drummer 1962-1970.
- **Billy** Shears (aka William Wallace Campbell, William Shepherd, Billy Pepper, Apollo Wermouth, Vivian Stanshall, Phil Ackrill... *1937). Singer, bassist, pianist, 1966-1970.

Author

George Paxton [pseudonym] lives in Auroville since 2010; works in organic farming, as a librarian, podcaster, book author, and blog writer. As a translater he wrote for Thomas Henry Pope, Daniel Quinn, Keith Farnish, John Michael Greer, David Cayley and Charles Eisenstein, among others.

Veronica's gaze fell on a small circular black-framed picture, just below an autographed portrait photo of the young Paul McCartney. The motif looked somewhat familiar to her. A lettering that followed the top arc read 'Sgt. Peppers.' Aha, she thought. A cutout of a Beatles album cover. The lettering was repeated in mirror image at the bottom. In between, at the widest point, framed by ornaments, it said:

I ONEI X HE ◊ DIE

What was that all about? She couldn't make sense of it. 'HE \Diamond DIE' sounded sinister, though. The rhomb-shaped symbol between the two words seemed to point upward like an arrow, where a slightly chubby-cheeked Paul smiled down at her from the much larger photograph.

"You must have been about my age then, a year or two older at most," she thought. "Good thing you didn't die, sweetheart," she murmured, "or the world would have missed out on so many great songs."

