

THE
GIRL
WITH
THE
FUNNY
WALK

AND OTHER STORIES

MICHAEL MACMURDY

The Girl with the Funny Walk

By

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He leaned against the thick, cool glass. Three faintly lit figures were moving about behind the counter. Starting the Colombian dark roast? The Arabian?

For some fellows, it was drugs. Cocaine, mostly. Alcohol would never go out of style. Women. But when he needed to unwind, it was dark roast with a touch of cream. Coffee was supposed to wire people, but that was normal people. Not him. Not Billy D. They didn't use last names in his line of work.

Two men were on the corner to his left, watching him without looking in his direction, and two more on the corner to his right. No bulky pistol handles showed under their jackets, but if one knew where to look, the outlines of .380-caliber MAC-11 submachine guns weren't difficult to see. Four out front, and at least two more would be watching the back alley. He hadn't been told six of his associates would be on hand for the day's events, but Mr. G liked to keep an eye on things.

He could have run for it. It would have been a long shot, but the chance had been there. He'd hesitated for a few seconds, and the opening disappeared. He glanced at the two groups of men again...and decided to have a cup of coffee. They'd wait. These fellows were used to waiting.

He pushed the door open. The early morning crowd was quiet, New Yorkers drinking their coffee without looking away from their newspapers. He nodded good morning to a skinny girl with a nose ring, ordered his dark roast with light cream, and sat down. Someone had left the op-ed section of the paper on the table. Even the *Times* was struggling to paint last week's Reagan-Mondale blowout in a positive light. Well, if by some miracle he lived through the next few days, he couldn't care less who was president.

A scruffy-looking college kid brought his coffee, and the warm aroma of Colombian dark floated up to him. He wrapped his fingers around the cup and let the warmth sink in. Admired his long, slender fingers one last time. As always, his nails were clean and trimmed. There was just the one tiny flaw: a white line behind the second knuckle on his right ring finger from when he'd broken some bully's jaw back in high school.

He checked his watch: 6:56. In another two minutes the detonator would revert to safe mode, and the rising politician and his young assistant would go on with their day.

Seven months. He'd had seven months off and was hoping he was finished. But you didn't just give thirty days' notice in this line of work, and his phone had rung a few weeks back.

"Billy."

"Tuesday at two o'clock. The usual place." Male voice, Italian accent. The tone didn't invite conversation.

"Tuesday at two. Got it."

The line went dead. Capos didn't make small talk, especially not on the telephone.

Twelve jobs...business trips. He liked to think of them as business trips. The first in El Salvador six years ago, the last in Angola back in April, where he'd faced his first little moral test. Had he failed it or passed it? They'd sent him to settle a score with a business associate of the organization. It had taken three extra days, and the heat and humidity, his "wife" Annette, and Luka had all been getting on his nerves. But Big António was dead, and Billy had enjoyed the trip home.

Today was to have been number thirteen, right here in New York City. He took that first wondrous sip of dark roast. Set the cup down and checked his watch again. 6:59.

Sixteen minutes had elapsed. The detonator was in safe mode.

Are you sure about this, Billy? You're just two button pushes away from a nice retirement.

* * *

Luka was studying the little barometer. "Pressure eight-twenty-five," he whispered. "Temperature twenty-two. Humidity seventy-nine."

Billy paused in setting up his rifle and glanced to his right. Luka was writing the figures down in his notebook. Billy wiped the sweat from his eyes, keeping his movements smooth. The temperature wasn't bad, but they'd been in the Angolan sun for over three hours. Luka put his eye to the rangefinder.

"Six hundred and twenty-four meters to the podium. Inclination...down three degrees." Luka worked through his range charts.

"Six clicks up."

"Copy six up."

Luka watched their little weathervane, which they both preferred over the more high-tech options. Billy had been concerned about the wind coming off the South Atlantic and funneling through the passes. They'd had gusts up to sixteen knots yesterday, but today it was almost calm.

"Wind is from one o'clock. Three to five knots...three clicks right."

"Copy three right."

Billy turned the dials of the scope, one click at a time.

"Sight is set. Weapon loaded and safety off."

Billy glanced over the lines of the L96 sniper rifle as Luka packed up his equipment. Modular construction and no obvious flaws, but with all the grace and style of a hammer. That said, it was a big step up from the infantry Zastava M48 with a scope tacked on that he'd used

during his stint with the Yugoslav People's Army. But times change, and today's weapon of choice was the British L96A1: solid bolt action with a bipod. Paired with an S&B telescopic sight and 7.62×51 mm NATO sniper-grade ammo, it was accurate to 800 meters.

He glanced down at Luka's notes: 624 meters. The bullet would travel that distance in less than a second and the unfortunate would jump up and back, as if the puppeteer had yanked on his strings. *Sorry, folks. Show's over. No refunds.* The organization kept a .50-caliber Barrett M82 somewhere back in New York, in case Billy really needed to reach out and touch someone. Americans—they did everything big.

He blocked a frown as he regarded the L96. He didn't allow himself to show emotion, but he much preferred plastic explosives—what he'd grown up with in Special Ops. He'd keep his eyes down as he pushed the button and never watched the news reports. Perhaps it was his version of the “if a tree falls in a forest” question. If he couldn't see beyond the smoke and the dust, did he really know what had happened?

He scanned the foliage around them before focusing on the makeshift stage again. Four guards with submachine guns were watching over a crowd of about three hundred people. He checked his watch. The star of the show, one António Manuel Caholo, was twenty-nine minutes late. Big António was a first cousin of the president, but apparently that hadn't been enough to swing the balance for him back in New York.

Their little Angolan adventure should have been over three days ago. The package had been in place: sixteen ounces of Semtex and a radio detonator. He'd watched the big fellow come out and walk to the car...followed a few seconds later by a white woman. Billy focused his binoculars on her and recognized Caholo's British wife from her pictures in the file. Well, if she got into the car with him, that was just too bad.

But another woman came out, a servant, trailed by two little kids. Billy let out a quiet sigh as the wife and kids got into the back seat of the car, sitting almost directly on top of the device.

He flipped the toggle switch on the radio transmitter, and the little red light came on. The car pulled out, followed by four guards in a second car. He looked at the transmit button, at the kids in the back seat of the car...and flipped the switch off.

Luka had been furious—he wanted to get the hell out of there. But Billy didn't really give a damn what Luka thought.

He focused on the stage again. Still nothing. His skin was flypaper-sticky and covered with dust, and another ant had just bitten his ankle. He ignored it. They were under camouflage netting, but the rule always applied: no unnecessary movement.

This was always the hardest part. The waiting.

* * *

The crowd was stirring. A couple of handlers came onto the stage. Billy rested his eyes for a few seconds before looking through the scope.

“Wind is holding,” whispered Luka.

“Copy.”

After a few minutes of preliminaries, the big fellow strode onto the stage, pumping his arms as the crowd cheered. A sure-fire way to foul up a perfectly planned hit was to shoot the wrong person, but there was no mistaking Caholo: a 250-pound drug-lord-turned-politician who always wore a gold chain and coat of arms medallion around his neck. Unlike on TV, no gold medallion was going to stop a 7.62 mm NATO sniper round traveling over 800 meters per second.

The rumor was Caholo had shorted the organization a few hundred million dollars' worth of merchandise on their last shipment. But they never told Billy the reasons for his business trips. They called, and he came.

Billy waited as big António circled the stage, working the crowd, shaking hands with the people in the front row. He went to the podium and began speaking. Billy made a tiny adjustment to center the crosshairs on the huge upper chest, waited for Caholo's gesticulations to settle, and gently squeezed the trigger.

Crack.

The wind hadn't shifted, and the L96 had been properly seated. He knew the result before Luka whispered, "Hit."

They slithered backward down the slope and trotted along the path, placing their feet carefully. They couldn't afford to twist an ankle. Their handler and driver were waiting in a Toyota Land Cruiser eight hundred meters away, and somewhere behind Billy and Luka, the guards were blasting away with their submachine guns. Good. That would add to the confusion.

They got into the back seat of the Toyota, and the driver stepped on the gas. Their handler put the equipment in a duffel bag and tied it off. There was a SIG P226 in the seat pocket in front of Billy. He chambered the first round, stuck the pistol in his belt, and covered it with his shirt.

The Land Cruiser powered along the winding dirt road. They picked up speed on the downhill and slid around a turn. The back half of the SUV scraped through the branches, and for a horrible moment Billy thought they were going over the side. But the Land Cruiser pulled them back onto the road, its four wheels churning up clouds of dust. He put his pistol against the driver's head and pushed.

“Slow down.”

Their handler rattled something in Portuguese, but the driver had already eased off the accelerator. Billy kept the barrel of his pistol against the sweaty neck for a few more seconds before sitting back. It'd be thirty minutes to the second car, where Annette would be waiting.

He'd spent six days in a hotel in Lubango with his twenty-year-old South African “wife,” the first three of which had been planned. They'd needed to be seen together, just in case. As for days four through six... Well, one needed to be flexible in this business. Their marriage wouldn't pass scrutiny, but it would be good enough for a cursory check or two. He'd gone over her naked body in their hotel room, memorizing the location of two prominent moles, and had her do the same to him. He'd checked her passport: it showed the same New York to Johannesburg flight as his.

Annette had scored points with him by knowing how to play cribbage and backgammon—maybe there was an intel file on him somewhere that mentioned his two favorite games. But she'd kept bugging him about turning on the damn TV. Normally, he'd do his business trip wife at least once or twice. Why not? They were there. But Annette looked more like seventeen than twenty and he wasn't interested, despite her sleeping in the nude with an occasional brush against him.

The Land Cruiser circled around a 1950s-style gas station and stopped in front of an old warehouse, its corrugated steel sides covered in a thick layer of dust. A local fellow raised the door, and they pulled inside.

He nodded to Annette and looked around: seven people, counting himself. He and Luka wiped down with alcohol, changed clothes, and combed their hair. The three of them got into the

back seat of the old Mercedes. It would be about a three-hour drive to the podunk airport at Matala, where a light twin would be waiting to take them to Johannesburg.

Luka would go straight home, but Billy was never in a hurry to get back. His \$3,000-a-month Fifth Avenue apartment overlooked Central Park, but it was still an empty apartment. He'd connect to JAL in Frankfurt and go home through Tokyo. He loved those girls in their blue uniforms, and if they didn't appreciate his presence on board, they did an excellent job of faking it. Too bad they didn't have super first class, where you could lie down and the girls would take their shoes off and walk on your back. Did JAL do private jet charters...maybe he'd check on that next time. It wasn't like he needed the \$1.5 million sitting in his bank account.

* * *

He'd met Kathy in late August. The hot weather had broken, and it was almost cool that morning. He did some easy laps on his bike in the park to warm up before heading down Columbus Avenue, keeping a steady pace as the serious riders blew past him. He picked up speed on a gradual downhill and swept around the curve. It was clear out front. There was traffic on Columbus, but when wasn't there traffic in New York.

The terrain leveled out; he downshifted and pedaled faster to keep his speed up. Sensed unusual motion in his left rear quarter and glanced over in time to see a mid-sized delivery truck sideswipe a gray Honda. The truck swerved and kept going, and Billy got a glimpse of frizzy blonde hair as the Honda skidded. She got it under control, but the Honda's rear quarter panel bumped his wheel. The back end of his bike came around, and he went over the handlebars.

He sat up, biting his lip, and shifted his torso and shoulders. Moved one leg up slightly, then the other. His jersey was torn at the right shoulder and there was a little blood, but his helmet had protected his head. He stood up and moved away from the road. He'd expected the

girl to keep going, but the Honda had stopped about fifty feet farther on, and she was getting out of the passenger-side door. She glanced back at him, moved to the driver's side and checked her car over.

He looked at his right forearm. It hurt like hell and was obviously broken. That would cramp his style for a month or two, but arms heal and pain had never bothered him much. He pulled his battered bicycle away from the road and took his helmet off. Had a drink of water. Poured some water in his palm and wiped his face. Blondie was walking toward him when he looked up, her gait slightly off-kilter. She was about twenty-five, semi-pretty, with blue eyes. Her white and pink running shoes were almost new, her straight-leg jeans clean, and her light blue blouse went nicely with her eyes. No wedding ring. A little dog, maybe a pug, was watching them from the back seat of the Honda.

“Is your arm broken?”

“I think so.”

“I'm so sorry, but it wasn't my fault. The truck pushed me—”

She was probably worried about getting sued. “It's okay. I saw the truck. Not to worry.”

She looked down at his bike and up to his face again, as if making up her mind. Young women didn't normally give rides to strange men on Columbus Avenue, but it was Saturday in New York and there were about a million people within a square mile or two of them.

“I'll take you to the clinic. Which one do you use?”

He shook his head. “It doesn't matter.”

She gave him a questioning look before nodding. “We can go to mine. It's not far.”

He picked up the bike with his good arm, and they walked to her car. The Honda had a nasty gouge from the middle of the rear door to the broken taillight.

“It’s my sister’s car,” she said. “I was taking it back to her.”

Billy only nodded. The worn Honda had a terminal case of rocker panel rust.

She opened the trunk and tried to help him with the bike.

“I have it, thanks,” he said. It didn’t weigh much more than twenty pounds.

She moved three books from his seat as he opened the door: *The Moonstone*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and a leather-covered Bible. They both strapped in. As he’d guessed, the car didn’t smell of cigarette smoke. Her dog was on the floor. He had his front paws on Billy’s leg and was looking up at him.

“Stay down, Pug,” she cautioned.

“It’s okay.” He patted his lap. Pug jumped up and made himself comfortable.

She pulled into traffic, and he glanced back at the books. Wilkie Collins. He’d read *The Woman in White*, but not this one. He’d be on his bunk reading some English novel, and the other recruits would rag on him as they went out to play poker or hit the bars. But he never cared what they thought or about being one of the guys.

He asked her about *The Moonstone*. She explained it was a detective story about a stolen gem, with British colonialism and class status themes in the background. He let her talk, asking two short questions. Either she had excellent retention, or she’d read it more than once. He glanced at her again. She was too young to be a college professor. Graduate student? High school English teacher?

The clinic was about half full. He told her she didn’t need to wait, but she shook her head and sat down one seat away from him. She’d brought *The Moonstone* along and read her book.

In the examining room, the nurse asked him about his pain level. “We have plain Tylenol, or with codeine if you need something stronger.” She was looking at her clipboard.

“No thanks.”

Her eyes went from his face to his forearm and back to his face. “You don’t need anything for the pain?” He shook his head.

They took X-rays. As he’d thought, both bones were broken. They put a cast on it, admonished him to keep it dry, and asked if he needed a referral—he’d need to see an orthopedist in two weeks. He’d told them no. Kathy tried to pay when they were finished, taken aback that he didn’t have health insurance. He told her no, and she tried to insist. He told her no again, raising his voice the tiniest bit for the first and only time with her.

Once outside, she said she had to run. She had to return the car to her sister and get back home. That was fine with him. No way was he going to ask her to drop him at 1040 Fifth Avenue.

He took the bicycle out of the Honda’s trunk. They touched hands and said goodbye.

* * *

He finished breakfast in his apartment. He’d go to the local bagel shop on Sundays, but today was Saturday so it was muesli with skim milk, coffee, and orange juice. He went upstairs to the gym. His bicycle crash had only been two weeks ago, but the cast had been bugging him and he’d cut it off yesterday. He did thirty minutes of cardio and some easy leg presses. If someone said hello, he’d answer and go back to his workout.

He got cleaned up and changed clothes. Wrapped his arm in an ACE bandage and looked out the window: it was a beautiful September morning. He went down to the park and read his book, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. He’d read Hemingway’s big fish story back in school and thought it was boring, but this one was about the Spanish Civil War, and those sons of bitches knew how to fight dirty.

That said, his favorite part of the book wasn't written by Hemingway. It was the little poem in the front by John Donne:

*"No man is an island,
Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
...
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee."*

It tolls for thee. What a great line.

But Donne was wrong about one thing.

He was an island. Billy D was an island.

He took a break from reading and watched bright white clouds float across a blue sky. Watched the fiery yellow-orange of the leaves as they twisted in the breeze. It wasn't like one of those calm, cloudless summer days that so many people loved but that had always struck him as lifeless. The girls in their tights and running shoes went by, some walking their dog, some just jogging along. He admired hips and backsides or looked at their dogs, but he usually didn't look at their faces. He didn't care if the girls were looking at him or not.

He picked her out at about a hundred meters: the off-kilter walk and frizzed-out blonde hair. Her little pug. He went back to Hemingway. If Kathy wanted to stop and chat, that was fine with him. But he'd leave it up to her.

She and Pug had slowed down. He pretended to read.

They stopped in front of him, and he looked up. Smiled without meaning to. "Hello, Kathy."

She was looking at his arm. "They took your cast off. That was quick."

"I guess I'm a fast healer."

Pug had recognized him—or was just naturally friendly—and was trying to put his front paws on Billy's khakis. Kathy was holding him back.

"It's okay." Billy picked him up and set him on the bench. The words "won't you sit down?" came out.

She only paused a moment. "Sure."

"Did you finish *The Moonstone*?"

"Yes, but I've read it before."

Ten minutes later, he invited her for a coffee, and she knew a café where dogs were welcome. He ordered the Arabian. It wasn't like in Ethiopia or Tanzania, where they ground the beans by hand and roasted them while you waited. But it wasn't bad. Not for the USA.

They talked about Hemingway. Kathy didn't like reading about war but loved his imagery. They talked about mysteries and coffee and dogs, and agreed to meet at the café on Monday at three o'clock, which meant she wasn't the Monday to Friday, eight-to-five type. His best guess was graduate student, but he didn't ask.

* * *

He eased his chair back and took another sip of his dark roast. Two guys in business suits sat down at the next table, talking about Reagan and long-term interest rates. Inflation. He tuned them out.

That day in the park with Kathy had been two months ago, and he'd seen her most days since. Except Sundays. He didn't see her on Sundays. That was her church, Bible study, and animal shelter day. Once, she'd talked about her church and paused when she'd finished, not looking at him. It had been her quiet way of inviting him to come along. He'd passed.

They'd been dating two months, if he could use that word, and he didn't even know her last name. He'd seen textbooks in her apartment and had asked—she was working on a master's in English at Hunter College. He'd told her he worked in international finance but was semiretired, and they'd left it there.

One of his former associates walked by the window of the coffee shop and glanced inside, checking that he was still there. But the guy hadn't bothered to meet his eye—why bother to look a dead man in the eye? For some reason he thought of Annette. She'd hinted at visiting him in New York—another girl looking for a way out and thinking Billy D might be the answer. And before Annette and Angola... El Salvador, Colombia twice, Mexico twice, and the others...

Twelve business trips on top of his days in the People's Army, yet he'd never quite come to grips with snuffing someone's life out. In some ways it reminded him of being with a woman. The planning. The buildup. The release—equal parts satisfaction and letdown. But there was an uncomfortable finality to his line of work. *And guess what, Billy—today you get to see it from the other side.*

He almost smiled, looking down at his cup of coffee. His favorite “F” word: finality.

The one scene he remembered from high school lit...the sentries spot the smoke and sound the alarm. There's more shouting and blowing of horns as the word is passed. The excitement builds and spreads through the city. The generals, the king himself, scurry up the stone steps.

Then the cry from the sentry in the high tower.

They're burning their ships!

The shouts die to murmurs, to quiet, as the realization sinks in.

Finality. The act of doing what cannot be undone.

* * *

It was his third or fourth time in her apartment, and she asked if she could read the Bible to him. He nodded and watched her face as she read, absorbed in the words, and it became part of their routine. The first few times he didn't pay much attention, and afterward she didn't talk about how to be a good Christian, stuff like that. She would read for no more than ten minutes and set it aside. But at some point, he found himself listening to the words. How did some guy scraping through life two thousand years ago come up with, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness understood it not."

They talked about their favorite characters from literature. His was Athos from *The Three Musketeers*, hers was Esther from *Bleak House*. She loved Agatha Christie mysteries, and he'd found a beautiful hardback set that would be her Christmas present. Once she talked about an around-the-world cruise and showed him some pamphlets, knowing it would never happen. He glanced at the price list—he could write a check for the Owner's Suite without bothering to check his account balance. Maybe he'd buy her that cruise someday. But not the Owner's Suite. That wasn't her. He'd go with a standard, with a balcony. She'd like that, if she could be away

from Pug that long. Kathy had nice legs and hips, and he eyed her out of habit as she went back and forth. But he was happy with things as they were and didn't try to fuck her.

He loved her little one-bedroom apartment. Pictures of dogs next to a twenty-seven-inch TV that wasn't plugged in. A simple but beautiful drawing of a shepherd watching over his sheep. At first, he'd thought it was black and white. But later, he'd noticed there was a touch of green in the grass and some yellow in the light of the stars. The caption was simple:

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

The words stopped there, without delving into what actions by the sheep might be disqualifying, but he didn't kid himself that heaven was for people like him. It didn't square that he could spend years snuffing guys out and not be called to account. It wasn't like there was an angel or two Mr. G could buy off.

* * *

She opened the door in her usual tights and sports bra. Smiled at him. He kissed her, his hand firm against her back, feeling her warmth. Pug had both front paws on his leg, waiting for his share of attention. Billy scratched him on the head.

"Where should we go tonight?" he asked. They usually ate Italian, always with a large salad, with Indian a close second. She didn't eat meat but never made a face if he ordered a juicy steak.

She didn't answer, holding his hand but looking at the floor. He waited, watching her. She walked him into the bedroom, shooed Pug out and closed the door. The sun was going down, and she'd lowered the shades. The only light in the room was from the four orange lines outlining the dark square of the window. He'd been in her apartment maybe fifteen times, but it was the first time he'd seen her bed.

He didn't want her to see his apartment. The marble entryway and the high ceilings. The .52-caliber Sharps carbine above the fireplace. Standard issue, United States Cavalry, US Civil War. Besides the carbine, he kept a Beretta 92F with a spare magazine by his bed. He loved that pistol: rock solid but with a certain feline beauty. Maybe Beretta employed female design consultants. Of course, both guns were properly registered with the NYPD.

How many women had he taken to that apartment, to show off his money and his taste in art? Soft music, wine, and he'd do them in front of the fireplace. But some of them thought sleepover rights were part of the deal and would get pissed off when he threw them out. He'd decided it wasn't worth the trouble and had moved on to hookers. You could order them right off the internet:

- *Books*
- *Home and Garden*
- *Prostitutes*
 - *Female / Male*
 - *Height / Hair Color / ...*

Door-to-door delivery, without the cardboard box. He'd done five or six made-to-order young ladies before the thrill was gone, if it had ever been there. Until a month ago, he'd loved that apartment. Now, its antiseptic phoniness reminded him of a freshly cleaned meat locker.

She pulled his polo off and ran her fingers along his chest, down to his stomach. Did it a second time, and a third. He tensed as she undid his belt buckle. The button. The soft buzz of the zipper. She finished undressing him and had him lie down. Nudged him onto his side, facing away from her, and he listened as she slipped out of her clothes and slid in beside him.

* * *

It came out a few days later at dinner. He was talking about how beautiful she was...and stopped.

“Why are you crying, Sweetie?”

Had he ever in his life called a woman “Sweetie”?

She dried her tears and explained that she’d been in a car accident when she was eight and had broken both legs and a hip. Her legs weren’t the same length, and the kids in school used to laugh at her. They said she walked like a baby giraffe.

“You have beautiful legs. Trust me. I know.”

That brought a smile, and they moved on to dogs. He watched her as she rattled on about border collies. If she ever lived in the country, she’d want a border collie. Maybe two. She’d always want a pug but didn’t like to think about *her* Pug being gone.

After dinner, they’d go back to her apartment. She would read the Bible; they’d listen to piano music and have another glass of wine. Later, they’d move to the bedroom. He’d undress her, lay her on the bed and caress her with his fingernails.

His eyes met hers across the table.

Could this be...

He caught himself.

Don’t forget who you are, Billy. What you are.

Why don’t you do this nice girl a favor, and disappear?

* * *

Mr. G motioned him to a chair. As always, he was wearing gold-rimmed brown sunglasses. Billy had never been sure of his employment status within the organization. They

called, and he came. But even after six years the bodyguard in his immaculate three-piece still frisked him. Mr. G nodded to his capo.

After a long stare at Billy, Marco slid a large manila envelope, a plastic clipboard with a single piece of super thin paper, and a smaller envelope across the desk. It was the usual routine. The paper was large enough to make any notes he needed but light enough to dissolve in his mouth in a few seconds. No floppy disks, no incriminating phone calls. Just some documents and photos that would be shredded and burned as soon as he left. The smaller envelope, maybe three-quarters of an inch thick, would contain two hundred C-notes. The other two hundred would show up a few weeks after the work was done.

He'd been expecting South America. Word was the organization was making millions every day on the cocaine and heroin trade. With that much money in play, people can get greedy and do foolish things. When that happened, when someone needed a reminder of who they were dealing with, Billy's phone would ring.

He opened the envelope: white male, well-dressed, mid-forties, getting out of a car. New York license plates. He didn't like it but kept his face blank. The next page had the particulars. A name he vaguely recognized—an up-and-comer with his sights set on mayor or governor. *It's past time to get tough on organized crime... Why don't you come by my apartment tonight, ma'am, and we'll discuss your situation?*

He read every word, studied every detail. Went through it a second time to be sure he hadn't missed anything and put the papers back in the envelope. He was a little surprised they were going to snuff this guy out and call down heat in their own backyard. Who knew, maybe the schmuck had insulted Mr. G's daughter. Regardless, the "why side of the matter" wasn't his concern.

He looked the question at Marco, and the capo mouthed the answer. “A month.” It was unlikely the Feds were listening in, given the size of the house and the grounds, and rumor was the walls of the inner sanctum were lead-lined. But these fellows didn’t take chances.

“I’ll need Luka,” he was almost whispering. His friend—no, his fellow operative—from his days back in Special Ops. Marco nodded.

Billy looked from Marco to Mr. G to the original 1865 map of the USA on the wall. It had always struck him as odd that the boss was proud to be an American. Billy’s eyes drifted to the upper left corner of the map: the Montana Territory.

He’d been looking at pictures and had made a few calls: a ranch with a few hundred acres up in the northwest corner would go for \$100,000, maybe a little more. There weren’t many tourists up there—the grizzlies scared them off—and there’d be plenty of room for her dogs.

She’d talked about having three or four, spacing the ages out so it didn’t hurt so much when she lost one. He’d build a solid fence out back and sweep it clear of rattlers, and the dogs could roam their little piece of the Montana backwoods.

He looked at Mr. G.

“The heat will be high.” They stared at him. Contractors for the organization were seldom encouraged to state the obvious. He took an invisible deep breath.

“I want to retire after this one. Luka can do it. He’s almost as good as I am, and he’s still hungry for the money.”

Mr. G studied him through his brown sunglasses. TV and movies made it sound like you couldn’t retire from this line of work. That wasn’t quite true, but the boss had to be comfortable with the idea. Comfortable that the Feds could never bring enough leverage to make a difference.

“Where would you go?” Mr. G spoke softly, tonelessly. If they’d been on the phone, Billy would have wondered if he was talking to an answering machine.

“I’m not sure. I’ve always loved Scotland. The highlands.” Which was true, although he hadn’t thought about retiring there.

“By yourself?”

“With a girl.”

There was another pause. Had he just signed his own death warrant? And maybe hers too?

“Very well, Billy. But I need you to get this one right.”

And that was that. At least, he hoped it was.

* * *

He’d asked to go to church with her a few weeks back. He wasn’t sure why—she’d only mentioned it the one time. But how bad could it be?

They sat in the second-to-last row, and he looked around. The place looked more like a warehouse than a church. Three hundred or so cheap plastic seats, about half of them occupied. A poster advocating workplace safety and a second one for Snap-on air tools. At the front of the room, an old wooden cross stood next to a podium. No candles, no fancy tablecloth with gold trim, no big Bible.

How long would this last? Not that he had plans for today, but he’d rather not spend most of it sitting in a warehouse church.

A forty-something guy in blue jeans and a polo had come in and was standing by the back row. *Hey, buddy. There are plenty of seats up front.* The new arrival and Kathy waved hello. He sat down behind them and... *Damn it.* A tap on the shoulder.

Billy turned around, his face blank.

“Got dragged here too, huh?”

Billy only shrugged.

“Jason.”

He shook the outstretched hand. Beyond that, he didn't see the need to make conversation. He looked at Kathy and she gave him a little smile.

“They keep strong coffee in the kitchen,” said Jason. “They're pretty good at putting people to sleep around here.”

Billy turned back to him and forced a smile.

“The acoustics are lousy in this place, and the snores echo back and forth. Sometimes you can barely hear the guy as he drones on.” Jason nodded toward the front of the room. Two elderly ladies and two guys with guitars were huddling. “Can you sing?”

“No.”

“Perfect. You'll fit right in.”

Billy didn't reply, trying not to look unfriendly.

“They tried to get me to sing. I think they were trying to get rid of me. But I'm still here.”

Everyone stood for three songs. He didn't know the words, not that he would have joined in. After the music was finished, his new friend went to the podium and looked out over the group. Billy looked around but didn't see the minister, or pastor, or whatever you called those guys these days. He must be in the back putting on his robe.

“I've always found history fascinating,” Jason began. “The history we have is simply how things *actually* played out, but there were about a zillion other realistic possibilities.” Maybe Jason was a local history professor, studying to be a minister. But talking about history was an

odd way to introduce the real minister, wherever he, or she, was hiding. Did this little history lesson count toward the sermon, or was it an add-on?

“Think about it. If Hitler or Stalin had died as a child, or Winston Churchill or Abraham Lincoln, history would look different. Perhaps *very* different. Two thousand years ago in a backwater of the Roman Empire, a young rabbi with a small but devoted following angered the local Jewish leaders. They came up with some false charges and engineered his execution by the Romans.

“All through the night, after his betrayal and arrest, he’s dragged from one official to the next. He keeps his composure as he’s kicked and beaten and ridiculed, and as the death sentence is passed by the Roman governor. He’s made to carry his own cross and is whipped until he falls to the dirt, unable to go on. Finally, he’s stripped and the nails are hammered through his flesh into the hard wood of the cross. It’s lifted and dropped into place, and he’s left to die an agonizing, and very public, death.”

There was a long pause, and Jason met his eyes. It dawned on Billy. His new friend *was* the minister.

“He dies on the cross. Now what? Suppose we could put fifty super smart historians in front of that cross and ask them what happens next. Ask them how likely the little following of the man who just died would grow into mankind’s greatest institution? I guarantee you they’d give us an odd look and say there was *no* chance. They’d say his followers will go back to their fishing, their tax collecting, or whatever they were doing to put food on the table. Some of his sayings will be retold for a few years, perhaps a generation or two, and forgotten. The people who saw him perform miracles, who heard him speak, they die and their children and

grandchildren shrug off this silly idea of a Messiah who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Who rather than free Israel, was hung on a cross to die.

“If he had been a man, and nothing more, the historians would have been right. His following would have died with him. Yet as I stand here, several billion people for the last two thousand years know that the man who died on that cross is the Son of God, and that he rose on the third day and sits at his Father’s right hand. Several billion people know that he suffered and died for *us*.

“We couldn’t have gotten here without the resurrected Jesus appearing on the Damascus Road to the man who oversaw the stoning of the first Christian martyr, the same man who voted for the execution of many other believers. That man, Saul of Tarsus, was going to hell. Yet he was redeemed as Paul of Tarsus and would go on to be the single most important person in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Jason met Billy’s eyes again.

“Redemption is here for *all* who truly believe. It *is* that simple.”

Billy went out and found the kitchen. Got his coffee and stood in the hallway. Jason was right about one thing. That religion, that following, should have died out. It *had* to die out when that man died on that cross, in a dusty corner of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago. Yet it hadn’t.

And how did Jason seem to know that Billy needed redeeming? And if there *was* a judgment day, wouldn’t everyone have some sort of scorecard: times gone to church, good deeds done...

* * *

It was like being a surgeon. You studied the particulars and planned the operation but never knew how it would play out. Once the mark was in the car, Billy would push the button to call the first number and arm the detonator. He'd wait until the car was clear of civilians, then push the second button.

Boom.

Walk four blocks to the parking garage. Walk, don't run. Change clothes during the drive to the second car. His clothes, including shoes and socks, and the valise would go into the incinerator bag. The plane would be waiting for him at Teterboro. He'd told her he had to go out of town for a week.

He stationed himself across the street, half a block down. Watching the cars as if he were waiting for a ride, the small valise in his left hand. Inside was a partially disassembled Motorola DynaTAC 8000X, bolted in place with its antenna extended. Two external buttons, blending almost perfectly with the brown leather of the valise, were wired to the speed dial of the Motorola.

He straightened as the mark came out of the building and went down the steps—toward twelve ounces of Semtex and an electronic detonator. The mark paused on the sidewalk, talking to a passerby who must have recognized the rising politician.

Billy's eyes went to the mark's young assistant, who had followed him down the steps. A lump stuck in his throat as adrenaline jolted him...and he let out a sigh of relief. It wasn't her. He studied the woman again. She was the same size and shape as Kathy, and her hair frizzed out the same way, but it was a little longer and darker. The mark dismissed his citizen admirer, and the young woman went to the other side of the car, with the confident walk of a beautiful, twenty-something political staffer.

He drew in a deep breath and let it out. He still had his dream. He still had Montana and an Agatha Christie collection for Christmas. Maybe an around-the-world cruise someday.

The car edged out of its spot, heading away from him. He found the first button on the valise with his index finger and pressed it. Felt the little click. He hated mushy buttons and had told their tech guy he wanted feedback. The relay would have switched to the armed position, and the device's little red light would be on. Billy checked the time: 6:43.

The traffic on West 83rd was heavy. The mark's car moved a few more feet and stopped.

He slid his finger to the second button. The signal from the Motorola would travel the distance in less than a millisecond, and the detonator would fire, setting off the plastic explosive. The young staffer looked out her window. Enjoying the nice fall weather? Looking forward to her day, unaware that her bones, brain, and internal organs were about to be obliterated by a shock wave moving at 7500 meters per second? Funny though, she wouldn't feel a thing. By the time her nerves realized they were being ripped apart and screamed the alarm, there'd be no brain left to hear it. Like in a movie: one frame you're there, the next you're not.

He watched the car move slowly down the street, a black spot in a sea of yellow. Ran his index finger around the second little circle on the valise. Felt the eyes on him.

He let out a little sigh. The black spot was still there, but it had gone out of focus as his thoughts wandered.

They'd been sitting on her sofa a few nights back, and Pug was in her lap. She'd spoken softly. "You're going to have to talk about it sometime. Whatever it is that's inside of you, that you cannot talk about." He looked at her, but she was looking at Pug. "Without trust, there can't be love." Every other time in his life when a woman had said the "L" word, he'd scoffed. But that night, he'd only looked at her. At the tears in her eyes.

Could he really tell her?

Kathy, there's just one little thing...

Jason had said *everything* could be forgiven if one truly believed. But could that really apply to people like him? Kathy had read him a lovely piece about forgiveness a while back, and he'd tracked it down. He almost chuckled. Billy D knew a quote from the Bible.

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He slid his finger along the smooth leather of the valise, away from the button, and looked around. There was a coffee shop a few doors down. He walked over and leaned against the heavy glass, careful not to meet anyone's eyes.

He looked down the street again. The black car was gone.

* * *

The coffee shop was almost full now, and he didn't see his associates on the nearest corner. Well, they wouldn't have gone far. He looked down at the little brown circle in front of him. His last cup of real coffee? Should he order a donut—the condemned man's last meal?

He still had the valise. The relay on the device had switched back to safe, but it was just a matter of pressing the buttons in the correct order. He'd destroy it if he could, but most New York coffee shops didn't have incinerators. Maybe he could find one of those fire department axes and chop it up.

A hand appeared on the back of the chair across from him. He couldn't believe it—some jerk was sitting down. His hand went toward his gun. Maybe he'd go out with a flourish.

He paused, looking into a face not so different from his own, and brought his hand back to his coffee cup. Cleared his throat. "Special Agent Bradshaw, if memory serves. You're up

early.” Billy looked around the coffee shop: four guys he hadn’t seen come in were looking at him. Two were standing by the door and the other two by the counter, and all four had a bump on their right side under their jackets—most likely Smith & Wesson .357s.

The FBI agent was stirring sugar into his coffee. “We have to get up early, Billy, to catch the bad guys.” Bradshaw glanced at him before returning to his coffee. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re in trouble with your employer.”

Billy kept his face blank. The first rule around cops was to never give anything away. Not even today. Bradshaw sipped his coffee and set it down. Regarded him with unreadable eyes. “We’d deactivated your little device, by the way. That was modeling clay under the car, not Semtex.”

The missive jolted him, but he didn’t let it show.

Where was the leak?

Not knowing what to say, he took a sip of coffee.

To buy time? But for what?

“We got the first call when you pushed the arming button. If you had pressed the firing button, it would have called us a second time, and nothing more...well, nothing more except I doubt we’d be having this little chat of ours. At least not here, drinking our coffee. We’ve been watching you for quite a while, and I never would have expected this. You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

Billy waited as Bradshaw sipped his coffee again. If the FBI agent was making what might be the biggest bust of his career, he seemed awfully nonchalant about it.

“I tried that dark roast you like, but it’s a little strong for me. I’ll take the valise—the lab guys can’t wait to tear into it. Also the Beretta on your right ankle.”

Billy slid the valise across the table, followed by his gun, handle first. He looked out the window. Flashing red and amber lights were reflecting off the gold lettering. At the other tables, people looked up for a moment before going back to their newspapers.

The FBI agent ran his fingers over the gold latches of the valise. “Will it blow up when we open it?”

“I don’t know.”

Bradshaw eyed it for a few more seconds. Waved to one of his agents and handed him Billy’s gun and the valise. “Don’t try to open it. We’ll let the lab boys do it.” He pushed his chair back and crossed his legs. Regarded Billy.

“RICO. That’s twenty years right there. For *each* hit.”

Billy didn’t respond. What was he supposed to say?

“Murder for hire. Conspiracy to commit murder. Use of a firearm in a violent crime. Would you like me to keep going?”

Billy kept his face blank.

“That said, you have one point in your favor, and you can use points right about now. All the gentlemen who’ve been, how should I put it, the objects of your attention the last few years... Let’s say they weren’t exactly upstanding members of their local community. And today’s gent, who I suppose some people would consider upstanding, is still breathing.”

Billy looked out the window at the flashing lights, and at the New Yorkers going by. Was Bradshaw just enjoying himself, or was this headed somewhere other than life in prison—life until Mr. G’s boys got to him?

“FBI witness protection program, Billy. No one’s ever cracked it. No one ever will. Not even Mr. G.”

He heard the words, but he was thinking about a girl who loved dogs and read the Bible.

He was thinking about a man who suffered and died on a cross two thousand years ago, and about something a preacher in a polo and jeans had said in a warehouse church.

He let out a little sigh.

The Road to Redemption might not be smooth and downhill, but perhaps it led to Montana.