

**MINERVA**

**by**

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## Prologue

Peter O'Toole winced as his finger touched the pan. He turned off the oven but left the wings inside; no need to waste the heat. O'Toole walked over to the faucet and let it run for a moment, checking it with another finger to make sure the water was cold before putting his tender skin under it. The burn wasn't bad at all, but thirty seconds of cold water now would prevent a possible blister later.

The blare of the stadium crowd suddenly cut off. *Great, the dish acts up in the fourth quarter*, O'Toole thought. He glanced up at the widescreen television, which was easily visible from the Formica kitchen countertop, expecting to see a blank screen. Instead he saw the bold letters proclaiming BREAKING NEWS.

The screen shifted to a news anchor, detached and professional. He informed twenty-five-year-old Peter O'Toole that a passenger jet taking off from LaGuardia Airport had had an explosion and crashed into the icy water. There were no reports yet from rescue crews, but everyone on board was feared dead. The scene shifted to helicopter footage of the smoking wreck.

O'Toole's stomach dropped out as he glanced at the clock. That probably wasn't Mary's flight. He'd never really thought about it before, but surely LaGuardia had dozens of planes leaving every hour. Yes, Mary's flight would have been taking off at about that time, but that didn't prove anything.

O'Toole snapped out of his momentary paralysis and picked up the phone. But then he stopped once again. *Who the fuck do you call when you think your wife's plane just crashed?*

The news anchor interrupted the helicopter reporter. He informed Peter O'Toole that Airways Flight 361, headed for Houston, had crashed moments after taking off from LaGuardia Airport. Preliminary reports suggested that all 186 passengers and crew were killed.

The phone slipped out of O'Toole's hand and banged against the linoleum floor.

## One

O'Toole shuffled his feet as the guard led him to the holding cell. He couldn't tell if his emerging headache were due to his first—and last—barfight, the obscene amount of liquor he'd had, or (most likely) some combination of the two.

"In here," the guard said, beckoning to the cell. Inside were three other prisoners: An Asian and black man sat on the cell bench, listening to a small yet wiry older white man. The older man appeared to be homeless: he wore an ancient three-piece suit in a horrible shade of green, and his originally white dress shirt had a yellowed collar and was missing several buttons. His shoes were dusty black wing tips, through the holes of which the man's green dress socks were visible. The older man had (like O'Toole) not shaved in days, and what white hair he still had protruded from his large head in an excited tangle. Despite his tattered appearance, the other two men seemed quite intent on his words.

The opening of the cell door caused the older man to turn around and face O'Toole and the guard.

"Ah, the agent of the State delivers us yet another citizen-ruler," the older man said, beaming with glee. "And as usual, the humble public servant comports himself with courtesy, professionalism, and respect."

As O'Toole entered the cell, the guard muttered to him, "Have fun. Looks like today's lesson is Remedial Politics for Gangbangers."

"Hey fuck *dat* man," the black prisoner said. "The NYPD is the biggest gang there is."

The guard ignored him and cast a quick look of disgust at the older man. He closed the cell and walked back down the corridor.

O'Toole collapsed onto a bench on the far side of the cell. The older man resumed his "lesson" to the two others.

"Now Michael, I cannot stress this enough," he said to the Asian, a man who looked in his late twenties and seemed quite nervous. "Yes, your family is not going to

approve of what has happened. They are going to be disappointed. But keep in mind that you have done absolutely nothing wrong.”

Michael’s head, which had drooped down so that he stared at the floor, snapped back up. He looked with anxious curiosity at the older man.

“That’s right, you did nothing wrong. Think about it: What exactly have you done? There were poor farmers in Colombia, growing a plant. There were rich kids in America, who wanted the plant. And what did you do? Why, you helped them to make a mutually advantageous exchange.

“Did you hurt anyone? No. Did you steal anything from anybody? No. So it’s perfectly understandable for you to regret the pain this will cause your family, and maybe you wish you had done something else with your life. But do *not* let them”—the man pointed a thumb in the direction of the corridor—“convince you that you’re a bad person. You must not give them that power over you.”

“Yeah I know what you’re sayin,” Michael said in a weak voice. “But those cops told me I was fucked. They said I could get twenty-five *years* for that shit.”

“Those *fucking* pigs,” muttered the black man. Michael swallowed hard and wiped his right eye with the back of his left wrist.

“Michael Michael,” the older man said in a gentle voice. “You are absolutely *not* going to spend twenty-five years in prison. I would be surprised if you served more than five.”

Michael’s throat trembled. “Yeah but five *years*...”

“Michael, look at me. You are a gifted individual and I want you to use your powers of reason. What’s done is done. You must look at this as a learning experience. Now you know what the State can and will do to its opponents. The hopelessness in your life? *This*,” he held up his hands to signify the cell, “is its ultimate cause. There is a war going on, Michael, and you are now one of its official casualties.

“It’s regrettable, of course. Just as a soldier wounded in combat laments his fate. But the soldier is not *ashamed* of himself. He is *proud* of what he has done, and he would gladly do it again.

“I know you don’t believe me right now, but I assure you, you will one day walk out of prison as a new man, a *stronger* man. The scales will have fallen from your eyes.

We live in an unjust society, Michael. And in such a society, the place for a just man is prison.”

“What in the *hell* are you talking about?” O’Toole could no longer restrain himself. The glib bum had finally worn away his patience. O’Toole looked sternly at Michael. “Son, I’m sorry about your situation. But what you need to do is get yourself a lawyer, and stop taking advice from your cellmate.” Having spoken his piece, O’Toole laid himself back on the bench.

There was a momentary silence. The older man broke it.

“Forgive me, good sir, but you seem to have given young Michael contradictory counsel. He is in the paradoxical position of either listening to you—one of his cellmates—and thus spurning your advice, or of following your suggestion, by disregarding your suggestions.”

O’Toole was flabbergasted, but in no mood to argue. “Look,” he said calmly, “I realize your lifestyle is a bit...different from mine, and I’m not saying it’s a bad one. But some of us have li—responsibilities on the outside. And I *really* don’t think you should be telling some young kid that it’s romantic to be a coke dealer.”

The older man waited a moment before speaking.

“Tell me, do you believe Michael here deserves to be in prison for what he has done? You are in here for violence. He is in here for commerce.”

O’Toole realized that his eye must have been quite a sight. He sighed. “Look, I don’t want to argue with you; I’ve got a bad headache. I didn’t mean to offend you, and I appreciate that you’re trying to cheer this guy up.” O’Toole rested his head back on the bench and closed his eyes.

“Your response intrigues me,” the older man began after another short pause. “This boy’s life as he knows it has now ended. You feel perfectly justified in challenging my comments, and perfectly qualified to offer him your advice, yet you have neither the will nor apparently the ability at the moment to engage in abstract thought. It seemed you very much *did* ‘want to argue’ a moment ago when you chastised me.”

*What a nightmare*, O’Toole thought. After a moment he relaxed. *Well, can’t blame the guy; this is probably a treat for him to get a roof over his head and have an audience.*

“Look, I’ve got no problem if you want to legalize drugs. That’s fine; if they legalize it, more power to you. I’ll even sign a referendum on it. But right now there are serious legal penalties for dealing cocaine, and I think you’re doing a disservice by advising people when you’re not a legal expert.”

The black man chuckled. “Don’ know who he’s dealin with,” he muttered.

The older man said to O’Toole, “Again your position intrigues me. You feel yourself competent to participate in a referendum on the matter; you are willing to cast your vote for one side of the question. Yet you are unwilling to discuss *why* you would vote in this way. Would you have been so cavalier with, say, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II? The Nazis weren’t the only ones with concentration camps during that war, you know.”

*Here we go...* O’Toole considered for a moment, then decided it wasn’t worth it. “Sir, I’m not going to have a debate with you. You’ve obviously put a great deal of thought into your beliefs, and I respect that. I’m sorry to have interrupted your discussion. Please resume it and I won’t bother you again.”

The older man smiled and looked back at the other two prisoners. His voice returned to its previous level, and O’Toole closed his eyes again.

“Although our new guest does not want to discuss the matter,” the older man said in a gentle voice, “it is worth considering why *certain* drugs—not all of them, mind you—are currently illegal.

“Some say it’s to reduce crime. After all, look at the condition of inner cities, and the behavior of drug dealers.” The older man paused to survey his audience. The younger man, Michael, was staring at the floor. But the other fellow had a grin on his face and was paying close attention.

“But if we all agree that an addict will do anything, even steal or kill, to get his next fix, then why in the world would we enact policies that make drugs such as cocaine hundreds of times more expensive than they would be if legalized? Will that not simply force a junkie to commit *more* crimes to finance his habit?

“And yes, what of gang warfare? Do the drugs themselves drive dealers to shoot each other? Why then don’t liquor store owners take contracts out on each other? No, it is not *drugs* that cause violence and crime, but drug *prohibition*. Think about it: The

government sends around groups of heavily armed men, who will kidnap and hold hostage anyone caught selling certain substances. And then everyone wonders why reckless and violent individuals end up being the ones who sell these substances.”

O’Toole chuckled. *He’s got it all figured out*, he thought and smiled. He found that if he viewed the older man’s monologue as a form of entertainment, he could relax and even drift into a light sleep.

## Two

*Kcc-uhhhhh!* The aluminum bat reverberated as Andy foul tipped the ball off to his right. Andy had never played organized baseball; his practice had consisted of outings to the cages at Putt Putt. His hands were really starting to sting, and he was ready to go.

But he couldn't let the other guys know that. This was the first time he'd hung out with them after school; the other times it had just been in study hall or the occasional lunch. (Tom and Nick were taking an art class with nobody else in it, and so their table would be wide open at that lunch and they'd usually call Andy over when he walked by with his tray.)

"Holy shit man, that's the fourth fucking tip in a row," Tom DiGatano yelled from the shallow outfield. "Just connect with the damn thing. This is homerun derby, not the fucking World Series."

The others in the field laughed and followed Tom's lead. "Yeah, that guy's like stepping out of the batter's box to adjust his gloves and shit," Freddy Malone yelled from left field. "This doesn't count for your slugging percentage," Jim Valentino quipped, but the sophomore said it so softly that not everyone really heard him.

Andy forced a smile. He really just wanted to get the hell out of there and go home. He glanced over at the parking lot to see if anybody else from school might be around to witness him. It'd be cool if kids the next day asked him about it and he could just say, "Yeah, I was out hitting the ball a bit with Tom and Nick. We weren't playing or anything, just a little homerun derby."

He didn't even care if he hit it far. Andy just wanted, like Tom had said, to connect with the thing and go back out in the field.

*Pom!* Andy swung the bat cleanly through the ball and watched it come down a little past second base. Tom jogged up and caught it.

"All right I'm up," Tom said as he tossed the ball underhanded to his brother. He jogged up to the plate and took the bat from an eager Andy.



“Okay you got my spot,” Tom said. He apparently forgot that Andy needed his glove. (Andy hadn’t had one in his locker like the others.) Andy considered not making a big deal of it and just running out there to field balls without a glove, but he reconsidered and thought he’d just get ripped on if he did that. So Andy simply stood there while Tom took a few swings to loosen up.

Andy stared at Tom’s back while he took another swing. Tom DiGatano was hands down the toughest guy Andy had ever known about. He was at least six-foot-two, and had to weigh over 230. People said Tom could bench 300, but that was probably bullshit. Jim Deacon though said he’d personally seen Tom throw up 250, and Jim was usually pretty good about stuff like that.

But it was more than just their size; Tom and his buddies *liked* to fight. They were the guys who went around to church festivals just to fuck with tough guys from other schools. And the DiGatano brothers always won.

“What are you, looking at my ass or something?” Tom demanded.

“N-no,” Andy said and managed a laugh. He had been embarrassed to ask about the glove, but that was nothing compared to being caught staring. “I just need—can I use your glove again?”

Tom looked puzzled for a second and then said, “Yeah no shit you can take it. You’re not gonna barehand the shit out there.”

Andy chuckled and picked up the glove. As he ran to center field (where unfortunately he’d have to catch more balls than where he started in left field) he noticed the two men sitting in lawn chairs. They were on the grass by the parking lot, about two or three hundred feet away from Andy. Judging by the pile of beer cans next to them, the men had been sitting watching for a while. But Andy hadn’t noticed them before: He’d been concentrating on the plate when he’d been in left field, and when he was up to bat he’d been focused on Nick.

“Fuck!” Tom yelled as he foul tipped the ball. “Yesterday I was killin the ball.”

“Sure it wasn’t a softball?” Freddy Malone yelled.

“Yeah I hear *you* got soft balls,” Nick yelled back. Everyone laughed wildly at this. Nick threw another pitch, overhand but not too fast.

*Ping!!* Tom had just crushed the ball. It sailed well over Andy (who'd been standing where Tom had been, a dozen yards behind second base) and landed far in the outfield. It bounced and rolled, coming to stop about ten feet from the two men.

"You just fuckin *killed* that thing DiGatano," Jim Valentino announced. Tom just nodded his head.

"Hey boss a little help?" Nick yelled at the two men.

"You that kid's boss?" Jack Quinn asked Jim Knight.

"Nope. You?" Jim asked in return.

"Nope," Quinn responded. He tossed his fourth can on the grass and opened another.

"Hey chief, you wanna throw that ball over here?" Tom yelled. Andy of course could have run to get the ball, but he decided to hold still.

The men continued to drink their beer. It wasn't just that they were ignoring Tom, Andy realized. They were both looking straight at Tom. They were *purposefully* ignoring him.

"You know these guys?" Tom asked Nick as he walked toward the mound.

"Nah, they don't look familiar," Nick answered. The two brothers walked toward the ball. The other three fell in behind them.

"You guys like the show so far?" Tom asked as he and Nick drew close to the men. The men just sipped their beer, staring at Tom.

Something just didn't sit right with Tom. He wasn't at all afraid to fight grown men; he'd had plenty of practice with that, including his father. But normally when Tom got hostile with somebody, the guy...well, *reacted*. But here he was, holding a bat, and these guys were just sitting there. Sure, they looked solid, and the black guy was pretty fucking big, but *still*: he was holding a bat.

"You guys cops or something?" Tom demanded. He and Nick had stopped about five feet from the men in their lawn chairs.

"Nope. You?" Quinn answered. Jim snorted.

“You know,” Tom said after a moment. “You’re lucky I don’t crack your fuckin head in with this.” Tom tapped the bat gently on the palm of his left hand.

“It’s not luck,” Quinn said immediately.

*He doesn’t think I’ll do it.* Tom took a warmup swing, bringing the bat within about a foot of the white guy’s face. Nick felt his adrenaline kick in, and sized up the black guy. *This fucker doesn’t know who he’s dealin with.*

Quinn did not flinch when the bat *swooshed* in front of his face. He continued to stare at the boy’s eyes. Jim looked for pockets on the other boys. Most of them had sweatpants on, and the one with jeans wouldn’t be a problem. Quinn checked his footing but kept his eyes on the boy.

“The windup, the pitch,” Tom said as he began his swing. He truly aimed for Quinn’s head, but he didn’t swing as hard as he could. He was quite confident Quinn would duck or put up his hand. But if he didn’t, Tom didn’t want to actually kill him.

As Tom brought the bat around, Quinn leaped out of his chair with both arms outstretched, his left palm facing up. He grabbed the bat with both hands and butted his head into Tom’s nose, before quickly snapping it back. Having absorbed the swing into his left arm and chest, Quinn rotated the bat clockwise, slamming it into the side of Tom’s face. The blow loosened Tom’s grip on the bat, making it easy for Quinn to yank it towards himself, bringing it parallel to the ground. Then Quinn shoved it back toward Tom, giving him a sharp jab with the end of the bat, just below his sternum. This knocked the wind out of Tom. He let go completely of the bat and reflexively hunched over. Quinn yanked the bat back away from Tom, and gripped it properly. He swung it up and over his shoulder, as if he were chopping wood. He brought the bat squarely down on Tom’s back. Tom crumpled to the ground.

Nick and the others backed up several feet. Within mere seconds, the man had taken the bat from Tom and laid him out. Tom groaned and began wiggling his arms and legs.

“Whoa whoa chill out man,” Nick said. Quinn sat back down, laying the bat across his legs. Nick and Freddy Malone helped Tom stand up. They both wrapped an arm around their necks and walked him back toward the field. Andy and Jim Valentino followed them, but checked every few feet to make sure Quinn and Jim stayed seated.

“Hey kids don’t forget your *bat*,” Quinn yelled as he threw the bat like a tomahawk at the boys. Although it flew several feet over their heads, Andy couldn’t help ducking down as it passed them. Jim Valentino picked it up.

“We should probably get going,” Jim said as the boys collected the rest of their things from the grass. “Those meat heads might call the cops.”

“Yeah,” Quinn said, searching the other baseball fields. They were empty except for a small group of younger boys playing soccer. “Looks like I had the wrong time for Tara’s game anyway. Lemme finish my beer.”

## Three

O'Toole walked down the corridor, counting off the numbers on the office doors. The campus was spread out in the Village, and O'Toole had had to ask several young people before finding the building. As he approached 824, he saw the old man walk out and close the door. O'Toole smiled; the old man was wearing a quaint but distinctive gray suit and vest, and a ridiculous red bowtie with black dollar signs on it. Unlike the earlier night, the old man's hair was now neatly combed. As he looked up from locking the door, the old man's face beamed with recognition.

"Hello Mr. O'Toole! Need to brush up on your microeconomics?"

"Oh, no," O'Toole said after a moment. He was stunned that the professor had known his name. "I just saw you on TV and thought I'd swing by."

"Well, I appreciate your swinging, but right now I'm headed for class." His voice dropped as he added, "It would be difficult to hold myself up as a paragon of courtesy if I kept my students waiting."

"Oh, I'm sorry to have bothered you," O'Toole said quickly. It hadn't occurred to him that the professor might have *work* to do. "Can I come by some other time?"

"Not at all, come to the class." The old man stopped to look back at O'Toole, who had stopped walking and looked uncertain. "I'm serious, it will be fine. It's an Honors seminar anyway; the discussion might even be interesting."

O'Toole shrugged and followed the professor. "Just out of curiosity," he said, "how did you know my name?"

The old man stopped and turned. "Oh my, I've forgotten that although I know who you are, and you know who I am, and moreover that now I know that you know who I am, and you now know that I know who you are, that this is not a solid foundation for a relationship. Please excuse me. You gave a talk at the Business School three years ago, Mr. O'Toole. I recognized you from the cell, and looked up the old schedules to recall your name.

"And, as you must know since you found your way to my office, my name is David Mason. But please, I must get to class. We can discuss this afterwards."

O'Toole fell in behind Mason as he resumed walking, and tried to suppress a smirk. He had known the man was eccentric, but he had thought it might largely be an act. The performance in the cell had been for an audience, and obviously the remarks to reporters (in which Mason had explained his purpose for publicly refusing to pay his taxes, and had promised that he would, if convicted, go on a "horny strike" in which he would "refuse to masturbate in prison") could only have been a childish publicity stunt. But apparently the man in person was just as strange.

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Mason looked up from his notes and scanned the classroom. Several of the students immediately terminated their conversations when he caught their eyes, but it took a few moments for the last murmurs to die away. Mason had long ago learned to use the students' greatest weakness—the need for approval from their peers—to manipulate them. As a dictator surely realized in his own realm, Mason recognized that he had no real power over his students, should they openly defy him. If half the class decided to prevent the transmission of knowledge, they could do so. Fortunately, Mason also knew that the students had other concerns of more immediate importance than disrupting his classroom, and that any individual troublemaker could be quickly subdued by humiliating him in front of the other students.

"All right, just to refresh our memories, today we're discussing the Dennett excerpts, and you need to read Dawkins for next time. Then you'll all be able to write essays on why 'selfish altruism' is not a contradiction in terms."

A girl raised her hand. Mason nodded his head, knowing what she would ask. "So is that going to be a question on the final? Could you please repeat it?"

"Yes, Miss Lancaster, I could repeat it," Mason began, "but I will not." The girl's face dropped. "If I were to repeat every sentence, you would all learn only half as much." The class laughed. "And no, that will not be on the exam."

The class laughed again. Julie's face blushed, and she struggled to remember exactly what Professor Mason had said about altruism. She wasn't sure if he now meant that the Dawkins material wouldn't be on the test, or just the fact that he couldn't repeat

every sentence. Most of the time she didn't understand why the class laughed when it did at Professor Mason's comments.

"Professor?" another student, braver than Julie, said as he raised his hand. "What's your view on evolution?"

"I think it would be a good thing for most of you," Mason said, pausing just long enough to signal that this was a joke.

"Aww, come on," the student persisted after the class's laughter subsided.

"Well," Mason said, casting a glance at the back row in which O'Toole sat at a desk, "since the purpose of these readings is to understand the concept of spontaneous order, rather than any particular empirical application of the idea, I suppose it doesn't matter if I share my personal opinion." Mason saw the students perk up as they realized he was about to make a rare exception to his normal rule.

"First, let me concede upfront that the theory of Darwinian evolution is the greatest thing to ever happen to atheism. The theory provides an undeniable crutch for those who deny the existence, or at least the necessity, of an intelligent creator. However, this alone does not disqualify the theory; after all, the truth certainly has implications."

Brian Jones tried to conceal his skepticism. He braced himself for a long-winded exposition defending the absurd idea that a dinosaur could turn into a man. Mason was yet another self-styled "scientist" who didn't even do real science, but instead sat in his office conducting thought experiments. Nonetheless Brian listened intently, hoping to pounce on any flaw in the argument.

"I would say that there are five or six major points of contention in the debate over evolution." Mason let the point sink in as he surveyed the room. "I personally am only competent to judge on three or four of these controversies; the rest require proficiency in biology and archaeology that I simply do not possess.

"However, on those points which I feel competent to render a verdict, I always agree with the proponent of evolution, and disagree with the critics of the theory. Beyond that, there is a definite sense in which the Darwinian explanation is too *elegant* to be wrong. Let me offer an analogy: Suppose we want to pinpoint the epicenter of an earthquake..."

Brian Jones couldn't believe what he was hearing. The charlatan wasn't even going to argue the material; he was simply going to switch the discussion to one about earthquakes!

"...Now when the earthquake occurs, shockwaves travel away, through the ground, in all directions. So supposing the epicenter is here"—Mason colored in a circle on the blackboard—"the shockwaves will move out like so." Mason drew larger and larger concentric circles around the solid dot.

"Now it turns out that certain types of waves move at different speeds through the earth's crust. So if we have an observation station at some point"—Mason drew a small square several feet from the solid dot—"then immediately following an earthquake, the people listening at the station will receive the fastest waves first." Mason paused to draw a long arrow from the solid dot in the direction of the square. "Only after some elapsed time will the slower waves hit the station." Mason drew another arrow, this one shorter than the first, in the direction of the square.

"What is quite fascinating about this is that seismologists can use this single number, the time delay between hearing one type of wave and another, slower one, in order to calculate the *distance* of the source of the waves, which is of course the epicenter of the earthquake."

Mason could see confusion on the faces of many of the students. Brian Jones was smirking behind his left hand, but Mason was used to such immaturity.

"The principle is the same that you use to estimate the distance of a thunderstorm. Light waves travel faster than sound waves. Therefore, when you see a bolt of lightning, you can count off the seconds that elapse before you hear the thunderclap. This difference allows you to calculate how far away the lightning bolt occurred, because scientists know the relative speeds of light and sound waves. It's the same with the waves traveling through the earth's crust.

"Now then, the interesting part." Mason erased everything on the blackboard except the square. "Unlike the observer of a lightning bolt, the scientists at the observation station cannot so easily tell the direction from which the shockwaves are coming. All they know for certain is the gap between the initial reception times of different wave types, and consequently all they can say is that the epicenter of the



earthquake is at some specific distance from the station. But they *cannot* say in what *direction* the epicenter lies. What this means, therefore, is that any one station can only confine the location of the epicenter to a circle of a definite radius, with the station lying in the center of the circle.” Mason drew a large circle around the square.

“But don’t give up yet!” Mason said with a twinkle. “For if we have another station over here, then its staff can calculate the distance of the epicenter based on the gap that *they* experience.” Mason drew a second square, and a second circle around it, so that the two circles overlapped in two points.

“Now what has happened is this: The first station knows the epicenter is, say, 75 miles away. That means the epicenter has to be somewhere on this circle.” Mason pointed to the first circle. “But the people at the second station know that the epicenter is, say, 45 miles away from them, meaning the epicenter must be somewhere along *this* circle. Of course, putting the two facts together leads us to conclude that the epicenter must be at one of these two points, where the circles intersect each other.

“Finally, if we had a third station, we could pinpoint the exact location of the epicenter.” Mason drew a third square, and carefully drew a third circle around it, making sure it touched one of the points where the first two circles intersected. “And this, the method of triangulation, allows us to locate the source of the earthquake. There is only one point that is the proper distance from each of the three observation stations, and so it must be the source of the shockwaves.”

Mason waited for a full thirty seconds to allow the entire argument to seep in. The students would need to understand it before he could use it as an analogy.

“Now then, let us suppose that after this particular earthquake, seismologists announce that they believe the epicenter is likely to be somewhere near this point.” Mason pointed to the spot where the three circles met.

“But then along come a group of cynics.” Mason put down the piece of chalk and faced the class, now ignoring the board. “They point out, quite correctly, that this suggestion of the location of the epicenter is merely a *theory*. These critics further point out that the seismologists are not making a *prediction*, but rather offering an untestable assertion. Indeed, the most articulate of the cynics write books, explaining that the scientists involved are merely *assuming* that the earth’s crust is comparable to that found

at a few dig sites. The scientists, after all, have never actually *measured* the speed of shockwaves through the ground around this point.” Mason turned to gesture at the board.

“In fact, based on the explanation of earthquakes given in a book passed down first orally and then copied by hand, originating thousands of years ago, the critics of the scientists offer their own rival theory: They say that the earthquake must be here,” Mason drew another circle and filled it in on the far side of the leftmost square. “This is because...” Mason paused to dream up something clever. “...the earth was created shell first, and then the insides were pumped into a hole, which was then sealed. This is the location of that hole, and consequently *all* earthquakes originate here.

“Incidentally,” Mason said with a charming smile, “the reason the scientists were so completely fooled is that the *true* composition of the earth’s core—as explained in the book—is extremely complex, and thus not at all approximated by the crude models of the scientists. Brilliant scholars, ignored by the mainstream seismologists, can actually demonstrate with numerical methods that the readings at the observation posts are entirely consistent with the idea that the epicenter is here,” Mason pointed at the second colored dot, “and not at the place where the scientists had conjectured.”

Mason put the chalk down again, and sat down. After a moment of staring at his desk, he looked back up to face the class.

“I think that’s all I shall say on this subject. If you have not entirely learned my position on evolution, then my attempt has been successful. Now then, whose turn is it to summarize the reading for today?” The students shuffled their things as they took out stapled photocopies.

“Who had the Dennett piece?” Mason asked, looking around the room.

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After the last student had left, Mason walked out into the hallway where O’Toole was waiting. Mason headed back toward his office, and O’Toole fell in with him.

“I hope you were not too bored,” Mason said in a light tone. “Oh, in case you caught it, I think I may have botched the earth science analogy in the beginning. Halfway through the lecture I realized that it may not be different types of waves that the scientists

measure, but rather the same shockwave traveling through different types of rock. It doesn't affect anything, but I don't want to be 'teaching' false things."

"Oh, no problem," O'Toole said. "And the class was fine; I wasn't bored."

Mason nodded his head in appreciation.

"So tell me," O'Toole asked after he realized Mason was not going to reply, "did you actually attend my talk a few years ago?"

"How could I forget it?" Mason asked with a large smile. "You actually invented a better mousetrap! And you made a bundle of money in the process. You symbolize America."

O'Toole blushed.

"Honestly, Mr. O'Toole, that was one of the finest talks I've ever heard at the Business School. Those MBAs learned more from your fifty minutes than from a semester in any of their classes. I'm not patronizing you; it was a wonderful talk."

The two men stopped outside Mason's office. Mason unlocked his door and opened it.

"But of course, you didn't come here to reminisce about your presentation. You want to know what I was doing in that jail cell, and why I was dressed so shabbily."

O'Toole nodded his head as he walked into the office. Mason closed the door behind him and sat down. He gestured for O'Toole to sit as well.

"The second question is easy enough: I have frequent occasions to be arrested, and I am conducting an experiment to see how my treatment by the police is influenced by my appearance. You happened to catch me on a night when I wished to appear indigent."

"And what of the first question?" O'Toole asked.

"I am a philosophical anarchist, Mr. O'Toole." Mason paused to detect any reaction from O'Toole, but found none. "I long ago promised myself that I would either live in a free society, or else be imprisoned for its advocacy. Inasmuch as I have utterly failed in the former goal, I must content myself with rather futile but nonetheless amusing protests against the government."

O'Toole thought for a moment before speaking.

“I imagine you’ve heard all sorts of objections to your beliefs.” O’Toole paused again. “You certainly seem to be quite intelligent, so I realize you must have excellent reasons for thinking the way you do...”

“Here, this should help,” Mason said as he pulled a book off of his cluttered shelves. “It’s a novel I wrote many years ago.” Mason smiled to himself. “Back when I actually thought it would make a difference.”

O’Toole took the paperback from Mason and examined it. It was a novel titled *Minerva*. As with Mason’s bowtie, black dollar signs littered the book cover’s deep red background. Aside from the title, there were no other words on the book, not even a designation for its author. And although most people would overlook the fact, O’Toole noticed that there was no ISBN bar code on the back. He opened the book but found no explanatory material on the inside cover. The book simply began with “CHAPTER ONE.”

“Not much foreplay, is there?” O’Toole asked. He was quite certain his suggestive reference would be perfectly acceptable, given the professor’s antics. As he flipped through the book, he paused at a page with just two words on it:

*For Rachael*

O'Toole didn't know what to make of this. Whether it was a device for attention or a simple error by the independent publisher, he couldn't tell.

"I was a different man when I wrote that book, Mr. O'Toole." Mason looked at O'Toole, his face full of apparently genuine anguish. "I do not mean to insult you, sir."

O'Toole raised an eyebrow. How could this charming and entertaining old man possibly *insult* him?

"But I assure you, my understanding of certain social problems is so...*clear*." Mason's voice trailed off, and again his attention seemed to leave the room. After a moment he looked back at O'Toole. "Can you possibly imagine the sheer *excitement* it would cause a cynical young economist, to realize that, in essence, the hippies were right? That the sociological analyses of John Lennon and Bob Dylan far surpassed that of my Nobel laureate colleagues?"

"And that...worst of all...what we were doing was *evil*?"

O'Toole didn't know how to respond. This was turning out to be one of the most unusual conversations in his entire life. But the old man seemed on the verge of tears, as if he were discussing the unfamiliar foibles of his deceased wife, without realizing that O'Toole had no idea what he was talking about.

Perhaps sensing his discomfort—although O'Toole was certain that his face conveyed nothing—Mason's twinkle immediately returned. "Forgive me, Mr. O'Toole. After realizing that government as we know it was completely unnecessary—actually no, after realizing that government was the *creator* of all social ills—I decided that it was my duty to bring this message to the masses. And yes, you are perfectly correct; my novel left much to be desired on the criterion of marketability. At the time I was under the impression that it would gain underground notoriety, and inevitably find its way onto everyone's night stand. But of course, the federal government still collects trillions of dollars per year."

Mason smiled broadly. "It would be quite embarrassing for me to face the true wielders of power in our society. I actually thought I would bring them to their knees, yet all I have to show for it is a tenured position at a mid-rank university." Mason looked up at his ceiling, lost in thought. "It honestly took *decades* for me to realize that these unseen enemies—the ones who controlled the politicians and the CEOs and the oil

companies and all the rest—that these nemeses were not grossly underrating me, as I so smugly thought. No,” Mason looked back at O’Toole, “these men were *amused* by me.”

There was a long pause. O’Toole finally broke it. “Well, I’ll certainly get a copy of your book. Is it...available?” O’Toole was worried about its lack of a bar code.

Mason’s face visibly drooped. “Mr. O’Toole, again I apologize. My behavior has been nothing short of obscene. You paid me the courtesy to visit and I repay you with unjustified assertions that I could indeed have been a contender. By all means, the book is yours.

“Oh, you might like this,” Mason said as he opened a drawer of his desk and flipped through a file folder. He pulled out a newspaper clipping enclosed in a transparent cover.

O’Toole took the sheet and examined it. It was a page from the *Village Verdict*, a local, artsy publication that he never read. On it was a book review of David Mason’s *Minerva*.

“It came out the year after I self-published my book,” Mason said. “Go ahead and read it; it’s quite entertaining.”

O’Toole held the article up and began to read:

*Menerva: A Review of David Mason’s cult classic*

by Tara McClare

Well what can I say? I finally broke down—“You gotta read this book, Tara! It’s *awesome!*!”—and read *Minerva*, that meticulously detailed blueprint of a parallel universe that has had right-wingers in such a tizzy all these years.

And you know what? It wasn’t half bad. We have to give Mason credit. After all, the guy’s an *economist*, for Chrissake. You know the type: Mason’s the sort of guy (and I’m not even making this stuff up, honest!) who comes up with formulas for insurance companies to calculate the dollar value of a human life (with richer people getting higher marks, of course), and who testifies before Congress on the “efficient” number of homicides per year (hint: it’s not zero).

But Mason is more than just an economist. He’s a *consistent* economist. That is, Mason takes the economist’s notion of “inefficiency”—i.e. that the status quo is B-A-D whenever the economists would prefer to live in an alternative world where we all did

things their way—to its logical conclusion, and discovers that—heavens to Betsy!—the world is full of injustice. Armed with the tools of his economic “science,” Mason pronounces moral judgment on any social arrangement falling outside the purview of a laissez-faire free market. Mason doesn’t just want to cut the government; he wants to get rid of it altogether. And, just like a certain darling Russian thinker, Mason isn’t afraid to write an entire novel just in order to smuggle his political views into the mainstream. (Elsewhere I’ve referred to these books as Trojan horse literature.)

But as I say, the book wasn’t *terrible*. Aside from their freakish endowments of craftiness (obviously Mason’s favorite trait), not to mention their generous helpings of conceit and egomania, the characters seemed fairly realistic. (Well, the *male* characters did. Fortunately, Mason only introduces one major female character, who will no doubt become an object of desire for America’s exploding population of adolescent libertarian boys. Admittedly, the book’s romantic scenes were a bit wooden, but what can you expect? An economist will argue that incentives and information costs make it better to jerk off than get a handjob.) The plot, though somewhat far fetched and interspersed with Batman and Robin cliffhangers, was interesting enough. (Of course, as a red-blooded American, Mason had to include not one but *two* wars.) And, I must say, the dialogue was rather snappy. You can even understand where Mason is coming from, given his obvious naïveté.

There is, finally, a certain *style* to Mason’s writing, which I can’t quite put my finger on. Despite the herky jerky flashbacks and uneven pacing (which at times made me wonder if Mason wrote his novel in the throes of a severe bout with diarrhea), in the book you can definitely sense shades of a Larry McMurtry and Stephen King. But the problem is, Mason’s characters are all designed to fulfill his propaganda needs. And in order to boil the message down for the faithful, the book is less a novel than a script for a Broadway show. (That might even be too kind. *Minerva* would be a *comic book* if not for Mason’s prodigious vocabulary.) Although they are undeniably clever, Mason’s characters are still artificial. Try as he might, Mason hasn’t turned out good literature, since he hasn’t tried to appeal to “us” but instead to those who are afraid of “us” and (gasp!) the decisions we might make at the ballot box.

Well, I suppose I should stop psychoanalyzing the author and get to his product. The book has some tacky stunts, like a character reading a book called *Minerva*. (That had my sci-fi acquaintance bouncing off the walls. He was convinced there should have been an “infinite ripple” from this silly ploy, like when you’re in a changing room and see a zillion of yourself in the mirror.) And for those with darker skin than mine (and no, that doesn’t include *everyone!*), be wary of a ridiculous encounter in which Mason has a character snap and appeal to every stereotype the reader might harbor. Nonetheless, the



book is entertaining in its own way, and by the end—with young Danny heading back home with his head held high—you feel as exhilarated (or not) as you would at the end of a Hitchcock movie.

In conclusion, I'm not saying David Mason's *Minerva* is bad. I'm just saying, unless you have a political science book report coming up, there are so many *better* books you could be reading.

O'Toole handed the clipping back to Mason. "I'm not so sure she liked your book."

Mason smiled. "Lovely girl, that Tara McClare. Do you know her work? She's got quite an underground following. Whether it's her looks or her talent, is harder to say."

"Oh, yes, I've certainly heard of her though I believe this is the first thing I've read, or at least, this is the first time I've read her and known it," O'Toole said, though he couldn't name a single local writer at all, let alone recognize this one.

After a slight lull, O'Toole lifted the novel and said, "Well, I'm looking forward to this..."

"Yes! Enjoy! My door is always open."

O'Toole got the sense that Mason wanted him to leave. He nodded and left the office.

As he went down the elevator, O'Toole realized that Mason had indeed wanted him to leave, but only so that he could get home and read *Minerva*.

## Four

Matt King ran a hand through his jet black, gel-stiffened hair as he examined himself in the mirror. Although only seventeen, the boy of average height and medium build could always pass himself off as much older. Matt took a step back from the mirror, ran his dazzling blue eyes up and down, and proclaimed, “The only question now is, which lucky lady is taking *this* home.”

Matt left the cramped bathroom and worked his way through the crowd back to the bar. He was wearing his East Village camo, and decided that this would best be complemented by a wine cooler. He contemplated a serious night of hogging—there was really no other word to adequately capture his present disposition—and so he would no doubt end up focusing on insecure girls. (*I seem to do that a lot. Well, practice makes perfect*, Matt thought.) Normally this beverage strategy would leave him open to wiseass comments from the dipshits who’d be hanging around the girl (or girls, if he played his cards right) Matt would end up fucking that night, but he frankly didn’t feel like that bullshit right now. He’d take the easy approach and go sit next to a girl all by herself. Matt could easily find some NYU freshman who was considered hot in her hometown but just recently realized that no matter how slutty she dressed, she still couldn’t compete in the big leagues. In that context, the chick drink would be a sign of vulnerability for Matt, and prove indispensable in getting her naked. Hell, for this kind of mission, Matt almost wished he could whip up a whitehead or two.

Matt paid with a ten and let the bartender keep the change. Overtipping on the initial drink had become a habit with him lately; of course it was more practical when he was buying mixed drinks, but what was five dollars?

Matt sipped his drink (...*which is basically pink water*...) with his right hand and leaned on the bar with his left forearm. He casually scanned the room from left to right. There were quite a few females in the room he’d gladly pound the shit out of, but, as always, there were plenty of other gents who were *also* aroused by luscious tits and tight asses. Matt really didn’t feel like starting a bidding war tonight. Not only was it an extra pain in the ass, but Matt couldn’t stand competing for some chick that *wasn’t even that*

*hot* damnit. What was the point of such a contest? That he'd be able to best some fucking frat boy who thought his football exploits would trump Matt's jokes? No, the only time to bring out the big guns would be when it was fair. Like at that upcoming party in the Hamptons, which his buddy in film school promised they could get into. There would certainly be models there—as in, girls who made a living by having people take their picture, not the fucking homemaker who tries on an apron for a K-Mart circular—and there was a good possibility some celebrities as well. So sure, doing a line of coke and getting all worked up to pick up a former Playmate—*especially* if she's getting hit on by some jazz musician—now *that* was something. But to get all competitive and cockblock some punk kids who were just trying to get laid? Why bother?

It really was funny though, the sorting that happens in a bar, Matt thought as he continued his surveillance. You'd occasionally see dorks trying to talk to girls they had no business talking to, but the girls dealt with that quite effectively. Good for the girls, but bad for Matt, since the only girls worth fucking in the bar were currently surrounded by groups of hardasses.

*If I could take a pill that made me think fat bald girls were smoking, would that be incredibly stupid or the best decision of my life?*

Matt's reflective musings left his mind the moment he saw her. *Whoa*, he thought. She was a fairly tall, skinny redhead sitting at a table in the corner, wearing tan dress slacks and a blue shirt with ruffled sleeves. Matt hadn't noticed her before since he hadn't seen any of the guys around the pool table try to talk to her. But when she walked over to the jukebox, Matt saw everyone staring at her ass, so he realized they had just been *afraid* of her. And as she turned and walked back to her table, Matt saw that she wasn't some girl, she was...a woman. *A lady*, in fact.

Matt acted quickly. He knew it was only a matter of time before one of the dipshits fantasizing about her and resolving to "talk to her after this beer" would realize he could ask her about the song she picked. As Matt walked quickly towards her, his mind raced for suitable introductory remarks. He threw back the wine cooler and left it on a table as he walked by. One of the guys sitting there yelled, "Hey thanks," to which his idiot friends laughed.

*Why is she coming here?* Matt wondered. She sat, looking perfectly content, sipping ostentatiously on her drink, which appeared to be a strawberry dacquiri. *What a little hottie!* Matt thought with amusement. *'I'm just sitting here being hot, sipping on a straw and pursing my lips just like I would do even if people weren't watching me.'* Matt chuckled.

The woman got back up and again walked over to the jukebox. *Little shy up top,* Matt thought after examining her chest. *But an ass to die for!*

The woman bent over at the jukebox and kept shifting her weight from one leg to the other, wiggling her behind in the process. As she leaned over, her shirt slid up her back and Matt could see the faintest hint of her red underwear.

Matt stopped dead in his tracks. He was absolutely flabbergasted.

*That fucking cocktease! Here she is, looking all sophisticated and elegant, and she's flaunting a fucking thong!?! Are these women INSANE??* Matt looked away for a moment to compose himself. *Okay, if that's how it's gonna be, I'm ready.*

Matt jogged over to the table and sat down opposite the woman's drink. He got the waitress' attention and motioned that he wanted her to come over. She nodded and gestured with her head to the guy who was fumbling through his wallet trying to pay her.

This exchange allowed Matt to be justifiably occupied as the woman walked toward him. She said nothing and sat down at the table, opposite Matt. Matt smiled and winked at the waitress and then turned his attention to the woman.

"Look," he said, looking sincerely into her eyes, "I hate music snobs as much as the next person, but *seriously*, if you ordered up the Eagles, I'll have no choice but to leave the room."

"If I played the Eagles then I'd be leaving the room with you," the woman answered immediately. "But I picked something from the White Album."

Matt was nonplussed by this response. It was neither an invitation nor a rejection. *Damn* he hated the chick strategy of uttering factual statements. If a girl started making things up, you could figure her out pretty quickly. But the *truth* could mean so many different things, you never knew what they were really saying. Fortunately the waitress walked over and provided a smooth exit.

“Two Jacks and cokes, please,” Matt said, looking deeply into the eyes of the waitress, as if she were the only other person in the room. In his present attire, the drink order was the only play that made sense. If he’d been dandied up and in a martini bar, that would have been something else. In any event, if the lady were quick, she might pick up on the grammatical novelty; it had worked once before.

“I detest Coca Cola,” the woman said to him, not the waitress.

“So don’t order it,” Matt answered with a slight look of puzzlement. “The Jack’s for me.”

The waitress looked worried. The woman looked up at her and said pleasantly, “I’ll have another dacquiri dear.”

As the waitress walked away, the woman and Matt looked into each other’s eyes. Matt honestly wondered if all he had to do was win a staring contest to take home this *fine* piece of ass.

“Do you want to hear something funny?” the woman asked, breaking the long silence.

“Sure,” Matt said, beginning to relax. This was actually turning out to be *pleasant*.

“Any minute now my dates for the night are going to come in that door.” The woman paused to sip on her drink, finishing it. “I promise you that they are the toughest men you will ever lay eyes upon. The reason I’m even *in* this bar is that they need to keep a low profile, since one of them killed a mobster in Chicago.”

Matt sat motionless and continued his smug, assured smile. He said nothing as the waitress came with the three drinks. He pulled out his money clip and paid with a hundred. The waitress apologized and went to get change.

“So how do you feel about that?” the woman asked cheerfully after a moment of additional silence.

Now this was quite unheard of, Matt decided. It was an incredibly bold move, but what did it mean? Was she just a fucking psycho? She didn’t seem it, but obviously, *every* guy who goes home with a genuine nutcase doesn’t realize he’s going to get his dick chopped off in his sleep.

Matt looked up into the air and chuckled. He extended his hand. "Where are my manners? Matt King, a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Tara McClare, how exhilarating to make yours," the woman said, shaking two of his fingers. Suddenly she looked over his shoulder and elation broke over her face. "Jim!" she yelled and waved her arm.

Matt's stomach fell. *Oh fuck it*, he thought as he slowly turned his head to see who this Jim cat was.

And towards him strode a black guy who looked like a Raiders lineman and a white guy who was built of brick. *Okay, so they just might eat me.*

"Hello boys, I want you to meet Matt King," Tara said. Jim and Quinn looked at Matt. Their faces were completely without expression. Even Matt was surprised by what happened next.

"You fellas both know you shouldn't be here," he said in a mature and confident voice, his eyes slowly moving back and forth between theirs. He completely ignored Tara. "Now I happen to like this place, so if you walk out right now, I'll wait a minute before I make any calls."

Quinn was alarmed. He kept track of King's hands while he surveyed the bar. No one else seemed to be with him, but then again, he hardly expected the Caruzzis to be sloppy a second time.

Jim saw Quinn stiffen and instinctively took a step closer to King. He wanted to smother him if King went for his pockets. Quinn noticed Jim's step and worried that Jim had noticed something.

Tara was smirking and couldn't stop a slight giggle from escaping her lips. Matt thought it was slight enough that the two men wouldn't have recognized it.

"Did I not make myself clear?" Matt demanded. He stared at Quinn. "*You* are going to take your nigger bodyguard and *leave*." Matt pointed to the door.

Quinn was barely looking at King. For the life of him he couldn't spot anyone in the bar, but nonetheless he decided that a straight shot for the door would be his best bet. Except for the pool table, there was really no cover to speak of, and there probably wouldn't be a window in the bathroom.

Now *this* really made no sense to Matt. He could have understood them leaving or, more likely, them kicking the everliving shit out of him. But they were just *standing there*, staring at the floor!

Matt reached across the table and grabbed Tara's slender glass. He had practiced with beer bottles and thought (...*yep*...) that he could break it on the side of his head (being careful to snap his wrist back immediately after striking). He literally snarled at the men as he brandished the jagged half of the glass.

Tara couldn't help it. She burst into laughter.

After a few moments, the men still had made no move, and continued to stare off into the distance. Matt shrugged, put the glass down, and used his two small napkins to sop up some of the spilled dacquiri. He looked back up at the men.

"Okay you got me. Whaddya drinkin?"

It dawned on Quinn that the boy had been trying to pick up Tara. He felt quite foolish. Jim looked at him and they both started laughing.

"We've got an extra Jack and coke if either of you would like that," Tara offered helpfully as she slid over to the chair by the wall, leaving hers open for Quinn.

## Five

O'Toole glanced around the small, makeshift church as Mason spoke. The teenagers and younger children were hot and bored. A brother and sister argued until their mother hushed them. The adults, most of them still dressed from work, politely paid attention.

“...and that is why, paradoxical as it may sound, minimum wage laws and other regulations are actually used by labor unions to drive wages up for white workers, while at the same time they create inner city unemployment by making unskilled labor artificially expensive.” Mason scanned the crowd and saw many cynical faces. “Think of it this way: Suppose the government decided to place a \$10 surtax on every purchase people made at McDonalds. Would they be able to sell as many Big Macs? Of course not, just like teenagers with no job experience can't get hired, since their labor isn't worth the minimum wage. What do you think such a surtax would do to the prices at *Burger King*? They'd go up, just like union wages go up because of labor laws. If McDonalds is forced to charge \$12 or so for a burger, you can bet that Burger King will raise its prices too. It's the same with union labor.

“So if you want to help poor workers, the best thing to do is take politics out of the system. Let everyone get a job who's willing to work. Yes, they'll start out with low wages. But those with initiative will quickly gain skills and earn promotions, or move to a better job. The way it is now, unskilled workers can't even get their foot in the door. Yes, if they could *get* a job, all of the government's mandated goodies would be nice. But your work benefits, mandated or not, are simply paid for out of your paycheck. Businesses don't hire you if you're going to lose them money. Here, as elsewhere, the politicians make wonderful speeches, but in the end implement policies that benefit their rich corporate contributors, to the detriment of disenfranchised workers.”

O'Toole looked at the congregation. As the only other white in the room, he was conscious of the reception to the professor's strong opinions. O'Toole was particularly worried that Mason was coming across as extremely naïve, or worse, extremely patronizing. But Mason was at least doing an excellent job in appearing *earnest*, O'Toole



noted with approval. Of course the introduction by the Reverend, explaining that Mason had been his “favorite teacher of all time,” had certainly been helpful. Even so, it was Mason himself who established his sincerity (if not accuracy), by constantly stressing that he shared the goals of the church members, and merely disagreed with the conventional solutions.

“And finally, we turn to our nation’s horrible War on Drugs, or War on *Some* Drugs as they say.” Mason paused as the room chuckled. “Now I’m sure many of you have heard what I am about to say in one form or another, but I think it bears repeating: Yes, illegal narcotics are potentially dangerous, and drug abuse is a tragedy. I respect any organization that educates the public about these issues, and I expect all good parents to teach their children to respect their bodies and their minds.

“However, it is immoral and simply impractical to order men with guns to eliminate drug use. The government sends heavily armed agents into your neighborhoods, with the authority to break down doors and shoot anyone who frightens them. These heavily armed agents will then kidnap at gunpoint any drug dealers they find, holding them prisoner in a small room for decades. After all this, of *course* the drug trade is violent. It is the government—the biggest gang in the world—which has introduced violence into the drug industry. For those of you familiar with American history, you know that gangsters shot each other over moonshine during Prohibition. But nowadays, when the production and sale of alcohol is perfectly legal, it would be absurd for the CEO of Budweiser to order a drive-by shooting of the board members of Heineken.

“I realize this seems cold-hearted.” Mason thought he had captured the interest of several men in the audience, but he could tell many of the women were horrified by his remarks. “But you must face reality. Yes, it would certainly solve many problems if we could snap our fingers and eliminate drug abuse. But we simply *can’t* do that. Even if we executed all convicted drug dealers, millions of Americans would still find a way to support their habit. Think about what we’re actually saying: Our present solution to inner city drug use is to give a bunch of young white guys guns.

“Oh, perhaps you’re worried about drug-related crimes? Well, if you don’t want people robbing old ladies to finance a cocaine habit, the absolute *worst* thing to do is

drive up the street price of cocaine by a factor of fifty. Yet this is exactly what our drug policy *aims* to do, to make drugs incredibly expensive.”

Mason glanced at his watch. He had to wrap up his talk.

“In conclusion, I would like to thank you, and Pastor Jones, for this opportunity. As a group who has suffered injustices both historical and current, the African American community does not need to be told the evil and hypocrisy of which our very own government is capable. There is nothing magical about democracy if many of the voters are ignorant and bigoted. What I have tried to sketch for you today is the argument that the same cruelty, dishonesty, and injustice that your community has experienced in the form of police brutality are characteristic of *all* government actions. You realize that ‘the system’ doesn’t work when it comes to foreign policy or law enforcement. So why do you think it’s any better at curing poverty or educating children?

“The challenges your community faces will only be solved when the racist government removes the remaining shackles from your people, and allows individuals to improve their own lives and others’ through peaceful means. Thank you and have a wonderful night.”

Mason squinted his face into a cheerful smile and left the podium. As per his arrangement with Jones, he wasn’t going to field questions from the audience. His purpose had been to plant a framework in the minds of the young teenagers who were only half-listening. The older he got, the more Mason believed that longer investment periods were just as productive in the field of ideas as they were in the production of commodities. A thirty minute talk today would have virtually no effect on the adults who heard it, and had to return to their daily routine of work and caring for children. But if Mason had planted a firm seed in just *one* child’s mind, the eventual payoff would make his speech well worth the effort.

\* \* \*

“Well, how did I do?” Mason asked as he and O’Toole walked to the car, parked across the street from the V.F.W. building. They had taken Mason’s old Toyota, since O’Toole had been uncertain of the neighborhood.

“I think you did as well as could be expected,” O’Toole said. “I was glad you didn’t use the A-word. I would’ve bolted for the door.”

“Come now, Mr. O’Toole, you need to learn to relish a good confrontation.”

“Nope, controversy is your department.” O’Toole unlocked the passenger door and then walked around to the driver’s side. “What *I* have to do is *sell*.”

“And how are your preparations coming?” Mason asked once they had buckled their seatbelts.

“Pretty well, I think.” O’Toole started the car. “I’m still a bit shaky on the children issue.”

“That should be an easy one,” Mason said with excitement, “since the government harms children more than any other group. Just point to the public school system, and the horrible foster care system. I have dozens of newspaper clippings in my office if you’d like some anecdotes.”

“Nah, I’m thinking more about...” O’Toole’s voice trailed off as he switched lanes on the busy road. “...is it in some sense *wrong* to abuse children in an anarchist society?”

“Of course it’s wrong,” Mason replied immediately. “Surely you don’t need a group of legislators to teach you morality.”

O’Toole laughed. “Okay, that’s not what I meant. I’m asking, how exactly do you penalize people for child abuse?”

“First, keep in mind that there doesn’t need to be ‘an’ answer to that. There are all sorts of mechanisms available to a free people to influence their world. Most obvious, parents wouldn’t send their children to schools or daycare facilities unless they possessed a solid reputation. Just as with abortion, people with particularly strong beliefs could form homogeneous communities in which all members signed a contract specifying the penalties for improper behavior. And the most elegant solution,” Mason said with a twinkle, “is the baby market. With no paternalistic regulation, adoptive couples would be allowed to offer thousands of dollars to mothers to give up their babies. This would probably eliminate child abuse altogether, since abusive parents would most likely sell their unwanted children to loving buyers.”

O'Toole smiled. "You know what? That will be our little secret. If anyone asks about children, I'll handle it."

"Fine with me," Mason said as he stared out the window.

## Six

“Yummy ass,” Tara whispered after leaning over.

“Hush!” Amy whispered back, jabbing Tara with her elbow and giggling. The plump woman was always exhilarated to be doing anything outside the office with Tara, but *still!* Sometimes Tara could be so immature. O’Toole, dressed in a fabulous Armani suit, turned back to face the audience.

“And so you see, if we guarantee them the tonnage figures I discussed earlier, they can profitably add us to a shipping route. And once we’ve got *that*, it means anyone else living on the island can ship items as cheaply as from anywhere else in the world.” O’Toole paused and then remembered to add, “You might have to wait longer, of course, for your product to get somewhere; but the point is, you’d pay the same to ship it.

“And so,” O’Toole continued, “if a business operation (1) only uses low-skill labor, (2) makes a product with a relatively high price per cubic foot, and (3) already serves an international market, then I’d bet you good money that this business could double its profits by relocating to our island.

“I have to tell you folks,” O’Toole said as he looked at the crowd, who put only a dent in the large auditorium, “I’m very excited about this. For those of you who’ve read Professor Mason’s book,” O’Toole said, raising a copy of *Minerva*, “you understand what we’re about to do. We are going to have the world’s first truly *free* economy. Our banking institutions will be completely private, offering security for their customers that will make Switzerland look like Russia. As you can read in the corporate charter, there is absolutely no power to establish an official currency or to regulate money in any way. And although no one would be forced to use it, I agree with Professor Mason that businessmen in today’s world of rampant inflation will once again adopt gold as the international money par excellence. Foreign investment will be *flooding* our shores.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” O’Toole said as he beamed at the crowd, “what I want you to picture is this: Suppose that an old wizard lived on a small island in the Pacific. Now when he grew very old, that wizard cast a spell, so that when the villagers buried his body in their native soil, the wizard’s magic would spread throughout the land. From that

moment on, anyone who grew crops, or made shoes, or went fishing, discovered something absolutely magical! You see, every night, when all the villagers went to sleep, the wizard's power would cause all of the day's harvest, or all of the cobbler's shoes, or all of the fishermen's catch, to *double in size*.

"Now as you can imagine," O'Toole said matter-of-factly, "word of this spread pretty quickly throughout the world. Foreigners came from all over to set up their own experiments. And sure enough, when the manufacturers of stereo equipment started producing speakers and tape decks, they found that every night the units made during that day would magically double. And the manufacturers lived happily ever after. The End."

The audience laughed. Even Tara had to chuckle.

"Now folks, what's the point of my little story? Simple: Professor Mason over there is the old wizard on his deathbed"—everyone laughed as Mason feigned outrage—"and a fair and stable business climate is going to be our magic. We already *have* the stereo manufacturers on board; they've already invested millions both in the Minerva Corporation and in their own manpower programs. They've really done the hard part: Dealing with the shippers, food vendors, construction companies, and so on. The Minerva Corporation is a *go*. It's going to happen, and these joint owners are *going* to be turning a profit in eighteen months, and they're *going* to earn millions within the first five years.

"So the only question remaining is this: Do *you* want to be a part of it? I personally am putting all of my own money into buying as much land from the Minerva Corporation as I can. The way I see it, Minerva's purchase from the Lotosian government is the exact same thing that happened when the Europeans bought Manhattan Island from the Indians for under thirty bucks.

"I know it seems too good to be true. But the prospectus is right here; you can see that what we're doing is perfectly legal"—as he said this, O'Toole wondered if bribing two Senate committee chairs were "perfectly legal"—"and legitimate. The reason I'm coming to you here, rather than holding an IPO, is simple: Only the truly *perceptive* can understand the significance of this. You are all here because I knew you'd at least understand the *potential* of what I'm showing you.

“Of course there are risks. That’s true of any investment opportunity. But for a mere thousand dollars, you can buy a parcel of land in what’s going to be the new Hong Kong. Now when the rest of the world catches on, and everybody realizes how lucrative this project is going to be, *everyone* is going to want to move their business to our island. And if, at that time, you were smart and bought some of this land, you can sit back and earn the generous rental payments for the use of your property, or you can choose to sell your parcel to the highest bidder. How much more than one thousand dollars do you think you’ll be able to get for it? How much did the price of Manhattan real estate go up?”

“In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I know I am personally not looking at this as a business venture, but as a way of insuring myself. You see, I like to fancy myself a savvy businessman. And I know that if I passed up this chance, and twenty-five years from now the little island off the coast of Lotos ends up as an economic powerhouse, I would just have to *kick* myself in the rear.”

*Can I do it?* Tara thought with a smile.

\* \* \*

“Thank you,” Tara said as O’Toole handed her a mug of coffee. Tara proceeded to fill it with six packets of sugar.

“I’m almost afraid to read your story,” O’Toole said with a smile. “After your review of Mason’s book, I’d hate to hear what you think of my vulgar commercialism.”

“You actually read my review?” Tara asked with surprise.

“Yes, I can read papers other than the *Wall Street Journal*,” O’Toole answered.

“Well, I wrote that a long time ago.” Tara recalled the joyous certainty she’d felt at that stage of her life.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I *loved* your review, and so did Mason.” O’Toole sipped from his own coffee.

“He did?” Tara snapped out of her daydream. “What did he say?”

“Oh, I don’t remember exactly,” O’Toole said, wishing to divert the conversation.

“‘Lovely girl’ or something like that.”

Tara's face drooped. "Oh, he was just being sarcastic then." Her face lit back up. "Anyway, don't you worry Mr. Peter O'Toole, I pledge that I will not make fun of your speech." She quickly added, "But I make no promises about your name."

"Oh I get it," O'Toole said with mock cynicism. "Let's blame someone for the name his parents chose. Believe it or not, you aren't the first person to notice that connection. I think this is the point where I say, 'Do you want some coffee with your sugar?'"

"Aww don't be a bad sport about it," Tara said. "C'mon, what was the best one you ever heard?"

"Hmm." O'Toole thought for a moment. "Well, it wasn't a movie reference, but someone once told me that my name was doubly phallic, and I thought that was pretty good. As it turns out, several years later, I heard that some comedian had said the same thing about the actor, so I'm sure this guy just stole the line."

Tara smiled, not at the anecdote, but at O'Toole's reference to "the actor," when most people would have said "the real Peter O'Toole" or "*the* Peter O'Toole."

"Well, I've got a friend waiting, so we should really get started." Tara looked over her notes. "Okay Mr. O'Toole, what in the world made you work on a new mousetrap?"

O'Toole smiled. The clichés were coming fast and furious today.

"My neighbor bought a trap for outdoor rodents that was basically a big box with a one-way door. You placed bait inside, the animal would walk in to get the food, the door would close behind it, and the animal was stuck inside.

"So I thought that was a great idea. But the box had clear walls, maybe so the rodent could see the bait; I don't know. So what I did was adapt the concept for an indoor mousetrap, using a much smaller box made out of cheap plastic. The plastic was opaque so that a housewife wouldn't have to look at the dead mouse inside. I put holes in the box so the mice could still smell the bait, and I put a handle on the top so the housewife could pick the whole thing up and throw it out without touching anything that a mouse might have.

"I offered it in various sizes." O'Toole always slipped into his sales swing when someone asked him about the Trap Door. "Those glue traps you can buy simply aren't



effective against big enough rats. And those are *precisely* the kind that you don't want to have sprawled on your kitchen floor with a broken neck from using a more traditional trap."

"Very interesting," Tara said, glancing at the notes she'd jotted on her pad. She looked up, "Do you always focus on housewives so much, Mr. Peter O'Toole?"

\* \* \*

"...and so what we're doing is a win-win situation. The Lotosian mainland gets a much needed injection of cash to maintain law and order during its tragic civil war, and we help entrepreneurs crank out products with lower prices for the consumer. We've hired legal experts to go over the deal. Under international law, the Minerva Corporation is technically buying the political sovereignty of the island from the government of Lotos. It just so happens that, as specified clearly in the corporate charter, the Minerva Corporation will choose *not* to exercise any of its internationally recognized powers. It will be as if someone ran for President, but signed a legally binding contract with everyone in the U.S. agreeing *not* to sign any bills once in office."

Tara nodded as she finished jotting her notes. She placed the pad on the table to her right, placed her elbows on her thighs while folding her hands, and rested her chin on her fingers.

"You've sold me," she said. "My father has a large stake in the paper. I can cut you a check immediately for, say, \$250,000?"

O'Toole was stunned but didn't show it. Throughout the interview, Tara's frequent smirks and grunts had made him certain that she found the proposal ridiculous. Before he could respond, Tara spoke.

"There's just one condition." Tara sat back in her chair, arching her back into perfect posture.

"Yes?" O'Toole asked.

"I'll only give you the check tomorrow morning..." Tara paused to allow O'Toole's mind to dare. "...in my hotel room."

O'Toole stood up. "Thank you for your generous offer, Miss McClare." He walked over to the door and opened it. "Were we in Nevada, perhaps things would be different. But as I have repeatedly emphasized, what we're doing here is raising funds for a completely legitimate business venture. I thank you again for taking time out of your schedule and I look forward to reading your story."

Tara grunted, grabbed her things, and headed for the open door, which led back to the auditorium. She stared at O'Toole with amusement as she walked out of the makeshift office, but said nothing more to him.

## Seven

“Hello David, come in.”

Mason entered the apartment, which was small even for Manhattan, and began pacing violently. O’Toole closed the door.

“Do you know a Mark Knolton?” Mason asked.

“No-o-o...” O’Toole responded, wondering where this was going.

“Mark Knolton is a former student who just happens to be on the construction crew at the main harbor.” Mason paused to compose himself. “Before he left, I asked him to keep a journal on the development of the island, as detailed as possible. I promised him it would one day be famous, in the same category as Anne Frank’s diary.” Mason chuckled but without amusement. “In retrospect, that was an excellent analogy.”

O’Toole folded his arms. He now had an idea of what this was about.

“This morning I received a letter from Mark.” Mason stopped pacing long enough to look at O’Toole. “It seems Minerva employees have an interesting way of dealing with the indigenous population.”

“You’ll have to fill me in,” O’Toole said after an awkward silence. “Mr. Knolton didn’t send me a carbon copy.”

“Well, it’s quite simple, really.” Mason resumed his pacing. “You may recall the provision in the original sale; you *should* recall it, since it was the one thing upon which I specifically insisted.”

O’Toole took a step back and leaned against the wall. This *was* going where he thought it would.

“In that provision,” Mason continued, “any Lotosian living on the island retained his property rights as dictated by custom. The Minerva Corporation was only buying the land owned by the *Lotosian government*; it was not to restrict the privileges of the native islanders whatsoever, unless they voluntarily agreed to sell their land over to Minerva.”

“Yes, I remember those details,” O’Toole said after another silence.

“Well, as I say, it seems the Minervan employees have a rather broad definition of the word *voluntary*,” Mason said with a sneer. “Apparently islanders are much more

likely to sell their property and move to the mainland, when masked men set fire to their huts in the middle of the night.”

*Damn*, O’Toole thought. He was hoping the college kid hadn’t known about the fires.

“Okay David, I want you to calm down.” O’Toole uncrossed his arms and motioned with his hands to indicate that Mason should relax. “I understand your concerns. But you have to understand, it wouldn’t have worked to do it your way.”

Mason’s eyes narrowed.

“David, listen to me. Don’t you think I would’ve done it your way if I could? We’re not talking about a few flower gardens in a corner of the island. We’re talking about villagers scattered all over. We’re talking about ‘customary’ rights to river access and to certain fishing locations. The government of Lotos nominally owned the entire island, and that’s what we bought. Under international law, six months ago the Lotosian president could have ordered everyone to relocate to the mainland. At least this way, they get paid to do it. For a lot of these people, we gave them over a year’s wages.”

Mason looked genuinely puzzled. “When we settled on the island, you told me it could be done.”

“I thought it could.” O’Toole looked at Mason for a long time before continuing. “The information I had was inaccurate. The report obviously was written from a Western viewpoint. I thought their property law was compatible with ours, and I thought we only had to convince a few elders to go along with us. But as it turns out, the tribal leaders either would not or could not order their people to move.

“David,” O’Toole pleaded. “You can’t build a factory on plots of land that aren’t contiguous. Did you really think we’d find somewhere inhabitable that no else had found before us?”

Mason said nothing and headed for the door. O’Toole opened it and closed it behind him as Mason left the apartment.

A heavy despair settled on Mason as he waited for the elevator. He should have known better than to trust someone else—even O’Toole—with something so important. Mason had waited his entire life for an opportunity like this, yet O’Toole couldn’t take

the time to check his facts. But it wasn't O'Toole's fault, really; he had no idea of the ramifications of his incompetence.

It didn't matter anymore. The fact was that now, regardless of the unprecedented freedom and prosperity made possible by Minerva, critics would forever have an unbeatable trump card: Minerva stole its land.

Safely behind the elevator doors, Mason began to weep.

\* \* \*

"Yep," O'Toole said as he nodded to the bartender. The argument with David had greatly upset him, and for the first time in almost a year O'Toole found himself drowning in Guinness.

Didn't David realize that O'Toole had been trying to *protect* him? Once the wheels were in motion, O'Toole couldn't have stopped Callahan from doing what he did. At that point, better to shield Mason from it entirely, so at least *his* conscience could be clear.

One couldn't really blame Callahan, O'Toole mused. Callahan was in this for the money, and he expected expropriation in five to seven years. So he certainly couldn't be expected to deal politely with the villagers.

*But why the fires?* O'Toole shook his head. *Maybe he's just bitter about his name.* O'Toole chuckled: Eugene Callahan *was* an unlikely name for a corporate baron.

O'Toole glanced down at the paper. He had been picking up *Verdicts* ever since Tara McClare's payment of the full \$250,000 had come in. Although not particularly interested in the topics of her articles, O'Toole could certainly appreciate McClare's style. Her articles exuded sex appeal as shamelessly as she did in person. And O'Toole was especially amused by the professional look, complete with glasses that were probably not even prescription, that McClare had adopted for her picture. O'Toole wondered if the paper would have even *had* the staff photos at the end of every issue, if not for Tara McClare's looks and her father's position.

“Ooh, we like her around here,” the bartender said as he placed the fresh beer in front of O’Toole. “Tara McClare comes in just about every week. She lives right down the street.”

“I know,” O’Toole answered.

“Oh, you’re one of *those* guys? A real fan, huh?” The bartender chuckled. The smartest thing the owner ever did was give Tara McClare and Guest a bottomless tab. When Tara got loaded and started dancing by the jukebox, nobody left the bar. The bartender chuckled again, recalling the night Jack had been too drunk to stand and so Tara had grabbed a beautiful woman at a nearby table to dance. Several men had lined up at the pay phone to call their friends at that point.

“I don’t know what you mean,” O’Toole said. “I’m supposed to meet her here tomorrow night. Today I was a bit thirsty after a business meeting, so I came here to check the place out.”

O’Toole wondered for a moment why he had offered that explanation to the bartender. He realized that he’d been preparing for an encounter with Tara, even though she was supposed to be out of town until the next morning.

“You talk as if it’s a *date*,” the bartender said with a smile. “If I had a dime for every time Tara McClare invited a guy here as a treat, and he thought he was getting more than just the free drinks... Heh.”

“So she comes here with a lot of men?” O’Toole asked, taking care to sound unconcerned with the answer.

“Oh, well, yes.” The bartender seemed uncomfortable. “But really, it’s not like that. I shouldn’t have said anything; Tara’s—Miss McClare is a wonderful girl. I was just saying that it was *funny* how fellas—and I don’t mean you, of course, I’m just making an observation—look so pleased with themselves, sitting at a table and drinking beers with Tara McClare, and then Jack—that’s Jack Quinn, Tara’s boyfriend—will walk in and pull up a chair.”

“Hmm, I don’t think she’s mentioned a boyfriend,” O’Toole said. The bartender smiled.

“She usually doesn’t.” The bartender added, “But that means she must like you.”

“Ah, how reassuring,” O’Toole said with a grin. After a slight pause he asked, “So what’s this Jack Quinn like?”

The bartender actually threw back his head and laughed.

“Mister, Jack Quinn is *the* toughest man you will ever lay eyes on.”

“Oh really?” O’Toole finally took a sip of his beer. “And why is that?”

“Well,” the bartender said, “I can tell you a story, but you really need to keep it under your hat.”

O’Toole nodded.

“The thing is, normally I wouldn’t say anything—and you’ll see why—but I’d hate for you to go into this without knowing what you’re up against.” The bartender lifted up his index finger to indicate that he would resume the story as soon as he dealt with a customer at the other end of the bar.

As he returned, O’Toole considered interrupting to make it clear that he was not “up against” anything at all; he was just answering an invitation from Tara McClare to meet for drinks. But the bartender seemed particularly anxious to tell his story, something he had apparently done many times before.

“As I was saying,” the bartender said quietly, “Jack and Tara used to live in Chicago. Jack was mostly staying out of trouble, but his one weakness is his temper. There were a few incidents, all minor, and before he knew it, Jack had a little problem with some local mafiosos.

“Now this one night, Jack and Tara were in a small restaurant eating dinner. In comes three guys: a made man and his two goons.”

O’Toole nodded his head to show his interest in the tale. The bartender was becoming excited. It was obviously his favorite story.

“Now this is important, you have to understand the seating.” The bartender paused to make sure O’Toole was listening. “Jack and Tara were at a small table, both sitting on the booth side. The boss’s nephew—sorry but I really can’t say his name—walked up and sat down at a chair directly opposite them. The two goons each pulled up a chair and sat on the left and right side of the table.”

Quinn and Tara had had their backs facing the wall. After they sat down, Caruzzi's men had placed their hands on the table, using their gloves to conceal the revolvers.

“Come on without, come on within,” Eddie Caruzzi said, “well well well, it's the mighty Quinn.”

“What do you want?” Quinn asked. Tara instinctively slid closer to Quinn.

“What does any man want, Jack? To sit and have a drink with a beautiful woman.” With this Caruzzi flashed a toothy smile at Tara and wiggled his eyebrows.

Quinn dropped his eyes just enough to examine the table. The two men were both right-handed. They had both laid their guns flat on the table, barrel pointing straight out, away from their stomachs. Each man gripped his revolver with his right hand, while laying his left forearm and hand on top. For his part, Caruzzi's hands were empty; he was using them while he talked.

“Can anyone here tell me,” Caruzzi asked as he flagged a waitress, “why there are so many Irish cops?”

“Because they're born pigs?” the man to Caruzzi's left answered.

“Because they're into bondage,” declared the other man.

“Excellent answers, all around,” Caruzzi congratulated his men. “But specifically, the reason there are so many Irish cops...”

Caruzzi slammed his hands down onto the table. People at nearby tables stole glances at the unfolding scene.

Caruzzi leaned forward and said in a steady voice, “The reason there are so many Irish cops, is that the Irish are **so fucking stupid**, that when they all came here on a boat **since they couldn't grow anything besides a fucking potato**, they found out that being a cop was the only job they could **get**.”

Quinn sat back and tilted his head down. He wanted to see if the table were bolted to the floor.

“Nope, nothing down here,” Caruzzi said, sticking his head under the table. “No guns taped to the underside, sorry.” Caruzzi once again leaned on the table. “And it's well known that Jack Quinn doesn't carry a piece.”



That much was true. In addition to the frequent hassles with the police, there was too much temptation to snap. Quinn had long ago decided that he would walk around without a gun because, frankly, a man should be able to walk around his hometown without a gun.

“Are you listening to me, you piece of shit?” Caruzzi hissed, as Quinn continued to show no appreciation of the gravity of the situation. “I know you’re a real badass, aren’t ya.” Caruzzi paused to regain his composure. He was a made man, now, and he had to control his sarcastic urges in situations like this. If nothing else, he had to let his *men* know that he was now a higher form of life.

Quinn suppressed a grin as he scanned the restaurant. He was quite sure Caruzzi and his men were alone, but with Tara present Quinn wanted to be careful.

“But though you may possess a certain street reputation, you shouldn’t forget who *runs* the streets, Mr. Quinn.” Caruzzi thought that was a nice touch. “Now how many times do I have to tell you? *Leave Chicago.*”

*So much TIME*, Quinn thought as he rested his right palm on Tara’s left hip, with his fingers bent back towards the wall.

“How long are you going to just sit there and *stare* at me, you ugly motherfucker?” Caruzzi demanded.

Quinn said nothing.

“Do you think I’m *bluffing*? You think mob shit is just in the *movies*?” Caruzzi turned to address Tara. “Hey twinkle tits, listen up: I know how much you must love the eggplants, going to clubs with Jim Knight like you do. Well it’s your lucky day: See, if your boyfriend doesn’t get the **fuck out of Chicago** by next week, I am going to *personally* arrange for you to have five healthy black cocks—”

“Julie!” Quinn suddenly yelled over Caruzzi’s left shoulder, a look of hilarity on his face. “Your nipple’s showing!”

Automatically, Caruzzi’s men glanced at the bar. Caruzzi turned his head left but suddenly felt very uneasy.

Quinn squeezed his hand tightly into Tara, and threw her off the bench. In the same motion he leaned forward, stuck out his index finger and jammed its tip into Caruzzi’s right eye. He then stared at the center of the table as he brought his hands

down. He simultaneously found both right wrists and with a quick jerk tilted them up. The two men, after spending years emulating fictional gangsters and knowing that the slow were the dead, did the obvious thing when each saw the other's revolver pointed at his chest: They pulled their triggers.

After the shots Quinn quickly let go of the wrists and punched a stunned Caruzzi in the chest, knocking him out of his chair and onto the floor. Quinn flipped the table out of the way and took a step forward as Caruzzi shuffled away on the floor.

*Oh, he'll show me where it is*, Quinn thought as Caruzzi's right hand traveled up his coat and slid inside. Quinn pounced, placing one knee on Caruzzi's chest while he threw open his coat. He found the gun, a small automatic. Quinn pulled his elbow back past his head, then brought the gun forward in a quick thrust, jabbing it into Caruzzi's mouth and smashing teeth in the process.

"Now Cyclops, you listen to *me*." Quinn leaned over with his face only a few inches from Caruzzi. He whispered. "You make sure you tell your uncle that *you* fucked with *me*. And then you tell him, that if anything should *ever* happen to Tara, I'm gonna hurt you *for real*."

Quinn's fury was broken by a light hand on his shoulder.

"Johnny, we need to *go*," Tara commanded.

As they ran out the door, Quinn glanced back at the floor. The man to the right of Caruzzi didn't look like he was going to make it. *Damn*.

## Eight

O'Toole poured Tara another glass of wine. He couldn't take his eyes off of her; in the dim candlelight she was absolutely stunning.

"But I just don't understand," O'Toole said, "how you could...*associate* with someone like that."

O'Toole was very interested in the exact nature of Tara and Quinn's relationship. He lately had been plagued by a string of "bad luck," and O'Toole couldn't help but be suspicious. It was not a matter of jealousy but simple prudence.

In the beginning it hadn't really mattered. O'Toole hadn't touched a woman since the crash, and he had doubted if he ever would again. The physical urges had naturally resumed, but he just didn't feel the whole thing was *worth it* anymore. So he thought the outings with Tara, though replete with innuendo, were harmless; he knew *he* wasn't going to pursue the matter. And he had assumed that someone like Tara McClare would stop inviting him once she'd filled in the details of her personality sketch, and moved on to somebody else new and interesting.

But after the fourth session of free drinks (and the second of jukebox dancing), things had changed. As she pulled up to his apartment on that night (because of Tara's taunting, O'Toole had had far too much to drive himself home), Tara had thrown her pink Mustang into Park and jumped in O'Toole's lap.

"Does this make you uncomfortable?" Tara asked. "I can move."

"N-no, it's fine," O'Toole said. He stared into her eyes.

"Can I ask you something?" Tara queried.

"Ask away," O'Toole said, and nervously drummed his fingers on the door.

"If we were shipwrecked on a desert island," Tara asked, "would you kiss me *then*?"

O'Toole was speechless. After a moment it occurred to him that this was in fact an invitation.

“Oh!” Tara exclaimed after a moment of necking. She looked down. “It seems we have a visitor.”

“Uh,” O’Toole fumbled, “yes, that’s my friend. It’s been a while since I’ve done this, so he’s a little eager.”

“Hmm...Maybe someday I’ll meet your friend,” Tara said and they resumed necking.

O’Toole put down his menu.

“They tell me the lobster bisque is ‘to die for,’” he said and smiled.

“That’s what they say about cigarettes,” Tara said without looking up from her menu.

“Okay!” she said after another moment. She put down the menu. “I know what I’m having.”

“Good,” O’Toole said, declining to ask Tara her selection. He didn’t want to encourage the idea that deciding on a meal was a big event. “Now you can finally answer my question.”

“What do you want me to say?” Tara asked. “He’s an intriguing man. He’s so...” Tara looked up in the air, a slight smile on her lips.

O’Toole braced himself for the worst: rugged, solid, sexy, masculine.

“...*honest*.” Tara looked back at O’Toole, with the same expression she’d had after choosing her entrée. “Yes, that’s what it is: John Quinn is very honest. Unlike *some* people, who will say anything to make a sale...” Tara pursed her lips and paused, pretending she did not see the implication for O’Toole. “But unlike *those* types of people, John Quinn is a *real person*, and that’s a very rare thing to find.”

“He’s also a *real criminal*,” O’Toole answered in the same tone.

“Whoa ho *ho!*” Tara said and laughed. “You violate international agreements to start a colony with a right-wing *anarchist*, and you’re telling me I shouldn’t associate with John Quinn?”

“I am not telling you what you should or shouldn’t do,” O’Toole said. “I’m just curious how a responsible woman can be attr—involved with someone like that.”

“He’s very spontaneous,” Tara said after a moment of silence. “He doesn’t worry about the future. He makes you feel as if nothing could be more enjoyable than the present moment. Not at all like *you*, who lays out his clothes for the week.”

“I don’t ‘lay my clothes out,’” O’Toole said and emptied his glass. “I just hang them up in the right order when I get home from the cleaners.”

“The words of a heroin addict—I take it all back!” Tara said and signaled the waitress by pointing at the empty bottle of wine.

“Don’t worry, you’re just as spontaneous as John Quinn,” Tara said, and leaned over to pat O’Toole’s knee. As she said it, she recalled the night in Paris.

Quinn had left the country immediately following the Caruzzi incident. At his urging, Tara had taken off from work and toured Europe with him.

“Any trouble at the airport?” Quinn asked once they were settled in the taxi. He had arranged for several friends to watch Tara, but providing protection for someone who didn’t even want it was quite difficult.

“Nope. And no rusted vans pulled up when I went jogging,” Tara said contemptuously.

“Good then,” Quinn said, tossing one of Tara’s gloves onto the floor by her feet. “Welcome to Paris.”

Quinn leaned over to pick up the glove. As he did, he pulled up Tara’s skirt just enough to expose her left knee. He kissed it gently.

“Driver?” Quinn said as he popped his head up. “How long until the hotel?”

“About fifteen minutes,” the driver replied.

“Make it thirty,” Quinn said, tossing a hundred dollar bill onto the front seat.

“So how does it work then?” O’Toole asked. “You run around with the bad boys, then you catch your breath with the nice guys?”

“I’m not sure,” Tara said with puzzlement in her brow. She folded her hands and rested her chin on them. “Which one are you?”

“I am *definitely* a nice guy,” O’Toole said.

“But that’s just what a bad boy would say. He’d break my heart, wouldn’t he?” Tara said, nodding her head.

O’Toole just smiled. He had quickly learned Tara had too much energy to be beaten in a battle of wits.

O’Toole’s attention wandered from Tara’s conversation as he tried to plan something spontaneous. He could easily persuade the staff to accommodate him; a simple story about his desire to propose, plus some tipping, would see to that. But what to arrange? A special song from the band? No no, a special *dance* on the floor, just he and Tara.

“Hi, good evening,” an employee said after approaching the table. “Sir, are you Peter O’Toole?”

“Yes,” O’Toole answered.

“Great!” The woman seemed genuinely pleased. “There’s someone on the phone for you; says it’s very urgent.”

O’Toole’s brow furrowed. He excused himself and followed the employee.

As soon as O’Toole had left the room, a shy man wearing a collared shirt and sweater approached the table.

“Miss McClare?” he asked, shifting his weight nervously on his feet. “My name is Jim Teasdale. I work with Pete O’Toole. I hate to disturb you—may I have a moment of your time?”

“Oh-okay,” Tara said, slightly confused.

Teasdale sat in O’Toole’s chair.

“Slow down,” O’Toole commanded. “You work for *who*?”

“*You know, what’s his name....I’m telling you, we’ve been robbed!*” The voice on the phone proceeded with the story once again.

“But why are you calling me? How could you possibly have this number?” O’Toole was perplexed. The security teams at Minerva didn’t know him at all. They should report to Linehan.

“*Okay you’re obviously not the person to handle this. I’ll call somebody else.*” The phone clicked.

O'Toole checked his watch and calculated the time difference. He pulled a business card out of his wallet and dialed the home phone of Darrell Linehan.

“And really, I *don't* want you to hate Pete,” Teasdale implored. “But since his wife's passing, I think he just *gave up* on a normal relationship. He didn't want to risk getting hurt again. And I'm sure, during those years, well, he must have gotten it on one of our Vegas trips.”

Tara said nothing.

“Ma'am, you've got to understand, he truly doesn't *know*. He won't get tested, since he doesn't *want* to know. But after Amy told me, and she swears she was only with him, I thought I had to say something.” Teasdale glanced at the back hallway.

“I really have to go,” he said, standing. “*Please* don't say anything. It would embarrass him tremendously.”

“I *had* to say something,” Teasdale repeated over his shoulder as he hurried away from the table.

Chris Nook chuckled as he jogged to his car. It had gone fairly well inside; the woman was too stunned to ask any details.

*Well, they don't call me the Cockblock Jock for nothing*, Nook thought, referring to Matt's poetic nickname. *I may not be good for much, but I can certainly fuck up a healthy relationship.*

“What took so long?” Tara asked when O'Toole sat back down.

“Oh, just a problem on the island. No big deal; sorry about the wait.”

O'Toole had spent ten minutes while Linehan confirmed that the call had been a hoax.

“Have you ever been to Las Vegas?” Tara asked.

“Sure,” O'Toole answered. He had taken Mary there on several occasions.

“Do you work with a Jim Teasdale?” Tara asked.

“Ye-e-s,” O'Toole said, perplexed. Between the phone calls and Tara's random questions, he was ready for a nap.

“Describe him.” Tara sat back and stared at O’Toole.

“Well, he’s about five-foot-ten, he’s got brown hair, he wears glasses...”

“Does he ever wear contact lenses?” Tara interrupted.

“Not that I’ve ever seen.”

“And you’re sure his hair is brown? It couldn’t be black and you just got it mixed up?”

“I think I know the difference between black and brown,” O’Toole said. “What’s this all about?”

“Nothing, no big deal,” Tara said, and poured another glass of wine. She refilled O’Toole’s glass, even though he had only had a few sips.

“I know!” Tara suddenly exclaimed. “Let’s take a field trip and get blood tests tomorrow!”

“Yes dear,” O’Toole said, shaking his head. *This one was certainly a handful.*

Tara smiled and wiggled in her chair.

She also resolved to pay John Quinn a visit.