

A must Read

An
Astounding
Suspense !



Vengeance

M.L. Lego



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Cover graphic design: M.L. Lego

Back cover photography: Jim Lego.

Translation: Peter A. LeGault

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**The thirst of vengeance, even as a simple idea
is similar to a sword hanging
above one's head.**

M.L. Lego

Introduction

For the first time in his life, Yannick could not do anything, could not change anything. For the first time, he had to lower the arms and accept the dirty blow he had just received. So far, his life had been quite good. Born out of a modest family, he grew up in Val-D'or, Abitibi, a town located in the north side of the province of Quebec, in Canada. Overall, he had a happy youth. His parents were far from rich but were always able to offer him a safe life, filled with comfort and love. In fact, the only reproach he had against his parents is that he was an only child. He would have liked to share what he knew as his happiness with a brother or a sister. But, how could he be upset with his mother who became infertile after his birth. The poor woman suffered atrociously while giving birth to him. At time of birth, the child weighed almost four and a half kilo. He was too big to come out the regular way. To prevent a tragedy, the doctors freed the child through a caesarean. Yannick was alive and healthy but his mother suffered a long time before returning to normal. Following this episode and after trying many times, Yannick's mother never gave birth again.

Even though, he had to grow up as an only child, Yannick could not complain. His childhood may have been somewhat lonely, but as he sometime figured, the fact that he did not have a brother or sister may also have been a good thing. He was only seventeen when his father, who worked as a miner, for many years, died at the age of forty five years old following the pains and tribulations of a lung cancer. In his will, Mr. Simard left thirty five thousand dollars to his family. After many years of loyal services to the mine that was the cause of his disease, that is all he managed to save. It was out of question that Yannick would have the same future. His mother, Jeannine, had promised herself that her son would have a different career. But opportunities of employment were few in Abitibi. To live a decent life, a man had to work at the mine; unless, of course, he won the lottery. After considering most possibilities, Jeannine decided to invest all the money she had inherited in the education of her son, a decision she could not have taken if she had the responsibility of more children. So, Yannick had the opportunity to receive advanced studies in administration at the local college and to pursue his education in finance and economy at Montreal University. The day he left Val-D'or for the big city, he had no idea that he would return for his mother's funeral less than four years after his father had died. No one could tell the cause of her death. Some claimed she died of loneliness. Surely because her husband had left her for a better world and her son was away, she had no reason to remain alive. At the time of her death, she was skin and bone. Her face showed the years that she had left behind. She was only forty eight but at the time of her death, she seemed much older. Yannick had many difficulties to adapt to this loss. He was now alone in the world. After the funeral, he cried like a child. A week later, he sold all his parent's possessions. He returned to Montreal and never came back to Abitibi. Now without a father or a mother, he had to turn the page and build his own life. And, it was quite a good life... at least, until this miserable day when emotions and feelings of the worst kind invaded his heart. He was hurt to the point of becoming a diabolic avenger of the worst kind.

Upon his return to Montreal, he studied with heart and soul. On top of his regular courses, he studied salesmanship, marketing and motivation... All that he would need to become one of the greatest stock brokers of all time; the KING as he liked to say. All that he did, while he was

not buried in his many hours at the university, he researched the marvellous world of finance. He only read about finance, only saw movies touching this subject and spent time with people that shared his passion. He only had one hope and desire: to become rich, really rich. He wanted to earn money to the point that he would not know what to do with it. To reach his goal, he was ready to commit to anything. Among his friends, only one person shared his high hopes. His name was Jim; Jim Desnoyers. The first time they met at the University, they understood each other. As time went on, they shared everything: Studies, recreations, even an apartment. Jim was not only a friend and a future associate; he became a brother in law. Both of these guys did not have much talent to transfer their thoughts, ideas or school works on a computer. That's why they hired Marilyne, Jim's young sister, for a small salary. This lady was a talented young pianist with a great future ahead of her. She could definitively use the few dollars she was earning from Yannick and Jim, but she also liked to be close to her brother's associate. She thought he was quite cute. She also thought he was nice and sweet. Throughout the years, she became very attached to her young boss and left her own ambition behind. It took time but eventually, he revealed to her that he shared her feelings. The day Yannick told her how he felt about her became the most beautiful day of her short life. That day, he visited her to pick up some work she had done for him. On this rare occasion, because they were normally always together, Jim was not with him. When she gave him the documents he wanted, he casually invited her to have lunch with him in a nearby restaurant. Of course, Marilyne was not about to refuse the invitation she had been waiting for more than two years. In that period of his life, Yannick was not financially comfortable, so, their first rendezvous and meal together was at a McDonald restaurant. The conversation with her charming prince was pleasant, amusing and stimulating. Without even realizing it, Marilyne kept ordering coffee after coffee in order to extend the pleasure she had to be with him. It took a while, but when he ultimately told her what she wanted to hear, it was a dream.

"You know, Marilyne," he said with hesitation, "I spent a wonderful afternoon with you, so... well... hum... I would like... if you want... I would like for us to go out together again. If you want; that is..."

"Of course I want!" she answered with great excitement. "Oh! Yannick... What took you so long?"

That night, in front of her door, they exchanged their very first kiss. The first of millions of others kisses that would feed this great love story. From then on, she became his full time lover and associate. In the future, all she would do and think was related to Yannick. She would never regret it; never.

After four years of hard work and study at the University which had filled a large part of their young respective lives, Yannick and Jim were ready to face the world of finance. They dared to enter through the golden doors. Because they were both leaders of their class, they received offers from the major companies. Most people would have sold their services and accept the best offers, but, not them. They both rejected all the offers, from the lesser to the best. Without hesitation and without considering the advices of Carl Desnoyers, Marilyne and Jim's father, who recommended they accept the best offer they had received in order to accumulate some experience before facing the market on their own.

“We will not work for others!” would say the young men. “We are ready and as they say: the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We are ready! From the time we started at the University, we wanted to operate our own business. We never thought of anything else and this is what we are going to do and that is it!

“But where will the funds to start your business will come from?” would ask Carl. “You will need some investors...”

“Well,” answered Jim, now that you ask it...”

“I see,” sighed Carl. “I should have known that was coming... How much do you need?”

“Hum... Just about one hundred thousand dollars,” mumbled Jim.

“You know very well that I don’t have that kind of money,” riposted his father.

“I know,” replied Jim. “But how much could you invest?”

“Take into consideration that we are not asking for charity but for an investment,” added Yannick. “Believe me... It would be profitable investment, for you!”

“I don’t know,” hesitated Carl. You are so young...”

“We are young, but we are brilliant!” said Yannick, “truly brilliant!”

“And without money!” replied Carl.

“Only for the time being...” interjected Jim.

“Not totally,” contradicted Yannick, “I have some personal savings...”

“Really?” said Carl seemingly surprised.

“Sure!” explained Yannick. “I was able to pay for my university tuition and education with money I earned in part time jobs and with the money I inherited from my father, but I never used the money I received after selling my parent’s house. Of course, it’s not a very large amount of money, just about twenty five thousand dollars. But I invested this money... good investments and now, I have approximately...”

“How much?” asked Jim, utterly startled and with raised eyebrows.

“Thirty eight... I have thirty eight thousand dollars to invest in our business. And you, Mr. Desnoyers? How much could you invest?”

After a long hesitation, Carl answered:

“Ten thousands... I can lend you both ten thousand dollars.”

Yannick answered appreciatively:

“This will be the best investment of your life!”

“Not so fast, young man,” interjected Jim’s father. “Come back to earth. First of all, you are still missing fifty-two thousand dollars to attain the amount you need and secondly, you don’t have any serious clients. Nobody knows you. Who will trust two young punks like you?”

“Error!” corrected Yannick. “We have some clients. Very few, but, still, we have clients.”

“Really?” smothered Jim.

“Well, my friends, during the last few months, I did not waste my time,” explained a self-satisfied Yannick. “While you, Jim, were studying the stock market, I was concentrating on future clients... Affluent people. They had faith in us because they are the people who gave us our diploma last week. Not only they claimed we were financial geniuses, but they made that statement in front of a large crowd.”

“What?” exclaimed Jim, leaping up with joy. “Don’t tell me that you convinced certain faculty members of the university to invest some of their savings with us?”

“Our professors,” continued Yannick, professors from other colleges, the university directors and these good people helped me convince some of their friends, lawyers, judges and so on.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Jim. “I can’t believe it! I had no idea! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was waiting for the right time, Jim, the right time! And do you know what else? I also convinced the owner of our apartment. He is not exactly poor, you know... And, neither is his mother...”

“So, we are ready!” said Jim with enthusiasm.

“Not so fast boys,” interjected Carl in an authoritarian way. “I admit that these accomplishments are quite remarkable but I need to remind you that you are still missing fifty two thousand dollars...”

“We will borrow from the bank,” declared Jim as he was raising his shoulders.

“I’m not sure that any banks will gamble with little wolves like you!” explained Carl. Even if the odds of success are on your side, you have no success background and you don’t have any security, collateral or assets to offer.”

“Your father is right,” mumbled Yannick while facing Jim. “We need more funds. Fifty two thousand dollars is far from enough. We should be able to find more money somewhere.”

So far, during this conversation, Marilyne had remained silent. However, she would be the one finding the solution.

“I have money!” she said quite casually.

“What?” asked Jim, flabbergasted.

“I have faith in both of you, so, I will sell my piano. It’s a Fazioli... I’m sure it’s worth at least forty thousand dollars.

“No way!” objected her mother Francine, while preparing the meal in the kitchen, right next to the dining room where the meeting was held. “You will not sell your piano! You can’t be serious! Your grandmother worked like a dog to offer you such an instrument.”

“I know that very well,” admitted Marilyne. But... I’m not really playing piano anymore, so...”

“Well, you should be playing that piano, my dear daughter, heavy-heartedly replied Francine. I can’t believe that you would set aside your brilliant career so you...”

“For love, Mother, for the love I have for Yan. I want to devote my life to him. To him and only to him, not to a career I never really wanted...”

“But, you are truly a prodigy, a virtuoso!” continued her mother with sadness in her tone of voice. Your grandmother and I truly believed...”

“Exactly!” harshly interrupted Marilyne. “Grandmother and you wanted me to become a great pianist... not me! I only want a quiet life. A husband that I love and a family... that’s what I want!”

Francine thought for a second and replied:

“I hope, my dear child, that you will never have to regret the choice you are now making...”

“Not more than you, mother, not more than you, unless...”

“No,” quickly answered Francine, “I never regretted my choice. I abandoned my dream to become a pianist and followed your father and... From the bottom of my heart, I hope that Yannick will offer you as great life as your father gave me”

Francine faced Yannick, pointed her large soup spoon toward him in a threatening way and said:”

“I’m telling you, Yan Simard, make sure you make my daughter happy, or else...”

Not at all worried, Yannick took advantage of the occasion and announced his intention to marry Marilyne as soon as possible. The young lady became so emotional, that her mother, her father and Jim never found anything to say. With a small smile on the lips, Francine celebrated the event by offering champagne to everyone.

“The decision is made!” said Marilyne while raising her glass. “I’m selling my piano

and whatever money I get for it, I will invest in Jim and Yan's business and... I'm additionally offering them my talent as a secretary for a minimal salary. I must say that I have been typing your documents for quite a while, guys, and that I am familiar with the world of finance."

"Fantastic!" replied Yannick. "But I swear to you, my love, that you will not have to work for a petty salary for a long time. In fact, you will only work for a short time. Just wait and see what we will do with your money! You can start dreaming. Soon, the world will be ours!"

"So!" figured Francine. "After selling the piano, you will still need twelve thousand dollars to start your brokerage firm, is that right?"

"Absolutely right!" answered Jim. "But don't worry, mother. We will find the money."

"You won't have to. I am offering it to you," conveyed Francine.

"What?" yelled Carl, gasping for air. "Where would that money come from?"

"Well!" admitted Francine, while you were traveling, I did a few things, like selling Avon or Tupperware products or babysat some children; different things, you see... So, I saved a few dollars."

"I'll be damned!" said Jim while looking at his mother with admiration.

"But your business..." continued Francine with a challenging face, "has to bring me a good profit, my boys! I mean a big profit!"

So, this is how the brokerage firm "Desnoyers-Simard" was created. Because of the Desnoyers family, but mostly because of a piano. Marilyne did not immediately realize that her sacrifice, which was not really a sacrifice, would change the life of every person involved. Once the magnificent Fazioli was sold for a fair price, the business was on its way. In order to economize money, the offices were set in the basement of the Denoyers' house. To save a few more dollars, Jim and Yannick left their apartment and decide to also live in that house. Francine and Marilyne devoted much time and efforts to prepare the administrative aspect of the new offices. They took care of everything: the incorporation, the legal matters, the official logo, the paper work, the preparation of the legal documents and contracts, the filing system, the telephone and whatever else. As far as Jim and Yannick, they agreed to divide their responsibilities and to respectively use their different talents and knowledge, so each would work in his field of expertise. So, because he was the great negotiator and manipulator, and, let say, the big mouth of the team, Yannick would be the one recruiting investors, while Jim, the authority in investments, who had a great instinct to recognize a good venture, would be the one deciding where to invest the money. They could not possibly be happier: to spend time on the floor of the stock market, play with money and make it grow was Jimmy's dream. Yannick was practicing his favorite sport and game while convincing potential investors. If he had wanted to, he could have been a great politician. Carl, who by profession was an accountant, took care of the good financial aspects of the enterprise.

Three months later, even if they had some good clients and investments, the new kids in the

finance world still had to count on Marilyne and Francine's help to administrate the office and kept feeding themselves from the Desnoyers' refrigerator. Six months later, they could occasionally afford a few nights out. A year later, some profitable investments helped their reputation grow in the right direction. Two years later, all was going well and Yannick finally married Marilyne. They left the Desnoyers' residence and found themselves a comfortable apartment. As far as Jimmy was concerned, he was not married, but was involved in a love story with a young woman he had met in a little restaurant not far from the Toronto's stock market building. The young woman was also from the province of Quebec and had recently found employment, as a waitress, in the restaurant where she met Jimmy. In fact, Jimmy was her very first client. She lost her job after spilling a cup of coffee on him. What followed proved without any doubts that he did all he could to forgive her little accident. Her name was Christine. Her close friends called her Christie. Anyway, after spilling the coffee on Jimmy's new and expensive shoes, she was aggressively showed the door by her new and upset employer. When Christie reached the sidewalk, she was in tears. Did the pretty blonde with beautiful blue eyes attract Jimmy or was he bothered by her situation? Anyway, Jimmy followed her and offered his help. They became friends and gradually, friendship gave way to love. Christie was not successful in Toronto and accepted to return in the province of Quebec where she became a receptionist for the firm "Desnoyers-Simard". Unlike the two other ladies still working, she never had to work without pay. The day she became part of the company, Francine and Marilyne were already getting reattributed for their work. It was a small salary but, it was an income.

Three years later, the company was truly successful. Marilyne left her job and gave birth to their first child; a sweet little girl by the name of Helene who had her mother's beautiful green eyes and her father's dark hair. Selected to be godfather and godmother, Jim and Christie took advantage of the moment to legalize their union and get married. Francine decided to devote more time to her grandmother's role and to only work for the firm on a part time basis.

About two years after Helene's birth, her parents gave her a little sister. Jade, unlike Helene, had the sharp blue eyes of her father and her mother's red hair. Yannick was living in the seventh heaven. Not only did he have his own family, his older daughter would have the great advantage of having a sister. Around the same period of time, Jimmy and Christie also had a child. Now that she was a grandmother for the third time, Francine decided that it was time to stop working. Christie did the same and devoted her efforts to the education of her little boy. Even if these two ladies were precious for the firm "Desnoyers-Simard", their departure was not a calamity. In fact, it was a good thing. They would be able to take advantage of a better life. The company was now successful and profitable for its owners. Jim and Yannick were not yet millionaires, but it was only a question of time. On his side, Carl kept working, not by need, but because he liked his job and did not want to become restless and useless. The amount of ten thousand dollars that he had invested in the company had flourished many times. He was not rich, but he was on his way. It was interesting to see that Carl kept re-investing his savings in the family operation. He now realized that he had done the right thing by trusting the two young men. Because of them, the financial future of the family was assured. He, Francine, Marilyne and all of those who had trusted them were now collecting the benefits of their investments. As time kept going on, "Desnoyers-Simard" became a synonym of the word 'trustworthy' and the list of investors kept growing. The business was growing so fast that Jim and Yannick had to move their offices to downtown Montreal and had to increase the number of employees. When Jade was born, the business had about twenty employees. When

Frederick, Jim's son, came to life, the number of employees exceeded thirty five. Two years later, when Christie gave birth to her second child, another boy they called Jimmy Jr, the company had a Montreal staff of one hundred and twenty five and the workforce in Toronto, where they had to open an office to better serve their clients, exceeded fifty five. A short while after, when Helene reached the age of six years old, "Desnoyers-Simard" had reached the summit. With offices in the two largest cities of Canada, their original investors were now millionaires and the two owners of the company had reached their goal... They had more money than they knew what to do with.

At the age thirty three, Yannick experienced the best of the life. He had everything he had ever wanted: plenty of money, a wife that he adored and the most beautiful and charming little girls in the world. And there was Jimmy, his long-time friend who had become a brother. Yannick was now a member of the best golf clubs and of the most popular tennis clubs. He visited the top restaurants and was very popular among the Canadian high society. He travelled everywhere in the world and deserved the respect of everyone. He was a handsome and elegant man. Six feet two inches, slim and well-built, even if he was developing excess in the middle of the body. His dark tan gave the impression that he spent most days under the sun, but on the contrary, he hated being exposed to the sun. He always remembered the premature death of his father and did not want to share this destiny. He stayed away from everything that could cause cancer and that included the sun. Finally, his long hair style, somewhat frizzy, and his hypnotic and sharp blue eyes gave him an irresistible charm. It is probably why people looking at him were easily seduced. His good looks and his control of words and conversations were without doubt the secret of his success and he knew it. He never neglected to use his powerful charms and convincing words when it was time to persuade or even manipulate difficult investors.

But on this day, he was not appreciating the multiple advantages life had given him. On this day, his life changed forever. Was it his destiny to live alone and to bury everyone he loved? First, his father died; then later his mother and now, the three loves of his life. A man can endure the departure of his parents and even, the death of his wife. To die is a normal part of life. But, to suffer the early death of his children? This is the highest level of cruelty life can offer to a human being. Presently resting in a hospital bed and still under the influence of powerful drugs they had given him, Yannick knew that his life would never be the same. He knew he would never be cured of the intense drama that had crushed his existence. Everything happened so fast... He and his family were on the way to their hotel after a marvellous day spent at Disneyland, in California. It was dark and it was around ten o'clock at night. This was the last day of their trip on the West Coast of the United States. They had to return back to Montreal because in a few days, Jade would start kindergarten and Helene would start her first year in elementary school. That was the plan but, while driving his car, Yannick had an accident with a limousine moving toward him at excessive speed; it was dangerously zigzagging. It was easy to understand that the driver was not in a normal state of mind. Yannick first reflex was to press on the break to prevent a collision with this damn limousine coming directly toward him. Bad reflex, very bad; in doing so, he lost control of his car. After a few turns of one hundred and eighty degrees, the car stalled in the middle of the road. The passenger side was facing the wild limousine coming in their direction. Marilyne was sitting on the front seat and the two girls were sitting side by side on the back seat, close to the passenger side. All Yannick remembered is that he did not have the time to restart the car. He heard a strong bang and then... nothing, it was the total darkness. He might have been sufficiently conscious to notice a light silhouette walking around his car. But he was not sure. In his mind, it was total confusion.

1

“Tonight,” said Johnny while talking to the person he affectionately called Manou, “I will not only need one pill but two so that I can finally sleep...”

“Really?” retorted Manou somewhat surprised. “When Johnny wants two pills so he can sleep, it is because Johnny is hiding something... so, tell me.”

“There is nothing, Manou,” lied Johnny. “Nothing happened, except for the fact that I had to wait two hours at the airport for this damn driver who never showed-up. I can’t believe I had to come home by taxi, like any normal citizen. Not only am I upset, I am exhausted. Will you please give me the pills?”

“That’s it?” asked Manou. “That’s really all there is to it?”

“I swear,” lied Jimmy for the second time. On the cross and if I am untruthful, I will go to hell.”

Manou kept silent and gave him the two pills he was asking for. She was sure he was lying. But why? Normally, and since he was a little boy, Johnny always told her everything. He never kept anything from her. He knew very well that when he was deceitful, she knew immediately. Every time he lied, he always squinted abnormally. And now, his big blue eyes were squinting more than ever before. While he was falling asleep, she sat at the edge of his bed and kept her eyes on him. That’s what she did every night. She would never leave until he was in the arms of Morpheme. As soon as he was asleep, she normally moved to her quarters to rest. This time, however, she stayed by the bedside of the young man she loved like her own son well after he had fallen asleep. She perceived that he was hiding something from her and if he was, it had to be of major importance. He was not only upset by the fact that this incompetent driver never showed up at the airport and that he had to come home by taxi. It was more than that. Johnny was more than frustrated. He seemed terrorized, traumatized. What happened in Las Vegas from where he was just returning? He might have lost a large sum of money while gambling?

“No,” she whispered within herself. “He doesn’t give a damn about money!”

Now, she would be the one with problems going to sleep. How many scotch would she need before dozing off? Until she found out what happened during that evening... “But who knows?” she eventually thought. “He may tell me the whole story after a good night sleep. Still looking at him, and even if her love was truly maternal, she couldn’t help but find him handsome. Since he was a little boy, she was always amazed by his angelic face. When they brought him to the San Diego Orphanage, where she used to work, he was less than two months old. His mother did not want him. It was probably better that way. What child could have grown normally with a prostitute, for a mother, who spent most of her days taking drugs? At the time she met the child, Manou noticed that he was totally bald but she knew that he would eventually have blonde hair. What other color could possibly match his beautiful blue eyes? The day that Johnny arrived at the

orphanage, he rapidly became her favorite child.

“You may not have a mother,” she whispered in his ears while taking him to the dormitory, “but you have Manou and I will do all I can to give you a good life...”

She kept her promise, to the point that when Johnny became an adult, she left her job and left the orphanage with him. She knew that life with her Johnny would be everything but boring. And as she had guessed for his hair color, she quickly understood that luck and providence were on the side of this young man. Determined to become a rock star, he was rapidly accepted by a music publisher based in Los Angeles. It had to happen. The young man was handsome, attractive, seductive and seemed to have unlimited talent. He sang and danced like a star. He also wrote his own music and lyrics. At age eighteen, he knew by instinct how to create songs that would inevitably reach the top of the hit parades. It only took him a few weeks after his first album was on the market to climb the ladder. He soon became one of the greatest stars of the world. Girls, young and older, were nuts about him. It was evident... with his long blond curly hair, his beautiful blue eyes, his angelic face, his contagious naivety and his undeniable charisma, the young man was attractive to all who met him. He was the perfect image of the Little Prince. Little, because he was small, frail and naive. Prince, because he always dreamed to be a prince. From the way he dressed and by looking at the castle he had built for him and Manou, Johnny Boy totally deserved this nickname that his fans had given him. The daughters desired him as a lover or husband and the mother wanted him as a son. As far as men were concerned, particularly the young ones, they all envied the effect he had with the feminine gender. Many attempted to imitate his behavior and the way he dressed. Since his startling beginning, Johnny boy had produced five other albums, accomplished multiple tours around the world and was presented on the front page of the media quite a few times. His career had already lasted for over ten years and he was still getting more and more popular. Of course, money was flowing in and Johnny was living the golden life. Many thought his life style was superfluous, but in his mind, he had had a difficult childhood and he now deserved anything he could get. Manou agreed... there was no doubt that her little angel deserved every happiness he could possibly secure.

If one person could confirm the distress and harsh treatment Jonny had received as a child, it was her. He was rejected by almost everybody; by all except her, of course. She was the only one that would defend him. To defend and protect him while giving him all the love he so needed. How many times did he find refuge in her plump, soft and comfortable arms where he would receive reassurance and support? How many tears did he spill on her in order to find consolation after the constant humiliation he had to submit to? The other kids were always laughing at him. Why? Surely because he was different. First of all, he was truly the best looking boy living in the orphanage and that provoked the jealousy of the other children. And he was different. He did not dream, like the others, to become a baseball or basketball star. Sport was not for him. In all kind of physical activities, he was worthless. The other kids kept reminding him that he was fable, called him dirty names and many times beat the hell out of him. It was very grueling for him. Each time his teachers forced him to play with other children or to participate in physical activities, it was always the same episode. Nobody wanted him in their team. So when the selection was completed he was forced to play for the weakest team. That is where his hardship began. Every time he

made a mistake, and God knows he made quite a few, he had to cope with minutes of insults from members of his team and mockery from his opponents. And when his team lost the game because of his shortcomings, he lived in hell. In each of these occasions, he was hammered. Occasionally, five or six members of his team would hit him. But only one would have been enough... the poor child was defenseless. The scene would last until Manou showed up, punished the guilty children and brought the unloved child away where she would console him. But as soon as the kid returned to the dormitory, the torments would start over.

“You’re nothing but a girlish boy,” would whisper the other boys to him so that Manou would not hear.

Or they would say:

“The creepy baby of fat Manou is back... You have to be the lowest of the low to go and cry in the arms of that filthy Niger!”

And it would never stop. That was the daily tragedy of poor Johnny McLean. Fortunately, he could find peace in Manou’s arms, but predominantly, in music. Great people like Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger or Jon Bon Jovi existed to remind him that even if it was often difficult, life was worth living. Because of these stars, he knew very early in his life what he would become. He would become like them... exactly like them and even, better than them. “The day will come”, he would say to himself, “when those who made me suffer will deeply regret what they have done to me”. So, he learned to sing and dance while listening to the music of his idols. When he had the chance to go to the toilet or dormitory by himself, he would practice in secret, while facing a mirror. Then, he performed in front of Manou. The woman rapidly realized that he was highly talented. So one day, when he was not quite ten years old, she decided to invest a portion of her salary in his tutoring. She helped him take singing and dancing courses. He took his lessons very seriously and assiduously for a period of eight years, without the awareness of the other residents of the orphanage. It was a well-kept secret between him and Manou. Many, of course, wandered where he went each time he left the premises to go take his lessons. Even when the other children tried to make him talk, sometime using violence, Johnny would remain silent. On one given day, when the youngsters pushed the torments so far, he thought he had reached the last day of his life. It was after the celebration of his fourteenth birthday when he was approached in the shower room by big Tommy and his herd of scums. Following the orders of Tommy, their leader, two bullies grabbed the young boy while his was totally naked under the shower. They pulled him before to forced him to lie on the cold and damp floor, and held him down with violence. Tommy showed his pocket knife and applied the blade against Johnny’s genitals. This poor one could feel the coldness of the blade and knew that one short move could cripple him forever. He was terrified and was shaking out of control when the other boy said:

“OK, sissy, tell me where you go almost every night, or I’m going to cut this thing in half!”

“Well, said one of the other boy, there is not much to cut!”

“Really,” agreed Tommy, also laughing. “It is quite true that the little bastard of his Manou is not favored by nature. No, but... can you see that thing, boys? It is so little!”

“It matches the rest of his body,” added the third boy. It’s small, flabby and totally useless.”

While Tommy was laughing like a mad man, Johnny felt the blade slightly cutting the outer skin of his penis. He could not see blood, but the pain he experienced made him realize that his skin had been severed.

“Last chance, Dummy,” threatened Tommy who was strongly squeezing the genitals of his victim.

“Talk or say goodbye to shitty cock!”

Johnny was praying when by chance, good old Manou walked by. She heard the boys laughing and wondered why. She opened the door just in time to prevent Tommy from executing his threat. Of course, Tommy and his accomplices were severely punished, but the damage was done. The size of Johnny’s penis became a popular subject of ridicule among his peers. How many times since that day did the boys sharing his room take down his pants to examine his genitals. Each time, it was total humiliation. They were laughing at him while pointing toward his penis. These incidents would forever affect Johnny’s sexual orientation: meaning none whatsoever.

During his stay at the orphanage, he developed another passion: gambling. First, Manou did not see any problems. She figured he played cards to pass time when he had nothing else to do. She received him in her room quite often and they would play together a few short games of Poker or Black Jack. The bets were never very high. At first, they were betting pennies, than nickels, quarters and eventually, one or two dollars. During the courses of the years, Johnny made much progress. At fifteen years old, he had the ability to count the cards and knew how to bluff his opponents. Each game they played together, Manou would lose and never figured out why. She lost so many times that she was constantly out of change or small bills. As time went by, she realized that she should not have encouraged Johnny to become a gambler. As soon as he earned money, he offered himself luxury outings to Las Vegas. During these trips, he often lost large sums of money. At first, he would take her with him. But because she was complaining every time he was betting too high or lost serious amounts of money, he decided to go without her. In fact Las Vegas became the only destination where he did not want her to go with him. When he was traveling to other places, not only did he want her to accompany him, but he insisted. In his company, she traveled around the world, had great meals in the best restaurants and stayed in the most formidable palaces. She could also brag about the fact that she had met and talked with some of the most influential people in the world. Who would have believed it? She, Manouscha Tarah, daughter of an African merchant, not only shared time with members of the high society, but she became one of them. Yes, really, her life with her Johnny was anything but dreary. So, OK, for her, who had in the past suffered hunger, on a financial point of view, the astronomic sums of money that her little angel was losing and spending rendered her quite insecure. It was the only aspect of her new life that bothered her, her only annoyance. And when her inquietude climbed out of control, she would tell

herself that as long as Johnny was at the top of the charts and as long as he could produce new albums and present new shows... there would be plenty of money. She had nothing to fear. Of course, she would sometime get upset with Johnny and warn him against his bad addiction. Each time the little fellow would challenge her, he came up with a good answer:

“You,” would he often say, “when we are home and even if I don’t want you to drink so much, you regularly empty quite a few bottles of scotch. Do I bug you? I tell myself that you also have the right to your own bad habit or sin...”

And each time, he forced her to seal her complaining lips. He was right. She likes to drink and it began a long time ago. She started drinking at the age of twenty one, around the time that she became the director of the San Diego Orphanage. The children were a major source of worries and that is why, at the end of each day, just before going to bed, she had taken the habit to drink a significant glass of scotch, mostly to relax and fall asleep. Her habit grew with time, pretty well at the same rhythm as the problems caused by the young residents. So, one glass of scotch became insufficient. It became two, then three and four... up to half a bottle each night. Sometime, she drank even more but her alcoholism left no trace and no one noticed. In the morning, when she got up, she always seemed in good shape. She hid her bad habit so well that at first, even Johnny didn’t notice. He was greatly surprised the day he discovered her vice. It happened a short while after they left the orphanage for good. Johnny had just received his first recording contract and since his producer had given him a generous advance, he decided to invite Manou in an upper class restaurant of Beverly Hill to celebrate the event. Unable to contain herself, Manou gulped down six cocktails before the meal, half a bottle of wine during dinner and four of five drinks after the meal. She was so intoxicated that Johnny had to help her walk to the car.

“Do you have a problem?” he asked her. “How long have you been drinking like that? You never told me...”

“Don’t you worry?” she answered. “Manou likes to drink but she knows when to stop. I am very resistant; you know... alcohol does not really affect me.”

Before leaving the damn hole where his youth had been so miserable, Johnny had declared to Manou in a desperate tone of voice:

“I need to be with you. Without you, I would be totally alone...I’m afraid...I wouldn’t make it.”

These were the only words he had to say to convince her to leave the orphanage where she was living for more than thirty-five years. During this period of time, she was only forty five years old, an age when a person can easily reorganize her life. She never regretted that choice. The day she closed the door of the orphanage behind her, she never thought, not even once, to turn around and look at the building she had lived in for so many years. She never bothered to say goodbye to

anyone, not even to the children she had cared for. It would have been hypocrisies. How could she have demonstrated interest in these orphans who laughed at her for years? She was not mindless enough to ignore all the bad names that the kids gave her and used when she was not around. “Big Mama!” would they call her while laughing. Or, “Dirty Niger!” Yes, she was an African American and yes, she was fat; very fat. But was it all they could find about her?

Really... after all she did for them. She fed, cleaned butts, and educated every single one of them... and that’s all she deserved? Of course, all of them did not receive from her all the advantages she gave to Johnny; but still, after all the years she devoted to them, she would expect a little more respect. So, it is without regret or feeling of guilt that she left them to follow Johnny. If there was any blame she could accept, it was that she had kept Johnny away from people who visited the orphanage to adopt a child. Beautiful as he was, someone would have chosen him. He would have grown away from her and she would never have seen him again. She loved this child way too much to let him go. Yes, she admitted to herself, in consequence, she deprived him from a better childhood; but, only maybe. One thing remained certain. If in his adult life he became so successful, it was because of the way she acted. She did not only invest most of her savings in him. She did more. She made him. She believed in him and thought him to believe in himself. What he became, he owed it to her. She is the one who from the start took care of everything: his career, his fortune... everything. She managed everything as a controller. Because of her absolute devotion, he owed her.

She must also say that she made a good boy out of him. She educated her Jonny very well. So much, that even after he reached the summit of glory, his good education helped him not to fall in the traps of celebrity. It would have been easy for him to imitate his peers and to indulge in alcohol and drugs, so he would appear to be cool. Even in his sexual life, Johnny remained himself. He was not under the control of any vice, with the exception, of course, of gambling. Manou figured that this wickedness was within him from the day of his birth. That was truly his only fault. He didn’t drink, did not use drugs and the idea of sex made him sick. In fact, he was still a virgin and proud of it. Any time a girl, a woman or even a man, that was not rare in the world in which he performed, tried to make a pass at him; he would leave as soon as he could as if he had been in a snake’s pit. When, occasionally, he was seeing people kissing or fondling in public, he would make a sound of disgust, just like an eight year old child. This behavior may not have seemed normal, but Manou was not concerned at all. In fact, she preferred that her Johnny be that way. If her little darling boy did like the other musicians and brought girl after girl at home... her life would have been a real hell. And if he had fallen in love, she surely would have lost most of the authority she had over him. The only living being, excluding herself, that occupy a place in his heart was named Charlie, a sweet little doggie that Johnny took everywhere he went, including Las Vegas. Charlie was given to Johnny by a musician, whose dog gave birth to three little puppies, one male and two females. Johnny was there when the dogs came to life. He remained totally indifferent when he first saw the two females, but rapidly fell for the male dog with big blue and bright eyes, just like him. Eyes color of the sky.

“Strange,” said the musician while studying the animal... “a shih-tzu with the eyes of a husky...very strange.”

Johnny immediately wanted the puppy.

“His look must be from his father,” explained the musician. “We found him in the forest... strange dog... he looked like a shih-tzu, except that he was three times as big and attacked like a wolf. I guess he was a mixture between a shih-tzu and a wolf... or a husky... who knows!”

“Can I have him?” asked Johnny as he grabbed the white puppy. “Please...you can see that he’s meant for me... He even has my eyes!”

The musician hesitated. He knew the dog was special and rare, but the man could not resist Johnny’s insistence. Without the young star, he would not have a job. It was effectively because of Johnny, that he was earning a good living, traveled around the world and could get all the woman he wanted. Precisely three months later, Johnny came back to pick up the canine who became his very best friend. Since then, Charlie went everywhere with Johnny. On tours, galas and fell asleep in his master’s arms every night. He grew to be the most celebrated dog in the world. The fans loved him almost as much as they loved Johnny.

So, Charlie was not sleeping on that special night. He was doing like Manou and watching Johnny who was deeply asleep. The woman looked at the dog and said:

“If only you could talk... You would be able to tell me if my little Johnny is becoming worse than a gambler... like a bad little liar... I’m certain that he is not being truthful with me.”

And so, she looked at her watch. It was a few minutes past midnight. It was time for a last glass of scotch, or maybe, the one before last. She laboriously stood up, caressed Charlie and placed a soft kiss on Johnny’s forehead. He was sleeping but appeared agitated. Two sleeping pills could not even calm him down. Definitively, she thought, something bad did happen. To know, she could use an old and good method that she often used at the orphanage... the “sleeping technique”. It was a way to make people talk and tell their story while they were sleeping. She had learned this technique from her father and it always worked. When she was a little girl and still living in Africa, her father would use this method when he figured she was not telling him the truth. But she knew very well that Johnny did not appreciate this kind of therapy. Every time she had played this game with him, he made her regret it. He would accuse her of invading his intimacy and would not talk to her for days. He would also deprive her from her scotch. He would either hide the bottles or replace the content by colored water. Not enjoyable for an alcoholic to find out that the bar is empty while all the liquor stores are closed... So, no... she will not make him talk while he’s asleep. She decided to wait until the next morning.

She walked toward the living room bar, picked-up a clean glass before heading to her bedroom where a half full bottle was waiting for her. Earlier that evening, she had shared a few drinks with Gregory, the damn driver who was without doubt at the origin of Johnny’s problems. Whatever happened, it will be the last time. No way will she forgive him in exchange of sexual favors. For what it was worth anyway... the guy was just as bad a lover as he was driver. But he was the only one who would occasionally bang her needs. Not really easy to find a lover when you

have a repulsive body. She was fat, totally obese, fifty-five years old and covered with cellulite. So, when it came to finding a sexual partner, she could not be picky. Of course, Gregory was far from being a charming prince. He liked to booze as much as she did, he was skinny, wrinkled with bad skin everywhere. He was pale and colorless. He looked like a person coming out of a scary movie. But, well, at least, he accepted to have sex with her during one week of the month, each week that Johnny would leave her to go to Las Vegas. Of course, her little boy never knew what was going on. If he had known... he would probably get rid of her.

“Totally disgusting!” would he say. “Get out of my life forever.”

While filling her glass with her favorite elixir, she tried to remember the moments that preceded and followed Johnny’s call. Before the phone rang... she was in bed with Gregory. Right after two or three drinks, they proceeded to have sex. In their case, so few drinks didn’t mean much. Then, Johnny called Manou to remind her that he was coming back from Vegas and that he would be at the airport precisely at nine o’clock at night.

“Please tell Gregory to be on time,” he asked her. “I am not in a very good mood and I don’t feel like waiting for him tonight.”

“Oh, Oh...” replied Manou. “I see you don’t sound happy. I guess you must have lost a lot of money...again!”

“Stop it, Manou! I just told you that I was not in a good mood. Can I count on you to inform Gregory? Tell him that he better be on time. I will not tolerate any excuses. If he is late, I will fire him.”

“You can trust me, my boy. He will be there.”

The time was about 20 minutes before eight o’clock. Less than five minutes later, Gregory left the house. If he never made it to the airport, where the hell did he go? She thought a while. She knew that Gregory quite well. She grabbed the phone and dialed the Brady Bar’s number. For Gregory, this bar was much more than just a regular bar. It was his office, almost his second home. Anytime Manou would look for him, she was almost certain to find him there. If this time she was right, she would not wait for Johnny to fire him. She would do it herself. She just wouldn’t get laid anymore.

“Brady Bar, good evening,” somebody said.

“Brad,” she said, sounding somewhat worried. “Can you tell me if Gregory is there?”

“Well... no. He came here earlier, but he left fifteen minutes later; why?”

“What time was it?”

“Well, I would say that he arrived here around eight fifteen and that he left around eight

thirty. He told me he had to pick up Johnny at the airport. Don't tell me he never made it?"

"You just understood! Did he drink?"

"About three shots... he gulped them down swiftly"

"I see... and that's on top of the two or three drinks he had here."

"Wait a minute... I remember... he left the bar with Alan."

"With Alan? Oh no! Don't tell me these two whooped it up again?"

"I don't think so. Alan was quite drunk when they left... Gregory proposed to take him home before going to the airport. He said it was on the way."

"Here it is... he probably got in Alan's house for another drink, then another and hell with Johnny! Well, this time he went too far!"

"Hum... I don't think so..."

"Why? Do you know something else?"

"Well... Alain came back. Wait... I'll let you talk to him."

About thirty seconds later, Alan took the phone. Apparently drunk he asked:

"What is it?"

"Hello Alan, its Manou... Do you know where Gregory is?"

"At the airport..."

"Absolutely not... he never made it."

"Well, that's where he was heading after taking me home. Anyway, that's what he said."

"How long were you in the limo?"

"Just a few minutes... I had a drink on the back seat. You see, there's a bar in that limousine. I hope Johnny won't mind."

"Don't worry about that. I don't care what and where you drink. What I want is to find Gregory."

"He's in trouble again, isn't he?"

"It's none of your business. If you see him, tell him to get his ass here immediately. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"As you say, boss!"

Now truly worried, Manou hanged up the phone.

“Damn it!” she curses. “Where can that brainless bastard be?”

She gulped down her drink and refilled the glass. “Johnny may not be hiding anything,” she said to herself. “He’s probably upset because his driver let him down one more time.” Nevertheless...

She didn’t have to torture herself too long. A few minutes after one o’clock in the morning, someone rang the front door bell. She figured it was Gregory so she charged toward the door, as fast as her humongous body would allow her. It was not the man she was expecting but two police officers. A woman and a man; both were expressing a severe face.

“My God!” exclaimed Manou while she placed her hand upon her chest. “What’s going on? This can’t be good. You have bad news for me, don’t you?”

“May we come in?” asked the female cop who did not wait for an answer before entering the house.

“What’s going on?” insisted Manou seeming ready to collapse on the floor.

”Do you know a man by the name of Gregory A. Simon?”

“Of course, we have been looking for him. Where is he? What happened to him?”

“It seems that according to his identification, this man lives here. Is that right?”

“Yes,” confirmed Manou. He’s one of our employees... our driver.

“And we are at the residence of Johnny McLean? Is that right?” asked the female cop. She was admiring the sumptuous décor of the house.

“Yes.”

“Is Mr. McLean here?” continued the male officer, pointing his eyes toward his partner.

“Yes,” answered a panic stricken Manou. “He is sleeping upstairs. My little angel can’t be responsible for anything bad. He is not able to do anything wrong, he is like an angel, he... he...”

“No,” replied the woman. “In fact, we are reassured to know that he is here. It means he is still alive...”

“What happened?” nervously interrupted Manou. “Will you finally tell me what’s going on?”

“Can we talk to Mr. McLean?”

“He is sleeping! repeated Manou, showing some impatience. “I gave him two potent sleeping pills. We won’t be able to wake him up. I’m his adoptive mother... tell me what’s going

on?”

“Was Johnny McLean on board the limousine with Mr. Simon tonight?”

“Well no!” answered Manou showing more irritability. “He should have been there, but he was not. Gregory was supposed to pick him up at the airport, except that...”

“Except what Ma’am?” asked one of the officers.

“Well... Gregory never made it to the airport. That’s why we are looking for him.”

“If Mr. Simon never made it to the airport, how did Mr. McLean get here?”

“In a taxi,” retorted Manou seemingly angry. “Can you imagine that? Johnny Boy, the prince of rock, coming home in a cab! I can tell you that he was furious!”

“Can he prove that he arrived here in a taxi?”

“Of course! I have personally seen him get out of a damn taxi. Will you finally tell me what’s going on?”

The cops eventually explained the reason for being there. Around ten fifteen, that night, two cars, one was a limousine, were involved in an accident, mid way between the airport of Los Angeles and Johnny’s residence. The highly intoxicated driver was not only driving at high speed, but was moving in the wrong direction in a one way avenue. So doing, he collided with a family car in which a man, a woman and two young girls were traveling. The result of the accident: the driver of the limo was dead as well as the woman and the two girls. Only the driver of the car was still alive.

“It’s too early to confirm his declaration,” said one of the officers, but according to the survivor, a second person was on board the limousine.”

The poor Manou was perspiring like a pig and let herself fall in one of the seats while wiping her forehead.

“Why do you say that it’s too early to confirm what the survivor said?” she inquired.

The man answered:

“Because, even if he doesn’t have serious injuries... only a few broken ribs... he seems somewhat, out of it. You see... the poor guy just lost his wife and his two children. They had to give some medication to calm him down. Anyway, it could be that he was under the effect of these medications, but he declared that he saw someone exiting the back of the limousine... it could be possible because only the front of the vehicle is seriously damaged.”

“So,” asked Manou, getting more and more worried.

“Well,” continued the officer,” according to the survivor, the person who came out from the back of the limousine came close to his vehicle, briefly peeked inside and then ran away.”

For Manou, this was way too much. She did all she could to remain calm and asked:

“Do you have a description of this person?”

“No... well... it was dark, you know. Our man is not sure of anything. He declared that he saw a shadow, a very dark shadow. We thought it could have been Mr. McLean. If a person was really on location and if he acted the way the survivor said, this person could be charged with criminal negligence or, as you can imagine, of refusing assistance to someone in danger...

“It can’t be Johnny!” objected Manou. As I said to you earlier, he arrived here in a taxi... Taxi L.A., that’s what I read on the car.

“Well, Ok,” sympathetically replied the female officer. “We appreciate the information. We will verify and if everything checks, this part of the investigation will be completed.”

“Another thing bugs me...” added the other policeman while scratching the back of his head. “On the back seat of the limousine, we found a glass that contained alcohol and the prints on the glass were undoubtedly fresh. That would confirm the presence of a second passenger... so, if Johnny McLean was not in the car, do you have any idea of who else could have been there?”

“I really don’t know,” lied Manou. “However, if you give me your business card, I will try to find the info for you. Well, you can no longer suspect my Johnny. You need to know that he never drinks alcohol. So, it can’t be him.”

After the departure of the officers, Manou was in a state of rage. Her apprehension was founded. Johnny, the little scoundrel, did not tell her the truth. And not only did he lie to her but now, he could have some serious problems. She had to intervene and fast. But, the first thing to do was to practice on him her sleeping technique. The sooner she would find the truth; the sooner she would be able to do something. As she was climbing the steps of the long stairway leading to Johnny’s room, she was far from realizing that from this moment on, the destinies of Johnny McLean and Yannick Simard would forever be intermingled.

II

“Go Charlie!” yelled Johnny as he was throwing a toy toward the other end of the dining room. “Go get the little toy and bring it back!”

While the dog was doing what he was asked, Manou entered the room. She did not have to say one word before Johnny figured that she was upset.

“Well... what’s wrong?” asked the young man with a pleasant smile on his face. What’s wrong this morning?

She was about to answer when Charlie ran back to his master.

“Ha! ha!” said Johnny, always amazed by the unbelievable intelligence of his doggie. “So you want to play a little more? You are so brilliant. Okay, I agree, I will throw the toy up and you try to catch it while it’s in the air!”

So he launched the toy one more time and admired his dog as he was trying to jump high enough to catch the object.

“You missed it, my dear dog! But you didn’t do too badly. Do you want to try again?”

“Enough Johnny!” said Manou while bringing him coffee and toast.” I am not in the mood to play games this morning.”

“Thanks, Manou, but why are you serving my breakfast? The cook is not here this morning?”

“Today is Sunday, it’s her day off.”

“That’s true, I didn’t remember”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” replied Manou. “With everything you have on your head, it’s normal to forget this kind of details. Isn’t that so?”

“Okay, Manou!” said Johnny while taking a bite of his peanut butter covered toast. “Will you finally tell me what’s going on this morning, yes or no?”

And Manou retorted:

“I thought my little Johnny had no secrets from me?”

“What do you mean?” asked the young man with a vague expression and making sure he was not looking at her.

“Don’t you play dumb with me; you know I hate it when you act this way. So tell me... What happened last night?”

“Well... nothing special, except for what I already told you. But I feel much better this morning. Really, everything is forgiven now. Talking about that, did you see Gregory this morning? Where is he?”

“You tell me!”

“Please, I really don’t understand you this morning!” added Johnny seeming a little worried. “Are you done playing the mystery game?”

“I know everything, Johnny boy... I know everything!”

“And?” said Johnny getting a little nervous. “You know what? What do you mean when you say that you know everything?”

“It’s amazing all the things you reveal while you’re sleeping.”

“Oh no!” yelled Johnny getting angry and aggressive. “Don’t tell me you made me talk during my sleep? You don’t have the right to do that. You know I hate it. It will cost you plenty this time, you can believe me!”

“Except this time young man,” retorted Manou, “I did not really have the choice.”

“What do you mean you didn’t have the choice?”

“Well, we received visitors, last night, visitors that were very informative for me and I wish they had not been here.”

“Oh yes,” asked Johnny with a very soft voice. “Who was it?”

“Two police officers, young man, the police was here.”

“Whoops!”

“So would you mind to tell me what really happened?”

“Why should I?” whispered Johnny. “You know everything, so why should I repeat the story?”

“Because you could be in deep trouble, do you understand? Serious trouble. And I need to know why you acted the way you did. Why did you run away like a thief? Tell me why you did not help these poor people?”

“Because I was afraid, can you imagine that?” cried Johnny trembling and almost out of control. “They were dead... every one of them... Gregory, the woman, the children... and this man. He was there behind the wheel... He was dead, but his eyes were wide open... As if he was

looking at me. I got scared, do you understand? My first reaction was to run away as fast as I could and to get out of there. Either way, there is nothing I could have done for them... Nothing... Everybody was dead”.

“I understand, my sweet Johnny,” sadly said Manou, “but the man was still alive... The man with open eyes, well, he is not dead”.

“What?”

“No, he is not dead and according to the police, he is not badly hurt. In fact, if he was looking at you, it’s probably because he wanted you to help them... And that’s what you did not do”.

“Oh damn!” yelled Johnny, in a total state of panic. “So what does this mean? Does it mean that I’m in real deep shit?”

“Probably so,” answered Manou while getting closer to him so she could appease him, “or, maybe not.”

“What do you mean by that? Tell me?” cried Johnny, letting his head rest on his mother’s shoulder.

“I mean that the man in the car was quite confused and, for this reason, he was unable to identify the person he has seen... he is not sure of anything... he told the police that he had seen a black shadow...”

“It was me!” acknowledge Johnny while drying his tears. “You said this affair can cause me major problems... What kind of problems?”

“Well... If the police can prove that you were there... And it does not seem probable at this stage... You could be accused of criminal negligence or to have refused assistance to a person in danger...”

“What?” yelled Johnny. “Do you mean that I could become a criminal?”

“Don’t get so worked up,” said Manou, trying to reassure his son. “We are not at this point yet, and you can be sure that I will do anything I can to help you... Everything.”

“I can’t believe it,” muttered Johnny while crying even more. “The newspapers... Television... I will get all kind of bad press. It’s over! My career is done! It’s over, do you understand? Over!”

“Of course not...”

“I’m telling you!” cut in Johnny with rage. “Shit! I was not the driver and I’m not the one who collided with the other car! I am not responsible for what happened... Absolutely not responsible! Why should I be blamed or charged? No, but... They seem to forget that I could also be hurt or dead. The same thing could have happened to Charlie. It’s not fair, Manou, it’s totally unfair! I will be accused of a crime I did not commit...”

While he was crying and in total despair, Manou was holding him against her. She remained silent for a short moment, before saying:

“Don’t be so worried, my dear Johnny... I said I would help you. Yes, I will do everything to clear you. You know, it is not the first time that you and I have major problems. We have lived through worse situations, isn’t that so?”

“Maybe so,” replied Johnny while sniffing, “but it’s the first time that we are involved in such a serious story... There was never any death. This time, the police is investigating and whatever else...”

“We will find a solution but first, I must know everything. You must tell me everything, every little details, you hear me? So start... I’m listening.”

So, Johnny started at the beginning and revealed his adventure of the previous night. First of all, and for once, Gregory arrived at the airport on time. Charlie and he did not have to wait. Once in the limousine, he recognized a strong aroma of alcohol. Then he asked Gregory if he had been drinking. The driver admitted that he had a few drinks, but only a few. He certified that he could drive.

“The fact that I picked you up at the airport without any problems clearly shows that I’m able to drive. Doesn’t it?”

And Johnny trusted him. He should have been more distrustful when he took place on the backseat, recognized the smell of alcohol, the presence of a glass and of a bottle of brandy. Then again, Gregory reassured him and explained that he was not the one riding on the back seat. It was one of his friends that he drove at home not too long ago.

“I don’t want this kind of people in my limo, is that clear?” ordered Johnny with authority. “It stinks like hell back here! Charlie and I feel like puking”.

They got on the road and Johnny had no worry until he noticed that his dog was getting nervous. He then noticed that the limo was zigzagging on the road and moving forward at excessive speed. He was ready to press the intercom button to tell his driver to slow down when he felt a major impact followed by a slamming noise. His first reflex was to take care of Charlie but then, the bottle of brandy fell on his head. Then all was dark. In a total state of fear he yelled:

“What happened? What’s going on, Gregory?”

In the absence of an answer, he repeated:

“Gregory... Can you hear me? What’s going on?”

After realizing he was not getting an answer, Johnny asked one more time.

“Gregory, you hear me? Tell me what’s going on?”

Totally terrified, Charlie was scratching the door as if was trying to convey the message that it was time to get out of the car. Johnny picked the dog up before opening the door. Once out, he ran to the front of the car and rapidly realized that Gregory was no longer a living member of this world. It was probably a good thing for the driver because his body was seriously damaged. Survival would have been total torture. It would have been worse than damnation. The front lower part of the limousine seemed to have entered the lower part of Gregory’s body and the steering wheel had found a home inside the chest. It was practically impossible to recognize the face, all covered by the windshield. It was a frightful scene of horror... Even Charlie was terror-stricken.

The car, in front of the limousine, was also in a dreadful condition. It did not receive a frontal collision, but was impacted on the passenger side. Johnny set Charlie down on the ground before getting closer to the vehicle. On board, there were a total of four passengers, two in the front and two on the backseat on the passenger side. It was total horror. Somewhere between the front and back seats, two skulls were completely smashed, while in the front seat a woman was practically be-headed by a large piece of glass. For the driver, a man, the impact was not as cruel. His body didn’t seem too badly hurt. His head had probably smashed against something hard because he seemed totally out of it. His eyes, still wide open, were staring into oblivion and he showed no sign of life. Johnny looked into the gazing eyes, and lost his nerve. He rushed toward the back of the limo, with Charlie following him, grabbed his travel case and ran toward the woodland that was separating the highway from the airport. He stayed out of sight and waited for a car to pass by. Hard to believe, but he had to wait at least a minute before he saw a car coming by. It was hard to believe that on that singular night, so few cars were traveling on this highway. To Johnny’s great delight, the car, obviously driven by a Good Samaritan, had the decency to stop and help. Johnny ran across the woodland like a madman until he reached the airport. It took few minutes before travelers noticed his presence. A little girl yelled:

“It’s Johnny boy!”

As a result that many people heard her and Johnny was soon surrounded by several fans. Normally he loved having people around him, but after what had just happened that night and all the atrocity that he witnessed, the only thing he wanted to do was to go home. Two guards came to his rescue and it’s without even waving goodbye to his fans that he followed them.

“A personality like you shouldn’t be traveling without bodyguard, expressed one of the guards.

“Yes, I really shouldn’t,” evasively answered Johnny. “But tonight, my employees did not show up... One of these days, I will fire every single one of them”.

“So, what are you doing?” asked the second guard. “Are you leaving or are you arriving?”

“Well, I just arrived. I don’t know for how long, but I have been waiting for my damn driver... My dog and I, we are fed up and we want to go home. Do you understand? And I mean right away!”

“Calm down, sir...” replied the guard. “It’s not so bad, you know...”

“Don’t call me, sir!” protested Johnny, “I am Johnny Boy... and I want to go home... Right now!”

“You seem traumatized, my friend... Are you okay?”

“I’m not traumatized!” yelled Johnny with rage. “I’m exhausted and upset. I want to go home... Please find me a way to get out of here! Any form of transportation will do, but please do it now or I’ll make a scene!”

“Okay, sir... I mean... Johnny... We could call a limousine for you, but it may take a little while before it gets here and you seem so much in a hurry, I think a cab would be the fastest way”.

“A cab will be fine. Call one right away.”

Less than a few minutes later, Johnny and his dog were on their way home inside a common taxi. During the trip to his residence, the young man realized the graveness of what he had just lived. It all seemed so unreal... Gregory was dead and the same with the passengers of the other car... It was hell... It was shit... he said to himself, while holding Charlie closely against his chest. “Tell me I had a bad dream, Lord, I beg of you... Tell me it was only a bad dream and that I will soon wake-up...”

But it was not the case. He could pinch himself as much as he could, it didn’t help. His nightmare was not fiction, it was reality. What happened was factual.

“There is no way I can tell Manou what happened,” he thought in himself. “No way... maybe tomorrow, but not tonight.”

If he had reluctance about telling the whole story to Manou, it was mostly because he has doubt within himself. He was not convinced that he had done the right thing when he left the site of the accident. Did he do the right thing or not? What would another person have done in his place? A person like Madonna, for example... what would she have done? Surely the same thing he did... Or maybe not. He had to think about this. He really had to think... And who knows? Maybe the problem will settle of itself. Seriously... what could anyone possibly hold against him? There were no witnesses to certify that he was in the limousine at the time of the accident. Nobody, absolutely nobody... Truly, he shouldn’t worry so much. Of course, when the media will be informed, they will all make headlines of this story, but because he was not directly concerned, the story will soon be yesterday’s news, and quite rapidly fade away. He had no reason to worry. A small press release from his agent to the media should solve the problem. What was important was to minimize the impact of the story and reduce its importance. So he considered it was better to maintain this

decision and not to say to anyone what he had seen during the evening. He was not there and had not seen anything. Nothing at all... He will say that he was waiting for this irresponsible Gregory, who never arrived at the airport, and that's it. Fed up of waiting for his driver and not wanting to become the prey of his fans, he simply decided to go home by taxi. That's it... he was not sure that Manou would accept his story, but for the people of the press, it was as solid as steel.

"When I will tell the story to Manou," he said to himself, "I will have to concentrate on the way I look at her. My eyes must not squint... Hum... The best would be to ask her to give me something to help me sleep. Maybe two capsules instead of one... It should knock me off enough to prevent me from any side squint."

If no one, with the exception of Charlie and himself, had survived the accident, all would have been better. But, there was a survivor, a survivor who declared there was a second person inside the limousine, someone who flee the site of the accident instead of calling for help and provide assistance.

"I am in deep shit, am I not Manou?" whispered Johnny looking truly pathetic.

"Stop acting like a wimp!" pronounced Manou in a reassuring tone of voice. "That's how people get sick. Didn't I tell you that before? I think I can get you out of this dilemma, but first of all, did you really tell me everything?"

"Absolutely everything!" promptly replied Johnny. "I swear on my head, Charlie's head and yours!"

"I heard you say something like that before! sighed Manou. "In fact... just last night. Are you sure you did not leave anything out, not even a small detail?"

"Absolutely certain. So... what will you do?"

Before answering the question, Manou struggled to get from her chair and walked toward the telephone, while grabbing the headset she said:

"First of all, we must try to find out if the press is aware of the situation."

She dialed the number of their press agent who rapidly answered after a first ring.

"Hey, Julia," said Manou. "I'm glad I got you. Tell me, do you know if..."

She was immediately interrupted by the agent.

"Manou... I was getting ready to call you. I just heard on the radio that Johnny's driver had

a serious accident and that he is dead; is that true?"

"Damn... So the news is already out?"

"Yes, and people keep calling me. Is it true that he was drunk? How is Johnny? Was he on board the limo? Is he hurt? I heard there was probably a second person inside the limousine..."

"Calm down," said Manou, "calm down. I can immediately reassure you. The second person in the car was not Johnny..."

"Who was it then?"

"Don't worry, I will soon find out... Meanwhile, send a press release explaining that Johnny is well and that he has nothing to do with this story... And tell them that the other person in the limousine was without doubt a drinking friend of Gregory and also, you can add that after learning that his driver liked boozing a little too much, Johnny was getting ready to fire him."

And Manou told Julia a fictive version of the story.

"Are you telling me?" retorted the press agent, "that poor Johnny had to wait two hours at the airport before coming home in a taxi?"

"Yes my dear," lied Manou, no use to tell you that all the fans were rushing him. The poor guy was almost traumatized. By the way, mention that in your press release, okay?"

"Okay, you can count on me, anything else?"

"Well... You can end your article by saying that we are deeply saddened by the event and that we sympathize and share the pain of this poor man who lost his wife and his children."

"And I suppose", continued Julia, "that Johnny is not available for interviews?"

"Of course not..."

After this conversation, Manou made another call, this time to the Brady Bar.

"Hello Brad", she said after the bar owner answered. "It's Manou again".

"Hello, Manou," answered Brad seemingly nervous. "I just heard the news concerning Gregory. It's... terrible. I can't believe it... I kept telling him to never drink and drive... How's Johnny Boy? Was he in the limo?"

"No, it was not him... Tell me, do you have Alan's phone number?"

"Well... Yes... Of course... You think he's involved?"

For Manou, this was the ideal occasion:

“Yes, sir! I think he was in the limo. Did you see him this morning?”

“No, not yet... But it can be him... He was here, last night, don’t you remember? You even spoke to him on the phone.”

“Of course I remember... And I also remember that he was totally intoxicated. May be the reason why he drank so much after he returned to your bar, was to forget what he had seen... Tell me, at what time did he come back to the bar?”

“Well... I would say... eleven fifty. In any case, it was not much before you called.”

“I would like to remind you that the accident happened at ten fifteen. You and I both know that before going to the airport Gregory took Alan with him...”

“Yes, but it was to drive him at home... And that’s what Gregory did...”

“No, Brad, that’s where I think you are wrong,” continued Manou. “Understand that once they were in the limo, they kept drinking. That’s what the police told me. They found a glass with prints on it. I’ll bet you one hundred dollars that the prints belong to Alain. So, they drank... There was an accident... Alain survived... He ran away from there without concern for the victims. After that, he came back to your bar as if nothing had happened. I think that’s what took place. Between ten fifteen and eleven fifty, he had plenty of time to make it back to your bar.”

“It’s feasible,” mumbled Brad, “but... If it that was the case, I think he would have been more agitated. But, I swear to you, he was drunk, but acted perfectly normal... well... normal for an inebriated man.”

“When someone is drunk,” added Manou, “he is capable of anything... I would like to see what he looks like this morning”.

“Well”, agreed Brad, “you may be right. Normally, at this time of the morning, he should already be here... I figured that he was digesting his wine, but after realizing what happened last night, he must be panicking at home. I think I just lost my two best client... and at the same time.”

“So tell me, can you give me his phone number?”

As soon as she obtained the number, Manou immediately called Alan. Totally amazed by what she was doing, Johnny was staring at her and said:

“You know, you can truly be diabolic, when you want.”

“I already told you, reminded him Manou, “I will do everything I can to save you... Everything.”

“Who is this?” she heard on the phone.

“Alain, do you know what happened to Gregory?”

“Well... No... I was sleeping. What happened?”

So Manou told him the story, but this time, giving him the true version. She came across as totally desperate and begged for his help.

“Please, Alan, you must help me to clear Johnny. His career is at stake. You must absolutely tell the police that you were in the limo. Can you do that for him?”

“Well... I don’t truly know,” answered Alan with reluctance and apparently still light headed. “If I do that, I’m going to be the one in deep shit, don’t you think? I don’t want them to lock me up, you know... They can lock someone up, if he leaves the scene of an accident?”

“Not if you have some really good attorneys, Alain... Not with the best lawyers, and we will hire them for you, believe me.”

“You know, Manou,” explained Alain still reluctant, “I love the little guy... In fact, I adore him... But... I really don’t know...”

“We will pay you generously, Alan, very generously”.

She had just pronounced the magic sentence. She was quite aware that Alan had money problems. Not only was it difficult for him to pay his bills, but he could hardly refund the large sum of money he owed Brady for all the drinks he never paid.

“How much?” he finally asked.

“One hundred thousand dollars!” answered Manou. “We will pay you one hundred thousand dollars.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Alan, “that’s a lot of bucks!”

“More than you ever had,” declared Manou, happy to see that her strategy was marvelously functioning.

“Oh... that will work. But before I say yes... If the cops decide to pursue me for non-assistance... meaning... for not helping the people that were there... Do you think your lawyers will be able to get me out of trouble?”

“Simple!” declared Manou, “considering how drunk you were... It was impossible for you to think appropriately, my dear. Alcohol and fear can utterly affect your judgment. Believe me... getting you out of trouble will be child’s play.”

“Okay... I’m in”, finally decided Alain. “When will I get the money?”

“As soon as this story is over. However, you must swear to me that you will never reveal to

anyone, the subject of this conversation. Never, otherwise not only would you never see the color of the money, but I will be obliged to turn my attorneys against you..."

"You don't have to worry... You can trust me. But to show me some good faith, can you give me a little advance? I owe a lot of money to Brady and I would like to give him something."

"I agree," accepted Manou. "We will pay Brady today. Meanwhile, jump in a cab and come here right away. We will go to the hospital together".

"The hospital?"

"Of course, we have to visit the poor man so you can tell him how sorry you are. It's the least we can do, don't you think? We will also tell your story to the cops. Let's hope we can clear you... After all, you were not driving. Tell me, do you have a bad record with the police?"

"Well... Yes," admitted Alan, why?"

"Perfect! That means they have copy of your fingerprints. That will make our story more believable, because if it's not already done, they will rapidly realize that your fingerprints are on the glass they found."

"Oh... oh..." said Alan. "You mean they may soon come to my place?"

"It's possible, yes, that's why you must hurry. You must admit your negligence before they find you. That should reduce the charges against you. So, jump in a cab and get here as fast as possible."

This done, she called the Sheriff's office to announce to the agents she had met the night before the new elements she had gathered to help them proceed with their investigation. She confirmed to them that she wanted to meet them at the hospital where the victim was hopefully recuperating. The meeting was set for one hour later.

"Well," she said after putting the phone down, "I think this event will soon be history, just a very bad memory!"

Far from sharing her optimism, Johnny said:

"Don't you think we should consult our attorneys?"

"Of course not, my little guy!" reassured him Manou. "Why waste more money? You are already squandering enough the way it is, don't you think?"

"Manou..." retorted Johnny with anger, "I don't like this kind of allusion, you know?"

"But its true, Johnny, when will you stop wasting our money? With all that you are throwing away, we may eventually be unable to face some urgent situation, like the one we are now living."

“Don’t you think you are exaggerating?”

“Not at all, I’m totally serious and, if I was you, I would ask God to make sure that this story is not going to go too far, because if it happens, we could be in the poor house. When is the last time you checked your bank account?”

“Well...”

“We are not broke, but... You have to stop throwing money everywhere you can. We may be rich, but still, we have to be far-sighted and stop living like if there was no end to our assets. You would not be the first star in the world to become totally broke, you know!”

“Really, Manou!” smiled Johnny. “I agree that lately I have lost a lot of money but don’t worry, I’ll get it back. My new album will soon be out and in three months, I will embark on a new tour. Millions of dollars will replenish our account. So stop worrying, won’t you?”

Before she could reply, Alan was at the door. Johnny let him in. When he saw the singer, the big and tall guy, totally neglected and unshaved, looked at his host as if he was from another world.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” he exclaimed when he stood in the presence of Johnny Boy in person. “Well, I guess Gregory was right, you are really small. You look like a little Prince, like in the story of the thousand and one nights!”

“I guess he’s still drunk,” thought Manou, while their visitor was strolling throughout the house, getting excited with everything that he looked at.

“Wow!” added the man, looking totally amazed. “You guys have quite a house, it’s a genuine castle!”

“Ok, that’s enough!” exclaimed an impatient Manou. We have wasted enough time. Alan, we must go to the hospital immediately if we do not want to miss our rendez-vous. As soon as we are there, you need to tell the cops that at the moment of the accident, you were drinking in the back of the limousine, that you were completely drunk and that you panicked when you saw all the dead people. After that, make sure to apologize to the survivor. Tell him you were convinced that he was dead and that you ran away because you were totally startled. After, let me take over... Do you understand?”

“I get it boss,” agreed Alan.

To Manou’s satisfaction, the guy had the odor of a rat covered with alcohol. She was sure it would help the credibility of his story. After putting on her coat and grabbing her purse, she turned toward Johnny and requested that he locked the door behind them and ordered him not to open the door for anyone else and for no reason whatsoever.

“I want you to confine yourself up in your music studio until I come back, you hear me?”

And take the dog with you... Everybody knows he is always with you. If the police or some journalist hears the dog barking, they would immediately realize that you are here.”

“Ok, Manou, it’s okay,” promised Johnny. “I won’t open the door for anyone. Meanwhile, take care and come back as soon as you can.”

He looked at Alan and added:

“Well... Thank you, sir, I really appreciate what you are doing for me... I will not forget. You are now a friend of the family, a friend for life”.

“It’s my pleasure to help out Johnny Boy,” answered Alan while scratching his backside. “If I can get you out of that shit whole, I’ll be quite happy”.

“You will also be happy for your wallet, isn’t that so, Alan? interjected Manou while winking at their new accomplice.

As soon as he was by himself, Johnny locked the door behind him and hurried-up to the studio with Charlie on his steps. He turned the music on and practiced new dance steps.

Once at the hospital, all could have gone well for Manou and Alan if it was not for Tommy’s unexpected visit. The same person who throughout the years and days after days made Johnny’s life at the orphanage a true nightmare. The relation between the two men had never improved and Tommy spent a lot of his time finding ways to poison Johnny and Manou’s lives. Tommy had become a paparazzi. Not just any kind of paparazzi, but one who specialized in covering the life of Johnny Boy. He was always after Johnny. Most everything he photographed, wrote and published concerned Johnny Boy. He was constantly pursuing the star and tried to involve him in all kind of scandals that were actually manufactured by him... Anyway, he did anything that would allow him to make money and cause problems to Johnny. He did not have cold feet, oh no! He would never back down to anyone, never. To reach his goals, he was always ready for anything, absolutely anything.

As soon as they arrived at the hospital, Manou and Alain visited the man who had miraculously survived the terrible accident of the previous evening. It was a man from the province of Quebec, in Canada. His name was Yannick Simard. According to the information Manou received from the police, Mr. Simard was extremely wealthy and operated in the world of high finance. Even after the tragedy and the fact that he was still under the influence of the medications, the officers declared that he was mentally alert. As soon as Manou looked at the patient, she immediately observed that not only his mental aspect seemed powerful, but everything about him appeared resilient and formidable. His whole personality, as well as his way to move and express himself, showed great self-assurance and a efficient energy. He was strength and might. That’s what she detected when she first saw him. The way he looked at her reflected great intelligence and magnetic vitality. And what about his eyes... They were so blue, so magnificent... just like Johnny’s eyes. How could a woman resist such a man? But she, Manouska Tarah, would never have the answer to this question.

And, worst of all, she was there to lie to him.

Yannick Simard was not alone in his room. As soon as they were informed of the accident, members of his family had taken the first flight to be there and support him. His brother in law Jimmy and his wife were by his bedside, as well as his father in law, Carl Desnoyers... the father of Yannick's beloved spouse. Manou was moved and impressed by the hospitalized man and could easily guess that the other people in the room were close to him and to each other. These people cared and were part of a solid family. After the formal introductions, she offered her deepest sympathy and Johnny's condolences. She explained that he wasn't there because he was extremely mortified by the irresponsibility of his driver.

"He feels responsible, you understand?" she said. "When I divulged this awful tragedy to him, the poor guy almost collapsed... he was crying like a baby."

Her words probably touched the heart of the most implicated person who immediately replied:

"Tell him from me that he shouldn't feel guilty... a person cannot be responsible for an error committed by another"

"I will tell him, sir" murmured Manou while a tear was rolling from the corner of her right eye.

"You know..." added Yannick by breaking a light nostalgic smile. If there is one person in this world who drove my daughters totally crazy, it's Johnny Boy. I still remember that night... He was giving a concert in Montreal and my daughters did all they could to convince me to take them. Even my wife was part of the tactics..."

Tears were sadly appearing from his beautiful blue eyes as he continued:

"I recall that I was hard to persuade. Johnny Boy and I... you know? But I decided to give in and at the last minute, I bought four tickets. I took my daughters practically everywhere in the world. They almost saw everything... Disneyland, Disney World, Paris, La côte d'Azur, but I can tell you that the night we went to Johnny's concert, it was the most beautiful day of their young life. Mine also. Well... maybe. Not only did Johnny perform a spectacular show... he made us happy. On our way home, we were all thrilled and delighted with our evening. This guy is out of this world... the most talented artist I ever saw!"

"God!" answered an emotional Manou. "I am so happy by what you just expressed. I wish Johnny was here to hear what you said."

At that moment, the police officers decided it was time to intervene:

“Mr. Simard,” indicated one of them. “If Mrs. Tarah is here, it is because she has something important to tell you. In fact, you were not hallucinating when you noticed another person. There was definitively a second passenger inside the limousine.”

Manou looked at Alan and encouraged him to walk closer to Yannick Simars’s bed. He was staring at the ground with a deep remorseful expression.

“It was me, sir... I’m so sorry... I should have stayed and called for help. But I was drunk, you see... I panicked... I thought you were also dead... just like the others... I acted like a coward... I ran away. I only realized that I had done the wrong thing this morning...”

“It was you?” asked Yannick seeming surprised, “really?”

“Everything is concordant, Mr. Simard,” confirmed an officer. “We discovered a glass of alcohol in the back of the limousine and the digital prints we found on it matches the finger prints of this man. We were about to visit his home when Mrs. Tarah called us to let us know that he decided to confess.”

“I’m a little confused.” admitted Yannick. “You are the one I was looking at through the windshield of my car?”

“Do you doubt this man’s declaration?” wanted to know the officer.

“Well... I don’t know,” hesitated Yannick while scratching his head. “The man I saw... or better... the shadow I saw... seem to be smaller than the stature of this man, much smaller. More like Johnny Boy’s size.”

“It can’t be him,” affirmed the officer. “We completed our investigation. All that Mrs. Tarah declared last night has been confirmed. We have witnesses stating that they noticed Mr. Alan Mercury taking place in the limousine that crashed into your car. At the airport, we took the declarations of two security agents. They declared they had to calm down Johnny who was greatly upset by the absence of his driver. We also have the testimony of the taxi driver who said he drove Johnny home. That proves without doubt that Mr. McLean cannot be the man you observed.”

“You may be right...” surrendered Yannick. “It was really dark and I was quite dozy... I may have been fooled.”

Alan took this occasion to say:

“It was truly me, I was there, Mr. Simard, and if you want to charge me, or something like that, I’ll face the music... I deserve it...”

Manou convinced the problem was solved when Yannick declared:

“Listen, sir... If you had been the one driving the vehicle, I might as well tell you: I would have killed you. But since you were on the back seat, you are not responsible. You should have helped me, but, I can understand that you were panic-stricken. And even if I could sue you, what would it give me? Money? I already have plenty of money”

The situation was under control until Yannick heard the sound of a camera. Immediately after, he noticed a man trying to hide behind the open door of his room. The pointed toward the intruder and asked:

“Who the hell is this?”

Jimmy rushed toward the door to see who was there. He grabbed the man by his shirt collar and forced him inside the room.

“Oh no!” exclaimed Manou while covering her face with her hand. “Tell me it’s not true!”

“You know him?” questioned Jimmy as he was releasing his prey.

“It’s Tommy!” whispered Manou. “Tommy MacMillan; Johnny’s nightmare... the worst paparazzi in Los Angeles!”

“A paparazzi?” repeated Yannick, ready to jump out of bed. “That’s all we needed!”

Directing his question to Tommy, Yannick wanted to know if the paparazzi had taken a photo of him.

“Well, of course, admitted Tommy with a challenging expression. You see... it’s my job to take pictures.

“And also to bug our little Johnny!” ironically added Manou.

“Shut up you black bitch!” dared to say Tommy, looking at her with disdain.

“I want your memory card immediately!” ordered Yannick as the police officers approached Tommy to grab the camera. “There is no way I will let you publish my photo in your garbage newspapers, do you hear me? Otherwise, you will have to deal with my lawyers and believe me, you don’t want to know them.”

“OK, my dear sir,” politely concurred Tommy as he gave the memory card to the officers. “But, if you allow it to me, I would like to say that I heard the conversation you folks were having and, I think you were right.”

“I was right?” questioned Yannick. “I was right about what?”

“Right to believe that the man you saw last night is not this fat slob now standing in front

of you.”

As he was saying these aggressive words, Tommy was staring at Alan. Then he added:

“You distinguished a black shadow; is that right?”

“Right.”

“A small black shadow, is that also right?”

“Well... yes... at least, that’s what I assumed.”

“Something looking like... a very small person... wearing a burka?”

“Yes, I think so!” confirmed Yannick, now staring at Tommy. “Yes, decisively, that’s was I observed... a woman wearing a burka.”

While the police officers were following this conversation with interest, Manou was heavily perspiring. “The burka!” Looking at her with a triumphant scowl, Tommy arrogantly pursued:

“It would have been advantageous, my dear sir, if you were familiar with the biography I wrote concerning Johnny Boy. You would not have had to wonder about the questionable black shadow.”

This being said, he pulled out a book out of his bag and tossed it in Yannick’s direction.

“Here it is!” he said, to supplement his gesture. “It is a donation from the author.”

“This book!” protested Manou with anger. “It’s a web of misrepresentations! In your book, how do you call the bastard who attempted to cut Johnny’s genitals? You called him Norman, isn’t that true? Amazing, isn’t it? The way I remember the incident, you were that cock sucker... You... Tommy MacMillan!”

If Manou assessed that she had changed the tide with this revelation, she was mistaken. Everyone was now looking toward Tommy, who said again:

“You have to know that when Johnny Boy travels, he infallibly protects his privacy. So, he disguises himself. I don’t know if he is attracted by the Muslim religion but, he likes to wear a burka.”

“It’s true,” nervously approved Manou. “But yesterday, he was not wearing it. I promise you. The burka was actually not in his suitcase.”

The police officers were looking at each other in a strange way, as if the reality of the event was now confronting their previous evaluation.

“Tell me?” asked the first one to the other. Didn’t we find a burka in the woodland last night?”

“Yes we did,” remembered the other.” We found a black burka with some blond hairs inside of it.”

“Ah... Johnny!” thought Manou. “That’s why the burka was not in his suitcase. He got rid of it in the woodland and never mentioned this detail to me.”

She was getting ready to say something when Alan chickened out and admitted to all:

“Ok guys, I’m sorry, I lied... But she made me... she offered me one hundred thousand dollars to cover Johnny. What would you have done in my place? I’ve always been so poor...”

Manou was caught right-handed. Yannick was shocked and looking at her while the officers informed her that she and Alan were under arrest. As far as Tommy was concerned, this was his hour of glory. What a story! Now handcuffed, Alan and Manou were asked by one of the agents:

“Where can we find Johnny?”

In result of their respective muteness, they were advised that hiding the where-about of Johnny would worsen their case.

“No!” yelled Manou as loud as she could. “I won’t let you hurt ma little Johnny, do you hear me? He didn’t do anything wrong... he’s only a child... he was afraid... he ran... I beg of you! Do what you want to me but leave him out of it. He has nothing to do with our lie!”

Totally desperate, she faced Yannick Simard like if she was begging for help. However, the victim only had one thing to say:

“I can’t believe your falsification of the fact. The truth would have been sufficient. I wonder why you bothered to mislead us the way you did...”

“I did it to protect my Johnny,” cried Manou in her defense. “He is my son, do you understand? My son! You will have to run over me to get to him... over me! I am sure you would have done the same to protect one of your children... the same thing!”

“Are you filing charges against them, Mr. Simard?” inquired one of the officers.

Yannick pathetically answered:

“Listen... This is all I can tolerate. All I want, now, it's to go back home. So, I will not take legal action against them. The law of this country has to determine if they must be criminally prosecuted or not. Please leave me. I'm sure you understand that I have a wife and two children to bury.”

Less than two hours after, Manou had given her castle keys to the police and as witnessed by more than one hundred cameras, including, of course, Tommy MacMillan's camera, Johnny was arrested. Dressed like a prince, with tight striped yellow and black pants, an assorted jacket covering a white medieval shirt, a scared out of his wits shivering Johnny was following the police like a child who had just lost his mommy. He kept saying he wanted Manou and was holding his dog in his arms. Probably touched by his angelic look of innocence, the arresting officers did not find it necessary to humiliate him even more and did not place handcuffs on him. In all radio and television stations, the main news was:

‘The Little Prince has been arrested.’

III

The journalists were at the police station before Johnny was taken in. As the officers were trying to make their way through the crowd, Johnny was still holding his dog in his arms. Press photographers were trying to get a great photo or video while reporters were bringing a microphone close to the singer's mouth to record a comment or two. Once inside the building, Johnny turned around just in time to address a dirty look toward Tommy, who was enjoying the moment and finding pleasure, while posing for the cameras that were directed toward him. Johnny was wondering what Tommy could possibly be saying.

"Is it possible" he thought in himself, "that this moron knows more about the reason of my arrest than I do?"

To this point, he knew very little concerning the reasons leading to his arrest. He realized that it was related to the accident, but after invading his domicile, the cops only told him that they wanted to take him to Manou.

"Your mother has problems," they said to him after finding him in his studio. "If you want to help her, you must follow us. She told us that you were here... She gave us the keys."

The young man obeyed without thinking of calling his attorney. On the way, he tried to get some information from the agents, but they only answered him that he would get additional details once they reach the police station. Once on location, he and his dog were led in a plain little room. The furniture was limited to one table and three chairs.

"Where is Manou?" he impatiently asked. "I want to see her immediately."

"Calm down, Jonny Boy," nicely replied one of the agents. "The chief inspector and his assistant will soon be with you, OK?"

After a few minutes, that appeared like an eternity to Johnny, a tall and beefy sort of guy, accompanied by a much smaller man, entered the room.

"Hey Johnny Boy!" declared the blue eyed tall man. "How you doing man? I heard that you will soon come out with a new album?"

"May be so," answered Johnny. "Where is Manou?"

"It won't be long, be cool..." explained the smaller guy while placing his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "You will soon see her."

"Where is she?"

The tall man answered:

“She and your buddy Alan are answering a few questions.”

“They are in deep shit, aren’t they?”

“Well... yes,” admitted the short man. “You may be in trouble too.”

“Damn it,” whispered Johnny. It’s because of yesterday’s accident isn’t it? I want my lawyer, right now!”

“Don’t worry, young man, he’s on his way. Your Manou already called him,” said one of the men.

“And both of you... who are you?” inquired Johnny with a suspicious look.”

“I am detective Clark,” answered the tall man, before to point toward his colleague and add:

“And this is detective O’Brien.”

“You two look like Laurel and Hardy!” teased Johnny with a smile on his face and while caressing the head of his dog. “A big tall guy and a shorty. So, who is the bad cop between the two of you?”

Seeming amused, detective Clark answered:

“We have no bad cop and no sweet cop, Johnny. I think you have been watching too many movies...”

O’Brien added:

“To say the truth, we figured we do not need a bad cop, just some nice guys.”

“Great then!” ironically answered Johnny. “I’m in luck. So, what am I doing here?”

Becoming somewhat more serious, Clark informed Johnny of what had happened at the hospital. He ended his report by saying:

“Your scenario could have been believable, young man, but... our agents found a burka in the woodland.”

“And of course, without Tommy...” said Johnny mostly for himself.

“Right,” confirmed the detective. “The biography he wrote about you was quite informative.

My wife showed it to me this morning, you see... I read it rapidly and paid special attention to the section that states that you like to wear a burka when you travel.”

“It’s genial!” exclaimed detective O’Brien. “Nothing better to travel incognito. You are very brilliant!”

“What I read in your bio,” pursued Clark, “added to what we found near the site of the accident, confirms Tommy’s declarations.”

“Well,” whispered Johnny, “I may be good when it comes to disguising myself, but when it comes to making stories, I’m not so smart.”

“You can give us the facts, Johnny?” asked Clark. “Tell us why you ran away and left a poor man in a deadly situation.”

“Because I was afraid,” admitted Johnny, now crying. “In all my life, I was never that scared. Well, except for the time when that stupid Tommy came close to cutting my... well, you know what.”

Johnny remained silent while drying his tears and kept going:

“Listen... let Manou and Alan go. They have nothing to do with what happened. They only wanted to help me. They are good people, you know. Well, I don’t know Alain very well but, Manou, believe me, is the best person in the world. She is everything I have. Everything!”

He took a short pause and informed the detectives that he and Charlie were dying of thirst and hunger.

“I would like a bowl of water, a coke, a burger and also some fries. Charlie loves that.”

As soon as detective O’Brien left the room to complete the order, Jonny decided to tell the whole story to Clark. He revealed his miseries of the previous night as they happened. He insisted that total fear led him to act the way he did.

“I was even afraid to tell the truth to Manou,” he explained. “That shows how afraid I was.”

“Why did you dispose of the burka?” questioned the detective. “That’s how you betrayed yourself.”

“That proves that he had no bad intentions!” yelled a man while entering the room with Johnny’s press’s agent.

“Julia!” cried out Johnny, while rushing toward her.

And then facing his attorney:

“John, I’m so glad you are here. Your team is not with you? I’m in deep shit, you know? Serious shit.”

“Don’t you worry,” said the lawyer with a glorious smile. “Your situation is not that bad. One good lawyer is all you need.”

John turned around, faced Clark and said:

“I insist that you free my client immediately. He did not commit any crime and you know it as well as I do.”

“Calm down, Mr. Richard. Calm down,” slowly replied Clark. “You must understand that we had no intention to detain him any longer. We just wanted his side of the story. You must however realize that your client left the site of an accident where four persons lost their life. He also abandoned a survivor to his destiny”

“But I thought the man was dead!” cried out Johnny. “I swear... and on top of that, I did not completely abandon him. I waited for a car to stop before I returned to the airport, and...”

“OK, Johnny, don’t say one more word,” ordered his lawyer. “I have something to tell you, detective. You can charge my client if you want but whatever charges you bring against him, I can tell you right now that he will be found innocent. First of all, the fact that he left his burka in the woodland established that he did not have any bad intentions.”

“It was totally filthy and disgusting!” said Johnny while taking a bite in the burger that O’Brien had just given him. “I did not want to wear it anymore. I wanted some clean cloths.”

“So, if my client had realized that he was acting illegally while running from the scene of an accident, do you really believe that he would have been stupid enough to leave such a proof of his presence behind him? He may somewhat think like a child, but give me a break. He also told you that he only left after he was assured that another person was there to help. That should be enough, don’t you think?”

“It may be enough to convince the district attorney,” answered Clark, “but not me. I see no other choice than to charge your client. He acted wrongly... it may have been subconsciously, but it was wrong. Concerning his mother and Alan Mercury, don’t try to convince me that they also acted subconsciously. There is no way I would believe that.”

“Where is Manou?” asked Johnny for the third time. “You told me that I would soon see her.”

“John made sure she was free to go home,” informed Julia as she was placing her arm around Johnny’s shoulders. “All is fine, OK?”

“As you can see, detective Clark,” added John while producing a large smile and looking at Johnny cuddling against Julia. “My client is an adult, but he still reacts like a child. He does not deserve to be treated like a criminal.”

“Oh, but I was well treated!” interjected Johnny. “They even gave me a hamburger and

some fries.”

And then, looking at detective Clark, he said again:

“Do you know what Sir? The way you look, you could be my father.”

“You think?” quickly answered the detective. “So it is true? Somebody mentioned to me that you see your father everywhere.”

And it was true. Each time Johnny met a man with blue eyes, he figured that he could be his dear father, the man he never knew. Nevertheless, because he did not know his dad doesn’t mean he did not have an idea of what he could look like or could be. He was sure that his birth father was an exceptional man, an illustrious man. For him, that was a fact. He liked to believe that this great man, surely as solitary as himself, travelled around the world and that during a visit in San Diego, he had taken advantage of the services of his mother to fill his solitude. His mother was a woman not worth knowing, according to Manou. So, Johnny investigated all blue eyes men that crossed his path and stayed away from prostitutes. He didn’t need that kind of mother. Anyway, why would he be looking for a mother? Manou was the best mom in the world.

“Tell me, did you frequently associate with prostitutes?” He asked detective Clark. “I asked because Manou told me that my mother was a...”

“No Johnny,” answered Clark with a kind smile. “Sorry to disappoint you, my dear boy, but I don’t patronize prostitutes; I arrest them. There are no chances that I could be your father. So, go, you are free to go.”

“Too bad!” said Johnny, before leaving. “I kind of like you.”

He followed Julia until they reached John’s car where Manou was waiting.

“Oh!” she cried out as soon as she saw him. “My little Johnny, my poor little Johnn, I hope they did not treat you too badly. So, tell me that they did not hurt you...tell me.”

“Don’t worry, Manou,” reassured her Johnny. “Everything went well. The detectives were super nice with me and Charlie. Isn’t that great? They did not even play good cop-bad cop.

They were both very nice.”

“Johnny,” continued Manou, now becoming serious. “Why didn’t you tell me about the burka? That’s the reason our story didn’t hold.”

“I’m sorry,” replied Johnny seeming truly remorseful. “I had forgotten that little detail... it was totally out of my mind.”

“Well, your lack of recollection got us in trouble. Let me tell you that we are now deeper in shit.”

“Not really,” intervened John. “I don’t think we will have criminal or legal suits. So, there is no use for you to blame each other. On the contrary, you must stick together.”

“You are saying that they will not charge us?” questioned Johnny. No charges against Manou, me or Alan? By the way, where is that guy? He is not with us?”

“Well no,” sadly answered Manou. He was deported back to Canada. That’s where he is from, you see? I understood that the Canadian police were looking for him.”

“Hey... you could have done something to help him.”

“Well, let’s say that I really didn’t want to. As soon as he felt that the soup was hot, this dummy did not hesitate to reveal everything to the cops. After that, I did not really want to play mother Teresa for him.”

“I see,” agreed Johnny.

Then turning his attention toward John, he asked:

“Tell me... If they should prosecute, will you be able to help us? I want to be sure that we will not end up in jail.”

“Don’t you worry,” reassured him John. “If they decide to prosecute, and I said if, we will act accordingly. For now, try not to worry. As I said, I’m certain that they will not proceed and put us on trial.”

“And for the time being,” continued Julia, “we have more important things to think about.”

“Is that so?” inquired Johnny. Like what?”

“Like what you will say to the press.” she explained. “I’m sure that the friendly journalists are having a ball.”

“I’m sure!” interjected Manou. “Like this bloody Tommy.”

“This bastard!” whispered Johnny.

“Johnny!” reprimanded Manou. “Don’t use that kind of words. You know that I despise crude language. It doesn’t fit your social standing.”

“Sorry Manou, but if you only knew how fed up I am with this guy!”

“We are all fed up with him,” said Julia. “That’s why we must immediately bring an end to all the rumors that he is spreading about you since this morning.”

“What rumors?” wanted to know Johnny.

“He claims that you were driving the car at the time of the accident.”

“What? He is completely out of his mind!” replied Johnny with anger. “Who in the world can believe that? Everybody knows that I don’t know how to drive a car.”

“True,” conceded Julia. “However, Tommy mentioned that you had to drive because Gregory was too drunk to hold the wheel. So, he says you are the one responsible for the accident.”

“What?” yelled Johnny. “But this guy is totally insane! He wants the world to think that I’m an assassin? Do you know what? I’m gonna kill him. I’m gonna kill this guy!”

“Johnny!” rebutted Manou. “I oppose this king of language, do you hear me? Even if you are referring to Tommy.”

“So, what can we do?” asked Johnny while facing Julia who suggested:

“Tomorrow morning, we will hold a press conference at your place.”

“At my place?”

“Yes my little friend. Tonight, I will prepare a statement that you will read tomorrow from the balcony of your bedroom.”

“Oh... oh!” smiled Manou. “You will look like a real little prince!”

“Hum...” weakly whispered Johnny while pouting. “And what do you want me to convey to these halfwit?”

“The truth!” replied Julia with a big smile. “You will tell the whole truth.”

“Great idea!” approved John. “The truth is not always welcome, but in this case, I agree. It is best to tell the truth. To admit that you ran because you were in a state of panic and that Manou was deceitful because of her love for you. I am convinced that you will have the masses sympathizing with you.”

“Do you agree, Johnny?” asked Julia.

“Yes, I guess so. If I only have the truth to reveal, at least I’m sure I won’t make any mistake. What do you think Manou?”

Manou quickly answered:

“I say that it’s an excellent strategy. To say the truth, that’s what we should have done from the start. I’m sorry I mislead you Johnny, it’s my entire fault.”

“No problem, Manou!” expressed Johnny. “We all make errors... and me most of all. What’s important is to learn and not repeat our mistakes.”

“You are suddenly becoming so wise,” proudly said Manou while projecting a big smile.

“I learned from my mother!” retorted Johnny with a pleasant grin.”

The next morning, high on his balcony, Johnny faced over two hundred journalists who were present to receive his side of the story. Tommy did not seem to be on location. Normally, he should have been in the first row to listen and observe the young rock star.

“Hum... Something is not right,” whispered Johnny into Julia’s ear. “This fat-head should be here. I wonder what dirty trick he’s now preparing.”

“One more or one less,” laughed Julia. “Who cares? We always win anyway.”

Johnny addressed the journalists without even consulting the script prepared by Julia. To tell the truth is so easy. Why risk making mistakes by using the words of another person? He started by revealing what happened before and during the accident. He insisted on the fact that he was never in the driver’s seat.

“The proof,” he said, “is that I’m still alive. You all saw the front of the car, did you not? If I had been behind the wheel, believe me, I would not be here today to report what really happened. I would be exactly like Gregory Simons. Meaning broke in many pieces.”

“Well, who knows Johnny Boy?” yelled a journalist. “If you had been behind the steering wheel, there may not have been an accident?”

“May be so,” replied Johnny making sure to remain solemn. “But, we can’t be sure of that...everyone knows that I can’t drive.”

This last remark produced a few giggling among the journalists. Johnny immediately understood that he had prevailed and won the battle. The people of the press were supporting him one more time. Encouraged by Julia who was smiling at him, he kept going and explained his reasons for leaving the scene of the accident and Manou’s motivation for lying. He concluded by reading the text prepared by his press’s agent. He then looked right into the lens of the CNN camera and spoke directly to Yannick Simard.

“Dear Sir, I will easily survive this awful experience, but you... I’m looking for words that could be comforting and I can’t find any. Nothing I could say could bring back your loss. The dear members of your family are now part of the victims of road accidents. If there is nothing I can say, Sir, there is one thing I can do. It is to sympathize and feel sorry for your distress and anguish. Not only do I sympathize with you, but I want to use my influence to help prevent such disasters. It is by far too frequent that an intoxicated driver, who thinks he can safely drive, takes the road and creates tragedies like the one that took the lives of Marilynne, Helene and Jade Simard. Today, I want to take advantage of this podium to address the general population in these terms: whoever you are, I beg of you. Never drive after consuming alcohol or drugs. Even if it’s only one drink and even if you consider that you are stronger and more alcohol resistant than other people. No one is shielded against deadly tragedies. What happened last night, because of Gregory Simons, can happen to anyone. It is sad to say, but Mr. Simons is exempt from major problems, since he died as a result of the accident that he caused. He does not have to live through the horrible consequences

of his actions. Many are not so lucky. There is nothing worst for a man or a woman who survived a tragedy that they caused, than to live with the guilt. Please, in memory of Marilynne, Helene and Jane, join me and support zero tolerance.

Among the people listening to this conference on television, one person was extremely attentive to the words of the singer. It was, of course, Yannick. From his bed, at the hospital, he had not missed a word from Johnny's presentation.

"You know him better than I do," he said to Tommy. "Do you think he is sincere?"

"No way, not for a minute," replied Tommy. This guy always lies as easily as he breathes."

Somewhat surprised, Yannick added:

"Interesting, he seems so... innocent... most would feel like giving him heaven without confession."

"You must remain suspicious..." maliciously said Tommy. "Behind the angel, hides Lucifer."

"Don't you think you exaggerate a little? inquired Jimmy quite annoyed by the paparazzi's presence.

"Not at all. Well... OK... I agree that Johnny by himself is too much of an idiot and that we don't have to worry about him... but his gang, that another story. You can't trust these people."

"If you say so..."

"Are you certain you don't want to give me an interview, Mr. Simard?"

"He's been refusing for over one hour, you idiot." impatiently said Carl Desnoyers. "Will you leave him in peace, yes or no? Don't you have any compassion for what the man just lived through?"

"Listen," added Yannick somewhat calmer than his father in law. "I'm well aware that you missed the press conference so that you could get an exclusive interview from me. But, as I told you, almost one hundred times, I refuse to have my life and my photo printed in your cheap sensation newspaper, is that clear? In a few minutes, I will be released out of this hospital; I will leave this place and go as far as I possibly can from your frantic part of the world."

"OK, Sir," could only say Tommy while taking a deep breath.

He turned toward the door, took a few steps, changed his mind and offered his business card to Yannick.

"In case you should decide to change your mind!" he explained.

He was on his way out when he heard a special news bulletin concerning Johnny Boy on the television.

“According to information recently received by this TV station, the rumor stating that charges would be filed against the young singer and his adoptive mother appeared partly founded. So, Johnny Boy would be accused of severe criminal negligence and no charges would be filed against Manoushka Tarah. The false story made by the woman was never properly recorded and therefore, she could not be prosecuted.”

If Yannick, Carl and Jimmy remained bewildered by this news, Tommy was delighted.

“God!” he said with jubilation. “What I would give to see the expression on the face of this fat-head. I’ll bet ten box that he’s crying in the arms of Big Mama.”

“You really hate the guy; don’t you?” said Yannick.

“As much as a rock in my shoe, Sir, and even more!”

IV

It had been awhile after his return to Montreal when Yannick heard that Johnny's days in court were about to begin. He had returned at least three months ago. Three months during which he had to learn how to mourn his triple loss and how to relearn to live by himself. Even if he tried to mask his emotions and play the role of the successful man, he knew within himself that he was emotionally drained. He could dissimulate his sorrow in front of others, but could not ignore the suffering that was growing within his soul. He could answer to all who cared about him that he was doing well and was handling his predicaments, but, he knew that, he was not doing well at all. It was as if unexplainable venom was tormenting his heart. Something was not normal and was bringing him excessive pain. He was living the pain of life, the sorrow of love; his soul was in distress. He could not understand the changes and the feelings that were growing within him. All he knew and realized is that his torment was becoming more and more dominant. He was there, ready to explode and fly into rage at the first spark.

The first time he experienced the powerful sensations, was at the funerals of his three loved ones. He had organized the funerals the day he arrived in Montreal. At least two hundred people were present. The moment he was placed in the presence of the three coffins, in which rested the respective bodies of his loving wife and two daughters, he experienced extreme emptiness and vertigo. He had the impression of not being himself. As if an invisible force had taken possession of his brain. A conflict within his thought leading him to see the world in black. As he stared upon Marilyne's body for the last time, he could swear that he was being told to destroy everything in his way and to madly hit all that was surrounding him. He believed his inner soul was whispering:

"Go ahead, strike them all. That's what you want, Isn't it? You know these people don't really care about your distress. They only want to shine by your side. They are profiteers, dirty profiteers, all of them. Go ahead... free your emotions and set your anger against them. You will feel so much better."

At first, he believed he was exhausted. He also assumed that these debilitated thoughts were due to the fact that he was out of the medications prescribed to him at the hospital. The tranquillizer his doctors had prescribed gave him the strength to face the horrible tragedy that had touched his life. As time went on, he realized that there was something else. These negative sensations of vertigo and this little voice kept addressing him constantly and added pressure upon his inner self. After reporting and discussing the phenomenon with his Canadian doctor, he was told that the problems were the result of an intense stress.

"Give yourself a little time," would recommend the MD. It will go away..."

But the predicament has lasted for more than three months. Not only did the symptoms persist and took more and more dominance, but they seriously affected his life. And that was not the end. If less than a week after the funerals, the voice he had been listening became gradually silent, each night, and always at the same time, Marilyne and his two daughters would appear to him. They would communicate and talk with him as if they were still alive. He was convinced that it was not a dream. What he saw was way too real. The only person with whom he shared the

occurrences was Jimmy.

“You are having hallucinations,” was his diagnostic. “Do you know what? I’m not a psychologist, but I think you are in the denial phase.”

“The denial phase?” replied Yannick.

“Yes, I read one or two articles on the subject. It has to do with the subconscious. You see, when a person has problem accepting a major ordeal, well, his unconscious self-behave in an odd way. So, a person nose-dives into the surreal. I think that’s where your hallucinations come from.”

“You think I am crazy, is that it?” questioned Yannick somewhat irritated.

“Not at all,” said Jim. “Considering what you just lived through, I think it’s normal that you should have certain reactions. Let’s say... bizarre reactions.”

“Bizarre, you say? So, you think I’m crazy? Come on... admit that’s what you mean to say.”

“No! You are definitively not crazy, but you are somewhat unsettled. Before your hallucinations develop into insanity, I think you should consult a psychiatrist.”

“A psychiatrist, you say?” yelled Yannick rapidly getting upset. “Why don’t get them to lock me up while you’re at it?”

“You know, Yannick...” mumbled Jim. “Since the tragedy, I have been observing you and I must say that I am worried. You act as if the accident never happened. You work, you smile to everyone and you say that all is well...”

“And, the problem is?”

“Well, I am pleased that you mentioned your hallucinations to me. It proves one thing. It proves that you are normal.”

“Normal?”

“Yes, it is normal that a human being should negatively react after a drama like the one you experienced. It’s a good news, no? Your hallucinations prove that you are normal and uncover your true emotions. The sorrow you are trying to hide from everyone.”

“What would you like me to do? Tell me, would you like me to complain and place my head on the shoulder of everyone asking how I feel?”

“Of course not, but, you should take a break instead of driving yourself forward at one hundred miles per hour, like you are now doing. See someone, Yan, consult a professional who could help you get rid of these hallucinations.”

“And what if it helps me to see them every night? Did you think of that? It may be what’s helping me to tolerate my sorrow.”

Yannick took a short pause and retorted:

“You know what? I should not have shared my problem with you.”

“Listen, Yannick...” said Jim, trying to reason with his friend.

“Don’t say anything else!” interrupted Yannick. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Not with you and not with anyone else.”

And before leaving the room, he added:

“Once for all, what I see are not hallucinations. You should know that there are thousands of episodes like mine. People who declared having contacts with dead loved-ones are numbered in the thousands.”

From this moment, he kept his emotions and experiences for himself. Also, he had acquired many bad habits since he returned from California. He was unaware that these habits were undermining his mental and physical health every day.

So, he lived forward, believing he was sufficiently strong to manage his emotional distress by himself. His sorrow? What sorrow? The girls came to visit him every night. Yes, every night, after five or six drinks, an ocean of tears and two sleeping pills. That’s when they would appear to console him, listen and talk with him. And, what about the deep pain he experiences every morning when he woke-up and found that Marilynne was not next to him? No problem, a capsule or two of ‘speed’ and he was ready for a new day. If Jimmy and the others had known about the dangerous cocktails he absorbed day after day -Speed-sleeping pills-alcohol-, his friends would then understand the source of his hallucinations and bring an end to his decline. But, no one knew. However, Yannick was aware that his new lifestyle was perilous. “It’s only temporary,” would he say to himself. He was convinced that all would return to normal as soon as he would overcome the violent traumatism tied to the accident, and most of all, as soon as he would have forgotten that once, he had a living wife and two daughters. It was only a question of time. He had to be patient and keep his mind occupied. That was the reason why he would fill his days with work. Between each materialization of the girls, he lived to generate millions of dollars.

How did this fallout start? In fact, it started right after his return from California. That day, he took an important decision that should help him to forget what his life had been. This resolution was that he would never step back into the home where he lived with his family. As soon as he touched the ground at the Montreal airport, he said to Jimmy, who had offered to take him home before getting his own children at grandma’s place:

“I thank you, Jim, but that house is no longer my home. I will not live there anymore. Please, take me to the Ritz, won’t you?”

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” asked Jimmy, without being really surprised.

“One hundred percent sure. I have too many memories in that house. If you were in my shoes, would you want to return there?”

“Well... no... not really... The Ritz may not be a bad idea.”

“Why not come and live with us for a while?” suggested Jimmy’s wife.

“It’s very nice of you, Christie, but, no. I prefer the Ritz. I need to be by myself, do you understand?”

Christie wanted to insist but Jimmy asked her not to. Because he knew Yannick for many years, he was aware that when his friend had taken a decision, no one could change his mind. If he was himself in Yannick situation, he would also prefer to be alone, just to think or cry in complete intimacy. At this precise moment, he had a question that was not quite appropriate but he had to ask:

“Tell me, if you don’t want to live in your house anymore, what will you do with it?”

“I will put it for sale,” rapidly answered Yannick. “What do you think?”

“Well... yes... I guess so...” stuttered Jimmy, feeling a little foolish.

“It’s a good thing that you asked.” said Yannick, “because I would like you to take care of it.”

“You mean you want me to sell your house?”

“Yes, I really don’t feel to do it by myself. Do you understand? I can’t, that’s all. I have to turn the page and as quickly as I can. The price is not important. Get what you can and that’s all. The faster you sell it, the better it will be.”

Jimmy accepted without confirming that he would not sell it for less than it was worth. Yannick’s house was worth a fortune. He was not about to sell it for less than its value because the owner wanted to get rid of it to escape his misfortune.

To leave Yannick alone with his sorrow constituted a major error. But, who could have known? At this point, he seemed so strong. It seemed evident that he would be able to overcome his misery. His first night at the Ritz was horrible. His suitcases just made it to the room before he threw himself on the bed and cried nonstop for hours. Many ideas came to his mind during that night. Many, including the desire to commit suicide. Around eleven o’clock at night, he figured that he had to do something. He dried his eyes and left the room. Once outside, he walked toward the closest bridge, with the idea and the firm intention to jump in the St. Lawrence River. On his way, he encountered a crude woman who said, in a way that made it easy to guess her profession:

“Hello good looking.”

Yannick kept walking forward when she said again:

“You don’t seem to be doing well, honey. Looking at you kisser, I can swear that you are about to do something stupid.”

“And what business is it of yours?” asked Yannick after interrupting his walk.

“Well, I don’t like to see gloomy guys. Especially when they are as handsome as you are.”

“Is that so?” ironized Yannick while looking deep into her eyes. “And you think that a blow job or something else that a woman of your kind can offer me could solve my problems?”

“Listen, for you I may only be a whore, but it does not mean that I don’t have a heart. Tell me where you are going. I can see that you are hurting. What are you planning to do?”

Facing the complete silence of her interlocutor, she added:

“I think you need to chat a little. You know what? I’m really a good listener. Buy me a drink or two and I will listen to everything you have to say. Even if you tell me dumb stories.”

“Do you really think that I’m the type of guy who would share his problems with a complete stranger?”

“Not a complete stranger, darling, my name is Anna... Lady Anna. I’m the best adviser in town. Come on handsome. You really need to talk and you also need a drink. There is a bar over there. It’s very close. That’s where I normally run my business. But tonight, there will be no business. I will leave everything else aside. I will be there just for you.”

Without truly knowing why, Yannick followed her. Maybe she was right. To talk with someone may help him. Three hours later, he was willing to agree that Lady Anna could really listen. After a few drinks, he revealed his story as if it was an open book. Not only did she listen without losing the sense of his conversation, but when he cried, she found the right words to ease his sorrow. At the bar closing hour, he felt much better, but was also quite intoxicated. That is probably why he invited her to follow him to the Ritz.

“Ah! You will see, Honey...” she declared while following him without hesitation. “Nothing is better than sex with a pro to forget one’s miseries; even when they are as severe as yours.”

In any case, once in the room, Yannick was incapable to perform. He could only cry.

“Damn it!” he exclaimed, “I feel like a sissy. I can’t even get it up.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Lady Anne to console him. “After what happened to you, it’s quite normal. We must also say that you drank a lot. So, it’s normal.”

He fell asleep while resting his head on the large breasts on his guest. The next morning, waking up was somewhat difficult. He had planned to visit the funeral parlor, but the excess of the previous night left him totally out of shape.

“Here,” offered Lady Anna while giving him something that looked like a white pill. “Take this, you will feel better in no time at all.”

She was right. Less than thirty minutes later, Yannick Simard seemed as fresh as a rose.

“Well,” he asked. “What kind of stuff is that?”

“It’s called ‘speed’,” proudly answered the woman as she was getting ready to leave the room. “If you need more, you know where to find me.”

She, of course, did not bother telling him that addiction to this product produced a serious inability to sleep and that it should never be mixed with sleeping pills. The mixture of the two could create hallucinations.

Once the funeral arrangements were done, poor Yannick tried to return to his daily routine by diving in his work. Because of the ‘speed’ that Lady Anna would sell him almost every day, his working hours could start as early as six o’clock in the morning to end around ten or eleven o’clock at night. To remain in shape, he trained a lot. He trained way too extensively, considering that he did not eat much. He did not realize that on top of affecting his sleeping habit, the magical little pills he was taking interfered with his appetite. So, within one month, the bulge around his waist and belly gradually disappeared and his stomach became as hard as steel. He imposed this inhuman discipline to himself six days a week, from Monday to Saturday. He devoted each Sunday to the Desnoyers. He would either visit Carl and Francine or would spend time with Jimmy. Where ever he was, all subjects of conversation were acceptable with the exception of any allusions referring to the accident, Marilyne and the girls. Jimmy had imposed this restriction after informing the other members of the family about Yannick’s problem with hallucinations. That rule should stay in place until Jimmy found a way to deal with Yannick’s state of denial. So, the talks and discussions would mostly be about work and money, and money and work. As far as this aspect of the family was concerned, all was good. The firm Desnoyers-Simard broke new performance records almost every week. Taking in consideration the many hours that Yannick would spend working, it was evident that he was the main factor of their success. Jimmy would do as much as he could, but did not have the adrenalin to keep up with his brother in law. He often had difficulties keeping up with the rhythm. Of course, he never justified the fact that he spent less hours working because he had a family to manage.

The days kept rolling on. While conscientious of the negative symptoms displayed by Yannick, no one in the Desnoyers family felt it was necessary to activate the distress signal. For them, his loss of weight his excess of energy constituted a notice of auto-defense, activated by the horrible tragedy and the death of his loved-ones.

“He will eventually adapt and start a new life,” would say Francine. “If someone can prevail such a disaster, it is him.”

The others agreed and acted as if everything was fine. But, if someone had set aside the denial theory and had attempted to understand Yannick’s hallucinations, the drama to come could have been prevented. If someone had been more vigilant and understood the reasons for the hallucinations, that person would have grasped that the conversations Yannick believed he had

with his wife and daughters were not a demonstration of good mental health.

Yannick first caught sight of the girls, or what he believed was the girls, about a week after the funerals. He had begun his doses of sleeping pills to counter the insomnia caused by the speeds. As he cried like a desperate child, waiting for the sleeping pills to calm him down, he would set eyes on Marilyne and the girls as they took place at the foot of the bed.

“You shouldn’t be crying like that, daddy,” he heard his daughter Jade say. “It makes us very sad.”

He would close and rub his eyes to chase the vision, but nothing would work. As soon as he re-opened his eyes, the girls were still there. Not truly believing they were there, he would rise on his knees to get closer and touch them. He was unable to truly touch them; his hand would only glide through their bodies.

“Sleep, my love,” would softly whisper Marilyne before he closed his eyes.

The next day, he took more speed and believed he had been dreaming. A simple dream, yes, but a dream that was disturbing. The following night, he lived the same scenario with the exception that Marilyn appeared by herself.

“The girls aren’t with you?”

“It’s because I want to talk to you in private,” she answered. It’s important, it’s about Lady Anna.”

She disapproved that he had spent a night with her.

“You cheated on me, Yannick. It’s very hard for me to accept that behavior, you see? If you want the girls and me to keep visiting you, you must refrain from such activities. No but... can you imagine? What if the girls saw you with her?”

She disappeared after he promised to only see Lady Anna to get his medicines.

At the beginning, his three loves only help him to ease his chagrin until he fell asleep. Then one night, they talked about the accident and Marilyne declared:

“I still can’t believe that right after our death, the dirty fat black woman dared to lie to you in your hospital room.”

“Really, my love,” replied Yannick. What kind of language is this? It’s not like you to talk that way.”

“Please excuse me, but you see, since I lost my life because of her dumb kid, I can talk the way I please. It’s my way to manage my frustration.”

“Fucking Johnny Boy!” yelled Helene. “It’s his fault... and I used to call him my favorite singer.”

“Considering what he has done to us, you should kill him, daddy. You should kill that stupid singer.”

“Stop it, girls!” would reprimand Yannick. “This poor guy has nothing to do with the accident. He was not the one driving while intoxicated. His driver is the guilty one.”

“That’s where you are wrong, my darling,” corrected Marilyne. “Yes, the driver is guilty, but the real responsible person is the bloody singer. He should not have permitted his driver to drive while he was drunk. If that singer had any sense at all, he would not have permitted his driver to be behind the wheel.”

“And that’s without saying that he abandoned us,” added Helene. “And he lied to escape the reality of his actions.”

“You have to avenge us , daddy.” continued Jade. “We want justice.”

Yannick would then answer:

“I don’t have to get involved, girls. I want to let you know that this guy will soon have his day in court. Justice will prevail.”

“I hope you are right,” would say Marilyne before vanishing.

Even though he was seriously troubled by these nocturnal conversations, Yannick made sure to keep them secret and never revealed his state of mind to his close friends. In reaction to their silence concerning his miseries, he suffered deep sorrow. As if the subject of the accident, Marilyne and the girls was taboo. He was getting more resentful every day. He eventually began to believe that he had no more place in the family that he had so deeply loved. He felt that no one was interested by him or his distress. He never expected them to pity him, but a few encouraging words and some compassion would have been welcome. He felt like they were using him as he passport to wealth. They didn’t seem to appreciate anything else. “Work, Yannick, work and make us more money. Oh... you have a problem? Who cares? It’s not our problem!” Yannick felt like his days in the Desnoyers Kingdom were now coming to an end. It was only a question of time before he followed another road. As soon as the occasion would present itself, he would leave.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Johnny had to wait three months before knowing the outcome of his trial. No use to mention that during that time, the media were saying and printing whatever they wanted. The story concerning the accident had been told and re-told at least a thousand times. As if the damn accident was the only important subject in the world. People didn’t seem to care

about the collapse of the stock market, the recession or the terrorist attacks...They seemed only concerned about what was happening with Johnny Boy. Is it true that he was the one driving the car? Is it true that he was drunk? Did he really watch the people in the car die before running away? Wow! I don't believe it! Each new day, a new rumor was born concerning Johnny. The poor guy could no longer take the pressure. To find peace, he would lock himself at home. Only Manou, his lawyers, his press agent and Charlie could approach him. All others were 'persona non grata'. He was so sad that he hardly ate, did no longer create or produce new music and was only sleeping after absorbing many sleeping pills. Given the situation, the production of his new album had been delayed. Meanwhile, his attorneys were working to solve his legal problems. Those poor ones had to tolerate a major scene when they informed Johnny that criminal charges were held against him.

"What?" he yelled like a mad man. "Did the prosecutor fall on his head? I didn't do anything wrong. I'm innocent."

"Calm down, Johnny," would unemotionally say John. "We will get you out. As you say so well, you didn't do anything wrong and you are innocent. That's what we will prove to the judge."

"I don't believe you anymore!" screamed Johnny with rage. "You told me I didn't have to worry at all. You said they would not prosecute me. You are a liar. I should fire you!"

"Come on, Johnny," repeated Manou to reassure him. "Stop attacking the poor man, OK? He is the best there is. He will get you out of that dilemma without problem. Trust him!"

"He better get me out," replied Johnny still dreadfully angry. "If he doesn't, I will kill myself. He will have my death on his conscience."

"Johnny!" yelled Manou now truly getting upset. "I will not let you make declarations of the kind. No one commits suicide for such a small reason. Come on..."

"For such an insignificant reason?" ironically said the young man. "It's evident that you are not in my place."

While John was preparing the defense and while Julia worked to control the wild rumors published by the media, Manou did all she could to facilitate Johnny's life. The singer kept looking at the black side of things and searched new ways of taking his life. He was studying different methods of killing himself, but of course, never did anything to bring his threats into action. That was nothing new. He had been threatening to bring an end to his life since he was a little boy. Obviously, Manou and other people who knew him were not worried at all. They knew that he talked that way to attract attention on himself and to demonstrate that he was not happy about certain situations. In fact, people around him would only worry if he faced a problem without complaining. In many cases, his reactions could be out of the ordinary. So, meanwhile, each threat from him seemed like a good thing. If Manou reacted strongly against his ultimatum of committing suicide, it was only to play his game and to give him the impression that he was taken seriously.

This dilemma still as a good side. The stories prepared by Tommy and the media couldn't change the opinion of his fans. They stood behind him. Every evening, during the news broadcasts,

results of certain surveys to know if Johnny Boy had acted properly were presented. Questions were asked:

“Do you really think that he ran because he was panic-stricken?” or “Do you think that he was behind the wheel?” “Do you believe that he drinks too much?” “Does he get intoxicated when no one is watching him?” “Do you think he should have kept his driver from driving the car?”

The questions would never end. What the fans realized every night, is that ninety percent on his supporters stood behind him. On given night, Johnny laughed and was happy to hear that one hundred percent of his fans answered in his defense, when the announcer had asked:

“Do you believe all that Tommy MacMillan is saying about Jonny Boy?”

“Ha! Ha!” declared Johnny to his dog as if he had been talking to a human. “This bastard can start looking for a new job. No one believes his porky lies. No one...”

The day of the trial, between the time he left his home to go to court and the time that the judge would render judgment, Johnny told his entourage at least one hundred times that if he was declared guilty, it would be the end of his life.

“If this clown lock’s me up,” he loudly pronounced, “I will get a riffle and shoot myself in the head. Is that clear?”

“Johnny...” retorted Manou. “Won’t you stop these futile threats?”

Once in court and after the prosecutor’s presentation, John began his client’s defense by loudly saying:

“Your Honor, it is not a secret to anyone that Johnny is affected by a mental disorder known as: the Peter Pan’s syndrome.”

After a few laughs coming from the room where the trial was held, John added:

“Even if some people think that what I just said is amusing, this syndrome truly exist. To prove my point, I would like to question a renowned specialist on the subject: Dr. Charles Stewart.”

Once the psychiatrist took place in the witness box, John asked him to briefly define the Peter Pan syndrome. The doctor proceeded by explaining the rare mental disorder, explaining that it mostly affected human males. He explained that the people with this disease grew normally and could easily find a place in society. However, these people often rejected the adult’s world to find sanctuary in the children’s world.

“If these persons,” continued the doctor, “normally reject responsibilities, they, however, generally hide real genius. When they have the opportunity to settle in a domain where imagination

is a must, their possibilities are endless.”

The doctor took a short pause and continued:

“The people affected by this disorder have an exceptional imagination, rarely reached by a conventional person and they demonstrate a sense of high level perfectionism. That is why their reactions are unique and sometime perfect...”

“You just described to us the positive aspect of the Peter Pan syndrome,” interrupted John. “Can you now explain the negative aspect?”

“The negative aspect of this mental disorder,” answered Doctor Stewart, “can be explained this way. The patient is often incapable to administrate adult’s responsibilities. Mentally, he is still a child. And even if this child can sometime be extremely wise and intelligent, he is often incapable to face certain difficult burden.”

“How would such a person react while facing a major problem?” asked John.

“Badly...” rapidly answered the witness. “Very badly; if he is well surrounded, as it is the case for Mr. Mc Lean, he will transfer his responsibilities, his obligations and his problems to another person.”

“What would happen if no such person was with him at the time he experienced a major problem?” questioned John.

“The consequences could be critical. While dealing with serious problems, the subject could react like a child and throw a major tantrum. But, if he ever had to deal with too great a responsibility, he could enter an imaginary world from where he may never come back. He may even act totally irrationally and attend suicide.”

John pursued:

“So, taking into account what you just revealed to us, Doctor Stewart, and considering your knowledge on this disease, how would a person, with the Peter Pan syndrome, act in reaction to an accident as traumatic as the one experienced by my client on August the twenty fourth?”

“The reaction of such a person would be similar to the one of a frightened child... Terrorized to the point of acting irrationally... Like running away, for instance.”

“In such a case, can this kind of patients evaluate the consequences of their actions?”

“No more and no less than a child.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that a child, having a bad or good reaction to an event that he encounters for the

first time, cannot be blamed for his choice. He should be considered totally ignorant of the proper action to take. But this no longer applies when this same child relives the same situation. He should then have retained the proper way to react and what to do in a certain kind of traumatic circumstance”

“Seems clear to me,” said John. Now, tell me, doctor, you have been Johnny Mc Lean’s psychiatrist for almost five years. Can you tell the court if he suffers, or not, from the Peter Pan Syndrome?”

“There is no doubt in my mind,” concluded the doctor. “In fact, Johnny is one of the most serious cases that I have ever encountered during my career.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I have no more questions.”

To the crowds great’s satisfaction, John summoned Johnny Mc Lean to the witness box. Relatively intimidated, the rock star requested that Manou be close to him.

“Good morning, Johnny,” amicably said the attorney in order to make his client feel at ease.

“Hi...” timidly answered Johnny while staring at the Judge. “Hi, to you too Sir... I mean your Honor.”

The magistrate remained expressionless and did not acknowledge Johnny’s salutations.

“Johnny, in how many car accidents were you ever implicated?” asked John.

“Well... only one.”

“You mean... the accident that happened on August the twenty fourth? Is that it?”

“yes.”

“Now, tell me, how many car accidents have you witnessed before August the twenty fourth?”

“None...” answered Johnny without any hesitation.

“How many dead people or corps have you ever seen in the course of your young life?”

“None...” repeated Johnny.

“Did anyone ever tell you, as you were growing up, that you should never leave the site of an accident, particularly when you are the principal witness?”

“Even if it’s not my fault?” replied Johnny.

“Did you know, yes or no?”

“Well, no...”

“Why did you run away, Johnny?”

“Because I was frightened,” whispered Johnny. “I was so scared; I could swear that one of the dead was looking at me. I was scared out of my wits.”

“Did you ever think, that night, that the dead person, who was looking at you, might still be alive?”

“No!” categorically answered Johnny. For me, it was impossible that he could still be alive. He was not moving, his eyes and his hands were not moving... I’m telling you, he seemed dead!”

“That’s fine, Johnny,” cordially said John. “You can return to your seat.”

After the defense’s presentations, the judge declared that he would render judgment around three o’clock in the afternoon. However, he only announced his verdict around four o’clock. Considering his mental disorder and considering that before he left the site of the accident, he remained in the woodland until the arrival of some assistance, Johnny Mc Lean was declared not guilty.

Less than two minutes later, the news had reached every corners of the world. The people of Quebec received the information around five-thirty. Yannick was sitting in front of his TV when the bulletin was made public and therefore advised of the verdict. Detailed information concerning the trial were broadcast around ten o’clock in the night while Yannick was still watching TV. To the question asked by the newsman: “Are you in agreement with the verdict made by the Judge?” The majority of his listeners answered: yes. At this point, an upset Marilyne appeared to Yannick. What made her blow her cap, were the words delivered by a fan of Johnny Boy:

“Really... why did they accused Johnny Boy, tell me? He didn’t do anything wrong. Nothing to justify all this chaos. It’s like justice as nothing else to do than to cause problems to the innocent like this poor Johnny.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong?” yelled Marilyne. “We are dead because of this ignorant singer and someone dare to say that he didn’t do anything wrong?”

She turned toward Yannick and said:

“That’s what they call justice? This guy ran away from the site of the accident, lied like a pig, his stupid mother did the same and the results... They are free to go!”

“Calm down, darling,” retorted Yannick trying to unwind her. “I also think that the verdict is unfair, but...”

“Unfair?” yelled Marilyne. That’s all you find to say? Unfair... did you lose your balls or what?”

“Marilyne!” protested Yannick, seemingly angry. “Please, control yourself in the presence of the girls.”

“Control myself?” she shouted “I lost my life and so did your daughters and you ask me to control myself?”

At the time that she was yelling these words, the TV was presenting smiling images of Johnny Boy leaving the tribunal. While walking toward his limousine, he was waving at the supporting crowd, shaking hands with many and signing autographs.

This was too much for Marilyne:

“Look at this bastard... he’s acting like nothing is wrong. Three human lives were lost because of his lack of judgment and... Look at him... no regrets! He is not showing any remorse.”

Observing Yannick’s inertia, she screamed:

“I hope that something will be done.”

“What? What do you mean?” answered Yannick.

“I mean, my dear husband, that if justice did not prevail, well... you have to bring us reparation. You have to do something. The girls and I are counting on you.”

“Listen Marilyne,” quietly replied Yannick. “I’m also disappointed about the verdict, but, there is absolutely nothing that I can do about it.”

“I do not agree.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could avenge us.”

“Avenge you? Take justice into my hands? Is that what you are asking me to do?”

“Not only am I asking you, Yannick... I’m giving an order and an ultimatum.

And the three girls started to sing:

“Death to Johnny Boy! Death to Johnny Boy!”

“But...” uttered Yannick, totally distraught.

“There are not... but...” severely answered Marilyne. “Our respective deaths must be avenged.”

“Death to Johnny Boy!” kept to sing Helene and Jade. “Death to Johnny Boy!”

“You see...” continued Marilyne. “The girls agree with me. Would you like us to visit you again?”

“Of course I want you to!” rapidly answered Yannick. If you were to cease these visits, I

don't know what I would do.”

“So, there it is... If you want to see us again, you must punish and avenge us. I might as well tell you now, we will not come back to see you until vengeance is done.”

“But...”

“No, Yannick... you have been acting like a loser for the last three months. It's about time you take control and bring back the man you use to be. Do you remember? My Yannick who was not afraid of anything or of anybody... The one who was always able to face any problems. You must become this man again!”

“But, how the hell do you want me to avenge your deaths? Do you want me to appeal the court's decision? Or... do you think I should sue this Johnny in a civil court?”

“As I can see, you are not grasping what I'm trying to tell you. I want you to hurt him. I want him to suffer as much as you are suffering. I want him to know how painful it is to lose someone you love. And then, I want him to lose what the girls and I have lost because of his lack of judgment. I want him to die!”

“You mean that you... you want me to kill this guy?” inquired a suffocating Yannick. “But, my sweet love, you know me well enough to know that I can be anything, but a murderer.”

“You must make the choice, my dear Yannick. Do what we ask or we will be out of your life forever.”

“But..?”

“Make your choice.”

“OK...” finally approved Yannick. And how do you want me to execute vengeance?”

Marilyne answered:

“Not too long ago, you proved your great intelligence and ability to plan and create the firm now known as Desnoyers-Simard. Isn't that right?”

“Sure, but...”

“So now, you can imagine another genial idea to punish this damn singer.”

She kept silent for a moment and continued:

“This fellow that you met at the hospital, the guy who said he hated Johnny Boy as much as a pebble in his shoe; he gave you his card, did he not? I feel like you should call him. His assistance could be precious to you. Will you call him?”

“I will...” promised Yannick.

“Then, we will see you again when you have accomplished your task.”

This being said, his three darling girls vanished. There was only one way to see them again. He had to change direction and unleash the anger that was buried within him since the Bloody Manou had lied in his face. Marilyne had asked him if he still had balls. Well, not only would the lady find out very soon, but she would royally be served. The spark that his emotions needed to explode was now lit.

V

As soon as Yannick noticed Tommy at the Los Angeles airport, he knew he had found the perfect ally. The one who would help reach his goals. In fact, it was actually hard to believe that a person could despise Johnny Boy as much as he and the girls did. It was also baffling to grasp that envy pushed Tommy to unite his effort to Yannick's to destroy the person he hated so much. Of course... Yannick had offered a large sum of money to him; amount to be paid as soon as the assignment would be completed. Marilyne had done well when she suggested to contact Tommy. It was a great idea. The day after she challenged him, Yannick conceived the plan for his vengeance. It was actually a malicious plan. He did not have to wait too long to get his project on the way. The evening TV news was hardly over when he was ready to proceed. Ready as if had been planning his vengeance since this big ugly black woman dared to stand in his presence. The bitch had no way to understand how he suffered by the death of his loved ones. For her, all that was important was to protect her little Johnny. All she wanted was to save his skin and his stupid career. And this shitty little bastard and the nice words he offered during his press conference... It was only done with the intention to stimulate and protect his career. He talked about Marilyne and the girls as if he had really cared. He delivered empty words. For him, it was Showtime; the bastard was an actor reading words that someone else had written. If the son of a bitch had been sincere, he would have talked to him directly instead of addressing his message to a wide audience on television. If he did not want to have a face to face with him, he could have called, written or send a simple email. But the bastard didn't do such things. As far as Johnny Boy was concerned, who cared about the pains of Mr. Simard? Not him, that's for sure. "Ok, let's get back." But things would not stay the way they were. The girls were right. He had to seek vengeance.

His plan was well prepared. He retrieved the business card that Tommy had given him a few months ago. He studied the card for a few seconds and finally decided to call. The paparazzi answered at the second ring.

"Good morning" said Yannick with a deep tone of voice. "Am I talking to Tommy MacMillan?"

"It's me," proudly answered the young man.

"I am Yannick Simard."

"What?" replied Tommy. "I can't believe it! Are you ready to give an interview?"

"Definitively not." whispered Yannick. "Tell me, Tommy, do you still loathe Johnny Boy?"

"More than yesterday and less than tomorrow."

"Then, you are the person I'm looking for."

So, Yannick explained that he was enormously upset with Johnny and that he was seeking vengeance. To reach his aspiration, he needed an ally, a person that knew everything about the

singer. Someone who knew what to do to destroy him and transform his life into nightmare.

“I like the idea,” reacted Tommy. “But first, you must understand that we can’t attack Johnny without attacking the people around him.”

“That is the kind of info I need to strike with ferocity. So, will you help?”

“Well, of course, but, except for the pleasure of destroying Johnny, what’s in it for me?”

“Do you like wealth?”

“How much?”

“All of Johnny’s fortune.”

“As I can see, you have not read his biography?”

“I didn’t have much time. Is there something I should know?”

“Our Johnny Boy is a serious gambler, don’t you know? He is a legitimate bad gambler and that does not help his bank account. He goes to Las Vegas about once a month. Each outing leaves him a somewhat badly off.”

“I think I will have to read his bio.”

“It’s in the book. Anything else you want to offer me?”

“Listen, trust me. I can assure you that as soon as I’m done with that Johnny Boy, **you** will be rich...very rich.”

“What do you mean?”

“His whole fortune will become yours. Trust me...”

“I don’t quite follow you. Do you want to help him or do you want to ruin him?”

“What do you think?”

“Why would you want to improve his wealth?”

“So that I can transfer it to you.”

“Hum... I see... So everything would be mine; even his house? I always wanted that residence. It’s quite a pad.”

“You want it? You will get it. It will be my pleasure to offer it to you.”

“Damn... I can’t believe this. It must be my lucky day. Are you truly serious?”

“More than ever.”

“You really believe that you will be able to destroy Johnny and his organization?”

“Yes, I do.”

“They are quite powerful, you know?”

“Not as much as me.”

“So, how will you proceed?”

“Don’t you worry and don’t ask any questions. The least you will know, the better it will be. All I want is to be able to count on you whenever I will need you. Do we have a deal?”

Tommy hesitated a few moments and asked:

“I don’t know why, but I feel like I should trust you. I did investigate you, my friend, and I know that you are important. So far, you did very well for yourself... very well.”

“I appreciate the compliment... Can you meet me at the Los Angeles airport tomorrow? I will call you later today to let you know my time of arrival.”

“I will be there, Sir. Meanwhile, I suggest you make your homework and study Johnny’s bio. That way you will find out the kind of pest he really is.”

Before purchasing his airplane ticket, Yannick made a second phone call. This time he called Jimmy. He told him he was leaving, without telling him where he was going and when he would be back.

“I don’t feel very well,” he said to justify his departure. “In fact, I’m following your advice and taking a break for a while. I have to take control of my life and get back on the right track.”

“Wise decision,” was the answer. “I know you don’t want to discuss the subject, but... are you still having these weird hallucinations?”

“No,” answered Yannick. “But, I need therapy or I’ll shoot myself in the head.”

“I understand. How long will you be away?”

“Whatever time it will take, Jimmy. Whatever time I will need,”

“Did you break the news to my parents?”

“I’m counting on you to tell them. If I call them, they will try to prevent my departure. I have to leave; I must absolutely go away for a while.”

“The only thing that concerns me,” added Jimmy, it’s the company. Without you, I don’t know if I will be able to keep it so profitable...”

“You will be able Jimmy, I have no doubt. In fact, to compensate for my absence, I will reveal an important dossier to you. It will bring a lot of money and I am the only one with the information. So, please, be discreet.”

“OK, what are we talking about?”

“It’s about Johnny Boy and his recording company.”

“What did you say?”

“Find the name of his company and keep an eye on the share’s value. Whenever you think they are at the lowest point, buy all that you can. Then, be patient and believe me, it will be worthwhile. I can assure you that his shares will climb like an arrow.”

“How do you know that? Is it legal?”

“Totally legal. I’m sorry, but I cannot reveal my sources. It’s top secret.”

“Does it have anything to do with the publication of his next album? I know it should soon be on the market.”

“I see... how do you know that? I didn’t know you were interested by Johnny Boy’s music.”

“I am not; but the children are. They won’t stop talking about that Johnny Boy. If your sources don’t have anything to do with his next album, where did you get the information? Are you in contact with him or someone close to him?”

“Let’s just say that someone owns me a favor, or, maybe THREE.”

“I see, I guess it’s their way to accept culpability.”

“If you only knew how much I despise them.”

“Do you think you will ever be able to forgive?”

“Even if I hope so, I have the impression that I will never forget or forgive... never.”

“I don’t know what else to tell you, my friend. Wherever where you are going, take advantage of your freedom and try to forgive. Let bygones be bygones.”

“To forgive?” yelled Yannick. “You want me to forgive?”

“Yes, you must forgive, Yannick. It will not help to carry all that anger with you. It can’t bring the girls back. You are only hurting yourself and feeding your distress.”

Yannick remained speechless. Jimmy kept going:

“I may be repeating myself but I think you have taken the right decision. It will be good for you to travel a while. Go, Yannick, rest and come back in perfect health. We will always be here for you.”

At the end of the conversation, Yannick had tears in his eyes. Was it because Jimmy confirmed that he would always have a place within the family? Or was it that when Yannick advised Jimmy of his departure, he knew he was leaving the family for good? Within his mind, he knew very well that he had no intention to come back to the Desnoyers family. For a short while, the idea of cancelling his hideous project entered his thoughts. It was still time to take a step backward. He had the strong feeling to tell Tommy that 'project vengeance' was off, but his dead love ones inspired him otherwise. That's why he called back Tommy and said:

"I'll meet you tomorrow at three o'clock in the afternoon, OK? Unless you changed your mind, wait for me by the central exit door of the airport."

"You can count on me, Sir, I will be there."

"You can drop the 'Sir', call me Yannick. By the way, we will start phase one of our program tomorrow night. Make sure you have the telephone number of the ugly fat woman with you."

"OK, Yannick... Ha! Ha... I think I'm going to enjoy working with you."

Following this conversation, Yannick was suddenly feeling ill. He had another rush of vertigo and experienced severe pain within his stomach. Fortunately, the pain did not last too long. After two sequences of regurgitation and two pills, he felt relatively better. The next day, while travelling from Montreal to Los Angeles, he familiarized himself with Johnny Boy's biography, written by Tommy MacMillan. Yannick gathered many interesting facts in regard to Johnny, but also about the writer. While reading, he remembered a statement made by Manou concerning the boy who had tried to cut off Johnny's penis.

"What's the name of the guy who wanted to slice Johnny cock?" she asked Tommy. "You said, Normand, didn't you? Strange because the way I remember the incident, the offender was called Tommy... Tommy MacMillan."

So, figured Yannick, the person referred to as Norman, in the book, was actually Tommy. He smiled when he realized how much the guy disliked Johnny. Yet, his aversion against the rock star was the result of pure jealousy and unhealthy envy. That's why the paparazzi wanted to be a part of the vengeance's project. He hoped for the ruin of Johnny Boy.

"This is so evident," figured Yannick. "I'm sure he would have helped me without receiving any money."

By the way he wrote about his enemy, Tommy's aggressiveness became obvious. For a reader who did not know that the author was Tommy, the book could have seemed impartial. But, for someone knowing the writer and his prey, the book was very biased. True or not, the stories told reflected the dishonesty of the author and his jealousy against the subject of the book. Reading

forward, the reader could almost understand and even tolerate Tommy's statements and opinions; but, it was difficult to accept the evident dishonesty. This was surely not the image Tommy wanted to project, but it was the case. So, Yannick gathered that the principal reason why Tommy hated Johnny was mostly because while they were both living at the orphanage, Johnny received most of Manou's attention, while he, Tommy, was neglected. He never received compliments or caring words; none whatsoever. As far as Manou was concerned, Johnny was always the smartest, the sweetest and the best looking boy. Every time he used his sweet little angelic face to get something, he got it. Manou was always there to reassure, encourage and cheer him in everything he did. When Johnny misbehaved, he never got in trouble. However, the other boys had no special rights, no caresses, no kisses, and no supporting words. Manou never rocked them in her arms and yet, all young boys needed the attention. When it was Johnny's birthday, the cake was always bigger and he invariably received more gifts than the other boys of the orphanage. The other kid's special day were almost disregarded. Normally, they would only receive a May West's pastry, a pair of socks or a simple "Happy Birthday." The worst one-sidedness committed by Manou was the fact that she invested a colossal sum of money, so that Johnny could learn to sing and dance. No such spending for the other children. Why Johnny and not the others? questioned Tommy in his book. Let's study the case of Norman: he had great aptitudes and exceptional writing ability. Why did she not give him the opportunity to develop his talents? Who knows? He could have become the famous author that he was dreaming to become. But, no... at Manou's orphanage, only Johnny had special favors; only her favorite pest. And imagine this... once Johnny reached success, the fat cow kept bragging that she was the force behind his glory.

While analyzing the book, Yannick discovered much information concerning Johnny. He was however conscious that he would have to validate some of the details. The book had been written by a jealous individual and many of the statements were probably false. But one thing was evident... Johnny was a compulsive gambler; he was extremely naïve and probably suffered from Peter Pan syndrome. He was definitively very talented, but did not seem to be impressively intelligent. It was clear that other people were doing the thinking and planning for him. Without his entourage, he probably would have been fragile and helpless. When Yannick read that Johnny had no sexual preference or interest, he was rather bewildered. Ok, he was a little guy with childlike attitude, but he was also a popular rock star. Most women would throw themselves in his arms. How could a man who could enjoy the most beautiful women in the world live the life of a monk? Unless he was gay; that would explain why he only attended illustrious parties accompanied by Manou and his dog. Or, taking into consideration his Peter Pan syndrome, he may only be sexually attracted by teenagers or young adults. While flying toward Los Angeles, Johnny's sexual preferences remained a point of importance for Yannick.

"I can't believe that he is totally asexual!" he said to himself. "Only a holy man chooses to live without sex."

Another point was bugging him... Johnny Boy's seemingly exemplary life. Yes, he gambled, but did not consume alcohol or drugs. He did not even smoke and normally retired to his room early. That was a complete contradiction. Popular rockers did not typically live that way. The guy could buy anything he possibly could desire or do whatever he wanted, but he lived a simple

existence. Hard to believe. Nevertheless, this is how things appeared to be.

Important facts to remember: outside the fact that Johnny has temporary financial problems, which will be solved with the publication of his next album, he was attached to Manou and this one likes alcohol and men. Of course, that's what the author of the book stated.

“Whenever possible, said Yannick to himself, big fat Mama liked to open her legs. She evidently could not be choosy and had to accept anyone showing some interest...”

When the plane landed in Los Angeles, Yannick only had one thing in mind: “Let's attack!”

VI

“So, how was the trip?” asked Tommy, as a way to open the conversation.

“Without any complication,” evasively answered Yannick. One of these days, they might insist that we...

“What do you mean?”

“Well, with these terrorist attacks they are worried about, it’s not pleasant to travel by air anymore. These dumbos don’t know what else to invent in the name of security. One of these days, they may force everyone to travel stark-naked.”

“That’s funny!” laughed Tommy. “I would like to see that... Can you imagine? Big Mama without anything on? Nasty!”

“Since you are talking about her,” said Yannick while surveying his surroundings, do you have her phone number?”

“That was not an easy task,” proudly answered Tommy while retrieving a small piece of paper out of his pocket, but I got it! She changes her cell phone number almost every week.”

Realizing that Yannick kept looking around, seemingly searching for something, the paparazzi asked:

“Are you going to tell me what you’re looking for?”

“I want to rent a car. There should be a car rental company around here, no?”

“Of course, what kind of wheels are you looking for?”

“A Ferrari.”

“A Ferrari? That’s what you want? Nothing else will do?”

“Nothing else; I always wanted to drive one of them. Now that I no longer have a family to bring in my car, I can at least satisfy my caprice.”

Tommy remained silent. What could he answer to such a sad statement? Yannick noticed that his interlocutor had lost his cheerfulness. So he added:

“I want a red Ferrari...”

“What?”

“My Ferrari... I want it to be red!”

“I see... well, I’m sure we will not find this kind of car. Come with me, I’ll take you to Beverly Hills.”

As soon as he took place in Tommy’s old jalopy, Yannick observed that the car resembled its owner: ugly, neglected and out of style. It was an orange pick-up that had to be at least fifteen years old. The color was severely faded and needed to be redone; ideally in another tone. On the back seat, there was a display of empty hamburger boxes, mostly from McDonald’s. Based on the quantity of boxes, it became easy to justify Tommy’s extra weight and the face full of pimples. Frankly, the pimples had the advantage of covering his heavy and dark freckles. The poor guy had not been blessed and Mother Nature must have disliked the fellow in order to give him such a mediocre physique. Worse of all, his head was covered by long and outrageous red hair. His appearance was totally opposite to Johnny Boy’s. No wonder Tommy had so much dislike for the singer. Yannick smirked and tried to control the assessment of his sad looking new partner.

“I read your book.”

“Really? What do you think of it?”

“Somewhat well written,” rapidly answered Yannick.

Tommy proudly answered:

“One of these days, believe me, I will win a prize; a Pulitzer Prize.”

Yannick ignored the last remark and asked questions concerning the veracity of the book.

“Everything in the book is one hundred percent true, replied the author. I would never mislead my readers, never.”

“Seems logical...” said Yannick acting as if he believed the driver. “But, something bugs me...”

“What?”

“It concerns Johnny’s sexual orientation. I can’t believe he is asexual. It doesn’t stand to reason...especially for a rock star.

“But it’s truly the case!” certified Tommy.

“You are absolutely sure?”

“One hundred percent and here is the proof... He has never been seen out on a date. If there was or had been a woman in his life, I would be the first to know. I have been spying on him for quite a while.”

“He may prefer men? That could be the reason why he is never seen with a woman...”

“No way! I made a test sometime back. I paid a real cute gay guy to seduce Johnny.”

“What happened?”

“Well, our national rock star ran away as soon as the other guy got too close to him. He almost left without his dog. Why are you so interested by his sexuality?”

“It’s bothersome to me. If Johnny has no sexual orientation, we will have to find one for him.”

“I like the idea!” said Tommy with jubilation. “Tell me, what’s your plan?”

“I told you yesterday, Tommy, don’t ask any questions. The least you know, the better it will be. Just do what I ask and all will be fine.”

“OK, and when will the phase ‘destruction’ begin?”

“Immediately, my friend, immediately!” said Yannick while grabbing his cell phone and the piece of paper where Manou’s number was written.

“I might as well tell you,” commented Tommy. “Johnny is presently in Las Vegas. Probably losing money before his new album comes out.”

“Really...?” replied Yannick with a big smile. “Luck is on our side. Our man is gambling while his poor mother is probably alone and lonely.”

Just before dialing Manou’s number, Yannick asked:

“When will his new album be on the market?”

“In about two weeks.”

“Do you know in what casino Johnny presently is?”

“No idea, he never goes to the same place. Why? Do you want to catch up with him?”

“And how!”

Yannick began to dial Manou’s number but rapidly cancelled the call and asked Tommy if he knew the name of a good restaurant.

“You want to invite fatso?” negatively asked Tommy.

“Why not? I have to establish a first contact. Where do you think she would like to go?”

“If you want to please her, don’t take her to a restaurant, take her to a bar. The woman likes to tank up, if you know what I mean.”

“Is that so? In this case, are you familiar with a bar that would be classy enough to attract her?”

“Did you say classy? I can see that you don’t know her, my friend!”

“That’s why I asked for your help. So, tell me... Where should I take her?”

“No matter what people think, and contrary to Johnny, Manou is a very unpretentious person. She doesn’t go for high class joints. Her favorite bar is... Are you ready for that? It’s a real rat hole. It’s called ‘Chez Brady’.”

“Works for me... Is it far from here?”

“The bar is located downtown Los Angeles, not too far from the hotel where I reserved a room for you; I hope it’s OK?”

“It’s fine with me as long as you are not taking me to a dump.”

“Don’t you worry?” smiled Tommy. “Even if I don’t spend much time with guys like you, I know they are finicky about their social statute. The room I got for you is at the Marriott, on Figueroa Street.”

“Perfect, but I would have preferred a suite. But it’s not a problem... I’ll make the changes when we get there.”

Yannick finally composed Manou’s telephone number. She must have been distant from her phone because she took quite some time before to take the call.

“Johnny!” she answered, sounding totally out of breath. “Is this my little boy?”

“No, I’m not Johnny, Mrs. Tarah,” retorted Yannick with a pleasant tone of voice.

“Oh! I’m sorry... I’m not familiar with the telephone number you are calling me from. I thought it was Johnny calling me from a phone booth or from his hotel. Sorry for the error. Anyway, who are you? I don’t recognize your voice...”

“Yannick Simard.”

“Yannick who?”

“My name doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“Not at all, should it?”

“Three months ago,” continued Yannick slightly arrogant, “your son killed my wife and my two daughters and you already forgot my name?”

“What?” angrily protested Manou. “I want you to know, Sir, that my son did not cause the accident. It was his driver. Don’t you forget that!”

After this powerful statement, she banged the phone down.

“Filthy bitch!” muttered Yannick.

Ironically looking at him, Tommy indicated:

“Strange way to make a first contact. What did you expect after such an introduction? Did you think she would fall in your arms? I hope this is not an example of your famous plan. If it is, I’m out of here.”

“I agree,” approved Yannick, rather embarrassed. “I was rather unskillful, so, let me try again.”

He redialed Manou’s number.

“Yes!” she answered without trying to cover her anger.

“Mrs Tarah?” gently whispered Yannick. “I’m very sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude and hurt you. You see, I have problem adapting to the situation. As my psychiatrist says, I’m somewhat ill-tempered.”

“Ok, I understand,” replied Manou with a touch of concern. “I forgive you.”

“You do not have to forgive me, Mrs Tarah. I’m the one who must apologize.”

Tommy offered Yannick a thumb-up as a sign of support while Manou kept going:

“You really do not have to apologize, my dear Sir. I can’t imagine how I would feel if such a horrible accident was to happen to my Johnny.

“I don’t imagine such an accident would happen to Johnny.” said Yannick while squeezing his cell phone. Did you not say that if someone wanted to hurt him; he would have to go through you first?”

“That is true. You speak very well, Mr. Simard. It’s a pleasure to listen to you.”

“Thank you. You know... I use to say the same thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that if someone wanted to hurt a member of my family, he would have to go through me first.”

Manou remained silent. Yannick added:

“It’s strange to say, but, that exactly what happened.”

“I’m not sure I understand...”

“I mean... Your driver, that’s what he did. He ran me over. The problem is that I survived and was unable to protect my loved ones.”

To activate Manou’s sympathy, Yannick had pronounced these words with extreme sadness. He quickly perceived that he was using the right strategy when Manou said:

“I feel so sorry for you and, believe me, I understand. Just to think that I lied to you breaks my heart. I despise what I did. Is there anything I can do to be of assistance? Whatever you need, please, just ask.”

“Well,” explained Yannick, “my psychiatrist instructed me to find conciliation within myself. He said I have to meet and forgive all the people involved with the accident. Would you please meet with me? Is it too much to ask?”

“Absolutely not, I think this meeting would be as beneficial for me as it would be for you. Oh! By the way... How did you get my cell number?”

“You know who I am, don’t you? You are aware that people like me always get what they want; even if it cost a few dollars.”

“I see. Well... I’m looking forward to meeting you. Where and when do you want to get together?”

“Can you meet me tonight?”

“Oh... You’re already in Los Angeles? Tonight would be fine. You see, Johnny is presently in Las Vegas. Do you want to come to my place?”

“Well... No... For this first encounter I would prefer a public place.”

“For this first encounter, did you say?” pleasantly asked Manou. “Do you mean that we will meet more than once?”

“I truly hope so; I plan to live here for a while. I must say that I feel relatively lonely. To have an understanding friend would be wholesome for me.”

“I would be pleased to be that person, Mr Simard. That would give me a chance to admire your beautiful blue eyes. You have the same color eyes as my Johnny, exactly the same!”

“Is that so? I didn’t know I produced such an effect on you,” replied Yannick while trying to conceal the disgust and aversion growing within his guts.

“I like handsome man, my dear sir, and I remember that you are quite good looking.”

“Well... In this case, why don’t you call me Yannick?”

“I will be pleased, as long as you call me Manou.”

“Great! By the way, there is a bar not far from my hotel. It’s called ‘Chez Brady’. Would you like to meet me there? Let’s say around seven o’clock?”

“Chez Brady?” repeated Manou, satisfied with the invitation. “This is my very favorite bar. Nothing high class, but I like to patronize that lounge.”

“So it’s set. We will meet at ‘Chez Brady’ at seven.”

There was a short pause and then, Yannick asked:

“Simple curiosity... You said your son was in Las Vegas?”

“Yes he is,” whispered Manou sounding affected by the question. “It’s his monthly outing.”

“Interesting,” lied Yannick. I just came back from Vegas and I did not see him. Which casino does he like to visit?”

“If only I knew! complained Manou. He always goes to a different place. I only find out where he went after I received his credit card’s statements. Don’t tell me that you also share his vice?”

“Not at all, I hate gambling. I only went to Vegas for business reasons. Ok, I will see you soon.”

“See you later, nice eyes,” flirtatiously whispered Manou.

Before Yannick could end the conversation, Tommy was already making fun of him.

“If I was you, I would beware. Two shots of scotch and she’ll eat you rare.”

“Tell you what, declared a pensive Yannick. I hope it won’t go that far.”

“May you be right! Anyway, well played my friend. You got her in your pocket without even meeting her.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.”

At the car rental office, Yannick easily found the Ferrari he was dreaming off. After paying the full rental cost for two months, he took a walk outside while his car was being prepared. It was the end of November and it was still fairly hot in Los Angeles. He was enjoying the sun when he noticed a beggar. The tall black man was only a few feet away and Yannick felt sorry for him. Hundreds of people were walking in front of the poor man, but no one seemed to notice him. How can an individual accept to live in such a miserable way? He would be better dead. Any living soul deserved a better existence. With Tommy behind him, Yannick approached the beggar and handed him some money.

“You shouldn’t give him any money,” warned him Tommy. “You will only motivate him to keep begging.”

“Don’t worry about it.” retorted Yannick. “I know what I’m doing.”

As he gave one hundred dollars to the vagabond, he asked:

“How are you? What’s your name?”

“What?” said the man as if he was just coming out of a trance.

“I’m asking you to tell me your name.” repeated Yannick. “You must have a name?”

“Mell G. Larson, Sir,” amicably answered the beggar, as he raised his right arm up and offered the military salute. “Private Mel G. Larson, Sir.”

“What?” wondered Tommy. You were a soldier and now you are a beggar?”

“Well, I was a soldier... until they discharged me. It’s a long story.”

“Did you go to war?” questioned Yannick

“Yes sir!” proudly answered Mel. “I was part of the Golf War in 1990 and also of the Iraq war in 2003.”

“Did you kill anyone?” wanted to know Tommy.

“Yes, Sir.”

“What division did you fight for?” asked Yannick.

“I was a marine, Sir.”

“So, you are not scared by blood or dead people, are you?”

“Not at all, Sir.”

Yannick concentrated for a short before to ask:

“Do you believe in luck?”

“What? replied Mel.

“I’m asking you if you believe in luck?”

“Well... I don’t really know. I must say that since I returned from Iraq, luck did not smile at me.”

“Your luck is back, my friend. Follow me.”

“What?”

“Luck is opening a door for you; won’t you take advantage of it?”

“I don’t know, answered the vagabond with hesitation. Is this a joke?”

“Would you like to work for me?”

“What is this?” asked Tommy absolutely bewildered.

Mel was also flabbergasted by the offer.

“Do you want to work for me or not?” repeated Yannick. “I am offering you a suite at the Marriott, three meals every day and whatever else you may need.”

“I’ll be damned,” whispered Mel, who was lost in conjecture and couldn’t understand what was happening to him.

“When do I start?”

“As soon as you clean-up,” instructed Yannick while handing Mel four other bills of one hundred dollars. “Get a shave, buy some proper clothes, have a great night and meet me at the Marriott tomorrow morning at nine o’clock... Clear?”

“Clear as water coming out of the mountain, sir,” answered Mel still not believing what was happening to him. “Where shall I meet you?”

“Meet me at the reception.”

Yannick waved at Mel and left to pick his Ferrari at the car rental company.

“What will you do with this guy?” asked Tommy. “Did you notice how he stinks?”

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing.”

That is all Yannick explained. As he was taking place behind the wheel of the Ferrari, his cell phone rang. Jimmy was calling to get the last news and to give information concerning the company.

“Where are you?” he asked, in order to open the conversation.

“Somewhere in Ixtapa,” untruthfully answered Yannick.

“Excellent destination! I didn’t know you could find therapeutic help over there?”

“The best, my friend, the best! At least, that’s what they say.”

“You still don’t know when you will be coming back?”

“No, I don’t.”

“By the way, I received information concerning the stock market shares in Johnny Boys production house. They are quite costly.”

“Watch them daily,” replied Yannick. “They will soon plunge.”

“I’ll keep an eye on it. I also meant to tell you that I invested a lot of money in a company called: “Secure Flight.”

“Is that so? said Yannick. “Isn’t this the company specializing in thousands of gadgets for aerial security?”

“Absolutely right!” proudly answered Jimmy.

“Tell me more?”

“I received privileged information concerning that company. According to my sources, and they are trust worthy, it seem that Secure Flight has invented a robot capable of detecting any explosive substances from a distance of 300 hundred feet.”

“But they already have trained dogs to do that job.”

“Yes they do, but dogs can only detect explosives if there is a strong smell. The robots will not need any specific odor to find the explosives. A terrorist who could ingest some kind of chemical or hide it somewhere on or in his body will no longer be able to fool custom or the security guards. Where ever the explosives are, the robot will detect it.”

“Hum...” retorted Yannick. “You really think these robots will be as efficient as they claim?”

“I’m told that all the tests are conclusive. But, you know, I don’t really care. What’s important is that the airlines of the world are convinced.”

“I see,” laughed Yannick. “So, all the airline companies will order the robots and Secure Flight will have large orders and bigger bank account...”

“Large orders, did you say?” There are no words powerful enough to describe the importance of the orders the company will receive. Their shares will double in no time at all. I’m practically the only person knowing about these robots. Pure luck, I tell you.”

“How many times have I told you that you were the best, Jimmy?” complimented Yannick. “When will the information be part of the public domain?”

“In forty eight hours, my friend; forty eight short hours. You don’t have to buy any shares. I bought enough for both of us.”

“Thank you, it’s very nice of you.”

“This was the golden news of the day. Now, do you want the lemon news?”

“What?”

“Project Beatrice!”

“Project Beatrice?”

“Yes, Sir!” said Jimmy with a burst of laughter. “Imagine that the Haitian Government has a company in the stock market. And, this company wants to enter the race for the conquest of space.”

“What?” yelled Yannick not believing what he just heard. “Are you crazy, or what?”

“Not at all,” replied Jimmy who was still laughing. “Let me add that Project Beatrice has seventy two hours to convince investors. If they can’t do it...Bye, bye...finitos Amigos.”

“You said seventy-two hours?”

“And not one minute more!” added Jimmy. “No investors and the shares will fall to zero and it’s: Adios Amigos.”

“Haiti in space!” laughed Yannick. “What a joke! I can’t believe the stock market accepted to recognize the program.”

“No one understands... No one.”

“Ok”, concluded Yannick, slowly becoming serious. “Keep me posted if you receive new information. I appreciate the fact that you keep me informed.”

“You can count on me. Oh! By the way... A serious buyer wants to visit your house tonight. Do you still want to sell it?”

“More than ever.”

“If the sale goes through, we will have to find a place to send your mail.”

“Send it to the office.”

“Good idea. Anyway, if something important happens, I will call you immediately. Is it Ok with you?”

“Yeah!”

At the moment that Yannick ended his conversation with Jimmy, he figured the perfect idea to complete his plan. A few little details to tweak and it will be: Bye-Bye Johnny Boy! All was going well; his meeting with Mel, Secure Flight and Project Beatrice. Everything was working in his favor. It was now time to involve Tommy.

“Tonight, while I will be talking with Big Mama, I want you to do four things for me. First of all, get me two airplane tickets for Las Vegas. I want to leave in the morning”

“Wow! So we are going to Vegas?” Tommy was getting eager.

“Hum...” answered Yannick without concern for Tommy’s deception.

“I’m not taking you. I’m taking Mel.”

“What? You are leaving me behind to go with this beggar you hardly know? I thought you and I were a team; working together to accomplish our plan...”

“We are a team and that’s the main reason why you are staying here. Johnny knows you way too well. In Vegas, you could become a problem. Imagine what would happen if he saw you with me... You are his worst enemy. That would be the end of our scheme.”

“Ok, admitted Tommy. I guess you are right. But why are you taking the beggar with you?”

“Didn’t I tell you not to ask any questions?”

“As you wish,” whispered Tommy. “What else do you want me to do?”

“I need to know how much money Johnny has in the bank?”

“Twenty-five millions.”

“How do you know that?”

“One of my contacts works for the bank where Johnny keeps his money.”

“Twenty-five millions? That’s a lot of money. You told me he was almost broke.”

“He is.”

“Twenty-five millions, I don’t call that being broke.”

“For you and I, no; but for Johnny, yes. You already know that he gambles a lot. He should normally have billions of dollars in the bank. Every time he gambles, he leaves millions of dollars behind him. Soon, he may be penniless. Who knows how much money he is presently losing?”

“When did you find out how much money he still has in the bank?”

“This morning.”

“This morning?”

“You told me that in exchange for my help, I would get all of Johnny’s money. So, I was curious.”

“That explains it.”

“You’re not changing your mind, are you? A promise is a promise.”

“You can trust me and remember this... In this story, you will be the great winner. You may even be the only winner. I swear it to you.”

“All right,” replied Tommy. If you say so, I believe you. What else do you want me to do?”

“Big Mama doesn’t know where Johnny is playing. You must find out for me. I need that information before my departure for Vegas.”

“That won’t be easy. If Big Mama doesn’t know where her Johnny is, how do you want me to find out?”

“You said you had a good contact at the bank. Is that so?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I imagine that Johnny has credit cards and we must assume that he is using them, no?”

“Damn good idea! I never thought of it. All I’ll have to do is to ask my contact to inform me about Johnny’s last transactions. It should be possible. You can count on me.”

“Let’s meet at my hotel tomorrow morning,” ordered Yannick while stepping into his Ferrari. “I have to get ready for my meeting at Chez Brady.”

Yannick was ready to leave when Tommy asked him to stop:

“Hey! Don’t you have another think you wanted me to do?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said you wanted me to do four things for you. Unless I don’t remember how to count, you only gave me three.”

“You are right,” answered Yannick. “I see that you can be quite competent. I did well to choose you as my partner in crime.”

He hesitated a few seconds, trying to recall what else he wanted Tommy to do.

“Oh... I got it. Do you know a dealer?”

“What kind of dealer and why?”

“A dealer that sells drugs, medicine, weapons, you know... That kind of stuffs.”

“Yes I do, but why?”

“I told you before, no questions.”

“Fine, but I have to tell you that Johnny doesn’t gobble any drugs.”

“Just find what I’m looking for, OK? And arrange a meeting between you, the dealer and me.”

Less than an hour later, Yannick up graded the room Tommy had reserved for him at the Marriott and entered his high class suite. After a warm shower, cleaning up and dressing, he almost fainted as his mysterious illness seized control of him. He felt like if someone was piercing his stomach with a steal blade.

“Shit!” he complained. I don’t have time to deal with this attack; not now.”

He still had a few minutes before his meeting with Manou. He took place on the bed and tried to constrain the pain. He eventually felt much better. He stood up and attempted to master his dizziness through self-control and a glass of scotch.

At precisely seven o’clock, he was sitting in front of a cool beer at Chez Brady. Manou had not yet arrived. He took advantage of his free time to study his surroundings. Tommy was right. The place was a rat hole. With the exception of many photos of Johnny Boy and of a few other celebrities that may have visited the joint, nothing was appealing. A few old tables were yellowed by time and some filthy wooden chairs attracted the eyes of the visitors. It would be wise for anyone to wipe the chairs before sitting on them. An unsuspected client could easily stain his clothing by sitting in beer or ketchup left by the previous client. The walls were greasy and nauseating, as if they had not been cleaned or painted since the middle of the last century. At the back of the bar, next to a neon sign advertising Budweiser beer, was an old TV with an unstable image. While Yannick was drinking his beer, out of the bottle, he was watching the barman hitting the TV in order to stabilize the image. A few minutes later, a silhouette of extreme generous proportions entered the establishment. Even in this badly lit bar, it would have been impossible not to recognize Manou. Before Yannick had time to stand in order to greet the woman, the bartender was running toward her and kissing both her cheeks.

“Manou!” he exclaimed with evident delight. “It’s been a while since your last visit. To what do we owe the honor of your presence?”

“A man...” wittily and loudly answered Manou. “A real good looking man!”

She pleasantly accepted the kisses Brad placed on her cheeks before noticing the man walking toward her.

“Yannick!” she almost shouted while extending her big arms toward him. Come here, handsome, come to Manou.”

As soon as he got close enough, she grabbed him and pulled him toward her with such strength that he almost ran out of breath. Instead of returning behind his counter, Brad stood still, trying to identify the guy with a tie, whose presence in his bar was quite surprising. This man had way too much class to spend time in a hole like Chez Brady. He was totally out of place. Manou had a strong odor of alcohol. After embracing Yannick, she said:

“How about something to drink, Brad?”

“Same as usual... Double scotch on the roc?”

“I see that you did not forget what I like!” she seductively answered.

Brad turned around to step behind his counter, before to change his mind and returning toward the odd couple. He wanted to know who his new visitor was.

“I’m an old friend of Manou,” stated Yannick before Big Mama could say anything.

“I see,” said Brad. “Do you live in Los Angeles? I have never seen you around here before.”

“You are so nosy, Brad!” cut in Manou. “Hurry up, get my drink!”

She took place at Yannick’s table and sat right in front of him. She then lit the slimey candle that was set in the middle of the table, raised it and stared at her companion.

“Ah yes...” she exclaimed with a sexy smile. You really have beautiful eyes. You must be a heart breaker.”

Yannick was ill at ease but had to answer something.

“Thanks for the compliment. You also have beautiful eyes.”

“Oh... Oh,” replied Manou while Brad was placing her drink on the table. “You like to flatter women, don’t you. I know I’m not sexy or pretty. You do not have to lie to me.”

“In your own way, you are very personable!” rebutted Yannick.

He watched her empty the glass she was holding and felt obliged to order a new one. Tommy was right. The big woman was thirsty and she could really drink. After her second drink was served, he carried on the conversation.

“So, Manou... Tell me about you. I guess that originally, you are not from here; so tell me where you are from?”

She told him that she was from Africa, more precisely from Cameroun. She was the eleventh of a family of twelve children and lost her mother on the day of her second anniversary. Her poor mother was exhausted. Her father was a devoted man and did all he could to take care of his family. As much as he worked, he was never successful. He was a small retailer and could not make enough money to meet the family requirements. Some of the kids were sick and weak. After the death of his two oldest children, the poor guy gave up. He was unable to fulfill his family obligations and before other children starved, he left them with the social security services. Before leaving them, he begged every child not to forget that he acted with love and devotion toward

them. On that day, Manou was only six years old. In order to endure her miserable life in the orphanage, she kept recalling the last words her father addressed her:

“I love you, my little girl. I leave you because I love you.”

Manou kept saying to herself that she had it better than the other orphans living in this place. She had a father and even if he was not with her, he loved her. With time, she witnessed the departure of some of her brothers and sisters. They were normally sold to some rich family looking to buy slaves at low price. She gradually felt completely abandoned. One day, she decided to let herself die. She almost accomplished her dream to be with her mother in paradise when her destiny took another path. An American couple on vacation in Cameroun requested, one day, to visit the orphanage where she was forced to stay. They were both in charge of an orphanage in San Diego. To visit such an establishment in Africa could be informative. In one of the dormitory visited by the couple was the bed where little Manou was getting ready to leave this world. The miserable appearance of the child touched the hearts of Mr. and Mrs. Clark. They decided to adopt her. After the proper formalities and a generous gift, Manou was taken to America. At the orphanage of San Diego, the little girl found a certain form of happiness and her health improved rapidly. The Clarks noticed that Manou was highly interested by the wellbeing of the other children. They taught her how to work and eventually manage an orphanage. They also encouraged her to become a nurse. At the age of twenty, caring for children had no secrets for her. The children loved her. She was the sweet and loving aunt of each child. She understood their needs because of the fact that she had lived the same youth. She devoted herself to give them all the love they had been deprived of. She liked to believe that by giving the attention and the love these children were deprived of, she would lead all of them toward forgiveness and happiness. Eventually, the children liked and loved Manou more than Mrs. Clark. That fact did not upset the owner of the orphanage. On the contrary, she was happy to see that she would have a succession. Now, she could take trips with her husband without having to worry about what was happening in the orphanage.

“That is quite a story,” expressed Yannick. “You were lucky that such nice people found you in Cameroun. Are they still in charge of the orphanage?”

“Unfortunately not,” sadly answered Manou. They both died a few days after I reached twenty years.”

“What happened?” wanted to know Yannick while placing his hand over hers.

“They lost their lives in a plane crash.”

Manou kept telling her life story by adding that her parents had rented a small plane to make a pleasure trip from Acapulco to Mexico City. She was eventually told that the plane has crashed. The authorities declared it was a pilot error.

“It was very hard on me,” she added. “For a while, I didn’t think I could live through it.”

To compensate for her sorrow, she indulged in food. She subsequently gained weight, became roundish and finally, totally obese. The presence of the kids she worked for gave her resilience and prevented her from falling in deep depression. Because of them, she maintained the energy to go forward. After the death of her parents, she requested the management of the orphanage. The administrators first considered that she was too young and did not have enough experience. After observing her excellent qualities and devotion, the person placed in charge by the administration decided that she was sufficiently competent to take charge. At the age of twenty-one years old, Manoucha Tarah became the youngest and one of the best orphanage manager in the United States. Jokes were made about her size and that did not help her to become slimmer. But one thing was certain: all the children loved her. She was strict, she was fair and she used to love all the children equally. She never favored one at the expense of another, until... The arrival of Johnny. The day a crying prostitute entrusted her little boy to the orphanage, Manou could sense that this little boy would be special. She would love him more than the others. From then on, Johnny became number one. It was Johnny and then... The others.

“He was so beautiful,” she tenderly declared to Yannick. “So small, so fragile, and his eyes... I fell in love.”

This special love she gave to Johnny had the effect of creating jealousy among the other children. That’s when the mockeries and the insults toward her little boy began. She was offended, but didn’t worry about what the other children said about Johnny and as time went on, she cared less and less for the children that were attacking her loved one.

“This is my story,” she concluded while emptying her fifth or sixth drinks. My little boy grew-up and it is together that we left the orphanage.”

Yannick replied:

“This little guy was truly fortunate to meet a person like you.”

“I only did for him what my adopted parents did for me. I completed the circle... help another one...”

The more he listened to her, the more endearment Yannick felt toward the woman. She was a person that devoted her life to the wellbeing of others. However, to fall under her charms was not in the plan. No way... Anything but that. What Marilyne and the girls would think of him? They would feel betrayed and would never come back to see him. He had no choice but to follow his plan. He had to detest the fat woman and learn to hate her more and more every day. Instead of considering the good sides of her personality, he had to remember her ugly sides. This fatso, as big as a whale, was a liar, a schemer. She only cared for the bottles and her foolish Johnny. She drank like a drunk and spread the odor of cheap scotch. That’s what he had to remember about her. Feeling that he may find other good qualities in the fat female, he decided to bring the meeting to an end. After emptying his second bottle of beer, he presented an attitude of sorrow and said he had to go.

“I have a business meeting tomorrow and I have to leave the city pretty early.”

But unfortunately, things were not that simple. Yannick would have liked for Manou to leave the bar the way she had arrived, by taxi, but... She was plastered. She could no longer walk a straight line. If he wanted to remain in her good graces, he could not let her go by herself. He realized that he had to act like a gentlemen and drive her home. He didn't have to make the suggestion twice. As soon as she heard the offer, Manou answered with a drunken voice:

“How sweet of you, pretty eyes! It will give you the chance to visit my castle.”

“I don't think I will have enough time, Manou,” objected Yannick, sounding a little uncertain. “May be another day... I really have to get up early tomorrow.”

“No way...” insisted Manou while resting her body against him in order to stand-up. “I want you to visit the castle. It's something to see, you know?”

To visit Johnny's castle may not have been a bad idea. The problem was that this woman seemed to have some romantic ideas. That by itself was a disgusting hypothesis and should he let anything happen, Marilyne would be very upset.

To take Manou home became a real adventure. As drunk and as fat as she was, she could hardly fit in the Ferrari. Yannick had to be clever and use his strength to get her in as well as to get her out of the car. On top of that, between Chez Brady and the castle, the elephant size woman kept pulling out the bottle of scotch she had in her purse and kept drinking. The fact that she was an old alcoholic may turn to Yannick's advantage. It would be easier to fool her.

Once in the castle, Manou removed her jacket, grabbed Yannick's hand and led him to the living room. The only word that came to his mind was...: WOW! What he was looking at was definitively different. If he hadn't known that this house was Johnny Boy's property, he would have guessed it. All decoration reflected the mind of a man-child. Johnny's castle was not only a castle... It was Disney. Decorated with taste, each room was an homage to a Disney film or character. The living room was called 'Aladdin'. The color scheme was mostly pink and mauve. The lamps and chandeliers seemed made of pure gold and crystal. Large paintings and expensive frames enhanced the setting. Facing a large cinema screen, activated in or out of the floor by hand control, there were two recliners, conceived to look like thrones. The large one was meant for Johnny and the smaller one for his dog Charlie. A little further in the room, next to the bookcase, a mammoth chair was set for Manou. Leaving the living room and entering the kitchen, the visitor entered the land of Snow-White and the seven dwarfs. Further down, one of the chambers was called Cinderella and Johnny's bedroom was decorated in honor of Peter Pan.

“That's where Johnny Boy sleeps?” asked Yannick. “In this bed made to look like a pirates boat?”

“That's right,” answered Manou. And the little basket, where you see the cushion with the

image of the fairy Clochette, well... Its Charlie's bed. However, he never sleeps in it. He spends all his nights next to his master. The two are inseparable... Inseparable, I tell you!"

On a table, placed next to the bed, Yannick noticed a few small jars containing different capsules. Out of curiosity, he grabbed one of the jars.

"Sleeping pills?" he inquired while looking at Manou.

"Yes..." she replied. "Johnny can't sleep without them. He may mostly act like a young boy, but, the pressure of his trade is immense, you know? His brain is over loaded; he can't sleep without these pills and if he tries, he gets anxiety attacks. One or two of these little pills really helps him. He sleeps like a baby. It's impossible to wake him up before morning... Impossible."

The tour ended by a quick visit of Manou's bedroom. If Yannick had listened to her, the tour would have been everything but quick. She did all she could to keep him and he did all he had to do to leave. Manou's room was decorated with the theme of the Little Mermaid, with plants, fish tanks and fish. "Very interesting," thought Yannick as Manou used all the conceivable tricks to prevent his departure. He took advantage of a large antic clock on the wall to remind her that it was late and that he had to go.

"No, no... Please stay," she insisted while pulling him toward her. "Johnny is not here tonight. Let Manou take good care of you, wouldn't you like that?"

"Another time, not tonight, I really have to go," explained Yannick.

"Come on, sweet heart; to sleep here or somewhere else... What's the difference?"

"You are a real tigress..." said Yannick while breaking away from her.

"Yes..." whispered Manou like a cat in heat. "I am a tigress. In fact, that's how my ex-lover used to call me. Would you like to know why? Come baby, I will show you,"

Evidently, Manou wanted to play. The only way to get out of there was to use a strategy as old as the world. It never failed.

"Listen Manou... I really like you and tonight I discovered that you were a very special person. You are kind and have great qualities. I could easily fall in love with you and that's why I must leave now. I want to respect you, Manou. When I admire a person as much as you, I never share her bed after the first date. It would spoil everything; do you understand?"

The strategy was well chosen. Manou was completely startled and didn't know what to answer. The words he had said about her were so beautiful to hear that she could only ask:

“So, we will meet again?”

“You can count on that, my sweet!” smiled Yannick while placing a light kiss on her forehead.

VII

On this beautiful sunny morning, Yannick boarded the plane toward Las Vegas. The game was set. He was only missing a few pawns to complete the chess board. However, he had enough components to start the game. An important partner, introduced to him by pure hazard, was travelling with him. This king jester, as Yannick referred to him, was the ex-soldier Mel G. Larson. He was no longer part of the American Marine Corps, but the man still thought of himself as a soldier. On this day, Mel had arrived precisely on time. He was wearing a uniform identical to the one he wore as a Marine. Yannick was even more surprised when Mel stood in front of him in a respectful military position. His hair was perfectly trimmed; he was clean and well shaved. He saluted and said in a traditional military manner:

“Good morning, Sir, soldier Mel G. Larson, reporting for duty.”

Yannick did all he could not to laugh. He couldn't believe this scene. He figured he was better to accept Mel the way he was than to ridicule him. He didn't have to think too long deeply to realize that a man looking like a soldier would be more profitable to his project than a civilian. After all, a soldier is trained to obey and not to think. That is exactly what Yannick needed; someone who would obey without asking questions like Tommy did. So, he adapted to the scenario and said:

“Welcome aboard, soldier Larson. Ready to attack?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then get ready, soldier, we are going to Las Vegas.”

Meanwhile, Tommy had perfectly accomplished his homework. His bank contact had given him the name of the hotel where Johnny was temporary residing. He was at the Bellagio.

“Hum,” said Yannick, “our friend likes to stay in classy places.”

“And our friend, as you say, doesn't seem to mind losing. He already wasted five millions dollars.”

Yannick could hardly believe what he had heard.

“This guy is completely nuts!”

“I told you, confirmed Tommy. Twenty five millions is nothing for him. If bad luck stays by his side, he may not have a penny left by the end of the day.”

“Good work, Tommy. Keep your eyes open while I'm away. I will soon have great news

for you. Oh... do not forget to find me a dealer, OK?"

"Don't you worry."

After this short conversation, Yannick, accompanied by Mel, took a cab to get to the airport. Next: Las Vegas. Even if Yannick didn't like the kind of gambling they did in the sin city, he couldn't wait to get there. Once in the plane, he explained to Mel the objective of what he called 'his mission'.

"You must always be ready, soldier, night and day. I may need your services at any time."

"Yes Sir; as your order, Sir."

"While I don't need you, you will have the right to do whatever you want, as long as you stay in your suite."

"Yes Sir."

"Of course, you have my authorization to order whatever you want and charge the expenses to my account; food, booze or even a whore, if you want."

"Thank you, Sir. Concerning the whore, I'm not sure..."

"That's up to you."

They both remained silent for a while until Mel dared to ask:

"Hum... Sir?"

"Yes?"

"May I know the reason for our mission? I mean, why are we going to Vegas? Who is our enemy?"

Before answering, Yannick studied Mel's Face. He was a strange fellow. He was evidently stuck on his career as a soldier, his was built like a gorilla and his facial features made you think of a child. He seemed brave and at the same time, scarred. He also appeared sad, very sad. Behind his large brown eyes, a person could discover the traces of a terrible drama. There was no doubt; this man had lived many dangerous experiences. The kind of tragedies only a courageous man could survive. His round face hardly ever smiled and denoted a will to live and at the same time a desire to reach the end. To reach the end, yes, but not without a struggle and not without leaving traces of his passage on this earth.

"I didn't know good soldiers asked questions?" replied Yannick to see what Mel would answer and what he was made of.

“Hum... I’m sorry, Sir”, answered Mel with embarrassment. “You are right; I shouldn’t ask questions.”

“You are intrigued? It stands to reason. I will answer your question but first, I’d like you to tell me something about yourself.”

“Not much to say, Sir; anyway, my mother had me in Brooklyn and when she died, I joined the military so I wouldn’t fall in a life of delinquency. I fought during the Gulf War and over there, things were going very well for me.”

When Mel returned from the Gulf, he was decorated for bravery. He became a hero during a battle where he fought without hesitation to protect his companions and the site they were holding. He was throwing small bombs and grenades like a mad man. He hardly knew what he was doing. The absence of fear gave him the power to fight away the enemy. Among the other soldiers, many were badly hurt but because of Mel, no one died. Our hero had carried every single injured soldier, from the battle site to the base.

“Very impressive,” commented Yannick. “But after such heroism, why did you get discharged?”

“It goes back to 2003,” sadly answered Mel. “I was in Iraq. My battalion fell in a surprise ambush. It happened really quickly. There was nothing to do but try to save your own skin. We were completely out numbered. Bombs and grenades were falling on us like rain drops. My friends were dying one after the other. There was absolutely nothing I could do. I had the choice between dying and running away.”

“So, you ran off,” said Yannick to complete the sentence.

“Yes, I acted like a coward,” admitted Mel with a trembling voice.

“I do not agree,” continued Yannick to appease the soldier. “You were more useful alive than dead. Is that the reason of your discharge?”

“That was not the only reason...” whispered Mel, like a kid revealing a bad deed. “There is something else.”

He explained that before leaving the battle site, he saw his friend John Miller. He was badly hurt and asking for help. Mel bent toward him and became aware that the poor guy would be dead in a few minutes. There is nothing he could do to help. His friend’s leg was cut off and his body was lacerated all over. There was blood everywhere. What he would have been able to make? Nothing... absolutely nothing. He would have liked to give his friend some medicine to ease the pain but he didn’t have anything.

“Courage brother!” he said to his friend before leaving. “Keep me a place in paradise.”

A few minutes after leaving the battle field, Mel got lost. He was unable to remember where the US base was located. On his way, he noticed a house that seemed inhabited. Exhausted, he decided to stop, rest, drink and eat something. He had food because on that day, he was the soldier carrying the food ration for many of his brothers at arm. He entered the house and came face to face with a young Iraqi woman and her two children. They loudly expressed their respective fear.

“Kill me if you want,” yelled the woman while stepping in front of her children, “kill me but not my children, I beg of you.”

Not at ease with the situation, Mel stared at the young woman. He had no desire of killing anyone. He however tried to find out where her husband was.

“He is dead!” screamed the woman. “He died last week during a battle against your people.”

Since her husband’s death, she and her children had been hiding in that house. She had nothing left to eat. Disturbed by her story, Mel removed the ration bag from his shoulder, opened it and pulled some food out. Nothing sophisticated, only dry meat, a can of green beans, a few apples and some water. He could have given the woman three gold bars, she would not have been more appreciative. He stayed with them for three days. The house was in a lousy state and needed considerable repairs. He fixed a few things, played with the children and helped them find food. After the tragedy of war, to help his neighbor became a positive way of life. As a soldier, he had to fight the enemy. As a man, he figured it was his duty to help people living in misery. That became his objective until he was found by members of his battalion. They had been looking for him since John had told them that Mel had left him to die and ran away. After arresting Mel, the soldiers killed the woman and her children and brought him back to the camp. He was kept in a military prison for a period of time and then sent back to the United States. The Martial Court found him guilty of high treason.

“Treason?” repeated Yannick, visibly shocked.

“Yes, treason. They claimed I had deserted my battalion and fraternized with the enemy,” whispered Mel.

“But, you did not abandon them, you said everybody was dead. For you, it was a question of survival. On top of that, you did not fraternize with the enemy, you helped a widow and her two children.”

“Tell the judge, not me.”

“Damn!” cursed Yannick.

“They condemned me to five years in jail and gave me total disgrace.”

“So, you have been free for one year?”

“Right.”

“And what have you been doing during that year?”

“Mostly begging.”

“Sad story, very sad.”

“What about you, Sir? What’s your deal? Why are we going to Vegas?”

Yannick divulged his whole story and left nothing out. He considered that Mel should have an idea of what was going on and he revealed part of his vengeful plan.

“Who is that Johnny Boy?” asked Mel.

Surprised by the question, Yannick retorted: “You don’t know Johnny Boy?”

“Well... no... I’m not much into music.”

Yannick made a pause and said in an authoritative manner:

“I have a project for you, soldier.”

“Yes, Sir, what do you want me to do?”

“I want you to write your story, just as you told it to me. I want two copies. The first copy will be addressed to the District Attorney of Los Angeles and the second to the Lost Angeles Post.”

“Well, as you say, Sir,” approved Mel rather startled.

“If something should happen to you, soldier,” precised Yannick, “you can be sure that your true story will be known.”

“Do you mean that something bad could happen to me?”

“You are not supposed to ask questions,” pleasantly replied Yannick.

“Hum... Sorry, Sir. I guess I’m no longer well disciplined.”

“Do you fear death?”

“Since I left the Marines, I tell myself that I’m living on borrowed time. I should have died on the battlefield as a hero. Since I’m no longer in the military, my life became sad and useless. What a mess. To die would be a blessing.”

“So, if I understand well,” asked Yannick, “you are ready to sacrifice your life for the success of our mission?”

“Yes, Sir, I want to die for a purpose.”

“If that should happen, soldier, your departure will leave some serious footprints.”

Yannick noticed a strange expression on Mel’s face. He seemed joyful or was it hopeful? He couldn’t tell.

“Ouch...” complained Yannick seemingly in pain.

“What’s wrong, Sir?” asked Mel.

“My stomach really hurts,” lamented Yannick.

Mel handed a glass of water and massaged Yannick’s back for a few minutes. The pain gradually faded away.

“May I ask a last question, Sir?”

“Sure, the very last one.”

“The kind of attack you just had, does it happen to you often?”

“Yes, too often, and each time, it’s getting worse.”

“Can I tell you what I think?”

“For the last time...”

“It’s happening because of your anger against that singer. Anger and hate are making you sick. If you keep that up, it will eventually kill you. I’m telling you, Sir.”

“And what would you want me to do? Forget and leave him in peace? He killed my wife and my two daughters.”

“From what you told me, Sir, it was not him. It was his driver.”

“It’s true,” admitted Yannick, “but if that irresponsible Johnny would have had the decency to prevent his driver from getting behind the wheel, this accident would have been avoided. He knew his driver was intoxicated, he knew it!”

“Yes, but, this deficiency he has, this syndrome... I can’t remember the name... well... it means that he is not very clever, doesn’t it?”

“It’s called the Peter Pan Syndrome.”

“Ok, well, that could be the reason he couldn’t think rationally.”

“Johnny is quite able to recognize a drunken person. He spent most of his life with an

alcoholic. Let me remind you that after the accident, instead of helping us, he ran away like a rabbit. Who knows, at the time he looked at us in the car, one of my girls or even my wife could have been alive. Maybe one of them would still be with me, if only he had helped us.”

“Maybe, but his bad judgment may have been caused by his Peter Pan problem.”

“It’s surely not a Peter Pan that stood at the foot of my hospital bed and lied to me like a rat.”

“On this point, I agree with you. That was real wicked.”

“Real dishonest and dirty,” added Yannick. At this point, I was still under control. But that’s not the worse.”

Mel stared and waited for the additional information:

“The worse is that the bloody judge found him innocent and a shameful person declared on TV that what Johnny had done was not bad at all. And I don’t tell you about the expression of glory that Johnny had on his face after leaving the tribunal. I tell you, I exploded. My family has been obliterated and I carry their pain and anger within me. Know this, soldier. Dead people can be angry, very angry.”

“Well...”

“Do you now understand why I’m doing what I’m doing? My wife and my daughters are dead! They were everything for me. I don’t have any choice. I must avenge them. If I don’t, I will forever feel that I betrayed them. I sense that it’s my mission to take revenge.”

“I understand your distress, Sir. You took me off the street and because of you, I’m finding my self-respect. For that reason, I accept to serve you.”

Nothing else was said until they arrived in Las Vegas.

When Mel stepped on Las Vegas Blvd, better known as the ‘Strip’, he felt utterly out of place. The negative feeling grew as Yannick lead him inside the Bellagio. The tremendous hotel, with more than four thousand bedrooms, was recognized worldwide for its casinos, bars, restaurants and outstanding variety shows. Enough factors to increase Mel’s perception that he didn’t belong in this establishment. In such a place, it was not rare to encounter certain celebrities like Johnny Boy. This hotel was also known for its poker tournaments, called: ‘World Poker Tour’ where the top poker players competed every year. While walking next to Yannick, Mel was not looking in front of him but above his head. The famous overhead of this great hall astounded him. There were thousands of multicolored flowers, made of blown glass, hanging from the ceiling. It was an inconceivable site. All the priceless décor and items he could observe were beautiful but not for him who appreciated simplicity.

“Well, Sir, You know... I would feel more at home in a simpler place, like a motel, by example. There should be some motel around here, no?”

“You’ll get use to this, you’ll see... objected Yannick. At first, all this opulence might be alarming but you will adapt. You will probably get to like it real fast.”

“I don’t know, Sir,” whispered Mel. “They are all looking at me as if I didn’t belong here.”

“No, my friend,” explained Yannick. “If they are looking at you, it’s not because they think you are out of place. They are staring at you because of your size and your military uniform. You look as if you just arrived from the battlefield. That’s why they’re looking at you.”

“Are you ashamed of me?”

“No, not at all. I’m only telling you why people are staring at you. You impress them; that’s all.”

“I see!” said Mel feeling somewhat better and showing a proud facial expression. “You mean, it’s like if they were looking at Elvis Presley? They are...”

“Impressed...” concluded Yannick.

“OK then...”

After they were both installed in their respective rooms, Yannick insisted that Mel remains in his.

“Stay close to phone,” he ordered. I’ll call you as soon as I’ll need you. Meanwhile, eat, drink and do whatever you want. You could also write the letter I want from you.”

“As you say, Sir,” said Mel standing at attention.

Without been a regular of this hotel, Yannick knew the venue quite well and enough to find Johnny. He was almost sure that the rock star would be in the ‘Bobby’s Poker Room’. The ideal setting for heavy gamblers. In that location, they were not playing with short change. The bets had to be twenty thousand dollars and more. No wonder Johnny lost so much money. Before heading to that section of the hotel, Yannick stopped at a bar to quench his thirst and to get information he needed before the closure of the stock market. It turned out to be a good idea. He was able to get more knowledge from the bartender than he actually needed. Is it not a known fact that the man behind the bar knows almost everything? On top of being familiar with almost everybody, these guys or gals know a lot on almost every subject. As soon as he took place on his bar stool, Yannick asked the bartender, named Joe, if he knew where there was a brokerage firm in the area.

“You like to play the stock market?” asked Joe.

“Not really,” lied Yannick. “My fortune teller predicted that I would be lucky today. She

said that by the end of the day, I would make some substantial gains.”

“I may have a better suggestion for you.”

“Really?”

So, Joe talked about the ‘Duel Boursier’ a new born in Las Vegas. Newly opened, this broker’s firm was situated a few corners away from Bellagio Street and was rapidly becoming popular. They were not offering to sell stocks but to bet on them.

“I don’t understand,” said Yannick. “What is the difference between buying stocks and betting on them?”

“Simple,” replied Joe, “when you buy shares or stocks, you give money to a broker, who buys them for you and of course, take a commission. And then, you wait for your investment to grow. It can take a while, and maybe not. Who knows? Nothing special here, do you agree?”

“And...”questioned Yannick still not knowing what the barman was talking about.

“What ‘Duel Boursier’ is proposing, it is to bet on the daily results of a given stock. Do you know what I mean?”

Now getting interested, Yannick invited Joe to keep explaining.

“So, during the course of the day, you bet on a particular stock, let’s say... ‘Canon’. You bet that before the stock market closes on that day, Canon’s stock will grow or fall. If you made the right choice, you collect your money at the end of that given day.”

“It’s that simple?” exclaimed Yannick, showing much interest. “How much profit or loss can you make on such a bet?”

“It all depends on the new value of the stock. If the price doubled, you will receive twice the amount of your investment.”

“I see... but I can imagine that there could be problems. For instance, let’s say that I have privileged information on a particular stock and that I bet a large sum of money. It could be catastrophic for them.”

“True, but like other forms of gambling in Vegas, there can be one great winner for hundreds of losers. I’m told that the guys at ‘Duel Boursier’ are very well aware of what is going on. I figure that if a bet is too risky, they will refuse it.”

“I understand. Can you tell me how I would get to that place? I’m asking in case I ever want to risk a few dollars.”

“I have what you need,” said Joe while handing a business card. Some fellow gave this to

me a few days ago. It's yours. The card says they accept bets twenty four hours per day. Let's hope that your fortune teller was right."

On his way to the 'Bobby's Poker Room', Yannick called Jimmy who answered in a positive manner.

"Yannick... I'm so happy to hear from you! I was just planning to call you."

"Is that so?" asked Yannick. "And why?"

"It's about your house. It's pretty well sold. The visitor we had yesterday is crazy about it. I'm just waiting for a confirmation from his bank. We are dealing with a big shot from the printing industry. I'm sure the deal is done."

"Great, good news! Now, let's change the subject. Do you remember what you told me yesterday concerning 'Secure Flight'?"

"Of course."

"Many people in the know concerning that deal?"

"Nobody else."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Without a doubt; I received the info directly from the president with whom I had lunch with last week. It's such a secret that his employees and the members of his board of direction were kept in the dark."

"Why did he share the information with you?"

"He owed me a favor."

"You are sure, totally sure of what you're telling me?"

"Did I ever mislead you, Yannick?"

"No, you never did, but..."

"Why are you asking so many questions? I hope you are not planning to share the info with someone else, are you?"

"Do you take me for an imbecile? Did I ever betray you in the past? I'm wondering because you invested much of our money in that deal. I guess I'm somewhat worried."

"Do not worry, Yannick. What I told you is solid as rock. I assure you that when the stock market will closes its door, at the end of tomorrow, you and I will have a few additional millions in our bank account."

“All right, if you say it, I believe you.”

“What I’m telling you is so true, that tomorrow morning, a press conference will be held on the subject. The report on the shares of Secure Flight will be kept secret until the new values are known.”

“Call me if you receive new information, OK?”

“Of course.”

Once he reached the ‘Bobby’s Poker Room’, Yannick bought one hundred thousand dollars worth of gambling chips. He also looked around to find Johnny. There were only two poker tables in the room, so it became easy to find the Rock Star with the long blond hair. He was sitting down with a little dog on his knees. Luck was on Yannick’s side. The chair next to the young man was available.

“May I join you?” he politely asked the players.

A few people stared at him, that’s the only answer he received.

“Nice little dog,” he added while caressing Charlie’s head and smiling at Johnny. “Is he your good luck charm?”

“Not today,” mumbled Johnny.

“Are you having a bad day?” teased Yannick while putting his chips on the table.

“It’s worse than that, fellow,” complained Johnny very softly. “I did not win one hand, today, not one. I wonder if someone is screwing with the games.”

Yannick rapidly realized that the game was fair, but that the player was amateurish, truly amateurish. Johnny knew perfectly the rules of the game but couldn’t control his emotions. Whatever card hand he was holding, it was easy to evaluate the value of his cards by looking at him. As soon as they would see him blink rapidly and excessively, the other players knew that Johnny was holding a good hand and they would fold. However, if Johnny remained calm, all players knew that he did not have a good hand. Yannick only played ten games. He won most of them and Johnny lost almost five hundred thousand dollars. Understanding that the poor young fellow was ready to explode, he placed his hand on his shoulder and invited him to follow him.

“You should stop now,” he suggested. “Today is not your day.”

“Why don’t you mind your own business, fellow? I’m gonna keep playing until I win. Stop bugging me or I’ll send my dog after you.”

Even if Charlie was offering a mean look, Yannick was definitively not afraid of him.

“Sorry, young man,” he apologized, “I only wanted to help. If I may ask, how much money did you lose today?”

“Too much,” admitted Johnny without hesitation. “I have to recover some of my money. I’ve lost seven millions in four days. Can you imagine? Seven millions! Manou will kill me, that’s for sure.”

“Who is Manou?” hypocritically inquired Yannick.

“No but... Am I dreaming?” protested Johnny. “Are you making fun of me?” Everybody knows Manou.

“I’m sorry, but, I don’t.”

“And do you know who I am?”

“Well... no.”

“What? I’m Johnny Boy. You don’t know me? Where are you from? From another planet?”

Since the little man seemed quite offended, Yannick decided to bring an end to the charade.

“Johnny Boy? Well... of course... I’ll be damned! I didn’t recognize you; I did see one of your shows...”

“Is that right?” replied Johnny in a friendlier tone.

“Yes, and I must say that it was one of the best rock and roll show I have ever seen.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet, Pal. Wait till you see the next one. It will be the best ever.”

“Well, I’m happy to finally meet my most popular rival. My girls are crazy about you. I’m almost jealous. Wait till I tell them that I personally met Johnny Boy.”

“Well, all that is good; but I have money to win back, so...”

Johnny was ready to leave when Yannick grabbed him by the arm.

“Listen, spend some time with me and I assure you that you will win your money back before tomorrow night. Do you agree? I hate to see people lose so much money...”

“Is that so?” retorted Johnny while interrupting his departure. “You will make sure I can get my cash back? And how will you proceed?”

“Come and have a drink with me,” proposed Yannick while pointing toward the bar reserved

to the 'Bobby's Room' players. It will be my pleasure to explain my theory to you."

"You are not trying to sell me some porky story, are you?" asked an hesitant Johnny.

"What?" answered Yannick while raising his eye browses. "What do you mean by porky story?"

"Porky story... as fabrication, made-up story or lies."

Yannick took a majestic attitude and replied:

"Young man, I solemnly promise that between now and tomorrow night, you will have all your money back."

Johnny thought for a moment, became serious and questioned:

"You swear that you are telling me the truth or hope to die?"

"I swear and may I die if I lie."

"You might as well be honest with me, Pal!" added Johnny in a threatening way. "Or else, Charlie and I will send my attorneys after your ass."

Not feeling threatened at all, Yannick pointed toward the bar. He ordered an aged Porto and asked Johnny what he wanted to drink.

"A fresh lemonade and please, don't be cheap and give me a lot of lemon. Oh... also, would you bring a bowl of water for Charlie?"

"What?" exclaimed Yannick in a teasing tone of voice. This bar serves the best alcohol in the world and all you want is lemonade?"

"I love lemonade."

"If it's a question of money, you don't have to worry. I'm buying."

"Whether you pay or not is without importance," replied Johnny. "You should know that I have plenty of money. If I don't want your kind of drinks it's because I don't favor alcohol; in fact, I hate alcohol."

Yannick decided not to insist. However, he was now aware that it is not with alcohol that he could corrupt the young man.

"Do you prefer 'weed'?" questioned Yannick. "Or you may like some coke?"

“What?” objected Johnny while looking at Yannick as if he was from out of this world. “Why would I want ‘weed’? Do I look like a cow? And I don’t want a coke, I want a lemonade”

Yannick had no answer. He was totally bewildered. Either Johnny was teasing him or he was truly weird. A few minutes went by before he decided to opt for the second alternative. The way he was drinking his lemonade, the little man showed that he was not very bright. Comfortably leaning on the bar like a tough man, he drank his lemonade as if it was a shot of scotch. He then wiped his mouth and ordered another lemonade. He was acting as if he was Lucky Luke, or, because he was so small, like Joe Dalton. Once he received his second drink, he placed a straw in his glass and closed his eyes as he was sucking the liquid into his mouth. Yannick looked at him and almost felt sorry for the cute and small little guy. He seemed almost fragile and innocent. To fool him would be so easy. With his blue eyes, blond hair and his innocent appearance, Johnny looked a little like Yannick’s mother. In fact, the more he observed the young star, the more Yannick thought of his mother. For that reason, and even if Marilyn would disagree, he considered giving a chance to the little guy. Once chance, only one that would allow Johnny to escape from the punishment Yannick had reserved for him. Figuring that the chance had to be deserved, he decided to ask a question. He told Johnny that he was aware, via the media, of the judicial problems he had had.

“How do you feel about this sad event?”

Johnny had no idea that his future was depending on the answer he would give. Without thinking too deeply, he retorted:

“Well, you know, what happened is very sad, but... that story is behind me. As Manou said, life must go on. So, I keep going forward. After all, I was not the driver of the car. I don’t feel guilty at all. It happened because it was supposed to happen. Once Mr. Universe decides that something must happen, well... it happens. Nothing we can do about it... nothing.

“Mr. Universe? Who is that?” inquired Yannick.

Johnny looked at him as if he was totally astonished:

“Don’t tell me you don’t know?” Mr. Universe is in charge of everything. He makes all the decision! Don’t tell me you don’t believe in him? As Manou always says: beware if you don’t believe.”

Yannick would have liked to drop the whole idea of vengeance and return home, however, the answer Johnny had given him did not match with what he was expecting. His three little darlings were right. Johnny had no remorse and did not feel responsible. He showed no sorrow. There were no doubts left. Even if the young man was somewhat retarded, he deserved what was about to happen to him. After a short silence, Johnny asked:

“By the way, you never told me your name... what it is?”

“Tom,” answered Yannick without hesitation. “My name is Tom MacMillan.”

“What did you say?” exclaimed Johnny while almost spitting out the lemonade he was drinking. Are you fucking with me or what?”

“What do you mean?” questioned Yannick seemingly insulted.

“Tom MacMillan? That’s the name of my worst enemy!”

“We call that a homonym...”

“What?”

“A homonym... to describe two words that are pronounced the same way or two persons that have the same name.”

“I see... well, I hope you are not a total homonym of the Tommy I already know. If it’s the case, we are done talking. This guy is the devil, I tell you.”

“Then I must be his antonym, because you see... I will be like an angel to you.”

“Ah yes...” remembered Johnny. You are here to help me get my bucks back, isn’t that right? How will you proceed?”

“To start with,” declared Yannick while handing the young man a handful of gambling chips, “by giving you back the five hundred thousand dollars I won from you.”

“Wow!” yelled Johnny while grabbing the chips. “I can’t believe you are doing that. Is it possible that you are a real angel? I believe in angels, you know. How will I get the rest of my money? We are talking about six and a half million dollars, you know?”

“You will have them back between now and tomorrow night. But first, you must promise me that you will not gamble until...”

“What? But why?”

“To prevent you from digging a deeper hole, my young friend.”

“What do you mean by digging a deeper hole?”

Even if he was about to offend him, Yannick confirmed to the singer that he was the worse gambler he had played against. He added that he had never won an easier five hundred thousand dollars. Ignoring Johnny’s protests, who considered himself a great player, Yannick kept going and explained to him the weakness of his game.

“You’re not made to be a gambler, Johnny. You bet too much and it’s easy to estimate if you have a good hand or not. In short, poker is not for you.”

“That’s not what Manou says,” argued Johnny with much anger. “And, she knows me a lot

better than you know me!”

“She may know you better, but obviously knows nothing about playing cards.”

“But, I like playing, don’t you understand?”

“In this case, play on ten dollar tables. There, you will gamble with people of your caliber.”

“You’re not beating around the bush, are you?”

“Do you want your money back; or not?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then you must listen to me. Otherwise, you will rapidly empty your bank account and will have no chance of getting back the money you lost.”

“Ok then,” finally agreed the little man. “So, what’s your strategy?”

“The stock market, young man! Instead of gambling at poker, you will bet on the stock market.”

“But, I don’t know anything about the stock market and neither does Manou!”

“You may not know anything about it, but I do!”

Yannick invited the rock star to invest six millions five hundred thousand dollars in the stocks of Secure Flight. He assured him that the value of the shares would double before five o’clock in the afternoon of the next day.

“That way, you will have all your money back.”

“Hum... I wonder,” hesitated Johnny, not at all convinced. “How do I know you’re not trying to swindle me?”

“Simple,” straightforwardly answered Yannick. I will also buy shares and at the same time that as you.”

“Really?”

“I won’t buy as many shares as you will, of course, because I don’t have as much money as you, but to prove to you that I’m not trying to swindle you, I will bet one million dollars. Does that make you feel better?”

“Well... yes.”

That’s all it took to convince Johnny. Less than fifteen minutes later, both men were in

the offices of 'Duel Boursier', on Sahara Avenue. They respectively invested their money before returning to the Bellagio. Jimmy was right. No one seemed to doubt what would happen to the shares of Secure Flight. Even the man who accepted their money was wondering why someone would invest in Secure Flight.

"It's the first time I meet someone investing in this company," he said.

Yannick had rapidly answered:

"Well, we wrote the name of a bunch of businesses on different pieces of paper, placed these names in a hat and picked one."

He said these words in a way that gave the impression that he was not too smart. However, the man from 'Duel Boursier' had recognized Johnny Boy. In Las Vegas, no one ignored that Johnny was an excellent prey. In the car, back to the hotel, Johnny directly asked:

"Tell me... with your nice blue eyes, did you, by any chance, ever frequent a prostitute?"

"What?" wondered Yannick.

He then remembered that Johnny saw a possible father in any man with blue eyes. So, he said to him:

"No, Johnny, I don't go out with prostitutes. I am married and have a good marriage."

"Too bad, I would have liked having you as father."

"No way, my friend, and let me tell you that I'm only five years older than you."

"I didn't think of that," sighed Johnny while hugging his dog.

Once they were back in the hall of the Bellagio, Yannick asked Johnny to give him his room number, so that he could call him in the morning.

"You are really a guardian angel, aren't you?" softly whispered Johnny. "My guardian angel... I'm sure that Mr. Universe brought you into my life."

"Well, then, do not forget that you must always listen to your guardian angel," stated Yannick. "And, your angel is telling you not to gamble anymore until I call you. You hear me? No more gambling."

While saying these words, Yannick handed his business card, on which appeared his fictitious name and the number of his cellphone.

“Call me if you need me, OK? Call me at any time.”

“Ok, but...” said Johnny somewhat sad, “why are you leaving me? If I can’t gamble anymore, what am I supposed to do? Charlie and I have nothing to do.”

“I would like to stay, Johnny, but I must go. I have an important meeting to go to.”

“But, what will I do until tomorrow?”

Yannick thought it was a good occasion to learn about the young man’s sexual life.

“Do you want a woman?”

“A woman?”

“Maybe two, if you prefer.”

“Why would I want a woman?”replied Johnny with a pathetic face. “You have nothing better to offer me?”

“Would you rather have a young man?”

“A man?” Are you out of your mind? You are kind of weird, aren’t you?”

While Yannick remained totally silent, Johnny turned around and said:

“Just drop it; I haven’t slept much in the last two days... so I’m going to the land of Nod.

The fact that Johnny Boy was truly asexual did not help Yannick. How can you compromise someone without vice? At this point, he needed help. Providence had always treated him well, why not this time? During the course of his life, he always found was he was searching for. This time again, he would trust his good fortune. He didn’t have to wait too long to find the piece that would help him to complete the puzzle and to start the phase two of his plan. As he was hungry, he decided to have dinner. He first went up to Mel’s room to invite him to eat with him at the Jasmine restaurant, from where the beautiful fountains of the Bellagio could be admired.

“That would be great, Sir,” answered Mel while wiping sweat of his forehead. I’m starving.”

“Why are you perspiring so much?” inquired Yannick.

“I just did over three hundred pushups.”

“Ah, I see... said Yannick while touching the ex-soldier’s biceps. I can tell that’s not the first time. Do you do such activity every day?”

“I have to keep in shape, don’t I? That’s what good soldiers do. Give me the time to take a shower and I’ll catch up with you at the restaurant.”

By the time they were done with the meal, Yannick decided to take Mel to a strip tease club. There was one located close to their present venue. It was called: ‘Eden Gentlemen’s Club’. The men decided to walk to the destination and after two or three hours of watching the naked dancing girls, they were sick and tired of the place. The girls were too beautiful for Mel and too straight for Yannick. In fact, the reason for him to visit such a club was to find the missing link to his plan. He needed a girl without morality, one that would sell her mother for a drink. There should be a few women like that in Las Vegas? He was probably visiting a place of higher class. So he decided to lead Mel to a bad section of town. On their way, they heard the vociferous scream of a woman. The loud call for help seemed to be coming from the rear and dark section of a bar presenting erotic and vulgar type of shows. A sign at the door was offering escort services to the people passing by, even if prostitution was not legal in the limit of Las Vegas. Most people would have walked away in order to stay away from the ruffians that were roaming the area... most people, but not Mel; he couldn’t prevent his natural instinct and had to help the lady in distress. He was more concerned about the life of others then he was about his own. It is without hesitation that he ran toward the back of the shady bar. Once there, he saw a young woman on the ground. A man, probably her pimp, was violently hitting her.

“Give me the cash, bitch!” he drawled, while brutally hitting her. “What did you do with it? Talk, fucking old bitch! Did you still buy drug and sniffed it? Is that what you did?”

“Why don’t you fight with a man?” asked Mel while grabbing the pimp’s arm.

The man furiously turned around to see who was daring to attack him. His anger changed to fear when he noticed the size of the man staring at him. The way Mel appeared was not a good sign. His large and challenging eyes, his strong jaws as well as the strength that seemed to emerge from him were dangerously intimidating. The hustler would have liked to decamp as fast as possible, but his opponent’s large hand was surrounding his sweaty neck, lifting him, without effort, above the ground and leading him toward the wall.

Mel’s prey, a Latino of about twenty five years old, was absolutely terrified. With difficulty and with a strong accent, he expressed:

“Listen, man, you shouldn’t protect this female. She’s only a whore and a drug addict.”

“If she’s that way, it’s probably your fault,” retorted Mel. “For what you did, I should kill you.”

He was ready to accomplish his threat when Yannick intervened:

“Don’t do that, soldier.”

Still holding the Latino against the wall, Mel looked at his boss and protested:

“But, Sir, look at what he did to this defenseless woman. This man is the scum of the earth. A bum and a lazy pimp; nobody would miss him, believe me.”

Yannick bent down toward the young prostitute and helped her to stand up. He ordered Mel to wait before proceeding with the execution and explained that he wanted to talk to whoremonger.

“I have a proposal for you. If you accept, we will let you go. If you refuse, you will be in deep shit.”

“I agree, answered the shaking Hispanic. I’ll listen to what you have to say, but please, tell you monster to set me free. I can’t breathe...”

At Yannick’s request, Mel decreased his hold. The pimp took a deep breath and asked:

‘So, what’s you deal, man, tell me?’”

“Simple,” phlegmatically answered Yannick. “You give us the girl and you are out of this unpleasant misfortune. I don’t think you have any choice. If you refuse, we will kill you and the girl will be ours anyway.”

“The problem is that the bitch owes me money that I have to pay to another guy. Dead or alive, I’m in deep shit, you see? At least, give me some kind of a deal.”

“How much does she owe you?”

“A thousand bucks.”

“Here’s your money,” replied Yannick while pulling the cash out of his wallet and throwing it at the foot of the aggressor. He then faced Mel and ordered:

“Make sure he’s not carrying a gun. I don’t want him to shoot one of us as soon as we turn around.”

It was sound advice, because Mel found a revolver and a knife. He removed the weapons from the guy, looked straight in his eyes and warned him:

“Get out of here, you filthy vermin, and make sure you never cross our path again, or else,

I'm telling you, man, I will break you in two."

The other one was ready to go when Yannick added:

"I want to know where the punk niches."

"What did you say?" asked Mel, unsure about the meaning of the question.

"I want to know where I can find him."

The Latino and Mel were both puzzled and looking at Yannick, who explained:

"Listen, even though we just had a violent encounter doesn't mean we can't do some business, one of these days. All I want is the possibility to find you if I ever need your services."

"Are you a cop?" nervously asked the man.

"If I was with the police, you would already be under arrest. So where can I find you if I ever need you?"

"In this saloon, man," answered the pimp while pointing toward the bar.

Yannick looked at the prostitute and asked:

"Is he telling me the truth?"

She moved her head up and down to affirmatively answer the question.

"And, what's your name?" wanted to know Yannick while looking at the man.

"Charlot..."

"Ok, Charlot, you can go. It was a pleasure to meet you."

Charlot left as fast as a rabbit would. Mel figured that Yannick would also let the prostitute leave, but, he was wrong. The Franch Canadian helped the young woman to get on her feet and supported her all the way to the Bellagio. She was really in bad shape. Her lips were severely lacerated, she had two painful black-eyes and her arms were covered with red and blue wounds. It was easy to see that it would take a few weeks for her to recover. Once arrived at the Hotel, Yannick asked Mel to take the woman to his room.

"I don't mean to be disrespectful, Sir," inquired Mel, but, what do you want to do with

her?”

“This girl was placed on our way by Lady Luck. Take care of her and make sure she has all that she needs.”

“I can help her with food, water and cloths, but not with the kind of drugs she will ask for.”

The young woman, called Sandy, was under the influence as much as she was physically hurt.

“What kind of shit do you like to take?” plainly asked Yannick.

“I like coke,” admitted the woman. I also like heroin, when I can buy it. If you give me what I want, I will work for you. I will do all that you say. All you’ll have to do is ask.”

“I’m counting on it, sweetheart,” admitted Yannick while handing some money to Mel.

That night, after a few stomach problems, more or less painful, Yannick fell asleep. Over all, he was satisfied. It had been a good day.

The next day, at one o’clock pm, he received the good news he was waiting for. Always trustworthy, Jimmy called him to let him know that the ‘Secure Flight’ stocks were back on the market. As promised, the value had doubled.

“Can you imagine?” said Jimmy in total high spirit. “We made ten million dollars! Just like that!”

“Wow!” approved Yannick. “And that one was easy.”

“Yes my friend!”

“What about ‘Project Beatrice’? Any new info?”

“Oh,oh...” replied Jimmy in a burst of laughter. “For them, things could not be worst. It’s catastrophic. Tomorrow, they will be out of the game; as if they had never existed.”

“Great. So, do you have any other news?”

“Yes, I sold your house. I got four million dollars for it. The money will be transferred to your account tomorrow.”

“That is great, thank you Jim.”

“How are you doing?”

“So, so... one day, all is fine and the next day, I’m completely down. Not easy to lose the ones you love, you know? I hope it will never happen to you.”

“Well, try to keep your head-up, pal, and pursue your therapy. I want you to know that we are all missing you. We can’t wait for you to come back.”

These last words reached Yannick’s heart.

“If all goes well,” he said with emotion in his voice, “I will be home by Christmas.”

“We can’t wait to have you back.”

At the end of this conversation, Yannick was suffering from stomach discomfort. He assumed it was a case of liberated emotion. He stood from his bed with difficulty and headed toward the adjacent room where he sat in front his laptop. He paid a few bills on line and prepared a publicity article, promoting the merits of ‘Project Beatrice’. Once it was done, he called Johnny from the hotel room telephone.

“Hello?” anxiously answered the rock star.

“Hello, young man!” enjoyably said Yannick. “This is your Guardian Angel.”

“Tom!” exclaimed Johnny. “Thank God! I was hoping you would call. So, what’s going on? Do you have good news for me?”

“Would it be good news if I told you that you just made twice the money you invested?”

“What?” It worked? You’re not playing with me, are you?” I really won back all the money I lost at poker?”

“Yes, my little man. You can go to ‘Duel Boursier’ to collect your initial investment and your winnings. Didn’t I tell you that playing the stock market was more enjoyable and profitable than poker?”

“You were so right! No more poker for me. Now, I will do just like you do. I will gamble on the stock market! But, how can you be sure that you make good and profitable investments?”

“You must trust your instinct, Johnny. You must listen and be able to read between the lines. Every time you hear or read something about a company listed in the stock market, you receive what is known as ‘privilege information’. Based on the information received, you can prejudge the results of the stocks you are betting on. Do you understand?”

“Hum... not really.”

“Ok,” explained Yannick while taking a deep breath and scratching his head. “Let see if I can help you understand. You record business is listed on the stock market, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” asked Johnny. “I didn’t know.”

“Well, you should know. Let’s say that I am a finance wizard and receive the information

that Johnny Boy will soon produce a new album...”

“Hey...” answered Johnny with joy in his tone of voice. It is the case; my new album will soon be out for sale.”

“Good! Now, once the finance wizard has the information and knows that Johnny Boy is a good singer and that his albums sell really well, he knows that the shares of your record company will be going up. Do you now understand?”

“Yes,” retorted Johnny. “I got it and because of you, I will become a financial genius. Watch me!”

“I know you can make it, little man. You have the necessary instinct and that’s what you need to succeed. By now, you must know that by investing at ‘Dual Boursier’, you have one chance on two to win. In comparison to poker, the risk is minimal.”

“I get it!” I will do as you say.”

“Well, all I can do now is to wish you good luck, little man.”

“Will I see you again?”

“You have my phone number, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Call me anytime you need me.”

“So, you will remain my Guardian Angel?”

“That’s it, Guardian Angel one day; Guardian Angel forever.”

Yannick paused for an instant and added:

“Listen Johnny... I want our relation to remain secret, Ok? I don’t want you to talk about me or give my phone number to anyone. Not even to your mother.”

“But why?”

“Because, that’s the way it is. Otherwise, I will never help you again.”

“Oh, I know why... it’s because a Guardian Angel is like Mr. Universe. What you share with him must remain a secret.”

“You understood.”

Following that conversation, Yannick inserted a document in a brown envelope addressed

to Johnny Boy and rushed to Mel's suite.

"I have an assignment for you, soldier," he said to his employee while he was giving him the brown envelop. Take this and push it under Johnny Boy's door."

"Yes, Sir," answered Mel without enthusiasm.

"Are you not feeling well?" asked Yannick.

"I'm totally exhausted," confessed Mel. I didn't sleep all night and mostly by the fault of the woman. She's been sniffing drugs all night. She asked me twice to go out and get her more. Twice..."

"Wow..." expressed Yannick. "She's really hooked."

"Hook, did you say? She's rotten, absolutely rotten."

"Tell me, soldier, did you write the letter I requested from you?"

"Yes I did, recalled Mel while pulling out two envelops from inside his jacket. I also addressed them."

Once the soldier left, Yannick entered the sleeping area of the suite in order to know more about Sandy. He noticed that she was sleeping and opened her purse. Outside a few lipsticks and empty cocaine packets, he found her wallet. There was no money inside, but he located identity document, including a driver's license under the name of Sandra McNeil. The young woman was soon giving signs of waking-up, so he replaced the purse where he had found it and starred at the girl. Her face was getting worse. She opened her eyes and stretched.

"Ouch..." she cried out. "Fuck, I hurt everywhere."

Realizing she was not alone in the room, she briefly checked out Yannick before recognizing his savior.

"Do you have something against major pain, Sir? I'm really hurting."

"I'm sorry, I don't have anything to help you," factually answered Yannick, while she was trying to move upward.

Only wearing panties and a t-shirt, she got out of the bed and moved toward the table where she had left her last packet of cocaine. While she was preparing her drug line, Yannick noticed all the scratches and lesions on her small body.

"No wonder she is in such pain," he said to himself. "With all the blues and wounds covering her body, it became evident that she had received quite a few beatings."

“Is your pimp responsible for all the beatings you received?”

“What do you think?” she stupidly replied while sniffing the drug with a straw.

“The kind of stuff you are sniffing will eventually kill you, you know?”

“So what? That’s the best thing that could happen to me. I’m fed-up with my shitty life.”

“Hum, you and Mel should get along very well.”

“What?”

“He is also fed-up with his life. The difference is that he wants to die like a hero, not like a harlot.”

“That guy bores me... fucking soldier. When he’s not doing push-ups, he eats and when he doesn’t eat, he’s doing push-ups.”

“It’s better than sniffing this shit,” critically answered Yannick while pointing toward the cocaine.

“While you’re talking about that, could you get me more? As you can see, I am almost out.”

“I’ll give you all that you want,” promised Yannick. “But as I said before, you’ll have to earn it.”

“And as I said yesterday, I will do whatever you want.”

Yannick did not answer. So, she questioned:

“So, what do you want from me? A blow job?”

“No, absolutely not.”

“I can see that you are just as boring as your soldier. He doesn’t want one either. So, what do you want?”

“I want you to do exactly what I want you to do and whenever I ask you to.”

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“You will find out when necessary. At this time, all you have to know is that we are taking you to Los Angeles.”

“What? When?”

“We will be leaving tomorrow.”

“So... I’ll be doing some actors? That will be a change from my regular clients.”

“Do you have any family around here?”

“Yep... something that resembles a mother.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know, somewhere around Vegas, I think.”

“Does she work? What does she do?”

“The last time I saw her, she was practicing what I do. You see, in my family, my profession goes from mother to daughter.”

Yannick felt sorry for the poor girl and moved in closer. He kneeled at her feet, held one of her hand and kindly whispered:

“You have to know, Sandy, that the work you will do for me will only last a short while. If you do exactly as I will ask, I may even pay you up to a million dollars.”

“What?” yelled Sandy, while widely opening her eyes. A million dollars?”

“That would really change everything for you, wouldn’t it?” insisted Yannick. “You could have a new life; you could study and make something out of yourself.”

“I can’t believe this! I feel like this girl that was playing such a role in a movie with Richard Gere. You know, what was it called? Oh! I know... ‘Pretty Woman.’ Looking at you, you are quite handsome. Richard Gere doesn’t have anything on you. In fact, you even look better than he does.”

“I’ll tell it you now and once for all,” said Yannick while stepping away from her, “you can’t fall in love with me. That is not in the game.”

“That’s real sad, whispered Sandy. I figure you already have someone in your life?”

“That is none of your business,” harshly stated Yannick. “Only do what I will ask you to do and all will be fine. Is that clear?”

“Will I have to kill someone?” she asked. “If so, I’m telling you, don’t count on me. I couldn’t kill a cat. I can steal, have sex and lie; but I can’t kill.”

“You will not have to kill anyone.”

“Great!” replied Sandy, feeling more at ease.”

“Sandy...” asked Yannick. “Is that your real name?”

“My real name is, Sandra.”

“Sandra who?”

“Hum... Sandra McPhee.”

“Now she just lied on her true identity.” Thought Yannick. Then he asked:

“You have a record with the police department, don’t you?”

“No I don’t, why?”

“You are lying to me.”

“Ok, ok, I do,” she admitted. “But, nothing serious... like possession of narcotic or solicitation... nothing real bad.”

Jonny was ready to leave his hotel suite with his dog Charlie when he noticed a large envelop under the exit door.

“Hum...” he murmured while picking it up.

He read attentively.

‘Quickly triple the money you have in the bank. In appreciation for your business, we are pleased to share confidential information with you concerning the company ‘Project Beatrice’. This firm is rapidly growing and all experts project that ‘Project Beatrice’s shares will triple by tomorrow night. It is the ideal occasion for you to improve your portfolio. We accept all bids, without limits or restrictions. Will you take advantage of the information? Please note; this is privileged data, you must not share this message with anyone. Otherwise, we will be forced to refuse your investment.’

“Wow...” whispered the young man.

He thought of calling Yannick, but the document specified that he was not to share the information with anyone. Then, he decided not to call his angel.

“If I talk, they probably won’t accept my bet and I would lose the chance to triple my money,” he said to himself.

So, he decided to invest all the money he had. Meanwhile, somewhere in the hotel, his face well hidden behind a newspaper, the false Tom MacMillan was watching the rock star as he was heading toward his limousine. No doubt that he was going to ‘Duel Boursier’.

At ten o'clock the next morning, the shares of 'Project Beatrice' had crumbled and the same applied to Johnny's money. Less than two hours later, Yannick received a call from Tommy:

"You know what?" said the paparazzi. "My contact just revealed to me that Johnny's bank account had fallen to zero. Is that you're doing?"

"No, Johnny did it all by himself. You can publish the news. Johnny Boy is bankrupt."

Without any doubt, Marylyne, Helene and Jade had to be proud of their man. Phase one of the plan was completed. Their common enemy was ruined.

VIII

“What did you do, Johnny?” yelled Manou.

“Don’t you worry, Manou.” replied Johnny, trying to reassure her after his return from Las Vegas. “My new album will come out in a few days and I will soon be going out on tours. We will get plenty of money.”

“And until then?” kept yelling Manou. “How will we survive? How will we pay for all the bills?”

“Well,” figured Johnny, “we can ask for an advance from the record company. And also...”

He handed her a check for five hundred thousand dollars, made to his name.

“As you can see,” he innocently added, “I didn’t lose everything. Didn’t have time to deposit these earnings. So, the casino made this check.”

“That’s a good thing!” exclaimed Manou, while violently grabbing the check-out of his hand.

He noticed that she was heading toward the bar. He left the room, so he would not see her getting intoxicated.

“If you need me,” he declared, “you can find me in the Beethoven room. I have to practice my new choreography.”

“That’s it!” said Manou while filling her glass. “If I can find something to eat, I will let you know when dinner is ready.”

Johnny ignored the comment and walked toward the music room, followed by Charlie.

Around the same time, Yannick had also returned from Las Vegas. As soon as he met Tommy, he explained how he mastered the plan to totally mislead Johnny.

“It was so easy!” he said with a proud smile. “It was child’s play.”

“Well done!” replied Tommy to congratulate his employer. “But, if Johnny is broke, how will you pay me? There won’t be much left for me.”

“Stay calm, my friend. Everything that comes down eventually goes up and whatever goes up must come down!”

After a short period of silence and while they were leaving the airport and walking toward Tommy's pick-up, Yannick said:

"I assume that the news concerning Johnny's ruin is already on the front page of the media?"

"Well, not really," answered Tommy, seemingly uncomfortable.

"What do you mean: Not really?"

"I sent the news out as soon as per your request, but..."

"But what?"

"My press release was blocked..."

"Blocked? By whom?"

"By Julia Adams, who else?"

"Who is that?"

"Johnny's press agent."

"And so? You have to defend yourself, my friend! This damn bitch surely does not control all the press!"

"This week, she does."

Yannick was becoming annoyed and impatient when he retorted:

"What do you mean... this week?"

So, Tommy explained:

"She doesn't like me very much, you see... Especially since the end of the court case. To get even with me, she threatened the members of the press that if they published my news, she would keep them away from the presentation of Johnny's new album. And because it will be a very popular event... they obey her."

"What?" replied Yannick now truly furious. "Our news bulletin as to be published at all cost, do you understand? This news and all the others that will follow. How can I destroy him if I can't turn the public against him? Isn't there anything you can do to intervene?"

"Sorry," whispered Tommy. "But, at this time the members of the press are on her side."

"Well, we will see about that!" fumed Yannick. "Continue to send our press release; one

hundred times each day, if necessary. Is that female a member of the clan?"

"Of course, and Johnny placed her on a pedestal."

"Is that so? Then, we have to take care of her."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"Don't you worry, you will soon find out."

Yannick turned around to face Mel who was following him with Sandy.

"I will need you to help me solve this problem."

"I'm at your orders, Sir."

"This guy is not getting any better," whispered Tommy to Yannick. "I guess he is still delirious."

"May be," approved Yannick, "but I want you to know that he is meaningful to me."

"Who's the girl?"

"Someone we picked-up in Vegas."

"Hum... She looks like a punching bag. Are you sure you did not find her in a boxing ring?"

"We can say so," answered Yannick.

"What do you want to do with her?"

"She will become very beneficial to my plans. By the way, could you keep her at your place for a while, a very short while?"

Tommy looked at the girl for a second and refused the offer by saying:

"Sorry, Yann. I admit that she's sort of pretty and well molded but, did you look at her? She's a drug addict. She is stoned. Why don't you give her to G.I. Joe?"

"She also too spaced-out for his taste."

"She doesn't seem like a very nice person," added Tommy. "She looks like the kind of girl who's not afraid of anything. She could be a major nuisance."

"That's exactly what I need."

Once they reached the pick-up, Yannick asked Tommy if he had found him a drug supplier.

“Of course,” replied the young man. “And a good one!”

“Can we meet him this afternoon?”

“Looking at the time,” we may be able to meet him tonight.”

“Why tonight? I would like to meet him now.”

“The guy lives about seven hours away from here.”

“Seven hours away? Damn, we are in L.A.! Couldn’t you find somebody closer?”

“Not somebody like him! I think I know what you’re looking for and this guy is who you need. I’m telling you, he’s perfect. Better than you wanted.”

“And, where can we find that fellow?” asked Yannick, showing some annoyance.

“At Kachina Village.”

“Kachi what?”

“Kachina Village,” repeated Tommy while laughing. “It’s a small place located near Flagstaff, in the north side of Arizona. And, should you want to know, it’s very close to the Grand Canyon.”

“I’m not here to play tourist,” protested Yannick.

“As you say, replied Tommy. “So, when would you like us to go?”

Yannick was about to answer: ‘What do you mean by... ‘us’? But, he rapidly changed his mind. Tommy seemed so pleased to travel with Yannick. By refusing, he could lose an important partner. Even if he was quite irritating, the young man was serving him well. To pursue the adventure without him could become a major error.

“Let me get ready and we will shortly hit the road.”

While travelling toward the Marriott, Yannick conversed mostly with Mel. He had some instructions for his giant partner.

“Take this money, he ordered to him while handing a pile of dollars coming from his pocket. “I want you to find a small apartment for Sandy and then, take her somewhere so she can dress properly. You should also take her to some beauty shop.”

That was definitively a good idea. With her pink hair, her super high heel shoes, her jeans full of holes and a t-shirt way too tight, the poor girl resembled what she really was. A more respectable look would better serve the role Yannick had for her.

“Should I also take her to a clinic to take care of her wounds?” questioned Mel.

“No, don’t worry about that.”

“Hum...Hum...” whispered Sandy.

“What?” asked Yannick.

“Well...” said the girl while lowering her sunglasses. “Are you forgetting the other things I need?”

“Oh, absolutely not!” replied Yannick while looking up. “I remember.” Then he added for Mel:

“Can you also take care and get what she needs?”

“No problem, said the big man. I have a few contacts.”

“Make sure she always has what she needs,” ordered Yannick. “I don’t want her to get crazy and wild because she does not have her potion.”

“Oh shit!” exclaimed Sandy while grabbing her cell phone. “This is too beautiful to be true. It’s just like in the film ‘Pretty Woman’. I have to tell my ‘amiga’.”

She was already dialing a number when Yannick interrupted her.

“Sorry, my dear, but, you cannot use the phone until the end of our agreement.”

“Hey...!” protested the young woman as Yannick was taking her cell away from her.

“The least your friends know regarding where you are and what you’re doing, the better it will be. If you can’t accept my terms, I will hand you back to your pimp, or better, to the police.”

“Ok, ok,” accepted Sandy. “I swear I won’t contact anyone. I have so few friends, anyway... But, don’t you forget what you promised me in Vegas.”

“I only forget a promise when a person disappoints me. I hope this won’t be the case with you.”

After this short conversation with Sandy, Yannick asked Mel to keep her cell with him. Once at the hotel, he took a shower while Tommy ran home to get couple of things. Less than thirty minutes later, they were heading toward Arizona in Yannick’s Ferrari. Pressed for time, this last one had advised his passenger that this trip would only be forth and back. No way would he stop

on the way to visit this or that or to rent a room.

“We find your guy, we buy what we need and we come back to L.A.”

On the way, Tommy asked him to give him more details about the way he had proceeded to cause Johnny’s ruin. To fill the time, Yannick spent around thirty minutes to tell the story. After hearing it, Tommy, still intrigued, wanted to know:

“But... if the barman had not told you about ‘Dual Boursier’, what would you have done? If I understand, this broker was never a part of your plan... so, you just got lucky?”

“Yes, it was pure coincidence!”

“What would you have done without the broker?”

“I would have found another way. My goal was to cause Johnny’s downfall. If I had not found ‘Duel Boursier’, I would have kept playing cards with him or convinced him to buy shares of ‘Project Beatrice’. It would have been more complicated, but the results would have been the same.”

“Is the rest of your plan is as brilliant as that?”

“I don’t know,” replied Yannick. But anyway, so far, everything is going well.”

“I can’t wait, added Tommy. I can’t wait to see how you will fill you promise concerning Johnny’s wealth, or... whatever is left.”

“I would say, corrected Yannick, whatever will be left...”

During all the trip, Yannick realized that Tommy’s presence was hard to tolerate. He by far, preferred Mel’s presence. He had more compatibility with the giant even if his way of thinking was somewhat odd. Mel was still attached to his past. His desire to end his life like a hero was definitively perplexing. But, in Yannick’s mind, Mel was true to himself and to others. He was authentic and mostly loyal. So loyal, that his attitude could be disconcerting. His loyalty toward others leads him to fulfill all assignments. He never asked for anything and never questioned anything. His unique motivation was to serve the people who were nice to him... No more, no less. Tommy, on the other hand, was a superficial fellow. He was false, egotistical, jealous and envious. Yes, he perfectly served Yannick’s cause but in doing so, it was not like Mel. When it came to Tommy, Yannick felt as if he was walking on a tight rope. At the first blunder, Tommy could easily change side and unveil all the plans. That was the only reason for him to respect his promise and make a rich man out of the paparazzi.

All along the way, the poor man had to tolerate all the negative things Tommy was saying about Johnny. But even so, the trip was a success. The man they met, a guy by the name of Rachid, had everything they wanted and even more. He was more than a simple dealer. He had everything,

absolutely everything. Not only the usual drugs like those Mel could get in Los Angeles. He was the ideal supplier for the perfect criminal or terrorist. He only sold his stuff to the people he knew. And he knew Tommy very well. They had grown up together at the orphanage. They hardly ever physically contacted each other but stayed in touch by telephone or emails. Tommy introduced Yannick to the dealer as if he was an old friend. The dealer had no objection and accepted to fill the orders. He first led the duo in what he called: 'The caves of Ali Baba'. A well hidden place, inside a modest wooden construction, located in the middle of nowhere. Yannick tried to note the address, but the shack was in such an isolated place, that if he ever tried to return without his guide, he would never relocate the spot. All he would recall is that first, he had to reach 'Kachina Trail' and from there, proceed through a large number of turns.

Rachid had everything; drugs, of course, weak and extremely potent. He also had medicine and poisons of any sorts. Some of his products were generally unknown to most people. He also had a large collection of weapons like guns, rifles and bombs. All a customer had to do was to asked. It was easy to entertain the idea that Rachid could be an Al Qaeda supplier.

"I can also provide you with counterfeit identity documents, he proudly announced. Your desires are my command."

While Yannick was visiting the different displays and paying attention to all he could see, he concluded that Rachid was the ideal person to do the kind of work he was doing. He was handsome, well dressed and quite friendly. He also seemed very well educated. It would have been easy to believe that the guy had frequented drugs and potions universities. Whatever question the client addressed to him concerning his business, he always had an answers and valid explanations.

"This poison is called this way and can cause such and such problem quite rapidly."

From the section reserved to drugs and poisons, sold as powder or capsules, they entered another section filled with aquariums and transparent containers. Each containers housed some form of insects, mostly spiders. Some aquariums were inhabited by strange looking specimens of fishes. Without staying too long where the venomous spiders were in exhibit, they continued the visit toward the aquariums. Yannick could hardly imagine that he would carry a spider to Los Angeles; not only could the thing escape its cage but how could a person offer a spider as a gift to another person? A young kid may be attracted by a spider but... However a fish? He stopped in front of an aquarium that, at first sight, seemed to be empty.

"Did you sell the fish that used to be in here?"

"No", answered Rachid with a big smile. "Look carefully... there is a living thing in here."

Yannick kept looking but outside sand and water, he could not identify anything. After a few minutes, Rachid pointed toward the rear-left side of the aquarium.

“Can you see?” he asked. There... the shape and the color of the sand are different. There is a form hiding out there. There... can you see it?”

Effectively, there was a brown lump, approximately fifteen inches long. It looked like a large pebble without a definitive shape. Looking closer, Yannick could distinguish, on the back of the thing, some very small dorsal thorns. Finally, Yannick could now see a large head, a mouth and two small eyes staring toward the top.

“What is that?” he asked.

“It’s call, SYNANCELA VERRUCOSA,” replied Rachid. “Or, if you prefer, it is a stone fish.”

“Is that so? I never heard of such a fish.”

“That’s because we don’t have any in our part of the world. But, you can easily find them in Western Australia or in the Maurice Islands. They can also be found in Polynesia. Normally, they live close to rocky areas. They like sandy bottom, as we have in this aquarium. They like to burry themselves in the sand to watch future preys. They look like a stone, that’s how they got their name.”

“What does this kind of thing eat?” inquired Yannick.

“Small fish and shrimps,” answered Rachid. They love shrimps.”

“Why do you keep that kind of fish here?”

“Because of its venom,” explained Rachid. “This fish may not look like much but it is the most venomous fish in the world. His venom is more deadly than the one coming out of a cobra. It’s perfect to cause an accidental death.”

Noting Yannick’s interest, Rachid continued:

“If someone should touch one of the quills and if nothing is rapidly done about it, it will cause a quick and painful death.”

“How does it happen?”

“First, the area touched by the quills will inflame and turn to black. The pain will gradually increase. It will spread through the zone of infection, reach and cause muscles paralysis and attack the nervous system. The subject will reach deadly convulsions, will lose consciousness and die of cardiac arrest.”

“Wow...!” exclaimed Tommy. “Is there an antidote?”

“Of course, for every poison there is an antidote. In this case, all there is to do is cut the

wound open with a sterile instrument and apply heat with anything hot. A cigarette, a hair dryer or simply hot water.”

“How soon should the antidote be applied?” wanted to know Yannick.

“It depends on the person, but obviously, the sooner the better.”

“That’s exactly what I need,” decided Yannick. I want two of those, is that possible?”

“Here, everything is possible,” retorted Rachid while winking at his new friend. “Will you need anything else?”

“You said you could also fabricate false identity documents?” asked Yannick as he was entering the weapon division.

“Sure I can.”

“How long does it take?”

“Only a few minutes; all I need is a name, a date of birth and a photograph.”

“Damn it!” said Yannick while scratching his head. “I don’t have any photos.”

But Rachid seemed to have the solution:

“I don’t have any camera on location, but I presume that if you need new identity papers, it’s because you are on file with the police?”

“It’s not for me.”

“Who are they for?” asked Tommy.

“For Sandy.”

“She’s on file with the police?” question Rachid.

“Yes, under the name of Sandra McNeil. Why do you ask?”

“Because I have access to the filing system of most police departments...”

“Is that true?” exclaimed Tommy. How can you do that?

“Don’t ask me how; I won’t answer. What’s her date of birth?”

Yannick had attentively studied Sandy’s driver’s license and remembered the date. Rachid was already sitting in front of his computer when he told him:

“Her date of birth is August 13, 1989...”

Rachid rapidly and easily reached the file of Sandra McNeil and her place of birth, Nevada. The girl have been arrested many times for petty thefts, prostitution and swindling.

“She’s not an angel, is she?”

“Can you prepare a green Card, a driver’s license and a student card under the name Sandra McPhee?” asked Yannick.

“No problem... the photo on her file is not great but it will do. Give me a few minutes and it will be done.”

While waiting, Yannick retreated back in the weapons sections and placed a telephone call to Mel:

“Hello Mel...”

Without giving the big man the time to answer, he continued:

“Are you really familiar with weapons?”

“What a question!” grumbled Mel. I was a sharp shooter, I’ll let you know, and I still am.”

“Perfect! So, tell me... what kind of weapon do you need to hit a distant target? I also want to know what hand gun you prefer. Finally, if I want a discreet boom that I can activate from a distance. What should I get?”

“Are we going to war?” replied Mel, totally surprised by the questions.

“Just answer my questions, won’t you?” ordered Yannick with a touch of impatience. “I don’t have much time; I to go back to Los Angeles as soon as possible.”

While Mel was giving him the information, Yannick was taking notes. When done, he put down the phone without any thanks or comments.

He received the identity documents and was satisfied with the results. He took Rachid aside and asked him to wrap a high precision riffle PGM338 and two Cyma 698A.

“I see that you are an expert,” noticed Rachid. You really seem to know what you want. Do you also require a telescopic sight and a silencer for the PGM?”

“Yes, answered Yannick,” acting as if he knew what he was talking about. “Please make sure the telescopic sight is equipped with night vision. I, of course, also need ammunitions.”

“Not a problem.”

“That’s not all...”

“Well... are you trying to empty my place, my friend? What else do you need?”

“I also need a small bomb that I can activate from a distance, type...IEE”

“That’s what we call, an improvised explosive engine. It is the weapon of choice for most terrorists. You want it to be operated by an intelligent phone or other kind of command system?”

Because Mel had not mentioned anything on the command system, Yannick decided to order an independent remote control.

“That’s perfect!” pleasantly stated Rachid. I’ll place everything in gift boxes... it is more discreet. Are you preparing some kind of attack?”

“Do I look like a terrorist?” questioned Yannick.

“No, but you look like someone who does not appreciate questions.”

“You got it!” retorted Yannick in a dry tone of voice.

He then adopted a friendlier attitude and asked how the remote control would be in contact with the bomb. Rachid answered:

“It will be activated by infrared”, answered Rachid. “Better and easier than a wire system.”

Once his shopping was done, Yannick had to pay a substantial amount of money and got on the road to return to Los Angeles. He would have liked to stay on location longer and get to know the fascinating Rachid. He was intrigued by the classic and charismatic man who had chosen to operate such an illegal business and live in the shadow. Money and profits were surely part of the equation. These were the thoughts occupying Yannick as he was driving his car. Spending more time with Rachid would have been interesting but he had so many other things to do. His time was limited. His plan had to be in operation before Johnny’s new album hit the market. Otherwise, phase two of his plan would be a failure.

On the way back, his stomach became severely painful, so, Tommy had to take the wheel. The young man had never driven such a car and it is with pride that he accepted this mark of trust from his boss. They reached Los Angeles around five o’clock in the morning. Once there, Tommy was ordered to go home and to expect a call from Mel, the next morning around six o’clock.

“Until then,” advised him Yannick, “try to rest a little.”

“As you say,” replied Tommy. I will also contact my friends of the press to see what else I can find out about Johnny’s problems.”

“Within twenty four hours,” assured Yannick, “things will be different. The journalists

won't have any scruples about what they published concerning the great Johnny Boy."

"You know what?" said Tommy. "I don't have any idea of what you are preparing for him, but, whatever it is, it gives me goosebumps."

Later, Mel and Sandy were invited in Yannick's room for an important meeting. Because Mel had already found a furnished apartment for Sandy, he had to use the Ferrari to go get her. As soon as Yannick was face to face with the young woman, he was impressed by the visual transformations. It's amazing how a new hairstyle, new hair color as well as new clothing can change the appearance of a person. Of course, her face was still swollen and inflamed but her expression was friendlier. If Yannick had not known her, he could have thought that she was a law student at the University of Los Angeles and would not have assumed that she was a street walker from Las Vegas. With shorter hair, light brown eyes, two pieces suit of neutral color and her white top, Sandy looked like a young woman stemming from a respectable family. Her transformation was excellent and matched her new identity. She was now, Sandy McPhee, student at UCLA.

"Wow!" she said, as she looked at her new identity papers. "How did you get that?"

"I hope that your new name... McPhee... is properly spelled," commented Yannick.

"Looks perfect to me," she answered. "I hope I won't have to study law. I might as well tell you that I have no damn talent in school."

"Of course not," laughed Yannick. "I will, however, ask you to watch your language and talk more graciously."

Sandy was about to react to this statement when he added:

"You see... tonight you will play the role of my young sister. You have to be believable."

"Your sister?" repeated Sandy. "But why?"

Yannick explained the evening program. First, they would visit the home of one of his female friend. Then, he would inform the woman that his young sister was attacked on the street by a bum who tried to steal her purse.

"OK," approved Sandy. "But once I'm there, what will I do?"

"First of all, don't say 'OK'... say 'very well'. Now, once we are in her house, I want you to tell the woman that you are exhausted and need to take a nap."

"O... I mean, very well, and then?"

"I'm sure she won't hesitate to take you to a bedroom. Once I'm alone with her, I will keep

her busy. Wait approximately thirty minutes and then, go to the bedroom named Peter Pan.”

“Peter Pan?”

“Yes, let me explain... the place where we are going is like a Disneyland Castle. Each room or bedroom are named in honor of a story or a character of Walt Disney.”

“Sounds weird,” said Sandy with a peculiar smile. “May I know who lives there?”

“Johnny Boy.”

“What? Johnny Boy? The, Johnny Boy?”

“The, Johnny Boy.”

“Wow! I can’t believe that shit!”

“You should say: I can’t believe it,” corrected her Yannick. “So, I see that Johnny doesn’t leave you indifferent?”

“Leave me indifferent?” replied Sandy trying to express herself properly. “Are you kidding? I find him out of this world. He is so cute!”

“Excellent, because I want you to seduce him while I’m talking with his mother.”

“What?” yelled Sandy who was unable to contain her joy. “Wow! It’s really like in Pretty Woman! He may fall in love with me, and...”

“If I was you,” interrupted Yannick, “I wouldn’t count on that. There is a problem, you see...”

“What do you mean?”

“When you will be with him, the little guy will be asleep.”

“Ah... well, count on me, I’ll wake him up.”

“With all the sleeping pills he takes before going to bed, I doubt you will be able to wake him up.”

“Well then... what do you want me to do? Watch him sleep?”

“You should know what to do, you’re the pro. The guy will be sleeping and your job will be to have sex with him. Sound’s simple to me. I don’t care if he knows what went on.”

“I would prefer for him to know that we’re doing it. I wonder how I can have sex with him while he’s snoring.”

“Give him a blow job!” suggested Yannick with a sarcastic laugh. “You should be good at that... you probably went down on thousands of men during the course of your life.”

“I suppose I can do that. What will I do after?”

“Well, here is the reason why I’m paying you so generously. I want you to create a scene to convince people that Johnny sexually assaulted you.”

“What, but why? I can’t do that to Johnny... it would be very nasty.”

“Do you want your money or not?”

Sandy had no answer. One million dollars, that’s a lot of bucks. The kind of money a girl like her could not turn down. Knowing that he had the Sandy’s attention, Yannick continued:

“Once your mission is accomplished, lie down next to him and wait for the cops.”

“The cops?” repeated Sandy by swallowing her saliva.

“Does that scare you? Does Sandra MC PHEE have something to be worried about?”

“No, but... what would I tell them?”

“You once told me you could lie like a pro, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Here’s what you will have to do. I want you to affirm that Johnny raped you. Certify that he’s the one who injured you the way you are. You will tell this story to the cops and later to the court.”

The young girl became speechless when Yannick added:

“When all is settled, you will receive your money. Then, you and I will be done.”

Sandy took a deep breath before consenting. Did she have any choice? Anyway, it will not be the wackiest thing she had ever done. She convinced herself that this would be her last immoral wrongdoing. After this story, with her newly found fortune, she will live an honorable life. No one in Las Vegas will ever hear from her again. Her past will be buried forever.

Mel’s assignment was definitively not a walk in the park. The sharp shooter would have to place a bullet in the middle of the head of Johnny’s influent press agent. For Mel, that would be a child play. He found the location of the woman’s residence on ‘Google Map’ and noticed that there was a high rise building of approximately sixteen floors, only sixty feet away. As the sun would set down, he would take place on the roof of that building and face Julia’s house. He would wait for her to appear in a window to look outside or close the curtains. The highly sophisticated riffle that Yannick had given him was equipped with a high-tech telescopic sight. No way could Mel miss his target. He would only need one shot. The assignment had to be accomplished before the ten o’clock news bulletin. Yannick insisted that the report concerning Julia Adam’s death be a

priority newsflash.

Mel's other role was to keep Tommy well informed of the outcome. He would also have two telephone calls to make between six and seven o'clock in the morning. The first call would be for Tommy. That would confirm to him that he had to be in front of Johnny's residence to get photos of the rock star's arrest. The second call Mel would have to make would be to contact the cops and let them know that atrocious shouts were heard coming out of Johnny's house. Meanwhile, Yannick would have taken care of Manou.

To start the ball rolling, Yannick used Sandy's cell phone to reach the woman who would die that night, after being bitten by a poisonous stonefish. The moment she answered, he knew she was expecting his call.

"Yannick!" she happily exclaimed. "I'm so happy! You are finally back?"

"Yes" joyfully confirmed Yannick. "And I'm free until tomorrow."

"Gee..." retorted the disappointed woman. "You will have to leave so soon?"

"Saddly so, I have a business meeting tomorrow night and to be there on time, I have to catch an early flight in the morning. Don't tell me you are not available tonight... I really want to see you!"

"Well... there is Johnny, you know. I cannot go out or receive a man when he's home. That would cause such serious embarrassments."

"That's quite annoying," said Yannick seemingly displeased. "Not only am I missing you but I bought you a gift, something very rare. I must give it to you tonight. It can't wait."

Noticing that Manou was hesitant, he added:

"You told me the other day that Johnny always took a sleeping pill before going to bed. So, give him two, and he will fall asleep faster. That way, I could visit you and we could have a good time together.

He sensed that if he led her to believe he would share her bed, she would be open to his visit.

"I agree," she finally said. "I will give him two pills. That should do the trick. In fact, I'm really looking forward to spending some time with a true ADULT."

"I can sense in your lovely voice that something is wrong. Is it bad?"

"Yes, quite bad."

She mentioned the last events concerning Johnny and didn't mind telling him that they were broke and close to bankruptcy."

"Don't you think you are exaggerating a little?"

"Not at all!" obstinately replied Manou. "In fact, to face our obligations until Johnny gets some royalties from his next album, I had to beg the record company to give me an advance. Can you imagine that? I was never so humiliated."

"God!" retorted Yannick. "Is it really that bad? You should have waited for me, darling, it would have been a pleasure to help you."

"Really?" ironically answered Manou. "I know you are not a poor man but I don't think you could have given me five million dollars."

"Five million dollars? You really needed so much money?"

"Maintaining this castle is very expensive, you know, and that's without taking our staff into consideration; whatever staff we have left. To save some dough, until money starts coming in, I had to let our workers go for a while."

"You should make Johnny cut the grass," amusingly suggested Yannick. "That would be a good lesson for him."

"I don't think so!" replied Manou while busting into Laughter. "Oh, Yannick... Only you could make me laugh today."

"So, can I see you later tonight?"

"Yes, come over, but, make sure not to get here before nine-thirty, OK? You see, Johnny never gets to sleep before nine o'clock."

Yannick thought of letting her know that he would be accompanied by his little sister, but in order to keep Manou under the impression he was coming over to seduce her, he decided not to mention it. Once he would get to Manou's place, he planned to mention that his sister's presence was a last minute dilemma.

It was finally nine thirty. While Mel was watching Julia's window, Yannick and Sandy were ringing the bell at the castle. Manou opened the door without delay and showed a wide smile. Yannick rapidly figured out that as soon as Johnny was deep asleep, the woman was standing close to the house's entry, probably counting the seconds. The big lady was dressed in style. One could think that she was dressed to pick up a prestigious Oscar. She wore a long satin gown covered with plentitude of diamonds. Her body was encased in lavish shining effects. The smell of expensive perfume surrounded her and her creative make-up made her stand out. However, her large smile tinted down as her brown eyes stared at Yannick's young escort.

"Hum," she uttered while questioning Yannick with her eyes.

“Manou”... hesitated Yannick, “I would like you to meet Sandy... my young sister.”

Somewhat appeased, Manou scrutinized Sandy who was presenting a grief-stricken appearance.

“Lord!” she exclaimed checking out the young woman. “My poor child, what in the world happened to you? Did you get run over by a truck?”

Playing her role of a well-educated young person, Sandy lowered her eyes down and let Yannick answer for her.

“You’ll never guess what happened to her.” said this one while affectionately taking Manou into his arms. “Imagine, the poor girl was savagely assaulted by some crook. It happened today, in the street. The bastard wanted her handbag!”

“Lord!” repeated Manou, acting like if she was horrified. “What kind of world are we living in? What a shame! I hope they will arrest the filthy monster.”

She grabbed Sandy by the arm and led her to the ‘ Aladin Room’, more precisely at the back of the room where was installed one of the many bars that could be found inside the house.

“Here young lady!” she said after filling a glass with scotch. “Swallow this; it will get you back in shape.”

Yannick looked at Sandy with a disapproving expression. Still she did as she was told and gobbled down the drink.

“Well...” expressed a surprised Manou. “I can’t believe such a small person can drink so fast. Do you want another one? This time I will drink with you. Would you like one my darling Yannick?”

“No Manou,” rapidly answered Yannick while severely starring at Sandy.

“Don’t you have school, tomorrow, Sandy? You know the rule... when there is school, there is no alcohol.”

“Oh... I see... I’m sorry, Yannick, I didn’t know,” apologized Manou.

“True, but SHE knows.”

Seeing that Sandy remained silent, Manou decided to improve the mood and changed the

subject.

“So, you are a student, little sweetheart? What are you taking?”

“Well, I’m studying law,” timidly retorted Sandy.”

“Good!” said Manou. “She will become a lawyer. That is really good!”

Yannick took advantage of the situation and added:

“It just so happened that our future lawyer needs a bed so she could rest a little. Considering all the rooms you have in the house, I assume you can find her a place?”

“Of course,” replied Manou while guiding her guests toward the long stairway leading to the second floor. We have twelve bedrooms in this house and one is called ‘Sleeping Beauty’. That’s where you can take your nap, young sweetheart. That will be the perfect room for you.”

Manou opened the door of the room and invited Sandy to walk in.

“Wow!” expressed this last one. “This is a room fit for a princess!”

“Absolutely,” replied Manou. “That’s why we call it ‘Sleeping Beauty’.”

The bed rested on a glass base surrounded by trees and flowers as if it was set in a forest. There were hundreds of flowers, soft and color balanced. A large transparent cloth, covered with golden little stars was suspended from the ceiling, which had small openings encased by minuscule white lights. The room’s atmosphere was delightful and relaxing. Next to a large window, behind long golden drapes, was a bronze fountain where water was coming out from a lion’s mouth.

“What is interesting with ‘Sleeping Beauty’s room,” explained Manou, “it is right next to the Peter Pan room. I imagine you already know who sleeps in that room? Did your brother tell you?”

“No,” murmured Sandy. “I know where I am, but...”

“Do you like Johnny Boy?” wanted to know Manou.

“I adore him...”

“I would like to introduce you to him, but, with all the sleeping pills he took tonight, I don’t think an explosion could wake him up.”

“It’s OK...” almost sadly replied Sandy. “I guess I will meet him some other time.”

“Do you know what?” said Manou with a great smile. “Next week, we will launch his new album. There will be a substantial party. You are both invited. Would you like that, Sandy?”

“That is so sweet of you,” softly commented Yannick while looking at his watch. “It will be a great pleasure for us to be there. Meanwhile I think we should let Sandy rest.”

At nine forty five, Sandy was finally alone in the room. Julia Adams died at precisely that time after being shot in the head. It had been easy for Mel to hit his target. Comfortably located on the top of the building facing Julia’s place, he patiently waited for her to appear in front of the glass door leading to a small veranda set in the garden. As she stretched her arms to pull the curtains tight, a bullet hit the glass and ended in her skull. Mel’s rifle was equipped with the best silencer ever made. His crime was committed in full silence and without any witnesses. Only a small perforation in Julia’s glass door could explain the source of her death; a stray bullet travelling in the night. Most people would assume that the poor girl was at the wrong place at the wrong time.

His mission accomplished, Mel did not use Sandy’s cell phone to call Tommy. He called him from another cell phone that Yannick had given him. The paparazzi immediately sent a press release to inform the media. If all went as planned, the news of Julia’s death would be out by ten o’clock that same evening. The next day, none of the media representatives would hold the news concerning the ruin of Johnny. Tommy was ecstatic; he was there, in the front seat to witness what he called: Mission Yannick. He was floating high. Not only did all the TV station comment on the accidental death of the woman who had been Johnny Boy’s personal press agent for around ten years, but they also revealed that the singer had gambled his fortune away. That very same night, the news was on all the media and all was exposed. The news maker reminded the public of Johnny recent presence in front of a judge. Another survey was launched concerning the rock star:

“Do you think Johnny Boy will survive the present situation?”

To that question, a majority of eighty three percent answered: Yes.

His assignment well completed, Mel broke down his set up and disposed of his weapon by dropping it in a large garbage container. The valiant soldier had accomplished his task and returned to his suite at the Marriott Hotel where he waited for Yannick’s call.

Once alone in her room and according to the plan, Sandy had to wait at least half an hour before entering Johnny’s room. That was the time needed by Yannick to deal with Manou. In order not to leave trace of his presence in the castle, he refused whatever his host offered him. No drinks, no food... nothing at all. He stayed away from most things that could record traces of his DNA or finger prints. Manou, meanwhile, consumed food and alcohol as if there was no tomorrow. An appetizer followed by a glass or two of scotch became the routine. It was evident that she had swallowed quite a few drinks during the course of the day. For Yannick’s purpose, that was definitively an advantage. His task would be much easier. After discussing different subject with her, he grabbed the large box he had brought with him and carefully set it on the floor.

“What are you hiding in there?” asked Manou with a tipsy pronunciation.

“Can we go to your bedroom, sweetheart?” proposed Yannick without answering the

question.

“Oh... you little horny darling! Follow me, Manou will lead you to the temple of pleasure.”

Yannick picked up his box and as soon as they reached Manou's room, he placed it on the large bed.

“Will I finally know what you are hiding in there, yes or no?” insisted Manou.

Without saying a word, Yannick opened the box and pulled out a bowl filled with water and containing something that appeared to be a roc.

“What is this?” wondered Manou.” Some kind of a roc?”

“Among all of your aquariums, do you have one that contains sand at the base?”

“Well, of course?” she replied while pointing toward one of the aquariums.

“That is perfect,” smiled Yannick while pouring the content of his bowl into the aquarium.

Once the roc reached the bottom of the aquarium, Manou seemed totally baffled.

“Is that it? Is that the gift you were telling me about?”

“This, my dear, is called a stonefish. A very rare kind of fish around here and you are now the proud owner of one of them.”

“That... it's a fish?”

“Absolutely, sweetheart. Wait, look at it closer. I have another one in my box. They are so amazing that I bought two.”

“Two? You're very generous, aren't you?”

“Don't show such ingratitude, my dear Manou. These fishes are extremely expensive!”

Manou was completely astonished as she watched Yannick picking up the second bowl. Instead of pouring the content into the aquarium, he placed it next to it.

“And who is this one?” teased Manou. “The other guy's brother?”

Yannick ignored her comment and proceeded to teach her where the eyes and the mouth of

the creature were.

“I’ll be damn!” retorted the woman as soon as she was able to distinguish the shapes. “That’s really a fish? What does it eat?”

“Shrimps,” informed her Yannick as he was taking a large bag of shrimps out of his box.

Of course, he never mentioned that the creature also fed on small fish... like the one who was now living in the aquarium with the other stonefish. After giving her a chance to observe the strange mollusk, he added:

“The people that are familiar with that kind of fish say that they are lucky charms.”

“Is that so?”

“They say that whoever touches one of them will have eternal good fortune. Would you like to try?”

“Hum...” whispered Manou, “I guess it can’t be so bad. It’s not worse than touching an old greasy stone. The way things are these days, I can say that I need some luck. I really need some.”

And she immediately inserted her hand into the bowl.

“To attract good fortune,” let her know Yannick, “you must caress the small dorsal thorns. Can you see the thorns on its back? It may sting a little, but it doesn’t really hurt.”

The poor Manou trusted him. At first, she was somewhat hesitant and barely touched the stonefish. As she discovered that it was not so bad, she increased the pressure.

“Ouch!” she complained as she pulled her hand away from the fish. “It bit one of my fingers.”

“I told you, Manou!” laughed Yannick while applying force on her arm to prevent her from taking her hand out of the bowl. “It hurts a little, but it will bring you luck. That’s what we call it... the sting of Lady Luck.”

Manou caressed the back of the fish one more time and was pricked on another finger and then inside the wrist, where the hand starts and where the arm begins. She rapidly pulled out her hand and vigorously scratched her wounds.

“That hurts!” she cried out. Is that what you call a minor sting? My hand is turning num. Look... it’s getting puffy and it’s turning black.”

“It will get better!” said Yannick while laughing. “Would you like another glass of scotch while we wait?”

“Yes, please.”

Yannick had not reached the bottle when he noticed that Manou had fallen on her knees, showing great physical distress. Most of her arm was now inflamed.

“Yan...Yannick,” she pronounced with difficulty. “Please call an ambulance. I’m not feeling well at all. I think I’m having a heart attack.”

Yannick did not react and watched her as she was rapidly fading away. She collapsed on the ground, her back against the floor. She fell into convulsion and was shaking like a piece of bacon in a frying pan. It became difficult for her to breathe, more and more difficult. Only a few seconds before the venom reached the heart. Kneeling down next to his victim, Yannick was looking at his watch and was counting the seconds.

“Three... two... one... zero!” he exclaimed with joy as Manou exhaled her last breath.

To observe his victim passing away was not enough to satisfy his vengeance. He had been told that the senses of a human being, like hearing, only left the body a few hours after death. He did not necessarily believe the theory, but some claimed that it was a scientific fact. In case it was true, he did not hesitate to step on Manou’s body, instead of walking around her, and headed toward the exit door. Before to leave the room, he wickedly declared:

“One day you said to me: ‘Someone would have to walk over my dead body before I let him hurt my son’. Well... it’s now done!”

He silently left the place to catch up with Sandy. She was surely getting ready to enter into Peter Pan’s room. Once he reached the ‘Sleeping Beauty’, he softly knocked, opened the door and walked in. Sandy was sitting at the foot of the bed and seemed extremely tensed.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered after a short hesitation. “I’m ready.”

She stood-up, left the room and walked the short distance leading to Johnny’s room. She gently opened the door and as she was entering the premises, a small and furious white dog charged toward her while barking as loud as he could to alert his master. If Manou had not given two sleeping pills to Johnny, Yannick’s plan would have surely failed. The sedative in question must have been truly potent because the dog’s racket did not affect Johnny’s sleep at all. However, Sandy appeared scared.

“Really, Sandy,” whispered Yannick, “don’t tell me that this little hair ball scares you?”

“Get it out of here!” she warned him. “Or, I’m out of here. I don’t like dogs.”

Yannick easily picked-up Charlie; the poor dog fought back as much as he could, but had no way to win.

“Go ahead,” he ordered to Sandy while firmly holding the dog. “Do what you are supposed to do and do not disappoint me. Everything rests on you, now.”

This being said, he returned to Manou’s room in order get rid of the dog. As soon as Charlie noticed his mistress’s dead body, he turned almost crazy. He was no longer barking; he was howling. He was far from anyone, so who could hear him? Really, all his noises were useless.

Once he was rid of the dog, Yannick went to the living room to watched TV. He was waiting for Sandy to carry out her mission. Of course, he listened to the news and was informed that Mel had accomplished his operation and that Tommy’s press releases were on the air. As he was listening, a female reporter was interviewing, by telephone, the representative of ‘Duel Boursier’ who had accepted Johnny’s risky bet.

“You know,” explained the man, “if Johnny had won his wager, I think it would have been the end of ‘Duel Boursier’. His chances to win were really small. I would like to know who influenced him to make such a senseless wager. ‘Project Beatrice’! Everybody knew that it was a lemon!”

After a survey, eighty three percent of the people believed that Johnny would survive this new crise. Yannick was not at all concerned by these results. Soon, the latest scandalous news concerning Johnny would rapidly reach the media. The singer would undoubtedly lose his most loyal fans. Yannick patiently waited another hour before proceeding toward the door of Peter Pan’s room. He evidently wanted to know how well Sandy was doing. Her mission was well accomplished. She had done all that was necessary to create the impression that she had been wildly abused, maltreated and raped. Totally naked, she was stretched alongside Johnny’s body, who was still sleeping in his Adam’s suit. The badly injured body of the young lady showed that she had been beaten. She had scattered sperm all over her face, so, there was no doubt that she had been involved in sexual activities. According to Yannick, an additional element would make the scene even more believable. Even though Sandy’s face was in bad shape, the injuries were not truly recent. It would be easy for an expert to discern that they were at least two days old. Even if he did not really want to, Yannick hit the young girl’s face at least three times. The wounds reopened and Sandy was pretty well knocked down. So, she would be in dream land upon the arrival of the police officers. Yannick couldn’t wait to see how Sandy would manage to convince the court and the jury that Johnny physically attacked her in every possible ways. He had not given her much instruction concerning the trial and had figured that he could trust her imagination. However, he

had guided her to say that on that day, she was coming out of the university when she realized that she had lost the keys to her house. As she didn't have a penny on her, she asked a lady for help. She begged for a little money so she could take the subway to get home and buy a few coffees. She explained that she would have to spend the night outside because it would be impossible to get a locksmith before morning. It was a cold night and because Manou was concerned about the security of the young woman, she invited her to spend the night at her house. These were all the instructions that Yannick had given to Sandy. The rest of the story depended on her.

Yannick left the castle at one o'clock in the morning. He had taken all Manou's jewelries, including what she was wearing at the time of her death. The jewels would be anonymously mailed to Sandy's ex-pimp. Back in his room, he suffered another painful stomach attack that lasted until the next morning. At five-forty five, in the morning, he was feeling somewhat better and called Mel. The soldier seemed in shape and ready for action when he asked:

"Sir? How did it go on your side?"

"Just perfect, soldier. You can now call Tommy and tell him to go to the castle."

"Will do, Sir."

"Don't forget, Mel, you must call Tommy from the second cell phone that I gave you. Once this call is done, wait one hour and call the cops from Sandy's cell phone. You got it?"

"Got it, Sir."

At seven thirty in the morning, and witnessed by Tommy's camera, Johnny Boy was arrested for sexual aggression by the police of Los Angeles. At the same moment, his presumed victim was taken to the hospital and Manou's body was taken to the morgue. Within two hours, Tommy's photos were published around the world and Johnny's miseries became the media's favorite news. Devoutly watching the television, Yannick was all smiles.

"Dear Marilyne, dear Helene and dear Jade... Daddy did very well today. Phase two of our plan, the ruin of the enemy, has been executed. I must also say that phase three is well on its way."

IX

A week after Johnny was arrested and after the sad death of Manou, Yannick was in his suite and quietly enjoying his breakfast when he received a call from his brother in law.

“Jimmy!” said Yannick, happy to receive the call. “How are you doing, my friend?”

“I’m doing very well but, apparently, not as well as you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure, but, the way you answered the phone, I sense that you’re full of life. I guess your period of rest was fruitful and you are doing much better.”

“Effectively,” lied Yannick who still had many problems with his stomach. “I’m doing much better. So, my dear Jimmy, to what do I owe the honor of your call?”

“Well, I’m calling you about Johnny’s record company. You were right... the stock is seriously falling. It’s been going down for over a week.”

“Did you buy many shares?”

“Yes, I did this morning. Of course, I could have waited longer, but, the shares are now so low...”

“You did well. The stock will fall somewhat more, but soon, they will start going up. We will make a lot of money on this project.”

“I’m curious to know how you were so well informed. How did you know the singer would be arrested?”

Yannick answered as innocently as he could.

“Who are you talking about?”

“Of Johnny Boy, of course! How did you know what he was going to do?”

“Hum...I’m not sure I’m following you.”

“Did you move to Mars, or what? The newspapers, the TV and the radio are only talking about this scandal. Johnny Boy was arrested after raping a poor student. On top of that, his mother is dead and so is his press agent. The world fell on the young star. It seems that he is ruined.”

“Is that so?” replied Yannick. “I... well I had no idea.”

“Then, let me ask you again. How did you know these shares were going to collapse?”

Yannick invented some kind of an answer and replied:

“Someone informed me that his new album, it’s supposed to come out today, was not up to standard. The record company figured the album would not sell as well as the others. At least, not at the time of release.”

“Make’s sense,” retorted Jimmy, but... how do you know that the shares will be going up?”

“Because, if his record is only “so, so”, the show he is preparing for his next world tour will be sublime. Something never seen before; at least, that’s what I’m being told. If the show is as good as they say, the record sales will go up.”

“That maybe so, except that we have a problem, my friend. If the court finds him guilty of murder, and if he is sent to prison, there will be no world tour and the sales of the album will be even worse.”

“Listen,” explained Yannick to reassure Jimmy. I don’t have all the details, concerning the murder he is charged with; but I can tell you one thing... this guy will get out of trouble. I’m sure he is not guilty. The poor guy has being framed.”

“How can you say that?”

“Do you remember how he was found not guilty when he went to court concerning the accident?”

“Yes, they claimed he had the Peter Pan’s syndrome.”

“Well... the treatment I am now receiving convinced me that I must forgive the people that caused me distress. I made a study on Johnny’s sickness and I learned that it can definitively alter someone’s judgment.”

“So...?”

“Well, I was informed that people who are seriously touched by this syndrome, as it is the case for Johnny Boy, normally have no interest for sexual activities. They are disgusted by sex.”

“Sorry to demolish your theory, but you are wrong. You should have seen the face of the young woman that he raped. It was awful.”

“Is he also accused of killing his mother and his press agent?”

“No. At least... not yet. It seems the mother died after being bitten by a strange kind of fish. Concerning the press agent, she was shot in the head. The police could not find a weapon and they are lost in conjectures.”

“His mother is dead, his press agent was killed and he is accused of rape... don’t you think it’s a lot of hardship to happen at the same time?”

“I have to agree with you.”

“I’ll bet anything that the little guy is being framed. I’m sure he didn’t do anything wrong. Somebody is trying to black mail or destroy him.”

“I would like you to confirm this last statement to my children. It would console them. They are all shook up.”

“I have to hank up, Jimmy,” announced Yannick while someone was knocking at his door. “I’ll talk to you soon, have a nice day.”

Mel was at the door, still wearing his military uniform. He was there because Yannick had requested that he and Tommy meet him to discuss the up-coming court case. In fact, the trial was scheduled to start the following day. According to Tommy’s sources, Johnny’s attorneys had charged Johnny a real fortune in order to advance the date of the trial. After being arrested, the rock star was questioned and then locked-up in the city jail. Since a large bail was negotiated by his attorneys, Johnny was only incarcerated for a few hours. On top of the bail, the judge ordered Johnny to hand over his passport. So, he was now in the impossibility to leave the US. For the record company, this was a catastrophic event. Not only was Johnny supposed to hit the road to promote his new album, but his international tour was planned to start in a couple of months. His producers had figured, as well as his attorneys, that he had been set-up. Therefore, they advanced the money necessary for the trial. Four millions dollars to cover the bail, ten millions dollars so the trial could start as soon as possible and two millions dollars to cover the attorney’s fees. Including the five million dollars that Manou had borrowed before her death, Johnny now owed twenty-one millions dollars to his record company. Not only was he ruined, he was covered with debts.

Tommy was late for the meeting and Yannick was annoyed. For the last two weeks, the relationship between the two men was somewhat bitter. It all started when Yannick ordered the reporter to only write favorable articles concerning Johnny. It might have been wiser for him to explain the reason of his decision. When Tommy received the request, he was totally opposed and wanted to know why. Instead of giving him an explication, Yannick said:

“I know what I’m doing. Stop questioning me and do as you’re told.”

Tommy did as asked and only wrote positive articles about Johnny. However, he never showed his face at the Marriott. Yannick also noticed that Tommy was not always answering his phone and that he took a long time before returning a call. Somewhat worried that the paparazzi may become a turncoat, Yannick had asked Mel to keep an eye on him. After following the guy for about two days, the soldier did not notice any abnormal behavior. He did however observe that Tommy visited the San Diego Orphanage and that he stayed there for a few hours. But in general, he was hunting for the last news concerning Johnny and was answering questions concerning his change of attitude. At first sight, he was not doing anything negative to affect Yannick’s plan, but this last one was wondering why his employee had visited the San Diego Orphanage. It is true that Tommy had grown up in that orphanage, but the purpose of the recent visit was still eluding.

Tommy finally arrived about fifteen minutes late. He did not appear to be in a good mood but still apologized for his unpunctuality. He explained that he had to cover Manou and Julia Adams’s funerals.

“It was truly sad,” he said.

He faced Yannick and added:

“Anyway, if your goal was to break down Johnny, you succeeded. I’ve known him a long time but never saw him so devastated. The poor guy is absolutely downhearted. Aside from his attorneys and his dog, no one can console him... nobody. It’s quite ironic that the day his album was supposed to come out, he had to bury his mother and his press agent. Two persons he really cared for.”

Yannick recognized the true character of Hollywood. When someone was on top, he could count on every body and at any time. Everyone wanted to be friends, even the people he didn’t know. However, when the wind turned, so did the so call friends. They would claim that they did not really know the culprit and that they had only met him in some casual evenings. As many other stars before him, Johnny now knew what it felt like to be down on his luck. Of course, he was still present in the newscasts and was the subject of many surveys ordered by the media. The idea was to keep an eye on his popularity. If more than ninety percent of the people that had taken the surveys indicated that he was not responsible for his mother’s death, ninety five percent assumed that he had raped Sandra McPhee. For Johnny, this result was more than catastrophic but it was still not as bad as the fact that less and less people where participating in the surveys. That fact indicated that his fans were becoming indifferent and turning against him. Nothing was worse for an artist than to lose the support of his fans.

“That means that we are progressing in the right direction,” simply answered Yannick while Tommy was sitting at the foot of the bed. “How did his attorneys appear to you? Did they seem worried?”

“Hard to say,” replied Tommy while looking at the large amount of pictures he had taken with his digital camera. “You know, John Richard is not a beginner. That lawyer proved his talent many times and always appears confident.”

He took a pause before adding:

“So, why are we here?”

“In order to discuss the next steps,” retorted Yannick. “Do I need to remind you that the trial will begin tomorrow?”

“In this case, shouldn’t Sandy be here?” inquired Tommy.

In fact, it would have been a good thing for Sandy to be there, but, as explained by Yannick, the young lady should never be seen with them. Hunted as she was by the journalists, she would have guided them toward the group. That could have led to the collapse of the plan. So, during the

course of the trial, she will be on her own.

“I hope she can take the pressure”, worried Tommy.

“Don’t you worry about her,” said Yannick. “She is an ace of the swindle, no?”

“That’s what she claims,” specified Tommy. “We never saw her in action.”

“Well... it will be amusing to see what she is capable of; don’t you think?”

After a brief silence, Yannick added:

“Don’t worry about her, Tommy. If something should go wrong, you will become the contact between her and me.”

“What? You just said we should not be seen with her.”

“I meant Mel and myself. But, you, as a journalist, would not be suspected if you meet her. From now on, anytime I will need to contact Sandra, you can claim you want an interview and meet her for me.”

“An interview? With all the junk you asked me to say about her since you forced me to write positive things about Johnny, do you really think it would be credible for me to request an interview?”

“Absolutely; you will give the impression of being a journalist trying to be fair by getting the two sides of the story. Don’t you think?”

“Maybe...”

“Anyway, I don’t think you will have to meet her very often. Your main duty will be to let me know, hour by hour, what’s happening during the trial. From the information I will receive from you, I will decide if I need to intervene.”

“And of course,” said Tommy while offering a disturbing smile, “you imagine that even from a distance you will be able to control the trial as you wish?”

“Keep your mockery for yourself, skeptic individual. “I want you to know one thing. As far as I’m concerned, each participant in this trial is nothing but a marionette. And, I don’t need to tell you who’s holding the strings.”

“Then I might as well tell you that you will need some mighty strong strings. Johnny’s principal lawyer is high class. He has never lost a case and I mean, never. You won’t be the only man who try to manipulate him. If you succeed, you will be the first one.”

“That’s looks like an excellent challenge!” exclaimed Yannick who seemed amused. “I can’t wait to see this John Richard in action!”

Now facing Mel, he continued:

“I will mostly need you to make, let’s say... special deliveries.”

Because Mel remained silent, Yannick understood that he was waiting for further instructions.

“Your first delivery may have to be done Tuesday. It all depends on what MISTER RICHARD will do tomorrow.”

“Not a problem, Sir,” said Mel while Tommy was watching. “May I ask what I will have to deliver?”

“Food, Mel, food!” pleasantly answered Yannick.

He kept silent a short while and asked Mel to leave the room, explaining that he wanted a private meeting with Tommy. Obedient, as usual, Mel left without hesitation. Yannick looked at Tommy and said:

“Well, Tommy, during the course of the last week, your attitude has been quite annoying. Can you tell me what your problem is?”

Before answering, Tommy hesitated for a few seconds. He needed to figure out how to explain his dilemma. It was evident that he was frustrated but not to the point of sinking the project.

“Well...” sometime you ask me to do certain things and I don’t understand why. Anytime I ask you why, I sense that it upsets you. I always get the same lousy answer... ‘Trust, me I know what I’m doing’. I’m quite fed up with that answer.”

“Are you talking about the articles I asked you to write concerning Johnny?”

“Exactly, you know I hate the guy. Everybody knows I can’t stand him. Why did you order me to change direction and write nice things about him?”

“Tell me Tommy, if you were as rich as Johnny...”

“You mean... when he was rich,” corrected Tommy.”

“He will soon be rich again!” rectified Yannick. “Anyway, if you were a rich man, would you ever think of trusting your worst enemy with your fortune?”

Tommy remained silent. His answer was quite evident. So Yannick continued:

“You must admit that Johnny hates you as much as you hate him. Even if he’s not very wise, and considering the present tension between the two of you, I doubt that he would entrust you with his properties; except if...”

“Except if I become one of his friends!” finally understood Tommy. Of course, now I understand!”

“I don’t know if you realized it, but, since they consider Johnny attacked Sandy, all the journalists are against him. Every one of them... except you. You are the only one defending him and claiming his innocence.”

“On that point, I believe you!” retorted Tommy with a little smile. “If you only knew what my peers are telling me. They think I’m going nuts. Every time Johnny did something good, I was putting him down. Now that he is accused of doing something bad, I’m protecting him. How do you think I can explain my attitude to the others? Do you have any suggestions?”

Yannick suggested:

“All you have to answer is: I know how to recognize an innocent man.”

“Hum...”

“In fact,” added Yannick, “I want you to defend him with such devotion that he will feel obliged to be thankful toward you; to the point that he will shake your hand in public. Can you now understand where I’m going with my plan?”

“I see”, approved Tommy with an enlighten smile. “So, if I follow you clearly, you don’t want Johnny to end up in jail?”

“That would be a disaster; for you as much as for me.”

“So, why all this comedy? I mean... Sandy, the rape and whatever else?”

“To make him fall at the bottom of the abyss.”

“What?”

“That’s enough for now. I can’t reveal more of my plan. Once more, I’m asking you to trust me.”

“All right, but the evidences you assembled against him are quite substantial. I can’t wait to see how you will manage to get him out trouble.”

“Child’s play,” replied Yannick, seeming quite sure of himself.

“You know what?” said Tommy. “I was informed this morning that John Richard wants to know how I found out so rapidly what happened at Johnny’s place on that evening. He may summons me to court.”

“Perfect!” happily exclaimed Yannick. “So, the game is on. If he summons you, and I’m sure he will, I want you to tell him the truth.”

“So, you want me to tell him that I was briefed on the phone?”

“Exactly. You can add that the caller never identified himself and that your phone indicated that it was an unknown phone number.”

“OK, that’s what I will do.”

“And... I also want you to mention that the caller had a strong Spanish accent, OK?”

“You can count on me.”

“So, you are not upset with me anymore?”

“Well, no... we are OK,” hesitantly answered Tommy.

“You’re still not happy. Come on, empty your bag.”

“It’s just that, the next time you want to know my where about, ask me instead of sending your G.I. Joe on my tail.”

“Sorry about that,” apologized Yannick seemingly at ease. “How did you know?”

“I’m a paparazzi... I spend most of my time pursuing people. I have like a...six sense. I know when someone is shadowing me,”

“OK, Tommy, we won’t spy on you anymore. I knew you were upset with me and I wanted to know what you were doing.”

Tommy stood and prepared to leave the room. Just before he could say good night, Yannick, teasingly asked why he had gone to the San Diego Orphanage.

“Well,” said Tommy. “That’s where I grew up.”

“I know, but why did you go there?”

“You know, I won some cash with the photos I made about Johnny’s arrest.”

“Yes.”

“I decided to invest some of that money to find my parents. As I’m sure I was not conceived by the Holy Spirit, I must have parents somewhere.”

“That is quite legit,” approved Yannick. “Did I ever tell you that I was also an orphan?”

“What?... You?... an orphan?”

“My god! You should see your face. You act as if you had seen a ghost.”

“Not really,” retorted Tommy. But still, I’m surprised to find out that you are an orphan.”

“Well, at least I had the chance of knowing my parents”

“That’s much better,” sighed Tommy.

“They both died before I reached adulthood. I know how it feels to be left alone. Especially since... well, never mind. You at least can be hopeful that you will eventually meet your parents. If I can help, please let me know.”

“Your parents must have been good looking,” wondered Tommy. “Because... I mean... because you are very handsome... No but, did you ever look at yourself? You have such nice eyes. I bet that you have your mother’s eyes. Am ‘I right?’”

“I can’t hide anything from you,” confirmed Yannick with a melancholic smile.”

“Tell me about her; give me a description of your mother.”

“What can I say? She was truly beautiful. She was a magnificent blonde with large blue eyes. But, overall, she was small, she was so petite...”

After a nostalgic silence, Yannick continued:

“I only understood after her death that she suffered from sadness that led to depression. I’m sure that’s what killed her.”

“Why was she so sad and depressed?”

“I really don’t know. She had all she needed to be happy. A good husband, a son, many friends... To me, this woman remains a mystery.”

“She may have been hiding a devastating secret.”

“May be, who knows?”

A heavy silence took place, as if the two men had nothing else to say. Tommy eventually looked at his watch and announced that he had to go.

“We will talk tomorrow. I’ll call you from court as soon as I will be able to.”

Five minutes after Tommy’s departure, Mel walked in with a ringing phone.

“It’s Sandy’s cell, Sir. It keeps ringing. Should I answer it?”

Yannick grabbed the phone and noticed that the call originated from Las Vegas.

“Yes, hello,” he answered with an official type of voice.

He heard the voice of an impatient woman saying:

“It’s about time! Finally, someone answers this damn phone! Anyway, who are you?”

“I should be the one asking that question, don’t you think?” asked Yannick

“My name is Alicia Bauer and I must absolutely speak with Sandy. This is her cell? Isn’t it?”

“Sandy is not presently available. What can I do for you?”

“This bitch left without saying anything and she owes me rent for the last three months. I have to talk to her. It’s urgent. I’m a cashier in a drug store. If she doesn’t pay her share of the rent, the owners will throw me out. I need to know when I can talk to her.”

“Well, she presently has some problems. I don’t know when she will be able to call you back.”

“I read the newspapers, you know, and I know what kind of problems she’s having. Either she pays me the rent she owes or I will call the cops.”

“Go ahead and do it, Miss,” politely replied Yannick. Tell me, what kind of relation do you have with Sandy?”

“I share an apartment with her. Is that OK with you? I’m also a great fan of Johnny Boy, maybe his biggest fan, and I won’t let that whore hurt him!”

“I see... do you have any information that could help the investigation, my dear lady? If so, please tell me immediately. You see, the trial will begin tomorrow.”

“No, but... can I know who you are?”

“I’m John Richard’s assistant; Mister Richard is Johnny’s attorney.”

“Is that right? Hum... as I guess I’m talking to the right person.”

She held her breath for a few seconds and became distrustful.

“Hey... wait a minute; if you are on Johnny’s side, that means that you are against Sandy. If that is the case, how come you have her cell phone?”

“We requested it,” quickly improvised Yannick. This cell can be valuable to us. You see... we believe she had an accomplice, and that person may decide to call her at any time.”

“Ah... I’ll bet one thousand dollars that the person in question is her pimp.”

“Her what?” exclaimed Yannick, as if he was totally startled.

“Her pimp! You know... the guy who forces her to work and who hit’s her like a punching bag... don’t tell me you didn’t know?”

“What? Are you trying to tell me that Sandra McPhee is a prostitute?”

“You got it; and, if she has a partner, it’s surely Charlot. I don’t know his full name. But, Charlot is probably not his real name anyway. And McPhee, that’s not Sandy’s real name. I don’t know how she got that name, but it’s not hers.”

“You mean that McPhee is not her real name?”

“It is not; her real name is McNeil; Sandra McNeil. I can’t believe that no one up your way is not aware of this name change. What are your cops doing? Eating donuts?”

“I agree with you that the police was inefficient, but... they had no reason not to believe her name. Until proven otherwise, she is Sandra McPhee.”

“McNeil!” insisted Alicia.

“Well, you see... in this story, the police assume that Sandra McNeil is the victim; not the accused.”

“OK, but if they had done their investigation properly, they would have discovered her true identity. They would also know that she has a police record as big as my butt, and let me tell you that I have a big one.”

“Are you absolutely sure of what you are saying?”

“Absolutely! Check on her... this girl is master con artist. She would do anything for money and I mean... anything!”

“Tell me, if you kept an eye on the news, you saw your friend on TV just as much as I did.”

“She’s not my friend anymore. She’s a bitch! She left me without paying her share of the rent.”

“Thanks for the precision. Now, you saw on TV how she was savagely beaten. Are you trying to tell me that she hammered herself?”

“Not by herself; I’m sure her pimp is responsible for her wounds. He always beats her. I never saw that girl without scratches and wounds on her body.”

“Wow...” replied Yannick “Are you aware of the importance of what you are telling me?”

Alicia kept silent when he interlocutor added:

“Would you accept to make these declarations during the trial? If necessary, of course. Mr. Richard would have to decide.”

“Do you mean that I would be a witness for Johnny Boy?”

“Precisely! Could you do that for him? Of course, he would happily pay for your travel expenses. On top of that, I promise, in his name, that he would give you all the money that Sandy’s owes you.”

“Really?” reacted the young woman. But it’s more than twelve hundred dollars and I read that Johnny was broke.”

“Don’t believe everything you read in the newspapers, Alicia. To prove my point, you and I know very well that Johnny never raped anyone. Do you agree?”

“I agree with that. I’m absolutely sure that Johnny never molested anyone.”

“So, do we have a deal? I will give you the twelve hundred dollars that Sandy owes you and in exchange, if you are needed, you will testify in favor of Johnny?”

“It a deal, Sir.”

Before hanging up the phone, she gave her address and her bank information, so the money she needed could be transferred to cover her travel expenses as well as her back rent. After ending the conversation, Yannick was more than happy. A few days ago, Sandy had mentioned the existence of this particular friend. He always figured that this girl would eventually become part of the equation. That was the main reason why he had taken possession of the cell. He used the phone for other strategic reasons, but mostly wanted it to talk with one of Sandy’s rare girlfriends. If Alicia could be called a friend, of course.

“Tell me, Mel, has the phone being ringing frequently without you answering it?”

“Well... since the rape story got all over the media,” admitted Mel seemingly sorry. “I didn’t know you wanted to answer the calls. I didn’t think it was important. Today, I figured that since the caller was so persistent, it would be a good thing to mention it to you.”

“You did well to inform me. Very well.”

Yannick searched in the cell’s file to see how many previous calls were made. Outside Alicia, who had called at least twenty times, nobody else had tried to reach Sandy.

“If that works with you, Mel,” he said, “I will keep that cell with me. Or, better still; let’s give it back to its rightful owner. By the way, I hope you don’t have any plans for this afternoon, because I have a few small assignments for you.”

These small assignments consisted in depositing money in Alicia Bauer’s bank account. Mel also had to buy an inexpensive small car so he could make a few deliveries during the course

of the following days. The idea was that if the soldier had to appear as a regular delivery man, his car had to match the requirements. It's was evident that even in Los Angeles, delivery people didn't drive a Ferrari.

Four hours later, Mel was driving a Honda Civic 1997, for which he had only paid twelve hundred dollars. For Yannick, that amount was only peanuts. It was quite an image to see the colossal Mel behind the wheel of that small car. It had been months since Yannick had such a good laugh. Amazingly, Mel was proud of the car. It's like if he was thinking: "Yes! I have my own car."

"Good!" said Yannick who was still laughing. "To celebrate it, I'm inviting you to a restaurant. I want to ride in your new car. In fact, I insist, let go with your new toy."

Meanwhile, Sandy had locked herself in her small apartment. The trial was planned to start the next day, but still, the young woman was perfectly serene. Of course, the cocaine she was regularly absorbing helped her to remain calm. She kept repeating to herself: "All I have to do is answer the questions and never change my story. If I was able to convince a bunch of cops that Johnny has raped me, I should easily do the same with a shitty judge."

Effectively, the trial would be held in face of a judge and without a jury. Since Johnny's attorneys had paid a fortune to quicken the date of the trial, a week was not long enough to assemble an equitable jury. The news of Sandra McPhee aggression was so popular that it would have been impossible to find people that were not aware of the case. It would also have been difficult to find someone believing that Johnny was not guilty, with the exception of Tommy McMillan. In fact, Sandy was wandering why this guy was using his column to destroy her. Was he not supposed to be part of her team? She would have liked to complain to Yannick but for the last seven days, he was not available. He was playing dead. Of course, he had mentioned to her that during the trial she could only count on herself. She never figured that he meant it in such a firm way. She had to deal with the fake rape and the police all by herself. It did not please her at all to see her face in all the newspapers and all over the place. And now, the day of the trial was tomorrow. She was trying to keep faith, but still, it won't be easy. She figured she should be getting more than a million dollars. When all will be done, she will ask for twice that amount. Double the money or else, she will sell her story to the journalists. That's the way it will be. Yannick better be careful. On the other hand, she knew the man had not completely abandoned her. She was regularly receiving the cocaine he had promised her. On that point, she had nothing to complain about. Yannick made sure that she always had the drugs she needed. The little bags were being placed daily and at the same time in her mail box. For the moment, she had to admit that she was satisfied with the arrangement.

If the day before the trial found Sandy not too nervous, it was different for John Richard. At seven o'clock, on that Sunday night, immediately after Manou was buried, he could be found in his large office of Los Angeles. He was sitting at a massive conference table and was surrounded by all his assistants. Even if most people did not favor his presence, Johnny was part of the meeting. Not only was he slowing down the progress of the meeting, he was obstructing it. If he was not frequently requesting water for his dog, he wanted something for himself or cried almost constantly. Every time he heard something he didn't like, he elaborated another plan to commit suicide. He was crying over Manou's death and about his present situation. For Richard, he was

totally useless for the reason that during the so called rape, he was sleeping. He had absolutely no idea how the stone-fish found by the police in Manou's room got in his house. He even kept referring to it as cat-fish or roc-fish. He was totally unhelpful but, John wanted him to be present. Since he was liberated from the City Jail, Johnny had been living at his attorney's house. Badly saddened by Manou's death, the young man was afraid to go back to his castle. He was convinced that bad spirits were now living there. He had also declared that if he was left alone with his sorrow, he would kill himself. In quite different circumstance, John would have done as usual an ignored Johnny's threat. However, this time, the situation was different. The experiences lived by his client were sordid and terrible. John was also aware that the singer suffered from Peter Pan syndrome. He could, in no way, leave the young man by himself. He would certainly commit suicide. John had been Johnny's watch dog for about a week. He made sure he had three meals a day, slept properly and mostly understood that he had to calm down. John would have liked to have someone in his life to help him with these nanny duties, but the nice man was still single.

The most popular attorney in Los Angeles had graduated at Harvard University and was first of his class. But today, he was worried. To this date, he had nothing to establish Johnny's innocence. He was convinced that his client had been set-up. And what a perfect set-up it was. On that day preceding the trial, all persons sitting around the table were aware that the rock star was a virgin. The unusual young man had never even kissed or touched a woman. They all knew that even if he liked to brag and sometime play the tough guy, in reality, he was incapable of any physical violence. However, what they knew had no value in front of a judge. How could they possibly prove that Johnny was innocent? How did the stone-fish ever appear in Manou's room? John knew that the woman never bought the fish. His assistants had made quite a few researches and found that this kind of fish was very rare and impossible to find in Los Angeles. Because of his dangerous venom, the sale of this fish was prohibited in the country. Another point of importance is that Manou never bought a new fish without showing it to Johnny. And in this case, Johnny knew nothing about the new tenant of Manou's bedroom aquarium. The legal team also figured that it was sort of strange that the killing fish appeared on the same day that Sandra McPhee slept in the castle. Also unusual that after tucking the young man in bed, Manou left the house to go to downtown Los Angeles. She normally never left her son alone in the house; never, unless it was an emergency. So, what was the emergency on that night? John's assistant had contacted all the taxi companies to find that no cab, whatsoever, had gone to the residence of, Manouchka Tarrah on that night. Same applied for limousine services. So, how Manou travel to Sunset Boulevard? Why was she wearing such a nice dress? They were convinced that she was not out on a romantic rendezvous. Sandra McPhee claimed that she had met her close to the Los Angeles University, at the corner of Hilgard Avenue and Sunset Boulevard. What was also bizarre is that no one had recognized Manou in the area. Not a merchant or restaurant owners. It was strange because Johnny's mother was also a celebrity. In Los Angeles, she could not go anywhere without being identified. John's theory is that she was waiting for someone. But, who could she have been waiting for? The way she was dressed, she may have been waiting for a lover, or at least, for someone she wanted to impress? As soon as Johnny heard that hypothesis, he rejected the idea.

"My mother would never receive a man in our house. Never! Never! You have to understand this. Manou had class; she was a good person."

John knew enough about Manou's secret life to assume that he may be on a good trail. But, there were no proof; he could not be one hundred percent sure. During the investigation in the house, no glasses were found with the finger prints or DNA of anyone, except for Johnny, Manou and Sandra McPhee. John had no one stating that Manou had received someone. The investigation was still going on because his assistants had not yet questioned everyone. There was a certain Mrs. Gilbert to meet. She was known as the woman with binoculars. A while ago, Manou had sued the woman for invasion of privacy. In fact, three or four years ago, the woman in question would spend hours behind of her living room window to spy on her renowned neighbors. Manou had used her own binoculars to observe the woman. But now, the curious Mrs. Gilbert was out of town until the following Monday. There was no way she could become a witness for the defense. John considered the problem for a short moment before declaring to his assistants:

"We know that on that afternoon, an unknown person called Manou's number. The called is listed on her display. I am sure that if we can identify the caller, we could have the name of this girl's accomplice..."

"I agree," replied one of the assistants. If there were no accomplice, how did she get rid on the jewelry she stole? There had to be someone to carry the jewelry out of the house."

"Sure," said another assistant. We visited every jewelers and brokers, but nothing... nobody tried to sell the jewelry."

"Also, we must remember that someone had to be there to lock the dog into Manou's room."

"That could have been the girl," suggested another one of the assistants.

"Of course," replied John, seemingly discouraged.

For the thousandth time, he looked at Johnny, hoping to learn something that could help him to solve the enigma.

"Are you sure, Johnny... you don't have any idea about the person who called that day?"

Before answering, Johnny scratched his head:

"Charlie and I, we spent the whole afternoon in the music room. From there, we can't hear much, not even the phone."

"But, isn't there something you can recall? A small detail, something Manou might have told you?"

"No, especially that on that day, she was mad at me. I had just gambled and lost a lot of money, so..."

"Do you think that Manou could have sold her jewelry?" continued John. "Do you reckon

that it could be possible?”

“I don’t know who she would have sold her jewelry to,” simply answered Johnny while lifting his shoulders. Anyway, she would never have done that. She was really attached to that stuff. Also, she had just received five million dollars from the record company. Why would she have sold her jewelry?”

At that point, the only valid information John had concerning Sandra McPhee, was the fact that she was not registered at the University of Los Angeles. One of his assistants had made the appropriate research and was certain of that conclusion. It was not much but it was starting evidence. If the presumed victim had lied on that point, she probably had lied on other things. They had to keep questioning her, again and again, to discredit her in front of the judge. But, how could they create a doubt? It was proven that the sperm they found on her came from Johnny. All the investigations established, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that there had been sexual activities. However, the tests also exposed the absence of sexual penetration. The hypothesis that she could have abused Johnny while he was asleep was a possibility. If only the tests could indicate at what time Johnny had taken the sleeping pills... that would have been a way out. According to the pathological records, Manou died around ten o’clock at night. If there was an aggression, it had to happen after that time. Otherwise, Manou would have intervened.

“Goddamn!” yelled John. If we could prove that Johnny took his sleeping pills one hour before Manou’s death, we would have a chance.”

“What I would like to know,” said Johnny, “is the identity of the person who hit this Sandy McPhee. I can’t believe she did it to herself.”

“On that point, Johnny, you are right, approved John. “Only a man can hit with such strength. The doctors established that some strikes were launched that night. That means that the girl had an accomplice and that he was in the house.”

He thought for a few seconds and continued:

“OK! Here is what we are going to do. Tomorrow, I will question that woman in all possible aspects. If something is not right, I will find out. I will also interrogate that Tommy MacMillan. I want to know how he found out so rapidly about the drama that happened that night.”

“It’s somewhat strange that he is on my side, don’t you think?” asked Johnny.

“Effectively,” whispered John. I will ask him about his change of mind. I can’t wait to hear his explanation.”

The lawyer looked at his six assistants and added:

“Michael, I want you to keep bugging the telephone company. They must give us the telephone number of the person that called Manou.”

“You can count on me, John. If I have to, I will sleep at their door step.”

“As soon as you have the info, come to join me at the court house. And you, Karl...”

“Yes, John?”

“You will park your car in front of Johnny’s neighbor and if she shows her face, make her talk.”

“Will do.”

“Well,” concluded John, let’s get some rest. Tomorrow will be a tough day at the court.”

Later that night, just before to sleep, Johnny took advantage of the fact that he was alone to call his “guardian angel”. When this one answered, he heard:

“Hello, Tom. Tell me... are you still my Guardian Angel, yes or no?”

“Your Guardian Angel for one day; your Guardian Angel for always,” replied Yannick.

“That’s good, because I really need you,” continued Johnny. Things are not very good for me right now. I can tell you that Mister Universe played a dirty trick on me.”

“Yes, I know, I guess we can say that this time, you are in deep shit!”

“I swear to you!” cried out the young man. “I did not do anything bad.”

“Don’t worry, Johnny. I believe you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Then, please help me. I beg of you. If not, I will kill myself.”

‘Calm down, my friend.’ pleasantly retorted Yannick. You can’t kill yourself for so little. Anyway, if you really wanted to shoot yourself; it would already be done. Instead, you called me and that was the right thing to do.”

“So, you will help me?”

“Of course, what can I do?”

“I’m not quite sure, but, you could start by finding some information about the case. My layers have been searching but did not find anything worthwhile.”

“What kind of information?”

“Well, they claimed that if we can find the person who called Manou before coming to our place, we would have the accomplice of that stupid girl who says all these bad lies about me. My

lawyers are sure that some bad person is the cause of my problems and that I was set up.”

“That is evident, young man.”

Johnny remained silent while Yannick continued:

“Did I ever tell you the kind of work I do, my young friend?”

“Hum... no, you never told me,”

“I never told you because it’s a secret. But I can reveal the truth to you. I’m sure you will not betray me.”

“You can be sure of that. I never told anyone about you. Not even Manou.”

“OK, young man, let me tell you. I am a secret agent, someone like James Bond.”

“Wow! yelled Johnny totally impressed. I’m talking to a real secret agent? Wow!”

“You are, but don’t tell it to anyone.”

“I swear on the head of my mother. If I lie, I will go to hell.”

“All right then, proposed Yannick. Here what I will do. I’ll start investigating right away. However, I don’t want you to call me at any time before the trial. My assistance must be kept a secret. Don’t worry anymore. As soon as I find something, I will inform your lawyer. Do you agree with that?”

“OK, but please... find something real fast. I can’t wait to be out of trouble.”

“What will you do after you are clear?”

“Well, I don’t know, I guess I’ll keep going with my career; if my fans still want me.”

“Of course they will. Your fans love you. You know that.”

“Not right now. My fans believe that I really did bad things to that damn girl.”

“Listen, I know that your mother is deceased. When your legal problem will be over with will manage your career?”

“John Richard will take the place. He promised me the other day. I presently live at his place. I’m lucky to have him.”

“That is perfect, replied Yannick. But if John should let you down, you can count on me.”

“What did you say? You, a secret agent, would accept to help me with my career?”

“It is not the secret agent that would help you. It would be your guardian angel.”

“Great! If John should change his mind, I will get in touch with you.”

“Call me after the trial.”

“I will.”

Yannick had been expecting Johnny’s call for over a week. He almost believed that the rock star did no longer believe in angels. But, it was not the case. However, if he hadn’t received that call, his strategy would have remained the same. The fact that Johnny called established that he still trusted him. Now that he knew John Richard’s problems, the fun part of the game could begin.”

“Well... what do you think, girls?” he asked while looking at the sky through the window. “Phase three of the plan is far from being done, but, one thing I must say, from now on, it will be fun. We will enjoy ourselves.”

X

The next morning, at eight o'clock, John Richard and Johnny were on the way to the court house. The young man feared that he would end this day behind bars while the lawyer was doing everything he could to hide his own uncertainty concerning the outcome of the trial. But he had a plan and that gave him some reassurance. However, he knew little about the girl he would soon face in the witness box. That woman remained a mystery. Who was she? Because of her brilliant scenario, she had gained the favor of the public in only a few days. Who the hell was she and, God, where did she come from? She had no police report, no school report and no medical file. It seemed that Sandra McPhee was out of nowhere. John had no idea about her and wondered how she controlled her emotions so well. At this state, all he could hope for is that he would be able to reach, even break the woman and that she would collapse under the pressure.

Still driving his car, John had to stop for a red light; he yawned and drank from his coffee mug. The night before, he hardly slept. He kept thinking and analyzing. He looked at Johnny and noticed that his client also appeared exhausted. No use asking him if he had slept well. The answer was evident. The only one that had had a good night sleep was Charlie. John was almost envious. He looked at the small canine through his retro-view mirror. The dog was stretched on the back seat and peacefully resting.

"You know, that's what all is about," said John to Johnny in order to break the silence. "What I would give sometime to be a dog. Right now, I would like to be in Charlie's skin."

"I'm not against the idea," commented Johnny, "but why did you insist that we bring the dog? You know that I like him to be with me but I don't think they will let me bring him in front of the judge."

"Oh, believe me..." answered John, offering his first smile of the day. "I'll get him in."

"How do you know they will let him in?"

"He's a witness for the defense."

"Hey! Did you hear that Charlie? You will be a witness. You better do a good job. Otherwise, we will both end up in jail."

During that time, Yannick announced to Mel that he had to leave immediately for Las Vegas. Before leaving, he handed two envelopes to the big man and said they had to be delivered to the offices of John Richard.

"The first letter," he added, "must be delivered tonight or tomorrow. Tommy will tell you when. As soon as you receive his call, buy a large pizza, place that letter in the box and deliver the pizza to the offices of John Richard. Is that clear?"

"Should I leave the pizza to security agent at the entrance or should I take it to Richard's office?" wanted to know Mel.

“Hum...” hesitated Yannick. For the first deliveries, you may want to follow the protocol. So, if you have to, give the pizza box to the security agent.”

“That’s fine, Sir,” agreed Mel. “What about the other envelope?”

“That one should be delivered Wednesday. I’m just giving it to you in case I’m delayed. If all goes well in Vegas, I should be back. If I’m not back, go to any restaurant, buy a chicken and deliver it to John Richard.”

“I’ll do it. You can count on me.”

As soon as Mel left, Yannick called Tommy. The reporter was quite surprised to hear of his interlocutor’s rapid departure.

“Can you tell me why the hell you are going to Vegas? I’d like to remind you that the trial will begin in a few minutes.”

“I know,” replied Yannick. “I can control the situation from Vegas as well as I can do it from here. I don’t need to be here.”

“But, what’s more important in Vegas then the trial in Los Angeles?”

“The jewelry, my friend. Manou’s jewelry.”

“What?”

“I have to get them back; the success of our case depends on that.”

“You are hard to comprehend, Yannick. But I think I’m starting to understand... is there some ‘turkey’ in your plan?”

“You got it!”

“All right, anything special I must do while you’re away?”

“Well, yes. Johnny called me last night and...”

“Really?”

“Yeap! He is counting on me to find information that could help his lawyer. Of course, my assistance must remain secret.”

“What kind of information are they looking for?”

“They are trying to find the identity of the mysterious person who called Manou a few hours before her death.”

“You are that person, are you not?”

“Of course, but I never used my cell phone. All the calls that could be of interest them came from Sandy’s phone, or from the cell I bought in Vegas.”

“And, of course, you are getting ready to give them the phone numbers in question?”

“Yes, as soon as Manou’s phone company will find and reveal the numbers. Unless he is totally incompetent, I’m sure Johnny’s lawyer requested the information. He and his team should soon have the numbers they want.”

“Why are you waiting until the telephone company gives them the numbers? Would it not be preferable to give them the info immediately?”

“Since the call was made from a cell phone, the phone company will only be able to give them the phone number. When it’s time, I will not only give them the number but also, the info related to that caller. The name of the owner, the other calls that were made on that cell, etc. Do you understand?”

“Not a bad idea. As soon as they realize that the number you are giving them is the same as the number given by the telephone company, they will take you seriously.”

“They will also be desperately waiting for my next delivery.”

“Good! Meanwhile, what do you want me to do?”

“As soon as you hear that they have Sandy’s cell number, I want you to call Mel and tell him to proceed with the first delivery.”

“Will do, anything else?”

“Yes, there is. In Johnny’s biography, you wrote a few pages concerning a fellow that looks like him.”

“That looks like him?” replied Tommy.” Are you kidding?” The guy looks exactly like him.”

“That much?”

“He could be his twin, I’m telling you! With the exception that he is not really blond, that his eyes are blue because of an implant, that he’s a few pounds heavier and that he is much more intelligent, the guy is a real double.”

“Are you still in contact with him?”

“Yes, why?”

“I would like to meet him. Can you arrange that?”

“Sure, I’ll see what I can do. Why is he of interest to you?”

“You shall see, you shall see, my friend. If he accepts to meet me, well, let him know that it will be to his financial advantage. I’ll make sure he receives enough money to last him for a while.”

“That’s intriguing. Well, I’m sure that under these conditions, he will accept to meet you; if only to hear what you have to say. When would you like to meet him?”

“At the end of the trial; ideally, next Monday would be perfect.”

“Do you really believe that the trial will be over by next Monday?”

“I more than believe; I’m certain.”

“OK... I’ll do what I can. I have to go, Yan. I’ll call you back as soon as I can.”

“Wait,” ordered Yannick. “There is one last thing: I would like you to come to my room and get Sandy’s cell phone as soon as possible. Keep the phone with you until Wednesday. Then, find a way to meet with her and drop the cell in her hand bag. Make sure the phone is operational. She mustn’t know what you did. It’s of premier importance. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know what you are preparing, Yannick,” sarcastically stated Tommy, “but let me tell you that I never met such a diabolical man. You are weird, my friend.”

“The fun will soon begin!” proudly declared Yannick before bringing an end to the conversation.

On that morning, at precisely nine o’clock, began one of the most publicized trials of the decade. At least a hundred journalist and curious citizens by the thousands were gathered in the street to witness Johnny’s arrival at the Courthouse. None was there with the intention of supporting the rock star. In fact, what he was accused of doing was disgusting to his fans and they had turned against him. The short walk between the sidewalk and the main entrance of the courthouse was the longest walk Johnny had ever taken. The poor little fellow was trembling to the point that he needed his attorney’s physical support. This one was holding his client by the shoulder and telling him to ignore the insults thrown in their direction.

“Courage, Johnny, don’t pay no mind to these people; we’re almost in the building,” kept repeating John Richard.

From the inside of the building, they could still hear:

“Dirty pervert! Throw the bastard in jail and destroy the key! Death to Johnny!”

“After he spent a whole night next to Manou’s cadaver,” cried out Johnny, “my poor little dog has to hear all these insults. He must be traumatized, that’s for sure.”

Less than ten minutes later, Johnny was sitting in the accused chair like a vulgar criminal. He didn’t have the nerve to look at anyone. He kept his eyes closed and was lightly kissing Charlie’s head. The poor boy could hardly hear the words pronounced by the general attorney as he was

giving his primary opening.

“Your Honor, said the district attorney, my opening will be brief. I do not need an extended monologue to establish that behind the angel face of the accused, lounges an authentic monster. A monster that is capable of the deadliest sin. I do not need a long speech, your Honor. The victim’s face tells the whole story.”

As he was talking, he stood right next to Sandra McPhee.

“Look at this face, your Honor. Observe all the wounds and scars. Defacements that will live with her, be ever present and haunt her and remind her of the treatment she received from Johnny McLean. The medical tests that were made may not prove without a doubt that Mrs. McPhee was raped; however, they show, without any possible doubt, that the accused took advantage of the victim to satisfy his vulgar and corrupted urges. When we look at all the wounds, it perfectly shows that Mrs. McPhee was savagely hammered by the accused. This is the reason, your Honor, why I have no need to make a long presentation and that I don’t require lots of witnesses to make my point. The victim is the only witness that I will present to this court”

So far, the district attorney had only faced the judge. He turned to face the audience and declared:

“I call Sandra McPhee to the witness box.”

Sand, timidly stood and walked toward the witness box and set at the left of Judge Malfoy. It was the moment of truth. She was aware that after the favorable interrogatory from the district attorney, she would have to face John Richard. She understood that this second set of questions would be much more grueling. Her story had to be logical and solid. She could not make any blunders. She had to keep in mind the rewards she would get for her performance. Soon, yes, very soon, she would become a rich woman. The cocaine she snuffed just before, while visiting the courthouse bathroom, should help her control her apprehensiveness. Once she was sitting in the witness box, she looked at the district attorney to indicate to him that she was ready.

“Mrs. McPhee,” began the attorney known as Mr. Adams, “can you explain to us in what circumstance you met Mrs. Tarah, the mother of the accused?”

“Of course,” murmured Sandy, trying to express herself properly.

“Could you please talk louder?” continued Mr. Adams.

The young woman cleared her throat and increased the tone of her voice.

“I met Mrs. Tarah on Sunset Boulevard, near the junction of Hilgrade Avenue, where Los

Angeles University is...”

“That’s where you are studying law, is that right?” clarified the District attorney.

“Well... Yes,” answered Sandy while lowering her eyes. “When I met her, I had just realized that I had lost the keys of my apartment and to make it worse, I didn’t have a dime on me. I had no credit card... nothing. Not even enough money to take the subway to go...”

“What time was it?”

“Hard to say,” answered Sandy. Could have been somewhere around nine-fifteen, maybe a little later or a little sooner.”

“Either way, it was too late for you to call a locksmith. So, it would have been useless for you to try to borrow money from a friend?”

“Exactly, I was condemned to spend the night outside. Another point is that the concierge at my building was not going to be on location that evening. Also, I am new in Los Angeles and I really don’t have any friends. Anyway, nobody I could call to borrow money. My plan was to ask a person, walking by, to lend me a few dollars so that I could go home. Once there, I would have spent the night in the hall and the next day, I would have called a locksmith.”

“And, this is how you met Mrs. Tarah?”

“Yes... continued Sandy. She was passing by and since she was a woman, I felt I could trust her.”

“So, you asked her some money to pay your subway fare?”

“Yes.”

“And then?”

“Well, I explained my predicament and instead of giving money, she declared that it was inconceivable for a young lady like me to spend the night outside, just like a homeless person.”

“So, she suggested that you spend the night at her place?”

“Yes.”

“How did you get to her place?”

When he heard the answer, ‘by taxi’, John Richard began to take notes.

“Very well, said attorney Adams. “At that time, did you know who Manouchka Tarah really was?”

“Absolutely!” rapidly replied Sandy. That’s why I immediately trusted her. In fact, after inviting me to sleep at her house, the first thing she told me is that she was Johnny Boy’s mother.”

“Did she invite you to meet him?”

“No, but she did mentionned that Johnny was already in bed.”

“So, you boarded a taxi with her and went to her house. Then, what happened?”

“Well, she showed me my room and said that it suited me perfectly because the room was called ‘Sleeping Beauty’. Of course, that night, I did not have all these injuries.”

“Did she first offer you something to drink?”

“Oh yes, that’s true. It was very cold that night and to warm me-up, she offered me something to drink. It was quite strong. I think she gave me a glass of Scotch.”

“That justifies your finger prints on one of the glasses. The other prints on that same glass came from Mrs. Tarah. Was there anyone else in the house?”

“Except for Johnny Boy? No...”

“And, apparently, Johnny Boy was sleeping.”

“Apparently... yes.”

“What happened after?”

“Well, Mrs Tarah walked me to my room and informed me that I was right next to Johnny’s room, called Peter Pan.”

“And then?”

“She wished me a good night and then she left.”

“Based on your deposition,” continued attorney Adams, “between the times that Mrs Manouchka Tarah left you and the time that Johnny knocked at your door; approximately thirty minutes had passed.”

“I think that’s right.”

“So, what time was it?”

“I would say that it was around nine forty five.”

Sandy corrected herself and stated that it was more likely ten o’clock, may be ten fifteen.

“Do you believe that Mrs Tarah was already dead at that time?”

“I think so.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Because... Johnny was talking very loud and his dog was barking like crazy. If Mrs. Tarah was still alive, I’m sure she would have come to the room to see what was going on.”

“If the dog was barking so loud, do you presume that it was because he had witnessed something terrible... like the death of Manouchka?

At this point, John Richard objected:

“Objection, your Honor, it is evident that the prosecutor is suggesting an answer to the victim.”

“Objection sustained,” said the judge.

“Very well,” said attorney Adams while handing a photo to Sandy. “Mrs. McPhee, this is a stonefish. While you were at the castle, did you see or did anyone show you something that looked like it?”

“No.”

“And you are not the one who brought such a specimen to the residence of Mrs. Tarah?”

“Not at all,” rapidly answered Sandy. “Of all my life, I have never seen something like that. I didn’t even know that such a creature existed.”

“Between the time Mrs. Tarah left you and the time that Johnny appeared at your door, do you believe that Johnny could have visited his mother, give her the stonefish, watch her die and then come back to your room to do what he did?”

“No way!” yelled Johnny while standing-up from his seat. “Now, this freak wants to accuse me of killing my own mother!”

The young man did not have the time to say anything else. The judge ordered his attorney to control his client or else, he would be removed from the court.

“Do not worry your Honor. I will take care of my client,” declared attorney Richard. “However, I would like to bring to the attention of the court that we are not here to determine what happened to Mrs. Tarah. We are here to discover if this woman, in front of us, was attacked by my client. I do believe that Prosecutor Adams is following a route that seems totally inappropriate.”

The judge shared Richard’s opinion and instructed the prosecutor to stay within the limits of the trial.

“Your Honor,” objected Prosecutor Adams. “I am not trying to suggest that Mister McLean has killed his mother. I’m trying to demonstrate that at the moment he erupted in Mrs. McPhee’s

room...”

“ERUPTED, did you say?” yelled John Richard. “Erupted? Less than five minutes ago, you declared that Johnny knocked at her door and now you are saying ERUPTED?”

“I’m in agreement with Mister Richard,” decided the judge. “Mister Adams, you will have to choose your terms more appropriately. In my book, to erupt somewhere does not mean knocking at the door.”

“You are right,” whispered the prosecutor, visibly impatient. “The wrong word came to my mind. What I’m trying to demonstrate is that when Johnny McLean knocked at the victim’s door...

“Presumed victim,” interrupted John Richard.

Prosecutor Adams irritably looked at John Richard and continued:

“What I’m trying to clarify is that when Mister McLean knocked at the door of the presumed victim, he was aware that he did not have to worry about an intervention from his mother and he knew he could freely do what he wanted to do.”

“Objection, your Honor!” aggressively replied John. “Here we go again. Our friend the procurer maliciously tries to suggest that my client has something to do with his mother’s death.”

“Sustained,” Said the judge. “Mister Adams, this is my last warning. Stay on the subject of our concern.”

Adams took a short pause to control the high level of frustration that was invading him and continued:

“Let’s resume, Mrs. McPhee: Mrs. Tarah left you and about thirty minutes later, Johnny McLean knocked at your door. Tell me what happen then?”

“Well, he introduced himself and said he was Johnny Boy. Of course, I was real impressed. Anybody would have been. I think he noticed it... that could be why... to convince me to go to his room, he added that I was as pretty as Sleeping Beauty.”

“What?” exclaimed Johnny. “I find this girl hideous!”

While the judge was severely staring at him, it would have been possible to hear an insect fly. Poor Johnny clumsily reacted and sat back in his seat.

“I’m sorry Mister your Honor. I won’t do it again.”

Sandy was then invited to continue her testimony:

“After his nice compliment, he invited me to follow him into his room and suggested we play Monopoly.”

“To play a game of Monopoly?” ironized Prosecutor Adams. “That’s original! The next time I want to seduce a woman, I will remember this strategy. It seemed to have worked with you. Isn’t that right?”

“Hum... yes”, ingenuously agreed Sandy. “I must say that I love the game of Monopoly. So, I followed him into his room. Then, he gently closed the door behind us, as if he was trying not to make any noise.”

“And then?”

“Then? Well, he jumped on me like a beast.”

Sandy acted her role as a real pro. She pulled a small handkerchief from her pocket and wiped tears from her eyes.

“Relax, Mrs. McPhee,” said the prosecutor while bringing her a glass of water.

“Drink a little, it will help you calm down.”

Seemingly sympathizing with her, he watched while she grabbed her glass with a trembling hand. He then added:

“I understand that it’s not easy for you, but... you must tell the court what happened.”

The woman took a deep breath before continuing her story.

“He... he pushed me on his bed, which looked like a pirate ship, and then, he ordered me to remove all my clothing.”

“Had he already removed his clothing?”

“No, not yet; he looked like a mad man. I was scared. I told him that he did not need to be so violent to convince me to... to do it with him. I told him I was consenting. I was really scared, do you understand? But... that’s the only way I had to calm him down and prevent getting hurt.”

“So, you acted as if you were willing to play with him?”

“Exactly. At first, it was working. He stretched his body over mine and... he touched me... and then, he kissed me. Of course, I played the game and kissed him back. I also caressed him a little. And then, everything turned wild. As soon as he removed his clothing... the problem

started...”

“I see,” said the prosecutor. “What was the problem?”

“Well, it’s a little embarrassing...”

“You still have to tell us, Mrs. McPhee.”

“Well, once he was naked, he tried to get inside me.”

“And?”

“Well, it didn’t work.”

“Is that right?” asked Adams. “A problem of impotence, is that what it was?”

“Hum, no... hesitated Sandy. It was mostly a problem of... how can I say? A problem of size.”

“Size? Size of what?”

“Of his penis... he was unable to...”

“Do you mean that he was unable to get inside you?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

At that moment, Johnny was dying of shame. He didn’t dare look back at the people that were mockingly observing him. Sandy continued:

“And then, I must admit that I was not very nice.”

“Why do you mean?” wanted to know the prosecutor.

“Because, well... I laughed at him. I didn’t really want to, you understand? But I was nervous. I was living the most difficult moments of my life and then, it happened. I laughed and laughed... I was out of control.”

“And that’s when he got mad? Is that it?”

“Yes, exactly,” replied the young woman. “I shouldn’t have laughed at him but it was now too late. He called me all sorts of names and started hitting me.”

She took another pause, wiped her tears one more time and continued:

“He wouldn’t stop... he was hurting me... really hurting me. I would never have believed that such a little person could hit with so much might.”

“We must consider”, explained the prosecutor, “that for a woman you are a small person. In fact, you are about the same size as the accused. But of course, he is a man...”

“That’s it,” agreed Sandy. Anyway, I’m not very good at defending myself. Violence is not my cup of tea.”

“That is honorable”, added prosecutor Adams. So now, he battered you with all his strength. What happened after that?”

“After, well... I was almost knocked out. I was so dizzy. I didn’t have any strength left. I had yelled so much that I was out of voice. Anyway, there was no one to hear me, nobody.”

“Did Mr. McLean ever say that he would kill you?”

“Yes, he threatened me. After beating me, he said that if I tried to run away he would have somebody to kill me.”

“And that’s the reason why you stayed, even while he was sleeping?”

“No, not really... before he went to sleep, he hit me three times with his fist. He hit me really violently. And I mean violently. It’s probably when I passed out. That’s all I can recall. When I woke-up, the police was there.”

“Very good, Mrs. McPhee, you can return to your seat. I’m done with my questions.

As soon as Sandy did as asked, the prosecutor faced the judge and said:

“Considering the content of this testimony and considering the irrefutable proofs against the accused, his attorney will of course, and one more time, try to justify his client’s actions by saying that the poor little guy suffers from Peter Pan syndrome. He will claim that because his client suffers from this disease, he can’t be held responsible for his actions. I’m sorry to say that I do not accept this form of defense. First of all, I’m not sure that this syndrome really exists. And, if I’m wrong, I can’t accept that a man, or even a man-child, can be feeble-minded enough to ignore that to sexually molest another person is wrong. I don’t think that Johnny McLean is sufficiently mentally deficient to believe that it is normal to beat a woman, to put her life in danger and to threaten her of death. I know that Peter Pan use to fight pirates. However, the Peter Pan that I know was mostly courteous with the young ladies. He never attacked them; he protected them. That’s why he was fighting the pirates. He was protecting the women that he loved. He protected good against evil. This being said; don’t exasperate me by declaring that a person suffering from the Peter Pan syndrome is unable to distinguish good from bad. Peter Pan himself showed us otherwise. If the defense persists in telling us that the accused cannot make the difference between good and evil, then, Mr. McLean suffers from a more serious sickness; like schizophrenia. If this is the case, then he does not deserve to live among us and not even in prison. He should be kept in a mental institute. At this point, I’m only guessing. I am not a psychiatrist. I can’t really state that Mister McLean suffers from mental sickness. However, I know one thing. This man is dangerous and for that reason, he must live outside of our society and for a very long while.”

The prosecutor returned to his seat. Just before sitting down he announced:

“The prosecution is done, your Honor. We have no other witness.”

“Very well,” answered the judge. “In this case, the defense can proceed with their arguments.”

At this moment, Tommy would have liked to leave the court room to call Yannick and let him know that Sandy had done exceptionally well. But, he would have missed some of what was about to happen next. He was intrigued and wanted to know how John Richard would manage to invalidate the prosecutor’s proceedings.

Before rising from his chair, John Richard thought, within himself: “I hope my sleepless night brought me wisdom.”

Normally sure of himself, he picked-up his notes and walked toward the judge. Before he could say a word, one of his assistant entered the court like a tornado. John immediately requested a five minutes postponement from the judge, and It was worth it. At least, that’s what he first believed. He was informed that the person living in the house across from Johnny’s castle was finally at home. The woman had declared that she does not have time to keep an eye on her neighbor’s house, but that night, she had noticed that a car had been parked in front of the house for most of the evening. After she received a written agreement that she would not be charged for spying, or other similar thing, she had accepted to give her testimony.

“Bless the Lord!” thought John while trying to hide his satisfaction. “I was just getting ready to start my address to the court. Where is the woman?”

“Here is the problem,” answered John’s assistant. She refuses to come here today. She will only present herself tomorrow morning.”

“Damn it,” protested John.” Did you at least add her up to our witnesses list?”

“Of course.”

“All right. Now, I want you to do something else for me. I had an idea while the prosecutor was questioning McPhee. I want you to bring Johnny’s doctor to this court. I also want you to go to my house and pick-up Johnny’s pills. They are right next to the bed where he sleeps in at my place. It’s written ‘Mogadon’ on the bottle. Can you do that?”

“Yes sir, I’ll do it as fast as I can.”

“Go, I’m counting on you.”

John started his presentation as Tommy was wandering if the attorney had received a

certain phone number.

“Your Honor, contrary to what the prosecution declared, I want you to be assured that I will not use the Peter Pan’s syndrome to justify my client’s so called attack against the victim, because Johnny never attacked Mrs. McPhee. I am positive that this young man is incapable of an act of violence against anyone. I have known him for years and other people that have known him for a long time will agree with me. Another point that I must mention is that my client had no desire to attack Mrs. McPhee; he is asexual. I am not trying to say that my client is emasculated, your Honor. If he does not have sexual relationship, it is because of a choice that he has made. Should he ever change his mind, we can all be sure that he would not have to wait a long time to find a potential partner. There would be a line-up in front of his door. Without insulting Mrs. McPhee, let me say that Johnny could find much better than her. Johnny would not be the aggressor. On the contrary, we would have to protect him against thousands of females. They would be the one trying to get in his pants and Johnny would be the vulnerable one. There is no way that Johnny ever stroked this woman. He never even raised a finger toward her. Even if he had wanted to, he would have been incapable of such action. He does not have the physical capabilities to hit anyone with such power. In fact, he is a feeble man. Look at him... he is hardly taller than the victim. I’m sure that if we placed them both on a scale, she would overweight him.”

People in the court room started to laugh, what gave to the attorney the chance to swallow a few drops of water. He was convinced that his presentation was playing in his favor. He almost believed that his sleepless night had given him the right inspiration.

“Of course, what I just said is easy to say but difficult to prove. I will attempt to prove my point during the following hours or even during the following days. I said ATTEMPT because... I know that it will not be easy. The set-up was so well prepared that at first sight, it seems infallible. For those of you who may not have understood what I just said, yes, I said a set-up, a well prepared set-up. That’s really what we have here; a real good set-up. Why would someone do this to Johnny Boy, do you ask? That is a good question and I am also addressing this question to myself. And so does Johnny. There can be so many reasons: jealousy, extortion, robbery. Do not forget that all of Mrs. Tarah jewelries disappeared that night... just like that, like magic. Equally, probably also by magic, Johnny McLean’s press agent was shot on that very same night. At approximately the same time, Manouchka Tarah was poisoned by a stonefish. By the way, we have no idea how the fish got into Johnny’s house. And, as if there are not enough coincidences, on that night, a perfect stranger is found in Johnny’s room. Too many coincidences, don’t you think? It could be an interesting scenario for a movie, but this is real life. All these incidents could not possibly have happened on that very same night. You have to perceive that it was a set-up. A set-up so well-conceived, that it cannot be originated by only Mrs. McPhee. There is someone else behind these events; an accomplice or maybe a few accomplices. Who knows? Some of these conspirators may presently be in this court. If such is the case, I want to thank them. Yes, thank these accomplices because they are making my proceedings easier. The set-up that you have imagined and created is excellent, but not perfect. In fact, nothing is perfect, absolutely nothing. If you could only discern how the testimony of the presume victim sounds incoherent to me! If you don’t understand that point, my friends, it is only because your strategy had some serious weak points. You did not think

of everything; far from it. But, that was not your biggest error. Oh no! Your worst blunder, the one that will make it possible for me to defeat you in this court, is that: you hired McPhee to be your main witness. If you really wanted to loose in this court, then... you did the right thing. But too bad! The dices are already rolling on the table. And now, to demonstrate to you and without a doubt, the innocence of my client, I will use a rare and risky legal approach. Your Honor, the first person I will call to the witness box is the accused. I'm therefore asking Jonny McLean to be my first witness."

It was in fact an extremely risky tactic. By bringing his client as a first witness, John was almost throwing him to the teeth of the prosecutor. As he was watching Johnny walking and carrying his dog toward the witness box, John was hoping that he had taken the right approach.

"Mr. Richard," asked the judge, "do we really need the dog?"

"At this state, your Honor," replied John, "we do not, but a little later, we will."

"So why your client is carrying his dog?"

"Well, until I need him, you wouldn't want this sweet little canine to urinate on the carpet, would you? I think that it's preferable to let his owner keep an eye on him."

"I am warning you, Mr. Richard," harshly declared the judge, "the dog's presence better be pertinent or else, I will have to fine you."

"Do not be concerned, your honor, all will be fine."

The presence of the dog temporarily under control, John began questioning his witness.

"Johnny, the prosecutor mentioned the presence of a stonefish in your house. How did this fish get there?"

"I have no idea!" answered Johnny while raising his shoulder. "I had never seen this beast before the police showed it to me."

"So, you're not the one who gave this fish to Manou?"

"Not at all! Now, it is true that she adored her fishes, but if I had given her a new one, it would have been something different than this stonefish. Did you look at it? Looks like a rock. Either way, I didn't even know that kind of fish existed."

"As most of us, I'm sure. Do you think that Manou could have bought this fish for herself?"

"It's possible, but not on the day of her death. She didn't go out on that day."

"How do you know? Where you not in your music room for most of the day?"

"True, but normally, Manou never left the house without telling me."

“Wasn’t she really mad at you on that day? Mad because you had lost all your money at the casino?”

“Oh yes, she was really upset with me, but not to the point of leaving the house without telling me. In fact, she visited me twice on that day. The first time, was to let me know that the record company had given us a loan and the second time, it was to tell me that the diner was ready.”

“Do you think she could have bought the stonefish the day before?”

“Didn’t you ever look at my mother’s aquariums? All of her fishes are extremely beautiful. Why would she want to mess-up her aquarium with a fish that looks like a rock? Anyway, if she had purchased a new fish, she would have shown it to me. It was a ritual for her to introduce her new pets to me.”

“We know that this fish was new to your household. When the police officers noticed his presence, he was in some kind of a bowl. Is it possible that Manou kept him apart until she show it to you?”

“If this is the case,” answered Johnny, “it only means that she would have received the fish as a gift, and if it’s right, it would happen only after I went to bed. No one came to our house on that day or during the evening. This stonefish is a real mystery, I tell you.”

“And so are many other incidents that occurred on that day,” commented John. “Now, we know that at three thirty, on that afternoon, your mother received a call. We don’t know where the call came from. Do you?”

“No, at that time I was in the music room. From there I can hear the doorbell but not the telephone.”

“Manou never told you anything about that call?”

“No, nothing.”

“Think deeply Johnny; it’s very important. Manou never told you anything about the call she received on that afternoon?”

“No, but now that you mention it, I recall that she was in a very good mood during diner. The bad mood she was in during the morning had faded away.”

“So, it is possible that her good mood came back after the phone call. Maybe she was invited on a date?”

“My mother never went out on dates. She was not that kind of woman. She was not like this other woman, over there. My mother was not a whore.”

“Objection your Honor,” yelled the procured. “The words of the accused are not only offensive but they are out of place.”

“Hey you!” replied Johnny, “I spent the first nine months of my life in the belly of a whore. When I see one of them, I can identify her from a distance.”

“Your Honor,” objected the prosecutor. “I insist that excuses be made to Mrs. McPhee.”

The judge did not have to say anything to Johnny, because John Richard himself ordered his client to apologize immediately.

“I’m sorry,” said Johnny.

And John insisted by saying:

“You should say: I’m sorry Mrs. McPhee. I’m truly sorry.”

“Please forgive me, Mrs. McPhee. I’m truly sorry.”

“Good,” said John. “So we can continue. Now, if I understand well, you have no idea about the person who called your mother and you don’t know if she was expecting a visitor the evening that she died. OK! Let’s talk of something else. I am aware that every night, as you went to bed, your mother came to your room to **tuck** you in and gave you one or two sleeping pills to help you sleep. I also know that she stayed by you until you fell asleep. Is that what happened that night?”

“Yes.”

“At what time did you go to bed?”

“On that night, I took Manou’s advice and went to bed earlier. It was around eight fifteen, I believe.”

“At what time did you fall asleep?”

Johnny thought for a few seconds before answering:

“Hum... I remember that this evening, Manou insisted that I take two pills. She suggested that with the album soon coming out and the mega tour I would have to make, I needed some rest and sleep. Normally, when I swallow two pills, it takes me around twenty or twenty five minutes before falling asleep”

“So, around eight thirty, you were sleeping.”

“I was sleeping like an angel.”

“And Manou stayed by you until you fell asleep?”

“As she did every night.”

“How was she dressed?”

“Well, she wore a simple dress. I think it was pink; yes, it was. It was the kind of dress she put on when nothing special was happening.”

“So, you have no idea why your mother, a few hours before being bitten by a stonefish, had removed her house dress and put on a sophisticated gown?”

“No idea,” answered Johnny while he was lifting his shoulder one more time. “The gown she was wearing the night she died, she only had it on one time before. She wore it for the Oscar ceremony. The time I won the prize for the best score for a film. She may have put it on to see if it still fitted her. Maybe she wanted to wear it the day my new record would come on the market.”

“And the jewelries,” asked the lawyer. “Why did she put on her jewelries?”

“I don’t know,” one more time answered Johnny.

“In her testimony, Mrs. McPhee declared that she met Manou on Sunset Boulevard around nine fifteen at night. However, we know that she was with you until eight thirty five. Between these two times, there are forty minutes difference. You know Manou better than anyone else. Can you tell us if you think that she could change her clothing, apply her make-up, leave the house and travel to Sunset Boulevard, at the corner of Hilgrade Avenue, in such a short time?”

“The Manou that I knew could never move that fast,” replied Johnny while offering a light smile. “She was rather heavy, you know, and somewhat slow.”

“Do you have any idea why she went to that area at that time of the night?”

“I have no idea,” whispered Johnny. “Sometime, she was going to Brady Bar, but that’s about it. She rarely went out. So, I have no idea why she went over there, unless...”

“Unless?”

“Unless there is a fish merchant in that area.”

“No, Johnny, we checked. And even if there was a merchant in this area, you can’t find any stonefish in Los Angeles.”

“I see.”

“Now, tell me; during the course of the evening, or the night, did you ever realize that you had a visitor in the house?”

“Of course not; I was sleeping.”

“Johnny, after a thorough examination, the tests concluded that during the night in question, you had sexual activities. How can a person have such activities without knowing it?”

“Listen,” yelled Johnny seeming totally desperate. “I know all this is mystifying, but... I don’t comprehend the whole thing. I told you, I was sleeping!”

“Are you a sleepwalker by any hazard?”

“No.”

“This woman, over there, claims that you sexually assaulted her before battering her. When the police arrived on site, they reported that they found the two of you in your bed and that you were both totally naked. Tell me, how can you explain that situation? How can someone attack a woman without knowing it?”

“I don’t know,” retorted Johnny who was almost crying. “I keep telling you; I was sleeping.”

“Then, there is only one other possibility...”

“Yes... this woman is lying. She did it all by herself while I was sleeping. In fact, she’s the one who abused me.”

“In this case, who punched her? We can’t possibly assume that she did it herself, can we?”

“Who knows? It’s a real mystery for me. She may have paid someone to beat her-up.”

“And then she accused you?”

“Exactly”

“But... why?”

“Maybe she wanted to black mail me and extort money from me. She wouldn’t be the first one, you know.”

“Did she solicit money from you since the events?”

“No.”

“So then, your plot isn’t very trustworthy, is it?”

“On the contrary,” added Johnny. “You see, she was misled. She didn’t know I had lost all my money in Las Vegas.”

“That is true,” approved John Richard. “If I remember well, that news was only published later.”

“Sure,” whispered Johnny. And after, it’s evident that this bitch...”

“I’m asking you to be more polite when you refer to Mrs. McPhee,” required the lawyer.

“O.K...” replied Johnny. “I’m sorry, sir, I mean your Honor. I was trying to say that Mrs. McPhee surely never estimated that my trial would be so soon.”

“Are you saying that she didn’t have the time to blackmail you?” questioned John.

“Exactly, and she never had the opportunity. After Manou’s death, I decamped out of the castle and I went to live with you. Since then, I’m always in your company. You never leave me by myself, so...”

“In this case, it was impossible for her to come near you.”

“Exactly.”

“Earlier, you said to me, and I quote: ‘I believe she paid an accomplice to beat her-up.’ So, you share my view and believe that Mrs. McPhee had an accomplice?”

“I’m sure of that. If there was no one to take care of Manou, how was Mrs. McPhee able to do all she did without worrying about getting discovered?”

“That is plausible. She surely knew that she would have no interference and that she was free to proceed with her plan.”

“Objection, your Honor,” interrupted the prosecutor. All they are saying are speculations. How can the accused pretend that Mrs. McPhee had an accomplice when he also declared that he was asleep during the whole operation?”

“Your Honor, replied John. I would like to point that my client did not say that Mrs. McPhee had an accomplice. He said that he was sure she did. It is not the same implication. We are trying to establish that the theory of a set-up is reasonable.”

“Keep going, Mr. Richard,” concluded the judge. “As long as you are merely ‘supposing’, I don’t have any problem.”

“Anyway, your Honor,” announced John. “I am done questioning this witness. He can no longer help the case since he was sleeping during all these sad events.”

“Mr. Adams,” asked the Judge. Do you wish to interrogate the witness?”

“Absolutely!” rapidly answered the prosecutor while rushing out of his seat.

XI

Attorney Adams rushed toward the witness box, placed both of his hands on the upper edge, stared at Johnny and said:

“Tell me, Mr. McLean, how does it feel to molest a defenseless young lady? How does it feel to use her to satisfy your filthy needs and then, beat the hell out of the poor girl?”

“But, I never did that!” swiftly protested Johnny.

“No, don’t answer my question,” continued Adams while ignoring the words of the accused. “Of course, you can’t answer, because... You were sleeping... isn’t that right?”

“But...”

“You are not aware that you are bad and abject because, each time you commit one of your crimes... you are sleeping. Or at least, you believe that you are sleeping. That’s your big excuse. It makes it easier for you to live with your unlawful behaviors. In fact, it may very well be a good stratagem. Other aggressors should take note. It could be a good way for them to escape justice.”

“But...” still protested Johnny.

“Do you know how I call someone who attacks another person during his bogus sleep?”

Of course, Johnny didn’t have time to answer; Mr. Adams did it for him.

“I call that person a mental monster suffering from Schizophrenia.”

Attorney Adams faced the judge and added:

“I don’t have any more questions, your Honor.”

“Do you have any other witness, Mr. Richard?” asked the judge.

“Yes, your Honor,” answered John Richard while controlling his laughter. “He said my client suffers from Schizophrenia... that’s amusing. Now, let’s get serious. I request that Mr. Ralph Steinberg come to witness box.”

As soon as Ralph Steinberg was named, a mumble was heard from the audience. Ralph was one of the top recording producers in the United States. He was also involved with cinematography. All actors and singers bowed in his presence. He was at the origin of many successful careers and productions. In the world of show business, many referred to him as ‘MIDAS’, for the reason that everything he touched turned to gold. For an artist, to fly under the wings of Steinberg meant

guaranteed success.

The man was in his fifties and had the appearance of a distinguished philanderer. As he walked toward the front of the court room, many stared at him with admiration. As he was accustomed to people's attitude toward him, he hardly paid attention. As soon as he took his seat behind the witness box, John Richard asked him to identify himself and to explain his relationship with Johnny McLean.

"I am Ralph Steinberg", calmly confirmed the witness. "Johnny is one of my artist-performers. I am privileged to have been producing his records for the last ten years. As time went on, he became the son that I never had. He is definitively one of our best artists and I could say our top artist."

"So, you know him very well?"

"Absolutely."

"Tell me, Mr. Steinberg, do you think that Johnny, the young man you know so well, do you believe he could be guilty of the crimes he is being charged with?"

"No way! And, as he says, I swear on my mother's head. May I go to hell if I lie."

"Well, as suggested by our good friend the prosecutor, do you believe that Johnny could have a secret life or maybe, a double personality that would allow him to commit all those regrettable crimes?"

"Totally ridicule," replied Steinberg with a sarcastic smile. "Even if Johnny wanted to commit one of these crimes, he would not be able. He is so naïve and weak... when his dog gets too active, he can hardly control it. This boy... beat a person, even a woman? Don't even think about it."

"You often travel with Johnny when he goes on tour, don't you?"

"Quite often."

"I assume that you know that he can only sleep with the help of sleeping pills?"

"Very true, that's a bad habit."

"Did you ever share his room?"

"The same room, never. The same suite, quite often. He even uses sleeping pills while we are flying"

"Does he always take his sleeping pills at the same time?"

"Yes, most of the time; he takes them around nine o'clock at night. However, when he is on tour he takes his pills a little later, meaning at the end of his shows."

"Is he the kind of person who likes to celebrate at the end of a show?"

“Not at all; contrary to other rock stars, the only thing Johnny wants to do after a show, is to return at the hotel and go to sleep. On that point, I can say that he is somewhat boring.”

“Personally, you like to celebrate after a show, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course, mostly when all went well. Johnny’s shows always go well. They are always a success.”

“So you like to celebrate?”

“Absolutely,” retorted Steinberg with a bright smile. “I normally live it up with Manou and the musicians.”

“Do you normally go out to?”

“Never. Manou never wanted to leave Johnny by himself. We would normally get together in the suite, share a few drinks and go to sleep.”

“At what time would your celebrations normally come to an end?”

“I don’t know”, hesitated Steinberg. “From one night to the other, it was never the same. Let’s say... around midnight, or one o’clock.”

“And, while your little parties where going on, Johnny was sleeping, is that right?”

“He was deeply asleep.”

“He never woke-up?”

“Never, even if some of the times we were quite noisy. Nothing would ever wake-up this little guy.”

“Not even a barking dog?”

“Not even a barking dog!” insisted Steinberg with a large grin. “In fact, it frequently happened that his dog would bark at us; mostly when we would get too close to the suite he shared with his master.”

“And Johnny would never wake-up?”

“That is the absolute truth. In fact, we use to joke about it in the group. I remember telling Johnny that his pet had been barking like a mad dog during the night. Each time, he appeared totally surprised. He never really believed me.”

“At this point,” clarified John, “I think we have established that Johnny slept deeply and that nothing could wake him up.”

“When he swallowed his sleeping pills... definitely!” summed up Steinberg.

“And he took them every night, so...”

“Exactly.”

“So, the night of the aggression was not an exception,” explained John. “The tests made on Johnny have proven the presence of a heavy dose of sleeping pills in his blood.”

The attorney remained silent for a short while in order to consult his notes and asked:

“During all tours that you made with Johnny, did it ever happen, if only on one occasion, that he got out of bed to walk around in the room and then, tell you the next day that he could not remember?”

“Are you asking me if he’s a sleepwalker?”

“Yes, did he ever do certain things, while he was sleeping, that could have given you that impression?”

“It never happened. As I mentioned before, when Johnny is sleeping, he really sleeps. Believe me.”

“Very good! Now, tell me, did Johnny ever become violent?”

“Never.”

“He never got angry to the point of wanting to hit someone?”

“Never. Johnny could sometime get nervous and say certain things that he may regret, but that’s all.”

“When you say: certain things he may regret... do you mean that he could have threatened someone?”

“It may have happened, yes.”

“Does he threaten to physically attack them?”

“Absolutely not; if he did so, he knows very well that no one would take him seriously.”

“How does he formulate his threats?”

“His favorite phrase is: ‘I’ll set my lawyers on your ass. You will see!’ That kind of thing, you know what I mean?”

“With that kind of answer, I recognize our Johnny. So, as far as you are concerned, there is no doubt... Johnny did not violate Mrs. McPhee?”

“Without the shadow of a doubt; if Johnny committed such a crime, the cops can shoot me on the public square.”

“You are convinced of Johnny’s innocence and so am I, but... how do you explain what

happened that night?”

Steinberg answered without any hesitation:

“It’s evident; it was a set-up.”

“A set-up by whom?” asked John. “And why?”

“By who?” retorted Steinberg while looking at Sandy. “Evidently by this young woman. Why? I really can’t tell. One thing for sure, the whole set-up did not originate in her head. I must say that I never met that woman before today and that she probably had no personal reason to hate Johnny.”

“If the plan was not conceived by this woman, who is the guilty one? I mean, according to you, of course.”

“Hum...” replied the witness while raising his shoulder. “Hard to say but it seems to me that the whole scenario was orchestrated by someone who really has a great aversion against Johnny. Obviously someone is seeking vengeance against the poor boy. It can also be the action of pervert, jealous or disturbed person.

“I agree that jealousy could be an excellent motive. If we assume that you are right, the people behind this scheme must feel happy and satisfied by now.”

“You are absolutely right, sadly answered Steinberg. This sad state of affair does not only affect the sales of his new record, but also the success of his up-coming tour.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Johnny’s new album is not selling and the show producers have turned against him.”

“His new album only got in store yesterday. How can you predict that the sales will be affected?”

“I can tell; normally, Johnny’s new albums are sold by millions as soon as they hit the market. We generally have to increase the production within a day or two of the new releases. This time, it’s quite different. Not only are the sales catastrophic, but many merchants are planning to return the albums to us. It appears that no one wants anything to do with Johnny.”

“That does not include you?”

“It does not.”

“Why? For a producer of your importance, it would be much easier to drop Johnny, no?”

“True,” agreed Steinberg, “but I totally refuse. Such action on my part would punish the innocent and give victory to the guilty parties. I know that Johnny will come out of the story with

clean hands. He is not guilty of any crime.”

“These are all the questions I have for you, Mr. Steinberg. I thank you for your testimony.”

Once John Richard had completed questioning the witness, the prosecutor approached the witness box. He only had one question to ask:

“Mr. Steinberg, how many times did you testify in favor on one of your artists and how many times were some of these artists found guilty of the crimes they had committed?”

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” inquired Steinberg with indignation.

“You understood the question. Please answer.”

“It is the first time,” forcefully answered Steinberg. “ that I testify for one of my artists who is not...”

“You are not answering my question,” interrupted Mr. Adams. “How many times did you defend one of your artists? And, how many times were some of these artists guilty of the accusation?”

“I don’t have a precise number,” regretfully answered Steinberg.

“This is my only question to this witness, your Honor.”

Even if some artists working for Steinberg had been found guilty of certain criminal offences, of which one of rape, John was not totally shot down by the producer’s last answers. He called another witness. This time it was Steve Klein, the regular trainer of Johnny’s dog.

“Mr. Klein,” began John, “how long have you been a dog trainer?”

“More than twenty years,” proudly answered the witness.

“So, I presume that dogs have no secrets for you.”

“No.”

“Is it right to suppose that a dog is pretty well the image of his master?”

“Yes.”

“So, if the master is nervous, we can assume that the dog will also be nervous?”

“You don’t have to assume,” corrected Steve, “if the master is nervous; so will the dog.”

“And if the master is violent?”

“The dog will be violent.”

“How long have you been training Johnny’s dog?”

“I have been taking care of Charlie since the day he was born. About three years.”

“Charlie, of course, that’s the name of the dog. Tell us about Charlie, Mr. Klein. What kind of dog is he?”

“Great dog,” replied the witness. “He can learn anything in no time at all.”

“I am happy to know that Charlie is a smart dog, but I want to know about his attitude. How is he, is he sometime violent?”

“Not at all,” laughed Steve. “This dog is everything but violent. He’s like a lamb. Even when he was still a baby, I never saw that dog bite anyone, not even by accident.”

“Would you say that he likes people?”

“As much as his master. Charlie is always with Johnny: during a trip, on tour, during special evenings; everywhere. So, it’s evident that Charlie likes to be in a crowd. He’s just like Johnny. He loves to be the center of attention. He likes to hear that’s he is beautiful and sweet. You know what I mean?”

“I assume that he must some time get angry?”

“Well, yes, like any other dog.”

“Then, what does he do?”

“He does exactly like Johnny. He growls and if this is not enough, he will bark. Sometimes, he barks very loudly. When Charlie barks, it’s impossible not to hear him. The whole neighborhood can hear him.”

“But, that’s all... he only barks?”

“Just like his master. He barks, but does not bite. At worst, he may adopt an attack position that I taught him in order to impress his opponents. But, it doesn’t last. As soon as he realized that he is not scaring anyone, he stops.”

“In what type of circumstances does he bark?”

“He mostly barks when he thinks someone is provoking his master. In such a case, he barks like crazy.”

“Some say that dogs have no memory. Do you agree with this statement?”

“No way, anyone who says such a thing does not know anything about dogs. I would claim that a dog has as much memory as an elephant.”

“Really?”

“Let me prove my point. The first time you take a dog to the veterinary, he will follow you without hesitation. The second time, he will resist as much as he can. That is only one example.”

“I believe you. What about people... can he recognize them?”

“Of course, be kind to a dog and he will always remember. Be mean to him and the same applies.”

“If someone attacks his master, will the dog remember?”

“The dog will detest this person forever, even if his master has forgiven the person in question.”

“OK, Mr. Klein. All you said is very interesting but it remains a theory. Can you prove what you said?”

“Of course, what do you want me to do?”

“First of all, you stated that Charlie likes people just like his master does. Show us...”

“OK, not a problem...”

Steve stood-up and went to get Charlie. He held the dog with a leash, walked around the court room, and invited many different persons to caress him. Charlie acted friendly toward any person that addressed him a compliment, mostly because of his beautiful blue eyes, and requested more attention.

“You see?” said Steve. “This dog loves people. Does he seem frightful to anyone?”

“No”, answered John. “I guess he was nice because everyone was nice with him. Let’s try something else. You claimed that like his master, this dog is incapable of violence. I want you to prove your point.”

“Hum... that won’t be easy.”

“Didn’t you say earlier that Charlie would get upset if someone attacked his master?”

“I did, but, what do you want me to do? Hit Johnny?”

“You can’t do that?”

In front of Steve who was hesitating, John continued:

“Very well... free the dog, I will gently strike Johnny.”

The attorney approached his client and acted as if he was going to hit him. The dog quickly reacted, took place between his master and the aggressor and barked aggressively in order to scare the offender away. John tried to calm the dog down but Charlie showed his discontent by barking

even more. Then, the man placed his hand close to the dog's mouth to realize that Charlie never tried to bite him.

"Can you believe this? exclaimed John. "The dog did exactly what his trainer said he would do. He acted like Johnny. If Charlie could talk, I'm sure he would tell me to stop or else, I would have to deal with his lawyers."

"That's about right," replied Steve.

"I presume that from now on, this dog will always dislike me; don't you think?"

"What you did was not very aggressive. You did not really strike his master. But, he may effectively give you a dirty look anytime you get too close to Johnny."

"That could be annoying, because he now lives in my house."

"Give him a few treats," suggested Steve while offering a big smile. "He may decide to forgive you."

"So", seriously concluded John, "you said that a dog never forgets and could remain aggressive against anyone who tried to attack his master. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Let's see... there is someone in this room who really dislike Johnny; in fact, he is almost a mortal enemy. His name is..."

The lawyer faced the audience and looked around until his eyes rested on:

"Tommy MacMillan! If someone truly detest Johnny, that's the one. Mr. Klein, I would like you to walk the dog toward this man; the one holding a camera as big as his head."

Steve acted accordingly. Once he reached Tommy, who was amused by the situation, the dog did not react aggressively. On the contrary, he wanted to play with this new friend.

"I don't quite understand," stated John. "It is public knowledge that Johnny hates this Tommy fellow, with all his strength and soul."

"For the dog to feel like Johnny, he would have to be able to read," pleasantly answered Steve. "Sorry, but as of today, I did not teach him the alphabet."

"You may as well take advantage of the situation, Mr. MacMillan," declared John. "This is probably your only occasion to caress Johnny's dog."

Tommy was smiling as he was caressing Charlie. Johnny, on his side, was pouting like a

child who would have lost his favorite toy.

“Don’t you be so sad, Johnny,” advised the attorney. This is rather good news. It shows that your worst enemy was not in your house the night of the crimes. So, he is not at the origin of your problems. If he was, the dog would have recognized him.”

John became silent for a second and ordered Steve to lead the dog toward Sandra McPhee. Less than three feet away from her, Charlie became aggressive and barked as if to announce an imminent danger. Sandy became nervous and stood on her chair.

“Take this dog away from me!” she yelled. “Can’t you see he doesn’t like me?”

John paid no attention to her request and seemed amused by the situation.

“For goodness sake!” ordered the judge. “Get this dog under control, Mr. Richard. Can’t you see this girl is terrorized?”

Once Steve calmed down the animal by taking Charlie away from Sandy, John said to the young lady:

“Isn’t strange? This dog seems to like everyone; but not you?”

Surprised by the statement, Sandy replied:

“It’s only because I hate dogs and this one can feel it. That’s all.”

“I see...” retorted John as if he was surprised by Sandy’s answer. I know another person in this court who doesn’t like dogs. I’m talking about Judge Malfoy. Would you subject yourself to an experiment, your Honor? In order to show that Mrs. McPhee is wrong, can we bring the dog next to you?”

“I will accept,” answered the judge after a short hesitation, “but don’t bring him too close. If that animal bites me, I will sue the hell out of you.”

Steve guided the dog next to the judge. This one showed a little apprehension and moved his head a few inches away when Charlie came too close to his face. The animal did not bark, but made his deception evident. He was expecting a few marks of affection. Somewhat sympathetic, the judge accepted to caress his head.

“You see, your Honor,” stated John, “this dog could not be any nicer. He can’t hurt anyone. He is just like his master. But, isn’t it strange that he showed so much aggression toward Mrs.

McPhee?”

After thanking Steve for his testimony and after Mr. Adams had declared that he had no questions for the dog trainer, John asked Tommy MacMillan to come to the box.

“Mr. MacMillan, on the night of the crime, you were rapidly advised of the drama that had taken place at Johnny’s house. I’m wondering... were you involved with Mrs. McPhee?”

“What?” strongly riposted Tommy. “Do you dare say...”

“I’m not daring,” replied John, I’m only noticing. “Do you realize that you arrived on location before the police? That leads me to think that you were advised of the drama before the police was. How can you explain this fact?”

“You should know that I have informers all over the place,” answered Tommy. “Everyone knows my cell number. Anytime something concerning Johnny happens, I receive a call.”

“I’m wondering why...” teasingly said John.

“I can’t do anything about it. That’s the way it is,” continued Tommy while ignoring the lawyer’s attitude. “Anyway, nothing proves that I was called before the cops. It’s not my fault if I got on location before them.”

“At what time did you receive the call, Mr. MacMillan?”

“It was...” Tommy was trying to remember before saying: “somewhere around six o’clock in the morning.”

“I see. Well... it just happens that the police was called at seven o’clock in the morning. The call was recorded.”

“If you say so, as far as I’m concerned, the call came to me from an unknown source.”

“I was told,” continued John, “that you were invited to listen the recording of the call. I mean, the call the police received.”

“True, the cops wanted me to listen so I could tell them if the voice was similar to the voice that had called me.”

“And?”

“Not at all”, continued Tommy. “The person who called the cops sounded American. The one who called me had a strong accent; maybe Spanish. I had problems understanding him.”

“At what time did you arrive at Johnny’s place?”

“I would say around six thirty.”

“What was happening at that time?”

“Well, nothing, really nothing. I assume that someone had sent me on a wild goose chase.”

“Sent you on a wild goose chase?”

“Yes, it happened before, you know.”

“So, after you realized nothing special was going on, why did you stay on location?”

“Well, it’s my job. I figured I would wait a few minutes before leaving. I was at the point of decamping when I heard the police siren.”

“And that gave you the exclusive coverage concerning the Johnny Boy’s arrest. By that time, were you aware of what had happened to his press agent?”

“Of course. I heard the news the night before on TV. As everyone else, I’m sure.”

“So, concerning her death, you were not the first one to release the news?”

“That’s right.”

“What do you thing of all that? I mean... all these sad events that happened one after the other.”

“I agree with you, it’s very sad.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think it’s a little too much. First Julia, than Manou... the aggression... I find the whole thing quite disturbing.”

“Is this why you are now writing favorable articles about Johnny? That is not normally the case, is it?”

“Sir, I am a reporter,” strongly answered Tommy. “As such, it’s not only my responsibility to report the facts, but I also have to analyze them.”

“I see,” sarcastically answered John. “Well... go ahead! Give us one of your brilliant analyses concerning the case we are involved with.”

“Taking into consideration everything I ever wrote concerning Johnny Boy, I can still recognize an innocent man when I see one. I’m convinced that Johnny is innocent. That’s the reason I am now writing favorable articles about him.”

That answer practically shocked the great John Richard. He expected much information out of Tommy’s mouth but, to hear that he was claiming Johnny’s innocence in front of the tribunal, exceeded his expectation. If Tommy MacMillan believed that Johnny was innocent, it was evident that many other persons probably felt the same way. Maybe even the judge?

“So,” continued the attorney, “If you believe that Johnny is innocent, does it mean you

think he was set-up?”

“Evidently.”

“And... according to you, why do you think Johnny was set-up?”

“Truly,” answered Tommy, “I have no idea. However, I’m convinced all the events are tied together. I’m sure there is more than one person involved.”

“How many persons, would you say?”

“If I’m thinking right, at least three persons were involved. It took one to kill Julia, one to take care of Manou and one to beat Ms. McPhee after she framed Johnny.”

“Objection your Honor!” yelled Mr. Adams. “All this is only speculation made in order to influence the court.”

“But your Honor...” replied John. “how can we establish that the whole thing is a set-up if we can’t talk about it?”

“Your objection is rejected, Mr. Adam. The witness is only telling us what he personally believes.”

The judge looked at his watch and informed John that it was almost noon and that if he had more questions for the witness, he had to proceed rapidly.

“I’m done with Mr. MacMillan, your Honor,” declared John. “I do not have any more questions.”

“This trial is postponed until one o’clock”, concluded the judge.

Tommy was getting ready to leave the premises when Johnny ran toward him and offered to shake his hand.

“I want to thank you,” said the accused. “Thank you for what you said. I don’t understand why you testified in my favor, but I really appreciate it.”

Even though he was not there, Yannick would have been satisfied to see Johnny and Tommy shaking hands. Of course, the event would rapidly be on the media. Many reporters had created and immortalized these images. As Tommy was getting ready to leave, he was approached by Ralph Steinberg.

“I thank you, young man,” he said while shaking the reporter’s hand. “For once, you are on the right side.”

This being said, he asked to John:

“Want to have lunch?”

“I don’t have time. I must set up the place to receive dear Ms. McPhee.”

At the same moment, the assistant supposed to bring in Johnny’s doctor came in without the witness.

“I’m very sorry,” he said to John. “The doctor can’t come here today. He will be available tomorrow.”

“Shit!” grumbled John.

“However, I have Johnny’s medicine,” announced the young man while showing the bottle containing Johnny’s sedatives.

“I don’t think I can use this,” whispered John. “Give them back to Johnny, won’t you? We may use them tomorrow. Where is the furniture? We don’t have much time left”

“It will be here soon, Mr. Richard, it will be here.”

As Tommy was trying to listen to whatever was being said, Ralph Steinberg was asking to John:

“Tell me, when your employee talked to you earlier, was it to tell you that the telephone company had found the number of the cell phone used to call Manou?”

“No, that’s not it,” answered John. “What he told me concerned Johnny’s neighbor. It appears that she noticed something but she will only testify tomorrow. All right, I have lots of things to do and also, Johnny must have something to eat. Can you take him with you?”

“I’ll take him,” proposed Tommy.

“What? When you said I’ll take him, did you mean you would take him to lunch?”

“No problems guys,” concluded Ralph, I’ll take care of this. Come on boys, I’m buying lunch for both of you.”

John was really amazed. Not only Tommy MacMillan had testified in Johnny’s favor, but now they will have lunch together. He could hardly believe it.

“Mr. Richard?” loudly said another of John’s assistants while rushing through the door “I received information from the phone company.”

Ralph looked at Tommy, stopped walking and heard:

“They will have it tomorrow for sure.”

“Damn!” reacted John. “I wanted this bloody number today.”

“Sorry, Sir,” replied the assistant. “They can’t act any faster. By the way, I may have something of interest for you.”

“What do you have?”

“Before coming here, I went to the office to pick-up the messages.”

“And?”

“There was something bizarre. There was a message from a man who claimed to be a private detective. Apparently, he thinks that Johnny is innocent.”

“Do you have his name?” wanted to know John.

“No, but he explained he was making his own investigation. He is doing this for Johnny and at no charge at all. He will make sure to inform us on anything he discovers.”

“Is that so?” retorted John who did not believe what he just heard. “This man must be some kind of a sicko, a mad fan, or...”

“He seemed real serious, Sir. He was expressing himself quite good. He wants to remain unknown and said he would send us information through the help of a delivery person from a restaurant.”

“A delivery person from a restaurant, is that what he said?”

“That’s it; he also said that it would be in our interest to accept any pizza, even if we did not order it.”

“Really?”

“He also added that it could be chicken.”

“I’m happy to hear that there will be variety in our menu. Hum... you were there, so what do you think?”

“I think we do not have anything to lose.”

“Ok, well... inform security to accept any delivery coming from a restaurant. We shall see what shall happen.”

“I have already done that.”

While Tommy was having lunch with Johnny and Ralph, Yannick was walking through the streets of Las Vegas in search of Manou's jewelries, the same he had sent to Sandy's pimp. He was convinced that the guy had sold them. To help him in his search, he had hired two muscle men from a body guard agency. Before choosing the men, he made sure they both knew the city well and that they had great strength of persuasion. Since his time was limited, he also hired a private driver, so they could rapidly move from one broker to another and from a jewelry store to the next one. It was evident that if Charlot the pimp had gotten rid of the jewelry, he had had to do so in one of these places. That's what Yannick was hoping. Otherwise, he would have a problem. He absolutely had to find the jewelry before Mel's second delivery and before John heard about the existence of a certain Alicia...

He was visiting the fifth broker when his phone rang. As he expected, it was Tommy who was calling to let him know what had happened during the morning.

"Sandy did very well," Tommy said. "But that Richard is a brilliant lawyer. He does not miss any details. The dog demonstration was powerful. It was a great idea. I don't know if Sandy will be able to deal with him."

"He will eat her up in one bite," predicted Yannick. "I have to let you go. I'm pleased that you are now in Johnny's good grace. That was of great importance. You're the best, McMillan, the best!"

Around one o'clock, as everyone was returning to the court room, they quickly noticed it had been modified to look like a bedroom. Somewhat displeased, Judge Malfoy ordered John to give some explanations.

"I beg the forgiveness of the court," explained the lawyer. "But I had to make these changes for the dog."

"For the dog?" repeated the judge, who was having problems accepting John's justification.

"Yes, your Honor, for the dog. I want him to recognize Johnny's bedroom. That's why I had the bed, the sheets and Johnny's night table brought here. Only the walls and the door are not a match. I figured it was easier to move Johnny's things here than to bring all the members of the court to my client's house. I chose the easiest solution."

"I see," unpleasantly replied the judge. "So, your client sleeps in a boat?"

"Kind of, your Honor; you may recall that my client's bedroom is called Peter Pan."

"I agree with your décor. Now, what are you planning to do?"

"I want the dog to feel at home. I want him to feel like if he owns the place,"

"What you are doing better be pertinent and appropriate. Otherwise, I will charge you with contempt of court."

“It will be, your Honor,” answered John while offering a pleasant smile. “Now, I would like to ask Mrs. Sandra McPhee to the witness box.”

As soon as Sandy was in place, John wasted no time and went directly to the point. He first asked her what she was doing in the area of the Los Angeles University the night she met Manouchka Tarah.

“Well, I was coming out of the library,” invented Sandy. “I had an assignment to complete and I stayed a little late.”

“What kind of assignment were you working on?”

“Why do you want to know that?”

“Because it is of interest to me; so, what were you working on?”

“Well... law, hesitantly answered the young woman.

“Your answer is somewhat vague, isn’t it? Anyway, I will accept it. You told the prosecutor that you approached Mrs. Tarah to ask her for some money so you could go home. Is that still right?”

“Yes.”

“I assume you wanted to take the subway?”

“Yes.”

“So, tell me, my dear lady, what is the identification number of the train that serves the University of Los Angeles?”

“What?” retorted Sandy, unable to answer the question.

“Come on, Mrs. McPhee! You take that subway every day to go from your home to the university and you can’t give me the name or number?”

“I don’t know it,” softly said the witness. It’s something I do mechanically, you see? I really don’t know. Let me remind you that I am new to Los Angeles.”

“Let me help you a little,” offered John. “Is it the train number two, three hundred and two, three hundred and five, or seven hundred and sixty one?”

“Well, I...”

“Well, it’s about time you know that all these trains lead to your university; every single one of them. So, not only do you forget why you stayed at the library but, you also forgot the number of the train you take every day. I don’t think you will make a very good lawyer.”

After a few laughs in the court room, John continued:

“What does it cost annually to study law at your university? Do you at least know that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I do not. I’m not the one paying for my courses.”

“I see... OK, so, whose paying?”

“My father.”

“Your father? Well, where is he? Can you point him to me?”

“He is not here.”

“Are you telling me that after his daughter was savagely attacked and beaten, and while she is in court, in one of the most publicized trial of the year, your father is not here to support you?”

“He is not,” awkwardly and apologetically answered Sandy. “He had to stay away... business reasons.”

“What kind of business would have such priority over you?”

“How would I know?” impatiently replied Sandy.

“I see”, said John, he was acting as if he was surprised. “You also fail to remember why your father is not here?”

“I did not forget!” yelled Sandy who was becoming nervous. “I never knew; that’s it.”

“OK... enough funny stories... I’m not playing games anymore. Your Honor and Mr. the District Attorney of Los Angeles, I’m telling you and without doubt that this woman is deceitful and untruthful.”

“What did you say?” exploded Sandy while her face was turning to red.

“Tell us the truth, Mrs. McPhee. You are not studying law at the University of Los Angeles more than my client is. We verified your information, you see. You are not registered at the university. No one knows you over there; not even the Dean. My question to you is: why did you lie about the university? Did you want to give yourself more credibility?”

“No... retorted Sandy getting more and more aggravated. “It’s because of my father, you see, he is the one paying for my study. He doesn’t know that I don’t really go to the university.”

“Well, I guess he will soon know. He may have the shock of his life when he reads the newspapers tomorrow”

Sandy remained silent when John continued:

“Do you know what I think? If a young woman misleads her father, tells the police and the court that she is a student at the university while she knows very well that her declarations are false, well... I tell myself that this woman is trying to deceive us on many other subjects. Such a woman could easily declare that she was aggressed by our biggest rock star. And in fact, it would be pure fiction. What do you think?”

“Objection, your Honor; the defense is trying to intimidate the victim.” declared Mr. Adams.

The prosecutor had objected in vain. The victim was ordered to answer the question.

“This is not the same thing,” she said. “It is true that I deceived my father. It’s only because I did not want to have problems with him. But that’s it. I did no misinform anyone about other subjects.”

“The tribunal will have to decide,” contemptuously stated John. So, here we are; you do not study at the university, but, on the night you met Manou, you were near the campus. What were you doing there?”

“I was shopping.”

“Shopping? But earlier, you said you had no money...”

“That is true, but, I realized I didn’t have my money at the time I was buying my first item. That when I also noticed I didn’t have my keys.”

“What were you hoping to buy? Did you want to purchase a stonefish?”

“Objection, your Honor!” repeated the prosecutor.

“Sustained,” whispered the judge.

“Very well, your Honor,” replied John. “It was merely a wisecrack. I know very well that Mrs. McPhee did not buy the stonefish. So, let’s keep going. You didn’t have any money, you didn’t have your keys and then, you met our dear Manou. Tell me, how was she dressed?”

“The way the cops found her.”

“Is that so?” sarcastically inquired John. “What was going on in that part of town for her to be dressed the way she was? Was there an Oscar Ceremony, by any chance?”

Sandy did not answer.

“Seriously, what was she doing over there?”

“She had her hand bag. She may have been shopping.”

“Bad answer,” corrected John. “We research every aspect of Manou’s activities on that night. She never entered a boutique, a restaurant or a bar. If she had visited one of the local businesses she would have been recognized and some merchants would remember. She was quite well known, you see. In fact, no one noticed her that night, except for you... that is.”

“Your Honor,” objected Mr. Adams. “Mrs. McPhee did not know Mrs. Tarah. How could she possibly be aware of what this woman was doing on Sunset Boulevard the night she met her?”

“Mr. Adams is right, reckoned the judge. “Mr. Richard, ask questions that can be relevant to Mrs. McPhee.”

“Very well, your Honor,” agreed John while lifting his arms up. “Tell me, Mrs. McPhee, how did Manou get to her destination?”

“By taxi,” answered Sandy.

“Another bad answer,” replied John. “We also investigated that subject. No taxi and or limousine were requested at Manou’s residence on that night.”

Somewhat confused, Sandy remained silent for a few moments and finally explained:

“Is that right? Oh! Wait a minute... I remember... we travelled in a taxi and she knew the driver. He called her “Manou” the same as you do. He did not charge her anything to take her home. It was some kind of a favor.”

She paused before continuing:

“The more I think about it, the more I believe she had something going on with him. She was dressed to please him.”

John figured that the woman had just made up an answer. Since he could not prove it, he acted as if he believed her.

“What you just stated could be possible. Now, tell me, what happened once you reached destination? Did the man get out of the car?”

“No,” answered Sandy. “He said goodbye and left.”

“He did not stay at all?”

“No, he left immediately.”

“How much time elapsed between the time the driver left and the time Manou took you to your room?”

“Hum...” murmured Sandy while taking a long breath. “I would say... fifteen minutes at the most.”

“Now, after going to bed, did you hear the noise of a car that would have stopped in front of the house? Or, did you perceive any other noise that could establish that Manou had received a visitor?”

“I did not hear anything.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“I am.”

“Very well. Let’s move forward. This morning, you testified to the prosecutor, that after you had been in your room by yourself for about thirty minutes, you received Johnny’s visit.”

“That is true.”

“How did he get into your room?”

“Through the door.”

“Is that right?”

“What do you mean by “is that right?” How else could he have come in?”

“By knocking at your door; that’s what you said this morning.”

Sandy showed more signs of impatience.

“Sorry about that, I forgot that detail. You are right, he first knocked at the door and then he came in. Are you happy now?”

“When someone creates a scenario the way you do, my dear lady, he must stick to the facts. Every detail is important.”

“Objection, your Honor,” repeated the prosecutor. “The defense is insinuating that the victim is lying and he is doing so without any proof.”

“Sustained,” answered the Judge. “I understand, Mr. Richard, that you are trying to establish that your client is victim of a set-up. However, try to back your statements by evidences and keep your personal impressions for yourself.”

“Sorry, your Honor. I’m trying to demonstrate that Mrs. McPhee’s story is not conclusive. This morning she claimed that Johnny had knocked at her door before coming in and now, I have to help her remember all that she claims. Admit, your Honor, that she is seriously confusing.”

Mr. Adams objected one more time by saying:

“Your Honor, tests have proven that Mrs. McPhee had received hard blows on the head. It is quite plausible that this trauma could have affected her memory.”

“Here we go again! exclaimed John. Something new.”

“The results of these tests are in the hospital records. Would you like to study them, Mr. Richard?” offered judge Malfoy.

“It will not be necessary,” replied John Richard. “I also read the reports, but...”

“But what?” asked the judge, showing signs of irritability.

“I’m suggesting that it would be important to know at what time of the day the victim demonstrated a memory loss. Was it this morning, while she was showing precision in all of her answers, or this afternoon, when she didn’t quite remember that she was never registered at the university. I really think we should know.”

“Do you have any more questions for the witness?” simply asked the Judge.

“Oh yes, your Honor. The game just began.”

John revised his note to make sure he had not forgotten anything important. The next step implicated Charlie.

“Mrs. McPhee, when Johnny entered your room to invite you to play Monopoly in his room, what was Charlie doing?”

“Charlie?” said Sandy who did not really remember the name of the animal.

“Yes, Charlie, repeated John. “Don’t you remember the name of the dog that seems to hate you?”

“Oh... that dog?” remembered Sandy. “He was not there.”

“You are saying that he was not there?” retorted John, quite skeptical. “Are you sure or is your memory playing more tricks on you?”

“I am sure, there was no dog.”

“Could you hear him bark?”

“No, until I entered Johnny Boy’s room, I didn’t know there was a dog in the house.”

“I sadly must repeat one more time that you gave me the wrong answer. I also regret, but I must tell this court that I caught you in another falsity.”

Before the prosecutor could intervene, John declared to the Judge:

“I can prove my statement, your Honor. I can prove that this woman is not telling the truth.”

“Go ahead, Mr. Richard,” replied the judge who was trying to cover an irresistible yawn.

John faced Johnny and asked him to walk toward him. Of course, the dog followed his master.

“No, Johnny”, requested John. “I want you to come near me without the dog following you.”

“Well, that is pretty well impossible,” said Johnny. “My dog follows me everywhere I go. How do you want me to keep him behind?”

“You could order him to ‘stay,’” suggested John.

“He won’t listen, I’m sure.”

“Let’s try...”

Johnny ordered his dog to lie on the floor. Charlie obeyed, but as soon as his master began walking toward John, he followed.

“You see... it’s useless,” explained Johnny. “I can’t stop him. He goes wherever I go.”

“I see...” said John.

He then asked the dog trainer to hold Charlie while Johnny would walk toward him. Steve did his best to control the situation, but when Johnny walked away, the animal became almost wild and barked out of control. The noise was unacceptable so, the judge objected:

“Silence that dog down! My court is not a circus.”

John indicated to his client that he could return next to his dog. That’s all it took to calm down Charlie.

“Here is my proof!” exclaimed John. “This demonstrates without any doubt that Mrs. McPhee’s stories don’t stand to reason. I don’t know what else can convince you. It is evident that this woman is not telling the truth.”

John turned toward Sandy to look at her face. She was red as never before.

“So, Mrs. McPhee?” he asked to her. “Are you still saying that the dog was not there?”

“Well...” murmured Sandy. Mr. Adam may be right. My memory may still be affected. I had forgotten this little detail.”

“You call that a detail? Didn’t you see how this dog was acting? He was in a fury. Good memory or not, I’m sure no one can forget what happened here today and Charlie’s behavior.”

“Well...” hesitantly added Sandy. “I mean... I’m sure the dog was not barking like that when Johnny entered my room. That is for sure, otherwise, I would have remembered. I mean... the dog might have been there with his master but, I never noticed it. I have to say that I was quite overwhelmed by Johnny’s presence.”

It was the ideal occasion for John to ask a spontaneous question to his client:

“Tell me, Johnny, was Charlie with you when you entered Mrs. McPhee’s room?”

“What?” reacted Johnny truly surprised. “What kind of question is that? I never went to her room. Do I need to remind you that I was sleeping?”

Satisfied with this answer, John faced Sandy and added:

“Did you notice? That is a true answer. I would never have questioned my client in such a spontaneous way if I had not been convinced that he would answer the truth. Notice how Johnny is accurate and sincere when he answers a question. Do you know why? It’s because he is telling the truth. Would you like a glass of water Mrs. McPhee? You don’t seem very well. A few minutes ago, your face was almost all red and now, you are as white as a cadaver. Drink a little; it may help you.”

As John was watching her holding the glass with two hands and drinking with difficulty, he noticed that she was trembling. In his opinion, that was a good sign. She was afraid and fear meant that she would soon crack. She would finally serve the truth on a silver plate. He had to remain patient and keep questioning the so called victim. Without hesitation, he asked her how the dog reacted when she entered Johnny’s bed room. She answered without hesitation:

“I can tell you that it was awful. That dog was acting as he did here, but he was worse. He didn’t want me to enter the room. Really did not.”

“But when you entered Johnny’s room, you were accompanied by Johnny; were you not?”

“Yes.”

“Who opened the door?”

“He did.”

“And then?”

“Well, we sat on the bed.”

“Both of you, side by side?”

“Together, yes.”

“What was the dog doing?”

“He was barking like a mad dog. It was unbearable.”

“And what did Johnny do? I assume that he did not jump on you, like you said this morning, without calming his dog down.”

“Well, he tried to calm him down by talking to him, but it didn’t work. Johnny got discouraged and chased him out of the room.”

“Do you mean that he left him in the corridor?”

“I think.”

“How long did it take for Johnny to get rid of his dog?”

“Only a few seconds.”

“You mean that he grabbed the dog, opened the door, pushed the dog in the corridor and then closed the door behind him?”

“Exactly.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Yes.”

“We can be sure, this time, that your memory is not failing you?”

“No way, it all happened the way I just said.”

“Well, my dear girl,” continued John, “this time I will not call you a liar. This is becoming pathetic. The reason I had Johnny’s furniture move to this court is not to prove that you are not telling the truth, but to give you a chance to prove that you are saying the truth. Before we start our little game, I want to ask you if you recognize Johnny’s furniture.”

“It would be hard to forget. This bed looks like a pirate ship.”

“Well, now... I will ask you to act a little. Should you dream to become an actress, this is your chance. I want to remind you that the great Ralph Steinberg is presently in this court room. Do not fear, you will not be the only actor; Johnny and his dog Charlie are part of the cast.”

Without knowing what was truly going on, Johnny and Charlie approached the attorney. Sandy left her chair and joined them. Now that they were assembled in a décor that almost perfectly represented Johnny Boy's famous bedroom, John proposed a first scenario.

"The three of you will now enter this room and act in accordance with Mrs. McPhee's version of the facts. I will now close the door. Be careful, Johnny; do not open the door with too much force. The door is not solidly attached to the set. I don't want it to fall on someone's head. Now, act one: Johnny, open the door and let Mrs. McPhee enter."

Johnny did as requested without any incident.

"Hum..." expressed John. "Isn't the dog supposed to get angry and bark? Oh... well... let's keep up with Mrs. McPhee's version. Now, my friends, please sit on Johnny's bed."

The audience in the room began to understand what Mr. Richard was trying to communicate. The actors did as asked and nothing special happened.

"This is very puzzling," protested John. The dog is not playing his role the way he's supposed to. This is quite confusing. According to Mrs. McPhee, Charlie is supposed to be upset and bark to the point that his master had to chase him out of the room. Well, let's try something else. Johnny, take your dog outside the bedroom and close the door behind him."

Johnny did as asked. The door was not completely closed before Charlie showed his temper, barked and violently pushed and scratched the door. John let him do his thing for a while, picked him up and passed comments about the damage done to the door.

"You bad dog, look at what you did to the door!"

Then he faced the audience and continued:

"Can you see what the dog did? The door is ruined. Would you be able to attack a girl on your bed while all that fury is happening on the other side of the door?"

He opened the door and proposed another scenario. He proudly explained that this new approach came directly out of his imagination.

"Here is what we are going to do, Johnny. I want you and Charlie to get in the bed together."

As soon as it was done, John closed the door. He then asked Sandy to open the door, enter the room and get in bed next to Johnny. The poor girl could easily figure out what was coming. However, she knew she was in trouble. She had no choice and did as asked. When she opened the door, the dog left the bed and aggressively rushed toward her. He was showing anger and meant business.

“Go in, Mrs. McPhee!” said John. “D’on’t get scared by this little hair ball. Go forward, get in Johnny’s bed.”

Sandy never made it. The dog was blocking her way.

“This is the end of our comedy,” announced John. “All the actors did very well. You can now return to your respective seat.”

While Johnny and Sandy were returning to their seats, John pulled a photo from his jacket and handed it to the judge.

“This photo, your Honor, was taken the day following the so call aggression. We can notice the side of the door facing the outside of Johnny’s bedroom. Do you see any scratch?”

“Definitively not,” answered the judge. “This door seems to be in perfect shape.”

“You see, your Honor, my problem is that the victim declared that Johnny left the dog outside his bedroom. You can see, as well as I can, what the dog does in such circumstance.”

“I see what you mean,” agreed the judge. “However, according to the police report ,the dog was found in Mrs. Tarah’s room. Isn’t that so?”

“That is right”, confirmed John while introducing another photo. “And lere is the proof. Look at the door and observe how the lower part is damaged.”

“Hum... what are you trying to demonstrate with these images?”

“I simply want to establish, one more time, that the victim is not telling the truth. She told us that Johnny had left the dog outside his bedroom. I think we just established that this is false. That is what you said, Mrs. McPhee; isn’t that right?”

“Listen,” nervously explained Sandy. “Johnny may have left the dog in his mother’s room. How can I know what he did with him?”

“But you stated that he only took a few seconds to get rid of the dog. You seemed convinced.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how long it takes to go from Johnny’s room to his mother’s room?”

“A few seconds? I have never been to his mother’s room... I don’t know.”

“If you knew, you would have said that it takes at least five minutes. From the Peter Pan room to the Little Mermaid room, it takes at least two and a half minutes to get there and the same to return.”

Without giving her a chance to reply, the lawyer added:

“This is not the only false segment in your story, my dear Mrs. McPhee. There are many more. We all know that you never entered Johnny’s room in his company. If you had, the dog would never have barked the way you claim he did. If the dog acted the way he did, it can only be because you entered his master’s room while he was sleeping. That’s why Charlie was barking. He was trying to alert his master.”

John paused a second and continued:

“That leads me to maintain that I was right from the beginning of this investigation. I believe that you were not the only culprit in this story. There was someone else in the house on that night. Another person took charge of the dog and led him to Manou’s room. During that time, you were creating the scene in order to make believe that Johnny had aggressed you. So, now, tell me. Who was that other person?”

“But, but... you are full of shit, Mister!” yelled a panic stricken Sandy. “If what you are saying is true, then... who do you think beat the hell out of me? Do you think I battered myself?”

“Oh... who hammered you, that is the question? Let’s try to find out right away. Johnny, I want you to leave this room immediately.”

Somewhat surprised, Johnny picked-up his dog and left.

“Now that my client is no longer in sight, can you tell me with what hand he punched you?”

“What?”

“You understand me. With what hand did he punched you? With all the blows you had to endure, you should remember. Did he hit you with his right fist or with his left fist?”

Sandy closed her eyes and concentrated. She had one chance on two to give the right answer.

“Think about the million dollars,” she said to herself.

She hesitated and finally answered that Johnny struck her with his right fist.

“Are you sure, this time?” asked John before requesting Johnny’s return.

As soon as Johnny Boy re-entered the court room, John asked Tommy to play the role of a punching bag.

“Since you are now friends”, declared John while addressing a friendly smile, “I thought you two could have an amiable fight, like you use to have at the orphanage in the good old days. It will bring great memories. Are you willing to play the game, Tommy?”

“I will,” agreed Tommy. “But I will not hurt him like I used to. These days are gone.”

“Simply defend yourself as he tries to hit you. Now, go ahead Johnny! Hit Tommy with all your strength. Don’t worry about him... he is three time your size, he can take it. Go ahead, hit him!”

Johnny obeyed and hit with all his limited power. Not only was he mostly trying to hit with his left hand, but most of the time he missed the target. When he occasionally reached Tommy, there was hardly any power behind the punch.

“As I told you before,” laughed Tommy, “you fight like a girl, Johnny.”

This remark irritated Johnny who multiplied the efforts. The results remained fruitless and mediocre. It demonstrated that he knew absolutely nothing in the art of fighting. Totally shameful, he was almost crying. John comforted him a little and turned his attention toward Sandy.

“I am tired, Mrs. McPhee, and I am sure you are feeling the same. I therefore ask the judge to postpone this trial until tomorrow morning. Until then, I beg of you, try to find the truth. If you don’t, it may be costly for you. Just before closing, I would like you to tell me something: we know that on the night of the aggression, Johnny absorbed some sleeping pills. If he did not take them while he was with Manou, can you tell me when he took them? You’re the only one who could know the answer.”

“He took them after he was done with me,” replied Sandy. After swallowing the pills, he warned me that if I tried to run away, he would have someone to kill me.”

“You seem to have forgotten the major punches.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the three punches that took you out until the arrival of the police.”

“That’s true, I’m not about to forget it.”

“What time was it when Johnny stopped abusing you?”

“It was, hum... something like one o’clock in the morning.”

“Very well, Mrs. McPhee, I bid you a pleasant evening.”

XII

By the end of the first day in court, John Richard was rather proud of himself. He rushed toward his office in order to prepare for the following day when he would have only two witnesses to question: the neighbor and Johnny's doctor. The results of the day would of course depend on the testimonies of these two witnesses, but also on the information he was hoping to get from the telephone company. He anticipated a telephone number, an address but most of all, a name. That's what he was hoping for; otherwise, it would be another long investigation. He was also looking forward to receiving a meal that he had not ordered. He wondered what information he may receive. He did not really believe in this secret informer, but, who knew? He could receive a pizza containing many important facts that could complete the puzzle.

Once he arrived at his office, he invited Johnny and his dog to take place in a small room before meeting with his assistants in the meeting room.

"Anything special happened at the office today?" he asked to his secretary while walking in front of her desk.

"A few calls, many letters... that's about all," she answered.

"We didn't receive a pizza or some chicken?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"No problem, but if we should receive something like that, let me know."

Meanwhile, Johnny was watching the news. He was sure that his court case was the main event of the day and that people had changed their opinion about him. It had to be the case. His attorney had done such a fantastic job. There was no doubt; John Richard was the best lawyer in town.

"We're lucky to have him on our side," he said to his dog. "I'm also lucky to have you, Charlie. You must be the smartest dog in the world."

Good news, the CNN journalist covering the trial shifted side and now believed the theory that Johnny Boy was framed.

"We can wonder," stated the journalist. "Maybe the accused should be the victim. The arguments from the defense are much more plausible than the accusations coming from the prosecution. According to the experts, even the dog Charlie was more believable than the victim."

"Great!" exclaimed Johnny while he was caressing Charlie. "Did you hear what he said about you? I will get a big box of treats for you and maybe more, if you want."

He lost some of his confidence when he heard the result of the last survey. Out of five thousands participants, seventy-two percent answered that Johnny was the victim of a set-up. That was not good. Normally, CNN surveys had millions of participants. This time, very few people gave their opinion. A reporter took the street to question the passing-by. Out of four individuals that he asked, only one person gave an opinion, whereas the others just walked away, refusing to hear about Johnny Boy's problems. One woman stated:

"Who cares about Johnny Boy and his trial? He's not the only person in the world. We are fed up with him; don't you know? We are totally annoyed; talk to us about something else, won't you?"

Johnny wished he had not heard that statement. So, people were fed-up with him? Really? He was only twenty-eight years old, he was at the top, and still, some people did not want to hear about him anymore? Is that why his new album was not selling? His fans did not like him anymore? What will happen with his up-coming tour? Didn't Ralph say that at the end of the trial, everything would fall back in place?

"Damn!" said the young man. "Mr. Universe... please make sure that I am not at the end of my route. Please, don't let me down, not now. That all I can do, you know. I want people to love me. I want everybody to love me; or else, I don't want to live anymore."

He thought about swallowing all of his sleeping pills, remembering that earlier today, John had given him back the bottle of Mogadon. He looked in all of his pockets in search of the bottle, before to recall that he had given it to Tommy during lunch.

"Shit, shit, shit!" he yelled with despair. "Because of him, I can't even commit suicide."

He took place on the sofa and grabbed a few boxes of DVDs. He studied each container and asked his dog:

"What do you want to watch? The Lion King or Rox and Rouky?"

He hesitated a few second and finally decided for Rox and Rouky.

"I'm sure you will prefer this one. There is a dog in the cast."

While watching the movie, he thought about Yannick, the man he knew as the other Tom MacMillan. He was ready to bet that this was the man who had left a message on John's answering machine. He wondered what type of info he would deliver.

The time was almost six o'clock in the afternoon and Yannick was still walking the street of Last Vegas in search of a merchant who could afford to buy expensive jewelry. He was no longer visiting the pawn shops. His body guards had convinced him that most pawn shops did not deal in such luxurious jewelry. That would be out of their working budget, unless, of course, they got a real deal on the price. If Charlot had stolen the jewelry, he may have sold them for almost nothing. But, the pimp probably figured he received them legally. After all, he found them in his mail box. It was evident that he would sell them for as much as he could get and only a classy jewelry store could give him a fair price. So, poor Yannick kept going from store to store, getting quite annoyed and almost ready to conclude that he would never find the stuff in time for the last delivery, scheduled for Thursday night. In fact, he had to be back in Los Angeles not later than Thursday morning. Otherwise his plan could be seriously compromised. The only good news he had received lately was that Johnny's attorney was doing a fantastic job. Tommy had called him at the end of the court day. He only had to say good things concerning John Richard and negative reports about Sandy.

"You should have helped her prepare a better story," he said to Yannick. "She acted like a dummy. The dog was smarter than her, and by far. I have the feeling that she will be the one ending in jail."

"Who cares?" coldly replied Yannick.

"Sure, but don't you think she may betray you in exchange of immunity?"

"If I was her," mischievously said Yannick. "I wouldn't even think about it. That would be the craziest thing she could do."

Before ending the conversation, Yannick reminded Tommy that Sandy's cell phone should be returned to her hand bag. Later, that same evening, around eight o'clock, Johnny recognized the voice of his doctor, the man he wanted to see.

"George!" he exclaimed. "It's you! I knew you were here. I heard your voice."

"Hello, Johnny," said the doctor. "How are you?"

"I'm not doing too well. I'm out of sleeping pills. I need some more."

"You don't have anymore?" asked the surprised doctor. "I gave you a prescription only three days ago. Don't tell me your lawyer let you absorb more than the recommended doze?"

"No," reassured Johnny. "I lost the bottle today. John had taken the pills to the tribunal believing that you would be there. Since you did not show up, he gave the bottle back to me."

"I see... well... you're in luck. It just so happens that I have some of your pills with me. I brought a bottle so that your lawyer could read the composite of these pills."

As the doctor was getting ready to give the pills to Johnny, John came out of his office, accompanied by an older lady.

“No,” he said to the doctor. “Do not give him the pills. Give them to me instead.”

John had also had watched the news. He was aware that his client’s popularity was seriously declining and feared that the young fool would absorb every single pill contained in the bottle. After placing the bottle in his pocket, he told everyone that the testimony of Johnny’s neighbor would dramatically perturb the story of the accusation. Proud of herself, Mrs. Gilbert declared:

“It so happened that I have seen certain things. Not everything, of course. You understand that I have other things to do. I’m not always watching my neighbors. Anyway, I did see a car parked in front of Johnny’s house. I definitely did. That car was there for quite a while. At eight thirty in the evening it was parked in front of the castle and stayed there till one o’clock in the morning. One o’clock, I tell you.”

“I’ll be damned!” exclaimed Johnny. It’s a good thing that you are not always spying on your neighbors, Mrs. Gilbert.”

“Oh!” objected the old lady with resentment. “But, not at all. It is not my fault if things happen at your place while I’m walking in front of my window.”

“And that is a good thing for us, Mrs. Gilbert,” commented John. “That’s what my client meant by his remark. Isn’t that so, Johnny?”

“Well, yes, of course.”

“Can I have your autograph, Johnny?” asked the woman. “It’s for my only little girl. She lives in New York.”

“My Lord!” replied Johnny as he was signing his name on a piece of paper. Do every members of your family live so far away?”

“Since my husband died, about twelve years ago, my son had to move to New York to pursue his career. I only have one son in my direct family.”

“I see,” said Johnny. That’s why you are always alone. If I was as lonely as you are, I guess I would do like you and spend my days watching...”

“Johnny!” interrupted John. “I want you to remember that Mrs. Gilbert is here to help you.”

“Yes, of course... I meant to say that to thank her, I will be honored to let her watch my place. That’s what I wanted to say.”

“My dear boy,” tenderly said Mrs. Gilbert, that is very sweet of you, but, you must understand that I have so many things to do, so many things...”

This woman story was truly pathetic. When her husband died, she inherited a colossal fortune but nothing could heal her sorrow. Her son was the only person left in her life. The day he left her to take root in New York, she had only one thing to do to kill time: sitting behind her window and try to see all things that were happening at her neighbor's places. After her statement, John said to Johnny:

"You see, Johnny... she is not a bad person. We should feel sorry for her."

"Yes, agreed Johnny. When all will be done with my court case, maybe we should do something for her."

"You have a good heart, Johnny," declared John who, in fact, liked the old woman. "We will see what we can do for her."

After a small talk with Dr. George Allison, John could finally return home and try to get a good night sleep. If he was confident that the testimonies of his two new witnesses would help him the next day, he was still disappointed that he had not received the pizza that he had not ordered. New information would surely have helped him win his case. The problem was that outside Dr. Allison and Mrs. Gilbert, he had nothing else to bring in front of the judge. Unless the telephone company gave him some of the details he needed.

"Damn secret informer," he whispered for himself, "I knew you were a fake."

"What did you say?" asked Johnny.

"Nothing, nothing at all."

The next day, John and Johnny arrived in court, accompanied by Charlie. Dissatisfied because of the presence of the dog, the Judge ordered John to follow him in his office for a private discussion.

"Can you tell me why this beast is still here? I don't run a zoo, my friend. This is a court house."

"I understand your point, casually answered John, but I need to remind you that my client is now living in my house and so is the dog."

"So?"

"Well, my house was newly redecorated and you have seen what that dog can do when he is not with his master... there is no way I can leave him alone at my place."

"John," said judge Malfoy truly irritated, "can't you see that we are creating a precedent?"

"What do you mean?"

“I mean that if I say yes to you, bunch of people will now want to come to my court accompanied by their respective pet.”

“I understand,” replied John. “That point of view never came to my mind. I’ll have someone to take the dog away.”

The lawyer was ready to leave the office when the judge offered him a mocking smile and declared:

“What is the name of the dog, yet?”

“Charlie, his name is Charlie.”

“Yes, I remember; well, my decision could be different if you told me that Charlie still could be a witness...”

John rapidly jumped on the occasion and replied:

“That’s absolutely true. It’s quite possible that I may have to call him to prove one of my points. We may want to keep him here, just in case.”

“In this case, I will accept,” announced the judge while showing a wide friendly smile. “You see, my house was also newly decorated. I understand your dilemma.”

“Thank you.”

“But I’m warning you... if that dog messes-up my carpet or scratches one of my door, I will sue you.”

The dog problem being solved, Mrs. Gilbert was the first witness called to the front. John started the interrogation by saying:

“Mrs. Gilbert, apparently, the night of Mrs. Tarah’s murder, you noticed certain things. Can you tell us what you saw?”

“Well, of course,” pleasantly answered the woman. “First, I must insist that I only saw all these things by pure hazard. As I told you before, I have too many things to do to keep an eye on my neighbors. I do much charity work and that keeps me quite busy. I also have to take care of my garden. I like spending time taking care of my flowers, and...”

“We understand,” interrupted John. “We know that you are very busy and for that reason, we do not want to keep you here too long. Can we please get to the point? On that fatal night, what did you notice, at Mrs. Manoushka Tarah’s place?”

“A car, Mr. the attorney... I noticed a car.”

“Why did the presence of a car in front of your neighbor’s house seemed abnormal to you?”

“Well, because normally, there is never a car in front of the house. Occasionally, a limousine comes by to pick-up Mrs. Tarah or Johnny, but it normally leaves right away, unless it was their regular driver, the one that died this summer.”

“Very good, Mrs. Gilbert,” said John. “Now, if you don’t mind, let’s concentrate on the night in question. So, on that night you noticed the presence of a car?”

“Yes sir.”

“Tell me, was it a taxi? I’m asking, because the victim mentioned that Mrs. Tarah had travelled by taxi on that night.”

“Absolutely not!” categorically answered the woman. “I can tell you that during that day, or that night, no taxi came to their castle. Not even one. I can add that on that day, no one left the house. Not Mrs. Tarah and not even Johnny.”

“How can you be so sure?” ask John, seemingly surprised. “Did you spend the whole day looking out your front window?”

The judge and many people in the audience laughed when a blushing Mrs. Gilbert answered:

“Not really. Well... maybe so... on that day, I was cleaning my front window. At my age, I will soon be seventy years old, things take more time, you know. It’s a hard work; I had to remove the curtains and then...”

“Yes, Mrs. Gilbert,” said John while offering is gentle smile. “We understand, but is it possible that you may not have noticed certain activities?”

“Not at all.”

“You never visited the little corner during the day?”

“I did, around seven o’clock, as usual.”

“So, between eight o’clock at night and ten o’clock you were constantly at your front window?”

“Yes sir.”

“And during that time, you never noticed Mrs. Tarah boarding a taxi and then, coming back on the same taxi and this time accompanied by another person?”

“No Sir.”

“And you are absolutely sure of what you are telling me?”

“I’m absolutely sure.”

“Well, that’s really confusing!” declared John. “Very confusing... you see... your testimony gravely contradict what the victim affirmed to the court.”

“If my testimony doesn’t match hers,” asserted Mrs. Gilbert with a spiteful type of voice, “it’s because the victim is not telling the truth.”

“Isn’t that surprising?” sarcastically said John. “Now, tell me about the car that you saw?”

“It was a sports car, a very nice car.”

“What color was it?”

“That’s hard to say, you see. It was parked in front of Mrs. Tarah’s house around nine thirty. It was already dark outside. Anyway, it seems to me that it could have been a red car.”

“A red sports car?” repeated John. That’s quite plausible. So, who came out of the car?”

“Two people,” answered Mrs. Gilbert. There was a man and a woman.”

“I know that it was dark but do you think that Mrs. Tarah could have been the woman?”

“No way and I have no doubt on that point. Because of her size, it would have been easy to recognize her; even if it was dark.”

“Of course,” agreed John. “You said there was a man with the woman?”

“Absolutely, I could not recognize him, because of the darkness, but based on his stature, I can say that he was a good looking man. He was tall, elegant and he walked in a classy way.”

“Ok, so you would not recognize him. What about the woman who was with him?”

“The woman? She was small, very tiny. If she had been a blonde, I could have thought that she was Johnny. She was very little.”

“What color was her hair?”

“Hard to say. Let me remind you that it was dark out there. One thing for sure; she did not have light hair.”

John moved, stood next to Sandy and said:

“Mrs. Gilbert, I would like to introduce the victim to you. Her name is Sandra McPhee. She is the one who declared that on that sad night, she arrived at the castle with Mrs. Tarah on board of a taxi. Can you tell me if that young woman, next to me, is the one you saw getting out of the red car?”

“As far as her face is concerned, I can’t say. But the rest of her body seems the same.”

“Very good, Mrs. Gilbert.”

"I would like to add that the man was carrying a large box," added the witness. "I don't know what was inside but it seemed fragile. He was carrying it with much care."

"Is that so?" asked John. "Do you think the box could have been big enough to carry... let say... a fish?"

"Yes, it could have."

"What happened after you saw them get out of the car?"

"Well, they rang the bell and Mrs. Tarah opened the door immediately. It seemed evident that she was expecting them."

"Mrs. Tarah opened the door by herself. Are you sure?"

"Who else could have opened the door? There were no more servants in the house. She could no longer pay them. It's surely because..."

"Enough of that", interrupted John. "We know why she had to let her servants go. But, tell me, how can you be so positive that she opened the door?"

"Easy, it is because of her size. I don't want to be nasty, but in our neighborhood, she was the only one with such a stature."

"I understand", replied John. "Now, what happened after? Did you notice something else?"

"No," said Mrs. Gilbert, seeming sorry to have nothing else to say.

"What about the car? Did you see it leave?"

"Yes, it left around one o'clock in the morning."

"You were not in bed at that time?"

"No, I still had to hang my curtains back."

"Next time, you may think of hiring someone to do that kind of work in your place. It would take less time."

"It's just that I like to remain active."

"Of course. Now, one last question: when the car left, who was on board?"

"Just the man, the woman was not there."

"Are you absolutely certain?"

"I'm absolutely sure."

"Then, thank you, Mrs. Gilbert. Thank you for your testimony."

John faced the judge and declared:

“Your honor, if this testimony does not convince you that the presumed victim has been deceitful from the beginning, then, I don’t know what else I can do to convince you.”

“Thank you Mr. Richard”, coldly answered the Judge. “I will decide what is convincing and what is not. Mr. Adams, do you have any questions for this witness?”

“Surely do your honor.”

The prosecutor stood up and approached the witness box.

“My dear lady,” he began. “I don’t want to place a doubt on your testimony but... if it was as dark as you said when that car parked in front of Mrs. Tarah’s house, how can you tell that the person coming out of the car was Mrs. McPhee?”

“Because...” hesitated the witness, “because I know that it was her.”

“To know is not enough,” interrupted the prosecutor. “You have to be able to prove your statement.”

“I know that it was her, continued Mrs. Gilbert. I recognize her silhouette. It’s the same girl, I tell you.”

“I see,” stated Adams. “You claim it’s her only because you recognize the silhouette. It’s not a very powerful argument. Many women have a silhouette similar to Mrs. McPhee.”

Adams rapidly walked to the court room section where the listeners were seating. He stood in the main alleyway and looked in both directions. He searched for young women about the size of Sandra, found three that were close to her silhouette and asked to each them to stand up. He then faced in the direction of Mrs. Gilbert and asked:

“Let’s imagine that we are at night and that it is dark. Now, look at these three women; could one of them be the one coming out of the car on that sad evening?”

The witness had no choice and answered yes.

“Of course,” said the prosecutor. “It could have been one of them, or any other small woman with dark hair. Now, let’s talk about the man. You said that he was slim, elegant and that he walked in a stylish manner. That’s amusing, you know. This weak description that you gave us could easily match the appearance of attorney Richard or even, of Mr. Steinberg... isn’t that right?”

As Mrs. Gilbert remained silent, Adams continued:

“You see, my dear Lady, the people you noticed coming out of the car could be... anyone! What you claimed to have seen are only... shadows. In this case, your testimony is not valid. I beg your honor to please reject this woman’s testimony.”

“Mrs. Gilbert’s testimony is rejected,” loudly stated the judge.

John Richard furiously jumped out of his chair and protested:

“But your honor, we cannot reject this woman’s testimony. She has seen and noticed facts that clearly support what I am trying to prove since yesterday: there was a third person in the house. I can understand that we cannot establish a definitive identification of the people who got out of the car, but we must retain that a car, that was not a taxi, was parked in front of my client’s residence and that a man entered the house.”

“I agree with you on that point,” replied the Judge. “We will retain this part of the testimony.”

John kept going and insisted:

“We also have to keep in mind, your Honor, that Mrs. Gilbert’s testimony is in contradiction with what the victim told us. You may recall that the so called victim declared that she and Mrs. Tarah had arrived in a taxi and that no other visitor entered the house on that night. We have to remember that the victim had falsified the truth one more time.”

“Objection, your Honor!” yelled Mr. Adams. “It has not been established that Mrs. McPhee did not tell the truth. I would like to point out that the taxi that took Mrs. Tarah and Mrs. McPhee home on that night was not on regular duty. The chauffeur may even have removed the taxi light from the top of his vehicle. It’s even possible that he could have returned to the house, on that same night, with someone else on board. That could have happened after Mrs. McPhee had entered her bed room on the second floor. From her room, how could she have known that Mrs. Tarah received another **guest**? By the way, didn’t the victim declare that Mrs. Tarah could have had an affair with the taxi driver?”

“Surely another lie!” ironically said John.

“Sustain,” decided the Judge after a short hesitation. “Mr. Adams is right. I’m sorry, Mr. Richard, but I have to lean toward the prosecution. Mrs. Gilbert’s testimony may have its value, but it does not prove that Mrs. McPhee was perjuring herself.”

Truly disappointed, John took place on his chair. He was truly counting on Mrs. Gilbert’s testimony but most of it was rejected by the court. At least, it was accepted that a third person had probably entered the house. That was worth something. Now, he had to find the man in question. But how? Sandy would surely not bring any light on that person. He brought a term to his thoughts and called Dr. George Allyson. As soon as the man was in the witness box, John began his questioning:

“Doctor Allyson, how long have you been Jonny McLean’s physician?”

“Hum,” answered the man while scratching his head. “I would say a good ten years.”

“In general, why was he seeing you?”

“Mostly to get a prescription for ‘benzodiazepines hypnotic,’ or if you prefer, sleeping pills.”

“Do you mean that our young man has a sleeping disorder?”

“It’s been the case since I know him. He can’t sleep without his sleeping pills.”

“What is the name or brand of the medicine you prescribed for him?”

“At first, I was prescribing short duration sleeping pills, like Imovane or Stilnox. As time went on, these medicine had no more effects on him. I modified his prescription and gave him a product called Noctamide. It was somewhat more powerful and has a longer duration. That product worked well for a while but, about two years ago, I had to prescribe a stronger medication. Actually, he is taking a medication called Mogadon.”

“You mean these pills?” replied John while taking the bottle of Mogadon out of his jacket’s pocket.

“That’s what I prescribed. Mogadon is a potent medication with a prolonged effect.”

“Does that mean that when someone absorbs this medication, he will have a deep and prolonged sleep?”

“That is accurate.”

“How much sleeping time would one of these pills bring to a patient?”

Allyson smiled and answered:

“There is no specific answer. It differs from one person to another. What will work for someone may not work for another.”

“So, am I to understand that Mogadon achieves good results for Johnny?”

“Yes, it is so.”

“If Johnny was to absorb only one of these pills, how long would he sleep?”

“I would say between four and six hours... maybe six.”

“We know that when Johnny is highly stressed he takes two of these pills. In such a case, how long can he sleep?”

“It could easily be eight hours.”

“At my request, you gave Johnny a medical exam the day after the sad events. The tests you made established that he had a strong presence of sleeping pills in his blood. Is that right?”

“Effectively; in fact, after reading the test results, it became evident to me that Johnny had taken more than one pill.”

“Would you say... at least two?”

“I would say only two. If he had taken three pills, that could have been a health hazard and Johnny knows that very well. As precaution, I always gave the medication to his mother. She was in charge of giving him the proper doze. The problem, with Megadon, is it can create a strong dependence. It would be easy for a client to excess the prescribed limit”.

“So, if I understand well, the night that my client presumably aggressed Mrs. McPhee, he had taken two of these pills. According to you, that would have given him about eight hours of sleep?”

“In Johnny’s case, eight hours would be a minimum.”

“I see, but now, we have a problem. Johnny declared that Manou gave him two sleeping pills around eight o’clock at night. On the other side, Mrs. McPhee certified that Johnny took the pills at one o’clock in the morning. Who should we believe?”

“You should believe Johnny without any doubt.”

“Why?”

“He woke up around the time the police arrived on location. Isn’t that right?”

“That is right,” confirmed John. “According to the report, the police arrived around seven o’clock in the morning.”

“That shows without a doubt that Johnny absorbed the sleeping pills around eight o’clock at night. If he had taken his medication at one o’clock in the morning, the police would have had a major problem to wake him up.”

“The report clearly states,” added John, “that Johnny immediately opened his eyes when a police officer called his name.”

“That proves that the effect of the sleeping pills was over.”

“But, as he was under the effect of the medication, if someone had tried to brutally wake him up, like pushing him violently... what would have happened?”

“In such a case, he could have been awakened, but would have been in a state of torpor and would have been quite confused. If he had tried to get out of bed, he may have collapsed.”

“Contrary to what you just described,” said John, “my client was completely lucid when

they woke him up and he could easily stand on his two feet.”

John briskly looked at his notes and informed the judge that he had no more questions for the witness.

“Mr. Adams?” asked the Judge.

“I have a few questions,” answered the prosecutor while standing up.

He kept silent for a few seconds and, approached the witness and asked:

“Dr. Allison, you declared that if the accused had taken the sleeping pills at one o’clock in the morning, the police officers would have found a very confused person. Is that right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“What are the signs that could allow someone to recognize advance confusion on a person?”

Surprise by the question, the doctor answered as if the response was evident:

“Well, the most obvious indication would be a major loss of memory.”

“A loss of memory?” repeated Mr. Adams. “You mean a severe loss of memory?”

“Yes, a loss of memory that could be distressful for someone. It could be quite disturbing.”

“Is it not what happened to Mr. McLean when the police officers woke him up?”

“Not at all. I truly do not understand what you are trying to say.”

“What I’m saying, my dear doctor, is that your client manifested a major loss of memory on the morning the officers woke him up. He had in fact forgotten the abuse he had afflicted to a defenseless young woman. That is what I’m saying, doctor. I’m done, your Honor. I don’t have any more questions for this witness.”

“I object, your Honor,” immediately riposted John.” The police report clearly states that my client was totally proficient the morning he was arrested.”

“Loss of memory is not a sign of mental deficiency,” retorted the prosecutor. “If you do not know a person, and that was the case of the police officers who arrested Johnny, how can you tell that the accused had really lost recollection of his actions? In the case of Mr. McLean, he seemed perfectly sane. Enough to pretend he has lost his memory. The officers are not specialists in mental health, you know. They often make errors. They never noticed that the young man they interrogated had really lost his memory. In fact, I committed the same error and I’m sorry about that. I only learned today that a person been awoken after taking a heavy dose of sleeping pills can suffer a major loss of memory. Therefore, I am willing to admit, in front of this court, that Johnny McLean was telling the truth when he declared that he had never abused Sandra McPhee. Now, I believe

him. His memory was seriously affected by the medication. We can only hope that one day, he will recover his memory. Then, he will be able to recognize the kind of monster he really is.”

John appeared furious when he replied:

“You are forgetting the other symptom, my dear colleague. I want to bring back to your attention that Doctor Allison said that if Johnny had been in a real state of confusion, he would not have been able to stand up. On that sad morning, both you and I noticed that my client was easily moving around.”

“I need to remind you,” said Adams, “that Doctor Alison clearly stated that there was a risk that a patient could fall when pulled out of bed. He never said that the person in question would definitively collapse.”

For John Richard this second trial day was much different than the first day. He had a successful previous day, but now, today, nothing went well. It was not total failure but almost. Two witnesses mean, two defeats. He had to admit that the prosecutor had done a hell of a job and cleverly played his cards. The only thing left for him to mark some points was to bring the victim back on the witness chair and establish that she was a liar and a perjurer. He was ready to proceed when he noticed that one of his assistants was hastily walking toward him. After convincing the judge to give him a short recess, he left the court room with his employee.

“You must absolutely find a way to adjourn the trial!” suggested his subordinate. “We just acquired the telephone number.”

“Finally!” exclaimed John with enthusiasm. “Please, give me a name... just a name.”

“The problem is that the call was re-transmitted through a cell phone. The telephone company could only give us a telephone number. We have to discover more info. That’s why I’m asking you to delay the trial. We have a big task ahead of us.”

“Damn,” whispered John. “That won’t be a walk in the park; damn it!”

“It could have been worst,” replied the assistant, trying to cheer up his boss. “The call could have been transferred to a pay phone. In such a case, finding the information we need would have been an impossible task.”

“You know what, Michael?” declared John with a smile. “You are right; the game is not over yet.”

Then, he returned to the court room and said:

“Your Honor, I beg the court to grant us a recess until tomorrow morning. We just received significant information concerning our case, but it has to be validated. That will, of course, take us

some time.”

Before reaching a decision, the judge ordered the two attorneys to approach his bench. As far as Adams was concerned, that recess played in his favor. He needed to be aware of the nature of the information. John started by saying:

“Your Honor, we now have on hand the telephone number of the person who called Manou in the afternoon of the dreadful day. As you can understand, it is capital for us to know who is the owner of that telephone number.”

The prosecutor tried to object, but he was too late. The judge granted the defense attorney’s request. As John and Johnny were getting ready to leave the court room, John Steinberg rushed toward them to be informed about the turn of event.

“We have the phone number,” announced John, seemingly happy with the fact. “Now, we need to know who used that phone number.”

Satisfied, Ralph winked at Tommy and left the court room. Five minutes later, the young reporter called Mel and told him to complete his first delivery. They were both sure that John and his associates would appreciate a good large pizza, covered with the best ingredients. Tommy was convinced that someone in Johnny’s team would soon call the phone number they now had. Of course, he had removed Sandy’s personnel answer and replaced it by the automatic respond. Tommy called Yannick to inform him of the latest developments. Even if the big boss seemed happy with the info, he didn’t appear to be in a positive mood. Not only did his stomach cause him severe pain, he was quite fed up of looking for the damn jewels.

“I visited over one hundred stores,” he reluctantly admitted.

“What I will now tell you may make you feel somewhat better. I have good news for you,” pleasantly said Tommy.

“What is it?” asked Yannick. “Shit! I’m in serious pain.”

“Did you watch the news lately?”

“I don’t really have the time. I trust that you have.”

“It’s about Johnny’s popularity level.”

“It’s falling?”

“Yes, as you predicted.”

“And now, I predict that his popularity will rise. By the way, were you able to prepare a meeting between me and his look-alike?”

“Yes, he will meet you at your hotel on Monday night.”

“That is good.”

“Can I finally know why you want to meet him?”

“No questions, my friend; you will soon know.”

This type of answer deeply frustrated Tommy. He wanted to know why Yannick wanted to meet Kevin Lebon. More than that, he needed to know.

Noticing that the regional code of the phone number he had received corresponded to Las Vegas, John dialed the number. The phone rang three times before an automatic mechanical voice answered.

“Damn it!” he roared.

He thought a few minutes before asking his staff to find the company that had issued the number. They would then have to contact that same company to learn the identity of the owner. Getting the information might be quite laborious. Any respectable company would protect the confidentiality of their clients. John’s team may need to get a court order.

“Hurry-up, guys!” ordered John while clapping his hands. “We don’t have any time to waste.”

The team had been working for about forty minutes when the building guard came to the door, holding a gigantic pizza box. His eyes almost coming out of their orbits, John rushed to the door to take possession of the precious delivery. As he grabbed the box, he almost kissed the guard’s hand.

“God!” exclaimed the guard. “You guys must be very hungry.”

“This is a pizza I thought we would never get,” replied John, while showing all his front teeth. “Make sure to rapidly bring us all other deliveries. Whatever if it is pizza, chicken or even couscous.”

“You can count on me, sir!” answered the guard, somewhat surprised by the lawyer’s excitement.

John rapidly noticed a small white envelope affixed on top of the box.

“Eureka, boys... we got it!”

A telephone number appeared on a white sheet of paper. The number corresponded to the one they had received from the phone company. They also discovered the name of the owner. It appeared that the number was used by a person named Sandra McNeil.

“It’s very close to Sandra McPhee, don’t you think, boys?” maliciously said John.

In the message, the sender made three recommendations. First, to compare the phone number with the one they already had. Second, it was used to call the police and to check on the legal file of Mrs. McNeil. “You will be surprised by what you will find,” added the sender. And third, he also promised a major surprise if they dialed the specific number while they were in court. The name of the person that had called Tommy MacMillan was also revealed in the content of the letter. It was Charlot Lopez, a resident of La Vegas who was surely in a certain form of relationship with Sandra McNeil. The informer had also stated in the letter: “Beware; we can’t be too sure of the name Charlot Lopez. It could be an alias.”

“Well!!” declared John while taking a bite of pizza. “Don’t you guys want any? Great pizza, the best I ever had!”

Once the pizza had been totally devoured, John ordered his team to get back to work. One assistant was asked to check if the cell phone number belonging to Mrs. McNeil had been use to call the police department. Another subordinate was instructed to find the legal file of this same woman. The third right hand man was requested to make some research on Charlot Lopez.

“The sooner we find the answers, the sooner we can go home and enjoy the rest of this magnificent day,” said John.

Motivated by some paid time off, something that John hardly ever offered them, the men rushed to work. Within two hours, they had gathered all the information they were seeking. It was established that the mysterious informer was accurate on all aspects. It was confirmed that the cell number used to call the police matched Sandra McNeil’s phone number. They also found that this twenty one years old woman already had a loaded police file. Finally, they concluded that the name Charlot Lopez was probably a fabricated alias. However, the poor quality photograph they had of Sandra made it almost impossible to faultlessly identify her. They could perceive an image that was not clear or sharp enough to identify Sandra McPhee. But, anyway, they now had enough tools to counter attack the prosecution. John couldn’t wait to get back in court. During the evening, he showed his satisfaction by offering Johnny and his dog a fabulous dinner composed of roast beef and expensive cheeses.

The next morning, Tommy showed up in court quite early in order to have a talk with Sandy before the trial continuation. As he expected, he found her on the way to the restroom. She was ready to walk in when he approached her.

“Hey, Mrs. McPhee,” he said, acting as if it was their first face to face. “I’m Tommy MacMillan. The prosecution was brilliant yesterday, don’t you think?”

“Tommy,” murmured Sandy. “What kind of game are you playing?”

“Would you please give me an interview?” continued Tommy. “It won’t take long at all.”

She kept whispering when she answered:

“Can you tell me why you are writing all that shit about me in your junky newspaper? It’s seems to me that you are acting as if you were against me.”

“I’m only obeying orders,” replied Tommy. “No one must figure that there’s a connection between you and me. Don’t you remember? Oh... by the way... Yannick wants me to congratulate you. He thinks you are brilliant.”

“Is that so?” retorted Sandy seemingly surprised. This damn Richard did...”

“No way,” Tommy reassured her. Yannick is proud of you. He said he would give you a bonus.”

“Is that true?”

Tommy changed attitude, and almost yelled as he said:

“So, Mrs. McPhee, will you give me an interview?”

“First, I need to go to the restroom.”

“You’re not going to suck on that narcotic again, are you?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Ok, let me have your bag. I’ll take care of it for you.”

“Are you nuts? I need my bag,” replied the young woman. “Hold on to my jacket, instead. It could be in my way.”

The moment she left, Tommy inserted the cell phone in a pocket of her jacket. He waited for her to come back and said:

“You know what? You were in there too long. The trial will soon begin and we have no time left for the interview.” He lowered his voice and continued: “I already told you what I wanted to tell you. Keep up the good work and don’t give up. You are doing well.”

And he swiftly walked away. As he was having this conversation, Yannick was yelling: “Eureka!” He had finally found Manou’s jewelry in a classy store managed by a courteous and honest merchant. The man was so morally upstanding that he offered his full collaboration to the man who was working in association with attorney John Richard, Johnny Boy’s defender. He became aware that the rock star was the adopted son of the lady who owned the jewelries, the same lady who had been assassinated by the seller. At first, the man was surprised as he explained to Yannick:

“The man who sold me these gems told me that he had inherited the whole things from unknown parent.”

“And you believed him?” asked Yannick.

“Well... yes, he seemed very sincere. He even clarified that he had received the jewels through the post office. He showed me the package, you know? It came from Los Angeles. There was no message and no name. Anyway, he would have been totally crazy to sell stolen jewelry here. We are not a pawn shop, you know? We are an honest jewelry store.”

“And as such,” concluded Yannick, “I assume that before buying the jewelries, you asked the seller to identify himself?”

“Well of course!” confirmed the jeweler. “I still have the photocopies of the identity documents that he presented to me. There is a name and photograph on each of them.”

“You must understand,” informed Yannick, “that even if I work for the defense, you are not obligated to show me the documents or return the jewelry to me. At this state, I can get a court order, or we can deal directly with each other. In the first scenario, the court will seize the whole paraphernalia from you and without any compensation. You will have to present yourself in court and your business will be thoroughly assessed.”

“And in the second scenario?” questioned the jeweler who was becoming worried.

“In the second case, you may have to come to court, but there would not be a police investigation. I would buy the jewels from you and give you whatever you paid for them. The choice is yours, my friend.”

Knowing that a police investigation would put in doubt the reputation of his business, the merchant chose the second option. He pulled out a box in which he kept all information concerning the people who sold something to him. He searched through the various papers and said:

“Here we are, I got it. I bought these jewels last Thursday for the total amount of thirty five thousand dollars. The seller was called, Carlos Fernandez.”

While looking through the papers, Yannick was utterly satisfied. He had all the information he wanted. He now knew Charlot’s real identity, his address, his green card number and his driving

licence. He was confident that the documents were accurate. The work address given by Charlot matched the address of the bar where he and Mel had seen him beating up poor Sandy. Dumb Charlot! When he received the jewelries, the dim-witted fellow believed he had received a gift from heaven. Not only was he moronic, he was totally ignorant. He sold for thirty five thousand dollars some merchandise that was worth at least five times that amount. The man had no idea of the value of what he sold. Yannick had originally categorized the pimp as a stupid individual and he was right. The man could fall in any trap without an idea of what was going on.

“If you want, I can make you some copies,” suggested the merchant.

“What did you say?” asked Yannick who was deeply concentrating on the documents he was reading.

“The documents...” repeated the merchant. “I can make you some copies”.

“Oh well, OK, sure... I’m sorry, those papers are more than what we expected. They will be extremely useful. I believe, my friend, that because of you, we will win our case. Johnny Boy will be quite grateful.”

The man, by the name of Peter Lambert, rapidly made a copy of each document. While doing so, Yannick asked him:

“Tell me, if you had sold all these jewels, how much money would you have sold them for?”

“Well, hard to say,” replied the man, “probably around fifty thousand dollars; maybe more.”

As the merchant said these words, his expression showed his deception. He understood that he was going to lose much profit. Considering that he was a good man, Yannick offered him to buy all the jewels for the amount of fifty thousand dollars.

“I can’t accept your offer,” rapidly refused the merchant. “We are talking about stolen jewelry here. I don’t do that kind of business.”

“These jewels,” explained Yannick, “will help us ascertain Johnny Boy’s innocence!”

“This story is a real set-up, isn’t it? I knew it, I was sure.”

“And because of you, we have the evidence and the proof. Please accept the fifty thousand dollars. It pleases me to offer you that amount.”

Yannick asked his two body guards to come closer to him. One of them was carrying an attache case filled with money.

“Take fifty thousand dollars out of the case and give it to this gentleman,” ordered Yannick.

He then looked at Peter Lambert and added:

“This being done, I want something else from you.”

“You want me to be a witness?”

“Precisely. I’m asking you to be at the Los Angeles tribunal, next Friday and no later than six fifty am.”

“No problem, I’ll be there.”

“I think it would be better if you come with me. Mr. Fernandez may not want you to testify and may come here to silence you.”

“Do you really think so?” said Peter, seemed somewhat anxious.

“Yes I do. That’s why I want to assure your security. Please come with me. I’ll take you to a first class hotel. You can sleep there until the end of the trial. Of course I will pay all your expenses.”

“Absolutely not!” objected the jeweler. “You have done enough. I will pay for my own expenses. I will only be gone for two days, isn’t that so?”

“Yes, we should have a verdict sometime Friday morning.”

“Can you give me an idea of what I will have to say?”

“You will only have to identify the man who sold the jewels to you as soon as you see his face. All we want is for the judge and the procurer to hear you.”

“That will be easy; I perfectly remember the man’s face. I won’t have any problem recognizing him.”

“Very good. Do you have to get some things? Let’s leave as soon as possible.”

“Can you give me about an hour?”

“Absolutely. One of my men will stay with you to assure your safety. Let’s say we meet at the airport in two hours. Is that acceptable to you?”

While the jeweler was preparing his trip to Los Angeles, Yannick and the body guard in charge of the attache case went to a restaurant.

“How much money do we have left in the case?” he asked.

“I would say around one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It may be wise to leave some of it at the bank .Would you like me to go with you?”

“No,” replied Yannick. “The rest of the money is to be shared between you and partner.”

“What did you say?” exclaimed the man while showing an extreme surprise.

“Of course you will have to do something else for me.”

“What?”

Then, Yannick spoke to him about Charlot, alias Carlos Fernandez. The bodyguard’s mission would be to convince the pimp to be in the Los Angeles court Friday morning. He should be convinced by friendly persuasion and if that was not enough, force was not out of the question.

“What do you mean by ‘friendly persuasion’?” wanted to know the guard who by size and color looked a little like Mel.

Yannick explained that he was John Richard’s right hand, the attorney that was defending Johnny Boy in this mega trial that was so popular.

“That I already knew,” said the guard. “So, it’s really a set-up?”

“That it is!” quickly answered Yannick. “Carlos Fernandez, who sold the jewels, is the pimp of the girl who planned this whole affair.”

“You mean the girl who was attacked?”

“The girls who claimed she was attacked.” corrected Yannick.

“Ok, so... this girl is a whore?”

“You got it.”

“Well, what do you know? How did you find out?”

“Certain things she said to her cocaine supplier who happens to be one of our informers. This little bitch did everything with the exception of killing Manou. That’s where the puzzle is incomplete. Who murdered Manou while the girl was framing Johnny?”

“Did you say murdered? Manou was assassinated?” asked the guard, who seemed shocked. “Poor Manou...”

“You liked the lady?” questioned Yannick.

“Well, of course, like most members of the black community. For us, she was a symbol of pride and...”

“And of kindness?” added Yannick.

“Indeed.”

“You are right,” approved Yannick. “Without her, Johnny would be nothing at all. He owes his career to her; he owes everything to her.”

“So, her death is due to a murder?” forcefully questioned the guard.

“Yes, and we have reason to believe that the killer is this bloody Fernandez. We have no proof, but we truly believe that he was working with Sandy McPhee. However, for one reason or another, he seemed to have walked away from the plot. Manou’s death may not have been an original part of the plan. After her death, he probably panicked and ran away, leaving Sandy behind. I don’t think he stole the jewels. I think she did. After realizing that he had left the castle, she may have planned a vengeance against him.”

Yannick kept silent for a few second, drank some of his beer and continued:

“To have some kind of a proof to present in court, it was important to find the jewels and the identity of the person who sold them to the merchant. Now, I’m sure you understand why that Carlos has to be in court.”

“I’m going to kill him!” busted the guard with rage. “No one can kill one of our sisters the way he did. I’m goanna kill the bastard.”

“Absolutely not!” protested Yannick. “If you kill him, I won’t have any way to establish Johnny’s innocence. That killer as to be in court, so the jeweler can identify him. After that, Carlos and his whore can finish their chitty life in prison.”

“Ok, I understand,” replied the guard. “How can I convince him to come to court without violence? It would like asking him to prepare his own jail sentence...”

“You can by playing stupid.”

“What do you mean?”

“Act as if we didn’t know the role he played in this sad intrigue.”

“I see,” finally understood the guard. “Once in court, reality will fall on his head.”

“You got it,” continued Yannick. “Gentle persuasion means that will make him believe that we mean to buy his testimony.”

“What will we offer him?”

Yannick explained his program. First, the guard had to tell Carlos that Sandy was in trouble. She was ready to betray him to free herself from the charges that will soon be laid against her,

including the murder of Manouchka Tarah. To better convince Carlos, he would have to add that Sandy stole the jewels and mailed them to him in order to implicate him if the situation was to turn against her. As things are now gradually turning against her, she is getting ready to tell the police that Manou's killer had stolen the jewels with the intention to sell them in Las Vegas.

"That should make him angry," said Yannick, while showing his best sadistic smile.

"So, I must act as if I had no idea that he was present at the scene of the crime?"

"That's right."

"Do you think that it will be sufficient to convince him to come in court?"

"It will be enough if you persuade him that the defense, and not the prosecutor, has found the jewels and that we know that he sold them. I think he will listen to you."

"And then?" asked the guard who was now interesting by the game he had to play.

"Well, explain to him that the goal of the defense is to clear Johnny. The jewelry does not have much importance in the trial. All that John Richard wanted, by finding the jewels, was to find the girl's pimp, the one who gave her the wounds she showed in court. Then, it will be easy for him to establish that Johnny is not guilty. At this point, Carlos will ask you: "How do you know that I'm the one who hammered her?" And you will answer: "Because she told the story to her cocaine provider. She also confessed that in order to get even with her pimp, she sent him the stolen jewels."

Somewhat confused, the guard asked:

"So, if I understand well, you want the pimp to come to court and declare that he is the one who afflicted the injuries to the girl and that Johnny had nothing to do with it. Is that what you want?"

"Exactly."

"But, if he does what you ask, he may become in trouble with the law, don't you think?"

"He will definitively give you that argument in order not to present himself in court. You will have to convince him that as a witness for the defense, he cannot be prosecuted. He cannot be arrested for telling the truth. For him, to be in trouble with the law, Sandy would have to press charge against him and that cannot be done during Johnny's trial."

After drinking more of his beer, Yannick continued:

"You can also tell him that in case he gets in trouble, the defense will help him without charging him a dime. Also, let him know that we will greatly appreciate his help and to thank him, we will give him back Manou's jewelries, as soon as we get out of court. From then on, he will

have the right to legally sell the stuff for its real value. You can show him the jewelry to convince him that you have them.”

“You will leave the jewels with us?” asked the guard.

“Yes I will.”

Yannick notice that the guard’s eyes became as reflective as Manou’s diamonds. He rapidly specified:

“Sorry to say that you won’t be able to keep Manou’s jewelries. I want you to hand them to the judge as soon as the jeweler completed Carlos identification. They are part of our proof, you see?”

“Do you mean that we will have to escort the pimp to the tribunal?” questioned the guard, seemingly worried.

“Of course,” replied Yannick with a big smile. “That why I’m paying both of you so generously!”

Noticing that his interlocutor was hesitating, he added:

“If you are not constantly with him, Carlos may lose his nerves and never appear in court. His testimony is of prime importance. Do you understand?”

“OK. And once we convinced him, what do you want us to do?”

“You take him to Los Angeles and keep him occupied until he is called to testify. I guess you could take him to a good restaurant or to a night club. I will give you additional money to cover these expenses.”

“Is there a plan B?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if the punk refuses our invitation, what do you want us to do?”

“Then, you can do whatever you want. You can tie him, you can give him drugs... do whatever is necessary to get in court on Friday morning.”

“We got a deal!” concluded the guard. “You can count on us.”

Yannick shook his hand before specifying:

“Last thing; once the pimp has been identified and once you gave back the jewelries, tell the judge that you don’t have anything to do with the case. Tell him that you are present at the request of one of Mr. Richard’s assistants. Tell him you were paid to bring to court the irrefutable

proof that Johnny Boy is innocent.”

“So, I’ll be telling the truth?”

“The truth, and only the truth!”

At precisely eleven o’clock in the morning, accompanied by Peter Lambert, Yannick took place in the plane that would take him back to Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, John Richard was having a ball in the court room and mostly because of the information he had received the previous night. After questioning a police officer, it was established that the telephone number that was used to call the sheriff’s office the night of the sad events, was the same that had been given by the telephone company. John decided to call Sandy back to the witness box. Without understanding how a simple phone number could be so important to that stupid lawyer, the girl slowly walked forwards, assuming that his opponent was trying to kill time. This dumb layer had nothing against her and was only playing a game. He just wanted her to contradict herself. It was his only way to gain some points. But it would be useless. She knew her story and would stick to it. Didn’t Tommy say that Yannick was proud of her and that he would give her a bonus? Once she was sitting down, John Richard approached her with a strange smile.

“Did you sleep well, Mrs. McPhee?”

“That’s none of your business.” coldly answered Sandy.

Acting like if he was offended, John continued:

“Very well... since you want to take that attitude, I’ll get to the point. Tell me... are you familiar with Las Vegas?”

A little surprised by the question, Sandy did not answer.

“Do you know that city, yes or no?” repeated John. “Did you ever go there? Have you ever resided there?”

“Hum... no,” softly answered Sandy.

“Very strange,” retorted John as he handed her a sheet of paper, “because on this sheet, my dear woman, given to us by Manouchka Tarah’s phone company, we can find a telephone number. Do you recognize it?”

“Well... no...” refuted Sandy who had easily identified her own cell number.

“Too bad!” said John. “I was hoping you would be able to help me.”

He remained silent for a few second and proceeded:

“This telephone number was released in Las Vegas. It is the number from which came the call to the Los Angeles sheriff department and also, the number from which came the call to Mrs. Tarah on the afternoon preceding her death. So, the person that Manou was expecting that night is also the person who called the police. Isn’t that strange?”

“Not really,” replied the young woman while looking at him with disdain. “How do you know that the person she was waiting for did not discover her cadaver?”

“Good reasoning, but, something else bugs me. This telephone number is registered to a woman, but a man placed the call to the sheriff’s office.”

“Can you tell me how this can be of interest to me?” impatiently asked Sandy.

“Well, let me tell you,” retorted John who was no longer smiling. “This telephone number is registered to the name of Sandra McNeil, residing in Las Vegas. McNeil... McPhee...these names are similar, don’t you thing? Very similar...”

“It may be similar,” answered Sandy, “but they are not the same.”

“Good thing for you, my dear, said John. “If you only knew who this Sandra McNeil is! My God! She has a long police file. Fraud, robbery, drug traffic and, get ready... she was even arrested for prostitution. Hum... that’s quite a file. I wonder if it applies to the Sandra I know.”

Totally silent, Sandy was becoming as pale as a cadaver. But John was far from being done. He pulled out a photograph that he showed to the judge before continuing his presentation:

“Look at this picture, your Honor. This is a photograph of the woman I’m talking about. We can’t establish that it’s Mrs. McPhee, but we can’t say that it’s not her.”

Of course the prosecutor wanted to look at the photograph. While he was trying to convince the judge that it was impossible to prove anything from such a bad photo, it was easy to determine that he was somewhat troubled. Another noticeable point was that the date of birth of the two women was the same. The prosecutor was concerned and John noticed it.

“Ok, Mrs. McNeil, said John. Oh... I’m sorry... I meant to say Mrs. McPhee. I’m very sorry. These two names are so similar. It’s easy to mix them up!”

John looked at the witness for a few seconds and amusingly continued:

“Come on, Mrs. McPhee! Don’t look so upset. We’re only playing, after all. Would you like a glass of water? Of course you do... it should bring back some color in your face.”

John did as he offered and placed a glass of water in front of Sandy. He also took a glass of water and proposed a toast. To every one surprised, Sandy grabbed her glass of water and threw it to his face. The judge was getting ready to intervene, but a smiling John asked him not to.

“Don’t worry, your Honor; no problem here; it’s only water after all.”

He wiped his face with a towel that a security guard brought him and when that was done, he became serious and said:

“Now that we are cooled down, Mrs. McPhee, let’s keep going. Does the name Charlot Lopez mean anything to you? I’m asking because we are not sure if that is his real name. He also lives in Las Vegas, isn’t that interesting? Do you know him?”

If Sandra had had a weapon at hands, she would have sent this arrogant bastard to his maker. How the hell did he find so many things about her? Shit! Shit! Shit! She took a deep breath and found the courage to answer:

“Charlot who?”

“Lopez, Charlot Lopez... but, anyway, don’t waste your breath. I can guess that your answer is no. Isn’t that weird? But for your information, Charlot is probably the one who called Tommy MacMillan the night Johnny Boy presumably aggressed you. Lopez... sounds like a Spanish name, doesn’t it? Interesting, Tommy told us that the man who called him had a strong Spanish accent.”

“Objection, your Honor,” interjected Mr. Adams. “These remarks are only presumptions. Not only is Mr. Richard harassing the victim while questioning her about a man whose name maybe Charlot Lopez, he is trying to tell us that the man in question could probably be the one who called the journalist MacMillan.”

“Mr. Richard, replied the judge, “unless you have tangible proofs about the implication of Mr. Lopez in this case, please respect the rules of our juridical procedures.”

John did not insist but declared:

“I can admit that I was somewhat fishing and I’m sorry about that. However, I want to notify the prosecutor and his presumed victim that they need to revise their strategy before tomorrow, because I may very well have tangible information about this Mr. Lopez. If I find what I’m looking for, your case against my client will be demolished. I strongly recommend you to come back with a new plan of action. Why not try the truth?”

He what about to declare that the defense was done with the witness when he changed his mind and smacked his own head.

“Good heaven! I was going to close this line of questioning and I neglected something very important. Where is my mind?”

This being said, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number that he seemed to know by heart. The judge was getting ready to object when the ring of a cell phone was heard.

“Well, your Honor, did you hear? Isn’t that the sound of a cell phone? Where is that ring coming from? One thing for sure, that cell phone is very near.”

While saying these words, he walk toward Sandy.

“What is this?” he asked. “The sound seems to be coming out from you jacket. Don’t you know that your cell phone should have been turned-off before coming to this court?”

Totally surprised, Sandy couldn’t find a word to say.

“Well... that’s not too big of an offense. I’m sure the judge will forgive you. But, go ahead, my dear lady... answer the call.”

As Sandy refused to obey, the lawyer added:

“You do not want to answer? Well, no problem... it was just me calling you and I have nothing important to tell you.”

Of course, as he interrupted his call, Sandy’s phone became silent. With a very serious attitude, John faced the judge and said:

“Please note, your Honor, that I just called Sandra McNeil. The Sandra McNeil that Mrs. McPhee is not supposed to know. Please, note that the calls made to the sheriff’s department and to Manouchka Tarah were made from this very same number. From the cell phone of the woman who pretends to be called Sandra McPhee. I have proofs to back this statement.”

Sandy stood-up and yelled:

“You are a monster! You placed this cell phone in my pocket, you are...”

“The comedy is over, Mrs. McNeil,” solemnly declared John. “We both know that no one else but you placed this cell phone in your pocket, because... it is yours.”

“This is a bloody set-up!” yelled the woman.

“Very well,” said the judge. Mr. Adams, do you wish to question the victim?”

“You Honor, I requesting that this trial be postponed until tomorrow.”

“Agreed.”

XIII

As he left the tribunal, John Richard had the best possible reasons to invite his crew to a sumptuous fiesta. But he did not, preferring to order everyone back to the office. He perceived he was getting close to victory but he wasn't there yet. First, he had to get more information about the obscure Charlot Lopez. He had to prove his existence and establish the ties between him and Sandra McPhee. It could be an arduous task, especially because it seemed evident that the name Charlot Lopez was an alias. He figured that by probing into the past of Sandra McNeil, he might discover something.

As far as Tommy was concerned, it was time to tell Mel to proceed with the second delivery. In fact, the young journalist did not want to argue with Sandy and had left the court room quite rapidly. The woman maybe somewhat brainless because of her cocaine consumption, but she might still be bright enough to figure that Tommy has had placed the cell phone in her vest's pocket.

Less than half an hour later, Mr. Richard hurriedly entered the building where his office was located. Deep into his own thoughts, he never noticed the colossal man that was leaving the building. Johnny, who was a few steps behind him, turned around a few times to gaze at the muscle man.

"Wow! Did you notice John? This guy is almost a giant. Did you see his muscles?"

"What?" mumbled the lawyer. "Yes... he has quite a body."

"If I had a built like that, no one would have beaten me up."

"You are right, Johnny," replied John without really listening. Hurry up, young man, walk faster."

As soon they reached the office, the secretary smiled and pointed toward a box filled with delicious sandwiches. John was ecstatic:

"You mean that you did not order this food? It was just delivered to us?"

"That's it!" confirmed the secretary without losing her smile.

"Fantastic!" exclaimed John while rushing to grab the box.

As he was expecting, there was a white envelop inside the box. As he read the message, he figured he could now give more time off to his assistants. The note clearly revealed that Charlot Lopez was very well known by Sandy McNeil. The pimp's real name remained undisclosed, but it was clear that in Las Vegas and to Sandra McNeil, he was known as Charlot.

All there was left to do was, to study Sandy's police files. It would surely indicate that Charlot and her worked together. One was the pimp and the other the prostitute. To confirm the

report, the informer suggested to contact Alicia Bauer who used to live with Sandy McNeil. It was explained that Alicia could easily identify Sandy and reveal many things about the pimp, the low class bum who used Sandy's face as a punching bag. The message ended by saying:

"You will find in this message Mrs. Bauer's telephone number. By the way, in order for the woman to testify in Johnny's favor, I had to tell her that I was one of your assistants. I have already paid for her travelling expenses. You should call her as soon as possible to schedule a time to meet her. She should absolutely testify TOMORROW. Should she become hesitant, promise her a face to face and a good meal with Johnny Boy. If you do so, she will rush to Los Angeles."

John did not have to read the message twice. He grabbed the telephone to call Alicia Bauer. While he was waiting for her to pick-up the phone, he joyfully said the Johnny:

"I might as well tell you now, young man... you will soon have your first dinner alone with a young lady."

"What?" riposted Johnny, showing total disgust. "No way!"

"No way? Even if this young lady comes all the way from Las Vegas to help you get out of trouble?"

Johnny wanted additional information, but it was too late. Alicia Bauer had already picked-up the telephone. The dialog was short, sweet and very informative.

"Your assistant said you would call me, Mr. Richard. Do you still want me to testify? Tomorrow? No problem, I'll take the first flight. And, don't you worry, I have all the proofs to show who Sandy really is. I have pictures, documents and I even have some identity papers that she left behind. I'll bring everything with me."

"I'm very thankful, Miss Bauer. Give me a call as soon as you know your time of arrival. I will have someone to pick you up at the airport. I'll select an hotel and a room for you. I truly appreciate what you are doing. I truly do."

"You should thank you assistant. He is a very nice guy. In fact, he convinced me to help Johnny."

"Did you meet him?"

"No, we talked on the phone. Do you know that it's because of him that I still have a roof over my head? Silly me... of course you do since Johnny Boy is the one who gave me the money that this filthy Sandy owed me."

"Well... of course..." retorted John who had no idea of what the girl was talking about.

"Anyway, this guy must be your best assistant. He's really involved in Johnny's case."

My best assistant? thought John. If only I knew who he is, I would surely hire him. He looked at Johnny and asked to Alicia:

“Tell me, did my assistant tell you that you will have a face to face meal with your idol?”

“What...?” yelled Alicia, who seemed close to ecstasy. “You mean that...”

“Yes, my dear Miss Alicia. Johnny is with me, right in front of me. He greatly appreciates what you are doing for him and he can’t wait to take you to a great restaurant tomorrow night. Should you want to... of course?”

“Well, I’ll be!!! Exclaimed the girl who could not believe the invitation she had just received. “You asked me if I want to? Of course I want to.”

Meanwhile Johnny was getting more and more upset.

“Very good, then, Johnny will be with you tomorrow,” added John while looking at Johnny with a diverting smile.

“I will order my plane ticket right away. I will soon call you back,” said the hyper excited Alicia.

As soon as John put the telephone down, Johnny strongly objected:

“This is stupid, really dumb! You didn’t have to make her such a promise. What will I tell her? I don’t want to eat with her. I refuse!”

“Calm down, Johnny, it’s only for one dinner.”

“Yah... a face to face dinner with me; if she accepted, it means that’s she a whore.”

“She seemed very charming. I’m sure you will have a nice evening with her. Come on; think about this... she may look like Cinderella or Snow White. Wouldn’t that be nice? You may even fall in love. Can you imagine? The little prince found his princess.”

“Are you done mocking me?” yelled Johnny. “If somebody falls in love with her it will be you. Anyway, I want you to be there. I refuse to be alone with her.”

“But, I won’t be able, my little Johnny,” replied John, who acted as if he was disappointed. “If that girl’s testimony is as good as I expect, I will have to be here all night to prepare my closure statement. You understand, don’t you? I have to be ready before court time on Friday morning.”

“Closing statement?” repeated Johnny. “You mean that all that shit will be over on Friday?”

“I’m counting on it,” answered John. Well, it all depends on what that girl will have to tell us.”

“All right,” whispered Johnny while looking at his watch. “I have twenty four hours to find someone to come with me at that stupid restaurant. I don’t have a minute to waste.”

He left and locked himself in the small living room to make a few telephone calls. Twenty minutes later, Alicia Bauer called to announce that she would arrive in Los Angeles at six thirty pm. John Richard was delighted!

Mel had just returned to his room and was planning to devour a mouth-watering anchovy pizza, when to his great surprise, Yannick knocked at his door.

“Sir, you are back? I just made the second delivery. All went perfect...”

“Very good,” said Yannick while rubbing his stomach.

“It still hurts, sir?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Did everything go well in Las Vegas?”

“Overall, it was a successful tri,” answered Yannick who noticed the pizza box that Mel was holding.

“In fact, my trip was quite satisfactory. Consequently, you will have to wait before gobbling your pizza. I need another delivery and it must be done immediately.”

“Fine with me, sir,” hesitantly retorted Mel while scratching the top of his head.

“What?” questioned Yannick, is there a problem?”

“Well... I just delivered a box of sandwiches, what else should I deliver?”

Yannick smiled and suggested:

“Some drink, why not a few cans of coke?”

“Good idea!” approved Mel. “I will do it immediately.”

Yannick handed an envelope to himl and added:

“Give them this envelope; won’t you?”

“It almost already done, sir!” exclaimed Mel while running toward the elevator.

Just before the closure of the doors, Yannick added:

“By the way, I didn’t come back from Las Vegas by myself. A man by the name of Peter Lambert was with me. He’s the guy who bought the jewels from Sandy’s pimp. He will testify in court tomorrow morning. Meanwhile, I would like you to keep him company. Can you do that for me? He is in room 638.”

“No problem, sir, I will have a new companion.”

“Thank you, my friend.”

On the way back to his room, Yannick called Tommy from his cell phone. The journalist was happy to hear from his boss and informed him of the last facts and events. He ended his report by saying:

“By the way, you were right. This trial will end very soon.”

“Friday, confirmed Yannick. The whole thing will be done by Friday.”

After a short silence and with some kind of hesitance, Tommy asked:

“Hey, I feel kind of lonely, these days. Between the trial and the articles I have to write, I don’t have much time for myself. I guess... I’m saying that I feel like a recluse. How about we meet and have a fun party together? You know what I mean... we could have a few drinks.”

Not feeling up to it, Yannick negatively answered:

“I would like to, Tommy, but I’m very tired. My stomach is killing me. I don’t feel like going anywhere. Time spent in my room is what I need.”

“Then, I could come and visit you!” insisted Tommy. “Please, let me come over. You know what? I’ll bring some of my things and I’ll spend the night in your suite. I’ll sleep on the sofa. It will be perfect for my moral.”

Tommy seemed so enthusiastic about the idea that Yannick didn’t have the heart to say no.

John Richard had just invited his employees to take the rest of the day off when the security

guard knocked at his office door and handed him a black bag.

“This just arrived for you, Mr. Richard. The delivery man said he had left the bag in the back of his car.”

John rapidly closed the door and opened the bag. He found four soda cans and an envelope like he had received twice before. Two envelopes in the same day! Obviously, the sender was not wasting any time, thought John. He would have liked to know who the sender was. He definitively would have want that man work for him. As soon as he read the content of the letter, he yelled:

“Bingo!”

He consulted his watch and figured he had enough time left to contact the court. He called and rapidly said to the receptionist:

“Let me talk to Judge Malfoy, please.”

As soon as he had the judge on line, he announced:

“Hello Alex, sorry to bother you at work, but I have an emergency.”

“You’re not bothering me, pleasantly retorted the judge. I was getting ready to go play gold. Do you want to join me?”

Alexander was really a good friend and John was sorry to refuse the invitation.

“No, sorry, I don’t have the time. I need to add the names of Peter Lambert and Carlos Fernandez to my list of witnesses. It’s urgent; they will be in court Friday morning.”

“More witnesses?” replied the judge. “Can’t we wait until tomorrow morning? You know very well that before adding someone to the list, I have to consult the prosecutor. A few hours ago, I had his consent for Alicia Bauer, but now, he already left his office. It places me in a bad position, you know?”

“I understand, but as I said, it’s urgent. Are you not on the side of justice?”

“Of course, but... anyway, tell me what’s going on.”

“OK, well... you know that tomorrow, I have to prove that Sandra McPhee is really Sandra McNeil.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, get this; one of my new witness is Carlos Fernandez, alias the famous Charlot that was mentioned earlier. It so happen that Charlot is Sandy’s pimp. He will come to the court and declare that he hammered Sandy and that Johnny is innocent.”

“Wow!” said the startled Judge Malfoy. “The little darling will have some hardship tomorrow. Who is the other witness?”

“The other one is called John Lambert, a jeweler that was in possession of Manouschka Tarah’s jewels.”

“Is that right?” questioned Malfoy.

“Yes, and he will tell us that the jewels were sold to him by Carlos Fernandez. From then on, we have solved two problems. Johnny Boy was framed and his mother was murdered.”

“That is something...” said a flabbergasted judge. “If Peter Lambert is to testify against Carlos Fernandez, how did you convince the pimp to serve as a witness for you?”

“Simple, my dear Watson!” answered John with a smart and joyful attitude. “John Fernandez does not know that the jeweler will testify. In fact, we have to make sure that I interrogate the pimp before the jeweler.”

“Hum... brilliant, but...”

Malfoy hesitated for a while before adding:

“You know, I discussed with Adams this afternoon and I believe he’s starting to doubt McPhee’s credibility. Anyway, I will do as you ask. Adams may be furious, but I think he will be happy to end this trial. I will advise him of the changes tomorrow morning. It will give him a little time to get ready.”

“Come to think of it, it might be better not tell him anything. All he needs to know is that these witnesses came out of the jungle at the last minute.”

“As I just told you, Adams won’t object. I’m sure he has enough of the McPhee girl.”

“It is not him who worries me, but her. If she finds out about the two new witnesses, she’ll prepare a new story. I want to take her by surprise.”

“Well,” added the judge while laughing. “She’ll definitively have a few surprises tomorrow.”

“What do you mean?”

“Adams never told McPhee that her ex-roommate would be testifying against her tomorrow.”

“Are you kidding?” said John while dissolving into laughter.

“Not at all. I’m telling you, he has enough of the charade. He knows he can’t win.”

“In this case, you know what? Now that I think about it, I will accept your invitation. Ready to receive a golf lesson?”

“Now you’re talking. I’ll meet you at the club in one hour.”

“I’ll be there.”

“What will you do with Johnny Boy?”

“Damn! I forgot about him. I guess I can’t leave him alone. From wherever she is, Manou would kill me.”

“Well, if you allow me to say, my wife kind of like the boy and...”

“I can’t take him to your place”, objected John. “If someone like a journalist became aware of the fact, he would think that I’m bribing the judge.”

“The idea is not to bring Johnny to my place, but to bring my wife to your house. It would be more discreet. Hardly anybody knows her and it should please her.”

“Ok then, I’ll take Johnny home and will meet you at the golf club.”

Around five o’clock at night, while Johnny and Charlie were being entertained by Mrs. Malfoy, Tommy, as planned, arrived at Yannick’s suite. The host seemed to feel better but his stomach was still causing him some problems.

“You should see a doctor, suggested Tommy, while dropping his bag on the sofa. “I know a real good one, you know...”

“Bah... I’ll take care of that problem when I return home.”

Tommy searched through his wallet and pulled out a business card.

“I don’t mean to insist, but take this card. Doctor Wilson is really excellent. He’s somewhat expensive, but I’m sure you can afford it. He’ll make you well in no time at all.”

“Ok,” finally accepted Yannick. “I’ll see him tomorrow.”

In order to change the subject, Yannick asked the young man if he wanted something to drink.

“Do you have scotch?” asked Tommy.

“Sure do,” answered Yannick. Pour a drink for both of us, won’t you? Meanwhile, I’ll take a shower. It should do me a lot of good.”

As soon as Yannick left the room, Tommy approached the bar. A few second later, he could hear his boss's cell phone. Not knowing exactly what to do, he answered.

"Good evening," a male voice said. "May I talk to Yannick, please?"

"He is not quite available at the moment," awkwardly replied Tommy. "May I know who is calling?"

"I'm Jim Desnoyers," answered the man. "I really need to talk to him immediately. I can't wait; I'm on my way to the theatre. Who are you? His therapist?"

"Yes," Tommy lied. So, you are the famous Jim Desnoyers? I heard about you. Can I give him your message?"

"Please, tell him I'm calling about his maternal grandmother. She doesn't have much time left. She will probably be gone within two weeks. She hasn't seen Yannick for a long time, but she would like to. There are things that she wants to give him before dying. I understand that he's taking therapeutic treatments but do you thing he could visit her?"

"I will discuss the subject with him," said Tommy. Can you give me the address of the hospital?"

Jim gave him the address and then, inquired about his brother in law's state of health.

"He is doing pretty well," reported Tommy without knowing what he was talking about. "He will soon be much better."

"Great!" exclaimed Jim. "Well... I have to go if I don't want to miss the beginning of the play. Please, tell him that we are all looking forward to have him home, won't you?"

"Do not worry, I will tell him."

As soon as Yannick was out of the shower he was informed of the phone call. When he heard about his grandmother's state of health, Yannick remained quite frigid. Without tell him nothing about the therapy, Tommy asked him if he was going to visit her.

"I don't know why I should," answered Yannick while yawning. I haven't seen her for years, so..."

"You have the chance to have a grandmother, and you don't have the heart to visit her before she dies?" aggressively asked Tommy.

"Listen," harshly replied Yannick. "When I left the county of Abitibi, in the province of Quebec, I invited her to come with me. I told her that if she refused, she would probably never see me again. No way will I return to this damn place where only the mine owners are making money. She refused to come with me, so, hell with her!"

“God!” objected Tommy. “You really hate your place of birth, don’t you?”

“Do you think it’s normal for a so called modern society to force workers to dig underground twelve hours per day to extract gold? Do you think that it’s normal that people have to waste their health in order to have enough money to pay their bills? Well, I don’t think so and that’s what’s happening in Abitibi. I bless my mother for getting me out of there; otherwise, I would have ended my life like my poor father.”

“I guess he was a miner?” questioned Tommy.

“Exactly; a miner like so many others. He died of cancer while still in his middle age. He wasted twenty lousy years in that goddamn mine and what did he get in return? Abitibi is out for me. I will never return to this shit hole... never!”

“Do you want another shot of scotch?” offered Tommy after noticing that his interlocutor had emptied his glass in one gulp.

“Yes I would.”

Tommy turned around to prepare the drink. He discretely dropped in two sleeping pills that he had taken from Johnny’s bottle. Once again, Yannick swallowed the scotch in one shot and asked for another one.

“Talk to me about your mother,” proposed Tommy while filling two glasses. “You told me the other day that she was never really happy. You said she had an empty life.”

“Yep...” whispered Yannick while letting his head rest on his pillow. “I really loved my mother. She was a brave woman; very brave. If I became who I am, I owe it to her. She didn’t live old enough to benefit from my success.”

“Why was she so unhappy?”

“She never divulged many things to me. My aunts told me that she always wanted to have many children. After my birth, she was no longer able to have a child. I’m told she really tried. She did everything she could to give me a brother. I was told that when I was about four years old, she had some kind of insemination. As she was very weak, the doctor told her that she had to remain in bed for the duration of her pregnancy.”

Yannick took another sip of his drink and continued:

“I was quite an active child and my father spent too much time in the mine to take care of me. So, I stayed with my grandmother. They promised me that upon my return home, I would have a baby brother or a little sister. As I always wanted a brother, I prayed god every day to get one.”

“And what happened?” questioned Tommy.

“Well, nine months later, I came back home. My mother was in tears; she explained me that her pregnancy did not come to term and that my little brother had returned next to Jesus.”

“I can see that you were very hurt,” noticed Tommy as tears were coming out of Yannick’s eyes.

“Very hurt!” admitted Yannick, who seemed very tired.

“You really would have liked to have a brother?”

“It was my biggest desire.”

“If you had one, what would you have done for him?”

“I would have given everything to him; everything. I would have protected him and I would have made sure he had a good life. I would have treated him like my friend Jim. Of course, I love Jim, but he’s not my real brother.”

“Let me ask you,” continued Tommy.” If you had a brother and if that brother would die because of you, what would you do?”

“What a question,” retorted Yannick with a strange smile. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m just curious.”

“If I had a brother...” Yannick yawned, “and if he would die because of me, it would be enough for me to kill myself. I wouldn’t want to live anymore. No way would I want to live. Damn it... I’m falling asleep... the first time I do without taking sleeping pills.”

Once Yannick was asleep, Tommy decided to test Manou’s famous technic of making people talk while they were drowsing. If it worked, he would finally know what his boss was really planning. He started the questionnaire by asking what he had in mind concerning Johnny. He had to ask the same question at least ten times before getting some kind of a reaction. He also knew that he could take advantage of a person’s sleep by making suggestions. So, he did. Only time would let him know if the results were to be what he anticipated. At least, he would have tried. He also asked question concerning Kevin’s role. What would his part be in this game? He soon found out that his sleeping boss rapidly became tired of answering. The only answer he really received was:

“Tommy, you’re bugging me. Let me sleep, won’t you... I’m tired.”

Tommy also assumed that people answering questions during their sleep would not recall it. Considering what Yannick had just answered, the young man decided to bring an end to his inquiry. He had not learned everything he wanted to know but at least, he knew the essential. He took place on the sofa, tried to fall asleep, but in vain. He stayed awake, watched the ceiling and counted sheep until his boss woke-up feeling good and in a fine mood. Apparently, this last

one was not aware of the questionnaire he had been given while sleeping. Figuring that Manou's technic had been successful, Tommy decided that he needed more information. So, just before leaving for court, he said:

"Are you busy tonight? I could come back."

"Sorry, but I have plans for the evening," quickly replied Yannick. "Call me at the end of the trial, Ok?"

"Will do..."

At precisely nine o'clock in the morning, Mr. Richard entered the court room. He seemed happy and offered his greatest smile to all who met him, while Johnny and his dog were following in his shadow. Mr. Adams looked at John with a strange expression, so, this one asked him quite innocently:

"Is the dog bothering you? Well, you must know that he is here with the Judge's agreement. After all, Charlie is an important witness."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, a relevant evidence."

"I must admit that this canine was of some help to you."

"Should I understand that this sweet little doggie help convince our merciless prosecutor?"

"I truly can't say. Did the dog play in your favor or is it the pathetic performance of my victim?"

"I might as well warn you. Your girl is not out of trouble!"

"You know what?" replied Adams. "I don't give a damn. I don't care anymore."

Even the prosecutor was out of it. Poor McPhee! She did not yet know that she was almost on her own. Adams didn't plan to do many efforts to help her. Let's hope she will appreciate the prison vacation that was waiting for her.

"Mr. Richard!" said one of the assistant who was accompanied by a large woman with light blond hairs. "This is Alicia Bauer... our star witness for today."

"I am pleased to meet you!" happily retorted John. Did you have a pleasant trip?"

"Yes," answered Alicia with a low tone of voice. "The distance between Las Vegas and Los Angeles is not very long. It was an easy trip."

The assistant added:

“I briefed Miss Bauer. She knows exactly what to say. Her testimony will destroy the prosecution’s case. There is no doubt about it.”

“If you’re talking about Prosecutor Adams, he is already deflated. As far as McPhee is concerned...”

“McNeil!” interrupted Alicia. Her name is Sandra McNeil.”

“Of course, I will have to remember her real name. Tell me... is this your first visit in Los Angeles, Miss Bauer?”

“Yes, so far I didn’t see much, but, at first sight it looks like a nice city.”

“Our Johnny,” said John while pulling on the rock star’s arms, “will be please to show you around. Won’t you Johnny?”

“Sure...” whispered Johnny while hiding his face behind the dog.

“Well, I’ll be!” declared Alicia who was quite impressed. “I mean, our little prince is awfully bashful! I’ll be... I would never have believed that. And, Oh... let me look at this sweet little puppy! He really has beautiful blue eyes! Just like he has in the magazines...”

Alicia walked away to find a seat. Johnny stared at his lawyer and murmured:

“Hey...Didn’t you tell me she would look like Cinderella or Snow White?”

“Well, I assumed,” replied John, somewhat ill at ease. “How could I have known what she looks like?”

“She looks like SHREK!” exclaimed Johnny. “I tell you, if she was painted in green, she would look exactly like SHREK!”

Furious, Johnny turned around and headed toward the witness box. He was almost ready to sit down when he made a one hundred and eighty degree turn and came back next to his attorney.

“Do you know that I never found anybody to come with me at this stupid dinner?”

As he was making this declaration, Ralph Steinberg entered the court room.

“Hum...” mumbled Johnny while showing a cunning smile. “I never thought of asking him!”

Johnny hurriedly walked toward his producer, not to ask him, but to order him to come with him at the upcoming dinner. Not truly sorry, Steinberg decline the invitation and explained that he had already scheduled a face to face dinner with his wife.

“Well, why not a face to face with four persons instead of two?” insisted Johnny. “What’s the difference? The more faces we have, the more fun we can have! Isn’t that right?”

“No way, Johnny!” answered Ralph with a kind smile. “A face to face only includes two people. Otherwise, it’s not a face to face.”

“I beg of you, Ralph, I’m in deep shit. You have to help me. Only you can help me!”

“What do you mean no one else can help you? You have lots of friends. Tommy is coming this way, why don’t you ask him?”

“You mean, Tommy McMillan?” disgustingly replied Johnny who eventually thought it could be a good idea.

So, he turned toward the tyrant of his youth and asked:

“Tell me, Tommy, how would you like to have dinner with Shrek and me? There would be three of us.”

“What?”

“I’ll explain the whole thing to you later,” simply said Johnny. “Catch up with me at the end of the day. We will take Shrek out, we will show her the city, feed her and then, we will take her back to her room.”

As soon as Tommy figured out that Shrek was a girl, he understood why Johnny seemed so disturbed.

“That will be fine,” he accepted. “Is the girl here?”

“Who?”

“Well, Shrek, of course.”

Johnny was a little hesitant when he explained:

“Don’t you worry; you’ll have the occasion to look at her. She will soon be in the witness’s chair. But, I’m warning you; I won’t let you change your mind. You must have dinner with us.”

“That will be just fine,” said Tommy to reassure this pushy fellow. “I’m sure we’ll have a ball.”

Less than five minutes later, the judge entered the court room. Before Alicia Bauer could be called to the witness stand, the prosecutor insisted that he had two identity documents that he wanted to introduce. He explained that the victim had just submitted the document in question and that they would prove the exactitude of her family name. John was of course invited to the judge's bench in order to study the documents. One was a green card and the other was a driver's license. They were both prepared to the name of Sandra McPhee. Making sure that no one but the procurer and John could hear him, the judge asked Adams if he had authenticated the two documents.

"I did not have the time, your Honor," answered the prosecutor. "Normally I would have but Mrs. McPhee only gave me these documents a few minutes ago."

"Excellent forgery," declared John. "The artist is a real pro."

"So, if I understand," continued the judge while looking at the prosecutor, "your victim plans to ignore your suggestions and keep going with her fable?"

"Nothing I can do about it," explained Adams while lifting his shoulders. "I did all I could to convince her to revise her story, but she swore to me that she is telling the truth."

"Well, that's her choice," said John. "May I call my first witness, your Honor?"

"Please do, Mr. Richard."

Alicia entered the court room and ironically winked at Sandy while passing in front of her. She was holding a green card, some photos and the birth certificate of her ex-roommate... all that was needed to prove that Sandy McPhee was in fact Sandy McNeil. She even had some press clips to sustain the crimes committed by McNeil. John grabbed the photos, and noticed many facial wounds and asked:

"Were all these photos taken at the same period of time?"

"No," replied Alicia. "Look... each picture has a date. Some of them were taken more than six months ago and some others less than a month ago. Can you see what I mean?"

"Yes I can," agreed John. "But, tell me, is Sandra McNeil's face always so injured or is she hurt in all these pictures by pure coincidence?"

"Hum... for as long as I have lived with her, she was pretty well messed-up."

"But why? That's terrible! Who did that to her? A jealous boyfriend, maybe?"

"Not at all!" retorted Alicia with a contemptuous smile. "Her pimp beats the hell out of her each time she does something stupid. And, since she always acts stupid..."

"You did say 'PIMP', didn't you?"

The question was asked as if John did not know that Sandy had a pimp.

“Yes, I said ‘PIMP’,” confirmed Alicia with a firm tone of voice.

“Are you telling us that Sandra McNeil is a prostitute?”

“Well, didn’t you study her criminal record?”

“Yes, but at the time we did, we were not aware that her true name was Sandra McNeil.”

“Well, now you know. Do you have any more questions for me?”

“Yes, one more question. You have known Mrs. McNeil for a few years. Do you think that she would be able to prepare the scenario that steered us to believe that a person like Johnny McLean molested her?”

“What do you mean by this question?” loudly answered Alicia. “Can’t you tell that her story doesn’t hold to reason... really?”

“Do you think that she committed that crime all by herself?”

“No way, she got set-up too. I would bet that her pimp is involved. He’s the one who forced her to do that. His name is Charlot. I’m not sure if that’s his real name, but anyway, that’s the way we all call him.”

“Why are you so persuaded that he is involved?”

“Because, there was a murder,” replied the witness without hesitation. “Sandy can do many bad things to pay for her drugs, but she is incapable of murder. She would never do that.”

“Mrs. Bauer, solemnly asked John. “Can you point toward the person you know as being Sandra McNeil?”

“Of course, said Alicia while pointing her index toward Sandy. “That’s her, that girl over there.”

Sandy was as red as a cooked lobster. She could no longer control herself. She stood-up and insulted the witness, using her regular form of language.

“This bitch is lying, ” she yelled, “this is a set-up organized by the goddamn defense! I never met this mountain of flesh in my life. I don’t know that bitch. I never met her, I tell you! Do you hear me?”

These despicable screams alerted Charlie who began to bark as loud as the victim was yelling.

“Mr. Adams,” ordered the judge, “do something and get this woman to take control of

herself!”

The judge faced John, who was laughing to his heart content and added:

“And you, Mr. Richard, I summon you to silence that dog. This court is not a circus!”

As soon as order was back, the judge calmed down and asked:

“Mr. Adams, do you have any questions for the witness?”

Everyone in the court room was surprised when the prosecutor answered:

“I do not have question for this witness, your Honor.”

“Mr. Richard,” continued the judge, “is there something you would like to add?”

“Yes, your Honor,” rapidly said John. “Considering the present testimony, I understand that we could bring an end to this trial. However, since my client’s reputation was severely damaged by these procedures, I believe that we need to continue, in order to prove without the shadow of a doubt that Johnny Boy is innocent of all charged laid against him. I am asking, your Honor, to extend this trial until tomorrow.”

“Bearing in mind the circumstances, I agree with you Mr. Richard.”

As soon as the judge left, Tommy rushed toward the front of the room to approach Johnny. On his way, he passed in front of Sandy who was crying like a baby. Still sitting down, she grabbed Tommy’s tie and pulled his head down to her own face’s level.

“Look, you little shit,” she harshly declared. “This whole thing is going to land me back in jail and I don’t want to go back there, do you understand? I must talk to Yannick. Tell him to bring his ass to my place tonight or else, I’m going to tell the whole story to the judge. Is that clear?”

Somewhat ill at ease, Tommy tried to calm her down and said:

“Listen, all this is part of the scenario. Don’t panic, Ok? Be cool.”

“Yannick... at my place... tonight!” replied Sandy, syllable by syllable.

“He’ll be there, you can count on me!” promised Tommy while leaving her as fast as he could.

Alicia was proudly standing next to Johnny when this one met Tommy's eyes. The journalist raised a finger to let him know that he would soon be with him. He ran out of the room, found a quiet place, called Yannick and said:

"Yannick, I don't have much time, but I must quickly tell you that everything worked as planned in court. I also have to tell you that you have to meet Sandy tonight. She's not in a very good state of mind and I think she will break. She threatens to tell the whole story to the judge. You have to do something."

"She is threatening me?" said Yannick with a touch of anger. "You say that she is threatening me?"

"Yes, you have to do something or else, she will take you down with her."

"Ok, I'll take care of it," retorted Yannick while calming down.

"All right, I'm hanging up, now. If you look for me later, you may not find me. I have to go to eat with Johnny."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, well, it would take too much time to explain. The idea is to prevent him from having an exasperating face to face dinner with... Shrek..."

"What?"

"I'll explain later."

Tommy seemed so hectic to bring an end to the conversation that Yannick had the impression that he was looking forward to dine with Johnny. But he rapidly changed his mind, knowing that Johnny and the paparazzi were not best of friends. Figuring that Tommy was only playing his role, he added, before the call came to an end:

"Look, I have an idea. Tomorrow morning, you will find a letter under the doormat of your front door. It will be addressed to Judge Malfoy. I want you to go to the court house before the trial resumes and give the letter to the judge, Ok?"

"No problem, I will do it."

That completed the following days' schedule. Tommy would first arrive at the court house and Peter Lambert would be next. In fact, Yannick would drive Peter to the court house to make sure he would arrive somewhat early. Then, a few minutes later, the two body guards would bring Carlos Fernandez in front of the judge. It would be a day that none would soon forget.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, Yannick decided it was time to visit Sandy. She had calmed down, but was still discontented. When he knocked at her door, she opened without offering any

salutations.

“You don’t seem to be doing too good?” deducted Yannick.

“Not at all and you would not feel any better if you were in my shoes. Did you know that the dumb defense attorney wants to keep going tomorrow?”

“You’re talking about John Richard?”

“Who else would I be talking about?”

“He’s a powerful attorney, isn’t he? I guess he was a little hard on you.”

“No shit, Sherlock. The story you gave me made no sense. The bastard saw right through me.”

“But, that’s what I wanted Sandy,” explained Yannick. “I didn’t want Johnny to land in prison. I only wanted to destroy his reputation, and nothing more. Things had to happen the way they did.”

“Is that so? argumentatively protested Sandy. “Well, I’m the one who may end up in a cage. But, I’m warning you, Yannick, I won’t be the only one to end up in jail. No way...”

“You won’t be going to jail, young lady,” promised Yannick with a kind smile. In fact, you are done. Your role just ended.”

“What?” exclaimed Sandy with wild excitement in her voice. “You mean... I won’t have to go to court tomorrow? You mean that I will get my dough today and that...”

“And tomorrow you will be far away from here. They will never find you. But first, you must do one last thing for me.”

“And then it will be all?” asked Sandy. “It will really be the end?”

“You will be free as a bird.”

“What do you want me to do, tell me?”

“I want you to write a letter to Judge Malfoy. In that letter, you will explain that you are sorry, but that you had to disappear. Tell him you had no choice. I also want you to reveal the whole truth to him, with one little change: replace my name by Charlot’s name.”

“So I will write that Charlot killed Manou and brought the dog in her room and that’s it?”

“Precisely. And you will never have to worry about that pimp again. You will be rid of him. I think he will end up in prison for quite a long while.”

“Wow!” joyfully replied Sandy. “You are a genius! Should I also write that Charlot forced me to do what I did to Johnny?”

“Absolutely. And add that his main goal was to steal the jewelry and other precious objects.

And also, you will write that he panicked after realizing that he had killed Manou.”

“I will explain that he didn’t know that the stonefish could kill a person. Someone had told him that a bite from that fish could only put people to sleep.”

“Very good!” approved Yannick. “You can also clarify that when Charlot realized that Manou was a cadaver, he panicked and that’s why he only left with the jewels.”

“And, what do I say about me?” inquired Sandy as she was taking notes to prepare her letter. “I mean... why did he leave me behind and why did he force me to do what I did to Johnny? I don’t see the purpose?”

“Hum... you have a point,” agreed Yannick. “Ok then... so, write that the aggression was only a diversion. With the burial of his mother and the charge of aggression, Johnny would have been too busy to worry about the jewels.”

Once the letter had been written, Yannick pulled out a syringe and a small bottle from his pocket.

“It’s been a while since you had a good shot, isn’t that right?” he calmly said to Sandy. “I thought I would please you and do you some good. That’s your bonus.”

The eyes wide opened and as big as a silver dollar, the young woman grabbed the syringe and gave herself a shot of heroin. It only took a few minutes for her to enter a different zone. She seemed to be flying high over the room. She was now happy... so happy, that she never noticed the gun her visitor was holding, as well as she never observed that he was wearing gloves. In less time that it took to her to travel in her marvelous trip, Yannick took place behind her and placed his gun against the side of her head. Only one bullet sent her in the mysterious universe from where nobody never comes back. His task done, Yannick picked-up the letter, placed the gun in Sandy’s right hand and left.

Just before leaving, he looked at his victim and said:

“It is never good to threaten me, young lady. You shouldn’t have.”

He thought of making a small prayer for the benefit of her soul, but he figured he did not have enough time left. He had many other things to do, so many more sad gestures to accomplish.

On his way to the Marriott Hotel, he visited a restaurant and bought a large basket of fried chicken. For practical reason, he ordered the giant size. Once back in his room, he locked himself in and began to turn this beautiful Thursday into a dark dramatic day. Once ready, he called Mel to let him know that a new delivery had to be done.

“Hurry up as much as you can,” he requested. “I’ll wait for you in the hotel lobby.”

“We don’t have to meet in the lobby,” said Mel. “I can meet you in your room.”

“No,” replied Yannick, “this time I’m coming with you. I need to get out.”

On his way to the elevator, he looked at his watch. Seven o’clock pm; that was perfect timing. Considering that Johnny Boy was dinning out in some restaurant, there was no chance that he would be in his lawyer’s office. He was also sure that John and his assistants would still be working, because he had called earlier and told to the secretary that he would visit the lawyer later that evening. The secretary had pleasantly answered:

“Good... Mr. Richard will be so please to meet you. The information you sent were greatly appreciated and helpful. You became our hero. I think he would like you to join our team. Do not be surprised if we are all there to greet you.”

Proud of his scheme, Yannick had one of his great smiles when he met Mel who was just coming out of the elevator.

“Should we take your car, Sir?”

“No, let’s take yours.”

“You do remember that it’s a very small car, don’t you?”

“So what? To be closer to you won’t kill me!”

Once they reached destination, Mel was getting ready to turn the engine off when Yannick told him not to and explained that the delivery would only take a few minutes. He handed the large fried-chicken basket to his chauffeur and made clear that this time, he had to give it directly to Mr. Richard.

“That’s fine, Sir! Wow! This basket is heavy. How many tons of chicken to you have in there?”

Instead of answering the question, Yannick said:

“I really like you, Mel. In fact, I like you quite a lot. I wanted you to know.”

Somewhat surprised, the big guy offered a gratitude look to his boss and walked toward the building. Very soon after, Yannick pulled out a remote control from his pocket and kept an eye on Mel who was discussing with the security guard. Once the two men left, on their way to John Richard’s office, Yannick waited a short while before depressing the red button that would

ignite the small artisanal bomb that was hidden inside the chicken basket. Rachid had explained that there would be a delay of about five second between the activation on the remote control and the deflagration. He pressed the button, rushed out of the car and hid behind the large building set across the street from his target. Within seconds, the offices and the people inside the building, located at 5555 Los Angeles Street, had been resumed to wrecks, debris, dust, and parts of human bodies. Five minutes later, Yannick came out of his hiding place and joined the many curious that were surveying the results of the disaster. A tear slowly rolled down his left eye. Poor Mel... he would never have killed him if the giant-man had not expressed his desire to end his life.

“To die would be a benediction for me.” That’s what Mel had said before adding: “As long as I die, for an important cause.”

“I want you to know that you died for an important reason, my friend,” murmured Yannick. “Your death will be known everywhere.”

Slowly leaving the crowd, as the noise of the sirens was getting closer, he walked until he came by a mail box to drop two letters written by Mel. One was addressed to the District Attorney of Los Angeles and the other to the Los Angeles Post. The letters were the ones originally prepared by Mel. Yannick had only modified the information on the cover of each envelope. He had written:

Mel Larson

Ex-soldier of the American Army

Who became a beggar in Los Angeles.

I declare that I committed the attack against

5555 Los Angeles Street,

Los Angeles, CA 90003

“The army should treat their ex-soldiers in a better way,” thought Yannick within himself.

Once all his undertakings were completed, he visited Peter Lambert and spent the rest of the evening with him.

The dinner that was so unanticipated by Johnny turned out to be quite pleasant. Pleasant because Alicia’s general vulgar attitude was only a front under which hid a person with a great sense of humor. She was actually charming and amusing. She brought both Johnny and Tommy to fun and laughter. Telling one joke after the other, she was hilarious and comical. She definitively had a great sense of humor. Even after Johnny, who had just consumed his first glass of alcohol, accidentally called her Shrek, she burst out laughing in the most humoristic way.

“So,” asked the young lady, “that’s how you guys call me? You know what? I like it! I will be pleased to be named Shrek. I really like it!”

She was joking but unlike many other fans, she behaved respectfully and tactfully toward Johnny. Like most people, she asked many questions about his career, but however, she dealt with him as if he was a regular guy. Johnny appreciated her manners as well as the way she was with Charlie and Tommy. Naively, the little prince did not notice that something special seemed to be developing between him and Alicia. As far as he was concerned, he had no idea of what was going on. At the end of the meal, he figured Tommy wanted a few more laughs when the last one suggested that the trio should spend more time together.

"But, it's almost nine o'clock," informed the singer. "John said I should be back home by that time. I have to sleep, you see, and the trial will start early tomorrow..."

"The trial is over, my friend," replied Tommy. "You won; John only added one more day to completely crush the lying bitch."

"But I should already be at John's place," insisted Johnny. "I like to go to bed early. You must take me back right away!"

"Ok, let's do it," sighed Tommy.

This last one was about to say goodnight to Alicia when he noticed that was looking for a cab. Then, he changed his mind.

"You know?" he said as naturally as he could. "Why should you take a cab? I can drop Johnny at his lawyer's place and then, I can drive you to your hotel. Would that be Ok with you?"

Of course, Alicia accepted the offer. While in the car, she talked about her family, her parents, her five brothers and sisters and mentioned many of her friends.

"My family is not rich," she confessed to the boys, "but let me tell you that when it's Thanksgiving or Christmas, we know how to celebrate and have fun."

Tommy seemed a little envious.

"Wow! You are lucky to have such a big family."

"Life is not like that for us," sadly added Johnny. "Tommy and I, we don't know what it's like to have a real family."

Alicia realized that it was clumsy for her to talk about her family. She swallowed a few times and asked:

"Who can tell me what animal can most rapidly grab a banana at the top of a coconut tree?"

A giraffe, a monkey, a lion or a squirrel?”

“It has to be the monkey!” answered Johnny as if it was evident. “The other animals do not eat banana.”

“And you, Tommy?” wanted to know Alicia. “What do you say?”

“Well, the answer is obvious. It has to be the monkey.”

“You are both wrong, gentlemen.”

Then, she began to explain that bananas do not grow in a coconut tree when Tommy briskly brought his pick-up truck to a full stop.

“What the hell is going on here?” he exclaimed as he left the vehicle.

“Hey... “ yelled Johnny as he looked in all directions. “Where is John’s office? Why are there so many cops here?”

With Alicia on his tail, he left the car without shutting the door behind him. He tried to catch-up with Tommy who was now talking with men dressed as a civilian, when a police officer stopped him to told him to circulate.

“What do you mean... ‘circulate’? Who the hell are you to talk to me that way? I want you to know that my lawyer lives here and...”

“I understand... “replied the police officer in a less aggressive way. “I know who you are.”

“Where is he?” questioned Johnny. “Oh God! Where is the office? Why are all these bricks in the street?”

“Come with me,” ordered the officer while grabbing Johnny by the arm. “Let me take you to inspector Robinson. He will explain what is going on.”

“But explain what? I WANT TO SEE JOHN RICHARD IMMEDIATELY! Do you hear me? IMMEDIATELY!”

A few second later, Johnny was next to Tommy who was, at the time, talking with inspector Robinson. He then learned the terrible news. For unknown reason, the building situated at 5555 Los Angeles Street blew up. At this point, the authorities had found no survivors. There were many cadavers and at this point, it was impossible to identify anyone. The corps we’re all in chunks and burned to the point of no recognition.

Johnny was in tears and hardly able to pronounce his words.

“John may still be alive, don’t you think, Tommy? He may not have been inside the building.”

“I so sorry,” retorted Tommy. “I’m sure John was here. We were supposed to meet him here, at this time.”

The inspector seemed very compassionate when he added:

“If the architectural plans I was given are right, we found the most cadavers where the office of Mr. Richard used to be.”

He thought for a short while and said again:

“For the time being, I have no other information. The best thing you can do is to go home. I have your telephone number and will call you as soon as I learn something new.”

Still crying and almost out of control, Johnny yelled:

“He wants me to go home? What an imbecile. Let me inform you that I live with Mr. Richard. He was my lawyer and he was also supposed to become my agent. He was taking care of me since the death of my mother. Now... I have no one. No one is left to take care of me. I’m totally alone in this world!”

“Come with me, Johnny, tried Tommy to console him, follow me.”

“To go where, tell me?” kept yelling Johnny before to fall on the ground. “Where should I go?” I don’t want to return to the castle. Since Manou’s death, Charlie and I are scared of that place.”

“I won’t leave you alone, Johnny,” kindly whispered Tommy. “Let’s both go to my place. Will that be acceptable to you?”

Noticing that Tommy had difficulties to bring Johnny back on his feet, Alicia bent down and gently convinced Johnny to stand and pulled him in her arms; just as Manou would have done in a similar circumstance. She led him to Tommy’s pick-up truck and sat with him on the back seat.

“Go ahead, little boy, she said while tenderly held him in her oversized arms. Cry as much as you need. It will make you feel better.”

Alone in the front seat, Tommy’s first instinctive reaction was to call Ralph. When the producer answered the call, he heard someone yelling in his ears:

“Ralph? It’s Tommy! Do you know what happened to John Richard?”

“What? disconcertingly answered Ralph. “What are you talking about? I’m having dinner with my wife. Why are you calling me?”

“John Richard is dead. Do you hear me? He is dead!”

“What? repeated Ralph. Are you kidding me? If you are, I don’t find you funny at all.”

“I’m telling you... it’s true, I swear!”

After a while, Tommy moderately calmed down enough to explain what had happened at John Richard’s office.

“Something weird is going on and it’s becoming extremely dangerous, solemnly replied Ralph. How is Johnny? Is he with you?”

“Yes, he’s with me... he’s not doing well at all, he is badly reacting to all these incidents.”

“I want you to both come to my place, guys. I think you will be safer in my house.”

Still under shock, Tommy was about to accept the invitation when he remembered that he had to come home to retrieve the letter Yannick had left under his door. Now that he had a better idea of what this guy could do, he told to himself that it would be safer to remain on his good side. Anyway, if there was a place where Johnny would be secure it was definitively at his place. Yannick still needed him and as long as he would play the game, he would be safe.

“Very well,” accepted Ralph. But, take good care of Johnny. I’ll meet you at the court house tomorrow morning.”

“What do you think will happen without John to defend Johnny?”

“I have no idea,” said Ralph. “All I know is that with or without John, justice must prevail. It won’t be easy but I’ll try to find another attorney.”

Once arrived in Tommy’s four and a half room apartment, the host and Alicia helped Johnny to settle in the guest room. Because this last one was still crying, it became evident that without his sleeping pills, he would never doze-off. Tommy remembered that he still had a bottle of “mogadon” in his possession.

“Give them all to me!” yelled Johnny. “I have enough of that damn life! I want it to end. I don’t want to live anymore.”

“Don’t say that, Johnny,” said Alicia. “Tomorrow will be better. You know... when the rain is over, the sunshine always return.”

“This time, the sun is taking way too much time to come back,” cried out Johnny. “Come on Tommy... do what you always wanted to do... kill me!”

“It’s horrible to say such words!” desperately said Alicia.

“Don’t worry too much.” interjected Tommy to reassure her. “If Johnny had committed suicide every time he said he would, he would have died at least a thousand times.”

Tommy handed out two pills to Johnny and said:

“Take these, Johnny. You will feel better tomorrow.”

After swallowing it, Johnny collapsed on the bed and waited to feel the effect of the medicine.

“My life is not worth living anymore,” he said Johnny while the others were listening. “I’m now completely alone, there’s no one else for me.”

“You are not completely alone, Johnny,” commented Tommy as he was trying to uplift the young man. “You still have Charlie, you have Ralph and...”

He meant to say: “And you have me,” but the other one was already asleep.

“Interesting!” said Alicia. “You both have the same age and yet, you treat him as your younger brother.”

“Johnny suffers from the Peter Pan’ syndrome. That’s why he is the way he is. Didn’t you know?”

“I read about it but I didn’t know it was that bad. He acts like a little boy.”

“That’s his sickness. He refuses to get older. But don’t think he’s brainless or lunatic. He is super bright. It’s just that he acts like a baby.”

“Some time ago, I read in the newspapers that you two hated each other. I guess that’s another falsification?”

“As off a few days ago, the press was right.”

Then, they quietly left the room. Even if the previous events were horrible, Tommy had the most beautiful night of his young life. A woman had never made love to him the way Alicia did. How wrong he was to think that an oversize woman could not please a man. As she left him, in the morning, he already regretted her departure. That’s why he carefully placed in his wallet the

telephone number she had written one small piece of paper.

“In case you...” she said, not believing that he would ever call her.

While Johnny and Charlie were still sleeping, he retrieved the letter Yannick had left him, the one he was supposed to give the judge. After reading the content, he almost screamed:

“Goddamn shit! What is he doing this time?”

Judge Malfoy entered his office at around eight o’clock in the morning. He let himself fall in his swivel-tilter armchair and whispered:

“John Richard... dead.”

It seemed so unreal. All someone had to do is turn on the TV or radio to hear that the renowned lawyer was dead following a major and suspicious explosion that happened the previous night at his office. According to the first investigation, all his teammates were with him. In fact, the detonations were first heard at nine twenty eight and at that time, even John’s secretary was still at work.

“What will happen with Johnny Boy’s trial? ask Malfoy to himself. Should the litigation continue or should I declare him innocent?”

In his mind, there was no doubt that Johnny was innocent. He took a deep breath and decided that the best thing to do was to talk with the prosecutor.

A little while later, Adams arrived, following by Johnny McLean and the journalist MacMillan. The three men were walking quite rapidly. The judge stood to greet them and find out what was going on. Tommy handed him a letter and said:

“This letter is for you, Judge. Someone left it under my doormat. I thought I should bring it to you right away.”

The judge and the prosecutor read the letter together.

“Well, I’ll be damned! exclaimed Malfoy. The girl finally admits that she’s guilty. It’s about time.”

He faced Tommy to ask him:

“Did you see her?”

“No, as I said earlier, I found that letter under my doormat.”

“She declared that she is sorry and that she had to disappear,” added the judge. “I wonder where she went... we have to find her. Justice is not done with that woman.”

“According to me,” suggested the prosecutor, the first thing to do is to send a patrol car to her place.”

“Sounds reasonable, Mr. Adams. Won’t you take care of it?”

If Malfoy thought that the surprises were over, he would be disappointed. As soon as Adams left, in order to dispatch two police officers to Sandra’s domicile, two other persons entered the court room.

“Gentlemen...” he harshly stated, “I did not authorize you to enter the court room. Please, wait outside.”

“My name is Keith Turner, your Honor, replied on of the men. I’m an attorney hired by Ralph Steinberg. I am here to assume the defense of Johnny McLean. Mr. Steinberg should soon be here. He will explain everything to you.”

“I do not need explanations in order to understand that Mr. McLean needs a new defense attorney.

Then, the judge looked at the second man and inquired:

“And you... who are you?”

“My name is Peter Lambert, your Honor. I’m here at John Richard’s request to identify the person who sold Manouschka Tarah’s jewelries to me.”

“I remember!” stated the judge. Mr. Richard mentioned that you would be here. You will be in the witness chair after Carlos Fernandez. Let’s not forget that important factor.”

A few minutes later, Ralph Steinberg entered the judge’s office. As soon as he saw Johnny and noticed his swollen eyes, he walked toward him and asked:

“How are you doing, my little prince?”

Without answering, Johnny threw himself in his producer’s arms and cried like a child. Meanwhile, Mr. Adams telephone rang. Once he answered, he listened and became extremely pale. He ended the conversation, faced the judge and announced:

“Apparently, Mrs. McNeil took her own life.”

“Unquestionable, Yannick is not playing anymore...” figured Tommy for himself.

And the astonishments were not over. As the judge was rubbing his head, three other persons entered the court room:

“What else is going on?” he wanted to know with a distinct sign of impatience.

“Well, your Honor,” said one of the three men, “my buddy and I were hired to bring this Carlos Fernandez to your court. He is supposed to testify today.”

“I see... so... that’s him? I was expecting him. So, young man, what do you have to say?”

“Well, hum...” hesitated Carlos with a very strong accent. “I’m here to tell you that I’m the one who stroked Sandy McNeil. The singer has nothing to do with it. I did it; so, can I leave now?”

“That’s the guy!” immediately declared Peter Lambert. “He sold the jewels to me and said that he inherited them. Apparently, it was a lie.”

“You are truly Carlos Fernandez?” questioned the judge while carefully studying the man standing before him.

“Yes, it’s me. Can I leave now?”

“So you are Mrs. McNeil’s pimp?”

“I was, Mr. Judge. That’s in the past. I’m done with that kind of life. I’m now a new man.”

Malfoy looked the two police officers who were standing by the door and ordered:

“Officers, arrest this individual immediately. He needs to answer a few questions about stealing, prostitution, felony, assault and most of all, manslaughter.”

“What?” yelled Carlos. “I did no such things. I’m innocent.”

The man tried to escape but the two police officers caught him rapidly. Before leaving, the two security guards hired by Yannick remitted the jewels to the judge.

“I’m not the one who should accept these jewels,” explained this last one. “Give them the young man over there, the one holding the small dog.”

Thirty minutes later, Alexander Malfoy officially declared that Johnny McLean was

innocent on all charges. If for the singer, it was great news, he was not in the mood to celebrate. The poor guy was almost offended when he heard Ralph Steinberg make a statement to the press:

“During the last few weeks, Johnny Boy received some very bad press. I can understand that his fans, including the most devoted, were quite disturbed by all the charges and accusations that were made against our favorite rock star. Johnny lived through very difficult times and of course, he will have to adapt. Time and support from his closest friends will eventually help him survive this horrible part of his life. For all those reasons, it has been decided that he will stay away from the artistic stage for an undetermined period of time. So here it is. I have nothing else to add.”

After this short speech, Ralph stepped back without accepting any questions from the journalists. During the evening news, on CNN as on the other TV and radio networks, the reporters did not know how to explain and justify the events. Between John Richard’s death, the innocent verdict given to Johnny and the statement that he would no longer be performing, it was difficult to take for granted the public’s major interest. Much of the news time was consecrated on John Richard’s death. However, the surveys were mostly conducted about Johnny, in order to grasp the public opinion. The artist would have preferred for the media to remain silent. To the question that was asked about him: “Are you displeased to learn that Johnny Boy will not perform for an undetermined period of time?” Ninety eight percent the people answered no. After that, the media went as far as publishing the answer of one of the survey participants:

“Well, you know,” said this one, “I think it is better this way. As far as I’m concerned, he can retire forever. We heard too much about this guy. To get rid of him would be a benediction.”

Only Yannick understood that this dissension in Johnny’s career would not last. He was the only one knowing what the future reserved for the star. But, for the time being, everyone could sleep in peace. Phase four of the plan had not yet begun.

“Phase three, my dear princesses, was meant to isolate the adversary. It is now done.”

XIV

The following Monday and just before meeting Kevin Lebon, Johnny's look alike, Yannick decided to follow Tommy's advice and meet with the praised doctor Wilson who was able to reduce his pain by prescribing a strong analgesic. Somewhat concerned to hear that his patient suffered from stomach pains for more than three months, the doctor asked:

"Did you live a stressful event or live through an incident that could be coincidental with your pain?"

"Outside the fact that my wife and my two daughters have been upset with me for over two weeks and that I miss them, I don't know what you mean, doctor," answered Yannick.

"I see," replied the doctor. "I hope that your problem will soon be solved. Meanwhile, I have no other option then to recommend more intense exams and tests. I think we should start tomorrow."

"That was already done, doctor," mentioned Yannick. "No later than last October, my personal doctor ordered all the possible tests."

"Did he diagnose anything abnormal?"

"Nothing at all."

"I would feel better if you accepted to take more tests. It would be sensible and prudent."

Doctor Wilson handed Yannick a list of tests that should undergo as soon as possible, before this one exclaimed:

"That's it? All I have to do is to present myself at the hospital and..."

"Give them this sheet."

"And I will rapidly get all these tests without a long wait?" questioned Yannick who was use to the bad Quebec Health Care System.

"You will of course have to schedule a time. My secretary will take care of it for you. Make sure to be at the hospital tomorrow morning and don't eat anything before getting the tests".

"Well, I'll be!" expressed Yannick quite impressed. "I can't believe this. I assume that it will be expensive, but I think the health service of Quebec has something to learn."

"In our country, health is not a joke," retorted the doctor who was smiling and showing his perfect white teeth.

Mentally feeling better, Yannick rushed toward the Marriott Hotel to finally greet Johnny's famous look alike, hoping that he would not be deceived. The resemblance between the two men had to be as good as Tommy had said. As soon as Yannick entered the lobby of the hotel, he noticed Tommy and Kevin Lebon's presence.

"My God!" he exclaimed while looking at Tommy. "Is this a joke? This guy... this is not your friend... this is Johnny Boy!"

"Absolutely not!" smiled Tommy. This is Kevin Lebon. I told you the resemblance was stunning."

"Stunning, you say? It's not stunning, it's unbelievable... it's... it's perfect!"

Once the introductions were completed, Yannick invited both young men to his suite. He offered them a drink before asking the look alike:"

"So Kevin, how is life? Are there many shows on your agenda?"

"Are you kidding?" dismally answered Kevin. "With all that happened lately, people have lost interest in Johnny. My business is down like I can't believe. I hardly could pay my rent this month."

"I see," said Yannick. "I guess you are not doing too well, are you?"

"In fact, things are so bad for Kevin, clarified Tommy, that he thinks he will be going back home."

"Hum..." retorted Yannick, seemingly concerned. "Can't you find other kind of work until business gets better?"

"First of all, I doubt that business will get better," stated Kevin. "As everyone else, I think that Johnny's career is over. Secondo, I'm an illegal immigrant. I can't legally work anywhere."

"So, where are you from?" inquired Yannick.

"I'm from Canada, more precisely, Calgary."

"Nice city, I have been there many times. It's a beautiful part of the country. Absolutely breathe taking."

"Tommy said that you were also Canadian?"

"Yes, well... actually, I from the province of Quebec. I live in Montreal. Does your family still live in Calgary?"

"Yes," answered Kevin without showing to much interest.

"I can feel that your family does not have much importance for you. Am 'I wrong?" wanted to know Yannick.

“I don’t care about them more than they care about me,” specified Kevin.

“But you still would like to return home?”

“I don’t really want to, but I don’t seem to have much choice. I don’t really want to starve.”

“If I had a good contract for you, would you stay?”

“Of course!” rapidly answered Kevin.

“If you meet the terms of my proposal, explained Yannick, you will be out of problems and live like a king for quite a while. You will have enough to wait for Johnny’s return to glory.”

Hopeful and curious, Kevin asked his interlocutor to reveal the terms of the contract.

“Simple, you will have to play dead,” said Yannick. Do you think you can do that?”

“What?” replied the young man, totally in the dark concerning this last request.

Then, Yannick explained that in view of the recent events, like the death of Manou and John Richard; he, wanted to protect Johnny Boy’s interest.

“Do you mean that you will become his new manager?”

“Exactly. In fact, I’m waiting for a call from him to legalize the understanding. I should hear from him after his attorney’s funerals.”

“The funerals are today, are they not?”

“Yes they are. Johnny should call me today or at the latest tomorrow morning.”

“What do you mean by ‘playing dead?’” Curiously asked Kevin.

To that question, Yannick answered that the best way to restart Johnny’s career was to start a rumor announcing his death. His records would sell like crazy and so would any other things with his name on it.

“Brilliant!” exclaimed Tommy who had finally understood the plan. “We will create a tumult like they did after Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson’s death.”

“Exactly!” continued Yannick. “As it is presently the case with Johnny, both Elvis and Jackson were broke at the time of their death.”

Tommy added to complete this statement:

“And as in their case, both families made a fortune before the dead stars were even buried.”

“And these families are still collecting fabulous amount of money,” added Yannick. “Do you both understand our goal? This operation must of course remain secret. If one of you reveals the plan to anyone, it would be the end of our project.”

Kevin remained thankful for a short while and asked:

“That may all sound good, but... Johnny won’t really be dead. People will eventually realize that we fooled them. What will happen then?”

“You are right, that will happen,” retorted Yannick while smiling. “Whenever that happens, we will originate a storyline to rationalize the confusion. Johnny will immediately become the first resuscitated idol. Isn’t that what Elvis fans were waiting for? If the masses had heard that “Elvis is back!” They would have been happy. The justification would have said that the simulation of his death was the only way to help him find a normal life and regain his health!”

“True,” agreed Tommy. “How many people in the world claimed to have seen Elvis without fans yelling that they had been lied to? Same thing applies to Jackson. How many people still believe that he was not the one inside the ambulance that took a corpse to the hospital?”

“Precisely!” approved Yannick. “And whatever the story was, it did not prevent the fans from buying the records.”

“But,” hesitantly said Kevin, “since we know that Johnny will eventually return, how will you explain his reappearance?”

“We could say...” suggested Yannick, “that after his many problems, he received death threats and the only way we had to protect him was to announce that he was dead.”

“Will there be funerals and all that kind of things?” inquired Kevin.

“Well, of course.”

“So, if I understand your plan, I will be the one in the coffin?”

“You got it! And you will be generously paid for your services.”

“But, how will I manage to play dead?” wanted to know Kevin. “Once I’m in the coffin, I will have to gasp some air. People will see that I’m inhaling.”

“That is the complication,” said Yannick. “For people to believe that you are dead, you will have to absorb some medicine and then, you will appear to be dead for a period of twenty four hours. The drug I’m talking about is the kind of drug Juliet ingurgitated in the story “Romeo and Juliet”.”

“Hold on...” hesitated Kevin. “I don’t know about this. What if that stuff really kills me? What kind of drug is it anyway?”

“The medicine is in liquid form,” answered Yannick. “It is called: “Lipopsus Calictus”. As soon as you swallow some of it, you will have the impression of being in a deep sleep. There will be no pain whatsoever. The product will then suspend your vital signs. For anyone looking at you, you will appear dead but, in reality, you will be in a deep coma. Then, twenty four hours later, the effect of the product will gradually diminish, you will start breathing and you will wake-up.”

“Was this product ever tested?” questioned Kevin.

“Well, of course!” replied Yannick as if he was stating the holy truth. “If it did not work I would not suggest you to take it and I would not be here to talk to you about it. I tested this medicine by drinking some myself.”

“What did you just say?” asked Tommy who had serious doubt about what Yannick was saying. “When did you drink some of that stuff?”

“Were you able to contact me this weekend?”

“No. In fact, I tried but could not find you anywhere.”

“Well, now you know why you could not find me.”

“How did you get that potion?”

“From your good friend Rashid.”

Tommy brought his attention back on Kevin and said:

“No need to worry, Kevin. The Rashid we are talking about is a real genius. If he recommends a product, you can be sure that it will do what it’s supposed to do.”

“Would you like to call him, Kevin?” proposed Yannick who knew very well that Rashid had been arrested the night before. In fact, he was the one who attracted the authorities’ interests on the merchant.

After trying to call Rashid a few times and without success, Kevin gave up without leaving a message. He decided to trust Yannick and to play the game.

“How much money will I get?” he asked.

“Would five hundred thousand dollars be acceptable?” replied Yannick.

“What? Did you say five hundred thousand dollars?” repeated Kevin could hardly swallow his own saliva.

“Not enough?” said Yannick. “Ok, then... what about six hundred thousand dollars? You better decide now, because I won’t pay a dime more.”

“Yes, I say yes!” accepted Kevin. “I’m definitively saying yes. I can’t spit on that kind of money.”

“Then we got a deal!” Declared Yannick while shaking the young man’s hand. “We will proceed as soon as I can confirm the plan with Johnny.”

Somewhat embarrassed, Kevin said:

“I hope it will be soon. I’m presently really broke. A small advance...”

“You would like some money now?” continued Yannick.

“Well... yes!”

“Would fifty thousand dollars be OK with you?”

While Kevin was looking at him as if he was looking at God, Yannick opened his attaché case and pulled out five hundred bills of one hundred dollars.

“Take this money and have yourself a great night!”

Not believing what was happening, Kevin stood up, walked across the room, waved good night in Yannick’s direction and left the room with Tommy.

“I can’t believe this. I can’t believe what just happened. Do you want to celebrate with me, Tommy? I’ll take you to the best restaurant in Beverly Hills.”

At around six o’clock on that same evening, as Johnny had still not called, Yannick decided to order room service and took place in front of his TV to watch the news. Of course, the media were talking about John Richard’s funerals, but were also analyzing the purposes of the assassins. It was now evident that the deflagration of the building was a murderous attack. Both the prosecutor and the sheriff were in agreement and so was the director of the Los Angeles Post. In fact, they had all received a signed confession hand-written by the terrorist, a man called Mel Larson. It seemed that Larson was a war hero who had been arrested and charged for treason. The letter was authenticated and matched the identity of the owner of a Honda Civic 1997, found across the street from the site of the disaster. When the police found the car, the motor was still running.

According to one of the news reporter, this was a desperate action. Mel Larson should not have been thrown out of the army and should never have been arrested and jailed.

“We should never charge a man of desertion when he is trying to save his own life,” added the same reporter. “And a man should not be charged with treason when he is trying to help a poor

widow and her children.”

Giving more information on the life of the man now called “The crazy terrorist”, the reporter said again:

“It is to wonder if the army was not totally unfair with this soldier; a man who had actually been decorated quite a few times. It is also to wonder why the army badly treats its heroes and does not pay attention to the traumatism caused by war. When he was released from jail, Mel Larson had no ways to earn a living and had to become a beggar. He evidently became insane because of his hopeless life style and that led him to the desperate action he committed last Thursday.”

To be presented as demented was definitively not Mel’s intention and Yannick felt sorry for him. However, his death may help the people and the leaders of the military forces to understand that they have to support their veterans instead of abandoning them. In fact, the question and survey of the day was:

“Should the military forces support our veterans and better help them with their mental equilibrium?” The survey results was more than clear-cut. Ninety five percent of the respondents answered... YES!

The next day, around three o’clock in the afternoon and after submitting himself to many tests, Yannick left the hospital. As he was starving, he decided to stop in a near-by restaurant. As he was taking a first bite into his enormous burger, his cell phone rang:

“How is my guardian Angel?” asked the well-known voice.

“Johnny!” exclaimed Yannick while trying to swallow. “I don’t know if I should ask but, how are you doing little man?”

“Not too well. In fact, I never felt so bad. Imagine... my lawyer was killed by a demented bastard, my producer walked out on me and, worse of all, I’m totally broke. The bank wants to foreclose on the castle if I don’t make a payment by next Monday. As you can see, I’m not doing too well. In fact, my situation is quite shitty.”

“Hum...” muttered Yannick. “Problems seem to follow you, no matter where you go or what you do!”

“Tell me...” wanted to know Johnny. “Are you the one that was sending the pizzas?”

“Of course, who else would have done that to help you?”

“I must say that it was very helpful. You did a good job. You were John’s idol.”

“Talking about him, you told me that after the trial, he would become in charge of your

career. So, now that he left us, what are you planning to do now?"

"You are asking me?" said Johnny seeming troubled. "Didn't you once offer that you would help me if John was unable to? Don't tell me that you are also forsaking me?"

"Definitively not! You should know that. I would never give up on you. I was asking in case you had found somebody else. I really would like to work with you."

Johnny could now breathe easier. However, Yannick told him that business was business and for that reason, they would have to prepare a solid contract.

"Don't you worry?" said Johnny. "The contract is already written. It so happens that yesterday I had a visit with my producer, Ralph Steinberg. I had the contract prepared."

"Already?" asked Yannick who was somewhat surprised.

"And also," interrupted Johnny, "if you agree to make all the payments for the castle and if you will take care of my personal needs until my...come back... that should happen one of these days, every dollar that I will earn will be deposited in your bank account until my debt toward you is paid."

Yannick did not immediately answer. This was too easy and good to be true. Johnny waited for an answer for a few seconds, got worried and asked:

"What... why aren't you saying anything? I think it's an honest proposal. Don't you agree?"

"Well..." finally retorted Yannick. "It seems fair to me. You surprised me. I mean... I didn't think..."

"We only need your signature at the base of the contract," added Johnny. "We also need the name of your bank and your bank account number so that Ralph can make deposits of our profits."

"Are you telling me?" asked Yannick who was astonished by the proposal. "You mean that Ralph Steinberg is in agreement with this arrangement?"

"Absolutely!" straightforwardly replied Johnny. "Ralph already signed the contract. All we need is your signature. You will not disappoint me, will you?" I beg of you Tom... say yes. I really need your help. By the way, did I tell you that if something should happen to me, you would become my only heir? It's all written in the contract. You have to admit that I'm offering you a significant deal."

Still amazed, Yannick told Johnny that he would meet him at the castle in less than one hour. As soon as he ended the conversation, he called Tommy to inform him of the latest development.

"This is very strange," he explained to him. "All that he proposed to me is exactly what I wanted. The kid must have read my mind!"

“I see what you mean,” concurred Tommy. “That is weird all right! I can’t believe that Steinberg approved such an agreement. Do you know what I think?”

“What?”

“I don’t think he cares about Johnny anymore. After all, he walked out on him. Did you know that?”

“He only did that because he doesn’t know the end of this story.”

“Can you finally tell me what the end will be?” tried to know Tommy.

“Not now, my young friend. Not now... all I can tell you is that the end is near. You will soon be very rich; just as I promised.”

As he was saying these words, remembering Johnny’s request, Yannick asked Tommy for his banking information. Quite motivated by all that money that would soon cross the threshold of his bank account, the reporter readily gave all the necessary data.

“When will I get my first million?” he asked.

“In a few days...” answered Yannick. “It will only take a few days.”

Without eating his whole meal, he rushed toward his Ferrari and rapidly headed toward the Castle. As he arrived, he noticed that the place was seriously neglected. It was sad to see. In fact, it was disturbing. As if the venue had no more soul. Was it because the fountain was no longer flowing? Or was it because the flowers were dying of thirst or because the grass had not been mowed in a while? Was it because Manou was not there anymore to take care of everything? All these ingredients were probably a cause for the mess Yannick was looking at. The saddest part was to notice Johnny and his dog seating on the steps of the large balcony and waiting for the savior. Near the doorstep, a large number of suitcases were sets on the ground, as if they were waiting for something before entering the castle. As soon as Johnny saw Yannick, he ran toward him and propelled himself into his arms.

“Finally you are here. Why did it take so much time?”

“It only took about an hour,” defended himself Yannick before asking what he and Charlie were doing on the balcony.

Johnny was about to answer when Charlie began to furiously bark. Not only was he barking, he was growling with rage and trying to scratch the visitor as if to say that he was not welcomed.

“What’s wrong with this dog?” asked Yannick, knowing perfectly well why Charlie was so animus toward him.

“That is strange!” said Johnny, while trying to calm his dog. “He normally never acts like that. I guess that for some reason, he doesn’t like you.”

“Your dog may have a touch of jealousy,” suggested Yannick who was trying to prevent the young man from searching too deep into the conduct of his pet.

“Normally, he never acts like that. I don’t understand his behavior.”

Johnny picked-up his dog and the animal calmed down a little.

“So, what are you both doing on the balcony? Repeated Yannick. Why all these suitcases? Were you guys coming, or leaving?”

“Both...” replied Johnny. We just left John’s home and we are ready to move to your place.”

“No way, I live in a hotel. I don’t have room for you guys over there. I figured you would move back in here, in your house.”

“Absolutely not!” firmly refused Johnny. “I never entered this place since Manou’s death. There is no way I will move in here until the place is inspected by ghost hunters!”

“Are you joking or what?” retorted Yannick while laughing. “Don’t tell me that you believe in ghost? Well, I can now say that I heard everything. You really believe that your castle is haunted?”

“Yes it is and I’m not going in there.”

“Ok!” said Yannick with a kind smile. “If I walk in there... will you follow me?”

“Hum...”

“Come on, stop being a baby and give me the keys.”

After opening the door, Yannick quickly entered and loudly called Manou.

“Are you here, Mrs. Manou? If you are here, you have to leave immediately. You are scaring you son out of his wit. He needs to re-enter his home. So, please... if you are here, get out of here.”

He waited a few moments before looking and saying to Johnny:

“As you can see, no one is here, absolutely no one, even not Manou. Everything seems to be in place. I can definitely say that there are no ghosts in this house and that nobody entered this place since you left.”

Johnny slowly and carefully crossed the threshold and headed to the living room. He had to agree, everything seemed in place. All things appeared to be where they belong. As Yannick was carrying the suitcases inside the house, he said for Johnny's benefit:

"You know what? To make you feel better, I'll move in here with you. Not for ever but for a certain time. After all, I'll be the one paying for the mortgage."

That last sentence convinced Johnny. He rapidly invited his guest to move into the room baptized the 'Lion King' room. The decor was somewhat childish, but the room itself was spacious and had a king size bed.

Later in the evening, the two men took place in the living room and studied the contract. All was in order and written the way Johnny had said. The document was signed by Ralph Steinberg. By placing his signature at the base of the agreement, Tom MacMillan undertook the responsibilities of taking care of Johnny's financial needs and of maintaining the castle until the singer was back on success road. After that, Tom Macmillan would collect all profits generated by the sales of any objects bearing the name of Johnny Boy. That implicated all profits made from the sales of DVDs, records, as well as promotional products and the profits made from the shows and copy rights.

After reading the contract a few times, to make sure there were no any hidden clauses, Yannick ratified the agreement and completed the section requesting the name of the bank and bank account number where the monies were to be deposited. Yannick finally returned the document to Johnny, without understanding how a great business man like Ralph Steinberg had agreed to such a contract. Tommy was probably right. The producer had not more interest in Johnny Boy. In a way, it was a good thing for him. If the man had stood in Yannick's way, he would have become the latest victim.

Around nine o'clock, Johnny stood up and took the direction of the 'Peter Pan's' room. Noticing that his new agent only waved at him to wish him good night, he said:

"Hey! You have to come with me. My doctor does not want me to take my pills myself. You have to give them to me. Also, you have to stay by my bed side until I fall asleep. Manou and John always did that."

Yannick slowly followed him to his room while promising himself that he would change this part of the program.

"Be patient, old guy," he said to himself. "All will be over in a few days."

While listening to all the absurdities that Johnny was telling him, he was keeping an eye on Charlie. He sure did not want the dog to jump in his face. Not only was the canine growling he was staring at him with fury. To try to pacify the animal, he gave him many treats, but without success. The dog remained antagonistic. Of course, Charlie was accepting the biscuits or bones

that Yannick was giving him but after eating it, he was returning to his hostility.

“Don’t worry about him,” said Johnny. “He’ll get over it. He doesn’t know you and he’s annoyed by your presence. Give him some time. He’ll get use to you.”

Once Johnny was asleep, Yannick returned to the living room and called Tommy.

“It is done!” he proudly said. “We have a signed contract.”

“Great!” replied Tommy. “Now that this segment of the plan is accomplished, when will you need Kevin?”

“I don’t feel like playing the role of a baby sitter for too long, answered Yannick after a short hesitation, so... the sooner the better. Let’s do it tomorrow night. Now, make sure not to get here before Johnny falls asleep.”

“Of course. So, I should be there around nine o’clock?”

“That would be just fine.”

“Hum... I have a question for you. While Johnny is supposed to be dead, what will you do to hide the real Johnny?”

“Don’t trouble yourself with that detail. I have a plan.”

“Come on... tell me!”

“I will convince him to remain in his music room until... the end.”

Then Yannick added in a most diabolic way:

“That stupid little bastard won’t be the first star to produce musical hits after his death. People will never have witnesses an agent producing so many hit songs coming right out of their dead rock star’s rubbish.”

“I can’t even imagine how much money we will make!” exclaimed Tommy, as if he had entered a fantasy world.

“It will be a fortune... a real fortune!”

There were no doubts. Manou’s approach to make people talk during their sleep was positively worthwhile. Except for the part concerning Kevin, everything that Yannick had just said, he had already revealed when Tommy had questioned him while his was sleeping. In fact, Tommy only needed one more piece of information to complete the puzzle. He had to find out the time of Johnny’s death. So, he casually inquired, but the only response he received was:

“As of now; I truly don’t know. When I will be fed up of playing with him... I suppose.”

To make sure that Yannick had not modified his plan, Tommy asked:

“How will you proceed to do away with him?”

“I won’t put him down, he will do it himself.”

So the final phase of the plan had not changed. But still, Tommy needed to know WHEN. When would Johnny be executed?

During the news bulletin, they were still talking about the soldier Mel Larson. The crime he had committed found no excuses but certain reporters seemed to show some sympathy toward him. His sad story had opened a can of worms and many such sorrowful episodes were becoming public. Many soldiers had accepted to testify in front of the cameras about their personal experiences after they had been retired by the military forces. It became a major outrage among the citizens. The finger pointing was not only directed toward the army but also toward the president of the country. The accusations stated that the president was getting rid of the veterans as if they were an old pair of shoes. Mel almost became the talk of the town. If the president kept his new promises, a large sum of money would be set aside to help the old soldiers. Mel Larson downfall would not have been useless. Yannick was happy of the turn of events. That night, he thought of his little darlings. They must be proud of him. That night, he slept like a baby.

The next morning and right after breakfast, Yannick tried to convince Johnny that he had to lock himself in the music room and create new songs.

“You have to prepare your come-back! And I want your new songs to reveal that you still have great talent.”

“I have plenty of time!” protested Johnny who really didn’t feel like working. “My come-back, as you say, is not for tomorrow?”

“I know,” insisted Yannick, “but if you want to open a new show with some master pieces, you have to prepare and create.”

“But it’s a beautiful day. I wanted take the day off, go outside the house and play with Charlie.”

“Listen to me Johnny!” severely said Yannick. “You can go outside for a short while, but in one hour, I want you to get to work. Do you understand me?”

“OK, ok...” grumbled Johnny while attaching the leash to his dog’s collar. “Come Charlie, let’s go run.”

Johnny obeyed and came back one hour later. After pouring himself some coffee, he headed toward the music room and said:

“At ten o’clock, you have to bring us some refreshments. Bring one biscuit for Charlie and bring me three chocolate cookies and a glass of milk. Then, we must eat again at two o’clock. You must bring us some more refreshments. Finally, I will stop working at six o’clock. My meal must be ready. I like to have dinner at that time.”

His interlocutor had to power up all of his self-control not to explode. As soon as “His Majesty” disappeared in the music room, Yannick called Tommy and started to scream:

“Tommy! I’m telling you... I’m going to blow-up! He is driving me nuts. I don’t think he knows the difference between a manager and a baby sitter!”

“What can I tell you? He’s acting like a... star!” Tommy laughed.

Yannick calmed down and explained the real reason for his call:

“You need to go to Johnny’s bank today and pay up his late mortgage payments.”

“What?” yelled Tommy who was genuinely shocked by what he had just heard. “Why me? You’re the one with the big resources, not me!”

“Come on, Tommy, think a little. Who’s the new agent? Yannick Simard or Tom MacMillan?”

“I know but...”

“The contract with Johnny is in your name. So obviously, you have all the rights. Johnny’s bank has already received a copy of the contract. On top of that, the news is all over the place. Most everybody knows about your new association with him.”

“If you only knew the number of calls I received this morning, confessed Tommy. “I transmitted the news to the media and in no time at all, it grew like a wet snowball rolling downhill.”

Tommy kept silent for a few moments and asked:

“I won’t mind playing the game and pay for the mortgage but... I have not received any money yet. I don’t have enough money in my bank account.”

“Then go to the Marriott. You will find money in the room’s safety box. The number of the combination lock is: 3-6-8-3. Take the amount you need, make a deposit in your bank account and pay Johnny’s bank with a check from your bank.”

“No problem, finally agreed Tommy, “I can do that.”

During the day at the castle and while he was playing the role of Cinderella to satisfy Johnny and his mutt, Yannick was counting the hours. Around noon, after bringing a sandwich for Mister Star and dog food for that dumb-ass dog, he looked at his watch and said to himself:

“I must have patience and courage. Only nine and a half hours left before Johnny goes to sleep. Only nine hours if I’m lucky.”

He repeated these words of encouragements to himself after the two o’clock midday meal, the six o’clock dinner and during the evening. After the meal, Johnny insisted on playing Monopoly. Yannick actually liked the game but on that night, it seemed to last for hours. Finally, the clock indicated nine thirty. To make sure that Johnny would sleep deeply, he gave him two sleeping pills.

“Why two?” wanted to know Johnny somewhat surprised by the dosage. “Manou only gave me two pills when she figured I had too much stress.”

“But you are stressed, my dear friend!” explained Yannick. “You should see your face. You look like you’re ready to explode.”

“Is that right?” asked Johnny without further question.

He swallowed the two pills and eighteen minutes later, he was deep asleep.

At precisely ten o’clock, Tommy and Kevin arrived at the castle. Their happy looking face made it evident that so far, they had had a pleasant evening and a few indulging drinks. Tommy rapidly lost his smile when Yannick ordered him to take Johnny and Charlie to his suite at the Marriott.

“What?” retorted the young man. “But why?”

“Let me remind you that in two hours, Johnny will seem to be dead. Don’t you think that it would be weird if people found him sleeping in his room while they found his body in another room?”

“I see...” approved Tommy seemingly disappointed. “It’s just that I would have liked to be here to support Kevin. You must understand that he is rather nervous. Don’t you?”

“Then, hurry up!” ordered Yannick. “If you make haste you will be present when the doctor gets here. I will not do anything until he arrives.”

“A doctor?” questioned Tommy who was somewhat surprised by Yannick’s latest statement.

“Well, of course. I’m not going to inject him myself. I could, but what if something went wrong. I better have a doctor present.”

“I get it!” approved Tommy.

He then turned toward Kevin and added:

“You see... I told you, the whole thing and caboodle will be just fine. You’re in good hands.”

The trio gently went to Johnny’s bed room. As expected, Charlie was not happy at all and reacted aggressively as soon as the door opened. He furiously stormed Yannick and Kevin but calmed down when he noticed Tommy.

“That’s interesting,” stated Yannick. “That dog seems to like you.”

Tommy smiled, caressed the animal and explained:

“We know each other. We met in court a few days ago. Isn’t that right, little doggie? Come here; let me take you in my arms.”

While Tommy was keeping the dog busy, Yannick did the best he could to dress Johnny into a burka. The young man was sleeping so deeply that nothing could possibly disturb him. Not even the clumsiness of the man who was trying to dress him.

“Why do you cover him into a burka?” inquired Tommy.

“Because, no one must see him. Otherwise, can you imagine? We would declare his death while other people would say that they saw him at the Marriott.”

Once Johnny was ready, Yannick told Tommy to carry him into his car. Meanwhile, Kevin took care of pulling the dog behind him. Once they reached the porch, they all noticed that it was quite dark. Tommy could not see anything ahead of him, so he told:

“But Yannick... what the hell? Can’t you at least turn on some lights? It would help, you know? I really don’t want to break my bones.”

“Are you nut? If we turn on the light the nosy old woman across the street will see what we are doing.”

“True, I wasn’t thinking about her,” agreed Tommy.

Slowly moving forward, he managed to reach the pick-up truck without hurting himself. In order to help him, Yannick opened the passenger door and noticed, that as usual, the back seat was covered with junk, paper and bags of all sort.

“Damn you! Won’t you ever clean your junk out of that dump?”

“Sorry about that!” replied Tommy. “If you had told me ahead of time what you had in mind, I would have cleaned my car.”

Yannick used his arms to push most of the mess on the floor and managed to clean enough space to create room for a human body.

“I’ll go as fast as I can,” said Tommy while taking place behind the wheel. I’ll soon be back. Don’t do anything without me.”

“Don’t worry!” promised Yannick. We’ll take a drink while waiting for you. I’ll leave the front door unlocked for you. Come and join us in Manou’s room. You know, the one they call the ‘Little Mermaid’.

“How am I supposed to find that room? riposted Tommy. “I’m not familiar with that house, you know. This place is huge... it’s a real maze.”

“It’s not that bad, answered Yannick who was quite amused. “All you have to do is to go to the Peter Pan room. Then, follow the passage way. It’s only a few feet away.”

As soon as Tommy left, Yannick guided Kevin to Manou’s room. Once there, he prepared a cocktail for the young man and invited him to look at all the aquariums. Kevin acted accordingly and noticed that almost all the fish were dead, or about to be.

“Weird!” exclaimed Yannick. “Don’t tell me this irresponsible Johnny didn’t ask someone to feed the fish while he was away? It’s a good thing Manou is no longer alive. She would have killed him.”

Relatively entertained by Yannick’s opinion, Kevin kept visiting until he paused in front of a fish tank that seemed unoccupied.

“Strange”, he said. “There’s nothing in here; there’s only a stone.”

Yannick stepped closer and acted as if he was furious.

“What the hell is this? It’s the damn stone that Johnny picked up in Las Vegas. I told him not to put it in one of the aquariums. Please take it out of there. That stone is hideous.”

Kevin obeyed without knowing that he was reaching for the second stonefish that Yannick had placed in that aquarium the night Manou died. He tried to grab the stone and experienced a sharp pain on his hand.

“Damn it!” he yelled while quickly removing his hand from the water. “That stone bit me!”

Yannick adopted a bewildered attitude and retorted:

“Let me see...”

While he was inspecting Kevin’s hand, the venom was progressing into the body. As Manou had done, Kevin complained about a sharp pain that was moving up his arm. He fell on the floor while pressing against his chest. The poison had reached the heart.

“Do something, Yannick, I can’t breathe, please... call a doctor.”

“I can’t,” answered Yannick. “You will play your role as a dead Johnny with brio, because you will indeed be dead. It’s nothing personal, you see. The ‘Lipopsus Calictus’ does not actually exist. I needed a dead body and... you were the perfect choice.”

As Kevin was slowly passing away, Yannick continued:

“You know what? The advantage is that everyone will think that you are Johnny. Since your family doesn’t care about you, they won’t be looking for you, will they? Anyway, you will have some fine funerals. The type of ceremonies only great people normally have.”

Kevin made a last sound and died quickly. About ten minutes later, his assassin took a bewildered face when Tommy entered the room and yelled:

“Damn! You were supposed to wait for me! Where’s the doctor? You told me the doctor would give him the injection!”

“Tommy, please calm down,” replied Yannick. “Something terrible just happened.”

“What?” questioned Tommy. “What happened... tell me!”

“He was walking around the room while I was not watching him. He stopped in front of this fish tank, the one that has a stonefish...”

“No!” yelled Tommy. “Don’t tell me he is dead! Not another one?”

“It was an accident.”

“I don’t believe you!” screamed the reporter. “I don’t believe you anymore! You killed him, I know you did!”

“No way.”

“You are lying!” interrupted Tommy who was now crying like a grief-stricken person.

Holding a hair dryer, he approached his friend on the floor in order to help him and screamed again:

“How many people must you kill to satisfy your vengeance? Tell me? How many?”

“Tommy... I swear to you. It was an accident. He put his hand in that aquarium to touch the stone. I did not see him!”

Tommy turned on the hair dryer and searched for the place where Kevin was bitten.

“The stonefish got him on the hand,” indicated Yannick. “I did all I could to help him, but it was too late. There is nothing we can do for him.”

Tommy could not believe what was going on. He attempted to heal his friend by drying the wound, before to look at Yannick with anger.

“So, Yannick... when is my turn? When are you planning to get rid of me?”

“You are wrong, Tommy, retorted Yannick as if he was insulted. You know very well that...”

“Is that so?” said Tommy with a sad ironic tone of voice. “Everyone that helped you in your pursuit is now dead. Even Mel; I’m the only one left.”

“I had no choice but to kill Sandy!” explained Yannick. “We had to get rid of her. She was getting ready to reveal our plan. On the other hand, Mel wanted to die. He even asked me to kill him.”

“You are a monster!” replied Tommy who was still shouting and crying. “Do you know that? You are a dirty, deceitful monster!”

Yannick adopted a cold authoritative voice and answered:

“Listen, believe me or not, call me monster or any other name, it does not change the facts: Kevin is dead and that’s the way it is. I’m now heading to the Marriot and while I’m gone, you know what you have to do.”

“You said that I’m supposed to do what? What am I supposed to do?”

“First, call the cops and let them know that a mortal accident just happened here.”

“What?” riposted Tommy. “Why don’t you do it yourself?”

“Listen, young man... who is Johnny’s agent? You or me?”

“But?”

“I have no reasons to be here. In fact, Johnny is not even supposed to know me. However, you, as his agent, it’s only normal that you should be with him. It is perfectly reasonable that he would have called you after being bitten by a stonefish.”

“I can’t do what you ask,” refused Tommy while still caressing Kevin’s hand. “I would never be able to lie to the cops the way you want me to. I’m having a major break down, I’m telling you.”

“Don’t worry so much. Report to the cops the story I told you to tell and keep crying the way you are now. You will appear totally sincere. Let me know as soon as they have taken the body out of here.”

Without saying anything else, Yannick left the house. Totally demoralized, Tommy was left alone with the problem and rushed toward the closest phone to call the only person susceptible to help him.

“Ralph!” he yelled soon as he heard the voice of the producer. “You have to help me! Please, you have to come to Johnny’s castle immediately. You will find me in Manou’s room.”

Ralph arrived on location without delay and found Tommy sitting next to Kevin and still trying to warm his hand with a hair dryer.

“What the hell is happening here?” nervously asked Ralph.

“Rachid told me that if I kept warm air on the wound, it could chase the poison,” cried out Tommy. “He said that heat was the antidote, but it’s not working. He’s not waking up!”

Tommy’s appearance was pitiful to see. He was covered with tears and his eyes were reddened and swollen.

“Stop whatever you are doing, stop it, ordered Ralph. There’s nothing you can do.”

“But he said that heat...”

Feeling sorry for Tommy, Ralph took the hair dryer out of his hand, helped him to stand up and said:

“Let’s call the doctor, OK?” If something can be done, he will know.”

Johnny's doctor soon arrived. All he could do was to declare the death of his famous client. The police was called and Tommy, encouraged by Ralph, did the best he could to explain the regrettable accident. The corps had not yet reached the morgue that the world journalists and reporters were announcing the final departure of the greatest rock star in the world.

Three days later and following the autopsy that had confirmed that the young man had died by lethal poison, Johnny's corps was discreetly brought back to the castle. Thousands of grief-stricken fans, from the four corners of the world, watched the funeral. The sad event gave birth to thousands of acknowledgement shows that were presented in the most renowned stadium and theatres of many countries. Every object, article or gadget that commemorated the existence of Johnny Boy was soon sold out in every store or boutique around the world. Ralph had to perform wonders and miracles to re-stock the retail outlets. In the history of show business, the death of an artist had never been so profitable.

"Happy my sweethearts?" asked Yannick while looking at the sky. "Phase four of my phenomenal plan is accomplished. The career of my most dreadful enemy is back on track."

XV

On this beautiful Monday morning, Yannick heard the telephone ringing. He answered before to recognize his brother in law and pleasantly said:

“How are you doing, my friend?”

“You are asking me?” replied Jim with a joyful tone of voice. “We just made ten million dollars and you ask me how I’m doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Earth is calling the moon! Johnny Boy’s record company... do you remember?”

“Ah... that’s what you’re talking about.”

“Your contact was right, my friend. I don’t understand how he knew the shares were going to climb as they are doing, but he was right. We have doubled our investment. I guess I could have waited longer before selling, but, I didn’t want to be too greedy.”

“I guess you also have good contacts...” commented Yannick.

“Don’t you find it’s somewhat bizarre? rapidly continued Jim. I remember the info you gave me a few days ago. You said the shares we’re going to fall to eventually climb to a record level. It’s very unusual; it’s as if someone had planned the whole thing. First, we have the crash of the singing star and then, his untimely death... personally, I think something spooky is happening, don’t you agree?”

“I don’t know,” slowly answered Yannick as if he was analyzing the question. “Do you think his producer could have killed Johnny just to make money? It would be totally insane...”

“I’m wondering,” retorted Jim. My children and I are following the story very closely. It’s like a Hollywood drama. People are dying, one after the other: the mother, the press agent, the lawyer and then Johnny Boy. The circumstances of all these deaths are quite creepy; don’t you concur?”

“I don’t know,” said Yannick. “I’m not really following the story.”

“Anyway,” replied Jim. “Since his driver did what he did, we can say that Johnny had a lot of mind-binding problems. You should be here to see what my children are doing. They are watching TV at all time of the day. They don’t want to miss anything.”

“And I assume,” guessed Yannick in a teasing kind of voice, “they want you to buy all the junky mementos that are flooding the market since Johnny died?”

“You got it! If I don’t want to hear never-ending complains, I have to buy what they want. Because of that, I probably contributed to the rise of Johnny’s company shares.”

“You’ll never change,” exclaimed Yannick while laughing. “You’re incapable to resist. You have to give these kids anything they want.”

“Do you know what else? They convinced me to take them to the stadium where there will be a big musical show in Johnny Boy’s honor. It will cost me two hundred dollars per tickets... can you imagine? Two hundred dollars.”

“Stop complaining you cheapjack. Johnny Boy made you richer and you have plenty of money. Tell me the date of the show?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Well, you might enjoy it!”

“Will you soon be coming home? Christmas is getting close and we would like you to be with us.”

“Christmas eve is in four days; isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if I’m not there for Christmas, you can count on me for New Year’s day. Things are getting better and I plan to be home soon.”

“I’m looking forward to wish you Happy New Year in person. I really miss you, you know. By the way, I’m aware that you did not visit your grandmother, did you at least call her?”

“No, I did not.”

“The hospital called me and They said she’s close to the end. She may only have one or two days to live.”

“You know, Jim? I have not seen her in such a long time. If she is as sick as you say, I doubt that she could recognize me.”

“I’m told that she still have most of her mental faculties. In fact, I think she’s waiting for you...”

“I’ll see, meanwhile, could you send her some flowers in my name?”

“If you say so,” said Jim who seemed disappointed, “I’ll do as you ask. At least, you will have done... something.”

As far as Yannick was concerned, Grandmother could wait as long as she could. She was far from a priority. He had just begun the last phase of his plan and that came first.

“So, have a nice trip grandma Theresa. See you soon... in another life.”

Later that day, Tommy arrived at the castle without any warnings.

“Are you sick in the head?” yelled Yannick, as soon as he saw him. “What if Johnny was here instead of being working in the music room?”

“There is no chance of that,” nonchalantly replied Tommy. “Since people think he is dead, you keep him locked in his music room, so...”

“That’s right, but... you still could have told me that you were coming over.”

“I had no choice,” explained Tommy, “my phone is out of order and I needed to talk to you.”

“Your phone is out of order?” questioned Yannick. “So, buy another one. With the millions of dollars you are now making, I’m sure you can afford to buy a new phone.”

Yannick looked outside and noticed that Tommy was still driving his old pick-up truck. So he said:

“Why aren’t you getting another car? Get something new. You should also buy new clothing. Those worn-out pants look awful.”

“It can wait,” retorted Tommy. “I want to make sure the money will really be mine. Meanwhile, I think it belongs to Johnny.”

“As you wish,” said Yannick appearing somewhat in agreement. “Ok then, why did you want to see me?”

“I wanted to let you know that I will be away for a few days. Three days at the most.”

“I see, and may I ask why?”

“I have to go to the city that you come from. I’m going to Montreal.”

“What?”

“Tomorrow, in Montreal, there will be a major show in Johnny’s honor. The organizers asked me if I could be there, and I said yes.”

“They really invited you? I wonder why.”

“Maybe because... I’m officially Johnny’s agent, am I not? They must also know that I knew Johnny better than anyone else.”

“Makes sense. Ok, you can go. But try to come back within two days. I would prefer that.”

“And why?” wanted to know Tommy, intrigued by his interlocuter’s request. “Do you think it may happen in two days?”

“Maybe yes and maybe no; I’m considering different options. I think I’d like to go home for Christmas. On the other hand, Johnny is presently creating many new songs. If I hurry the process, you could lose a lot of money.”

Smiling and staring at Yannick, Tommy replied:

“You don’t have to worry about me. You can make your own decision, you know. I already made so much money because of you, more than I was hoping for.”

He remained quiet for a few seconds and then asked:

“Where will it happen? In his room or in his music room?”

“No, it will happen in the back yard. More precisely in the garden shed. I already took the tools I will need in there.”

Tommy was satisfied and mentally thanked Manou. Yannick had just confirmed what he had said during his dream.

“Well then, I’ll see you in two days!” he said before to turned around to leave the castle.

“Wait!” ordered Yannick. While you are here, you might as well pick-up this file and take it to Steinberg. There are five new songs in there. As you can see, our Johnny is very productive. He falls on my nerves, but this guy is really talented.”

“On that point, there is no doubt,” agreed Tommy. “He’s really the greatest. Isn’t it amazing that he can play all the musical instruments?”

“Did he always do that?” asked Yannick. “I mean, is he always the only musician playing in his albums? Does he ever hire other accompanist?”

“Johnny always makes his albums by himself. He only uses other musicians on stage when he gives a show.”

“He’s amazing, I must agree; truly amazing.”

Tommy looked at his watch, realized the time and said:

“It’s almost noon, time for you to serve lunch to his majesty! I guess I might as well leave. See you later.”

So, Yannick prepared a sandwich for Johnny and for himself, as well as a 'Beef Cesar' plate for Charlie, and used a luxurious food tray to carry the food to the music room.

"So little man?" he inquired while placing the food tray in front of Johnny. "How's work today?"

"Not bad," replied Johnny without excessive enthusiasm.

Yannick found that Johnny was far away, nervous and tense, probably because the rock star was presently living in his own world. He was deep into the universe of the genius and in the cosmos only visited by the great minds.

"Can I do something to help you?" offered Yannick.

"No," disagreeably answered Johnny. "Don't touch or look at anything. I like to work by myself. I don't need anything from anyone."

"Oh, I see that our star is not in a very good mood. You seem defensive. May I know why?"

Johnny finally picked-up his sandwich, seeming somewhat despaired.

"I'm not on the defensive, but I'm at the end of my rope. Think about this: if from one day to the other you realized that your fans are turned against you; if your life was threatened and if the only way you could protect yourself was to lock yourself up as I have to do... wouldn't you also be at the end of your rope?"

It was evident that Johnny was practically living in hell. And, of course all his miseries were caused by Yannick who had convinced him that he had to hide and lock himself in the music room, explaining to him that the police was seriously concerned about his security.

"Since the end of the trial, many people are verbally menacing your life, he added. It's really serious. That information was on the news last night."

This story had been invented by Yannick after Kevin's death. The day Johnny and Charlie woke up in the hotel room, when the young man was wondering what he was doing so far from home, Yannick had given him the following explanation:

"When I heard the news on TV, I panicked. My first reflex was to hide you under a burka and take you to my hotel room. I figured it was the only way to assure your security."

"Why do you say you figured?" asked Johnny. "Do you mean that I was not safe in your hotel room?"

“Well, after taking you there, I called the police in order to receive more information concerning the threats that were made against you. They assured me that the safest place for you would be in the castle.”

“The castle? That’s the first place where somebody would look for me!”

“That’s right and that why it’s the best place for you to hide. The police explained to me that an assassin would never think that you were silly enough to move back in here. He would never consider looking for you in this place.”

Johnny covered his handsome face with both his hands. He was perplexed and could not understand why people hated him so much. But why, why did some people want him dead?”

“This story of aggression played much against you,” explained Yannick. “Many esteem that you are nothing more than an abuser and killer of a woman.”

“But the judge found me ‘innocent!’” protested Johnny. “My integrity was made evident. I was not guilty of anything.”

“You know it and I know it,” gently said Yannick while trying to calm down the singer. “Your innocence is obviously not evident for everybody. But, don’t worry; people forget. Within a month or two, this story will be out of people’s mind.”

If Yannick did not hold so much abhorrence against Johnny, he could have helped him. He could have showed him the favorable articles that were published since his death. He could have let him watch some of the special TV programs relating his life as well as his burial. Johnny would have realized that his fans no longer disliked him; on the contrary, they cherished him more than ever before. People by the thousands did all they could to physically attend his funeral. What an event it was. It was grandiose, fit for a king or the little prince that he was. For more people to see him and to prevent a riot, the mayor of Los Angeles had authorized the closing of Los Angeles Street. The fans had the opportunity to see the long parade that led their idol to his final resting place. If Yannick had cared to expose to the real Johnny how much his fans still loved him, he would have taken him on the balcony of his own house in order to see the thousands of flowers that had been set down all over his land. That’s what Yannick would have done if he had any pity. But he had no pity whatsoever. Not more than Johnny had for his family when his three girls died by his fault. So, in his mind, the little prince could suffer and be tormented by solitude during the last few days that would be his existence.

Johnny really suffered from his solitude. Since he had informed him of the dead threats that were made against him, Yannick kept him locked in his music room, night and day. He was never allowed to get out of there, not even to take a short walk through the castle.

“It’s too risky,” kept telling him Yannick. “Imagine this; one of these crazy bastards could see you through the window and shoot you. And Bang... you are dead. Only one bullet and you

are done with!”

Johnny was not even permitted to listen to the radio, watch TV or read the newspapers. Yannick had explained that he wanted to prevent him from being hurt by what people were saying against him. He only had Charlie, his devoted companion, to whom he could talk. Yannick visited him occasionally, but only few minutes: about ten minutes during the meals and twenty minutes at bed time. The remaining time, Johnny was lost in his solitude. He would sing a little, write, record some new music or play with Charlie. And today was just like the previous days. After spending about ten minutes with the young man, Yannick left, pretexting he had to keep an eye for the venomous pigs that were stalking the house.

“I’ll see you at dinner time,” pleasantly stated Yannick. “Keep up the good work. You are creating outstanding music. Ralph will be proud of you!”

Then, he left the music room and locked the door behind him. He was right in stating that Ralph was delighted. Each time Tommy brought a new song to the producer, he would publish it on a collector’s CD. Normally, this type of album only held a few titles, but still, discophiles are willing to buy for a high price. Usually, this album would contain at least one song that had never been edited. If the producer announces that the new album would be a limited edition, the selling price more than doubled. Selling such CD becomes very lucrative, especially if the artist was already defunct. By hearing new songs from there extinct superstar, the fans have the impression that their idol is still alive. As a brilliant business man, Ralph took advantage of the situation and within three days, millions of dollars were landing in his bank account.

On his way to the kitchen, Yannick walked in front of the house’s main entry. Through one of the two side windows next to the door, he caught sight of Tommy inside his pick-up truck. This scene seemed peculiar to him, because they said goodbye to each other no less than fifteen minutes ago. Why was Tommy still parked in front of the door? Intrigued, Yannick rushed outside the house.

“How come you’re still here?” he yelled while stepping in front of the vehicle.

“Now you ask me,” replied Tommy. “I had a flat tire; can you imagine? A little help would have been appreciated.”

“Sorry,” answered Yannick. “I never noticed. I was in the music room with Johnny. From there, I could not see the exterior.”

“That’s fine,” said Tommy. “My problem is solved, anyway, I’ll talk to you Thursday morning, right?”

“That’s right. Have a nice trip to my home town!”

Two long days dropped off the calendar. Yannick was bored to the max. He had to stay inside the castle and keep an eye on Johnny to be sure that he does not get out of the music room. Yes, he was bored out of his mind and felt lonely. He had gone through forty eight hours in slow motion. Each second slowly became a minute and each minute eventually became an hour. Jimmy was the only logical person he had been able to talk to. That happened last Wednesday and it was a short talk because Jimmy only had a few minutes between two business meetings. He had called Yannick to let him know that his grandmother had passed away. He also mentioned that she had sent a man who brought a small box to the office.

“The box is addressed to you,” he told him. “On the top it says: “Urgent and confidential”. Where would you like me to send the package?”

Because Yannick did not want to reveal his address, he gave Tommy’s address.

“Very well,” retorted Jimmy. “I’ll make sure to send the package to you today. I didn’t know you were in Los Angeles? Didn’t you tell me you were in Mexico?”

“I was there,” deceitfully answered Yannick. “However, I met a guy from Los Angeles who told me that he knew an excellent psychiatrist. So, I decided to come here.”

“I see,” whispered Jimmy. “I have to leave you now. Some people are waiting for me. I’ll talk to you on Christmas day or on the first of the year, OK?”

Thursday morning, Tommy called Yannick to let him know he was back in town.

“How did it go?” questioned Yannick who seemed happy that the young man was finally back. “Did my fellow Canadian know how to celebrate our great Johnny?”

“Yes, yes,” hesitated Tommy while yawning. “It was not bad at all. I think Johnny would have been proud.”

Yannick assumed that the lack of enthusiasm meant that his interlocuter was tired. He changed the subject and asked him if he had received a package addressed to him.

“Yes I did,” answered Tommy. “I was wondering why someone sent it here.”

“Bring it to me as soon as you can, won’t you? By the way, while you were gone, Johnny created more songs. I will give them to you as soon as you get here. I’ll tell you something... we won’t make millions of dollars... we will make billions!”

“Wow,” replied Tommy without showing much excitement. “I’ll come by this afternoon. Talking about Johnny, when will you...?”

“I have not decided yet. I’m really fed up of being here, but he is in a roll. He is producing

lots of music. I think I'll give him a few more days."

"Christmas Eve is tomorrow night. Didn't you say you wanted to go home?"

"I did say that, but I decided otherwise. I'll be there on New Year's Eve. I promised to make you rich and I'm still working at it."

"You have already made me rich. I consider that you have met your obligation toward me."

"No, my friend, I have not done enough yet. I want to do for you what you have done for me. You took many risks to assist me and in fact, you did better than expected. I won't simply make you rich; I'll make you super rich."

"It is so very kind of you!" said Tommy who was still not expressing much interest. "Before you do something to Johnny, you will let me know, won't you? I want to be there when it happens."

"You seem to be looking forward to Johnny's end," replied Yannick while bursting into laughter. "Are you that much in a hurry to see this guy off the earth?"

While Tommy remained silent. Yannick continued:

"Don't you worry; your desires will soon be a reality."

Less than an hour later, Tommy showed up at the castle to pick-up Johnny's latest recordings. Yannick was surprised to see that his hands were empty.

"Oh shit!" shouted the reporter while hitting the top of his head. "I totally forgot your package. It's on my kitchen table. Can you wait until my next visit? Or must I have it now?"

"Well," murmured Yannick, "the package contains things my grandmother sent me; can't be too important. There might only be a few photos in there."

"Did she die?"

"Yes she did."

"Then, let me offer you my deepest sympathy, my friend. I'm very sorry."

"Bah, I don't really care, you know. As I said before, I had no contacts with her. I didn't see her since my mother's funeral."

"So, can I bring you the package the next time I come here?"

"Absolutely, there is no hurry whatsoever."

As Yannick was watching Tommy leave, he thought of inviting him to spend Christmas Eve at the castle, but finally concluded that it was not a good idea. For his plan to operate successfully, it was important that Tommy and Johnny stayed away from each other; at least until the fatal day.

The next morning, December twenty fourth, Yannick woke-up in splendid shape before to receive a disturbing phone call. His plan, his projects and his life were at stake. Great philosophers often said that it only takes one minutes to modify someone's life. Most people think major drama can only happen to others, but it can occur to anyone. That day, it happened to Yannick Simard when he received a call from Doctor Wilson. The tests Yannick had taken more than a week ago were catastrophic. Not only did he have an incurable cancer, but his days upon this earth were limited.

"You only have a month left, maybe two," announced the doctor

Yannick's cancer had first attacked his stomach. That explained the terrible pain he often suffered. Since the cancer had not been detected by earlier tests, the sickness had progressed into the liver. Any worthwhile cancer expert would confirm that whenever cancer reaches the liver, there is nothing modern medicine can do. All that could be done was to reduce the distress. This extremely negative report hit Yannick like a bomb. From that point on, all that was crucial became unimportant and all that had never been meaningful became significant. Doctor Wilson recommended hospitalization around the second of January.

"There is no way that I will die here alone!" declared Yannick with a tone of voice charged with emotion. "If I must depart this life now, I want to succumb close to my family. I want to share my last days with those I love."

At the end of his conversation with Doctor Wilson, he let him fall in an armchair, completely annihilated. Without knowing why, his first thoughts were directed toward Mel. He could remember a phrase that the big man had said during a flight toward Las Vegas:

"It's happening because of your anger against that singer. Anger and hate are making you sick. If you keep that up, it will eventually kill you. I'm telling you, Sir."

So, the soldier was right. For a few minutes, Yannick contemplated the idea of being clement and considered letting Johnny pursue his life. However, he could not do it. The girls were counting on him and for that reason, he had to complete his vengeance. He could still hear their voices:

"Death to Johnny Boy! Death to Johnny Boy!"

Before joining them in heaven, he had to fulfill their wish. The girls' anger as much as his was totally justifiable. Their death was the responsibility of the bastard Johnny. If they had not met

on that certain night, on this cursed road, all would be fine. The girls would still be breathing and he would not be at the end of his own life. No doubt, Johnny was the cause of his misery and he had to pay, yes, pay with his life. This time, Yannick did not feel like playing anymore. He had to execute the singer right away. His self-given mission accomplished, he would be able to find peace and calmly die.

Before calling Tommy to let him know that Johnny would be soon executed, he sat in front of his computer to order a one way flight ticket to Montreal. He then informed Jimmy that he would be flying to Montreal the same day.

“Great!” exclaimed Jimmy who seemed perfectly delighted with the news. “The whole family will be so happy. We will all be at the airport to greet you. We will have a fantastic Christmas Eve.”

Then, Yannick called Tommy and ordered him to rush back to the castle.

“when you get here,” he explained, “don’t knock at the door. Wait outside until Johnny comes out. As soon as you see him, act like if you are amazed to see him alive. Take a few pictures and tell him that you will inform everyone that he pretexted his own death in order to rebuild his finances. Do you understand?”

“Perfect!” agreed Tommy. “What then?”

“Then,” maliciously answered Yannick, “I’ll take care of the rest. There’s one thing you must remember: at no time Johnny must know who I really am. He must never figure out the reasons that brought me here. Otherwise, the plan will be null and that little creep will run to the nearest police station.”

“It’s evident,” understood Tommy. “You want to be able to return home as if you had never been here.”

“Exactly, I would become an imaginary fellow!”

Now, the last phase of the plan, entitled: “Final Destruction of the Enemy” could begin. Before getting Johnny, Yannick inserted a disc in the DVD player and raised the sound level to the maximum. He continued his preparation by placing newspapers relating Johnny’s deaths on all the living room’s tables. Next, he cut off all the telephone lines. He then left the house through the back door, entered the shed to verify if all the things he had placed in there were still there.

“Good! All is well. Now it’s time to get Johnny.”

He came back inside the house and proceeded to the music room. He slowly opened the door and found the singer deep at work. Showing anger, Johnny interrupted his production as soon as he saw his manager.

“What the hell are you doing? he ask. I was recording a song! All that time and work is wasted. Now, I have to start from the beginning!”

“Well, you can redo it another time,” replied Yannick. Tonight, is Christmas Eve and you should get out of this room.”

Johnny was showing surprise and fear when he asked:

“What do you mean? What about all these people that are trying to kill me? If, as you said, they are watching the house and see me through the window...”

“Good news,” proudly stated Yannick. “You don’t have to be afraid anymore. The sheriff department advised me that they arrested the wild dogs that were trying to kill you! It’s over, Johnny, now you can live normally. Isn’t that a great Christmas gift?”

“Hum...” suggested Johnny who was still skeptical.

Yannick grab him by the arm and said:

“You don’t seem very pleased; why not?”

He then pulled his interlocutor into the living room. Once there, the sound coming out of the TV was so loud that it caused Johnny to ask:

“Why is the TV so loud? Are you becoming deaf, or what?”

He approached the TV to lower the sound when he heard:

“The premature death of Johnny Boy constitutes a real tragedy for the music world.”

“What is this?” he questioned just before looking toward one of the newspaper set on a table.

Noticing his name on a newspaper and on many others, he brought an article closer to his eyes and read: “Thousands of fans are rendering homage to Johnny Boy.” He was completely bewildered. He picked-up another article and read the title: “Farewell Johnny.” He then he stared at Yannick and asked:

“What is this all about? What does it all mean?”

“It means you are dead, young man! sarcastically answered Yannick. Dead and buried.”

“What?”

“What do you think?” continued Yannick while showing his biggest smile. “You were totally bankrupted. I had to find a way to earn you some money.”

“But?”

“And it worked, you know! Because of you, we made millions of dollars. You fans are buying your productions, your CDs and all your posters like crazy. They are paying through the nose for all these songs that were published after your death. I must admit that you did great work while you were locked in your music room. Ralph is proud of you and he did not lose any time before launching all your stuff on the market.”

Johnny scrutinized Yannick’s eyes, pondered for a moment and asked:

“Does that mean that my fans did not let me down? It means... they still love me?”

“Very much! It’s amazing how your death reformed their feelings about you!”

“Well, I’m stunned,” retorted Johnny while taking place in the closest armchair. “I can’t believe that Ralph Steinberg can be part of such a deceiving hoax. It’s not his style!”

“Ralph had no part in that plan,” rapidly said Yannick. As far as he’s concerned, you are dead and that applies to everyone else in the world. I’m the only one who knows the truth.”

Johnny covered his face with both hands before looking at the TV screen and watching other images showing his burial.

“You are in luck, little man. You are the only person that I know who has the opportunity to watch his own funeral. As you can see, you were given magnificent obsequies. The city even closed Los Angeles Street so people could watch the funeral parade.”

“I could swear that I’m the one in the casket,” noted Johnny. “It can’t possibly be me; so, who is it?”

“It’s your look alike. I’m told we all have one; this one is yours.”

“I’ll be damn...”

“This poor guy was bitten by a stonefish... isn’t that something? Just like your mother.”

“You killed him, didn’t you?”

“Absolutely”, admitted Yannick in a deep tone of voice. “ And I also killed your mother, John Richard and your press agent.”

“What?”

“It’s all over, Johnny Boy. I’m not playing anymore. I’m totally fed-up and today and it’s

your turn to die. But, since you are officially dead, no one will care.”

Immersed in fear Johnny began shaking and replied:

“You... you are going to kill me?”

“No, you will do it yourself, unless you lack the courage. You kill yourself or die in dishonor. You can’t hide forever, you know. Sooner or later, people, including Ralph Steinberg, will know that you are not really dead. They will realize what a fraudulent bastard you are.”

“Not if I tell them that you did it all.”

“Me...?” Yannick retorted by bursting out laughing. “My poor boy, in a few hours, I will be out of your life forever. It will be like if I never existed; and, it’s almost the case. Who else knows about me? Except for you, nobody does. People will think that I’m the result of your sick imagination.”

Now in a stage of extreme panic, Johnny rushed toward the closest phone.

“It won’t work,” warned Yannick. “You can always try, but I sliced all the telephone cables off.”

“But, may I know why you are doing this to me?” cried out Johnny. “What did I ever do to you?”

“You will die without knowing, little man. I would lose too much by telling you. But, remember this: in life, we harvest what we seeded.”

“But, I don’t understand what you are saying,” yelled Johnny. “Whatever I did to you, tell me. I’m sorry; at least, tell me what I can do to rectify whatever I did.”

“The only thing you can do to compensate the distress and suffering you caused me is to go to the shed and do what you must do. You have one minute to decide. If you don’t do as I ask, I am going to force you to swallow two sleeping drugs. It will give me a chance to get out of here before they find you.”

“You know what?” dared to say Johnny as he rushed toward the door with his dog in tail. “I’m going to take my chance!”

It amused Yannick to watch the other one open the door and rush down the balcony steps. As soon as he arrived on the ground, Johnny realized that he was face to face with Tommy. This last one adopted a look of amazement, took a few pictures and said:

“Johnny? You’re not dead? I knew it! I knew you had manufactured a wild set-up. Wait

until the world finds out. Oh... you're going to get it!"

A voice behind him added:

"If you need a witness, Mr. Journalist, I can help you. Like you, I just discovered the scam and..."

"Who are you?" asked Tommy.

"I'm here to have a look of the place. Someone told me it was for sale..."

"He's lying!" yelled Johnny. "He locked me up inside my studio while he was... organizing my death. He also..."

"What is he saying?" interrupted Yannick, showing much outrage. "Someone gave me the keys of the castle; I went in and there he was. He offered me ton of money not to tell on him. No way will I support such a crook!"

Johnny looked at Tommy and begged:

"I swear I'm telling the truth; you have to believe me."

"No way," meanly shouted Tommy. "I don't believe you; not at all. You were broke; weren't you? You were about to lose your nice castle and your career was in a slum. The more I think about it, the more I understand what you did and why you did it. But my friend, you got caught. Tonight, all your fans will know what you did. You will celebrate Christmas behind bars. You will be arrested for committing the largest scam in the history of men kind."

While saying these words, Tommy was taking many additional photos.

"People will finally know you for what you are!"

Not knowing what to do, Johnny looked at Yannick and begged him to say the truth. But the only answer he received was:

"It's the shed or total disgrace."

Johnny understood that he had no choice and ran toward the shed. Accompanied by his dog, he went in. A few seconds later, Yannick and Tommy heard the bang of a gunshot and the wild hollering of a dog. Johnny McLean, alias Johnny Boy, was no longer alive. The poor boy had taken his life with the gun that had conveniently been placed in the shed. To make sure that he was

dead and after paying attention in order to know if the neighbors had not been alerted, Tommy headed to the shed. None of the neighbors reacted. Of course, most of them were probably away for Christmas. Tommy inspected the shed, came back with a disgusted look on his face and said:

“You can go see if you want, Yannick, but it’s not a very pleasant scene. That dummy shot the bullet in his head. Well, it’s time for me to go.”

“Can you take care of the corpse?” asked Yannick.

“Of course, as soon as it gets darker, I will bury him in the shed. No one will ever know.”

“Well, anyway, I thank you for all your help,” said Yannick while shaking Tommy’s hand. “I hope you will enjoy your new found wealth and be happy!”

He was about to re-enter the house when he turned around and added:

“Since you are Johnny’s heir, the castle now belongs to you. I will leave the keys under the door mat before leaving.”

“Thank you,” replied Tommy. “You changed my life, you know. I will always be grateful.”

“It’s nothing at all, my young friend, nothing at all.”

“Oh, by the way, I have your package in the back of my pick-up truck. I’ll get it for you. It won’t take a minute.”

Once he had the package in hands, Yannick saluted Tommy for the last time and returned inside the castle. He looked at his watch and realized that he still had three hours to kill. His flight was scheduled to take off at the end of the afternoon, so, he had plenty of time to see what was inside the package. Captivated by all the photos contained inside of the box, he never noticed that Tommy was still standing in front of the door, as if he was waiting for someone or something. Inside the box, Yannick found a letter that had been written on a typewriter. He figured that it was written by his grandmother. A short sentence was set down on the small envelop and said: “To Yannick from grandma who loves.” In fact, it should have said: “To Yannick from grandma who loves you.” Yannick did not mind the error and that also applied to all the other errors inside the letter. He understood that the old lady was probably confused when she wrote these words; or maybe she never spent much time in school and her spelling was a mess. The letter was filled with spelling, grammatical or style mistake. Of course, Yannick never knew much about that woman. The letter was somewhat hard to read but after a few efforts, he was able to understand the essential part of the content. This one was so important, that he wished he had read it a while back.

At the portal of her death, grand ma Theresa wanted to free herself from a terrible secret, a secret that was so hard to carry. She had to reveal it before she left this world. She had written: “You must know.”

Yannick quickly perceived that she was referring to the period of time when he was living with her while his mother was doing all she could to give birth to a second child. As he already knew, the child in question was the product of artificial insemination. But, contrary to what he had been told, the child did not die at time of birth. Not only did he live, but he survived. At the time, Yannick's mother really wanted to keep the child. However, this poor little thing had entered the world prematurely after only thirty one weeks of gestation. The doctor never believed that the baby had any chance of prolong survival and if he did live, little were the chances that he would be normal. The doctor meant that the child would be physically feeble, fragile and probably mentally retarded. Nevertheless, the kid won his first battle. After one month of incubation, his organs developed normally. Well, almost normally. It became evident that his survival was assured, but his mental capacities were limited. There was no doubt that the child was mentally retarded. If the youngster's natural mother could accept the complication, the father, on the other hand, had a different opinion. He figured that the child would be too feeble to work in the mine and that he would become the 'half-witted boy' of the town. What a dishonor it would be! That's why he decided they could not keep him. He had to be entrusted to people who would be able to care for him. The mother fought back as much as she could, but her husband maintained his decision. The child was secretly baptized at the church where Yannick had been baptized. To be sure that the poor kid would be as far away as possible, the father insisted to place him in an orphanage established outside the country. Their doctor, who was originally from the United States, recommended a distinguished orphanage established in San Diego, California. According to the good doctor, this children's residence was better than most in the country. Then, Yannick's mother and her husband left home for a short while and travelled to California. Because the mother mastered the English language quite well, she was able to convince the director of the orphanage that she was a prostitute without any legal paper and that she was unable to take care of the baby. Fascinated by the beautiful eyes of the little boy, Manouska Tarah took him in her care. He was called Johnny McLean. Manouska chose the name McLean for the reason that it was the name of her favorite singer. After this terrible day and enslaved to what they had done, Yannick's mother was never the same person.

The letter continued and there was a picture of the baby attached to it:

"You now know you have a brother. You are not alone. Find him if you can. He has nice blue eyes like you. I pray you have good relation with him."

After reading it, Yannick was shattered. How could the world be so cruel? He kept looking at the infant's picture and realized that Johnny had effectively his mother's beautiful blue eyes. The same remarkable eyes Yannick had. At the back of the picture, there was a note, probably written by Manou.

"Johnny McLean: one month and five days. Date of birth: March second 1982. Arrived at the orphanage on April the seventh, 1982."

Yannick was perspiring like never before. Cold sweat was rolling down on both sides of his face. He found and grabbed two documents confirming his grandmother's statements: Johnny's birth certificate and the card establishing his date of entry at the orphanage. He could read on both documents that Johnny was the son of Jeannine Simard and Ken McLean, he figured out that his

father was so ashamed of his second son that he refused to let him use his family name. But if he had kept the child, he would have found out that this one was not mentally ill; on the contrary, he was an authentic prodigy.

Yannick stood up and walked around the vast living room like a lion in a cage. How could he possibly judge his father when he, Yannick Simard, had just assassinated his own brother? He always wanted a brother. He had always said that if he had had a brother, he would have protected him and would have given him the best of all lives. He had conveyed these words, he had taken an oath to God and now, he was the executor of his own brother. What kind of a man could commit such abominable action? A monster, that's what he was; only a monster could have done what he did. Only a filthy monster could have ruined his brother's life. While he was talking to himself, he remembered one of Tommy's questions:

"If you had a brother and if he died because of you, what would you do?"

And the answer had been:

"If I had a brother and if he died because of me, I would take a gun and shoot my brain off. I would not want to live anymore, no way..."

"Daddy..."

"What?" said Yannick as he turned around.

His youngest daughter was standing behind him. When he saw her, he began crying like a child.

"Jade? Are you alone, where is Helene? Where is your mother?"

"They are taking care of Johnny. They are waiting for you; just like I am. Your deed is done, my sweet Daddy. It's time for you to join us. We are waiting for you..."

"Tell the others that I will be there soon, my darling. Your Daddy still has a few things to do. I will be with you very shortly."

And his little daughter slowly faded away.

He was delighted. Tears of joy were appearing in his eyes. He grabbed a pencil and a sheet of paper, took place at the table and began writing a long letter. Once done, he read it a few times and placed it in an envelope. His task completed and not knowing that he was being observed, he used the back door to head to the shed where Johnny was. The first thing he noticed was the dog Charlie, resting next to his master's body, waiting for him to wake-up. Johnny's corpse was resting under a wide cloth. Good thing, Tommy thought of covering the horrible scene.

“Poor Tommy,” whispered Yannick, “when he comes back in here, he will not find only one cadaver, but two.”

He took a deep breath, reached for the weapon that was on the floor and took place next to his brother while Charlie looked at him in horror.

“Wait for me girls, he said, and you too Johnny, I’m coming...”

Without wasting any time, he shot himself in the head. A few seconds later, Tommy entered the room to view what had happened. Ralph Steinberg was right behind him.

“You can get up, my little friend. It’s all over,” nervously said Tommy to Johnny.

But Johnny did not react.

“No, God no!” yelled Tommy. It’s not possible! The last time I saw him he was alive; I swear!”

“Shit,” cursed Ralph. “Don’t tell me he was hit by the bullet that was shot...”

Then, they both heard Johnny’s trembling voice saying:

“I’m not dead... I was just scared to death!”

The little man was effectively shaking from head to toes. Tommy helped him stand-up while Ralph looked at the letter that Yannick had left on the small table.

“It’s over, Johnny. Do you understand? repeated Tommy while removing from Johnny head the exploded mask that had been made at Johnny’s resemblance and exclusively for this incident.

“Sure???” questioned Johnny while removing dust from his clothing. “This is disgusting. There’s blood all over me.”

“Don’t worry too much about that,” replied Tommy with a big smile. “It’s only fake blood.”

“Only maybe,” grumbled Johnny while staring at Yannick disdainfully. “How can you be sure that I don’t have some of this bastard’s blood on me? Did you hear him? Before dying, this old pig thought that his family and I were waiting for him in paradise.”

“Don’t talk about him that way!” corrected Ralph. “Of course, you can despise him, but in reality, he was a sad fellow who became insane after his loss. He became seriously insane...”

“But still?” objected Johnny, while holding his trembling dog in his arms. “Are you aware

of all the problems this guy caused me?”

“But, you are still alive, aren’t you?” asked Tommy. “We beat him at his own game and that’s the only important thing.”

“What is also of prime importance is that this man wrote a letter, announced Ralph. He admitted all his crimes with all noteworthy details. That will surely help the Sheriff complete his investigations.”

This statement scared Tommy, of course, because during that whole adventure, he had been Yannick’s main accomplice. Ralph quickly understood the journalist’s concerns and immediately reassured him by saying:

“He admitted all his crime but never mentioned your participation. I guess this guy liked you after all. In his letter, he never talked about you. Your name was never cited...”

“Well, at least he had some kindness,” said Tommy who was now feeling better.

“And, that’s not all!” added Ralph. “In his letter, he leaves his fortune to his closest heir... that means you, Johnny.”

After this statement, he took hold of his cell phone to call the police. He had not yet dialed when the three men heard the sirens; and the noise was quickly approaching.

“I’ll be damn!” panicked Johnny. “Who the hell called them? I don’t know what I will tell to these guys. How can I explain that I’m still alive?”

“Don’t worry so much, Johnny,” kindly answered Ralph. “All you have to do is tell the truth. This man kidnapped you in your own home and made believe that you were dead. It’s all explained in the letter that he wrote before killing himself.”

“It’s easy to say, but how will I explain all that blood on me?”

“Well, you could always say that in your music room, where Yannick kept you locked-up, you had some fake blood and a mask, made especially for you. That equipment was supposed to be used in a video clip. However, the producers decided the scene was too violent and should not be produced. You can add that while Yannick was not paying attention, you ran out of the house and...”

“OK!” agreed Johnny. “I know the rest. I can say that I went to hide in the shed, I simulated my own death and hope the plan would work.”

“And what else?” asked Tommy.

“Oh yes! I’ll say that I called you to explain that I was not really dead and that I needed for you guys to come here right away because I was really scared.”

“That’s it!” approved Ralph. As far as we are concerned, we thought it was a disgusting joke. So, before calling the police, we came here and discovered the truth.”

As they were trying to figure out who had called the police, they rapidly got the answer when Mrs. Gilbert approached the shed. She seemed totally out of breath and moved toward them with quick little steps. As soon as she came near the small building she said:

“Oh my god! Am ‘I seeing right? Is this Mr. Johnny? Aren’t you supposed to be dead? I was not sure; I saw a little blond person coming out of your house, but I couldn’t see very well; the grass is so neglected and tall in front of your property. Now, I have no doubt! It’s really you. A few minutes later, I heard a sharp noise. I was not sure what it was but later, I heard that same noise again and I realized that it was a gun shot. As I ran to my living room window, I saw you again with my binoculars. You were getting out of the shed with these two guys. Oh my God! All that blood on you! Anyway, I called the police. Did I do the right thing?”

“Of course you did, my dear lady,” replied Ralph while holding Johnny next to him. “This poor little fellow just lived some terrible moments. Did you have any ideas of what was going on in his house?”

“Well no,” defensively said the old lady. “I’m not always in front on my window, you know? I have other things to do. However, I occasionally did notice a man. He would open the door to pick-up the newspaper or the mail. He never came out, you see? He was a real hermit, that man. I figured he was the new owner of the house.”

Ralph was about to reveal the facts to the old lady when the police arrived. She had to hear the story at the same time the cops did. The agent in charge of taking the statements could not believe the story he heard.

“This is ridiculous!” he exclaimed after reading Yannick’s letter. “This man committed all these crimes because his DEAD wife and his two DEAD daughters believed that Johnny McLean was responsible for their death? He imagined his plans and assassinated all these people because his three darlings ordered him to do so? Damn! This guy was totally out of it. I never heard of such weird stories, never!”

He remained silent for a short moment before asking Johnny:

“In his letter, he claimed he was your brother and that as soon as he became aware of the fact, he took his own life. Was he really your brother?”

“Well... I don’t know. I heard the story the same way you did. I was just told, but it’s possible. If his head was not so disfigured, and if you could see his eyes, you could see that they look exactly like mine. How did he find out? I truly don’t know.”

They soon had the answer. One of the officer charged with investigating the inside of the house found a letter and a picture of a baby. On the back of the photo, the name Johnny McLane could be read. The letter was written in French, so, the police would have to find a translator to be able to read it. Nevertheless, it seemed evident that the content of the letter established how Yannick Simard was made aware that he was Johnny's brother.

The Sheriff faced Johnny and asked:

"Did you know that in this letter, the dead man named you his only heir? I don't know if he was wealthy or not, but it is written that he leaves the totality of what he owned to his legal heir. Of course, it's somewhat confusing because he assumed you were dead when he wrote this letter, but since you are still alive, I imagine that you are the legal heir. He requested that your agent maintains all the possessions that establish your presence on earth. That includes the castle and... your dog."

"Did you hear that, Charlie? exclaimed Johnny. You are now a wealthy dog. You're not as rich as I am, but almost."

Yannick's corps was taking to the morgue and a request was addressed to the procurer to exhume Kevin Lebon's body. According to the Sheriff, the investigation would be completed when the letter that Yannick had received from his grandmother would be translated to English and when it would become certain that Kevin Lebon's body was not Johnny's body. Once the legal inspectors left the castle, Johnny finally had a chance to rest and heal his emotions.

"To know that you are still alive," said the Sheriff before boarding his car, "will be the best Christmas gift your fans could possibly expect, definitely the best gift!"

"First of all, it is my gift," resolutely said Johnny. "My gift and Charlie's gift."

As soon as only Johnny, Ralph, Tommy and Mrs. Gilbert were the only persons left in the castle, Mrs. Gilbert said:

"The grass around this house is so tall! It really looks neglected and spoils the appearance of the neighborhood. Something must be done. Now that you are still alive, Johnny, it would be a good thing if you could take care of the problem. It would give the castle a new birth. It's really neglected around here since Mrs. Manou's departure. Do you know what I mean?"

"Don't worry about that anymore," interrupted Tommy. We will take care of it. "What Johnny just lived through was horrible, but there is a positive side to this story. He is now richer than ever. We will be able to get the servants and employees back."

"That's very good news!" expressed Mrs. Gilbert. "I could help, you know?"

"Help in what way?" questioned Tommy.

"I can contact all the employees. It so happens that I'm still in touch with all these people. None of them had time to find a new job. They would probably be happy to come back; except for the gardener...."

"Well, Mrs. Gilbert," replied Johnny, "I didn't know that you were familiar with my employees?"

"Of course! I had a relationship with them, practically bragged Mrs. Gilbert. Many of your employees had tea with me after their working hours. It's important to be friendly with the neighbors."

"Of course it is," agreed Tommy while smiling at the old lady. "Don't you think she should invite them back Johnny?"

"Well... sure..." answered Johnny. "That should keep you occupied, Mrs. Gilbert."

"Oh! exclaimed the neighbor. I want you to know that I'm always busy. I'm only offering my help because I'm happy that you are still alive. It's a gift that I'm offering you!"

After a short silence and when she noticed Johnny was not saying anything, she wisely submitted:

"You may not have paid attention when I mentioned that the gardener was no longer available. But it's important for you to know that your garden really needs some love and care. Tell me, did you look at your flowers lately? As far as your trees are concerned, I better not make any comments."

She took a few rapid breaths and continued:

"Did I ever tell you that I love taking care of flowers?"

"If I understand well, said Johnny, you would like to take care of my garden?"

"Well... yes... If it can help you..."

"Very well then, Mrs. Gilbert, you are now in charge of my garden."

But the neighbor was not quite done with her suggestions.

"If you allow me, I'd like to say that you will also need someone to keep an eye on everything... like Manou used to do."

At this point, Johnny was flabbergasted. Mrs. Gilbert also had a beautiful house. Why would she want to offer her services to the owner of the house across the street? He thought for a moment and said:

“To take care of my house would occupy much of your time, you know... you would have to spend more time in my place than in yours.”

“That is not a problem at all, my dear friend,” relevantly retorted Mrs. Gilbert. “Your house is right in front of mine.”

“That’s the thing, my dear lady,” continued Johnny. “If you take this responsibility, you will no longer be able to sit at your window and keep an eye on my house. Then, you will have to watch what is happening at your place from my front window. I don’t want to disappoint you, but if you are here looking at your house, you won’t see much activity.”

“Oh, young man!” protested Mrs. Gilbert. “How many times must I tell you that I don’t have the time to sit at my window and spy on my neighbors!”

“Don’t get upset, Mrs. Gilbert, I’m just teasing you.”

The old lady ignored this last remark and looked at her watch. She quickly realized that it was getting late and that she had to return home. Otherwise, her honey-ham would melt in the oven. She looked alternatively at each of the man and said:

“You know what? Based on the circumstances, I assume that you are all free for tonight’s Christmas meal, aren’t you?”

“That’s very sweet of you, my dear lady, answered Ralph, but my wife has already prepared some festivities at home. I will bring the boys with me.”

Seeming saddened, Mrs. Gilbert turned around and waved her hand to say good night.

“Hold on a moment!” said Tommy. “Isn’t your son celebrating Christmas with you?”

“Hum... no,” answered Mrs. Gilbert. “He was supposed to but he declined my invitation at the last minute. He said he had some business to attend to.”

“You know what?” announced Tommy while discretely touching Johnny’s back. “We really like honey ham. Isn’t that right, Johnny?”

“Oh yes!” confirmed Johnny, and so does Charlie!”

Not sure that she understood the young men’s intention, Mrs. Gilbert looked at them with questioning eyes.

“You are now part of the “Johnny Boy’s clan”, let her know Tommy. As such, we cannot let you spend Christmas Eve alone. Tonight, Johnny and I will go to your place.”

“That is assuming that you guys give me the time to clean-up, said Johnny. “Look at me...

I'm all covered with blood!"

Now happy, Mrs. Gilbert told Johnny to take all the time he needed and added:

"Meanwhile, I will prepare the mash potatoes and... Oh yes, the salad. Oh God! I also have to cook a pie. I must set it in the oven right away! I have to go right now. As you can see, I have a lot to do."

As soon as she was gone, Ralph stared at the two young men as if they were sacrificed lambs. The party at his home would surely be more interesting and amusing than Mrs. Gilbert's honey ham and mash potatoes. Normally, people did all they could to be invited to one of Ralph's receptions.

"So, you are not coming with me? Are you sure?"

"We are better not," softly answered Tommy. "We can't leave her alone. As I said before, she is now a member of the clan. The new clan, that is."

"You already started?" asked Raph with a stern smile. "You are already rebuilding the clan?"

"I have to," replied Tommy while slowly lifting his shoulders. "As Johnny's new agent, I want him to be well surrounded and as fast as possible."

"I was right to trust you, Tommy, said Ralph. I believe you will execute your new role and functions with excellence."

"One thing for sure," added Johnny, "we will like you much better in your new role. Better than we did when you were a damn paparazzi and a deceptive journalist."

Tommy replied by gently pushing Johnny's head.

"Tommy, continued Ralph, from the bottom of my heart, I want to thank you for what you have done. This whole story was very costly, but if you had not called me to inform me on this man's intentions, our loss would have been much more severe."

He then walked closer to Johnny and gave him a big brotherly hug.

"We would have lost this golden star of the music world. It would have been a horrible waste."

"It's true!" approved Johnny. "Without you, Tommy, I would be dead, my friend. Leading him to believe I was his brother was a very creative scheme. This Yannick Simard really believed

I was his sibling.”

“The idea you gave me to make him talk in his sleep was also brilliant,” replied Tommy. “As far as you are concerned, Ralph, to thing about the mask was really outstanding.”

“I hope so,” exclaimed Ralph, this damn mask cost me a fortune!”

Changing the subject, Johnny turned toward Tommy and invited him to live with him in the castle.

“I don’t know,” reluctantly answered Tommy. “I have to think about this. To choose between living here, or living in my fabulous mansion in the heart of Los Angeles’ slum district? Hum... it’s not easy to make up my mind.”

“You can have the room of your choice,” rapidly offered Johnny. “Well, almost... you can’t have the Peter Pan room, of course.”

This being said, Ralph told to his friends he had to go. He wished them a merry Christmas and invited them to a brunch at his place on Christmas day.

“Can we bring Mrs. Gilbert with us?” asked Johnny.

“Absolutely and you can also bring Charlie.”

The producer took place behind the wheel of his car and before starting the engine, he informed Johnny and Tommy that they still had one month before the end of their vacation and going back to work.

“So, then we can go back on tour?” happily asked Johnny. “No more sabbatical year?”

“A sabbatical year... are you crazy, young man? We have to mold the steel while it’s red hot! I’m sure that “Resurrection Tour” will be steaming! As soon as people will hear about your resurrection, it will be a new WOW in the musical world.”

“Resurrection Tour,” repeated Tommy with excitement. “It’s brilliant, what a heading!”

“You think?” proudly retorted Ralph. “It’s one of my ideas. It came to me a few minutes ago when Johnny removed the mask. Ok guys, I must go! By the way, now that you two have found peace, I hope that in the future you will be kind toward each other.”

“We will be like brothers!” promised Johnny and Tommy in perfect unison.”

CONCLUSION

On his way home, Ralph Steinberg had reasons to be proud. Once more, victory was his. Whichever way he looked at it, the results of the last few days made him the winner. It was evident that he had taken a major risk in playing Yannick Simard's game. It was his theory that any person who never take a risk, never wins anything. He remembered when Tommy called him to let him know that a mad man was planning to hurt Johnny. He used all possible arguments to convince the paparazzi to join forces with the aggressor. That way, they would be able to defeat the man at his own game, even if choosing that option jeopardized Johnny's life. It may have been safer to involve the police.

"You'll see, it will be worth it, my friend," had explained Ralph to Tommy. "It will be advantageous for you as much as for me. If you keep this story under cover and if you work with me, not only will you become a member of Johnny's clan, but you may become the leader of it."

"But I have to warn you," insisted Tommy, "this man plans to kill Johnny. He's not just anyone, you know. After the car accident, I looked into his life. This fellow is important. He is a financial tycoon and he is extremely rich. He knows what he's talking about. I think it would be safer to get the cops on our side."

"I'm aware of who this guy is", answered Ralph. "His reputation is well known. However, I'm not a bull shitter either and if I say that we can beat him at his own game, it's because we can. We will let him do whatever he wants to do, but we will control the game from under the table."

"But..."

"Believe me, Tommy MacMillan. We have a lot to win here and I mean a lot!"

"What do you mean?"

"It will be fantastic publicity for Johnny," explained Ralph. "Based on what you said, Yannick assured you that you would inherit Johnny's fortune, did he not?"

"Yes..."

"And, he did say that by the time he will be done with him, Johnny would be extremely rich; isn't that so?"

"Yes..."

"Well, since Yannick Simard is a financial genius, it would be wise to let him do whatever he wants to do. We will let him play his game and we will keep a close eye on him. We will only intervene when Johnny will be in real danger. As far as you are concerned, all you have to do is being a good double agent. I'll take care of the rest. Is that acceptable to you?"

Tommy finally accepted.

The problem was that the arguments Ralph offered to Tommy were not reflecting the whole truth. It was obvious that all the publicity that would come out of this story would help Johnny. Especially that this last one's popularity was on the way down. Nothing too dramatic, but it was noticeable that the highest point of Johnny's career was now behind him. Since he had administered many careers, Ralph knew by experience that when an artist's success was plunging down, something had to be done. To re-orient a career or to temporarily remove the artist from the scene could be fruitful, but a big publicity stunt was always the best. At the present time, the arrival of a Yannick Simard in Johnny's life may be a winning card. The rock star would become the victim of an unbelievable drama. That would stimulate the interest of his fans and would bring him back on top.

However, the real reason that had motivated Ralph was quite different. Before Tommy's call, he was living some difficult hours. His faultless reputation was under attack. A few days ago, John Richard discovered that Johnny was victim of a large scam and the person responsible for this major swindle was Ralph Steinberg himself. The attorney had irrefutable evidences that for the last few years, Ralph was short-changing Johnny and not paying all the royalties who was due. After a study of Ralph's bookkeeping, John discovered that the amount of money received by the producer and the amount paid to Johnny was nothing less than fraudulent. A sum of about eighty million dollars had never been remitted to the singer. With damage and interest, Ralph actually owed Johnny over one hundred million dollars. He had explained to the lawyer that he needed time to pay that debt and John gave him one month. But he warned him that if after one month he had not made payment, the scam would be revealed to Johnny and Manou and legal actions would be taken. At the time of Ralph's conversation with Tommy, the delay to pay the large amount of money was coming to an end. Ralph only had half of the money necessary to satisfy the lawyer. Before getting in trouble with the law and ending in jail, he had to find a way out. And the solution was delivered to him on a silver plate by Tommy. After receiving all the information concerning Yannick Simard's intention to hurt Johnny, he believed that he may have found an answer to his problem. Tommy had told him that he had asked Yannick:

"Do you think you can take on Johnny and his clan?"

And the Canadian had answered:

"Absolutely!"

"They are quite powerful, you know?"

"Not more than I am."

This phrase, expressed with an unbelievable determination, incited Ralph to dive into the adventure. He knew by reputation the man who had thrown the challenge and he was certain that Yannick Simard was not bragging. From this point on, Ralph tried to predict the future. To get

Johnny, Yannick would have to eliminate the people surrounding him and that should include the lawyer, John Richard, who would surely stand in his way.

That's what motivated Ralph's choice. The reason that made him do what he did was known by no one and most of all not by Johnny. In fact, the rock star had only received basic information concerning Yannick's intentions. It was relatively easy to convince him to play the game. All he needed to know is that after the big drama; his fans would love him again and that the worse paparazzi in town would leave him alone. In fact, he was informed that Tommy MacMillan was ready to bury the hatchet and become his friend. Knowing that Ralph would personally assure his protection, he had no reason to worry.

Based on the particulars received from Tommy, the game began and Ralph was in control. Yannick was led to believe that his merciless plan was developing in accordance with the schedule, but in fact, Ralph was the person in charge and kept the French Canadian under supervision. Without his producer's intervention, Johnny would surely not have given his trust to the man he met for the first time at the casino. He surely would not have named, Yannick, his guardian angel and would not have called him so many times. And of course, Ralph would never have made and signed the unreasonable contract that tied Johnny to Tom MacMillan.

Except the fact that, Johnny, without really knowing why, had really invested all his money on 'Project Beatrice', the first part of the game rather took place well. From that point on, since Yannick was not sharing all the informations with Tommy, it became difficult to maintain perfect control. That is how the murder of the press agent, Julia became inevitable. Manou's death could have been averted but however, Ralph had no intention to intervene. The death of the fat woman, as he called her behind her back, was favorable to him. After her fatality, he convinced Johnny and Tommy that the tragedy could not have been perceived before it happened and that nothing could have been done to prevent it. Ralph had no serious grief against Johnny's mother, but her alcoholism was a source of problem, specially during the society parties in which Johnny took part. Most of the time, she was a real shame. So for Ralph, Manouschka Tarah's death was a blessing.

The execution of John Richard was a great advantage and brought on the elimination of the last member of Johnny's clan. To provoke the lawyer's death, Ralph had convinced Johnny to say that after the trial, John would become his manager. Of course, that did not favor Yannick's project, who really well planned mass execution of John Richard and his whole team. But this massacre had never been in Ralph's strategy. At this point, it was too much for him. That very same night, he really experienced deep fear. If he had been able to, he would have interrupted the game, but it was too late. He was too deeply involved. How could he possibly denounce Yannick to the police while he, himself, had been implicated from the start? He had to find a solution to remain in control without putting his own life in danger. In fact, Johnny's clan was not totally eliminated. There was someone left. That someone was not just anybody; it was him, Ralph Steinberg. At this point of the game, with the exception of his appearance in court, he had only operated in the shadow. But there was a major problem: Yannick had read the biography that Tommy had written about Johnny and in that document, Ralph was mentioned quite a few times. So for him, the problem was: how could he give Yannick the impression that he was not a threat to him? After thinking and analyzing the situation for hours, he finally found a solution.

The idea was to surprisingly and publicly announced the interruption of Johnny's career. This proclamation, as well as the ridiculous contract, should convince Yannick that he had no further interest in Johnny Boy's career.

From this point on, the story became somewhat exiting for him. All he had to do was to wait and see. Since Tommy had used Manou's exceptional method to make people talk during their sleep, he was aware of most of Yannick's plans concerning Johnny's death. Then, he didn't have to worry about the outcome. Of course, he had to find out when the so called suicide would take place, since Yannick had never given that information to Tommy. Nevertheless, after giving two sleeping pills to the criminal, Tommy had been able to suggest to him that the suicide should happen in the shed at the back of the house. Aware of that likelihood, it became logical and simple for Ralph to tell Tommy to place the bleeding mask under the table, next to the weapon placed by Yannick. The mask was set in place as soon as Tommy figured out that Ralph's strategy was under control, what means the day he pretexted having a flat tire. That was the reason why he remained parked in front of the castle for ten additional minutes.

When Ralph was informed by Tommy that Yannick wanted to meet with Kevin, he understood man's scheme. To that point, he was wondering how Yannick would proceed to bring back Johnny's fame after having destroyed his career. But even before Yannick met Kevin, he had figured out the plan. What a genial idea. He could only applaud the killer. Simulate the death of the artist and incite him to develop new creations the fans would buy at any cost... was really brilliant. It took only few days to amass a real fortune. The reputation of this financial tycoon was definitively not exaggerated. It was almost sad that his days on earth were already counted. The man did not know, but as he was planning Johnny's death, he was planning his own annihilation. Ralph's team was only waiting for the enemy to order Johnny's suicide before proceeding forward.

The next phase was set in execution the day Johnny shot a bullet into the air to make believe he had shot himself. Concerning Charlie's scream, it was a little trick that his master had taught him while playing in the music room. So, when Johnny said 'woof' the dog understood that he had to holler. The idea was to give a more realistic aspect to the scene.

This part of the plan being completed, Tommy had to assure the next step by handing to Yannick the important package. It wasn't true that he left the package behind the previous day. In fact, he was waiting for the right moment to give it to Yannick. Considering its contents, it was essential that Yannick did not see it before Johnny's simulated death. The photographs inside the package were truly sent by Grandma Theresa, but the bogus letter had been forged by Tommy MacMillan. Same applied to the legal documents relating to Johnny. The birth certificate had been fabricated based on Yannick's document that the old lady had placed into the package. The document authenticating Johnny's admission to the orphanage was real and was taken by Tommy directly out of the orphanage. Only the name of the mother had been changed.

How did Tommy receive the package from the grandmother? He simply went to visit her. He had previously received the address from Yannick's brother in law, so to find the old lady had been quite easy. At that point, all he needed was a pretext to go to Montreal. Then, Ralph came up with the solution. Ten large stadiums had accepted to present a show in Johnny's memories. These concerts, presenting a host of musical stars, were to be held in different cities around the world and of course, Ralph had the idea to sent the journalist to Montreal. Once in the province

of Quebec, Tommy did not spend time in Montreal. He visited the hospital in the city of Amos where the lady was slowly fading away. He introduced himself as the envoy of her grandson and had no problem receiving the important bits and pieces she wanted Yannick to have. The family memories combined with the information received about the Simard family and also, about the child that died at birth were enough to enable Tommy to prepare his counterfeits. Once the documents had been falsified, all he had to do was to write the letter. But at this point, he had a serious problem. Even if grandma could properly express herself in the language of Shakespeare, her first language was French. So, the letter had to be written in this language that Tommy didn't know at all. To organize what needed to be said, he first wrote the letter in English. As he was limited with time, he did not use the services of a competent translator and was obliged to use the translation software that he had inserted in his computer and favored the copy-paste technique, not without deeply hoping his text would be comprehensible. Only Yannick would be able to judge the quality of the translation. All documents prepared, Tommy returned to Montreal and delivered the package to the receptionist of 'Desnoyers-Simard'. He assumed that Jimmy would send the package to Yannick and that Yannick would not give his brother in law the address of the castle. He also assumed that Yannick, who refused to leave Johnny, would send him to retrieve the package.

The letter must have been comprehensible, because Yannick did exactly what he said he would do if he was ever the cause of his brother unhappiness or death. If his reaction to the letter and his suicide were predictable, the confession he wrote before killing himself was totally unexpected. It was a blessed contribution that would make it easier to deal with the police.

The unquestionable winner of that mad rivalry was, without a doubt, Ralph Steinberg. The second winner was Tommy, even if the death of his friend Kevin was a sad cloud floating over his head. That tragedy should not have been. The day it happened, Tommy threatened to give up and confess the whole thing to the police and Ralph had to dissuade him.

"Even if you drop out of the game," explained the producer. "It won't change anything. Your friend will still be dead. There is nothing you can do to bring him back. Think of avenging your friend's death. Look ahead... you will have a beautiful life. All that you ever wanted will be yours. Please, sit down and do not shatter our program."

Ralph was right. Tommy's biggest dreams and desires would soon be a reality. He was aiming for wealth and also wanted a good relation with Johnny. He was always fascinated by the singer's looks, his fragility as well as his Peter Pan syndrome. He had always been intrigued by his talent and had always loved him like a brother. Nevertheless, he could never show or express his feelings. Even when they were living in the orphanage, he was dreaming to become Johnny's brother. However, he had been afraid to show his true feeling to the other boys who liked to ridicule Johnny. So, he figured it was safer for him to imitate them, realizing that whoever caused the most problems to Johnny became more popular with the group.

"Who cares," he used to say to himself. "When we get out of here, Johnny and I will be friends."

The day that Johnny reached eighteen years old, he and Manou left the orphanage forever without saying goodbye to anyone. On that day, Tommy realized that because of all the pain he had caused him, Johnny would eternally hate him. Later in time, when Tommy observed Johnny's glory and knowing he could never do anything to gain his friendship he became vengeful and worked at destroying the singer's life. As he had a given talent for artistic literature, he managed to become a press reporter. The articles and the allegations he wrote against Johnny attracted the public's attention and he rapidly became the person in the know, when someone wanted to attack Johnny's reputation. Most people believed that Tommy was envious of the big star, but in fact, he was only trying to convince this last one that he hated him as much as the rock star hated him.

The day Yannick Simard gave him the occasion to improve the situation, he made sure not to miss that chance. More than making him rich, the occasion would give him the opportunity to make peace with Johnny; to make peace and also, to become his agent.

On his side, Johnny was the big loser of this story. Of course that venture made him richer and more popular than ever. But, was it really worth the loss of Manou, John and Julia? It is easy to replace money, but impossible to bring back the ones we love or care for. If Johnny had known the price for his new found popularity and if he had known ahead of time, would he have consented to play the game? But, the dice had been thrown and instead of ruminating over the past, he decided to face the future. He still had his favorite friend, Charlie, and he had discovered that Tommy was really a good guy who deserved his trust. Occasionally, he doubted Tommy's sincerity. He feared a mean blow from the journalist, mostly around the end of the colossal melodrama. While he was confined in the music room, he feared that Tommy would willingly leave the mask out of the shed or that he would not arrive at the castle in time to witness the fake suicide. Outside the doubts that he had about Tommy's behaviors, the times he spent with Yannick were the most terrifying moments of his life. Each time the old maniac entered the music room, the poor Johnny became nervous and believed that his life was now ended.

"I beg of you, Mister Universe," he was often praying within himself. "Please, make sure I won't be murdered and if this mad man wants to kill me; make sure that Tommy will be on time and that he will do what he's supposed to do."

But, to his greatest satisfaction, Tommy did not deceive him. He would now pursue his future in the company of this old rival, with Mrs. Gilbert and all the good people Mr. Universe would send on his way.

"Are you ready?" he heard. "Mrs. Gilbert is waiting for us... you remember?"

"Yes, yes," he answered. "Let me put on my pants on and I will be down."

A few minutes later, he came down the stairs and caught up with his new roommate.

"You know what?" asked Tommy. "I think that Mrs. Gilbert may be a little old to manage the castle. She will probably need some help."

“You think?” replied Johnny. “And who do you have in mind?”

“Well... what about Shrek?”

“Shrek?”

“Yes, she is young, she his strong and...

“She is mostly strong.”

“She is also very amusing. Not only would she be perfect, but she would bring life back in this castle. She would be great to have around Christmas time. Do you remember what she said about the holydays in her family?”

“I remember... with children and a lot of people in the house; it would be a great Christmas gift. Better than the one we will have tonight.”

“Should I call her?”

“You know her phone number?”

“Yes, she gave it to me.”

“Hum... that gives me an idea!” said Johnny. “I will rename the ‘Lion King’ room in order to get rid of the bad memories Yannick left in there. Do you think she would mind if we call the room Shrek?”

“I think she would love it; she would surely find the idea amusing. However, you would have to inscribe ‘THE SHREK’ on the door.”

“Why?”

“Because, well... I would share the room with her.”

“What?” ask Johnny with disdain.” You mean... you... with her?”

“Yes!”

“Disgusting... I didn’t know you did that kind of things!”

“Sorry to disillusion you, but everyone is not as PURE as you.”

They both slowly left the castle and headed toward Mrs. Gilbert house. Just before crossing the street, Johnny asked:

“So, you and I, we are now friends? Aren’t we?”

“Friends?” retorted Tommy seemingly insulted. “No, I don’t think so.”

“But...”

“Well, friends, if you insist but... I would prefer to be your brother.”

“My brother? Wow! And you mean... forever?”

“Forever.”

“You’re not joking?”

“No, I’m not joking.”

“Wooden cross, iron cross and if you mislead me you end up in hell?”

“Wooden cross, iron cross and if I mislead you I end up in hell.”