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The Investigator Who Vanished

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About the Author

[Christine Jackson](#), Ph.D., professor at college, teaches courses in writing and literature. An active member of the Florida Chapter of Mystery Writers of America, she has published two non-fiction works, *Myth and Ritual in Women's Detective Fiction* (McFarland, 2002) and *Marcia Muller and the Female Private Detective* (co-edited with Howe; McFarland, 2008). Her book studying the impact of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction on contemporary popular culture is scheduled to publish in 2012. She continues to shop in the agent marketplace, keeping in hand her international thriller novel *Flight to Nairobi*.

The Investigator Who Vanished

by Christine Jackson

Stepping outside the glass doors of the Phoenix airport was like prying open a mummy's tomb. The dry, stifling air caught like dust in my throat. Had Finn thought the same thing when he passed through these doors? Gathering the sun's last rays, Phoenix shimmered from the center of a massive volcanic crater surrounded by low ridges. Mountains to the north and south stood as hulking pyramids. Of course, my assumption about Finn being in Phoenix could be a total mistake. I might have placed too much weight on the flimsy evidence of a mysterious postcard, and he had never made it to Phoenix at all. If so, like the ancient pharaohs, he had disappeared completely.

"Where ya headed?" the taxi driver asked us.

"Downtown," Sol said. "Phoenix Skyview Hotel. Isn't that it?" The needle-like spire of Sol Minisky's conference hotel thrust upward from the horizon.

Once Sol and I were settled in the cab's back seat, the driver opted to give us the third-degree. "You a scientist, going to that meeting?"

"Retired," Sol said, his usual polite self. "Yes, I'm presenting a paper at the International Association of Physicists."

"You, too, miss?" The driver's bulbous eyes reflected from the rearview mirror sized me up. "You don't look like one of those nerd science types."

"A lot you know," I said. "I am queen of the nerds."

Sol nudged me, and tried to muster a look of disapproval, but the half-smile of his mouth gave him away. Sol and his wife Miriam were my landlords. The Miniskys had been married for 55 years, and they still held hands. Mim had stayed home this time, but I flew to Phoenix with Sol, lured by my cryptic postcard.

Sand dunes lined the sides of the highway. Rock designs emulated Navajo sand paintings, hieroglyphs in shades of turquoise and rust.

“Name’s O’Hara.” Our cabbie extended his bony hand to Sol over the seat. “You folks been to Phoenix before?”

Sol said we had, but O’Hara rolled out his budget tour, anyway. “And you got your camel-back mountains there.” He pointed to the land’s silhouette, undulating like a reclining nude. “All this here territory around Phoenix used to be an ancient sea. Now the sand is baked dry. ‘Valley of the Sun,’ they call it. People have settled here for a long time. Used to be home to the Hohokam people. No more.”

“Hohokam?” I said.

“The name means the ‘ones who went away,’” Sol explained.

“What happened to them?” I said. “Where did they go?”

“Who knows?” O’Hara shrugged. “They just vanished.”

“Most anthropologists say they had to move on because of no water,” Sol said. “That happens sometimes, Marcie. People have to move on.”

Boy, had I learned that the hard way. A budget crunch at a South Florida newspaper where I had been a reporter meant I was no longer queen of the journalist geeks. I had to move on. My only free-lance job so far had been to interview Girl Scouts selling cookies.

I also had to move on to mend a broken heart. Nearly three months had passed since I had seen my boyfriend Special Agent Finn Townsend. Finn worked for the FBI out of Miami’s field office. We had met in the spring when I interviewed him for a piece on domestic terrorism. After picnics on a sunset beach and intimate, crab shack dinners, our relationship flared. At 42, he had 10 years on me, but through sultry afternoons, we generated plenty of heat. He often stayed over, after late-night Scrabble games with the Miniskys. Then last winter, someone blew up the Cahill Federal Building in Phoenix.

Finn called before he went west, and that was the last I heard from him. I had been dumped before, but this rejection drew blood. I had high hopes.

I continued to cry myself to sleep, but a few days ago, a strange piece of mail showed up, postmarked from Phoenix. Finn had known about Sol’s conference. The coincidence was too tempting for me to pass up.

O'Hara leaned on his horn. A rusted truck rattled ahead of us. "Jerks." O'Hara swerved around the vehicle. "They need to go back where they came from."

Sol and I exchanged a look.

"You wouldn't believe how much Phoenix has changed. Used to be, you didn't have to lock your house. Now you sit behind a triple-locked door with a loaded shotgun and wait. I lived here all my life, but I got to get out. You heard about the Cahill bombing right? There's more where that came from, believe you me. There she is, up there." O'Hara turned to avoid a line of police barricades draped with yellow crime scene tape. "We all have to detour. What a pain."

The sagging remains of the Cahill Federal Building loomed ahead. The terrorist's explosives had blown off an entire wall exposing a collapsed honeycomb of offices. On the lower floors, blue tarps protected pigeonhole cubicles.

O'Hara maneuvered the cab under the hotel's portico. He struggled to haul our luggage from the back and thunked the bags onto the cement. "You folks have a great time with the rest of the geeks."

The lobby of the Phoenix Skyview smelled stale. Scarred furniture sat in semicircles adorned with papers and discarded conference nametags and booklets. Naugahyde chairs were dusty and cracked. Roach-sized carpet tacks lined the armrests.

Sol approached the front desk with his cane and tapped a bell on the counter.

"May I help you?" A toothy girl appeared at the desk. Her gold badge was embossed with black letters, *Trainee Yvonne*.

"We have reservations." Sol said. "We asked for adjacent rooms." We placed our paperwork on the counter.

"Here at the Skyview, we always give what you ask for." She showed a too-wide smile and checked our confirmations on a monitor. "But these are not right." She keyed in some numbers, hitting staccato on the backspace key for many deletions. "Let's see, a gentleman called about the reservation for Ms. Keyes. He asked for room 608, so that one is ready. Mr. Minisky, your room is on the eighth floor."

"Are you serious?" I asked. "We wanted adjacent rooms. You said you always give what we ask for."

"I'm sorry. The gentleman who called was insistent that the reservation in your name was for room 608." She drew up short and sniffed. "We aim to please."

"Aiming to please," Sol muttered. "What is this, target practice?"

“Guess who are the targets. Watch out, she’s wearing a badge,” I said. “Probably has powers of arrest.”

Chuckling over the misunderstanding, Sol and I agreed to meet later for drinks at the rotating lounge on the hotel’s top floor.

The Skyview Cocktail Lounge exuded a seductive perfume with its velour sofas, low lights, and smooth music. Conference-goers wearing nametags huddled over drinks and veggie platters. The lounge’s wrap-around windows offered a jet pilot’s view of Phoenix.

A thin blonde waitress took our drink order.

“Did you call Mim?” I said, popping a handful of salted peanuts.

“She sends her love.” Sol placed his conference program booklet on the table. “She’s headed to Vegas with the girls from the Senior Center, or so she says.”

“Look out, Michael Bubl .”

Sol chuckled. “Okay, Marcie, spill. When you said you wanted to come to Phoenix, I was delighted, of course, but surprised. What’s going on?”

The waitress arranged our drinks and cheese platter on the small cocktail table. “My name is Bonnie. Let me know if you need anything more.”

I pulled the postcard from my purse and handed it to Sol.

He adjusted his glasses and read the caption aloud: “Chapel of the Red Bluffs. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.” He peered close at the photo of an A-frame structure set on a hill. “Amazing how the chapel blends into the landscape.”

“Read the message on the back.” I knew it by heart. *Traveling light. Close shave riding rapids down Colorado River. Happy Anniversary.* No signature.

Sol flipped the card over. “Addressed to you, Marcelina Keyes. Phoenix postmark.”

“Do you recognize the handwriting?”

He tipped the card this way and that. “Not really.” He tried to hand the card back.

I pushed it away, like an extra helping of brussel sprouts. “All right, but do you notice anything unusual on the section identifying the picture on the front?”

He re-appraised the card. “There’s something, a light pencil line, under the *F* at the beginning of *Frank Lloyd Wright*.”

“There. You see?”

Sol looked at me with narrowed eyes. “You think this card is from Finn?” The card’s glistening blue sky lay like a swimming pool on the cocktail table next to him. “I never heard Finn call you ‘Marcelina.’ And I never knew him to talk about river rafting.”

“Forget that. Look again at the handwriting. Remember all our Scrabble games when Finn kept score? Doesn’t it match?”

“Hmm.” Sol rested the bottom edge of the card on the cocktail table, tipping it this way and that. “I’d need both writing samples for a comparison.” He peered at me over his reading glasses. “Could be the same. It’s hard to tell. What do you make of the ‘close shave river rafting’ comment?”

“I don’t know, but here’s what I think. The only thing he left behind in my apartment was his shaving kit. He wanted me to bring it to him. So I did.”

“That’s a stretch, I’m afraid.” He gave the card back.

“I’ve chased slimmer leads before, when I was with the paper.”

“Marcie, dear, that pencil mark is most likely a stray scribble from a cashier at the postcard store or a postal clerk. I know it’s hard to accept, but you have to move on.”

“I’ve told myself that a million times.” I stared out the window. The dots of lit windows in buildings around the Skyview seemed like cold stars, far from messy human affairs. “Sometimes at the end of a long night, I even wonder if I made that mark myself. Still—” My eyes stung with loneliness.

“If the card is from Finn, why all the games? Why not contact you directly?”

I rubbed my eye and turned toward a different window with a highway view. Now the Phoenix lights signaled couples and families coming together after a long day of work. “Finn is on a dangerous assignment. Maybe he can’t contact anyone, and this was the only way. All I know is that the card came from Phoenix, and Finn left to come here three months ago to investigate the Cahill bombing. This card could lead me to him.” More tears gathered at the edges of my eyes. “I’ll hate myself if I don’t at least try.”

“The card could very well be from him.” Sol patted my hand. “I hope it is.”

I blinked and changed the subject. “Any exciting seminars set for tomorrow?” I pointed to Sol’s conference program.

“I’m introducing the keynote address on a very hot topic.” He puffed up, looking proud. “An Iranian scientist named Roshan Ebadi has worked out the latest on the symmetry of space-time diffraction and diffusion.” Seeing my puzzlement, he added, “Using special lenses, we basically match light waves so they cancel each other out for a few nanoseconds, leaving a hole in time and space. It’s like a tiny cloak of invisibility.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Years ago, my friend Kurt Helgerson worked on time cloaking theory. A team at Cornell picked it up and stretched the length of cloaked time. Dr. Ebadi’s study uses an electro-optic modulator to expand the time gap.”

Not seeing Finn for three months was all the time gap I wanted to know about. “This is beyond amazing.”

“Kurt is set to pick up Ebadi at the airport.” Sol slurped his whiskey and soda. “I sure do look forward to seeing Kurt again. A first-rate mind. I saw him a few years ago. He stayed with us to visit family in Miami. That was before we rented to you. I wonder how he’s doing since that trouble with his son-in-law.”

“Why is there always trouble with a son-in-law?”

“The guy camped out weekends for war games, firing paint pellets at his buddies. He ended up stock piling guns and grenades in the house. He joined this group, paramilitary, I guess they call ‘em.” Sol shook his head. “In our day, they were hooligans and fascists. Last we heard, Molly and the kids were moving in with Kurt and Irene.”

“What’s the situation now?”

“I’m supposed to call Kurt tonight. I’ll meet him tomorrow morning, after he brings in Dr. Ebadi from the airport. Let’s hope he avoids our cabbie O’Hara.”

I flipped through Sol’s conference program booklet. “Where are you in here?”

“My talk is in the section on Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. The idea is that we can never accurately pinpoint both the position of a particle and its speed and direction at the same time. This concept has tremendous implications for quantum theory, although people use ‘uncertainty principle’ to describe nearly everything.”

I finished my drink and thought of my uncertainty over Finn. “Works for me.”

Our waitress Bonnie approached. “Ready for another round?”

“Yes,” we both said, certain about that, at least.

“Hoo boy,” Sol said. “A second drink. If Mim were here, she’d skin me alive.”

“I don’t see her, do you?”

“Nope.”

The window in my room faced east, and the next morning, it framed a spectacular vista of a glowing sunrise against silhouetted Arizona mountains. I was happy and filled with hope. I unpacked, placing Finn’s shaving kit under the bathroom mirror. I ran my thumb over the pebbled tan leather and breathed deeply, finding only a whiff of regret that the tang from his aftershave had dissipated.

I took out the postcard. *Chapel of the Red Bluffs*. I did not dream up the penciled line under the *F* in *Frank Lloyd Wright*. Sol had noticed it without prompting, well, not much prompting, anyway. I propped the postcard against the shaving kit.

Sol and I had arranged a rendezvous for breakfast at the hotel’s street-level restaurant. I arrived a few minutes early. Across from the elevators stood an easel with a sign, *Cactus Lounge Karaoke Tonight!* Musical notes cut from glittery paper promised a whirlwind time. I didn’t know what to expect from this trip, but for certain, karaoke was not on the agenda. I was a journalist, good at asking questions and writing a feature, not being a performer. Public speaking made my skin crawl and gave me nausea.

Outside the hotel’s glass entrance doors, a stretch limo pulled in under the hotel portico. Doormen and porters scrambled to retrieve luggage. About 20 people clad in black breezed into the lobby. The group was mostly men, but a few women strolled in, their heads covered despite wearing Western-style professional dress. A hotel employee ferried the VIP group into a large elevator and inserted the key for the penthouse floor.

A different elevator door slid open to reveal Sol. He stepped out uncertainly, tapping ahead with his cane.

I greeted him with a smile. “Ready for some decaf?” He didn’t respond. “Did you call your friend?” His face was grayer than usual. “Sol? What’s the matter?”

“Marcie, he died two weeks ago. Kurt Helgerson is dead.”

Sol insisted that we proceed with breakfast, but neither of us could eat. At a corner table at the hotel restaurant, he sat slumped and indifferent to the food. After a few minutes, he opened up.

“Kurt was burly but fit, an avowed walker. Each time he visited, he just about burned our feet off at the ankles. Every morning at 5:30, there he was, bounding up like a collie.”

“What happened?” I asked, keeping my tone gentle.

“He took his usual evening walk to the end of his cul-de-sac, and a car hit him, tossed him right off the road. Irene told me the driver never stopped. Bastard. Kurt’s injuries from the accident were serious, but not life threatening.” Sol’s voice lowered. “He had a coronary on the way to the hospital and died later that night.” Sol’s eyes were glossy. “Irene and the girls are devastated. She had called but never caught us in and refused to tell this news to the machine.”

I patted his freckled hand. “I am so sorry.”

“Irene told me something else.” Sol’s voice was agitated. “Kurt was trying to help Roshan Ebadi gain asylum here in the States. Oh, dear God. What if that’s why he was killed?” Sol put his napkin on the table and folded it neatly, as if gently tucking in a loved one. “Marcie, I’m very tired. Do you mind if I head back to my room?”

His face was the color of an old bruise, and I was more than a little worried. “I’ll go with you.”

“No, no. I just need a little sleep. I feel whomped with a five-iron.” He smiled. “Funny I should think about golf. Kurt and I played a few rounds at Sunrise Hills the last time he stayed with us.” He opened his palm, as if testing for rain. “I should also call Miriam. Poor old girl. She’ll take it hard. You just never know. What a world.”

“Give Miriam my love. Call my room if you need anything, Mister.”

A vigorous 75, Sol was still elderly, his shirt loose on him, belt cinched tight at the waist. He walked across the dining room as if on a tightrope. He advanced with his cane, tested one foot, then the other, and disappeared around the corner.

When I returned to my room, the red message light pulsed on the phone next to the bed. It was from the front desk.

“This message is for Marcelina Keyes in room 608. Please meet your party in the Cactus Lounge tonight at 8:30.”

Simple as that. My heart pounded. My party? Someone with a message from Finn? Better yet, was it Finn himself? “Meet your party.” I loved a party. I also knew I was on the right track. The reservation for room 608 finally made sense. The postcard said *Happy Anniversary*. Finn and I had met on June 8. Finn had phoned about my room.

I called the front desk and fired a question barrage at the clerk. No, the message was not from in-house. The call came in at 6:32. No, the caller left no name. No, the clerk did not know if the caller was a man or woman. The assistant manager had taken the message, and she was now off.

I had packed one dressy outfit, and 8:00 found me in a black dress and heels, following the golden notes and tipped martini glass into the Cactus Lounge. The hotel’s bar spilled over with laughter and tinny music. The drinking glasses suspended upside-down over the bar glittered like

rhinestones. I perched myself onto a stool and ordered a *pinot grigio*. The bubbles in my champagne of hopes continued to fizz as I scanned the crowd for a familiar face.

Along a velour rope, men and women jostled for position to sing karaoke favorites. From what I could tell these were mostly songs made famous by Willie Nelson. The women giggled. The men punched each other. There in the Arizona desert, a scrawny urban cowboy warbled *Harbor Lights*.

“Hey.” A beefy man, like a movie bank robber from a old Western, hoisted a leg over the barstool next to me as if it were a rodeo saddle. “Waitin’ for someone?”

He had shaggy charcoal hair and a ragged mustache to match. His green T-shirt sported sweat rings under the armpits. The T-shirt logo read *New Mexico—The Sacred Mountains Speak*. A beer belly hung over his belt, his personal sacred mountain.

Could this be the caller? “Yes. My husband.”

“How’s about if we keep company until your old man arrives?” The sacred mountain crooked a hairy finger at the woman bartender. “Another round, darlin’.”

I placed a hand over the top of my wineglass. “No thanks.”

“I’m turning you off, cowboy,” the woman bartender said. “You had enough.”

“Not nearly enough, little lady.” He leered at me. His pitted face was slick from perspiration and at least a six-pack’s worth of beer. I was ready to slap that leer off his face quicker than he could say “little lady.” The guy was clearly not my contact. He was too drunk.

I scanned the lounge for other likely messengers from Finn. No one looked my way, but it was not yet 8:30. There was still time.

“Name’s Chuck,” the bank robber said to me. “What brings you into town?”

I needed to dump this bozo. “A 727.”

“Ho, a smart ass babe. Ditto to that. I’m here to show off my new boots.” He plopped a hand-tooled size 12 onto my lap. “Just like on The Nashville Network.”

I swiveled the stool so his foot fell. “Not now, okay, big fella?”

“Hey, we’re just sittin’ here, and you want to be a hard ass. Why is that?”

I sipped my wine.

“I said, why do you want to be such a hard ass? That’s a ditto, in case you’re interested.”

Ditto? What the heck? I stood to cross to the other end of the bar. Chuck blocked my way with one boot. When I kicked his leg, he drew the boot back and snapped it into a kick that caught me on the kneecap.

The pain was like a lightning strike on a barren plain. Pinpricks of light strobed behind my eyes. Was my kneecap cracked?

“Hey! Hey!” the woman bartender said. “Leave her be right now, Chuck. I’m calling the cops.”

“I was just sittin’ here, showing her my boots.” The lout morphed into a sulky 12-year old.

“You and your frickin’ boots take a hike, got it?” the woman bartender said. “Or the cops can haul you off.”

Chuck scowled, clutched at his beer mug, and left.

“Thanks,” I said, cupping my knee. It was almost 8:30. “I thought I had the meatball under control, but he refused to stay put on the spaghetti.”

“You want to lodge a complaint, honey? The manager won’t be in for half an hour, but can you hang on?”

“Never mind, I’ll be okay. Can I buy another beer?”

“Sure. That clumsy galoot, Chuck.” Around her neck she wore a M.A.D.D. locket, Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

“Hey, Lurene!” a guy called from the other side of the bar. “We’re dry over here!”

“Stuff it, sheep-dip.” The woman had a pinched, hard face but kind eyes. “Honey, good thing you escaped from Chuck. He struts in here every few months. Hits on everything not hitched to a post. Tries to sign me up for his damned See-flow.” She paused. “Are you Marcie?”

I nearly fell off my stool. I placed a 20 on the bar and waited for her to speak.

She said, “You know the Phoenix Skyview Restaurant, top floor? Waitress by the name of Bonnie Gerlach might have the information you’re after.”

“How does she know what I’m after?”

“A guy investigating the Cahill mess said for her to look out for a young woman and old guy and a cane. Bonnie said if you came down to the bar, I should let you know.”

I remembered something. “You mentioned that Chuck kept trying to sign you up for See-something. What was that again?”

“You mean C-FLO?”

“What is it? A water conservation thing?”

“*See-eff-el-oh*. Stands for ‘Citizens for Law and Order.’ It’s some group doesn’t believe in the U. S. of A. They don’t want to pay taxes or stand in line for a driver’s license. The guys go to the desert on weekends to camp and shoot and generally pretend to kick butt.” It sounded like the same story of Kurt Helgersen’s son-in-law.

“You haven’t joined, I take it.”

She shook her head, and light glinted off the *M* of her M.A.D.D. necklace. “I lead a crazy life, but I’m not crazy. Bonnie’s break is at midnight.”

The Skyview Cocktail Lounge buzzed from a brisk business. I found Bonnie Gerlach hunched behind the soda spigots. The thin, dishwater blonde was the same woman who had served Sol and me our drinks.

“I’m dying for a break,” Bonnie said as she led me down a darkened hall away from the lounge. “These convention guys run the be-jesus out of me. Big drinkers. Lousy tippers.” She glanced at her watch. “Come in here, but we have to talk quick. The boss will be in any minute.” She opened a door marked *Assistant Manager*, and we stepped into a cramped office. She sat primly at the desk, and I took a chair by the door.

Bonnie said, “When I used his office before, he was sorta mad, saying, what did I think this was, Bonnie’s Press Room? I was one of the witnesses to the Cahill bombing, in case you don’t know.”

“You’ve drawn a lot of attention, I take it.”

“And how. After I was in the newspaper, it was, like, tabloid city. The cops came in to grill me, then those boring FBI flatheads. Last week this hunk of a guy comes in, buys a drink, and starts fishing around about that day, but in a nice way.” Bonnie’s thick make-up failed to conceal the circles under her eyes.

“I know you don’t have much time. Tell me about the man who asked you to watch for me with an older man and a cane.” I took out a small notebook. Until I knew what I was looking for, almost anything could be on this test.

“Okay. Let’s see.” Her tired face perked up. “His name was Mr. Townman.” “Townman?” Close enough to “Townsend.” “When was this?”

“Just last week sitting right where you are now. He was FBI, but in a different league altogether.” She stopped and smiled as if basking in the sun of the memory. “No flathead on him.”

I tried to keep my voice even. “Did he say where he was staying?”

She shook her head. “No. Just to look out for you. Wait. He left a business card.” She dug around in a Fendi bag, obviously using my same system of purse organization. “Here it is.”

The card showed an address, phone, and fax for the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Field Office in downtown Phoenix. Scrawled on the back in pen was *Scott Townman, Paloverde Inn, Room 608, Saguario, AZ* and a phone number. My heart jumped. Not only was “Scott” Finn’s middle name, but the handwriting matched.

It was after 1:00 in the morning when the Skyview elevator lowered me to the sixth floor. I was bone tired. I moved to slide my card key through the door’s slot, when a shot of adrenaline zapped me awake. The door was cracked open.

A pad of tissue low on the side of the doorjamb held the door propped. I pushed it open a few inches and peered in. The lamps on the night tables were darkened, and a shaft of light came from the bathroom, opposite from how I’d left them. Call security, one inner voice said. I had no weapon, but a heavy purse. These hotel security guards are incompetent, another voice chimed in.

A heavy purse would have to do.

I advanced slowly, silently. The bathroom door was open at an angle.

After two slow steps, I reached inside the bathroom door and flicked off the light switch. I tried to slam the door shut to give me a few seconds, but he grabbed the knob from the other side and tugged backward. I raised my saddle bag of a purse.

I stood to the side, heart thumping. I listened intently. Nothing. I waited half a minute of eternity before poking my head around the doorframe into the bathroom.

“Marcie, for God’s sakes, it’s me.”

The door opened, and Finn gradually came into focus, like the pixels on a downloading graphics file. He was more tanned than I had ever seen him. His gray hair was long and bushy. He wore a dirty sleeveless sweatshirt, baggy plaid shorts, and sandals. To me, he looked great.

I leaped into his arms, sank my face into his neck, and squeezed him to prove he was real. We kissed hard. Then I hauled off and whacked him on the arm.

“Ow!” He grinned like a lunatic. “Still my Marcie.”

“Where in God’s name have you been, you bastard? Running off like that, you really put a dent in a girl’s self-confidence.” All my fears washed in behind my eyes. I hugged him again, sobbing against his shirtfront.

“Hey! Sssh, I know, I know.” He had always given me room to be emotional. “I never meant to hurt you. I couldn’t contact anyone. I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t know whether to love him or beat him up. After a minute of his soft assurances, I made my decision.

We awoke early. I lay on Finn’s chest, resting in the truth that he was really there. My heart thudded, and the pulse in his neck throbbed along my cheek. This was it, journey’s end. Once more, we were two in one. The investigation was over.

“Your hair,” he whispered, “smells like Florida.”

“Coconut.” It was the conditioner I’d packed. “Have you missed it?”

He nodded, and against my palm I felt his lips smiling, though his eyes were still closed. “Where is that conditioner now?”

“In your shaving kit. I carry that thing everywhere. Of course, this is my first trip since you left.”

“Atta girl. You understood my message. Could you bring me the kit?”

Whoa. Did he have a kinky use in mind for coconut conditioner? I wriggled into a knee-length T-shirt, hustled after the small tote, and handed it to him.

“Draw the window curtains, will you?”

I pulled the drapes closed, and he turned on the light.

Finn dumped out the contents of the leather tote and felt along the canvas liner inside. With an open jackknife, he slit the liner just inside the zipper and reached in. His fist held a thin black plastic rectangle the size of a fingernail. He held it up to the light and nodded. “Good.”

“What’s that?”

“An SD card of encrypted documents that I desperately need to prevent an assassination.” He placed the SD card on the night stand. “But later.”

We moved into a playful puppy stage, and I pinned him. “Now, Special Agent Townsend or Townman, whoever you are, unless you want my knuckle and twist torture, you’re going to talk.”

“The night I left Fort Lauderdale, I planned being gone only a few days to work the Cahill bombing. Then all hell broke loose.” He winked, his face tanned from the desert. “We don’t have much time, so here’s the short version.”

“I’m all ears.” I settled into the blankets.

“When you and I first met, I was working Domestic Terrorist Operations, DTO or ‘Ditto’ for short.”

“Ditto?” Not again. “A guy in the bar last night kept saying that.”

“Probably wanted to see your reaction.” Finn’s brow creased with worry. “What did you tell him?”

I laughed. “Even though he threatened to pull out my fingernails and cut off my ears, I said, ‘You’ll get nothing from me!’” I nudged him in the ribs. “What could I say? That ditto means a repeat? I didn’t have a clue.”

Finn set his mouth into a grim line. “Anyway, Ditto sent me to join a local militia group to find evidence about the Cahill bombing.”

“Did you get it?”

“And then some. The Cahill Complex was only the beginning. This group is called C-FLO, Citizens for Law and Order. It’s very organized, with massive funding.”

I was skeptical. “Not a bunch of weekend warriors?”

“These guys are former military men, Iraq vets with special training and ties to higher-ups in Washington. The group has wealthy backers abroad eager to tip the delicate balance of power in the Middle East. You’ve heard that several Iranian scientists working on nuclear or military technology have been assassinated?”

I nodded. “A magnetic car bomb was the latest incident last month.”

“We have a reliable source that C-FLO is gunning for the keynote speaker here at this conference. Roshan Ebadi.”

“Dr. Ebadi? From what Sol told me, Dr. Ebadi works out of scientific curiosity only. He has no government ties, and his research is no threat.”

“But the product of his research could be. Mention ‘Iranian scientists’ to C-FLO or even Washington, and they think ‘nuke.’”

“What does Ditto plan to do?”

“Dr. Ebadi has had it with death threats in Iran and thinks he’ll be safer here in the States. He wants to defect, and the Bureau and his colleagues plan to help him.”

“How?”

“Ebadi’s babysitters from Iran are everywhere. That SD card lays out the names of Iranians willing to help Ebadi to defect. The switch will take place just before his keynote address. When his guards finally release him to go onstage, my men will whisk Ebadi to safety, and I’ll go onstage instead to read the speech to the scientists.”

“You?”

“Why not? Don’t you think I’m smart enough to pass for a scientist?”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No way. It could be dangerous. One of Ebadi’s colleagues, a man named Helgerson, has already been killed. I’m not dragging you into this.”

I told Finn about Sol’s tie with Kurt Helgerson. “I lost you before. I’m not going through that hell again.” I kissed him. “I’ll be useful. I can watch your back. After your speech, I’ll clap a lot and interview you for the Phoenix press.”

“All right. You can keep me calm before the speech.” He kissed me in return. “Ebadi’s guards are bringing him backstage in the auditorium. We’ll meet him there.”

Later that morning, a hotel manager with a security clearance let Finn and me into the auditorium by a back door. The speaker’s green room was off a hall right of the stage.

A short woman wearing a dark blue headscarf stood by herself in the gloomy lounge. She wore glasses and a dark blazer.

“Excuse us,” Finn said. “We’re supposed to meet Dr. Ebadi here. Where is he?”

She turned. “I am Roshan Ebadi.” The woman carried herself with regal bearing, and her voice was calm. “I see you are confused. The name ‘Roshan’ can belong to either a man or a woman.”

“Uh oh,” I said. Sol had never mentioned that the brilliant scientist was a woman. There was no way that Finn’s six-foot frame could take this woman’s place on stage.

Finn scratched his jaw. “Man, I didn’t get that SD card soon enough.”

Dr. Ebadi furrowed her thin eyebrows in puzzlement. “Is there a problem?”

The woman scientist was about my height and size. With the head covering, her glasses, and the jacket, I could be a creditable substitute. From a distance. On a dimly lit stage.

“Listen, I have an idea.” Could it work?

“No way. The men eager to stop Ebadi’s defection killed Kurt Helgerson.”

“Your team wasn’t there to prevent it. They are now. She goes on in less than five minutes. What other option do you have? Professor, give me your paper.”

Finn looked ill. “Marcie, I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I. Public speaking makes me vomit, but do you have a better idea?”

“All right.” He exhaled. “While you’re reading the paper, my teams will go to work. One group will subdue her guards, and another will secure her safety. When you’re finished, buzz off the stage and come back here, pronto. Got it?”

From my spot at the side of the stage, I risked a peep through the curtain.

Mid-stage, Sol Minisky bent over the podium and read a bio on Dr. Ebadi. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Dr. Roshan Ebadi.” The audience responded on cue, with enthusiasm. Stage lights overhead splashed a lemony light across the stage’s front rim. The lonely podium stood far away, like a distant mountain rising from an ancient sea bed. A lump rose in my throat, but I had to heed the call of patriotism.

I stepped onto the stage, certain of floorboards collapsing under me. Sol recognized me behind the glasses, and his eyes widened. It took an eternity to reach the podium. Finally, I grabbed its edges with slippery fingers, grateful that my trembling knees were hidden from the audience. Clumping his cane, Sol descended the stairs to a chair.

Blobs of faces floated in the dark, like balloons, staring and waiting. From the rear of the theater, someone coughed. The auditorium was packed, except for vacant seats in the first few rows. This was rich. Marcelina Keyes had failed high school Trig and didn’t know quantum from Qantas, but here she was, Dr. Roshan Ebadi, addressing the International Association of Physicists.

I opened the folder holding Dr. Ebadi’s paper and cleared my throat. “Invisibility? Compressed time? A century ago, this was the stuff of science fiction.” From behind the teaser curtain to my right, Roshan Ebadi nodded approval.

I plowed ahead, trying to make out word squiggles through the strange eyeglasses. The lenses were too strong. “We have long known that the diffraction of a light beam in space is equivalent mathematically to the temporal propagation of light through a dispersive medium. With early practical instrumentation limited to microwave frequencies, invisibility lasted mere nanoseconds. However, new instrumentation has vastly improved our capacity to stretch this time gap. In practice, a prolonged cloak of invisibility is indeed possible.” The audience stirred. Encouraged, I read about “space and time duality” and a “split time lens,” occurring that moment at the end of my nose.

Two latecomers side-stepped across the front row and took vacant seats. Their outlines seemed familiar, but the stage lights blinded me. The distraction caused me to stumble over “electro-optic modulator.” I skipped the foreign language of formulas. When I reached the last page, I glanced left, and panicked.

Something was wrong. Four of Dr. Ebadi’s guards still stood behind the side curtain, arms crossed, watching, not amused by my disguise. Across the stage, Roshan stood by herself in the shadows, visible only to me. Where was Finn’s team to lead her to safety? Clearly, Finn needed more time. The bottom margin of the final page had come too soon. I had to keep talking.

I removed her distorting glasses. “And so,” I looked up, “in an age of uncertainty, I stand before you, uncertain and, uh, aged.” *Come on, Marcie. Don’t lose it now. You hate public speaking but you’re a journalist. You know how to run an interview.*

I had to work without a net. No notes. “Let me ask all of you,” I said, “what about this time cloaking? We imagine its many military applications, but how can it be used for good?” Dr. Ebadi twisted her hands. Stall, Marcie, stall. I made a frantic plea for help to Sol in his seat by the wall, but he failed to pick up my S.O.S.

I pressed ahead. “What can we say about time that disappears? The Hohokam, the ancient people who used to live on this dried sea bed, were forced to move on. Once we tear a hole in time, there’s no patching it, like with a blown tire. We must move on. A hole in time is not an illusion of loss, but one that is very real, like losing a person we deeply care about. If we are lucky enough to find that person again, we have lost time together, but we gain when we vow to love that person even more.” Finn appeared at the side of the stage, along with half a dozen men in blue FBI jackets. The agents milled around Dr. Ebadi’s phalanx of bodyguards, and I heard scuffling feet. I hoped Finn had brought handcuffs. “So let us appreciate every nanosecond of life. Thank you.” At first came a smatter of clapping, then a steady beat of applause. Get off, get off.

The curtain behind Dr. Ebadi stirred, and a figure loomed behind her.

“Look out!” I yelled.

A commotion rose in the auditorium. One of the latecomers to the front row had a weapon. Without the glasses, I could see O’Hara, the bigoted cabbie who had driven us to the hotel. He cradled a rifle, and it was aimed at me. I ducked behind the podium. A shot popped, and the bullet thunked into the podium’s wood veneer. O’Hara screamed, and I peered around the podium to see Sol Minisky in the row behind the cabbie. Sol held his cane pressed across the man’s windpipe. I stood and scrambled offstage, but a ham-sized hand grabbed me by the arm. Chuck, the cretin from the bar.

Going on instinct, I whapped at his hand with the folder holding Dr. Ebadi’s speech, gaining a few seconds as pages cascaded onto the floor. I wrenched and loosened his grip, but Chuck grasped tighter. He pulled me toward him, and I caught the glint of a knife in his right hand. My

only defense was the sharp object on my foot, and I launched a rocket-propelled kick, the pointed toe of my patent leather heel landing on his shin.

“Agh.” He crumpled, losing his balance.

I reared to kick him again, but a swarm of FBI agents snapped him in half like a dried stick of firewood. “Ditto,” I said.

That night in our anniversary room of 608, Finn and I compared notes.

I said, “Chuck must have thought I really was Dr. Ebadi onstage. Idiot.”

“Roshan was only a curtain away, but by then two of my women agents were ready to escort her out of there.”

“For a nanosecond, she had vanished. It was like a hole in time.”

“I don’t know about that, but my postcard turned out to be pretty good, didn’t it? It worked better than that blasted encrypted SD card. The postcard brought you here and helped you to find me.” He lay back on the pillow. “But I have to tell you that I’m now in big trouble.”

“Oh no. What kind of trouble? Can I help?”

“You.” His eyes were on me. “You’re trouble. And you can help.” He placed his shaving kit on the night table next to the lamp. Then with shampoo, conditioner, tooth paste, and other mini-bottles of toiletries rolling around the top of the bedspread, he clicked off the light.