

Wrong Number

by Alexander Jablovkov

Regarding this story, Mr. Jablovkov says: Once, in an impoverished period, I owned a Subaru GLF that I had bought from a nonimpoverished friend who had abandoned it behind his house after it stopped working. It was an earnest car, a hard-working car, but its upbringing had resulted in many bad habits, among which was a need to visit the local repair shop every couple of months. Bob, of Uncle Russ's, had one piece of advice, which he gave me whenever I brought the car in: "Sell the car." Eventually I did, and then missed my visits. Uncle Russ's is gone, replaced with a crisply efficient Valvoline, and so "Wrong Number" will have to stand as a belated Valentine to that vanished crew.

* * * *

Stephanie found herself wide awake at 2:13 a.m., remembering a phone number. Hers, but with one digit wrong.

She could *see* the thing, rounded numbers on a cocktail napkin with a blue ship's wheel on it, her handwriting. The digit was wrong on purpose.

She hadn't thought of that night since ... well, probably since it happened. She'd been working on the campaign of a state rep, and had started talking with some guy vaguely associated with the rep's auto leasing business at the low-key victory party. Decent-looking guy, nice jacket, with, as she remembered, an interest in collecting antique cars. Everyone was in a great mood.

Then he began to seem creepy. Maybe it was the excessive emphasis on the size of the garage he kept his car collection in, or the way he made sure that she could see that the buttons on his jacket sleeve really buttoned, or the fact that along with the sleeve she also observed that he neither trimmed or cleaned his fingernails regularly. Whatever, she lost interest and decided to go home.

Despite her watch checking and "now, where's my coat?" scan of the rack by the entrance, he didn't catch on, and asked for her phone number. She didn't want to give it to him. He became insistent, in an oddly compelling way. She was there alone, and, at that moment, felt weak. After a moment's hesitation, she wrote down a fake number, changing the fifth digit of the actual number. She'd heard of obsessives working their way through all ten variants of a wrong last digit, but the fifth seemed safe.

And it worked. The feared call never came, and she forgot about the incident.

Until now. But it was more than a memory now, it was a compulsion. She could not stop thinking about it.

Around four, she gave up on trying to get back to sleep, and watched a couple of old episodes of *Law & Order*.

It was like something on a camera lens, showing up in every picture. That number. That wrong number. It seemed like the worst thing she had ever done. Worse than the time she had called her seventh-grade friend Fran, who had a limp, “gimpy,” in a failed attempt to get the class queen bee, Mandy Beekman, to like her. Worse, even, than not calling her grandmother Eleanor in the last week before she died, even though it was clear that the kidneys had failed and that was it. When she’d gotten the call from her mother on Monday morning, with the funeral date, she’d implied without actually saying so that she’d had a chat with Gran just a day or two before the end. Nothing really interesting, no great revelations, but it was really nice that she had managed to talk once more to Gran before it was too late ... and it was that, that implied—no, real—lie to her mother that stuck with her.

* * * *

“Quick update,” her friend Marlene said. “You’ve been an incredible troll this past week.”

There didn’t seem to be a good reply to that, so Stephanie just looked at the dead spider plant that had been on the bookshelf in Marlene’s office for at least six months.

“Is it still that stupid thing about the presentation?” Marlene said. “Everyone knows Edith was way out of line on that. Not your fault, and who cares anyway? Nobody even noticed.”

“‘Everyone’ has been paying a lot of attention to things ‘nobody’ cares about.”

Marlene tossed her blond hair. She’d gotten a short cut last week, seemingly just so she could do that. “Okay, you’ve uncovered the logical flaw in my argument. You’re still a troll.”

“I need a drink.”

“Brilliant suggestion.”

The Cromlech was their high-end Friday after-work bar. None of their usual cronies had been able to make it that week, so Stephanie and Marlene were on their own. They picked seats near a mixed-sex group from some other workplace, away from bathrooms, drink pickup, and dart board, hoping to discourage drive-by sexual suggestions.

As soon as the drinks arrived, Stephanie told Marlene about the phone number.

“Isn’t stuff like that just murder?” Marlene sipped her margarita across the salt. “Why do our minds have minds of their own?”

“But it’s not like some dumb pop song you can’t forget. Somehow....”

“What?”

“More is hanging on it than that.”

“Like what? Futility? Mortality? Still no children? Existential meaninglessness? Drooping boobs?”

“They’re not drooping!”

“God didn’t invent support garments, honey. Madame Olga did. Another reason to doubt.”

“Do you ever regret having done something?” Stephanie asked.

“Sure. ‘Why did I get the maple walnut? Wouldn’t a scoop of the coffee have been a better choice? I don’t even like maple, or walnut. What made me think the combination would be better?’”

“You know what I mean!”

Marlene examined her. "Okay, I guess I do. Do you think this guy could have been important to you? Like in a house-and-kids kind of way?"

"That's just it. I don't. He was just a nice-looking guy who turned out to be not so nice."

"Millions of those."

"Exactly. So why am I obsessing about this one?"

Marlene did not have a quick answer to that, so Stephanie sipped her own drink. Once she tasted the bite of the tequila under the lime juice and Cointreau, she couldn't stop. The Cromlech did not use a flavored corn syrup mix, but delivered something a grownup could drink. She drank steadily until there was nothing but a couple of bits of lime membrane at the bottom of the glass. The bartender, noticing her single-mindedness, had another ready even before she raised her finger.

"Whoa," Marlene said. "You better watch that. Best way to make sure you make decisions that lead to another such pointless discussion some time in the future."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Stephanie suddenly found Marlene's hip-yet-wise attitude intolerable. The second drink tasted even better than the first. She tried to take it slowly, but failed.

"Let me tell you a story." Marlene, who never had a second drink, and wasn't even finished with the first one, ordered another one as well. "Junior year of college I got involved with this guy. Archaeologist. Not my usual line, you understand. You know I like 'em big and stupid. I'll accept complexity in a Cabernet, but never in a man." Seeing Stephanie's impatience, she hurried on. "I guess maybe we all go through our outdoorsy phase, just like we all once liked horses, even if it was just My Little Pony. Spencer had that tang of wood smoke. Specialized in Anasazi stuff, out in the Southwest. Got to go to a lot of pretty places.

"Anyway, he was going away for a semester, to a dig in southern Utah. He wanted me to go with him. I didn't know we'd gotten that serious. I didn't want to go. I had other things on my mind, like getting through school, and wasn't interested in spending four months in a tent somewhere out in the desert, watching him clean dust off some potsherd with a camel's-hair brush.

"It became kind of a big thing, and we had a fight, and he left. He published a few papers about his excavation, I think. My next semester didn't go well. Bad relationship, too much partying, failed a couple of classes. Everything kind of turned to crap, in other words. And I started to think about Spencer, about

the clean dry desert, about the wind, about the clear blue sky, and the canyon walls, and the mysterious ruins, and realized how badly I had screwed up. I searched for him and found him, already junior faculty at San Francisco State. I planned a trip up there, thought I might surprise him, see if, at least, we could have dinner, and think about maybe fixing up what had gone wrong between us.

“I was packing. I remember that. I had a bunch of clothes in stacks on the bed, and I reached in the back of the closet and pulled out a bag I hadn’t used in a long time. I’d forgotten I even had it. It was the perfect size for an overnight bag. I opened it up. Inside was a photograph. It was of me and Spencer at some stupid party, our arms linked, holding drinks, smiling at the camera. Well, he was smiling. My head was gone. Someone—Spencer—had cut it out with scissors, and replaced it with a dog’s head.”

Stephanie found herself resisting asking what breed of dog. “He called you a bitch?”

“Stephanie, he cut my head off!”

“You must have been devastated.”

“I was furious! But relieved. I don’t know if I’d ever really believed something would be different if I could see him again, and go sit in the sun somewhere and drink lukewarm water out of Nalgene bottles, but this corked it. But how gracious of him, I realized later, to have made it so clear that that hope was ridiculous, and that I’d made the right choice in the first place. That none of it was my fault. Like salespeople who get nasty with you when you give their product a pass. Kind of lets you off the hook.”

“But this is different, Marlene. This is something I’m doing to myself.”

“Don’t be so sure, girlfriend.”

Stephanie stopped herself from ordering another drink, but only by finishing Marlene’s second, virtually untouched one.

“What do you mean?”

“You free tomorrow?” Marlene said. “I need to get some body work done on my car.”

“I didn’t notice anything wrong with your car.” They’d driven over in it.

“I guarantee you’ll see it tomorrow.”

“This looks really recent.” The mechanic, a tall blond man with a serious face, knelt and examined Marlene’s shattered right taillight.

Stephanie wondered what the mechanic would say if she told him that Marlene had, in fact, backed deliberately into a Dumpster just that morning, after picking Stephanie up.

“You know I don’t like letting things like that go, Jason.” Marlene was blithe.

“No, I don’t know that.”

“Does it tell you anything?”

“It tells me you could work on your driving.”

“Really.” Marlene arched her back. “Is that all?”

Not having an answer, Jason scratched his head with scarred knuckles. Every once in a while, Marlene got a yen for “someone who works with his hands.” The relationships with plumbers, carpenters, and deli counter employees had never worked out well, and the wiring some horny but unlicensed electrician had installed in her bedroom had once set off the smoke alarms in her apartment during a dinner party. The fire crew had taken off with all the carpaccio.

But there was something desperate about Marlene’s giddy flirtiness with the somber mechanic that showed the situation was more complicated than the usual predatory approach. While the two of them tested their anxieties on each other, Stephanie took a turn around the dark repair shop. Light had pretty much given up struggling through the wire mesh safety glass of the windows. The tarp-shrouded cars seemed to have been there for generations. Two guys way past retirement age, pointed out by Marlene as Cliff and Gordon, slowly hand polished the one alive-looking car in the place, a blue Alfa Romeo Spider, a sweet little convertible. One man had started out white, the other black, but both were now a general sort of grease-covered gray.

“You missed a spot.”

“That’s on your side, brother.”

“I don’t have a side. I’m kind of like overseeing this operation.”

“Since when?”

“Since you missed putting fresh tissues in the glove box. They gotta be fresh, every week. You know that.”

They both paused, looked over at Jason and Marlene.

“Think he’ll ever get tired of this?” Cliff microscopically adjusted the Alfa Romeo’s rearview mirror.

“And move on? Who can say?”

“Hey, isn’t that kind of your job around here? Predicting things?”

“Sure.” Gordon put some more polish on his cloth. “I can predict that you better be nice to me, because you’ll never get another job, flapping that chamois the way you do.”

Stephanie walked back around, past the partition that separated the office from the shop. She wondered if they had a refrigerator in there. She could do with something cold to drink. That damn wrong phone number. She was still thinking about it. If Marlene had brought her here to distract her, it wasn’t working.

“I think you’d better go somewhere else,” Jason was saying. “I don’t think I can handle this.”

“It’s just a taillight!” Marlene’s voice quavered. “Don’t you do taillights?”

“You know how I work. You know what I do. Please don’t treat it casually.”

Stephanie felt something cold on her knuckles and jumped.

“Sorry.” It was Cliff, the old white guy, with a Diet Coke. He had hair on his ears, and white hair straggling out from under a PawSox cap. “Did you want regular?”

“No, this is fine, thanks.”

“Hey, Jason!” Gordon, the old black guy, lumbered by with a tailpipe on his shoulder. “Help this lady out. You need to actually fix something that will stay fixed.”

Jason and Marlene stopped their discussion and looked at Stephanie, Jason pouty-lipped in an oddly aristocratic way, Marlene nearer tears than she usually allowed herself to get. The world seemed full of nothing but romantic disappointment.

“Where are you going with that?” Cliff looked at Gordon.

“It’s got to go in the back there. Top shelf.”

“Middle shelf. You’re making a mess.”

“I am not!”

Jason came quietly into the office, sat at the battered steel desk. “You have a problem, then.”

“My car is fine.”

“Not with your car.”

So, just like that, Stephanie found herself sitting down and telling an absolute stranger about the guilt she

felt about having given some guy an incorrect phone number. And she didn't even feel like an idiot doing it.

"What else do you remember?" Now that he'd made his decision, Jason was intent and clinical. "Not about the evening as a whole. Just about writing down the number. About him, about that man. Close your eyes. Let the image come up. Then think about your peripheral vision. It's not as sharp, but sometimes it's surprising what it will catch."

Obediently, Stephanie closed her eyes. She'd been trying desperately not to think about that night, but now she let it come. That place had come to seem like a really unpleasant job, a place you thought about all the time, even when you weren't there, so that it colonized all your available soul, and ruined your Sundays. Scribbles on a paper cocktail napkin decorated with a blue ship's wheel. A bit of table, a paper plate with a smear of frosting. A man's hand....

"I see his cufflink."

"Can you draw it for me?"

"I don't draw very well."

"It's not a contest. Nothing off a matchbook cover. I just need something to go on." He rummaged around on the office's Steelcase desk, searching for a piece of paper that was not already covered with scribbles, and finally came up with an empty paper bag only slightly stained with grease. He smoothed it out and handed Stephanie a ballpoint.

To her surprise, the image that appeared under her hand was a clear and accurate rendering of the oblong crystal of the man's cufflink. She even managed a reflection of the reception room's chandelier, which she had not consciously noticed. Maybe somewhere in those swirls was her own trapped face.

"Wow," she said. "I can't even draw things right in front of me this well."

"It's a symptom. It confirms my suspicions. Don't worry. The symptom is serious, but the cause is curable. Cliffie!"

"What, boss?"

“Can you make me one of these?”

Cliff squinted at the drawing on the white paper bag. “With what? We don’t got a lot of cubic zirconium around here, unless you’ve been getting shipments I haven’t been inventorying.”

“Just do the best you can with what we got on hand. There’s the rearview that broke. It’s in the trash, but you can get something off of it.”

“Great. I love wiping mayo and jelly donut off broken glass.”

Jason just looked at him and Cliff eventually shambled off.

A few minutes later he was back. He’d taken a square of the mirror-backed glass and glued it to a hose clamp. It didn’t look that much like the cufflink, but Jason seemed happy with it.

“Here’s what I want you to do,” he said. “I’m going to give you a tube of polymer adhesive. When you get home, take the cap off your crankcase, the one the oil goes in. Glue this to the underside of the cap. Let it harden, shouldn’t take more than a couple of minutes, then put the cap back on. Make sure it’s glued on tight, or it will fall off and screw up your entire engine.”

Stephanie waited a couple of seconds, waiting for some explanation that made sense, but it did not seem that one was forthcoming.

“What does this get me?” she said.

“It gets you in an accident. And that gets you back here. Where I can do what I do: work on your car.”

“Oh, for God’s sake just listen to him, Stephanie.” Marlene was sparkly. She’d arranged something, gotten everyone interested. That was what she liked.

“What will it run me?” Stephanie ignored Marlene’s gasp at the crude question.

“Nothing in cash.” Jason really was a most attractive man, Stephanie thought now. He listened hard when you talked, and his eyes were a nice and unusual dark blue. Clean him up, dress him up, and cheer him up, and he’d be great to be out with somewhere. “But, there will be something ... a piece of information, a connection. I don’t know what yet. That’s what I work for.”

But it was no doubt that air of great and secret tragedy that Marlene had really bought into.

“I think I can deal with that,” Stephanie said.

* * * *

What happened to test patterns? There was a time when people went to bed but ponderous electron-spitting tubes at TV stations had to be kept hot all night. Stephanie’s dad had many dates for when civilization had passed the knee in the downward curve, and the end of the test pattern was one of them. “Its disappearance marked the end of the era when the TV itself would tell you that you were wasting your time,” he said. “Though no test pattern I ever saw said explicitly ‘you’re a miserable loser.’”

Miserable *insomniac* loser. Thanks, Dad. So, instead of a test pattern, Stephanie found herself at three in the morning watching a rerun of a TV movie about ... what was it about? A once-famous murder-or-maybe-not in a wealthy suburb. The TV movie came down in favor of murder by the entitled wealthy husband. Stephanie had once wondered who in the world watched TV movies. Now she knew: terminally depressed people. A bigger market than she might have anticipated, it looked like. Hell of a target demographic.

According to Marlene, she’d met Jason when she came in to get a dent taken out of her door and ended up figuring out a way to leave her old job without half a year of misery and poor performance: her usual MO.

“And you think he had something to do with that?” Stephanie was incredulous.

“Well, yes. He makes connections. That’s just kind of the way he works. Just relax. It will work out for you.”

Stephanie thought about some of the things Jason had said. “What did it cost you?”

“Cost?”

“He said that solving that kind of problem doesn’t cost anything. Not in cash. But in—”

“Oh. Well, it was a little odd. I will say that.”

“What?” Stephanie was suddenly apprehensive. “What did he want?”

“Nothing gross or intrusive. The name of my imaginary childhood playmate. And the last time I had played with him.”

“Him?”

“Sure. Besides my two sisters, all my friends were girls. So Carlo had a role in my young life. Until that day when I saw a Batman comic at school. One of the boys had it. I lost my heart to that dark knight...”

“And Carlo got dumped.”

“Like a sack of concrete. So that was what I gave to Jason. An out-of-date imaginary playmate. Not too scary, right?”

“Um, no. Probably not. But weird.”

“Unusual maybe.” Marlene was oddly insistent. “Not weird. Maybe life would be easier if I went for guys like Jason. You know, the non-lummoX type. But it doesn’t really do anything for me. Plus ... oh, jeez, this is going to sound really dumb. Jason’s looking for someone. A woman. Someone he was once hooked up with. They broke up ... she ran away ... it all sounds wretched and melodramatic and book-groupish ... anyway, he’s still hooked on her, wherever she is.”

“I’ll let him work on my problem,” Stephanie said. “And answer whatever question he has.”

“It will be great. He’s really got some ... magic.”

As she remembered that afternoon’s conversation, Stephanie reached over the side of the bed and grabbed at the pint of Karamel Sutra. The thing was empty. She scraped at what was left on the lid, then threw herself back on the bed. Ouch. She reached behind her and pulled out an *InStyle* and a *Vogue*, each the size of an organic chemistry text. She’d read and dog-eared them both. That spa in Costa Rica looked great ... maybe she could sell everything she owned and go there. Or maybe the nice patterned stockings from Saks would be a more reasonable choice.

She’d gone to sleep just fine, but had again woken with a jerk at a little after two a.m. The husband and the husband’s blow-up doll mistress were setting up a perfect murder in the bedroom only ... oh, the girlfriend was supposed to be innocent, a dupe. She thought it was for a surprise party. So that was whose now-remaindered memoir the movie was based on.

Well, if she wasn’t going to get back to sleep, and wasn’t going to enjoy anything tawdry, she was going to get another pint of ice cream at White Hen Pantry. By God.

She pulled out of the apartment complex parking lot—

The car came around the corner with a screech. A big powerful sedan from some other era, wide, flat, and edged, rather than overinflated like modern SUVs. It was some pale color, and flashed across her field of view like a lightning bolt. Stephanie swerved toward the curb, but it was too late. The sedan sideswiped her, making her car rock up onto one pair of wheels, and then was gone, not even slowing down. She stared in shock after its red taillights, then whimpered.

Even a brief moment of thinking she was going to die hadn’t gotten her mind off that telephone number. What was she going to do?

The driver’s side door was so dented it wouldn’t open. She had to climb across the gear shift and out the other door.

The car was a mess, scraped and pushed in all the way from the front of the rear quarter panel to the headlight which, miraculously, still worked. Then she remembered. Her little afternoon task. Epoxy, a mockup cufflink, an oil cap. She didn’t know any more about what was happening to her, but now, at least, she was good and mad.

Thunder rumbled overhead. She’d never had an imaginary friend, male or female. So there was no way

Jason was ever going to get that from her.

* * * *

The shop entrance came up more quickly than Stephanie expected. She skidded on the wet pavement as she made the turn, and was satisfied to see Jason leap out of the way as she slewed into the bay. She let the water flick off her windshield wipers for a moment before turning off the car. They froze halfway down.

She wrestled with the dented door for a moment, swore, and dove across to the passenger side. She was so mad she banged her head on the top of the door as she jumped out. Jason stood right there, a printed diagram of a car hanging from his hand. Parts of the car were circled and marked with red pen. Looked like an insurance company was about to be charged for some hefty repairs.

“You bastard,” she said. “You set that up.” A pause when he didn’t say anything. “How?”

“‘How’ is just technique.” Jason was calm. Cliff and Gordon sat in the near background, placidly playing cards despite the fact that it was still only midmorning, while a radio played some endlessly rotated ‘60s song whose name Stephanie had never learned, and that the two old men must have heard for the first time when they were already adults, married with children. Water dripped through the leaky roof and into a line of mismatched buckets. “I could go into how, but it would be distracting.”

He slapped the diagram against the wet side of her car, and it stuck. Water seeped through the thin paper. As she watched the ink blossom, she realized that it was a diagram of her car. It showed the damage she had just brought in. What had she gotten herself into? Marlene’s answering machine message had cheerily noted the day’s wet weather, so she hadn’t disappeared or died or anything. Stephanie had yelled her message, in case Marlene was in the shower, but there had been no answer, and the machine had eventually cut her off.

“Distracting? I could have been killed.”

“Not likely.” Jason was dreamy, and a bit sullen. “Not likely at all.”

She wished she’d clipped him coming in, but had to be satisfied with the line of wetness her wiper had thrown onto his coverall.

“Did you think I understood what I was agreeing to? That I was signing up to have a car smash into me?”

“Well ... yes.”

“Well, nothing. That’s ridiculous. Do I seem like someone who understands the workings of whatever ... magic you play at here? Like someone who can give informed consent to whatever nutty contagion or psychic inertia or whatever the hell is your stock in trade?”

“She’s got you there, Jason,” Cliff said.

“Yeah.” Gordon got up, dug around in a locker and came up with an incongruously fluffy white towel. He draped it over his shoulder. “Hard to keep up the rent and maintenance on the kind of metaphysical freight you charge. Just doesn’t translate into, like, bill-paying stuff.”

“Maybe if you charged in cash...” Cliff said.

“This is the best job I’ve ever had.” Gordon put a couple of cards down. “Don’t want to lose it.”

“Do you *work* here?” Cliff, clearly losing, picked Gordon’s discards up.

“I’m sorry,” Jason said to Stephanie. “I’m sorry. But it’s a pretty strong curse.”

“Curse?” She felt like someone had just kicked her in the stomach.

“There are more technical terms, but yes, of course. Curse. You angered someone. Someone who had either developed or acquired the power to do you harm by influencing nonphysical states. So he cursed you.”

“Your job is uncovering curses?”

“No!” He stepped past Stephanie and knelt by her car, looking carefully at its scraped side. “I’d like nothing better than to just fix cars. That’s what I did, for a long time. Fix cars. But, sometimes things

would unfix, stop working in ways I could not explain. I realized that I had not adequately defined the boundaries of the problem. Nine tenths of solving any problem is knowing what the boundaries are. Keep that in mind. Your man drives a yellow car.”

“Yellow—” She hadn’t really seen it, but now the flash of bright color came vividly back. “Yes! How do you know?”

He gestured, and she knelt down and looked, even though it was painful to see what had happened to her car. The metal was buckled and scraped. But, yes, there, deep in the scratches: streaks of gold in the bare metal. Beyond that, the dark blue of buckled paint, so they seemed a gleam of sunlight darting, at the last possible moment of evening, through the clouds that had hovered in the sky the entire day.

That color made it real. A real car had hit her. Driven by—?

“You made him hit me,” she said.

Jason shook his head. “He’d already hit you. I’ve just processed the damage so that it’s a little easier to see. And thus to understand.” He frowned and looked more closely at the paint.

“Jesus!” Marlene strode into the shop from the rain outside. “What’s up with this weather?”

Her color was high. Her hair was wild from the rain, and it looked like she’d walked for quite some way. Mud had splattered up her calves and caked on the high-heeled sandals that curved their straps around her calves. She wore a bright red dress that looked like it was made out of rubber. Stephanie had run out of the house in dress appropriate for a spring cold snap, in a Fair Isle sweater and wool skirt.

Gordon handed Marlene the towel.

“You’re dressed like Polly Pocket,” Stephanie said.

Marlene toweled her hair. “You’re dressed like my mother.”

“Ouch.”

Jason quietly stood up from his examination of the dent, grabbed a Makita drill, and slid a wire brush wheel onto it. Everyone watched him put on goggles, step back to the car, spin up the drill, and lower it to the scraped quarter panel.

“Jason!” Gordon stepped forward. “That’s the evidence there. The only connection to the accident you’re trying to repair. Why are you—?”

“Yeah, boss.” Cliff was equally agitated. “That’s just not good business.”

Jason jerked back, almost scraping his nose with the wire wheel. “None of *your* business, gentlemen. Get back to whatever you were doing.”

“Jason.” Marlene raised a hand, but, seeing the expression on his face, did not touch Jason’s arm. The drill whined to a halt as his finger ceased to press on the trigger. “What’s wrong? What do you see there?”

“What did that man look like?” Jason spoke to Stephanie. “The one who cursed you.”

“I said as much as I remember. I wasn’t paying attention at that point. But I’m still thinking about the telephone number.”

“The telephone number....” Jason looked stunned, as if hearing all of it for the first time. “Old cars ... cufflink.... Did he ... his fingernails....”

“Terrible,” Stephanie said. “A horror. I must say, I’m impressed by how nice you keep your hands, Jason. Given what you do for a living.”

Jason ignored Stephanie’s feeble compliment and looked at Marlene, who stepped back, startled by the intensity of his gaze. “When we met, I was looking for someone. A woman who—”

“You’re still looking for her, right? I mean, you haven’t told me anything different.” Marlene’s cheerful mood had vanished.

“That’s true.”

“So I didn’t add in any hope. It’s still the same amount.”

Jason closed his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Gordon leaned over Stephanie’s car, ran a finger down the streak of yellow. “That’s it. The track. We got him, Cliffie. We got him. The guy she ran off with. Right here.” He rubbed his bald head with a large-knuckled hand.

“Amazing,” Cliff said. “Great thing about guys like that. They keep trying things, until you find them again.”

Gordon grabbed a box from the desk and handed Stephanie a tissue.

A few seconds later, she turned and sneezed. “Does anyone seem particularly happy about that, do you think?”

Gordon shrugged. “Jason’s been looking for this guy for a long time. He thinks finding him will solve his problems, get his girl back, all kinds of stuff. Even smart people don’t understand anything. Only way the rest of us can get by in this world, I always say.”

“That trace on my car is going to let him find his old girlfriend?”

“He thinks so. And he seems to know his business.”

“Buff it out.” Stephanie’s voice came out harsher than she expected, almost a bark of command.

Gordon and Cliff jumped. “What?”

“Clean out the paint. Then you can pull the dent, put in some Bondo, do your thing, right? Why don’t you get started?”

They both looked at Jason.

“Don’t listen to her.” Marlene was just as peremptory. “Jason. Do what you do.”

“Do you ... do you mean that?”

“Was this girl someone who would say things she didn’t mean?” Marlene shook her head slowly. “That gives me some hope, then, because I always mean what I say. Find her, Jason. Find her, however you do that. We’d have to deal with her eventually anyway. Right? Then we’ll see.”

“This was just coincidence, you know. I wasn’t looking for her when I decided to help Stephanie....”

“Keep denying things and I’ll start to think there’s something worth denying.”

Without another word, Jason went into his office.

“Marlene....” Stephanie was irritated with Jason for agreeing so easily, even though she could see that he would have had to eventually.

“Gordo,” Marlene said. “Got any of those tissues for me?”

Jason reemerged, with what looked like a set of jeweler’s tools: picks, scrapers, swabs. This time, when he removed the yellow streak from the side of the car, no one tried to stop him.

* * * *

“I usually have more paint to go on for a match than this.” Jason looked at a small glass vial. Clear solvent filled most of it, but a thin layer of yellow floated at the top. “This is really police lab stuff. Fortunately yellow’s a pretty straightforward color. Blues shift into green, reds into orange, with oxidation and light. Makes trying to figure out what color it was when it rolled off the line almost impossible. Yellow’s pretty stable and has a nice single pigment, so there are no ratios to worry about.” He cleared some space on the desk and turned on a bright white light. He pulled a peacock-tail Pantone color chip

book out of a locked drawer, fanned it out, and held paint swatches against the tube.

“Can you tell the make of car from that?” Stephanie asked.

Jason snorted. “Auto makers don’t make their own paint. It’s a huge web of contractors and subcontractors. Those polymers, resins, metal flakes, desiccants, pigments ... I won’t call it a craft industry, but it still is way more fragmented than most things are nowadays. No way I can tell the make of car from that. And, you know what? The exact color doesn’t really matter to me here. This is really more habit than anything else. But I do have the actual pigment with me here—given your description of the accident, probably from the front right portion of this car. There are resonance linkages, aesthetic to retinal. Pretty technical stuff, not usually of interest to clients.” He sighed. “The worst part of my job, color. Bumper gets painted at the same time as the car, and, you know what? It comes out different, right off the line: temperature, plastic versus metal, the slight amount of flex additives in the bumper paint. Clients always remember the bumper being the same color as the car. No one ever really looks at their car, except when it comes out of the body shop. Then it’s ‘Why doesn’t it match?’ ‘It *never* matched’ just isn’t an answer they’re ever going to hear.” He shook his head in despair at his doomed position, trying to satisfy the childish needs of emotionally vulnerable people who’d had car accidents.

He looked so comfortable with his color chips and pigment matching. It was a pity to have to rile him up again.

“Did you lose her through a curse?” Stephanie said.

He froze for a second, then folded up his Pantone book, cleared off his desk, and stood up. “Yes. He ... took her. That was how I got started, on all this. Her car.” He pointed at the Alfa Romeo Spider. “It was smashed flat, under an eighteen wheeler. I thought she was dead. But she wasn’t dead. The guy with the car collection. I think he collected her too.”

“Did you think repairing that car would help you find her?”

“It did. It taught me a lot. But it was only the first step on a long road.”

“A road you’re getting to the end of.” Stephanie couldn’t believe that the solution to her problem was going to hurt her friend. But Marlene had already offered to back away once. Any more, and Marlene would get annoyed. No new information had surfaced, so there was no reason for her to reconsider her decision. That was the way Marlene worked things.

“Maybe. We’ll see.” Jason sighed. “The price....”

Stephanie felt a chill. “Yes? What will you need from me? I never had an imaginary friend.”

“You and Marlene talk a lot.”

“Is that bad? Was she not supposed to have told me?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. Just ... when you talk to her, tell her that ... this doesn’t make me happy.”

“Come on, Jason. You really want to use me as some kind of back channel to give her some idiotic nonsense like that? It doesn’t matter if it was accidental, or coincidental, or what, but you’re going to hurt her because of what she brought in here for you. Because of me. You can stop. Just fix my car like a normal body shop would. I’ll deal with the damn number. I’ve almost forgotten it.”

“Now who’s giving nonsense? You’re a good friend, Stephanie. But Marlene’s right. If I don’t do it, if I leave it hanging, I won’t be doing anyone any favors. Plus, I want to give that arrogant s.o.b. one in the eye.” His voice was suddenly fierce. “Don’t you?”

“What will you want from me?”

“The number.”

“The phone number. The wrong one?”

“Yes. If this all works, it will be wiped from your mind. When it goes, I want it.”

Stephanie took a breath. Was it valuable in some way? Was she giving up something crucial? “Okay. It’s a deal.”

They shook hands, and looked over at where Marlene stood by Cliff and Gordon as they played an old board game of Panzer warfare, an endless expanse of hexagons representing the entire Eastern Front.

The two old men, one bald, one hairy-eared, fiddled with stacks of cardboard squares. Gordon was Stalin, Cliffie Hitler.

“Guderian,” Cliff looked at Stephanie. “I’m Guderian, for God’s sake.”

“What?” Stephanie said.

“Aren’t you going south along the Dnieper?” Marlene asked him. “Think of all that grain!”

“Excuse me, missy, but could you please stay out of it?”

Marlene looked up at Stephanie and Jason and winked. If she regretted letting things go ahead, she gave no sign of it.

Jason reached into a dark corner and pulled out a big chunk of Styrofoam that had once cradled a computer or piece of audio equipment. He grabbed a screwdriver off a shelf—every level surface seemed to have at least two or three tools on it—and dug a small round hole in it, just the right size to hold the vial firmly.

On the other side of the shop, he shoved the Styrofoam in one of the holders on a four-unit paint shaker that usually handled gallon cans. He tugged and readjusted until he was satisfied that it would hold.

The shake started loud and got louder, until Stephanie was sure it would shake itself into pieces, somehow unbalanced by having only one tiny container with a few fluid ounces in it. The vial blurred into a line, and the streak of yellow seemed to get brighter, as if glowing. Then the line—that shaker really was out of adjustment—shifted into two-dimensional shapes, like traces on an oscilloscope in an old sci-fi movie: an oval, an hourglass, a ridged thing, then a dancing wiggling thing that froze, for an instant, into a jagged ideogram, which then vanished.

“Cliffie?” Jason looked up at a car that had just pulled into the far bay. “Could you take care of that guy? He’s here for an inspection. Overdue, looks like. Give him whatever help he wants.”

“Hey, I was just about to capture Moscow! Okay, okay.” Cliff got up and limped over to the yellow 1965 Pontiac Bonneville. “What do you know, the car that owned the ‘60s! And, boy, do we have some legacy emissions standards for you.”

It was the car that had hit her. She could see the way the right headlight tilted away, shining on the Spider's gleaming blue fender. But she couldn't see anyone behind the black windshield. She started for it.

"You're not ready to meet him," Jason said in her ear. "Neither of us is. Not yet. Please."

"What do I get if I resist bashing his head in with a tire iron?"

"Release from the curse. Otherwise—"

"I'll be stuck with it?"

"Let's just say it wouldn't be under warranty. Here, put this on." He handed her a coverall. "It'll keep your clothes clean. Please excuse the name. It's our designated newbie coverall."

Above the right breast pocket on the stiff, oil-stained blue coveralls was an embroidered "Fartley."

Stephanie paused, then shrugged and put it on. "Who's your newbie?"

"Cliffie. Well, he's been here eight years now and he's kind of not liking that coverall anymore. So we use it for guests."

Cliff had set up the headlight alignment test. "This guy should fail, Jason. Look at—"

"I know. We'll take care of it."

That blue Italian sports car wasn't anything Stephanie had to do with. That was Jason's game. But it had all come together. Her need had played into what Jason needed. How much of that, she wondered, was accidental, and how much was planned?

“Hey, Cliffie!” Marlene yelled. “I’ve been playing your pieces for you, while you’re busy. I just seized the Caucasus oil fields.”

“That wasn’t my strategy, girl! I was going for the urban areas.”

“Show a little gratitude. That’s all I ask.”

“Can’t you let him lose on his own?” Gordon hunched, trying to figure a way to escape the complete collapse of his strategy.

That was Marlene: a smart babe in a rubber dress with a genuine talent for mechanized warfare.

“Here’s what I need for you to do.” Jason handed her a clean blue wipe rag from the dispenser. “As I adjust the light, write your phone number down on this.”

“My actual number?”

“Your actual number. I’ll take it from there.”

He knelt by the Bonneville and adjusted the headlight with a screwdriver. The misaligned headlamp beam left the Spider and crept toward the orientation cross on the wall. Stephanie grabbed a ballpoint and scribbled her phone number on the rag. As she got to the next to last digit, she hesitated. What was ... she couldn’t believe she was having trouble remembering her own phone number. But ... was it ... Jesus, of course, this was ridiculous. She managed to get the correct digit down, then finished.

As she did, the headlight hit the cross, and she could see.

There, in the light, was that room, the room where she had met him, and given him the bad number. It had only been ... Jesus, six years ago? But already it looked like history. The clothes had funny proportions, the celebrities discussed no longer interesting, the cell phones too big.

And there he was: the guy. He didn’t look horrifying. A bit self-satisfied, maybe. And then there were those fingernails.... He watched her intently as she wrote down the phone number. He wasn’t used to being balked. He would get back at anyone who did.

God, that bastard, putting that delayed-reaction booby trap into her temporary weakness. Sure, she should just have stood up to him and told him there was no way on Earth he was ever getting her telephone number. She'd tried, but he hadn't let it go.

Stephanie stepped forward into the scene, plucked the cocktail napkin off the table, and replaced it, neatly, with the completely out of context blue wipe cloth from the body shop. Let someone else worry about how little sense that made.

The headlights went off. Stephanie stumbled forward in the sudden darkness. Her foot slipped on a patch of grease and she was falling—

A hand caught her under the armpit and hauled her up. Once she was steady, the man stepped away. She turned to thank Jason for moving so quickly—

It was the driver of the Bonneville. The guy with the number. The man who had cursed her.

He stared at her. "Who the hell are you?"

"Who?" Stephanie was outraged. "You don't remember? Six years ago? I gave you my phone number, but I ... changed it?"

"No, I don't remember. But I guess you deserved whatever I gave you." He started to smirk, but his expression turned to one of pain. He stared at her. He sucked in a breath. Then he started to cry.

She caught a glimpse of the vision he was having. A vision, she thought later, of their collision, the one she had avoided. She had given him the right number. He had called it. They had gone out. Then ... a haze of possible courses as a relationship that shouldn't have happened limped to its death. Grim meals pressed flat with silence. Bodies next to each other in angry withdrawal. The final savage indifference of a relationship gone zombie.

"Now," she said. "Aren't you glad you never got that number?"

"That never could have...." He was gasping for breath. "Did that happen?"

“No way. Because I’m smarter than that.” She noticed that a sleeve of his shirt was flopping loose. “I have something for you.”

He wiped his nose with his sleeve. As she popped the hood of her car she noticed, without surprise, that the damage had been repaired. The side of her car was gleaming, perfect. She unscrewed the oil cap and there it was: a cufflink. Not a piece of shattered mirror on a hose clamp, but a real cufflink, beautiful and elegant. She wiped the oil off with a rag and handed it to him.

He stared at it in wonder. “What...?”

“You must have dropped it. That night, when we met.”

“Bull.” He made a fist around it. “It’s that stupid...” He raised his voice. “Hey, Jason! You out there, buddy? This is what it’s all about, eh?”

“No,” Stephanie said. “This is about what you did to me. That’s it.”

“Oh, sure. That moron. He’s just playing around. You were in trouble. He helped you out. Aw.” He made a mock sympathetic face that made her want to hit him. “Next time don’t play so hard to get.”

“Pay the cashier on the way out,” Jason said from the darkness.

“Go ahead. Use the number. Call her. Then you’ll learn what you never wanted to know.” The guy laughed.

“Hey,” Stephanie said. “Can I tell you something?”

“Yeah, sure, go ahead. I’m sure you can set me straight on everything.”

“Be kind,” she said. “Even when people disappoint you, just be kind.”

“That’s it?”

“You’ll meet someone, someday.”

“Screw you.”

He got into his car and pulled out of the shop.

“Jeez,” Marlene said. “What a sorehead.”

* * * *

Marlene finished up her chess game with Gordon, while Cliffie kibitzed and Jason sat on a high stool in the corner by the welding gear, talked on the phone, and cried.

“Hey, that rook’s *pinned*,” Cliff said. “Don’t count on that to save your sorry old butt.”

“Dammit, I can see that, can’t I? Just shut up.”

“And look out for that knight—”

“What did I just say?”

“It’s here,” Jason said through his tears. “Your car looks great. Perfect, just like before. You can just ... yes. That’s all. Just come get it.”

Marlene slid a bishop to the outer edge of the board. “Check.”

“Hey, man,” Cliff said. “Look, a revealed check from that rook back down there. I’d forgotten about it.”

“Great, thanks for pointing that out. After it already happened.”

“Oh, you want me to predict the future?”

“Predicting the past isn’t as helpful.”

“Okay. Here’s your future: mate in two, buddy.”

“What?” Gordon stared at the board. “Ah, hell.” He toppled his king, which rolled off the board, to be neatly caught by Cliff’s foot, flipped into the air, and caught by Gordon, who set it back up. “Thanks for a good game.”

“Thank you guys for a great afternoon.” Marlene beamed.

The two old guys exchanged a glance.

“Well, you know...” Cliff said.

“Once you’ve had old, you’ll be sold!” Gordon said.

All three of them laughed, although the two guys quit way before Marlene.

* * * *

The rain had stopped, but black clouds still covered the sky. Then a clear flash of sunlight came from behind, to illuminate the houses and trees on the other side of the street. The yellow light made them both vivid and flat. Everything glistened.

“I like a man who can cry,” Marlene said.

“Depends on what he’s crying about.” Stephanie started the car. It was perfect, like nothing had ever

happened to it.

And she couldn't even remember the false phone number, the one that Jason had reused to contact his vanished girlfriend.

"Me. He has to be crying about me."

"Or his mom."

"Okay. His mom. But not the Red Sox."

"Or his stock options."

"Right." Marlene rubbed her nose. "That's not sensitive. That's just dumb."

"You okay, Marlene?"

"Been better."

Stephanie touched her friend's arm. "Hey! You're all goosey-pimpley. We've got to get you out of this wet wind and into a dry martini."

"Green apple. There's a good place over in Davis Square."

"Do you have any idea of what's *in* one of those things, Marlene?"

Marlene stuck out her lower lip. "You never take me seriously."

"Oh, I certainly do."

They stopped at the corner. Behind them, they heard the garage door rumble up.

A blue Alfa Romeo Spider pulled out. It accelerated down the street, then screeched to a halt at the stop sign. The stocky, strong-jawed woman driving it was pretty, but wasn't an obvious candidate for romantic obsession. She turned and looked at Stephanie and Marlene.

"The throw's off on this shifter," she said. "He did his best, but sometimes you can't get things back exactly the way they were." She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. "No matter how hard you work at it."

Someone honked behind her. She didn't look back, but just waved her hand in a vague gesture, jangling her bracelets. After another blast on the horn, the other car pulled around.

It was a yellow Bonneville. It tore past, and, ignoring the stop sign, turned into traffic, causing a few honks of its own. None of them watched to see it disappear.

"Well," Stephanie said. "At least you're free now."

The woman turned to look at her. "He caught me through my weakness. How did you escape?"

"I wouldn't have talked to him in the first place," Stephanie said. "But I was trapped behind the pastry table."

"Don't you have weaknesses?"

Stephanie surprised herself by laughing. "Oh, I have weaknesses, believe me. But ... I also have friends."

The woman didn't say anything else. Off throw or not, she shifted smoothly and vanished into the traffic without a sign of disturbance.

"So, Marlene," Stephanie said. "Is it time to get back there?"

Marlene looked at the garage as its door finally came back down. “Not just yet. It would look a little ... desperate, don’t you think? Unattractive trait, desperation.”

“No one likes being pulled under by a drowning person.”

“Jeez, Stephanie, how charming.”

“I was just agreeing with you. Let him wait a couple of days.”

“You know, he learned this business, how to do it, looking for her. That was what got him started. So, finally, he found her. Now he’s got a nice little career going. I hope he sticks with it.”

“He sure enough saved me.”

“No number?”

“My brain is totally clear. So transparent I could go into modeling.”

Marlene snorted. “You want mental transparency? Did I ever tell you about the underwear model I dated?”

“I thought you liked men who worked with their hands.”

“Don’t make fun. It ends up being a more interesting story than you might think....”