



GATEWAYS

A REPAIRMAN JACK NOVEL

F. PAUL WILSON



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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK • NEW YORK

for Daniel and Quinn

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Tuesday

Blessed be the blackmailers, Jack thought as he pawed through the filing cabinet.

He had a penlight clamped in his teeth and kept it trained on the labels of the hanging folders while his latex-gloved fingers fanned through them.

What a trove. If someone could be called a professional blackmailer, Richie Cordova fit the bill. Private investigation was his legitimate line, if such a line could be legit. But apparently he dug up lots of additional dirt during the course of his investigations, and put that to work for him. Never against his clients, Jack had learned. Did his blackmailing anonymously. That kept his professional rep clean, kept that stream of referrals from satisfied clients flowing. But Jack had picked him up on a money drop Cordova had set up for his latest fish and took an instant dislike to the fat slob. Nine days of shadowing him hadn't mellowed that initial impression. The guy was a jerk.

Cordova's PI office occupied a second floor space over an Oriental deli on the other side of Bronx Park. But his other line of work, probably the more profitable one, was here on the third floor of his house. Small and stuffy, furnished with the filing cabinet, a computer, a high-end color printer, and a rickety desk, it appeared to be a converted attic.

Where was the letter? Jack was counting on it being in this cabinet. If not—

There... *Jank*. Could that stand for Jankowski? He pulled out the file and opened it. Yep. This was it. Here was the handwritten letter at the root of Stanley Jankowski's problems. Cordova had found it and was using it to squeeze the banker for all he was worth.

Jack tucked it in his pocket.

Yes, blessed be those blackmailers, he thought as he began emptying the folders from both drawers of the cabinet and dropping their contents—letters, photos, negatives—onto the floor, for the help keepeth me in business.

Blackmail was the reason a fair percentage of Jack's customers came to him. Stood to reason: They were being blackmailed because they had something they wanted kept secret; couldn't go to officialdom because then it would no longer be a secret. So they were left with two options: pay the blackmailer again, and again, and again, or go outside the system and pay Jack once to find the offending photos or documents and either return them or destroy them.

Destroying was better and safer, Jack thought. But untrusting customers feared Jack might simply use the material to start blackmailing them on his own. Jankowski had been burned and wasn't about to trust no one no how no more. He wanted to see the letter before he paid the second half of Jack's fee.

Jack spread the two drawers' worth of photos and documents on the floor. A small, voyeuristic part of him wanted to sit and sift through them, looking for names or faces he recognized, but he resisted. No time. Cordova would be back in an hour.

He pulled a pair of glass Snapple bottles out of his backpack and unwrapped the duct tape from around their tops. He was about to do a big favor for some of the people in that pile. Not all. Cordova had probably scanned all this stuff into a computer and had digital copies stashed away somewhere. But a scan couldn't sub for a handwritten letter. Cordova needed the original, with its ink and fingerprints and all, to have any real leverage. A copy, no matter how close to the original, was not the real deal and could be dismissed as a clever fake.

He looked down at the pile of damning evidence. Some of these folks were about to get a freebie. Not because Jack particularly cared about them—for all he knew, some of them might deserve to be blackmailed—but because if he took just the Jankowski letter, Cordova would know who was behind

this little visit. Jack didn't want that. With everything destroyed or damaged beyond repair, Cordova could only guess.

Burning the pile would have been best but the guy lived in a tight little Williamsbridge neighborhood in the upper Bronx. Lots of nice, old, post-war middle-class homes stacked cheek by jowl in a neat grid. If Cordova's place burned, it wouldn't burn alone. So Jack had come up with another way.

He held one of the Snapple bottles at arm's length as he unscrewed the cap. Even then the sharp odor stung his nose. Sulfuric acid. Very carefully—this stuff would burn right through his latex gloves—he began to sprinkle it on the pile, watching the glossy surfaces of the photos smoke and bubble, the papers turn brown and shrivel.

He'd used up most of the first bottle and the room was filling with acrid smoke when he heard the front door slam three floors below.

Cordova?

Checked his watch: about a quarter past midnight. In the past week or so that Jack had been shadowing him, Cordova had hit a neighborhood bar over on White Plains Road three times, and on each night he'd hung till 1 A.M. or later. If that was Cordova downstairs, he was home at least an hour early. Damn him.

Dumped the rest of the acid from the first bottle and sloshed the contents of the second over the pile, then left them atop the filing cabinet. Now to get out of here. Wouldn't be long before Cordova detected the stink.

Opened the window and slid out onto the roof. Looked around. He'd planned on leaving as he'd entered—through the back door. Now he was going to have to improvise.

Jack hated to improvise.

Looked over at the neighboring roof. Pretty close, but close enough to...?

Through the open window behind him he heard Cordova's heavy feet pounding up the stairs. Another glance at the neighboring roof. Guessed it was going to have to be close enough.

Hauling in a deep breath, Jack took three running steps down the shingled slope and leaped. One sneakered foot, then the other, landed on the opposing roof and found traction. Without pausing to congratulate himself, Jack used his forward momentum to keep going, his rubber soles slipping and scraping up the incline toward the peak.

A loud, whiny "Noooooo!" followed by a bellow of rage and dismay echoed from Cordova's house, but Jack didn't turn to look—didn't want Cordova to see his face. Then he heard a shot and almost simultaneously felt the slug *zing* past his ear.

Cordova had a gun! Jack had figured he'd have one somewhere, but hadn't expected him to shoot up his own neighborhood. Two miscalculations tonight. He hoped he hadn't miscalculated on getting home alive.

Dove over the peak of the roof and slid down toward the gutter, the shingles shredding the palms of his latex gloves and wearing away the front of his nylon windbreaker like an electric sander. Halfway to the gutter he slowed his slide and angled his body ninety degrees. That slowed him a little more. Further angling around allowed him to get his foot in the gutter and stop altogether.

Not home free yet. Still two stories up with Cordova no doubt pelting down his stairs and heading for the street. Plus this house was occupied, probably with two families, since that seemed the rule around here. He could see the glow of lights turning on inside. He was sure the owners were dialing 911 right now to report the racket on their roof. Probably thought he was a clumsy second-story burglar.

Jack peeked over the gutter and positioned himself over a dark window. Slid off the roof feet first and belly down, easing his weight onto the gutter. It groaned and creaked and sagged as he hung by his

fingers. Before it could give way he managed to place his feet on the windowsill and let that take his weight. Eased himself into a crouch to where he could grip the sill with his hands, then dropped again. He clung to the sill only a second or two, poising his feet a mere six feet off the ground, then let go. He twisted in the air and hit the ground running.

His sneakers made no sound as he sprinted along the sidewalk. He bent as low as he could without compromising his speed and waited for a second shot. But none came. Took a left at the first corner and a right at the next and kept running. At least now he was out of the line of fire—if Cordova stayed on foot. But if he got into a car and started cruising...

Plus, cops should be on their way.

What a mess. This was supposed to be a simple in-and-out job with no one the wiser until later.

Kept moving in a crouch, watching the passing cars, on alert for flashing lights. Slipped out of his partially shredded windbreaker—he was wearing a WWE Lance Storm T-shirt beneath—and pulled the Mets cap from the pocket. Jammed the cap on his head and bunched the jacket into a nylon lump the size of a softball. Palmed that and slowed to a speedy walk.

Slowed further when he hit 232nd Street. Stuffed the windbreaker down into a trash receptacle as he walked to the elevated subway station on 233rd. Caught the 2 train and settled down for a long ride back to Manhattan.

He patted the letter folded in his jeans pocket. Another problem fixed. Jankowski would be happy, and Cordova...

Jack smiled. Fat Richie Cordova had to be fuming as much as the sulfuric acid on his photos and papers.

A man who was something more than a man crouched among the foundation plantings of a two-story house in a quiet Connecticut community. He moved through the world under different guises, using different names, but never his own, never his True Name. And as he traveled, doing what must be done to prepare the way, he searched out places such as this family home.

He sat with his spine and the back of his head pressed against the house's concrete foundation. Someone coming upon him might have thought he was an indigent sleeping off a bender. But he hadn't been sleeping. He required very little rest. He could go for days without closing his eyes.

And even if this had been one of those rare occasions when he needed rest, he would have found sleep impossible while basking in the exhilarating emanations from the basement of this house.

On the other side of the wall...systematic torture, mutilation, and defilement. The victim wasn't the first so abused by this family of three, and would not be the last. Or so the man who was something more than a man hoped.

What the two adults within had done to the ones they'd captured and imprisoned over the years would have been sustenance enough for this man. But the fact that they had debased their own child and made him a willing participant in the systematic defilement of another human being...this was exquisite.

He flattened his back more firmly against the wall, drinking, feasting...

After stopping at Julio's for a couple, Jack fell into bed when he got home. Jankowski could wait till morning for the good news.

Somewhere around 3 A.M. the ringing of the front-room phone dragged him from slumberland. The answering machine clicked on and out came a voice he hadn't heard in fifteen years.

"Jackie. This is your brother Tom. Long time no see. I assume you're still alive, though it's hard to tell. Well, anyway, Dad was in a car accident earlier tonight. He's in pretty bad shape, in a coma, they tell me. So give me a call, prontissimo. We need to talk."

He rattled off a number with a 215 area code.

Jack had been up and moving at the mention of his father's accident, but didn't reach the receiver in time to pick up. He stood over the phone in the dark.

Dad? In an accident? In a coma? How the hell—?

Unease trickled through his gut. The past he'd cut himself off from was worming its way back into his life. First he runs into his sister Kate last June, and a week later she's dead. Now, three months after that, he hears from big brother Tom that his father's in a coma. Was he detecting a scary symmetry here? A pattern?

Deal with that later, he told himself. First find out what happened to Dad.

Jack replayed the message, writing down the phone number. He used his Tracfone to return the call. That same voice answered.

"Tom? Jack."

"Well, I'll be. The long lost brother. The prodigal son. He lives. He returns a call."

Jack didn't have time for this. "What's the story with Dad?"

Jack had never particularly liked his brother. Hadn't disliked him either. They'd never had any sort of a relationship growing up. Tom—Tom, Jr., officially—was ten years older and seemed to have viewed his little brother as an inconvenient pet, one that belonged to his parents and his sister but had nothing to do with him. He'd always been self-involved to a fault. Kate had said he was on his third wife and hinted that the latest marriage was headed for the same fate as his others. Jack hadn't been surprised.

Tom had been a Philadelphia lawyer for a couple of decades and was now a Philadelphia judge. Which meant he was an officer of the court, a cog in the wheels of officialdom. All the more reason for Jack to keep his distance. Courts gave him the creeps.

"Pretty much what I told you. I got a call from this nurse at the Novaton Community Hospital that Dad was involved in an MVA and—"

"M-V—?"

"Motor vehicle accident—and that he's in bad shape."

"Yeah. A coma, right? Jeez, what do we do?"

"Not we, Jackie. You."

Jack didn't like the sound of this. "I don't get you."

"One of us has to go down there. I can't, and since Kate's not exactly available, that leaves you."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"I—I'm in the middle of a bunch of legal business...judicial matters that have me tied up."

"You can't get away to see a comatose father?"

"It's complicated, Jackie. Too complicated to go into on the phone at this hour of the morning. Suffice it to say that I can't leave the city now."

Jack sensed a lot more going on here than Tom was telling.

~~“Are you in some sort of trouble?”~~

“Me? Christ, why would you ask something like that?”

“Because you sound funny.”

Tom’s tone took on a sharp edge. “How would you know what I sound like? We haven’t spoken in, what, ten years, and you’re going to tell me how I sound?”

“It’s been fifteen years”—not quite long enough, Jack thought—“and yeah, I’m telling you you sound funny.”

“Yeah, well, don’t worry about me. Worry about Dad. He gave me your number before he moved to Florida. ‘Just in case,’ he said. Well, ‘just in case’ just happened. Tag, you’re it.”

Jack sighed. “All right. I guess I’ll go.”

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic.”

Jack shook his head. First off, he hated to leave New York for any reason, period. Plus, this wasn’t a good time for him to be heading for Florida or anywhere else. He had another fix-it in the early stages of development, but he’d have to let it wait. Worse, an emergency trip like this meant that driving and Amtrak were out. He’d have to take a plane. He didn’t mind flying itself, but all the extra security since 9-11 made an airport a scary place for a guy with no official identity.

But then, it was his father down there.

Tom said, “In a way you’re lucky he’s in a coma.”

Strange thing to say. “How’s that?”

“Because he’s pissed at you for not showing up for Kate’s funeral. Come to think of it, so am I. Where the hell were you?”

As if he’d tell a judge, even if that judge happened to be his big brother.

Big Brother...judge. How Orwellian.

“Suffice it to say,” he said, deciding to give Tom a dose of his own medicine, “that it’s too complicated to go into on the phone at this hour of the morning.”

“Very funny. I tell you, though, I can’t say I was unhappy about him taking a turn on you. All I’ve heard for years from him was how he wanted to reach you and bring you back into the fold. That was how he put it: ‘Bring Jack back into the fold.’ It became his mantra. He obsessed on it. But he’s not obsessing anymore.”

Jack felt he should be glad to hear that—he’d had no intention of ever returning to any fold anywhere—but he wasn’t. Instead he felt a pang of regret, as if he’d lost something.

A decade and a half ago, when Jack had dropped out of college, out of his family, and out of society in general, his father spent years tracking him down. Somehow he found someone who had Jack’s number. He started calling. Eventually he wore Jack down to the point where he agreed to meet him in the city for dinner. After that they got together maybe once a year for a meal or a set of tennis.

A tenuous relationship at best. The get-togethers were always uncomfortable for Jack. Though his father had never said it, Jack knew he was disappointed in his younger son. Thought he was an appliance repairman and was always pushing him to better himself—finish college, get a pension plan, think about the future, retirement will be here before you know it, blah-blah-blah.

Dad didn’t have a clue about what his younger son was about, the crimes he’d committed, the people he’d had to kill while earning his living, and Jack never would tell him. The old guy would be devastated.

“Where’d you say he was?”

“Novaton Community Hospital, and don’t ask me where that is because I don’t know. Someplace in Dade County, I’d imagine. That’s where he had his place.”

“Where’s—?”

“South of Miami. Look, the best thing to do is call the hospital—no, I don’t have the number—~~and ask for directions from Miami International. That’s where you’ll have to fly into.~~”

“Swell.”

“If he wakes up, explain to him that I’d be there if I could.”

Sure you would, Jack thought. And then it hit him.

“*If* he wakes up’?”

“Yeah. If. They say he’s banged up pretty bad.”

Jack’s chest ached. “I’ll leave as soon as I tie up a few loose ends here,” he said, suddenly tired. He hung up. He had nothing more to say to his brother.

Semelee awoke alone in the dark. She opened her eyes and lay perfect still, listenin'. She heard the breathin' sounds of her clansmen around her, some soft, some rough. She heard the creak of the old houseboat timbers as it rocked gentle like, the soft lap of the lagoon water against the hull, the croakin' of frogs and the chirpin' of crickets among the night sounds of the other Everglades critters. She jumped as someone nearby—Luke, most likely—made a coughin' sound that turned into a snore.

The thick hot air lay like a damp sheet on the exposed skin of her arms and legs, but she was used to it. This September was provin' to be a hot one, but not like August. *That* had been a hot one, hottest she could remember.

Why was she awake? She usually slept straight through the night. And then she remembered the dream—not the details, for they had vanished into the night like mornin' mist before a storm, but the overall feel of movement...movement toward her.

"Someone's comin'," she whispered aloud.

She didn't know how she knew, she just did. This weren't the first time she'd had a second sight. Every so often, without warnin', she'd get a sense of somethin' about to happen, and then it did, it always did.

Someone was comin' her way. A him, a man, was on his way. She didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Didn't matter. Either way, Semelee would be ready.

“Such bounty,” Abe Grossman said, staring down at the half dozen donuts laid out in the box before him. “I’ve done what to deserve this?”

Jack said, “Nothing...everything.”

Abe’s raised eyebrows sent wrinkles like sets of surfing waves up his brow and into the balding bay of his scalp to crash on the receding gray shore of his hairline. “But Krispy Kremes? For me?”

“For *us*.”

Jack dipped into the box and extracted one of the crustier, sour-cream models, heavy with grease and glazed to within an inch of its life. He took a big bite and closed his eyes. Damn, these were good.

Abe made a face. “But they’re full of fat, those things.” He rubbed his bulging waistline as if he had a belly ache. “Like ladling concrete into the arteries.”

“Probably.”

“And to me you brought them?”

The two of them flanked the scarred rear counter of Abe’s store, the Isher Sports Shop, Jack on the customer side, Abe across from him, perched like Humpty Dumpty on a stool. Jack made a show of looking around at the dusty cans of tennis balls, the racquets, the basketballs and hoops, footballs and Rollerblades along with their attendant padding shoved helter skelter onto sagging shelves lining narrow aisles. Bikes and SCUBA gear hung from the ceiling. If the Collyer brothers had been into sporting goods instead of newspapers, this is what their place might have looked like.

“You see anyone else around?”

“We’re not open yet. I should see no one.”

“There you go.” Jack pointed to the donuts. “Come on. What are you waiting for?”

“This is a trick, right? You’re trying to pull one over on your old friend. You brought them for Parabellum.”

As if in response to his name, Abe’s little blue parakeet peeked out from behind a neon-yellow bicycle safety helmet, spotted the donut box, and hopped across the counter to it.

Jack spoke around a mouthful of donut. “Absolutely not.”

Parabellum cocked his head at the donuts, then looked up at Jack.

“Better not deny him,” Abe warned. “He’s a fierce predator, that Parabellum. A raptor in disguise, even.”

“Oh, right.” Jack tore off a tiny piece and tossed it to the bird, who leaped on it.

“What happened to the fat-free Entenmann’s and the low-fat cream cheese?”

“We’re taking a vacation from all that.”

Abe rubbed his belly again. “*Nu* ? I shouldn’t be worried about my heart? You want I should die before my time?”

“Jesus, Abe. Can we have one breakfast without you complaining? If I bring in low-cal stuff, you bitch. So here I bring the kind of stuff you always say you wish you were eating instead, and you accuse me of trying to kill you.”

Abe was past sixty and his weight ran in the eighth-of-a-ton range, which wouldn’t have been so bad if he were six-eight; but he missed that by a foot, maybe more. Jack had become concerned last year about his oldest and dearest friend’s potential lack of longevity and had been trying to get him to lose weight. His efforts had not engendered an enthusiastic response.

“Such a crank he is this morning.”

Abe was right. Maybe he was feeling a little short. Well, he had his reasons.

“Sorry,” Jack said. “Look at it this way: Think of them as a going-away present.”

“Going? I’m going somewhere?”

“No, I am. To Florida. Don’t know how long I’ll be there so I figured I’d pre-load you with some calories to tide you over.”

“Florida? You want to go to Florida? In September? In the middle of the worst drought they’ve had in decades?”

“It’s not a pleasure trip.”

“And the humidity. It seeps into your pores, heads for the brain, makes you *meshugge*. Water on the brain—it’s not healthy.”

“Swell.” Jack drummed his fingers on the counter. “Eat a damn donut, will you.”

“All right,” Abe said. “If you insist. A *bisel*.”

He picked one, took a bite, and rolled his eyes. “Things should not be allowed to taste this good. Jack had a second donut while he told Abe about his brother’s call.

“I’m sorry to hear this,” Abe said. “This is why you’re so cranky? Because you don’t want to see him?”

“I don’t want to see him like that...in a coma.”

Abe shook his head. “First your sister, and now...” He looked up at Jack. “You don’t think...?”

“The Otherness? I hope not. But with the way things have been going lately, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

After hanging up with Tom last night he’d called the hospital and learned that his father was stable but still on the critical list. He got directions from the airport, then tried to watch a movie. He started a Val Lewton festival, watching *The Cat People* Sunday night. He’d been looking forward to seeing *I Walked with a Zombie*, but after starting it he couldn’t get into it. Thoughts about his father in a coma and getting through airport security proved too distracting. He’d shut it off and lain in the dark, trying to sleep, but thoughts about an indefinable something pulling the strings of his life kept him awake.

So this morning he was tired and irritable. The chance that the accident might not have been so accidental put him on edge.

“You have any details on what happened?”

“Car accident is all I know.”

“That doesn’t sound too sinister. How old is he?”

“Seventy-one. But he’s in great shape. Still plays tennis. Or at least he did.”

Abe nodded. “I remember when he roped you into a father-son doubles match last summer.”

“Right. Just before all hell broke loose up here.”

“Another summer like that I don’t need.” Abe shook himself, as if warding off a chill. “Oh, I may have something for you on that citizenship matter.”

“Yeah? What?”

Since he’d found out last month that he was going to be a father, Jack had been looking for a way to sneak up from underground without having to answer the inevitable questions from various agencies of the government as to where he’d been and what he’d been doing for the last fifteen years, and why he’d never applied for a Social Security Number and never filed a 1040 or paid a cent in tax in all that time.

He’d thought of simply telling them he’d been ill—disoriented, possibly drug addled—wandering the country, depending on the kindness of strangers, and now he was better and ready to become a productive citizen. That would work, but in these suspicious times it meant he’d be put under extra scrutiny. He didn’t want to live the rest of his life on the Department of Homeland Security’s watch list.

“A contact in Eastern Europe called and said he thought maybe he had a way. Maybe. It’s going to take a little more research.”

This bit of good news felt like a spotlight through the gloom that had descended since Tom’s call.

“Didn’t he give you even a hint?”

Abe frowned. “Over an international phone line? From his country? He should be so foolish. When he works out the details—if he can—he will let me know.”

Well, maybe it wasn’t such good news. But at least it was potentially good news.

Abe was staring at him. “*Nu* ? You’re leaving for Florida when?”

“Today. Haven’t booked a flight yet though. Want to talk to Gia first, see if I can convince her to come along.”

“Think she’ll go?”

Jack smiled. “I’m going to make her an offer she can’t refuse.”

“Sorry, Jack,” Gia said, shaking her head. “It won’t work.”

They sat in the old-fashioned kitchen of number eight Sutton Square, one of the toniest neighborhoods in the city, he nursing a cup of coffee, she sipping green tea. Gia had been letting her corn-silk-colored hair grow out a little; it wasn’t so close to her head anymore, but still short by most standards. She wore low-cut jeans and a white scoop-neck top that clung to her slim torso. Although into her third month of pregnancy, she had yet to show even the slightest bulge.

Gia’s discovery last month that she was pregnant had thrown them both for a loop. It had not been on the radar, and they hadn’t been prepared for it. It meant changes for both of them, most drastically for Jack, but they were dealing with it.

Jack had told her about his father as soon as he stepped through her door this morning. Gia had never met him but had been upset by the news and urged Jack to hurry down to Florida. Jack didn’t share her sense of urgency. All he could do down there was stand next to his unconscious father’s bed and feel helpless; he could think of few things in the world he hated more than feeling helpless. And when his father awoke, how long before he started in on why Jack had missed Kate’s funeral.

So Jack had sprung his plan on Gia and she had shot him down.

He tried to hide his disappointment. He’d thought it was a sure thing. He’d offered to fly her and Vicky down to Orlando and put them up in Disney World. He’d shuttle back and forth between his father and Orlando.

“How can you say no?” he said. “Think of Vicky. She’s never been to Disney World.”

“Yes, she has. We went with Nellie and Grace when she was five.”

Jack saw a cloud pass through her sky-blue eyes at the mention of Vicky’s two dead aunts.

“That was three years ago. She needs another trip.”

“Did you forget school?”

“Let her play hooky for a week. She’s a bright kid. How much of a challenge can third grade be for her?”

Gia shook her head. “Uh-uh. New year, new class, new teacher. She just started two weeks ago. I can’t pull her out for a week this early in the year. If it was November, maybe, but then”—she patted her tummy—“I’d be far enough along to where I wouldn’t want to fly.”

“Swell,” Jack said. He took a turn patting her tummy. “How’s Little Jack coming along?”

“She’s doing just fine.”

This had been their tug-of-war since learning she was pregnant. Jack was sure it was a boy—had to be—while Gia insisted it was a girl. So far the fetal doppler had been inconclusive as to sex.

“Hey, I just had an idea. What do you think about hiring Vicky a nanny for a week and…”

Gia’s azure stare stopped him. “You’re kidding, right?”

He sighed. “Yeah, I guess so.”

What had he been thinking? Obviously he hadn’t. Gia going off to Disney World without her daughter? Never. It would crush Vicky. And Jack would be as uncomfortable as Gia about leaving her with anyone else for a week.

He leaned back and watched her take tiny sips of her tea. He loved the way she drank tea, loved the way her whole face crinkled up when she laughed. Loved the way she did everything. They’d met little over two years ago—twenty-six months, to be exact—but it seemed as if he’d known her all his life. All the women before her, and there’d been more than a few, had faded to shadows the first time he saw her smile. No one had a smile like Gia’s. They’d hit a few speed bumps along the way—her

discovery of how he earned his living had almost derailed them—and still didn't see eye to eye on everything, but the deep regard and trust they'd developed for each other allowed them to live with their differences.

Jack couldn't remember feeling about anyone as he felt about Gia. Every time he saw her he wanted to touch her—*had* to touch her, even if only for an instant brush of his fingertips against her arm. The only other person who approached Gia in his affections was her daughter Vicky. Jack and Vicks had bonded from the get-go. He couldn't think of too many people or things worth dying for, but two of them lived in this house.

"Aww," Gia said, smiling that smile and patting his knee. "Feeling shot down?"

"In flames. Looks like I'll be going alone. Usually you're the one getting on a plane and leaving. Gia made regular trips back to Iowa to keep Vicky in touch with her grandparents. Those weeks were like holes in his life. This one would be worse. "Now it's me."

"I've got a cure for those hurt feelings." She put her cup down, rose, and took his hand. "Come on."

"Where?"

"Upstairs. It's going to be a week. Let's give you a bon voyage party."

"Do we get to wear dopey hats?"

"No hats allowed. No clothes allowed either."

"My kind of party."

Jack was feeling a little cross-eyed and weak in the knees when they left Gia's. She had that effect on him.

On their way to his apartment on the West Side—she'd volunteered to help him pack—he stopped at a mailing service and picked up a couple of FedEx overnight boxes, along with some bubble wrap.

“What are those for?”

“Oh...just have to mail a couple of things before I go.”

He didn't want to tell her more than that.

When they reached his third-floor apartment in a West-Eighties brown-stone, he opened the windows to let in some air. The breeze carried a tang of carbon monoxide and the throbbing bass of a hip-hop song with the volume turned up to 11.

Gia said, “How are you going to work this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Buying the ticket.”

They stood in the cluttered front room filled with Victorian wavy-grained golden oak furniture laden with gingerbread carving.

“How else? Buy a ticket and go.”

“Who are you going to be this time?”

“John L. Tyleski.”

After careful consideration, Jack had settled on Tyleski as his identity for the trip. Tyleski's Visa card, secured with a dead kid's Social Security Number, was barely six months old, and so far he'd made all his payments on time. Tyleski had a New Jersey driver license with his photo on it, courtesy of Ernie's ID. It was as bogus as everything else Ernie sold, but the quality was Sterling.

“Isn't that risky?” she said. “You get caught buying a ticket under an assumed identity these days and you're in trouble. Big, Federal trouble.”

“I know. But the only way I can get caught is if someone checks the number on the driver license with the Jersey state DMV. Then I'm screwed. But they don't do that at airports.”

“Not yet.”

He looked at her. “You're not making this any easier, Gia.”

She dropped into a wing-back chair, looking worried. “I just don't want to turn on the news tonight and hear that they're investigating some man with no identity who tried to board a plane, and see a picture of you.”

“Neither do I.”

Jack shivered. What a nightmare. The end of his life in the interstices. But even worse would be having his picture in the papers and on TV. He'd made a fair number of people very unhappy during the course of his fix-it career. The only reason he was still alive was because they didn't know who he was or where to find him. A very public arrest would change all that. Might as well paint a bull's-eye on his chest.

While Gia checked the Miami weather on the computer in the second bedroom, Jack seated himself at the claw-foot oak table and took out a spare wallet. He removed all traces of other identities, leaving only the Tyleski license and credit card, then added about a thousand in cash.

Gia returned from the other room. “The three-day forecast for Miami is in the nineties, so I'd better pack you light clothes.”

“Fine. Throw in some running shorts while you’re at it.” He was dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt now, but he needed something more for the trip. “While you’re in there, pull me out a long-sleeved shirt, will you?”

She made a face. “Long-sleeved? It’s hot.”

“I have my reasons.”

She shrugged and disappeared into his bedroom.

While she was digging through his drawers, Jack swathed his 9mm Glock 19 in bubble wrap, then wrapped that in aluminum foil, and shoved it into the FedEx box; he did the same with his .38 AMT Backup and its ankle holster, then packed in more wrap to keep them from shifting around in the box. That done he wrapped duct tape around the box wherever the FedEx logo appeared.

“How many days should I pack for?” Gia called from the other room.

“Three or four. If I stay longer I’ll have them washed.”

Gia popped back into the front room holding a lightweight cotton shirt with a tight red-and-blue check.

“You sure you want long sleeves?”

He nodded. “Need them to hide this.”

He held up a plastic dagger. It was dark green, almost black, with a three-inch blade and a four-inch handle, all molded from a single piece of super-hard plastic fiber compound that Abe guaranteed would breeze past any metal detector on earth. The blade had no cutting edge to speak of, but the point was sharp enough to pierce plywood.

No one was hijacking *his* flight.

Gia’s eyes widened. “Oh, Jack! You’re not really thinking of—”

“I’ll have it taped to the inside of my arm. No one will find it.”

“This is insane! Do you know what will happen to you if you’re caught?”

“I won’t be.” He held up a roll of adhesive tape. “Help me tape it on?”

“Absolutely not! I’ll have no part in this craziness. It’s irresponsible. You have a child on the way! Do you want to be in jail when she’s born?”

“Of course not. But Gia, you should understand by now, this is the way I am, this is the way I have to do it.”

“You’re afraid of giving up control is what it is.”

“Maybe so. Getting on a plane piloted by someone I don’t know puts a crimp in my comfort zone. But I can handle that. What I can’t handle is handing some out-to-lunch airline full responsibility for making sure that all the other passengers are going to behave.”

“You’ve got to learn to trust, Jack.”

“I do. I trust me, I trust you, I trust Abe, I trust Julio. Beyond that…” He shrugged. “Sorry. It’s the way I’m wired.” He held up the tape again. “Please?”

She helped, but he could tell her heart wasn’t in it.

He blunted the point with a small piece of tape, then held it in place against the inside of his left upper arm, the butt of the handle almost in his armpit, while she secured it with three long strips that encircled his arm. Not the most comfortable arrangement, but he’d remove it in the restroom once they were in the air and transfer the knife to the inside of one of his socks for the rest of the flight.

When she finished taping she stepped back and looked at her work.

“That should hold. I…” She shook her head.

“What?”

“I can’t help thinking that if there’d been someone like you on those 9-11 planes, the Trade Towers might still be standing.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I’m not Superman. I can’t take on five alone. But along with guys like the

ones on Flight 93, who knows?"

~~He pulled on the shirt, rolled the cuffs halfway up his forearms, and struck a pose.~~

"How do I look?"

"Suspicious," she said.

"Really?"

She sighed. "No. You look like you always look: Mister Everyday People."

That was what he wanted to hear. "Great. Am I packed?"

"I put it all on the bed. Where's your suitcase?"

"Suitcase? I don't have one. I've never needed one."

"That's right. You don't travel. How about a gym bag or something along that line?"

"Yeah, but it's filled with tools." His kind of tools.

"Well, if it's not too dirty inside, empty it out and we'll see if it'll do the job."

Jack pulled the bag out of a closet and emptied its contents on the kitchen counter: glass cutter, suction cup, rubber mallet, pry bar, slim jim for car doors, lock picks, an assortment of screwdrivers and clamps in various sizes and configurations.

"What is all this?" Gia asked as she watched the growing pile.

"Tools of the trade, m'dear. Tools of the trade."

"If you're a burglar, maybe."

He wiped out the inside of the bag with a damp paper towel and handed it to her. "Will this do?"

It did. His wardrobe down south would consist of shorts, T-shirts, socks, and boxers. They managed to stuff it all into the bag.

"You're going to look wrinkled," she warned.

"I'm going to Florida, remember? Wrinkle City."

"Touché."

He hefted the bag. "Do I check this or will they let me carry it on board?"

"That looks plenty small enough for the overhead."

"Overhead...? Oh, right. I know what you mean."

She looked up at him. "When was the last time you were on a plane?"

Jack had to think about that. The answer was a little embarrassing. "I think it was sophomore year of college. Spring break in Lauderdale."

He barely remembered it. Seemed like a lifetime ago. In a way it was. A different life.

"Not once since?"

He shrugged. "No place I want to go."

She stared at him. "Is that the truth?"

"Of course. Anything I could ever want is right here in this city."

"You don't think the fact that flying is so much of a hassle, a *risky* hassle for you, has anything to do with it?"

"Maybe some." Where was this going?

Gia slipped her arms around him and squeezed, pressing herself against him.

"Don't you see?" she said. "Don't you see? You've built this anonymous, autonomous life for yourself, but it's become a trap. Sure, no one knows you exist and you don't spend the first four or five months of every year working for the government like the rest of us, and that's great in its way, but it's also a trap. Everywhere you go you've got to pretend to be someone else and run the risk of being found out. I go anywhere I want without a second thought. If I go to an airport and someone scrutinizes my ID, I'm not worried. But you've got the anxiety that someone will spot a flaw."

She released him and fixed him with her blue stare.

"Who's freer, Jack? Really."

She didn't understand. Jack figured she'd never fully understand. But that was okay. It didn't make him love her any less, because he knew where she was coming from. She'd been on her own for years, a single mother trying to make a career for herself and a life for her child. She had responsibilities beyond herself. Her days, spent dealing with the nuts and bolts of everyday life, were hectic and exhausting enough without adding multiple layers of complexity.

"It's not subject to comparison, Gia. I've lived the way I felt I had to live. By my rules, my code. My not paying taxes has nothing to do with money, it has to do with life, and who owns mine, or who owns yours, or Vicky's, or anyone's."

"I understand that, and philosophically I'm with you all the way. But in the practical, workaday world, how does that work for a man with a family? 'Oh, I'm sorry, honey. Daddy's not traveling with us because he's using a false identity and doesn't want us involved if he's picked up. But don't worry he'll meet us there. I hope.' That's no way to bring up a child."

"We could *all* have false identities. We could be an under-the-radar family." He quickly held up his hands. "Only kidding."

"I hope so. What a nightmare that would be."

This time he pulled her close. "I'm working on it, Gi. I'll find a way."

She kissed him. "I know you will. You're Repairman Jack. You can fix anything."

"I'm glad you think so."

But coming back from underground with his freedom intact...that was a tall order.

You'd better come through for me, Abe, he thought, because I've hit a wall.

He didn't want the hassle of parking at the airport so he called a cab to take him to LaGuardia. Since Gia lived in the shadow of the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, a minimal detour would allow him to drop her off at home along the way.

"Be careful," she whispered after a long goodbye kiss. "Come back to me, and don't get into any trouble down there."

"I'm visiting my comatose father. How on earth could I possibly get into any trouble?"

Jack reached the OmniShuttle Airways counter an hour before the next scheduled flight.

Before dropping Gia off, he'd had the cab take him over to Abe's where he left the package to be overnighted to his father's place. Abe used a small, exclusive, expensive shipping company that didn't ask questions. The cab ride had been uneventful, but it felt so odd to be moving about the city without a gun either tucked into the small of his back or strapped to his ankle. He didn't dare risk trying to sneak one onto the plane, though, even in checked luggage, now that they were x-raying every piece.

The ticket purchase went smoothly: A mocha-skinned woman with an indeterminate accent took the Tyleski Visa card and the Tyleski driver license, punched a lot of keys—an awful lot of keys—then handed them back along with a ticket and a boarding pass. Jack had chosen OmniShuttle because he didn't want any round-trip-ticket hassles. The airline sold one-way tickets without regard to Saturday stayovers or any of that other nonsense: When you want to go, buy a ticket; when you want to come back, buy another.

Jack's kind of company.

He asked for an aisle seat but they were all already taken. But he did manage to snag an exit row, giving him more leg room.

He had some time so he treated himself to a container of coffee with a trendoid name like mocha latte-java-kaka-kookoo or something like that; it tasted pretty good. He bought some gum and then, steeling himself, headed for the metal detectors with their attendant body inspectors.

He made sure to get on the end of the longest line, to give him a chance to see how they conducted the screening process. He noticed that a much higher percentage of the people who set off the metal alarm were taken aside for more thorough screening than the ones who didn't. Jack wanted to be in the latter category.

This is how a terrorist must feel, he realized. Standing on line, sweating, praying that no one see through his bogus identity. Except I'm not looking to hurt anyone. I'm just looking to get to Florida.

When it came his time, he placed his bag on the belt and watched as it was swallowed by the mouth of the fluoroscope. Then it was his turn to step through the metal detector. He put his watch, change, and keys into a little bowl that was passed around the detector, then stepped through.

His heart skipped a beat and jumped into high gear when a loud beep sounded. Damn!

"Sir, have you emptied your pockets?" said a busty bottle-blonde woman in a white shirt with epaulettes, a gold badge, and a name tag that read "Delores." She was armed with a metal detecting wand. A dozen feet behind her, two security guards stood with carbines slung over their shoulders.

"I thought I did. Let me check again." He patted his pants pockets front and rear but, except for his wallet, they were empty. He pulled out the wallet. "Could this be the culprit?"

She waved her wand past it without a beep. "No, sir. Step over here, please."

"What for?"

"I have to wand you."

When had "wand" become a verb?

"Is something wrong?"

"Probably just your belt buckle or jewelry. Stand here, back to the table. Good. Now spread your legs and raise your arms out from your body."

Jack assumed the position. The moisture deserting his mouth seemed to be migrating to his palms. She waved the wand up and down the inside and outside of his legs, then across his waist when she got a beep from his belt buckle—no problem—and then she started on his arms. Right one first—

inside and outside, okay; then the left—outside okay, but a loud beep as the wand approached his armpit.

Oh shit, oh hell, oh Christ. Abe you promised me, you swore to me the knife would pass the detectors. What's happening?

Without moving his head, Jack checked out the two security guards from the corner of his right eye. They looked bored, and certainly weren't paying attention to him. To his left a handful of unarmed security personnel were busy screening—wandering—other travelers. He could barrel past them and dash back out into the terminal, but where to go from there? His chances of escaping were nil, he knew, but he damn well wasn't simply going to stand here and put his hands out for the cuffs. They wanted him, they were going to have to catch him.

"Sir?"

"Hmmm? What?" Jack could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead. Had she noticed?

"I said, do you have anything in your breast pocket?"

"My—?"

He jammed his hand into the pocket and came out with his package of Dentyne Ice. Gum in a blister pack...sealed with foil...

She ran her wand over it and was rewarded with a beep. She took the pack, opened it to make sure it was only gum, then dropped it on the table. The rest of the wandering was beepless.

The future that had been telescoping closed at warp-10 now opened wide again. Feeling as giddy as a man with a reprieve from death row, Jack retrieved his watch, keys, and chain, but he left the damn gum. It had put him on a train to heart attack city. Let Delores have it.

As he hefted his gym bag strap onto his shoulder he fought an urge to ask Delores if she wanted to inspect that too. Inspect anything you want! The mad inspectee strikes again!

But he said nothing, contenting himself with a friendly nod as he started toward his gate. He reached it with just enough time to put in a quick to call Gia.

"I made it," he said when she answered. "I board the plane in a couple of minutes."

"Thank God! Now I won't have to figure out how to bake a cake with a file inside."

"Well, there's still the flight home."

"Let's not think about that yet. Call me when you've seen your father, and let me know how he is."

"Will do. Love ya."

"Love you too, Jack. Very much. Just be careful. Don't talk to strangers or go riding in strange cars, or take candy from—"

"Gotta run."

He wound up in a window seat in the left emergency row with the perfect traveling companion: The guy fell asleep before takeoff and didn't wake up until they were on the Miami tarmac. No small talk and Jack got to eat the guy's complimentary bag of peanuts.

The only glitch in the trip was a slight westward alteration of the usual flight path due to tropical storm Elvis. Elvis...when Jack had heard the name announced on TV the other night he'd done a double take that would have put Lou Costello to shame.

He wondered now if there'd ever been a tropical storm named Eliot. If so, had it been designated on the maps as T. S. Eliot?

Elvis was not expected to graduate to hurricane status, but was presently off the coast near Jacksonville, cruising landward and stirring things up, just as its namesake had in the fifties. Though the plane swung westward to avoid the turbulence, Jack could see the storm churning away to the east. From his high perch he looked out over the rugged terrain of cloud tops broken dramatically here and there by fluffy white buttes from violent updrafts. Elvis was entering the building.

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