

PART IV



In the BMW, The Driver noticed that his palms were sweaty. He'd *never* been nervous on a job before. But kidnapping Jack Russell *would make or break his career*, and his partner seemed like a *complete novice*.

He had to find out. “First time you’ve worked for The Undermind?”

“First big job, yeah. What’s it like? They seem like a good group.”

His hands got damper still, but he tried to sound relaxed. “Hey, it’s a job.”

“I hope I do okay; I’ve been looking for something where I can work part-time.”

You and everyone else. Jeez.

So far though, guy *had* displayed some talent.

Starting out of Hartford, he’d spotted Jack Russell in *ten minutes flat*—with nothing more to go on than “Chevy Cobalt, Pontiac Sunfire or similar.”

“Listen,” the Driver said, “you’ll do fine if you pay attention to the details. Let’s work on your accent.”

It was a secret of the trade. With a good fake accent, you would *never* be recognized.

The Driver listened closely.

“Try it again,” he coached. “Maybe you could throw in a few *himmels* this time.”



Shaking the BMW turned out to be easy.

We both got in the toll line at the Hudson Bridge; then I swung out and shot ahead in the E-Z Pass lane—transponder at the ready!

The best *they* could do now was to regain a few seconds by using the exact change. I laughed to picture them shuffling through their pockets.

But the Taurus followed us right through.

I watched it intently in the rear view mirror. So intently that I got on the ramp to the George Washington Bridge by mistake.

“Don’t kick yourself,” Kate said. “We’ve lost them.”



In the shadows of a downtown garage, two figures sat in a car near the Dollar booth. They were part of the rapidly-widening FBI net. One pressed his finger to an earphone.

“Lost track of the Kushes on the West Side,” he reported. After a pause he said, “. . . but confirmed; they’ve entered Manhattan . . . uh, *twice.*”

“Okay,” said his partner. “It’s Showtime.”



Bruce Richter was waiting for us at The Mobled Queen down near NYU. If anyone could help us escape, it was Bruce.

Photographer, adman, and gadfly, Richter owned a loft in the 'teens around Seventh Avenue. He'd moved there decades ago—long before the neighborhood became TeenSeA—and he knew all the haulers in the area.

Over fish and chips, Bruce made his recommendation.

“For two hundred cash, I can get you both to Philadelphia in a series of produce trucks. You'll change rides in warehouses and rest stops along the way. Don't worry; they do this all the time.”

“What about returning our car?” I asked. “I promised Kate we wouldn't pay for a second day.”

Bruce sighed. “Gotta level with you—I can take care of it, but it's another 75 bucks.”

Kate didn't even flinch at this. But as I handed the cash over to Bruce, she reached in her purse.

She held up a twenty and looked him in the eye: “The car goes back with a *full tank*, got it?”



As walked in the mist on East 9th I stopped to look at a music poster. At a club nearby, IED was playing a set sometime after midnight. *No way we can catch that show*, I thought.

Kate came alongside and quietly asked me, “Can I make a request? The next time you tell about our getaway: just *show* the transponder, don’t kiss it. Okay?”

“Okay. Sure.”



The Publisher glanced at his dark reflection in the window, then looked at his computer screen.

By morning, he had to finish redoing his slides.

He was still working on “week one.” Right now he was switching back to abbreviations for the days of the week.

Working on this, he got a new idea. Maybe he could lead with *The Louvre Labyrinth* on Mon, instead of *The Magdalene Mystery*.



Brownie was reviewing the details of the Kush dragnet when the phone rang.

“Brownie here. Hi, O’Malley,” he said, but no sound came over the line. “Surprised that we work *late* in DC?” he asked into the silence.

O’Malley finally spoke, dripping with sarcasm: “Congratulations on having *caller id*. Suppose we’ll ever get it out here in the real world?”

“I don’t think they have it for *rotary dial* yet,” Brownie said with a wicked little laugh. “What’s up?”

“Your alleged victim Robbie L. is not cooperating. Won’t say anything against the Kush woman.”

Brownie swiveled in his chair. “But we’ve guaranteed his safety,” he said irritably.

“Brownie, I’ll let you in on a little secret. Most people don’t exactly see FBI Witness Protection as a lifelong vacation.”



From Bruce's loft, Kate called a midtown hotel and asked for her parents. Ken was in town on some network business.

After she and Ken had made up, she handed the phone to me.

"When I *first* called," he said, "I wanted to ask if you still have that 'chuckle' note. Maybe I could help out—with a little Handwriting Analysis."

"*Great idea,*" I replied. The field of Mindology has many masters, but none equals Ken in *that* specialty.

Handwriting Analysis, I recalled, is also what launched Ken's TV career on the original Today show. At first it was just an occasional handwriting spot with Jack Lescoulie. Then came his big breakthrough—the celebrated segment with J. Fred Muggs, the felt marker, and an unflappable Dr. Ken.

Within a week, they'd signed him on as a Today regular. And by next fall Ken had his own NBC program, brought to you by Parker Pens.



I offered to come by with the chuckle note right away. “No, it’s late,” Ken said. “We can meet for a drink tomorrow. We’ll both be in the AmeriMedia building.”

I didn’t want him to know we planned to be gone by midmorning. “How about scanning and sending it?”

“Email? That’s risky,” he said.

“Ah, but I can *encrypt* it, I countered. “*If* you have Adobe Acrobat, that is.”

Acrobat was an advanced, two-stage data protection system. Before sending an email attachment, you’d scramble your file into something called a *pdf*. The recipient then *unscrambled* it with a deciphering program called *the Reader*.

With an Acrobat Reader, the image I sent would come up on Ken’s screen as slick as the cover of *Vogue*. But *without* it, he’d be floundering in sea of “alpha-numeric” soup.

“Acrobat?” he said. “I don’t think so.”

Suddenly a voice came from nowhere: “Ken, we do so have Acrobat. I use it all the time.”

It was Isabelle!



The Driver sat on the edge of the bed and unwrapped a square wafer of chocolate. On the other bed, his partner was already asleep.

Can't blame him for the toll bridge, he thought. But the guy just feels like bad luck.

Anyway, it was Plan B now. Jack Russell was expected to be at the AmeriMedia building across the street tomorrow. The rifle was assembled and attached to its bipod. There was a through-wall air conditioner they were trying to remove for a clear shot.

When Russell came out of the building, he'd be turned into a human Rorschach.

The Driver set the alarm, reset it 30 minutes earlier, and then punched in for a wake-up call. Just to be safe.



After I'd sent the attachment, Bruce asked me "How the heck were you talking to both of them *at the same time?*"

"Easy," I chuckled: "their hotel room has an *extension line*. They have one at home too."

Bruce looked totally lost.

"Come, come, my good man," I chided. "Surely you know how an *extension line* works."

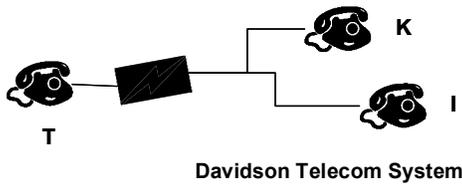
"Well, I sort of get it," he said, "but maybe you could remind me?"

I smiled inwardly, recalling how my friend Steve Blanchard once explained the Davidsons' extension to me.

An engineering wizard, Steve made his millions from the Blanchard Switch—the device that let people connect a Discman to the cassette slot of their car radio.

As it happened, I was carrying the extension line schematic Steve had drawn for me. Now *I* would be explaining it to *Bruce*.

That's how science works.



Running my fingers along the lines, I said, “Suppose Tom (person **T**) calls, and Isabelle (person **I**) answers. Now Ken (person **K**) can ‘join’ the call by just picking up the receiver.”

Bruce pondered this. “Like a conference call?”

“Sort of,” I said, “only Ken doesn’t have to *dial in, say his name, and press pound!*”

I showed Bruce how the process could be reversed. Looking over the diagram he asked, “Can Person **K** call person **I** and let **T** join the call?”

“Take a closer look,” I chuckled. “With all those little angles in the way, it just won’t work.”

I let Bruce absorb this for a moment.

“Here’s a *really* neat feature” I continued: “**T** calls, **K** answers, **I** joins the call. While they’re talking, **T** suddenly gets *cut off*, by that bolt of lightning.

“At this point, **K** and **I** can *still talk to each other for a few seconds*—allowing them to ask ‘is Tom on the line?’”



Zak rolled over in bed and squinted into the dim light. Angela was lacing up her boots.

“Cha doing?” he asked.

“Going home; I need to change for work in the morning anyway. Is that okay?”

“Mm. Makes sense.”

As she brushed her hair, he rustled in the drawer of the nightstand. He held out a palmful of tablets and capsules.

“One for the road?”

“I’ll pass.”

She waited for him to drink, swallow, and wipe his mouth, and then gave him a quick kiss. “Call you tomorrow,” she whispered.

“Pleasant dreams.”



In the car near the Dollar booth, the agent looked at his watch. Three am, or *exactly 5 hours and 10 minutes* since the Kushes reached town and he'd said "It's Showtime."

His partner was nodding, and he had a painful leg cramp. The garage wasn't cold, but its stale air permeated his clothes.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. With an insistent warning noise and flashing amber, the grey Sunfire rolled in—backward!

They got out and approached the tow truck. The driver was on the floor unhitching the car.

"We have some questions about this vehicle."

The driver stood up. "Here's everything you need to know: 3:00 am. 18,275 miles. Tank *full*." He handed them the oil-stained folder and the key. "Also, they want you to mail them a receipt."

"That's not what I mean. *Where did you meet the drivers?*"

"Mister," he growled, "I don't know nothin about nothin." He held a crowbar and was tapping his calf with it. "Take it up with my dispatcher."

"Let him go; this is pointless," the partner finally said.



For a long time, Zak had to lie very very still while his inside flew backward in deep space. Now it was better.

What *was* that shit he'd taken?

He rolled onto his side. It was funny. You can hear music whenever you want, just by thinking about it. That's always so. Someone can just dive in and pull you out through your eardrum. Then you hang out in the air looking around.

He rolled on his back again. *Can't move.* Under the bright light, the woman had a mask over her mouth. She put on telescope goggles, picked up a gleaming metal tool, leaned in close, and began to scrape his eyes away.

END OF PART IV