

ROUND ROBIN II:

TARREN FAWKES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Interlude	Jeffrey Stevens	ii
<i>written while waiting for next installment, in an email to Steven prior to his move</i>		
River of Mud, River of Death	Jeffrey Stevens	1
God Has Smiled On Our Undertakings	Steven Marsh	6
If I Only Wanted To	Colin Toenjes	9
Monica's Death	Holly Methvin	13
Tarren Faux	Philip Shannin	17
Remembering Brussels	Kristin Godfrey	19

The Interlude

The door gave a bellowing creak as it opened, a sound that shattered the silence like an alarm. If Tarren had been the type to wax poetic, he might have alluded the sound of the door to what lay beyond...the secrets of the ages, long since determined to be beyond the reach of man, and that to access them would raise the alarm of a world.

But Tarren Fawkes wasn't a poet, unless poets could be named of those that wrote odes with bullets and used blood as ink. To him, the door was a liability. We winced, thinking how such an unkempt entrance could have given him away in a dozen situations and left him to die in a hundred different ways.

"Focus!" Tarren admonished himself under his breath. This wasn't Azerbaijan, nor was it the slums of Hong Kong, nor the mysterious abandoned Incan outpost in the remote badlands of Tierra del Fuego. This was friendly territory, and as familiar as such brief respites could be.

The Informer slid out of the shadows from behind the door sheathing his antique short sword. Tarren had never seen him without the blade, not even in public, where he seemed to be able the weapon, not unlike the characters in that ludicrous show Tarren had seen on television the night before. Perhaps the Informer thinks himself just as immortal, Tarren thought. Why else would he insist on such an outdated form of personal protection, against the overwhelming arsenal that would be brought against him if one ever knew where he was? More likely, Tarren thought, the Informer considered knowledge to be his personal shieldmaiden; his enemies will not ever find him, as he will always know where they will be two weeks before they know it.

"So, you could not find them, eh?" The Informer chuckled, settling in the chair in front of the computer desk. In front of him, a computer screen listed countless row upon row of incomprehensible lettering, code that only the Informer knew, impregnable, unyielding. He started to search the immense pile of dossiers, files, and various forms of media lying about the desk, arranged in yet another organizational scheme only the Informer understood. "I told you they would no longer be in Cairo. This really will not look good in your memoirs". The Informer gestured to a pile of weathered looseleaf pages on the table, from a time when Tarren considered leaving the Business, when he thought the world deserved to know the truth.

"Enough" Tarren said tersely. The Informer was one of the few he could call friends in this world, but the past few days weighed heavily upon him. In a haggard hushed voice he confided his failure "Pluto got to the sunken sub before I could. They have stolen the Fallhammer."

The Informer quickly looked up, then back to his pile. Tarren noticed the look, however, the Informer had not expected this turn of events. And that chilled Tarren to the bone.

"You must go quickly" The Informer said. "McHaggart left Dublin this morning. He's is expected to arrive at a private compound in the Falkland Islands sometime this afternoon." The Informer handed Tarren a thick folder. "The latest NORAD satellite images of the facility, plus all current Echelon reports of transmission from the site, both radio and electronic." The Informant smirked. "The British censored some material from those reports before passing it on to the CIA and the VSA, but I reconstructed the missing portions, its on the CD."

Tarren wanted to reassure his friend. "Look, St-"

"No!" The Informant hissed, and lunged forward, burying the hilt of the sword into Tarren's stomach. Tarren expelled the breath from his lungs and doubled over. As he crouched, the Informant quickly whispered, "No names. There might be a bug, how else would they have found Fallhammer so quickly?" Tarren slowly stood. Even in a crisis, the Informer was still one of the quickest men he knew.

The Informant sighed and looked about. "I'll have to move, again. I hate moving." Tarren looked about at the stacks of books and folders, and nodded in agreement. He knew the company would take care of it, but he saw no joy in the future of agents who would scramble the Informer's organization in the process."

"You can reach me at 352-472-4847" Tarren said, placing the files in his briefcase. It wasn't really the right number, that would be traceable to anyone listening in. But the Informer knew where to reach him.

"Perhaps, when this is concluded, you can come back and pick up where we left off?" The Informant queried, gazing back at the table where the unfinished manuscript laid. "You never finished telling me what happened in Memphis. But wait..." The Informant looked up, a smile crossing his lips and then changed into a puzzling frown. "didn't you die then?"

Tarren looked thoughtfully on the script, then turned to the door and pulled it open. If possible, the creak sounded even more ominous than before. Night had fallen, and a chill wind blew through, lifting the manuscript and scattering its contents about the room. Tarren walked through the door and slowly closed it behind.

As the door sealed shut, the Informer could hear Tarren reply.

"I might have. After all, no one lives forever."

River of Mud, River of Death

The river of mud churned on, despite one man's wish for the world to stop.

Tarren stood on the edge of the railing, watching the waters of the Mississippi flow below him. After twenty years, the view of the River from this location had never become less impressive to him. He had been in many places more beautiful than this: the docks of Prague before the war, the Northern isles of New Zealand, the bays and inlets of Hong Kong, but the majesty of Old Man River had always stayed with him. And when he needed time to think, or time away from what others called a 'life', he came here.

Behind him, the city. Memphis, home of blues and rock and roll. An ugly concrete and brick anthill that had seen far better days. The people that lived there had the lazy mentality of those that had known that yesterday was bad and tomorrow wouldn't be any better, so there was no rush to do much of anything. Tarren liked it that way. Such a stark contrast to his 'life'...

"My life," Tarren muttered, as he unrolled a grape lollipop and placed it in his mouth. How long ago had it been since he joined the Company? Forty years? The world had changed more than a dozen times over, and Tarren had been there to see every one of those changes. Some of them he had had a part in, to be sure. Some of them he wished he hadn't. At first, it had been an adventure, a job that needed to be done. But responsibility had turned to burden, and acts to ensure 'national security' had now become more synonymous with 'murder' and 'terrorism' than Tarren felt comfortable with. Maybe he should just give it up, altogether.

Tarren spit the lollipop into the water, muttering, "A lifetime." The world had changed, but Tarren still hadn't. Almost penniless, except for the stipend that came to him with each new assignment, just as he had been when he had gotten out of college. Homeless, living out of a suitcase, just as he had been in those fruitless months of trying to land a job. Not many prospects for English and Russian majors, not during the Cold War and Macarthyism. In the end, there had only been one choice for employment.

Alone. Tarren had always been alone, or so he felt tonight. There had been women, and many times when he felt he had found the perfect one. But none had managed to break that wall that he had erected around his heart.

Except Monica.

He had met her in Brussels. He had been returning from Iran, just after the Gulf War, when he had quite literally run into her at the hotel. He had instantly been captivated by her eyes, brilliant green with small gold highlights. And her laugh, like pure silver.

Monica had never pushed, and slowly Tarren had let his way fall to her. It hadn't been easy; no relationship like theirs had ever been smooth. And in the end, as always, there were some barriers she couldn't cross, some answers she could not know. His job. Where he travelled to on 'business'. How long would he be gone.

Monica put up with more than any of the others had, but in the end, he couldn't give her himself. And that was that. And that was last Tuesday.

Tarren had never felt this alone. Christ, he was nearly sixty years old! Field assignments were coming up more infrequently, and he was never the type for a desk job. Retirement was coming, and that meant life would be empty.

Tarren turned away from the river, suddenly disgusted with the sight of it. Muddy and brown, dirty and polluted as he was.

"I need a drink."

Tarren made his way back into town, towards Beale Street. The lure of the neon lights and cheap liquor brought everyone to this side of town. From the clubs and bars, live music poured out into the streets. Snake charmers and street acrobats lined the streets. An Elvis impersonator walked among the crowds. Tarren had always felt at home here. Carven, his superior at the

Company, had never understood his love for the city.

"It's an armpit," he would say.

Tarren looked around. Sure, it was an armpit, but it was America's armpit. Cops mixed with voodoo dancers and strippers walking along in artificial day. A miniature Mardi Gras operating seven days a week all year round. From a nearby club, an outdoor band played "Swingtown" while couples from a nearby prom danced in the streets with blacks in Jamaican style dresses. An older couple danced next to them slowly. Inside the club, Tarren could hear a rock band playing "Play that Funky Music" for a more alternative crowd, all wearing black and lipstick of the same color. This is what it is about, Tarren thought. This is what I do it for. Democracy and the right to get your asses drunk.

Carven would tell him he was full of shit. Maybe he would be right. Tarren didn't care. The thought made him comfortable with what he did and that was fine by him.

The bourbon felt cool on his tongue. Tarren let it swish around in his mouth before he swallowed. The night had gotten marginally better, although he realized it was probably due more to the alcohol than to a genuine attitude change. At least the band was good. In the end, he had settled on the outdoor venue, and listened as the singer went from country to rock to blues and back again. Passersby on the street stopped to listen to their tunes. Even the rock band from inside came out during their break to listen. The lead singer introduced his parents, who had come to hear their son play. It was a nice touch, Tarren thought. Score another notch for my America of Beale Street Theory.

Of course Tarren wasn't fully drunk. Years of being in the Company had taught him never to do that. That didn't mean that he wasn't prone to drinking himself under the table; but that had been a younger Tarren. Besides, Tarren knew he was far too melancholy to get drunk. He was likely to become suicidal that way.

Tarren looked down at the drink and thought of Monica. He had met her that day in Boston, coming back from an assignment in Istanbul. He knew instantly when he got off that plane that something was the matter. He hadn't needed Company training to know that.

They exchanged noncommittal greetings and small talk. No hugs or kisses were forthcoming from her, so Tarren attempted a small peck. Monica deftly avoided it, almost as if it were a blow. Tarren reserved comment until they had reached her car.

"Want to talk about it?"

"What is there to talk about? You never tell me anything anyway!"

"Monica, I've told you, what I do is very sensitive. I'm not at liberty..."

"Not at liberty?? Tarren, I've told you, I can live without not knowing what you do, but you can't just keep slipping away without telling me anything? Damn it, I deserve more than that!!"

"I can't tell you when....Sometimes I don't even know..."

"You could if you wanted to. You're just so...Christ!"

Tarren felt she was holding something back. "What is it really, Monica?"

Monica stopped for a moment, then turned away from him for a moment. "Tarren, I know you give me all you can, and it isn't enough." She turned to face him, "Tarren, you know that I've always wanted. I want you. I want a family. But I know no matter what, those two won't happen together. It's one or the other. And if I choose you, I only get part of what I need. I need to know, Tarren. Will it change? Can I have both?"

Tarren looked at this woman. For five years she had been a steady anchor for him, a lifeline to an ordinary life. And for five years she waited, growing older, waiting for a man almost twice her age to end one way of life for a new way of life together, knowing that he was the kind of man that would never go for that type of life, even when faced with retirement. By the time he would

be able to give her what she wanted - a family, children - she might not be able to do so anymore.

And so he let her go.

Tarren had not made many stupid decisions in his life. In his line of work, he couldn't afford to. In his mind he had only made two. Letting her go was one of them.

Joining the Company was the other.

He realized he had made a third by coming to Beale Street when the bullet tore his shoulder, spinning him to the ground.

The crowds ran about crazily. Tarren thanked his stars for that. Although the silencer used muffled the shot, no one had not noticed the spray of blood from his shoulder or how he fell. And the silencer had failed to mask the characteristic sonic boom caused by the bullets passage through the air. The crowds served to distract the assassin and keep them from drawing a bead on Tarren.

It was a professional, Tarren was sure of that. An amateur would have used some sort of bomb, or just indiscriminately shot into the crowd. The assassin was using a rifle, and was being conservative with his shots. That meant also that he or she would take the time to confirm his kill. Tarren came up on his knees and assessed his options. Waiting just a second, he opted to jump out into the crowd in the street rather than duck into the building. He ran to the railing and jumped into the street.

Tarren attempted to follow the panicked crowd's flow, but it was no use. Everyone was running in random directions. Instead, Tarren attempted to scan the area to locate the rifleman. The outdoor cafe was covered; the bullet had to come from near street level. It had to have come from the park, but no one in that direction stood out as the assassin. Of course, the killer would have hidden the gun immediately.

Police rushed into the crowds. Beale Street had its own station, and over two dozen cops came in to restore order. Tarren turned to avoid them. Being stopped by a cop now would be the surest way of getting killed. Tarren, looking over his shoulder, ran into a panic stricken Elvis.

"Easy, fella, Graceland is that away," Tarren said, grinning.

Elvis just sneered at him from behind rhinestone glasses. Silently, the imposing man pulled a butterfly knife from his sequined jumpsuit. "Nothing personal," Elvis said, lunging towards him.

Tarren barely managed to avoid the blow, spinning around, he brought his elbow down on the back of the man's neck. He felt the jar of snapping vertebrae; the Elvis crumpled to the ground. Tarren had seen him before the shooting. Too close to have fired the shot. That meant a team of more than one was after him. Possibly even a sweeper team.

Damn, he thought. How many people knew he came here often? After a while, he thought, too many. He had become much too routine at doing this. 'A rut was dangerous' he had been taught at the Company training school, and only now had that fact been painfully cut into him.

Tarren retrieved the knife and rummaged through the impersonator's pockets. There was a few twenty dollar bills, a package of Big Red gum, a comb, and a wad of C-4 explosives and a detonator cap. Tarren knew then that this was deadly serious. If they had gotten to him here, he probably couldn't return to the hotel, or try to reach his car. He was trapped.

"Hey you!"

Tarren looked up to see an officer rushing towards him. They must have thought he was mugging the man. Tarren grimaced, jumping to his feet and running from the cop.

The wound was bad, worse than he had originally thought. He had better get to cover fast if he was to make it. Tarren crossed the street towards the park. Along the road stood a row of horse-drawn carriages, where their cabbies tried to calm their horses in the milling confusion.

"How much for a ride?" he shouted to the nearest one.

"Are you crazy?"

"Almost." Tarren decked the cabby, who fell like a sack of wheat. Unfortunately, like most cabbies, he had a dog. The Shepherd was on Tarren in an instant. Tarren fended the dog off with an arm. Although he hated to do, Tarren knew he had to get the dog off and get moving. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled the issued pepper spray and sprayed the dog's eyes.

"Sorry, boy," he muttered as the dog fell off whining. Tarren jumped to the cab and took off in the carriage, urging the horse to a trot and then to a gallop.

And not a moment too soon. Three sets of hands reached for the carriage as it pulled away from the curb and into the traffic: the cabby, the police man, and a third, dark-suited figure. From the way the gentleman's trenchcoat was held, Tarren knew it was the assassin. The rifle was hidden within the folds. As he watched, the man motioned, and a dark grey Bronco sped up in the traffic in pursuit. Cursing, Tarren urged the horse faster, cutting across lanes of traffic to go up a narrow one-way street. The Bronco swerved to follow, crashing into an grey monstrosity of a Buick. Tarren used the seconds it bought to rush farther down the street. Assessing his options, he used the knife to sever the leather bindings that attached the carriage to the horse. Then he lurched forward to jump to the horse's back.

Unencumbered of the carriage, his speed picked up dramatically. Tarren took a moment to take in the animal he was now entrusting his life to. Although not suited to sprinting, the horse had seen many years of service in the city, and was strong and able. Tarren petted its back, and leaned back to enjoy the wind biting his face. These were the moments for which he lived.

Now he had to figure out where to go. It was only a matter of time before the Bronco caught up to him. Tarren looked to his right. Hiding in the darkness of the Mississippi there was Mud Island. He could hide out there, just as Tom Cruise tried to do in that movie a few years ago. Quickly he dismissed the idea. There were only two ways on or off the island; the skyline walkway or the road bridge three miles farther down. The only other way off would be to take a boat, and with his injured arm he couldn't expect to be able to hotwire the controls, let alone steer.

Tarren continued along the river, passing the convention center and the Interstate overpass. On his left loomed the imposing Pyramid, which he had considered a piece of post-modernist crap. Attempting to evoke images of the city's namesake, the steel and glass pyramid stood higher than the Statue of Liberty, its dull metallic sides weakly reflecting the light of the full moon. Giant spotlights shot through the sky at each of the corners of the structure that faced the street.

Perfect, Tarren thought. I can hide in the civic auditorium from the killers. And the traffic cops outside should be able . . .

Just then the spotlights went out. Tarren glanced quickly at his watch. It was a quarter past two. The Pyramid was deserted, the police long since gone. He would be on his own even here.

A shot rang out. Tarren instinctively ducked, but he needn't have bothered. He wasn't the target.

The bullet tore through the horse's brainpan, killing the beast instantly. Tarren just had enough time to leap from the horse before the animal toppled to the ground.

Behind him, Tarren could see the Bronco, which had just cleared the corner nearly ten blocks back. With certainty, Tarren knew that the bullet had been fired by the same first assassin that had tried for in the restaurant. Lurching to his feet, Tarren tried for the only cover available; the twenty foot replica statue of Ramesses that stood at the street entrance of the Pyramid. Tarren had barely cleared its base before a hail of bullets scarred the sandstone pedestal. They were taking no chances now. They wanted him dead.

Tarren frantically searched for options. There was no other available cover for at least a hundred yards. The Bronco screeched to a halt, less than ten feet away. Tarren pulled the knife, thought about the situation, and dove to work.

Seconds later, a clear cut voice cut through the night air. "Give it up, Agent Fawkes. You have nowhere to run to. Come out now and I will make it painless."

Tarren stood to his feet and moved around the pedestal. The rifleman stood against the

vehicle, brandishing his weapon in his general direction. Behind him, the driver sat within the Bronco, aiming at him with a Beretta through the passenger window. They had him, and had him good.

"End of the line, Fawkes," said the assassin, lifting the rifle to his shoulder.

"Wait," said Tarren. "Why?"

"Because of what you saw in Istanbul," said the killer. He looked away for a second, staring into Tarren's eyes. "Our employers have invested too much time and effort for you to destroy the operation now. I'm afraid we must kill everyone you have had contact with in the past weeks as well. Including your fiancée."

"Monica?!" Tarren blurted out. In his eyes, hope and the will to live seemed to disappear. The killer noticed that with a chilling smile, and nodded.

The loss of hope was replaced by something far deadlier in the older agent's eyes. "You're a dead man," he whispered.

"Possibly," sneered the assassin, "but it won't be by your hands."

"You're right," replied Tarren. It was at that instant the explosive charge blew, taking the pedestal and the surrounding sidewalk with it. With a groan, the towering statute toppled forward, crushing the Bronco under tons of stone. Tarren rolled to the side, flinging the knife. The blade sailed through the air, catching the rifleman in the throat. With a gurgling cry, the assassin fell to the ground next to the crushed vehicle.

Tarren climbed wearily to his feet, assessing the destruction. Rubbing his jaw, he began to run up the street away from the Pyramid.

Now he knew why someone was trying to kill him...and why someone would try to kill Monica. The problem was...he really had no idea why.

"I didn't see anything in Istanbul..." he murmured, looking back at the dead killer. "Nothing at all."

The river of mud churned on, despite one man's wish for the world to stop and make sense.

Chapter 2: God Has Smiled On Our Undertakings

Age is almost universally disrespected the world over. The elderly are viewed as weak and unknowing in the face of the fast-paced modern era. Anyone over the age of seventy who expects to maintain his status and power had best be prepared to fight tooth and nail for it.

Which is exactly what Wolfgang Bloch did. Constantly. In the Org, an unending flow of ambitious young rogues issue challenges almost monthly. Bloch ignored the bulk of these challenges. He was usually too busy protecting the interests of the Org. But every so often, he would grant a haughty agent the "privilege" of a challenge. Bloch preferred to forbid those he favored from challenging him, but if they were persistent, he would eventually grant them the same trial by combat afforded all who officially opposed him. If a challenger were particularly favored, he would offer them a (usually futile) last chance to back down.

Because all those who challenge Bloch die.

Every one. Skilled in martial arts, stealth, melee, guns. . . it mattered not to the deceptively skilled Bloch. It became a boring ritual to Bloch; he would swing his katana near his opponent once. . . surely too slight a blow to be of any danger. And then the challenger would notice that his internal organs were on the outside of his body. And he would fall over.

Bloch had no visions of immortality, not at eighty-four. He knew he would die some day. . . but not in combat, and not at the hands of some young fool.

These thoughts flashed through his mind as he was interrupted. "Sir?" the unassuming middle-aged man said as he stood before Bloch's desk, holding a tape recorder.

The thoughts of betrayal and blood left, and he focused himself on the arrival of his trusted aide. "Yes?" said Bloch, looking not at his aide but rather out the high-rise window that loomed over New York's considerable skyline.

"Sir, Team Iota dispatched in Memphis against Tarren Fawkes." He was used to Bloch not answering him in the eye. In fact, it was better that way. Then he didn't need to look at Bloch's fire-scarred face.

Bloch sighed, as if weary from a game that lasted too long. "We sent Team Iota? Even the Elvis?" His aide nodded, and Wolfgang shook his head. "I assume they were unsuccessful?"

"They were. Fawkes killed them all." There was an uncomfortable silence as Bloch continued looking out the window. The middle-aged man continued. "We picked up the following from the hidden microphone on agent." he pressed play.

"End of the line, Fawkes."

"Wait; why?"

"Because of what you saw in Istanbul. Our employer has invested too much time and effort for you to destroy the operation now. I'm afraid we must kill everyone you have had contact with in the past weeks as well. Including your fiancée."

"Monica?! You're a dead man."

"Possibly, but it won't be by your hands."

"You're right."

An explosion.

After this segment, the middle-aged man turned up the volume on the player. "I found this particularly interesting."

Whispered, almost inaudible. *"I didn't see anything in Istanbul. . . nothing at all."*

Bloch turned to the man and raised an eyebrow, distorting his scarred face. "And?"

"Well, Fawkes says he didn't see anything in Istanbul."

Wolfgang paused uncomfortably again. "What is the only country to officially declare war against the United States before World War II?"

Off-guard, the middle-aged man tried to stammer an answer. "I don't know. Britain? Mexico? Canada?"

Bloch shook his head. "Tripoli. June 10th, 1801. Tripoli condoned piracy, while the states did not. They came to blows, and four years later Tripoli was forced to sue for peace."

"I'm not sure I see what this. . ."

"Where is Tripoli today?"

"I don't know."

"Exactly my point. No one gets anywhere declaring their intentions directly. Not even. . .Germany." Bloch clenched a wrinkled spotted hand into a tight fist, then continued. "I've known all along that Fawkes is ignorant of Istanbul."

"But then why. . ."

"Fawkes will now investigate this new mystery. It is how he copes with the ever-changing world around him. And he shall become my pawn, bringing Project Omnis Divisia to fruition."

"Why did you send Team Iota against him, then? They were some of our best, and could have easily killed him."

Bloch unclenched his fist and looked at the man. "You surprise me in your ignorance of Fawkes." Bloch turned away and resumed looking out the window. "No, Fawkes would never allow himself to be killed by the likes of Team Iota. I am certain of that."

"Even when he was drunk? And distraught about Monica?"

"Ah, yes, yes, yessss. . . Monica. The crushing blow of love and tenderness." Wolfgang Bloch leaned against the window, his head resting against the nest his folded arms provided, and began to sing.

"I'll take you home again, Kathleen
across the ocean far and wide
to where your heart has always been
since first you were my bonny bride
The roses all have left your cheeks.
I've watched them fade away and die.
Your voice is sad whene'er you speak
and tears bedim your loving eyes. . ."

Wolfgang stopped and shuddered, silently, as if to cry. But no tears came. After a minute, he collected himself and turned again to face his aide. "Have I told you how I acquired this weapon?" he asked as he drew the honed katana, pointing it at the man.

"N. . . No," he said, swallowing, his throat tight with controlled fear.

"Ah." Bloch sheathed the blade again. "No, not even the love of a woman would distract a drunken Tarren Fawkes to the point of death. And mourn not for Team Iota. They may have been the best of which you were aware, but you are not privy to the entirety of the Org's secrets. Were we to wish Fawkes dead, I assure you, it would be a trivial matter."

"He's going to ask the Company for help," said the man after another uncomfortable silence.

"Of course, Mr. Ash. That's why I have you. Go. Now. Await him as his. . ." Wolfgang Bloch chuckled. . . "friend. Guide him into our paws, giving whatever aid is necessary to further his involvement in Project Omnis Divisia."

"Yes, sir," said the man. Their meeting ended, Carven Ash left the skyscraper and drove off in his car, a jet-black Porsche too stunning for any man living solely as one of the Company's main superiors.

Elsewhere, Monica Bloch was thirty-eight seconds from mortal danger.

Chapter 3: If I Only Wanted To....

A red Ford sedan signaled a right hand turn, and pulled off U.S. Highway 87, into the parking lot of the Clayton Sands Motel. At the wheel, Monica Bloch was very tired. She had been on the road since early the previous morning. Everything was going smoothly. She drove slowly through the parking lot, and pulled her car into the space in front of room 127. On the car's Compact Disc player, her Melissa Etheridge CD was just ending. She waited for the last note to fade away, then shut the engine off. She had found this CD very appropriate for the lonely drive across the New Mexico high plains. Somehow, it seemed to insulate her from the bleakness of the landscape. Monica picked up a manilla envelope from the seat next to her, and withdrew a key, its green plastic keychain bearing the logo of the Sands Motel and the number 127. She reflected for a moment on the chain of events that had led her to this place.

It started as any other assignment had, with a blank white envelope slipped into her morning newspaper. This time, the envelope contained a small key and a notecard. Typed on the card was the number 360050 and the letters LAX. This meant her instructions would be waiting in a post box at Los Angeles International Airport. These boxes were typically used by business travelers to get messages from their offices while on extended stays in another city, before the advent of electronic mail and global messaging. The rental of these boxes is hard to trace, if the renter has a false identification and the necessary funds.

Monica knew the orders package would be there for 48 hours. She destroyed the notecard, and pocketed the key. Two days ago, she had gone to the airport at around four in the afternoon, when the airport would be very busy, and checked the mailbox. Inside, she found a large manilla envelope, mailed four days prior, with a return address of a post office box in Denver. She opened the envelope in a nearby restaurant. The envelope contained a smaller envelope, already with postage, addressed to the same box in Denver, a single typed sheet of instructions, and the motel key.

The instructions were clear and simple, to aid in memorization. She was to pick up a box from two men in a white camper at a rest stop on Interstate 17 near Flagstaff the next morning. She was to take that package to Clayton, stay in the Clayton Sands Motel, and then drop the box off at an old gas station in Perico, Texas the next morning. The note also gave the correct code phrase to identify herself to the man at the shop, and instructions to give the key to him, along with the box.

Monica memorized the instructions, and shredded them, dropping the pieces into a garbage can on her way out. Those cans are emptied frequently at a busy airport, and she knew they would not be found. The mailbox key she put into the stamped envelope, and carried it out of the airport with her. She would mail it from a public box on her way to Flagstaff.

David Gelner had been an All-American wide receiver at Texas A & M before a knee injury ended his career his senior year. With the promise of an NFL contract gone, and his distinct lack of education (he could not read above the fourth-grade level), his prospects of supporting his wife and twin daughters were non-existent. One day, he received a call from a Mr. Willie Brown, who identified himself as a booster. Brown asked him if he would be interested in a job. Since Gelner was no longer an athlete, he knew there would be no conflict.

When Mr. Brown told him what the job was, Gelner was skeptical. It sounded illegal, but Brown assured him there was no threat of arrest, and told him how much they would pay him for this simple task. Gelner agreed. One hundred thousand dollars will buy a lot of silence he told himself.

As Monica Bloch was preparing to leave Los Angeles, Gelner and his brother were waiting in the customs line at Nogales, Mexico at the wheel of a white camper. At this border, any large vehicle entering the country is searched to see if it is concealing drugs or trying to smuggle illegal aliens into the country. Gelner's camper was waved to one side, and a Border Patrol agent asked him and his brother to step out of the truck. They complied, as another agent led a German shepherd up to the camper and opened the back door and led the dog inside to search for drugs. Two other agents poked and prodded the underside of the camper, looking for hidden compartments. The searching agents noticed the large wooden box labeled "Deluxe Croquet Set", but since the dog did not react and since it was too small to hold a child, much less an adult, they ignored it.

The agents would have paid more attention if they had known that the crate had come off of a Cuban freighter at Veracruz two days earlier. That freighter had picked it up in Manzanillo, Cuba, off of a Russian cargo vessel. The crate appeared on no ship's manifest, but its point of origin had been Istanbul. The customs officials, finding nothing, waved Gelner and his brother through. The two men looked at each other and breathed a sigh of relief as they headed north to make their rendezvous near Flagstaff the next morning.

Monica Bloch was waiting when the camper pulled into the rest area the next morning. The camper pulled up next to her as she opened the trunk. The brothers recognized the car description they had been given. David walked around to the back of Monica's car as his brother opened the camper's rear door.

"I thought all of Arizona was a desert," he said.

Monica looked up and replied. "No, there is snow in Flagstaff."

Noting her correct response, David replied, "There is no snow in Mexico."

The exchange of code words completed, they both nodded, and David and his brother wrestled the box out of the camper and placed it in her trunk. She said "Go use the bathrooms. Your payment will be waiting for you when you get home." They nodded, and she climbed into her car and drove off. The whole exchange took less than four minutes.

Monica did not know what was in the box, nor did she care. It was just her job to deliver it. She settled into her seat as she headed north on Interstate 1. It would take her the better part of the day to get to Clayton, and she had already spent one day on the road.

In the parking lot of the hotel, Monica shook her head to clear some of the cobwebs, picked up her purse, and got out of the car to head for the room door. She turned the key in the lock, and stepped into the darkened room. As she stepped inside and reached for the light switch, she felt a cold circle of metal rest against her temple, and the unmistakable sound of a pistol being cocked. From somewhere in the darkness of the room came a rich, deep voice with a slight British accent.

"Welcome. Lights, please." The lights were turned on, and Monica saw a large black man in a crisp white linen suit reclining on the bed. A pistol was in his hand, and was pointed in her direction. Another huge black man had the end of a silenced pistol placed against her left temple.

"Thank you, Karim." the man on the bed said. Karim lowered his pistol slowly, as the other man stood, keeping his pistol trained on Monica.

"Hello, Miss Bloch." he said. "I am Colonel Daniel Kumonte, of the African People's Liberation Army. Please give me your car keys." Monica stood frozen. "Now. Put them on the

bed." said Kumonte, a veiled threat in his voice. She slowly extended her hand and dropped the keys onto the floor. Kumonte smiled. "Karim, pick those up."

He raised his gun and pointed it right at Monica's chest. "One move, and the cleaners will have quite a task. I suggest you do not make that move."

"What do you want from me, Colonel?" replied Monica as Karim retrieved the keys from the carpet.

"You are not that stupid, Miss Bloch, and neither am I. Please do not waste my time." Kumonte turned to Karim. "Secure her to the chair. Then go get the others." Karim grabbed Monica by the shoulder and forced her roughly down into the chair. He then took out a roll of duct tape. Monica's breath froze in her lungs.

Kumonte watched disinterestedly as Monica tested each of her bonds. Her legs were taped together at the ankles and thighs; her wrists were secured together behind her back. Karim and another tall black man, Jonny, entered, carrying the croquet set. They were followed by a much smaller white man, clutching a black briefcase. This was Dmitri Gregoriev. Once, he had been one of the Soviet Union's top nuclear scientists. But he had found that his government could no longer pay him enough to provide for his family. Others could.

The two men set the crate on the bed, broke the hasp, and opened the lid of the crate. Inside were four croquet balls, four mallet heads and mallet sticks, separated, and a jumble of wickets. Gregoriev opened his case and withdrew a pair of heavy gloves, a small electronic device, and a box cutter. Putting on the gloves, Gregoriev selected first one of the mallet heads. Unscrewing the rubber end revealed a hollow head containing a rod of gray metal. The small electronic box began to click madly. Apparently satisfied, he placed the head down and picked up the rubber mallet end and the box cutter. Slicing the head open across its diameter revealed a circular disk of another metal. He repeated the procedure with the other end of the mallet after replacing the first head. This end revealed another metal disk of a different color.

Gregoriev was smiling as he took out one of the croquet balls. It took a considerable effort to lift the ball, and so he set it on the bed before slicing the wooden ball open. Inside the thin veneer of wood was another metallic sphere, which Gregoriev gave a half-twist. It opened, revealing a globe of metal of the same color as the metal rod inside the mallet. The electronic device began to click madly again until Gregoriev replaced the top half of the sphere. Gregoriev turned to Kumonte.

"All the parts are here, Colonel."

"And the explosive?"

Gregoriev reached inside the lid and removed a thin layer of foam padding, revealing a block of gray material inside a thick plastic cover. Gregoriev pulled out the package. It was a three-inch thick slab of some material similar to putty.

"Plastic explosive," he said. "Enough to blow this town off the map."

"Check the rest of the shipment," replied Kumonte, turning to Monica. "And now, for you. Do you know what is in that crate?"

"No," she replied.

"I doubt that, but let me tell you. That crate contains enough enriched uranium to construct four atomic devices. We are perfectly safe, as at the moment it is shielded in lead. But combined with the disks of metal for the initiators, as well as the plastic explosive, they will make quite an explosive combination." Kumonte smiled at his little joke. "A few additional components will be needed, of course, but you have provided the raw materials. And since you have now delivered them to us, you have outlived your usefulness." Kumonte nodded to Karim. Monica felt a blow to the back of her head, then her world went black.

Monica awoke to the smell of gasoline. She was in a dark place that reeked of it. Her hands and feet were still tied, and her mouth was taped as well. She suddenly heard a key being turned in a lock, and a bright light flooded what turned out to be the trunk of her own car. Standing over her was Kumonte and his two helpers, one carrying a gas can. Kumonte was smoking a cigar. Kumonte leaned down. "Tell your father hello for me when you see him... in Hell." The trunk was slammed shut. Karim and Jonny climbed into the cab of a red pickup. The crate was already in the back, secured and under a tarpaulin. Kumonte leaned over the open window of Monica's car and shook his head.

"Such a waste." He flicked his cigar into the open window. It burst into flames as it struck the gasoline-soaked seat. Kumonte climbed into his BMW, where Gregoriev was already at the wheel.

"Shall we go, Dmitri Arkadevich?" Both men laughed as they pulled away and followed the pickup out of the motel parking lot, headed west on Highway 84. In the trunk, Monica heard the crackling of the flames and felt the heat beginning to build. She managed to spit out the gag, but her mind was becoming clouded. In the deepest reaches of her fume-fogged brain, one name spiraled up until it burst from her lungs as a scream.

"TARREN!!!!!!"

Tarren Fawkes was a thousand miles away, waiting to board a flight in Chicago for Washington D.C.

Chapter 4: Monica's Death

Tarren Fawkes still had a full head of black hair, making him easy to follow in the airport. The clean-cut, beak-nosed young Org agent easily made it through the metal detector a few minutes after him, carrying only today's Chicago Tribune. He wouldn't need anything else. His only mission was to make sure that Tarren Fawkes got on the plane for Washington. The young agent didn't know why it was so important, but he figured he was paid too much to mess things up by asking questions.

He watched Tarren go straight to the proper gate for the Washington flight and sit down in one of the uncomfortable-looking plastic molded seats. Carefully perching on a bench just out of Tarren's peripheral vision, the young man rearranged his coat and opened the newspaper quietly. He had already read it, so he wouldn't be distracted from his mission--to keep his eyes on the slightly muscular older gentleman. The young man took quick, bird-like glances at Tarren. He noticed that the only signs of age were his crow's feet and the weary blue eyes framed by them. The word "gentleman" wasn't one the young agent thought of very often, but he had never seen a man who so much seemed to fit the word.

The young Org agent was extremely observant. This man did look exactly like the picture he had memorized. If he only knew that Tarren Fawkes wasn't a perfect gentleman, he would have known that the man he was so carefully watching wasn't Tarren Fawkes.

At that moment, the real Tarren Fawkes was exceedingly glad that Monica had forgotten to take back the spare keys to her car when they had broken up.

He hadn't forgotten, and as he quickly popped the latch, it occurred to him that she might not have forgotten, either, but left them with him on purpose, so they could meet again. Tarren smiled with hope and scooped up the most beautiful woman in the entire world (and he'd seen enough women around the world to know) out of the car trunk. She was unconscious from the fumes again. He began running across the parking lot with the lovely bundle in his arms, when the car suddenly exploded. Tarren was knocked off his feet by the blast, Monica landing on top of him. Fate chose that precise instant to wake Monica up.

"Tarren! What . . . How did you . . . I don't unders . . ."

Monica's stream of confusion was promptly set right when Tarren reached through her thick chestnut hair to grab the back of her head and pull her mouth to his. Monica gladly kissed the man who had saved her, who also happened to be the man she loved, their breakup conveniently forgotten for now.

Tarren pulled Monica to her feet. "Are you feeling better?" he asked. "Can you stand?"

"Of course," Monica sharply replied, pushing him away. How can I let him get to me again? she thought. For all I know, he could be the enemy I was warned to watch for.

Tarren looked confused at her sudden shift in attitude. First, she's kissing me, then she's brushing me off, he thought. Women. He realized he didn't have time to ponder the question of women, a puzzle philosophers had spent hundreds of years on. Tarren heard the faint noise of approaching sirens. The police were coming.

"We've got to go, Monica," Tarren said, touching her slightly on the shoulder. She seemed to be in shock, staring at the smoldering remains of her car.

"All right," Monica said calmly, "Just a minute." She walked over about fifteen feet to the left and retrieved a curled-up, partially blackened sheet of metal. Tarren recognized it as the

license plate to her Ford sedan and raised an eyebrow. He watched her place it in her large sling purse, which she had somehow managed to hold onto throughout her entire ordeal. Then Monica walked straight ahead in front of Tarren and picked up something else. Tarren couldn't see what it was, since her back was to him, but he appreciated the view as she bent over to retrieve the small object, which she also stashed in her purse.

Tarren could hear the sirens getting louder and people beginning to come out of their hotel rooms to investigate the noise. "What the hell was that?" seemed to be their most popular expression. He ran over to Monica and pulled her out of sight. Tarren led her to the parking lot of the restaurant behind the motel.

"I don't think you want to talk to the police, but I have some questions for you, Monica," Tarren said. "Let's go to my hotel. I think you will find it is a much nicer place."

The police cruisers were pulling into the motel parking lot. Monica realized that since Tarren was right and she didn't want to talk to them, she really had no other choice. She had to go with him. And she silently cursed the part of her that liked the idea of being alone with Tarren in a hotel room. The memories of long, sleepless nights exploded in her mind. Whoever said older men didn't have stamina didn't consider the exceptions to the rule.

"Shit," she said out loud.

"Should I take that as a yes?" Tarren asked. "Hurry, love, we don't have much time."

"Well, I could definitely use a shower, so okay," Monica said. "And don't call me 'love.'"

Unlocking the door of the gray convertible parked nearby, Tarren, with an uncharacteristic grin, said, "I think we should take my car."

The young Org agent turned a page of the newspaper with a silent triumphant flourish. The man he considered to be Tarren Fawkes was just going through the door to get on the plane to Washington. Taking one last glance, the agent was shocked to see the man turn around, look directly at him, and wave. Then he went through the door.

The young agent almost dropped his newspaper. Regaining composure, he snatched his cellular phone out of his pocket and dialed the emergency number.

"Garfield was funny today," said the voice on the other end.

"He was the twentieth president of the United States, a nominee chosen as a compromise," the young agent said, beginning to sweat. They could kill him for this. What had he done wrong?

"What is the problem?" the voice asked.

"Uncle Max' spotted me," the young agent whispered, using the code name for Tarren Fawkes.

"We know," the voice said enigmatically, and hung up.

The young agent turned to the obituary section of the Tribune and saw his own name.

Monica wrapped her long, wet hair in a towel, put on the fluffy white bathrobe supplied by the hotel, held her breath, and stepped out of the bathroom, completely unprepared to talk to Tarren. She had thought she would never see him again, would never have to fight her feelings like this again. But she had to know how he knew where she was, how he knew she needed him. He wanted to ask questions, but she had a few questions for him, as well, and this time, she was going to get some answers.

Walking in the room, she noticed something which told her what her first question would be. "Why is there only one bed?" she asked, pushing away more memories.

"I'll get you another room," Tarren said. "If you want." He looked at her with that

expression that made her melt. I am not giving in, she thought.

She nodded and curled up in a large stuffed chair near a low table. "This is a nice place."

"Enough small talk," Tarren said, pacing. "I still have some questions for you."

"Me too," Monica said, defiantly thrusting up her chin at him. "So we take turns."

"Sounds fair," Tarren sighed. Monica was never as compliant as other women. "Ladies first."

"Okay, for starters, how did you know where I was?"

Tarren squirmed. He was uncomfortable discussing anything related to his job, but he realized he owed Monica the truth. Or at least as little of the truth as he could give her. Besides, she knew when he was lying. He could lie to ambassadors, military men, priests, and criminals, and get away with it, but not with her.

"There's a tracer on your calfskin boot, the left one," he said. Monica looked at her favorite boots, in the corner of the room, in surprise. Tarren continued, "I know you wear them a lot, so I could find you, if I need you. And I was tipped off that you were in trouble, by a good friend." Thank you, Carven, Tarren thought.

"Now for my question," Tarren said, "Who was trying to kill you, and why?"

Monica explained that she occasionally did "favors" for someone very important to her, someone to whom she owed her life. And she only had to do these "favors" once or twice a year, so it didn't seem like a big deal. She told Tarren the usual routine of gathering and delivering packages, not knowing what they contain, then going back to her regular, normal life. When she told Tarren every detail of what led up to her near-death, his jaw clenched.

"The African People's Liberation Army are a bunch of bastards who have no fucking clue what they're doing. Which is a good thing for you, my lovely. If they had been professional, your beautiful body wouldn't be in that chair," Tarren said.

He walked behind her and began to massage her shoulders. Monica wanted to protest, but her body wouldn't let her. It felt so good, and she was sore. It had been a long day.

Expertly rubbing the muscles in her neck, Tarren muttered, "But if they aren't professional, then how did they know about the explosives?"

Monica sighed, a cat-like sound. Tarren resolved to think about it later, as he picked her up off the chair, and carried her to the bed. Monica's towel and bathrobe fell off on the way, but neither of them minded.

Listening to the last statement Tarren made, from the bug Carven had put in the hotel room, Wolfgang Bloch laughed. It was a dry, papery, unpleasant sound, and it made the other man in the room shudder.

"How did they know about the explosives?" Bloch repeated. "A little bird told them. A little Russian bird." He began laughing again.

Dmitri Gregoriev joined in. He didn't feel like laughing, but was too afraid not to. Besides, Bloch was his generous employer, and Gregoriev had learned from his days in the Soviet Union that when the man who pays you wants you to do something, you do it.

"So, the African People's Liberation Army believes that my darling daughter, Monica, is dead?" Bloch asked.

"Y-y-yes." Gregoriev stammered. "They're too inept to check for remains."

"And the fools think that the uranium is real?" Bloch asked in a commanding voice, his humor gone.

Gregoriev wasn't sure which he was more afraid of, the laughter, or the harshness. He quivered while answering, "Y-y-yes. I assured them this was so."

"Perfect," Bloch said, stroking the sheath of his katana. "Project Omnis Divisia is coming to fruition nicely."

"Wha-wha-what if Mr. Fawkes hadn't arrived in time, sir? Your d-d-d-daughter may have been killed." Gregoriev asked. He had daughters of his own and could not understand the risk Bloch had taken.

"I knew the gallant Tarren Fawkes would be there at just the right moment. And if not, the loss of the beautiful Monica would be a small price to pay for my Project."

He swung his katana at a terrified Dmitri Gregoriev, slicing off his necktie. Gregoriev looked down, expecting to see blood pouring from his neck. He realized Bloch was just warning him, and backed quickly out of the room, apologizing over and over in Russian, having temporarily forgotten his English.

When he was alone, Wolfgang Bloch muttered bitterly, "And I have already paid the ultimate price. The Project must succeed." He knew exactly what Tarren Fawkes would do next, and it would accelerate the next step in his plan.

Hours later, Monica hit Tarren with a pillow.

"What was that for?" Tarren asked.

"For distracting me. I didn't get to ask you more questions." Monica picked up another pillow to aim.

Tarren grabbed her slightly tanned arm. "We'll have plenty of time for talking on the drive to Perico in the morning."

"We're still going to the drop-off point at the old gas station? But we don't have the package?" Monica dropped the pillow as Tarren grabbed her other arm and slid her closer to him on the bed.

"We'll improvise," Tarren said. "I'm good at that." Monica agreed as he kissed her, touching her in a way that proved his skills.

Monica's Melissa Etheridge CD, which had miraculously survived the explosion, was playing her favorite song on the player she brought to the room from Tarren's car:

"I'm the only one who'll walk across the fire for you. And I'm the only one who'll drown in my desire for you."

Monica drowned.

Chapter 5: Tarren Faux

"Mmmm," Monica mumbled as she woke groggily. Tarren was laying beside her, gently running his finger down the side of her face.

"Good morning, Sunshine," he beamed at her. "Did you sleep well?"

Tarren was a morning person, which always irritated her. Monica always felt inhuman, until after her morning shower. She had every intention of responding to his question with a smart quip, but as usual, she didn't have the heart. Tarren's million-dollar grin made her feel like even the smallest hurtful phrase would be a tragedy.

"Actually, not so well," she said truthfully. "I dreamt I was being chased by giant cockroaches and mathematicians."

"I think somebody had a little too much excitement yesterday."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," she laughed. "It isn't every day that you get held up at gunpoint, find out your croquet set is really a nuclear bomb and narrowly escape your own exploding car! Now if you'll excuse me I'm going to take a nice, long shower." With that she grabbed her purse and scampered off to the bathroom.

With a bit of chagrin, Tarren thought to himself, It may seem strange to you, but it sounds like an average day on the job to me. But maybe it wasn't abnormal for her. After all, she had secretly been delivering mysterious packages. And who the hell was this Willie Brown character that supposedly saved her life? Could Monica have made up the story, to justify her actions to him? No, I could tell if she was lying to me. Unless . . ., he thought, she thinks that she is telling the truth.

In the bathroom of the White Sands Hotel, Monica reflected upon how glad she was that Tarren had the libido of a nineteen year-old. By facing away from him and bending over just so, she knew his eyes would be following something other than the object she was picking up. Of course, reflecting upon last night, she could think of other benefits as well . . .

While Monica was in the shower, Tarren decided to check in with HQ. A voice on the other end of the line answered, "HQ, Ash speaking".

"Carven? This is Tarren."

"Tarren, where have you been? I was beginning to get a little worried when you failed to check in last night."

"Sorry Carven, I got a little . . . tied up."

Carven knew what it meant for Tarren to be 'tied up'. "And how is the lovely Ms. Hurston?" Carven said, carefully using Monica's mother's name rather than her father's. "I'm assuming she is all right."

"She's fine for now, but I think I better keep her with me, until this whole thing is resolved."

"Okay, Tarren, keep me informed."

As Carven Ash hung up the receiver, the man sitting in the chair in front of his desk gave him a knowing smile. Carven shuddered. The resemblance was uncanny. If he didn't know better, Carven would swear the man sitting before him was Tarren Fawkes.

On the way to Perico, Tarren and Monica began to discuss what they would do when they got there. After a long discussion, the two of them finally agreed upon a plan. They continued to drive along for several minutes in silence, lost in their own thoughts.

"Tarren," Monica said demurely. "What happens after the rendezvous in Perico?" It was a leading question, and they both knew it. After another minute of silence, she followed this up with the statement, "Maybe it would be best if I went my own way again".

"No!" Tarren responded, with startling forcefulness. "You . . . can't. It's not safe." He then went on to explain the events that happened in Memphis, leaving out some of the bloodier parts.

Monica listened patiently. After letting it all sink in, she asked Tarren, for the second time in her life, what happened in Istanbul. Both of them knew the importance of the question. If he told her the truth, it would be a breach of his professional standards. If he did not, she would leave again. And with the bad guys out there gunning for her, she'd likely wind up dead.

In his office at Org headquarters, Wolfgang Bloch was reviewing his plans for project Omnis Divisia. It was going well. Stage 1: "Tarren Faux" had gone off without a hitch. To pull off Stage 1, Wolfgang had to rely on two assumptions. The first was that Special Agent Fawkes would remain true to form. His record revealed him to be a loner, following up on leads before waiting for backup. It made him one of the best field agents in the C.I.A. It also ensured that people like Carven Ash would get promoted over him. Leaders had to be able to work with a team and delegate responsibilities. Secondly, Bloch assumed that Tarren loved Monica. By distracting him, the Org impostor was free to pull off his end of the mission at the Company without interference.

As a young man, Wolfgang reveled in his successes. With a swastika around his arm and a gun in his hand, he thought he was unbeatable. But it was a new world now and he was a different man. Experience made him paranoid. "Never underestimate your enemies," he would advise the young ones in the Org. "They are bound to surprise you, and in our line of work, that can be deadly."

The hell with standards, Tarren thought. Monica was mixed up in this now. She had a right to know why. Maybe she could make more sense of it than he could.

"There's really not much to tell," he began. "I was sent to investigate leads that a secret nuclear weapons construction facility existed near Istanbul. During my investigation, I got a tip off about where the facility was located. But by the time I got there, there was nothing to see. The place was abandoned and not a single scrap of evidence was left, except some elevated Geiger counter readings."

As Tarren reached the end of his story, their car reached the city limits of Perico. To Monica, the town seemed eerily quiet. Just your nerves, Monica, she told herself. I'm sure that its just like every other sleepy town in Texas. In reality, however, Perico was not like other towns. Its citizens held a dark secret that they would do anything to protect. Strangers regretted asking too many questions in Perico. A few hours from now, no one would regret coming to Perico more than Monica Hurston-Bloch.

Chapter 6: Remembering Brussels

The sun slowly began to rise as Monica and Tarren navigated towards the old gas station where she was to meet her contact. How can this man be so naive? Monica pondered as she looked over at Tarren, whose eyes never seemed to leave the road. The two of them had left so early in the morning that she slept most of the way in the car. And I can't believe how awake he seems. I guess years of this kind of life can do that to a person. She reached over and viciously yanked out a stray gray hair from his seemingly youthful raven head.

"Ow!" Tarren responded. "Well, I guess you didn't fall asleep listening to me. Would you look at this town? It's straight out of an old Western movie. I mean, even at this gas station there is a place to tie up your horses. Bizarre."

"This town gives me the creeps. And it seems so dead. Like a ghost town."

"Well, it is a Saturday morning. And who knows what secrets and ghosts may lurk here," he said quippishly. "The gas station hasn't opened yet. I vote we get some breakfast."

"And where in this ghost town do you expect to find food?" Monica asked in her most sarcastic voice. "McDonald's?"

"I was thinking Burger King, actually. Saw a sign on our way in." Monica looked at this man with disbelief, and it finally broke his straight face. "No, really, I packed some food from our hotel. It's in the bag in the back."

Monica divided up the bagels and bananas, but gave Tarren the cold coffee. "I'll go grab a Coke from that machine on the side of the building. How much change do you have?" Tarren handed her three nickels, two quarters and a dime, and she jumped out of the car, eating her banana on the way.

Tarren watched her go, swinging her hips seductively, and he remembered last night. Maybe he could retire and stay with her. But he'd have no income, and he has no savings. Well, I could write books. No, no one would believe my stories. He thought back on that night in Brussels when he first met Monica and smiled.

She seemed so frazzled, clutching her purse to her chest and walking with her head looking behind her. She had seemed to be walking on a path different than his, so he felt safe to look out to the street at the passing cars before returning inside to his hotel suite. In the next moment, he had made contact with her body and she fell to the cement while waves of excitement swept up his being.

"Entschuldigung, Fraulein!" Tarren blurted out while attempting to help her stand.

"What? Oh, no, I don't speak . . . uhh, Ich nicht spreche . . . Deutsch?" she clumsily responded. Tarren found that enchanting.

"Ahh, a fellow American. Can I help you get somewhere? I know this town fairly well, and I do speak the language," he smiled as he talked to her.

He remembered her gracious acceptance, the fortune that she was in the same hotel, the two of them spending the next few days together virtually inseparable, and that he almost bungled an assignment over it all. He was surprised, though, that when he called her back in the U.S. that she remembered who he was with such clarity and invited him for a visit immediately. Of course, when he went on that visit, he had been even more surprised. The same shy woman he met in Brussels who only would go so far as the hotel lounge with him, invited him into her bed that same night.

"Were you thinking about me?" Monica smirked at Tarren as she slid back into the car. She had in her hands a Coca-Cola, a flyer for a town festival, and the peel for her banana. When she saw Tarren's eyes focus on the last, she quickly explained. "I didn't see a trash can."

"Oh. Well use the bag," he suggested. "And I was remembering Brussels . . . and Maine." He was the one smirking now.

She playfully slapped at his arm and scrunched her face in mock anger. "Just eat your breakfast." Once she saw that he was eating, she focused on his profile and reflected on Brussels herself. Of course, she remembered it a little differently.

She had lost his trail about thirty minutes before and knew that she would never hear the end of it if she didn't find him. She also knew she was being watched. She ran towards her hotel, hoping that some of the surveillance equipment watching his adjoining room might lead her to his present whereabouts. She could never be as good as her father. She had too much of her mother in her. And on top of it all, she was lost. "Bitte sch`n, wo ist Douzysstra8e?" she asked a street musician as she dropped some coins into his guitar case.

"Gerade aus . . . vor Stadtlinger Haus." She thanked the man for directions directly to her own hotel and continued onward in the same direction. She loved this land, the harsh language, the cool air, and most of all, the wide assortment of people lined up on the streets. But tonight, she couldn't enjoy it. She had to move onward. She thought she heard someone call her name and figured if anyone, it was her tailer. I have to lose this guy before he realizes I've lost Fawkes. She began to run.

When she began to approach the hotel, Fawkes was standing outside, just looking at the cars pass by. It's now or never, she thought. I could make contact now, or continue to follow him like a shadow. She had never been one to hide well, and veered before she could think.

"Ooffh," she fell to the ground like lead. Didn't expect that. That kinda hurt. She heard him mutter something, must have been German. Fawkes knows every language. What should I do? Before thinking, she responded. "What? Oh, no, I don't speak . . . uhh, Ich nicht spreche . . . Deutsch?" Man, I must sound stupid.

She was very surprised when Fawkes offered to take her under his wing and "show her the town." She had to be careful, though. He couldn't know how she really felt about him. So, no intimacy, no connections, just stick to him while he is in Brussels. Then she'll never have to look at that face again.

She introduced herself as Monica Hurston, figuring her mother would be proud. Not that she'd ever know; Fawkes had seen to that years ago. But, then again, giving her true name would spoil her mission. And despite how she felt about the man personally, she could never let her Daddy down.

Three nights later, she followed Fawkes to the Alcatel office in the downtown area. Alcatel? The Telecommunications company? Then she remembered that along with general fiber optics, this international company performed vast research, employing a wide variety of people, including polymer scientists. Maybe they are working on some high secret aeronautical shell material? What does this have to do with American security? When Fawkes emerged from the building, he was carrying about ten optical disks, which he clumsily tried to shove into his fanny pack. She

tried hard to keep from laughing. How is this man the "super Spy"? I see no reason Daddy is so worried about him. Guess he'll be leaving tomorrow. I'll finally be done with him.

She was surprised when she got back to the hotel to find Fawkes in her room. "I . . . I . . . I . . . can explain all of this," she stumbled over her words as she glanced at all of the equipment that cluttered the room.

"Mein Sch`nheit, it is Wilhelm, your brother," Fawkes assured. Monica looked at this man in astonishment and ran over to the video monitor and saw her Fawkes getting undressed for bed.

She looked back at this man who looked like her target and back at the video screen. And back again, and back again. Finally she sat down and poured herself some brandy. "Talk to me. Explain this." What ensued was an insane plan which filled her with horror. What was worse, it was her own father's plan. She knew he wanted to destroy Fawkes, but did not know until now that she and Willie were expendable. She looked again at her brother, and recognized his striking hazel eyes regardless of the new face. She also saw the unmistakable look of utter despair.

"So, Sch`nheit, give him your Maine number tomorrow. You know what you must do from there." She was still clutching her snifter, long since empty. It crushed beneath her hand.

This cannot be true. How could Daddy expect me to overlook my feelings towards this man and draw him in? Even I am not that good an actress. She was sure she couldn't face him now or tomorrow. She was leaving then and damn meeting Fawkes tomorrow. She called down to the desk and left a message for him, "Monica Hurston. (207) 531-6987. She packed her bags and started her journey home.

When Monica looked back over at Tarren, he was asleep. Super Spy. But she had changed over the past seven years. She looked back on that time with disgust and did not understand why Tarren thought back so fondly. She tried to help him get out of this lifestyle, but he refused. And Monica was not known to repeat offers.

That policy had kept her out of so many of her fathers schemes. But when it came to Tarren, Daddy never turned down her offers. And so she was here with this man and in this town. She looked at her hands, and found the flyer crumpled into a ball. She straightened it out and took a glance. With surprise in her voice, she called out. "Oh my God. Tarren!"

Kalia Gelner was returning from the grocery store with her two twin girls and cursed her husband's absence under her breath. When she reached her house, she was surprised to see the older, dark haired gentleman waiting on the front porch. She parked in the neighbor's driveway and took the girls to their front door. The gentleman came over and addressed her directly.

"Mrs. Gelner? I must have gotten the wrong address. My boss said it was 1404 Paris Drive."

Kalia looked longingly at her neighbor's front door and leaned down and whispered something to her daughters. Two blonde heads skipped off towards the door. Kalia started to head back to her own house and the gentleman followed her. "Yes, I am Mrs. Gelner. What can I do for you?"

"Ma'am, my name is William Brown. Have you heard my name before?"

"Uhh, no. Are you somehow connected to my husband? He knows lots of people."

"No, ma'am. I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure. I played football for University of Texas back in my day, but I've seen David play."

Kalia looked at him again. His hazel eyes seemed somehow out of place with the rest of him. They held so much youth. "So, you're wanting an autograph then."

"No, ma'am. I regret to have to meet you like this. Would you please sit down?" Mr. Brown gestured to the Gelner porch which the two of them had just reached.

Kalia stood her ground and her eyes turned cold. She knew what must be following. "Tell me what you want."

"I work for an insurance agency and I'm here to tell you that you will be paid the full fifty thousand dollars since your husband's death was declared an accident."

"Y-y-you must be mistaken. My husband is due back any time now. He isn't dead." Her hands started to shake and she glanced nervously over to where her daughters last were. She saw her neighbor's door shutting.

"He was identified by Mrs. Molly Gelner. Isn't she your sister-in-law?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Her husband, Zeke, was also found with your husband. She also received the full fifty thousand dollars. I was told by the Flagstaff police that you had already been informed."

"H-how?"

"Well, they said they sent over some police officers."

"NO. How did he die?"

"Well, they figured the two of them walked in on some drug deal in the men's bathroom at the rest station and the dealer got surprised. I am truly sorry to be the one to tell you." Kalia fell to the ground sobbing. "Mrs. Gelner, I'll just leave the check here beside you."

Mr. Brown walked towards his black Sedan parked on the side of the road. Once inside, he turned on the radio and smiled. That was easy. At least she hadn't heard my name. That could have gotten messy.

Tarren's eyes opened to see white figures approaching the gas station. "What in the world is going on, Monica?" He looked over at her, but her eyes focused solely on the flyer in her lap. He grabbed the paper and saw what she did. On it was a picture of a black man in front of the gas station with the words Ku Klux Klan Rally written beside it. Today's date was listed, and the street corner where they were currently located was given as the meeting spot. "Of all days," Tarren sighed.

He reached across the car to the glove box and pulled out a black Beretta. He checked to see that it was loaded and shoved it into the lip of his pants. "Monica, get out of the car and head towards the service door." When she started to move, he opened his door.

He got out and followed Monica's movements with his eyes, waiting for her to reach the door before moving on his own. She doesn't even look scared. Guess I'm more afraid of bigots than she is. He saw her open the door and decided he could now follow. He never even heard the man come up behind him.

TO BE CONTINUED...