

# 7 Years Later...

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by Guillaume MUSSO

Novel

**Partial translation (chapters 1 to 11) by Jacob Bromberg  
Submission purposes only**

Part I  
A Rooftop in Brooklyn

“Only one is a wanderer.  
Two together are always going somewhere.”

Alfred Hitchcock, *Vertigo*

Nestled snugly under her comforter, Camille watched the sparrow on the ledge outside her window. Through the pane, she could hear the autumn wind blowing; sunlight was dancing in the treetops casting golden shadows over the vast expanse of glass. The steady rainfall of the night before had given way to bright blue skies. It was going to be a beautiful October day.

A cream-colored golden retriever peeked his head over the foot of the bed.

“Come here, boy. Come on, Bucky!” Camille said, with a thump on the mattress.

The canine immediately sprang into action, jumping up on the bed for a little morning attention. The fifteen-year-old girl cuddled her pet fondly, patting his round head and stroking a long floppy ear before shaking herself into action.

*Alright, girl, let's do this!*

Reluctantly, she dragged herself out from under her warm comforter, quickly slipped on a pair of sweats and running shoes and tied her blonde hair into a loose knot.

“Come on, Buck, let's go! We're going for a jog, lazy bones,” she called over her shoulder, moving downstairs to the living room full steam ahead.

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The three-story historic home, designed around an enormous atrium, was flooded in natural light. The elegant residence had been in the Larabee family for several generations.

The interior was resolutely modern, its clean uncluttered lines, open floor plan and minimalist decor - offset with paintings by Marc Chagall, Tamara de Lempicka and Georges Braque - more like the lofts of Soho or Tribeca than penthouses on the conservative Upper East Side.

“Are you still here, Dad?” Camille asked as she entered the kitchen.

She opened the door to the fridge, poured herself a glass

of cold water, then looked around. Her father had already had breakfast, she thought, eyeing the crowded surface of the shiny counter top: a half empty mug and the remains of a bagel, along with a copy of *Strad*<sup>1</sup> and the *Wall Street Journal* - which Sebastian Larabee religiously read over morning coffee.

Camille listened closely and could just make out the sound of the shower. Her father was still in the upstairs bathroom.

“Hey!” she said, swatting Buck away from the leftover chicken in the fridge and slamming the door shut. “You'll get something later, piggy!”

Slipping on her headphones, she left the house and began jogging crosstown at an easy pace.

The Larabee's home was on 74<sup>th</sup> Street between Madison and Park. In spite of the early hour, the tree lined cross street was already buzzing with activity. Taxis and limousines were coming and going in front of the neighborhood's private residences and elegant apartment buildings. Energetic doormen in brass-buttoned coats were hailing taxis, opening car doors and loading trunks with dizzying speed.

Turning onto 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Camille began jogging up Museum Mile, the famed twenty block stretch bordering Central Park, home to the city's billionaires as well as its major museums. The Met, the Guggenheim, the Neue Galerie...

“Come on, big guy, no pain no gain!” she exclaimed, picking up the pace as she entered the jogging track.

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The minute he was sure she'd left the house, Sebastian Larabee came out of the bathroom and headed straight for his daughter's room. Ever since Camille had hit the preteen years, he had given her bedroom a thorough going-over once a week.

He entered the room with a frown. Lately, Camille had seemed more secretive, less keen on schoolwork and playing the violin.

His practiced eye swept the teenager's spacious room:

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1 Magazine specialized in string instruments

pastel color scheme exuding tranquility and freshness; gauzy curtains glimmering in the sunlight; brightly-colored pillows and a mussed-up comforter strewn across a big bed. Mechanically pushing the comforter aside, Sebastian sat down.

He reached for the smartphone on the bedside table and coolly entered his daughter's four digit PIN. He'd "happened" to see Camille enter the code one day when she didn't realize he was looking. The phone unlocked. A rush of adrenaline shot through his body.

He dreaded what these incursions into Camille's private life might uncover...

Up to now? Absolutely nothing. He continued with his weekly inspections, even so.

Recent calls made and received were first on his list. He recognized all the numbers: her friends at Saint John's, her violin teacher, her tennis partner...

No intruders. No boys. No signs of danger... What a relief!

He scrolled through the recent photos. Nothing to worry about here either. Just some pictures taken at McKenzie's birthday party; the mayor's daughter went to school with Camille. He zoomed in on the bottles, just in case. No alcohol in sight. Only fruit juice and soda.

Next he inspected his daughter's emails and text messages as well as her IM and browsing history. Again all contacts were easily accounted for. And the contents of the conversations were perfectly harmless.

His anxiety dropped down a notch or two.

Putting the phone down, he turned his attention to the things on the desk. He didn't have to bother with her laptop anymore.

He'd installed a keylogger application on her computer six months before, a spyware program that gave him a detailed list of the web sites his daughter visited, as well as a transcript of her email and chat room conversations. Nobody knew about it, of course. The so-called positive parenting crowd would be up in arms, would call it child abuse. But Sebastian didn't care. It was his job to be prepared, to be aware of any potential dangers. The ends, he believed, largely justified the means.

In case Camille came back earlier than usual, he took a quick look out the window before carrying on with his investigation. He walked around the head of the bed, entered the dressing room and began methodically opening closet doors. He lifted the piles of clothes one by one, frowning at the strapless dress on the wooden dummy. It was much too glamorous for a girl her age.

Next he slid open the door to the shoe closet, discovering yet another new pair: patent leather Stuart Weitzman heels. He eyed the sophisticated pumps uneasily, the painful reminder of his daughter's determination to enter adulthood - much too soon.

Slamming the shoes back down on the shelf, he caught sight of an elegant pink and black shopping bag bearing the logo of a popular lingerie brand. Anxiously opening the bag, he discovered a satin balconette bra and a pair of matching lace panties.

*This time she'd gone too far*, he seethed, flinging the bag back into the closet. In the heat of the moment he slammed the door, determined to give Camille a piece of his mind. Instead he unconsciously directed himself towards his daughter's bathroom and began sifting through her cosmetics bag. He pulled out a pack of pills. Two rows of numbered tablets; some of the pills in the first row had already been taken. Sebastian's hands began to shake with rage. His anger turned to panic, however, as the reality sank in: His fifteen year old daughter was using birth control.

“Come on, Bucky boy, we're going home!”

After two laps around the reservoir track, the golden retriever was starting to pant. He was dying for a swim in the enormous basin of water on the other side of the chain-link fence. Camille picked up speed and finished her morning run at a sprint. To keep in shape, she jogged the mile and a half loop around the Central Park reservoir three mornings a week. Slowing down to catch her breath, hands on her hips, she navigated her way among the bicycles, roller-blades and strollers, exited the park and started back toward Madison Avenue.

“Still home?” she called, opening the front door. Without waiting for an answer, she climbed the stairs three at a time and went into her bedroom.

*I'm going to be late if I don't hurry!* she thought to herself irritably, stepping into the shower. A few minutes later, duly washed, dried and scented, she was standing in front of her walk-in closet.

*The most important moment of the day...*

She went to an all-girls Catholic high school, St. John's, an elite school for the city's brightest and best. The academy was governed by a set of strict rules, including a mandatory uniform of pleated skirt, school blazer, white shirt and headband.

A tasteful, no-nonsense dress code that fortunately admitted a few of more daring accessories. Camille picked out a scarf, knotted it loosely around her neck and carefully applied a hint of raspberry lip gloss.

After putting the finishing touches on her preppy schoolgirl look, she snatched up the hot pink bag she'd gotten for her birthday and headed for the kitchen.

“Hi, Dad!” she exclaimed, sitting down at the kitchen's central island.

No reply. Her father's dead silence made Camille look up. He cut an imposing figure in his dark Italian-cut suit. She was the one who had recommended the model: an impeccably tailored jacket with broad shoulders and a tapered waist. Staring into space with a furrowed brow, Sebastian was standing by the large kitchen window, perfectly still.

“Are you all right, Dad?” Camille asked. “Do you want me to make some more coffee?”

“No.”

“Fine,” she said lightly. A delicious smell of toast filled the air. Helping herself to a glass of orange juice, the teenager unfolded her napkin and - her birth control pills fell onto the counter.

“What... what's going on?” she asked, in a shaky voice.

“You're the one who has some explaining to do!” her father boomed.

“You went through my things!” she shot back accusingly.

“Don't try to change the subject! What are you doing with oral contraceptive in your makeup bag?”

“How dare you invade my private life!” she protested angrily.

“You do not have a private life when you are fifteen, young lady.”

“You have no right to spy on me!”

Sebastian came closer, waving a threatening finger.

“I have every right. I am your father!”

“Could you get off my case, just for once! You control everything - the people I see, the places I go, the movies I see... You filter my mail... You even choose my books!”

“That's enough! I've been raising you on my own for the past seven years and- ”

“and that's the way you wanted it!”

Her father slammed an infuriated fist on the table.

“Answer my question. Who are you sleeping with?”

“It's none of your business! I don't need to get your permission. It's my life, not yours. And I'm not a child anymore!”

“Are you out of your mind? You are way too young to be having sex! What are you trying to do? Ruin your life? The Tchaikovsky Competition is only a few days away.”

“And you can sure as hell count me out! I'm sick and tired of the violin. Sick and tired of the competition... So there, happy now!”

“Go ahead! Take the easy way out! If you really wanted to do well, you'd be playing ten hours a day right now. But no, you'd rather spend your time buying bimbo lingerie and shoes worth more than the Burundian GDP!..

“Stop harassing me!” Camille lashed out.

“Then stop dressing like a whore! You're just like your... your mother!” he yelled, completely losing it.

“You're totally nuts, you really are!” she hurled back at him, stupefied by the ferocity of his words.

That was the last straw. Sebastian snapped, raised his arm and gave her a resounding slap. The stool she was leaning on slipped out from under her and went crashing to the floor.

Camille picked herself up slowly, still in a daze. She stood perfectly still for a second or two, stunned by what had happened. Then, pulling herself together, she made a grab for her bag and fled, firmly resolved not to remain another second in her father's house. Sebastian tried to stop her, but she pushed past him and stormed out of the house leaving the door wide open behind her.

A luxury coupe made a right turn onto Park and then a second right onto 73<sup>rd</sup>; Sebastian lowered the sun visor to reduce the glare. The fall of 2012 had been a particularly warm one. Still reeling from the fight with Camille, he was utterly despondent. It was the first time in his life he'd raised a hand against her, and he truly regretted his actions. It must have been such a humiliation for her. But the shock, the disappointment - it had all been too much for him.

He was devastated by the thought of his daughter's being sexually active. She was much too young! And it put a kink in all of his painstaking plans, in everything he had so carefully orchestrated: the violin, the schools, the different professions to consider. There wasn't room for anything else...

Fighting to regain his composure, he breathed in deeply and looked out the window. The glorious colors of fall had a calming effect on him. It was a windy morning and the sidewalks of the Upper East Side were covered with brilliantly colored leaves. Sebastian was very attached to the affluent Manhattan neighborhood where the city's upper class families chose to reside. The elegant enclave was unspoiled, tasteful and reassuring. A haven of peace amid the urban hustle and bustle.

Turning onto 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, he drove south along Central Park still mulling things over. No doubt he was a little possessive, but wasn't this just another way – admittedly a clumsy one – of expressing his paternal love? Surely he could find the proper balance between his duty as a father to protect his daughter and Camille's growing desire for independence. For a second or two, he almost convinced himself that things weren't that complicated. That he would change. Then he remembered the birth control pills... And all of his resolutions melted away.

Ever since the divorce, he had raised Camille entirely on his own, and he was proud of his record. He had given her all of the love and attention she needed. And a proper education. He had listened to her and encouraged her, was always there when she needed him. He had taken his role as a father very seriously, and was involved in her daily life: her homework assignments, her violin practice, her riding lessons...

He had of course made mistakes, made a mess of things

at times. But he had always done his best. Above all, he had attempted to instill in her a strong sense of values, particularly in the present era of moral decay. This had meant protecting her from bad company, from the vulgarity, cynicism and mediocrity of today's world. For years they had enjoyed an open and trusting relationship. Camille would tell him everything, would often ask for his opinion and always consider his advice. She was his pride and joy: an extremely bright yet discerning and hardworking teenager, an outstanding student and a potentially great violinist. Yet in the past few months they'd been quarreling more often, and - Sebastian had to admit it - he was feeling less and less capable of helping his daughter navigate the perilous waters from adolescence to adulthood.

A taxi honked indicating the light was green. Sebastian sighed heavily. He didn't understand people anymore, today's youth, even the world he was living in... It was all so discouraging. So alarming. The world seemed to be teetering on the brink of some terrifying abyss. Danger was lurking everywhere.

Naturally he had to live in the present, to cope with the changing times and hold his ground. But nobody believed in anything anymore. Society had lost its moral compass, could no longer count on once familiar landmarks. The financial crisis, the environmental crisis, the social crisis... The system was clearly out of whack, and nobody - politician, parent or teacher - seemed to give a damn.

The conflict with Camille cast doubt on all his certainties and only added to his natural anxiety.

Up to now, his strategy had been to withdraw, to carefully shape the world around him to meet his higher standards. He rarely left the neighborhood, let alone Manhattan.

A renowned violin maker, he was solitary by nature and lately had preferred shutting himself up in his workshop for days at a time, with music as his sole companion. There he would lovingly fashion instruments with the unequaled sound and playability he was so proud of. His violin making workshop had branches in both Europe and Asia, but he'd never visited any of them. His social life was restricted to a small group of friends, people who moved in classical music circles for the most part, or the descendants of old Upper East Side families.

With a glance at his watch, Sebastian stepped on the accelerator. He got to Grand Army Plaza, drove past the light gray facade of the old Park-Savoy Hotel and wove his way in

and out of the cars and horse-drawn carriages until he reached Carnegie Hall. He parked in the underground lot across from the renowned concert hall, then took the elevator up to his workshop.

Larabee & Son's was founded by his grandfather, Andrew Larabee, in the late 1920s. Over time, what had started off as a simple workshop had gained an international reputation, his grandfather eventually becoming the world's uncontested lute-making and instrument restoration authority.

The minute he entered the workshop, Sebastian relaxed. All was peace and quiet here. Time seemed to be at a standstill. The pleasant scents of maple, willow and spruce mingled with the headier fumes of varnish and solvents.

He loved the unique atmosphere peculiar to the age-old craft. In the eighteenth century the Cremona school had taken the art of stringed instrument-making to the height of perfection, and few improvements had been made in the field since then. In today's ever changing world, such continuity was somehow reassuring.

Luthiers and apprentices were at their workbenches working on various instruments. Sebastian greeted the shop manager, Joseph, who was busy making viola pegs.

"The people from Farasio just called about the Bergonzi. They've moved the sale up by two days," he explained, brushing wood shavings off a leather apron.

"You can't be serious! That's cutting it pretty close," Sebastian uneasily replied.

"They also said they need your certificate of authenticity today. Do you think you can get it done?"

Sebastian was not just a talented violin maker, he was an acknowledged expert as well. He nodded with a resigned frown. It was the most important sale of the year. There was no way he was going to back out now.

"I still have to finish up my notes and write the report, but if I get started right away I can get it to them by the end of the day."

"Okay. I'll let them know."

Sebastian crossed the room and entered a large reception hall. Walls upholstered in purple velvet and some

fifty odd violins and violas hanging from the ceiling provided a distinctive atmosphere and superb acoustics: Violinists from around the world had played here when testing the instruments they were either buying or having repaired.

Sebastian sat down at his work table and put on a pair of lightweight glasses. He picked up the instrument he had been asked to appraise. It was a rather rare piece that had belonged to Carlo Bergonzi, Antonio Stradivari's greatest pupil. The violin, circa 1720, was in surprisingly good condition and had been estimated at over a million dollars for the upcoming sale at the prestigious auction house, Farasio.

For an event of this magnitude, Sebastian knew that even the slightest error of judgment would be a terrible blow to his credibility as an expert. Like a wine critic or master perfumer, he had memorized the thousands of characteristics specific to the great violin-making schools of Cremona, Venice, Milan, Paris and Mirecourt. Yet in spite of all his experience, accurately authenticating a particular instrument was still a tricky business - and Sebastian's reputation was at stake.

Carefully positioning the instrument between his jawbone and collarbone, he lifted the bow and played the first measures of a Bach partita. The instrument's tone was exceptional. Until one of its strings suddenly broke, snapping him in the face like a rubber band. Dumbfounded, he put the instrument down. He was too wound up, his anxiety could be felt in his playing! He'd never be able to concentrate, not with the events of the morning clouding his senses. Camille's accusations were still echoing in his mind, were getting louder and louder. He had to admit there was some truth in what she had said. He had in fact gone too far this time. Terrified at the thought of losing her, he knew he should try to talk to her as quickly as possible, yet he doubted it would be easy. He looked at his watch, then reached for his cell phone. Classes hadn't started yet and with a little luck... He dialed her number but her voice mail picked up.

*So much for that...*

This convinced him that a direct approach was bound to fail. He'd have to give her a little breathing space, or at least let her think that he was. What he needed here was an ally, someone to help him win back Camille's trust. Later there would be would time for clearing up the little matter of birth control, to make his daughter see the light. But only after their closeness had been restored. Yet who could he turn to for help?

He mentally reviewed the various options. Friends? He

did have friendly “relationships” with a number of people, but nobody he would feel comfortable talking to about such a delicate issue. His father had died a year ago. As for his mother, she wasn't exactly what you would call a model of progressive thinking... His girlfriend, Natalia? She was in Los Angeles with the New York City Ballet.

That left Nikki, Camille's mother...

Nikki...

No. It would never work. They hadn't spoken for seven years. Turn to Nikki Nikovski for help? Never, over his dead body!

Come to think of it she was probably the one who had encouraged Camille to take the pill in the first place. It would be just like her, after all... Nikki was a firm believer in sexual liberation and all the so-called progressive precepts: children should do as they please, should be trusted implicitly; punishment and authority should be banished; tolerance, not to say total freedom, should be advocated come what may. All the usual mumbo jumbo, both foolhardy and naive.

He thought the matter over for a minute or two. Could Camille have possibly gone to her mother for advice – instead of him? He highly doubted it, even for something as intimate as contraception. In the first place, Nikki and his daughter hardly ever saw each other. And then, of course, Nikki had never shown any interest – whether by choice or not – in Camille's education.

Feelings of bitterness and anger swept over Sebastian whenever he thought about his ex-wife. The anger was directed at himself, however; his relationship with Nikki had been doomed to fail from the very start. Their marriage had been the biggest mistake of his entire life. It had undermined his peace of mind and his zest for life, leaving him utterly disillusioned.

They never should have met, never should have fallen for each other. They had nothing in common. They were different in background, education, even religion. And their temperaments and characters were worlds apart. Yet they had fallen in love!

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Nikki had left her native New Jersey for Manhattan dreaming of Broadway musicals and a career on the stage. She had found work as a model and was living hand to mouth, heedless of tomorrow.

She was witty, outgoing and impassioned, knew how to please and to make the most of her charms. But life, to her, meant living on the edge. She was addicted to emotional outbursts. And her compulsive need to exist through the eyes of

men led her to play with fire time and again. She would go to incredible lengths just to test her seductive powers.

Sebastian couldn't have been more different.

Quiet and reserved, Sebastian had been raised in elitist upper-class circles. He liked to plan ahead, to organize his life around long-term goals and future projects.

Everybody had warned him. His parents and friends had all impressed upon him that Nikki wasn't the right kind of girl. But Sebastian had persisted. They were irresistibly attracted to each other, spellbound by that intoxicating platitude, "opposites attract."

So they had put their faith in their lucky star and were married. Nikki got pregnant right away and nine months later gave birth to twins: Camille and Jeremy. After the chaos of her own childhood, she had been hoping to find stability in marriage and motherhood. Sebastian, on the other hand, was looking for an escape route, had wanted to break free from his conservative upbringing and the Larabee family's oppressive pride. They both wanted to buck the system, exhilarated by the idea of violating class distinctions. And they were both in for a rude awakening: the differences that had initially put a spark in their relationship soon became the grounds for mutual annoyance and incessant arguments.

Even after the twins were born, they were unable to agree on a set of values that would have enabled them to build a lasting relationship. On the contrary, the question of how their children should be raised only exacerbated the conflict. Nikki thought that child-rearing should emphasize freedom and independence. Sebastian disagreed entirely. That was a slippery slope, he tried to convince her. Children needed a strict framework of rules in order to develop. Their viewpoints had become irreconcilable, however, and neither refused to budge. Such was life. You couldn't force people to change. You couldn't reorder the building blocks of someone else's personality.

Eventually, after a painful episode that Sebastian considered a betrayal, the couple separated. Nikki had gone too far this time. He would no longer stand for it. The events may have been devastating, but they had also sent him a signal loud and clear: It was time to put an end to what had obviously become a meaningless marriage.

First and foremost the children had to be spared. This, to Sebastian, meant getting custody of them. He hired a big shot

divorce lawyer specialized in family law who proceeded to drag Nikki's name through the mud and force her to give up a large part of her parental rights. But things turned out to be more difficult than he'd expected. Sebastian ended up offering his ex-wife a split custody deal: He would let her have the sole custody of Jeremy in exchange for that of Camille. Unwilling to risk everything in a prolonged legal battle, she had agreed to the deal.

That was why, for the past seven years Camille and Jeremy had been living in separate houses under the authority of two very different adults; their upbringings had been diametrically opposed. The visitation rights of the “other parent” were minimal and strictly regulated. Camille saw her mother - and Jeremy his father – every other Sunday.

The hopeless downward spiral of their marriage was well behind him now. In time, Sebastian had put his life back together again. Nikki today was nothing more than a distant memory. The little he heard of her was through Camille. Her modeling career had never taken off; her acting career had never even left the starting blocks. The last he'd heard, she'd given up the photo shoots and the auditions in favor of painting. And although her canvases were apparently shown at some minor Brooklyn galleries, she'd wasn't really on the art scene map. Then of course there were the men. Always someone new, never Mr. Right. She seemed to have a knack for attracting men who would zero in on her vulnerability and try to take advantage of it. With age, however, she appeared to be looking for a more lasting relationship. Her latest boyfriend, Camille had said, was an NYPD cop. Ten years younger than her, of course. With Nikki nothing was ever simple.

Sebastian's cell phone rang and put an end to his musings. Looking down at the screen, his eyes widened in amazement. In an unsettling coincidence, the name “NIKKI NIKOVSKI” appeared on the screen.

He was completely taken aback. He and his ex-wife were barely in contact anymore. And although they had seen each other briefly in the aftermath of their divorce - when making the agreed upon custodial “exchange” - their relationship now amounted to mere text messages coordinating the twins' bi-monthly visits. Nikki would never have called unless something was seriously wrong.

*Camille...* he thought, picking up the phone.

“Nikki?”

“Hello, Sebastian.”

He could tell at once by her voice that she was worried.

“Is something wrong?”

“It's Jeremy. Have you... Have you heard from him recently?”

“No, I haven't. Why?”

“I'm starting to worry. I don't know where he is.”

“What do you mean?”

“He didn't show up at school, yesterday or today. He isn't answering his phone, and he hasn't slept at home for...”

“Are you kidding?” Sebastian burst out angrily, “He's been spending nights out?”

She didn't answer right away. She had expected this, the anger and reproaches.

“He hasn't come home for three nights now,” she finally admitted.

Sebastian drew a sharp breath, his fingers automatically tightening around the phone.

“Have you contacted the police?”

“I don't think it's a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Can you come over? I'll explain everything.”

“I'm on my way,” he said hanging up.

Sebastian found a spot on the corner of Van Brunt and Sullivan. The traffic had been bad. It had taken him almost forty-five minutes to get to Brooklyn.

After the divorce, Nikki and Jeremy had moved to the west side of South Brooklyn, to the former dockworker and Mafia stronghold of Red Hook. Hemmed in and poorly served by public transportation, the isolated section of Brooklyn had long been riddled with crime. But the grit and grime were gone now, and the dangerous slums of the 80s and 90s had all but vanished. Like many other parts of Brooklyn, Red Hook had undergone a radical transformation and was now a hip and bohemian enclave of artists and designers.

Sebastian didn't come here that often, and although he had occasionally dropped Camille off on Saturdays, he'd never actually been inside his ex-wife's apartment. Whenever he did visit this part of Brooklyn, however, he was struck by how quickly it was changing: Derelict warehouses and docks were making way for art galleries and organic restaurants at a bewildering pace.

Sebastian locked his car and walked up the street to the red brick facade of a former paper mill converted into housing. He entered the old factory building and climbed the stairs two by two until he reached the second-to-last floor. Nikki was waiting for him by the metal fire door that opened onto her apartment.

“Hello, Sebastian.”

He eyed her coolly, determined to keep his emotions at bay. She'd kept her lean athletic figure: the same broad shoulders, narrow waist, long legs and firm behind.

Her face was still unmistakably distinguished, too: high cheekbones, straight nose and almond-shaped eyes. But she purposely camouflaged her good looks with a deceptively negligent style: long dyed-red hair worked into two braids and pinned up in a messy bun; green catlike eyes too heavily outlined with kohl; long slender legs floating in a pair of baggy pants; and chest squeezed into a low cut T-shirt.

“Hi, Nikki,” he said, entering her apartment without waiting for an invitation.

He couldn't help looking around the place with interest. The former factory had been converted into an enormous loft

with a proudly preserved industrial past: exposed beams, stripped bleached floors, bare brick walls, cast iron pillars and slab of gray concrete.

Abstract paintings, obviously Nikki's latest, were propped up against the walls and even set out on the floor to dry. The apartment's decor, Sebastian thought, was completely fanciful. A hodgepodge of objects – probably flea market treasures – from the old Chesterfield sofa down to the rusty industrial door lying across sawhorses. The interior probably met some particular aesthetic standard, but he had no idea what it could be.

“So, what is this all about?” he asked in an imperious tone.

“I told you. I haven't heard from Jeremy since Saturday morning.”

He shook his head in disbelief.

“Saturday morning! Today's Tuesday.”

“I know.”

“And you only just started to worry?”

“Listen, I called because I needed help, not criticism...”

“No, you listen! What kind of world do you think we're living in? Do you know the probability of finding a child forty-eight hours after he's disappeared?”

Choking back her rage, she grabbed him by the coat lapels and shoved him towards the door.

“Get out of here! If you aren't here to help, just leave!”

He was caught off guard by Nikki's violent outburst. Managing to break free, he seized her by the arms and held her back.

“Why didn't you call me sooner!”

She looked straight at him, her gold-flecked eyes flashing defiantly.

“Maybe if you were a little more interested in your son, I wouldn't have waited so long.”

Sebastian let her words sink in and replied in quieter

tones.

“We are going to find Jeremy,” he promised, “but first you have to tell me everything. From the beginning.”

Nikki warily eyed him a few seconds more, before dropping her guard.

“Sit down. I'll make some coffee.”

“I haven't seen Jeremy since Saturday morning, around 10 o'clock. He was on his way to the boxing gym,” Nikki said, her voice fraught with worry.

Sebastian frowned.

“When did he start boxing?”

“Are you serious? It's been over a year now.”

He grimaced incredulously. The vision of his gangly teenage son in a boxing ring was hard to imagine.

“We had breakfast together,” Nikki went on, “and then we got our things ready. It was kind of hectic. Lorenzo was waiting for me downstairs. We were going to the Catskills for the weekend and—”

“Who's Lorenzo?” Sebastian cut in.

“Lorenzo Santos, my boyfriend.”

“Is he the cop you've been seeing, or someone new?”

“Damn it, Sebastian. Stop trying to pick a fight!”

He waved an apologetic hand and she continued:

“Just as I was leaving the house, Jeremy asked if he could spend the night at Simon's. I said yes. They see each other almost every Saturday. It's practically a routine. They either sleep over either here or at Simon's house.”

“News to me,” Sebastian interrupted dryly.

Nikki didn't take the bait.

“Then he kissed me goodbye and left. I didn't hear from him at all over the weekend, but I wasn't really worried.”

“Typical.” Sebastian rolled his eyes but refrained from making further comment.

“I got back to Brooklyn late Sunday night, so I slept at Lorenzo's.”

Sebastian looked at her coldly, then asked:

“And Monday morning?”

“I came by the house around nine. He's usually at school by that time, so I wasn't expecting to see him here.”

“Then what?” Sebastian pressed, impatiently.

“I spent the day getting ready for my show at BWAC, an artist collective down by docks that—”

“Please, Nikki. Spare me the details!”

“That afternoon I got a message on my answering machine saying that Jeremy had skipped classes.”

“Did you call the other kid's parents?”

“I talked to Simon's mother last night. She said that her son had been away on a school trip for the past couple of days. She hadn't seen Jeremy over the weekend.”

Sebastian's phone vibrated in his pocket. He glanced down at the screen. It was the people from Farasio. They were wondering about the appraisal.

“That's when I really started to worry,” Nikki went on. “I wanted to go to the police but... I didn't think they would take me seriously.”

“Why not?”

“To be perfectly honest, it's not the first time Jeremy has gone off without telling me...”

Sebastian couldn't believe his ears.

Nikki explained: “Last August, Jeremy disappeared for two whole days. He never once got in touch with me. I was beside myself with worry so I went to the 1<sup>st</sup> precinct in Bushwick and reported him missing. He finally showed up, on day three. He'd been hiking in the Adirondacks.”

“The little bastard!” Sebastian let out.

“You can imagine how the cops reacted. All the lecturing, the accusations. I'd wasted their time, I couldn't keep tabs on my own son...”

Sebastian got the picture. He closed his eyes and rubbed them, before going on:

“I’ll make the phone calls this time around, but not to those clowns in Bushwick. I know the mayor personally. His daughter is in Camille’s class; I repaired his wife’s violin. I’ll ask him to put me in touch with—”

“Just a minute, Sebastian. I haven’t told you everything.”

“Now what?”

“Jeremy’s already had a little run in with the law. He has a record...”

Sebastian was stunned. He stared at her in disbelief.

“Are you kidding? And you never said anything to me about it?”

“Lately he’s done some stupid stuff.”

“What kind of stupid stuff?”

“Six months ago the police caught him spray painting a delivery truck at the Ikea warehouse.”

She took a sip of coffee and shook her head in dismay.

“As if those idiots didn’t have anything better to do, going after kids just because they like art!” she fumed.

*Graffiti, art?* Sebastian winced. Nikki really did come from another planet.

“Did it go to court?”

“Yes. He was sentenced to ten days of community service. But three weeks ago he was caught shoplifting.”

“What was he trying to steal?”

“A video game. Why? You would have preferred a book?”

Sebastian let the remark slide. A second offense was serious. Given the city’s zero tolerance policy even something trivial like petty theft could send his son straight to prison.

“I convinced the store not to press charges,” Nikki reassured him.

“Good lord! What in the world is he thinking?”

“It's not the end of the world, you know. Everybody does it, at least once in their life. When you're a teenager it's normal to –”

“Normal to steal?” Sebastian cut in, exasperated.

“It's part of growing up. When I was young I stole underwear, clothes, perfume... That's even how we met, in case you've forgotten.”

“No, I haven't,” *and it wasn't exactly the best thing that ever happened to us*, he added to himself.

Sebastian got up, trying to pull his thoughts together. Was there really anything to be worried about? It wasn't the first time Jeremy had run off, after all...

“This time I know it's serious, Sebastian,” Nikki burst out, as if she had read his thoughts. “Jeremy realized how upset I was last time. He promised he'd never disappear like that again.”

“What do you think we should do?”

“I don't know. I've contacted the emergency rooms of all the major hospitals, and I...”

“You didn't find anything unusual when you went through his room?”

“What do you mean, when I went through his room?”

“You have looked around in his room, haven't you?”

“Of course I haven't. I respect his privacy. It's...”

“His privacy? But he's been missing for three days, Nikki!” Sebastian exploded, heading towards the metal staircase.

“When I was a teenager, I hated it when my mother went through my things.”

In spite of her anxiety, Nikki was clearly reluctant to violate her son's privacy.

“You don't go snooping around in Camille's room,” she pointed out, “do you?”

“Once a week,” Sebastian replied without batting an eyelash.

“Then you really do have a problem...”

*Maybe I do, but at least Camille hasn't disappeared,* he thought vindictively as he got down to work.

Jeremy's room was on the same generous scale as the rest of the former factory. And as with any self-respecting geek hideaway, it was an unholy mess. Cult movie posters lined the walls: *Back to the Future*, *War Games*, *Innerspace* and *Tron*... In one corner, a fixed-gear bicycle. In another, a vintage Donkey Kong arcade cabinet, circa the 1980s. The trash was overflowing with empty cans of Red Bull, and a mountain of frozen pizza and chicken nugget boxes.

“What a pig sty!” Sebastian exclaimed. “Doesn't he ever clean his room?”

Nikki looked daggers at him, pausing briefly before carrying on with the task at hand.

“It looks like he took his knapsack with him,” she remarked, opening the closet door.

Sebastian went over to his son's desk. Three large monitors connected to two computer cases were arranged in a semi-circle alongside a fully-equipped deejay station: turntables, mixing console, expensive speakers, amplifier and subwoofer. Strictly professional material.

*Where does he get the money to buy all of this?* Sebastian thought.

He turned his attention to the shelves. They were sagging under the weight of comic books: *Batman*, *Superman*, *Kick-Ass* and *X-Men*. He skeptically leafed through one of the issues, a *Spider-Man* in which Peter Parker had been replaced

by a half black half Latino teenager. As Dylan sang, “The time's they are a-changin’”...

On another shelf, he found a stack of books on poker theory and an aluminum case containing ten rows of ceramic chips and two packs of cards.

“Is this a bedroom or a gambling den?” he quipped.

“I didn't buy that case for him,” Nikki said defensively, “though he has spent a lot of time playing poker lately.”

“Who with?”

“Friends from school, I think.”

Sebastian frowned. More bad news.

There were some “real” books on the shelf, he noticed, with a sense of relief: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dune*, *The Time Machine*, *Blade Runner*, *the Foundation series*...

Alongside these must-reads for any full-blown nerd were dozens of screenplay manuals as well as the biographies of Stanley Kubrick, Quentin Tarantino, Christopher Nolan and Alfred Hitchcock.

“He's interested in film?” he asked, amazed.

“Of course, he is! Your son wants to be a movie director. Hasn't he ever shown you any of his amateur films? You didn't even know he had a video camera, did you?”

“No,” Sebastian conceded.

In fact, he hardly knew his son at all, he thought, with a twinge of sadness. And not because they saw so little of each other. Over the years, they'd somehow grown apart. Even the arguing had stopped, giving way to mere indifference. Jeremy wasn't the son he had hoped for; he was too much like his mother. Sebastian had lost interest in how he was doing. His home life, his school life, his dreams... Slowly but surely he had thrown in the towel, with hardly any regrets.

“I can't find his passport either,” Nikki announced anxiously, rifling through the desk drawers.

Lost in thought, Sebastian pressed the computer keyboard's enter key. Jeremy was an adept at online role

playing games. The monitor lit up to a World of Warcraft screensaver, and a password entry panel appeared.

“Don't even think about it,” Nikki advised. “He is completely paranoid when it comes to his computer. And he knows ten times more about computers than you and me put together.”

Damn. The password deprived them of a vital information source. Reluctantly taking his ex-wife's advice, Sebastian gave up on the idea of exploring further. There was an external hard drive connected to the PC, however. Maybe the device wasn't password protected.

“Do you have a laptop? We might be able to hook it up?”

“I'll be right back.”

He took advantage of Nikki's absence to examine the mystic “fresco” Jeremy had spray painted on the back wall: a brightly-colored and benevolent Christ figure floating against a blue-green sky. The window was open but a strong smell of solvents still hung in the air. The mural was apparently recent.

“Has he gone religious, or something?” he asked, as Nikki reentered the room.

“No, not exactly. But I think it's beautiful.”

“Are you serious? Love really is blind...”

She handed him the laptop, with an angry stare.

“It was when I met you, but...”

“But what?”

Nikki let it go. There were more pressing matters at hand. Sebastian plugged the hard drive into the notebook and began exploring its contents. Massive amounts of music and movie files downloaded from the Internet. Jeremy was a big fan of a band called The Shooters. Sebastian clicked on a video file and watched a few seconds of one of their concerts: a rather crude garage rock band - hardly The Strokes or The Libertines.

“Do you know this crap?”

“It's a local Brooklyn band,” Nikki told him. “Jeremy goes to all of their concerts.”

*Good lord*, he thought, listening to the lyrics.

Browsing through the other files, he discovered dozens of television dramas he had never heard of as well as a host of explicitly titled movies - with the usual peppering of fucks, boobs, MILFs and so on.

Just to be sure he double-clicked on one of the files. A buxom nurse appeared, lazily unbuttoning her white coat before proceeding to do a job on on her very special patient.

“Alright, that's enough!” Nikki protested. “This stuff is revolting!”

“Don't get so worked up about it,” Sebastian reasoned.

“The fact that your son watches porno doesn't bother you?”

“No, not really. Actually, I find it reassuring.”

“Reassuring!”

“That's right. With his androgynous clothes and effeminate airs, and all, I was starting to think he might be gay.”

She stared at him indignantly.

“Is that really what you think?”

No answer.

“Even if he were gay, I don't see what difference it would make!” she persisted.

“But he isn't, so case closed.”

“As far as open-mindedness goes, I can see you're still stuck in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It's absolutely appalling.”

He was careful not to take her up on it, but that didn't stop her:

“Not only are you homophobic, but you condone pornography and its degrading portrayal of women...”

“I am not homophobic and I do not condone anything at all,” Sebastian retorted, beating a hasty retreat.

He opened the top drawer of the desk. Dozens of colorful candies had spilled out of an extra large bag of M&Ms. He fished out the card of a tattoo artist in Williamsburg stapled to what appeared to be a preliminary sketch. A dragon.

“He's planning to get a tattoo, of course! Why give us any breaks, right? Teenagers must have a list, or something. A compilation of all the stupid things they can do just to get at their parents.”

“Look,” Nikki broke in, taking a closer look at the sliding drawer. She pointed to an unopened pack of condoms.

“Does your little darling have a girlfriend?”

“Not that I know of,” she answered.

He thought back to the birth control pills he had found in Camille's bedroom a mere two hours earlier. Pills and condoms: his children were growing up, whether he liked it or not. In Jeremy's case, he saw it as something to be proud of. With Camille, however, the same prospect was terrifying. He was wondering whether he should discuss the incident with Nikki when he came across a half-smoked joint.

“Hash! Now this stuff is a lot worse than porn. Did you know he was smoking this shit?”

Wholly focused on exploring the contents her son's bureau, she merely shrugged.

“I asked you a question!”

“Wait a second. Look at this!”

Nikki pulled out a telephone from under a pile of sweatshirts.

“Jeremy would never have gone off without his cell,” she asserted.

She handed the phone to Sebastian. He slipped the handset out of its case and found a credit card stuck between the cover and the phone.

*He never would have left without his credit card either...* they both thought, exchanging a worried glance.



The smell of rosemary and wildflowers hung in the air; a brisk breeze blew through the lavender plants and other flowering shrubs. Converted into an organic vegetable garden, the roof of the former factory offered spectacular views of the East River, the Manhattan skyline and the Statue of Liberty.

Nikki had escaped to her rooftop sanctuary to calm her nerves; she was smoking a cigarette. Leaning up against a brick chimney, she watched Sebastian making his way among her teak planters bursting with pumpkins, zucchini, eggplants, artichokes and herbs.

“Can I bum a cigarette?” he came over and asked, loosening his tie, opening a few shirt buttons and removing a nicotine patch from his shoulder blade.

“I don't think it's such a good idea,” she remarked.

He ignored his ex-wife's words and lit up, inhaling deeply. Numb with fear, he rubbed his tired eyes and mentally reviewed what they'd found in Jeremy's room. For starters, Jeremy had lied when he'd asked to sleep over at Simon's house; he knew that his friend was away on a school trip. Then, he had left, taking both his knapsack and passport which seemed to suggest some far-off destination, perhaps even a trip by plane. Lastly, he had purposely left behind both his cell phone and the credit card his mother had lent him: the two dead giveaways as to his whereabouts...

“He didn't just run away. He made sure he wouldn't be found.”

“Why would he do a thing like that?” Nikki asked.

“He's obviously gotten into trouble again. And it's probably serious this time,” Sebastian replied.

Nikki's eyes filled with tears; there was a lump in her throat, a throbbing fear in the pit of her stomach. She knew her son was intelligent and capable. But he was equally naive and sensitive. The shoplifting was already bad enough, but to have disappeared... Nikki was terrified at the very thought!

For the first time in her life, she regretted having given Jeremy so much freedom, having placed so much emphasis on the values of generosity, tolerance and open-mindedness. Sebastian was right. It was indeed a dangerous world out there; no place for dreamers or idealists. How could anyone get by

without a healthy dose of cynicism, cunning and toughness?

Sebastian took another drag, exhaling the cigarette smoke into the sharp clear air; the ventilation duct in back of him was almost purring. Yet the tranquility of the urban garden did nothing to quell his mounting fear.

\*

High above the noise and agitation of the city, the rooftop perch was just the right distance from Manhattan. A colony of bees buzzed busily about a hive, hard at work gathering winter stores; the swaying greenery filtered dappled sunlight over a small wooden water tower encased in a rusty metal frame.

“Tell me about Jeremy's friends.”

Nikki stubbed her cigarette out in an earth-filled jar: “He spends most of his time with two friends.”

“Simon...” Sebastian guessed.

“...and Thomas, his best friend.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“I left him a message but he hasn't called back.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let's go look for him.”

“We can probably catch him at school,” Nikki hazarded, glancing at her watch.

They abandoned their lookout at the same time and entered onto the flagstone path that connected the various plots. Sebastian pointed to a small shed covered with a length of black tarpaulin.

“What's that for?”

“Oh nothing,” Nikki answered a little too quickly. “ I mean, it's just a place to store my tools.”

Sebastian stared at her suspiciously. He hadn't forgotten the particular tone her voice took on when she was lying.

He lifted up the tarp and looked inside. A dozen or so marijuana plants, hidden from prying eyes, were growing in earthen pots. The shed was fitted with sophisticated equipment:

rows of high pressure sodium lamps, air conditioning and an automatic sprinkler system, bags of fertilizer and the latest in horticultural products.

“You are totally irresponsible!” he exploded.

“Come off it! You're not going to get all worked up about a little pot.”

“A little pot? You are growing an illegal substance!”

“Well you ought to try smoking an occasional joint yourself. Maybe you'd relax!”

Her little joke only made Sebastian twice as angry.

“Don't you tell me you are selling this crap, Nikki!”

“I am not selling anything at all. It's for my own personal use. 100% organic grass, strictly homegrown. A hell of a lot healthier than the hash peddled down there on the street corner,” she argued.

“Are you out of your mind... You could go to jail.”

“Why, are you going to turn me in?”

“What about Santos, your Latin lover? Christ, I thought he worked for the DEA!”

“They have better things to do, believe me.”

“And Jeremy? And Camille?”

“The kids never even come up here.”

“Don't you play dumb with me,” he yelled pointing to what was obviously a recently mounted basketball hoop.

She shrugged her shoulders and sighed.

“You are such a pain!”

Looking away, he took a deep breath, struggling to regain his composure. His anger however continued to well up inside of him, bringing painful memories to the surface and opening old wounds. Once again he had been reminded to *never* count on Nikki, to *never* trust her.

In a fit of rage, he wrapped his hands around her throat

and slammed her up against a metal shelving unit.

“If you have gotten my son mixed up in any of your little dealings - in any way whatsoever - I'll destroy you... Is that clear?”

He tightened his grip, compressing Nikki's respiratory tract with his thumbs.

“Is that clear?” he repeated.

Nikki couldn't breathe, let alone reply. Unable to control his feelings of anger and bitterness, Sebastian squeezed even harder.

“I want you to swear to me that Jeremy's disappearance has nothing to do with your dope!”

All of a sudden Sebastian felt his legs come out from under him. Thanks to a self-defense leg sweep, Nikki had broken free of his hold. Grabbing a pair of rusty clippers with lightening speed, she pointed them at her ex-husband's chest:

“If you ever lay a hand on me again, I'll kill you. Get it?”

South Brooklyn Community High School was a large brown brick building on Conover Street. It was lunchtime, and food trucks were lined up in front of the establishment; the school's cafeteria must be pretty bad.

Sebastian suspiciously approached one of the “gourmet trucks” that had cropped up in the city in the past few years to feed the throngs of hungry New Yorkers. Each truck had its own specialty: hot dogs with lobster, tacos, dim-sum, falafel... Sebastian was a hygiene freak and usually refrained from indulging in such pleasures, but he'd had nothing to eat since the day before and his empty stomach was growling.

“Better stay away from the South American fare,” Nikki warned him.

Defiantly ignoring her advice, he ordered a portion of *ceviche*, a Peruvian dish made from marinated raw fish.

“What does this Thomas person look like?” he asked, as the end-of-class bell rang and a stream of students began pouring out of the building.

“I'll let you know,” she answered, screwing up her eyes; she didn't want to miss Thomas as he exited the building.

Sebastian payed for his order and swallowed a mouthful of fish, wincing as the fiery-hot marinade went down.

“I warned you,” Nikki sighed.

To soothe his burning throat, he downed the glass of *horchata* the vendor had suggested, the brownish vegetable milk's sickening vanilla flavor making him gag.

“There he is!” Nikki exclaimed pointing to a youth in the crowd.

“Which one? The nerd, or that kid with a smirk?”

“Just let me do the talking, okay?” she muttered.

“Yeah, maybe...”

Thomas had a very studied look: skinny jeans and Wayfarers, narrow black vest and white unbuttoned shirt – revealing a slender torso – casual air and expertly disheveled mop of hair... Clearly the youth spent hours in the bathroom

perfecting his teenage rock musician appearance.

Nikki caught up with him by the fenced in basketball court.

“Thomas!” she called out.

“Hey Mrs. Nikovski,” he carelessly replied, brushing a rebellious strand of hair from his face.

“You didn't call me back.”

“Yeah, I've been kind of busy.”

“Have you heard from Jeremy?”

“No, I haven't seen him since Friday.”

“He hasn't e-mailed you, or called? No text messages?”

“Nope, nothing.”

Sebastian looked at the teenager more closely. He didn't like the little twerp's impertinent tone or his Goth look. Rings, bracelets, pearl rosaries – the whole shebang. Hiding his hostility, he asked:

“Do you have any idea where he could be?”

Thomas looked at Nikki.

“Who's he?”

“I'm the Pope, you little prick!”

The teenager cringed but the insult seemed to have loosened his tongue.

“Well, we haven't seen each other much lately. Jer's been skipping our band's rehearsals.

“Why?”

“He's gotten more into playing poker.”

“Really?” Nikki fretted.

“I think he needed the money. He even sold his bass and placed an ad on eBay to sell his camcorder.”

“What does he need the money for?” Nikki asked.

“I dunno. Anyway, I have to go now.”

“Not so fast,” Sebastian said, grabbing the adolescent by the shoulder. “Who was he playing poker with?”

“I dunno. Some guys on the Internet...”

“And in real life?”

“You'll have to ask Simon,” he said evasively.

“You know very well that Simon is on a school trip,” Nikki pointed out.

Sebastian gave him a little shake.

“Come on, Thomas. Fess up!”

“Hey, man, get your hands off me! I know my rights.”

Nikki tried to get her ex to calm down, but Sebastian was running out of patience. The arrogant little bastard was getting on his nerves.

“Who does Jeremy play poker with?”

“I dunno, just some weird dudes. You know... *rounders*.”

“Rounders?”

“Yeah, guys who hang out at cash games looking for easy wins,” Thomas explained.

“Looking for inexperienced players, you mean, to fleece?”

“Uh huh,” the teen concurred. “Jeremy would pretend to be a beginner to trick them. He made a lot of money that way.”

“How much were they betting?”

“Whoa, not that much man. This isn't Vegas, you know. These guys were playing to make ends meet, to pay off loans and stuff.”

Nikki and Sebastian looked at each other uneasily. They didn't like what they were hearing. First their son had run away,

and now this: illegal gambling circles involving minors, maybe even debts...

“Where did these games take place?”

“In Bushwick, mostly. At a couple of crappy bars.”

“Do you have an address for any of these places?”

“No. I was never really into the scene.”

Sebastian would gladly have given him another shake but Nikki dissuaded him: He seemed to be telling the truth for once.

“Well, anyhow, I've gotta go. I'm starving!”

“Just one more thing, Thomas. Does Jeremy have a girlfriend?” Nikki inquired.

“Yeah, of course he does!”

Nikki showed a sign of surprise.

“What's her name?”

“She's older, a widow.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, a real whack job too.”

Sebastian glowered.

“She asked you for a name.”

“Mrs. Hand,” he burst out laughing. “Mrs. Hand Job!”

Nikki sighed. Sebastian grabbed the smart aleck by the collar and pulled him closer.

“Listen, I'm getting tired of your dumb jokes. Does he or doesn't he have a girlfriend?”

“Last week he told me he'd met a girl on the Internet. A Brazilian chick, or something. He showed me these pictures of this total babe. I'm pretty sure it was all an act though. There's no way Jer' could have landed a chick like that.”

Sebastian loosened his grip. The kid wasn't going to tell

them anything else.

“Call me if you hear anything, okay?” Nikki asked.

“Yeah, I’ll do that, Mrs. N,” Thomas promised, walking away.

Sebastian rubbed his temples. The smart-ass teenager had completely exhausted him. Everything about him was offensive: his language, his bizarre appearance, even the tone of his voice.

“That kid is a total idiot,” he sighed. “We’d better keep a closer eye on who our son hangs out with from now on.”

“Yeah, sure. But first we have to find him,” Nikki muttered.

They crossed the street to Nikki's vintage sidecar motorcycle. A BMW R60/2 straight out of the sixties.

She handed him the helmet he had worn on the way over.

“What now?”

Nikki's face was inscrutable. It seemed pretty clear that Jeremy had run away. He had sold his guitar to raise money and had posted his camcorder on eBay. He had taken all the necessary precautions not to be traced. And, worst of all, he had a three day head-start on them.

“He would never have run off like that unless he were afraid,” she pointed out, “really afraid.”

Sebastian spread his arms wide, in a gesture of helplessness. “But afraid of what? And why wouldn't he have turned to us?”

“Well you're not exactly a model of understanding...” her voice drifted off.

Suddenly he thought of something:

“What about Camille? Maybe she's heard from her brother.”

Nikki's face lit up. It was a definite lead. Though normally they didn't see much of each other, the twins seemed to have grown closer in recent months.

“You should call her.”

“Me?” she said with surprise.

“Yes, I think it's better that way. I'll explain everything...”

While Nikki was dialing Camille's number, Sebastian called work. Joseph had left two messages in a row asking him to call back right away.

“We've got a big problem, Sebastian,” the shop manager said. “The people at Farasio have been trying to reach you. They think you're avoiding their calls.”

“Something's come up. It's important.”

“Listen, they came by unannounced; they know you're not at work. They want you to confirm by one o'clock, to personally guarantee they'll get the assessment by tonight.

“Otherwise?”

“Otherwise they'll give the appraisal to Furstenberg.”

Sebastian sighed. Things were decidedly going from bad to worse today, and he didn't know what to do about it. He thought the situation over as calmly as possible. The commission from the Carlo Bergonzi sale would bring in \$150,000, a sizable sum that he had already budgeted for and that he needed to keep the business afloat. But apart from the financial damage, the loss of the Bergonzi deal would carry great symbolic weight. There were very few experts out there, and nothing in violin circles remained secret for long.

The fact of the matter was, the sale was an extremely prestigious event, and Furstenberg, Sebastian's biggest rival, would know how to create a buzz and turn things to his advantage.

Sebastian wasn't born yesterday. For twenty years now, he'd been working with artists: capricious and tortured beings crippled by self-doubt; creative geniuses with volatile tempers; musical greats with oversized egos who made it a point of honor to work with only the best. And in the stringed instrument business, Sebastian was the best! In less than two decades, he had made *Larabee & Sons* the most respected violin maker in the United States. But his renown was based on more than mere skill. He had a veritable gift: an exceptional ear and a rare intuitive sense that enabled him to perfectly adapt his instruments to the client's personality and playing. In blind tests, his violins regularly beat Stradivari and Guarneri. The Larabee name had actually become – and this was his crowning achievement – a label of excellence. Performers now came to his workshop to buy a “Larabee.” His client list included the world's dozen or so bona fide violin stars, celebrities that had been won over, slowly but surely, who had absolute faith in his workmanship, be it to repair an old instrument or to make a new. But this hard-earned renown was tenuous: It resided as much in his talent as in current trends and was dependent on an oh-so subtle balance of official news and the flattering but ever fickle grapevine. With the present economic downturn, today, more than ever, Furstenberg and other reputable instrument makers were waiting to pounce, were watching every step – or misstep – Sebastian made. Loosing this particular contract was

simply out of the question. And that was that.

“Call them back for me, Joseph.”

“But it's you they want to talk to.”

“Tell them I'll call in forty-five minutes. Once I'm back at the office. They'll get their appraisal before tonight.”

He hung up at the same time as Nikki.

“Camille didn't pick up,” she explained. “I left a message. Why don't you want to call her yourself?”

Instead of answering the question, he warned her:

“Look Nikki, I have to go back to the office.”

She stared at him in amazement.

“Go back to the office? Your son has disappeared and you're going back to work!”

“I'm worried to death, but I'm not a cop. The police are going to have to conduct an—”

“I'll call Santos,” she cut in. “At least he'll know what to do.”

With that, she dialed her boyfriend's number to fill him in on what was going on.

Sebastian looked on unperturbed. She was hoping to goad him, but it wouldn't work. After all, what could he do about Jeremy's disappearance? He had no idea how to even begin looking for him. And the uncertainty only stoked his anxiety, his sense of helplessness. Frankly, the thought of involving the police was a relief at this point. They had waited too long as it was.

While Nikki was finishing her call, he climbed back into the “monkey<sup>1</sup>” seat, put on his leather helmet – which definitely did not meet today's safety standards - and pulled down a pair of bulky aviator goggles. He was at an utter loss, overwhelmed by all that had happened. Yet here he, was sitting in the bucket of some weird vehicle, decked out in a ridiculous outfit. It was as if some god-awful chain of events had sent his

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1 In competitive racing, the name of the sidecar passenger who performs acrobatic feats to maintain the balance of the motorcycle.

entire life spiraling out of control: his unwelcome “reunion” with his ex-wife; his son's disturbing disappearance; his fifteen-year-old daughter's decision to sleep with boys; his career on the verge of collapse...

Nikki hung up and came over to him without a word. Straddling the motorcycle, she turned the ignition key and revved up the engine; the bike took off like a shot, direction the docks. Bracing himself against the pounding wind, Sebastian held onto the seat and clenched his teeth. He had forgotten his overcoat at Nikki's place and was shivering with cold in his elegant but lightweight suit. Contrary to his ex-wife, he was more homebody than risk-taker, and he much preferred the comfort of his Jaguar to the torture of this bumpy ride. Especially as Nikki seemed to take a perverse pleasure in speeding up as she went over potholes.

At last they got to the converted factory where Nikki lived.

“I have to go up and get my coat,” he told her as he extricated himself from the bucket seat. “My car keys are in the pocket.”

“Whatever,” she replied without even looking at him. “I'll be waiting for Santos, at any rate.”

He followed her up the stairs. When they got to the landing her apartment was on, Nikki opened the metal door, entered the loft and let out a cry of surprise.

The couch was ripped open, the furniture upended, the shelves disemboweled. The chaotic state of the living room spoke volumes: The apartment had been ransacked while they were out.

With a pounding heart, Nikki looked around to assess the damage. The whole place had been turned upside down. The TV torn from the wall, paintings flung to the ground, drawers pulled out and emptied, paper scattered all over the room...

Nikki was shaking, shocked by the violation of her privacy, the ransacking of her personal life.

“What did they take?” Sebastian asked.

“It's hard to say. Not my laptop, anyhow. It's still on the kitchen counter.”

*That's strange*, he thought.

On one of the few shelves still standing, he noticed a pretty inlaid box.

“Is that box valuable?”

“Of course it is. All of my jewelry is in it.”

He opened the small box and found, among other things, the rings and bracelets he had given her. All expensive pieces from Tiffany's.

“What kind of burglar would be dumb enough not to take a laptop and a jewelry box, both in plain sight?”

“Shh!” she ordered putting a finger to her lips.

He stopped talking, not understanding why until he heard a creaking. There was someone in the apartment! Gesturing for him not to move, she quietly climbed the metal staircase. Her bedroom was the first room off of the hall.

Empty.

Then came Jeremy's.

Too late!

The window overlooking the courtyard burst into a thousand pieces. Nikki hurried over, leaned out and saw a heavysset figure running down the cast iron fire escape. She stepped through the broken window ready to give chase...

“Forget it,” Sebastian dissuaded her, catching her arm. “He's probably armed.”

She yielded reluctantly, turning her attention instead to the apartment. The burglar or burglars had begun searching the house from top to bottom. The appalling sight of all her personal belongings strewn across the floor led her to the unmistakable conclusion:

“It wasn't a robbery. Whoever did this was obviously trying to find something.”

Sebastian took a closer look at Jeremy's room. At first glance, nothing seemed to be missing. Mechanically, he began straightening the computer equipment on the desk. He had a somewhat pathological side, was practically obsessive compulsive: a deep rooted anxiety regarding messiness, a mania for cleanliness. Next he picked up the fixed-gear bicycle, righted a listing shelving unit and began collecting the playing cards scattered on the floor. Reaching for the aluminum poker case, he gave a start. The ceramic chips in the case were in fact a solid block. They were fake, each row forming a hollow tube. He picked one up and looked inside: The cylindrical container was stuffed with plastic bags. He took out one of the pouches: It was full of white powder.

*This must be a bad dream...*

Horried, he emptied the contents of both of the ceramic tubes onto the bed. Dozens of transparent bags containing...

*Cocaine!*

He couldn't believe his eyes.

“Oh my god,” Nikki burst out as she entered the room.

They stared at each other, dumbfounded.

“That's what the burglars were looking for. There has got to be a kilo there, at least!”

But Sebastian still didn't want to believe it.

“It can't be real. There's way too much. Maybe it's some sort of role playing game... or... a joke or something.”

Nikki shook her head with a doubtful frown. Making a small rip in one of the bags, she put a little powder on the tip of her tongue. It had a bitter, numbing taste.

“It's definitely cocaine, Sebastian.”

“But how—”

The bright sound of chimes interrupted him mid-sentence. Someone was at the door.

“It's Santos!” Nikki exclaimed.

An identical expression of disbelief and dismay could be seen on both of their faces. For the first time in years, they were united by a powerful bond: to protect their son no matter what. Their hearts beat in unison - the same palpitations, the same cold sweat, the same dizziness.

The chimes rang again. The cop was growing impatient.

This was no time for procrastination. They'd have to make a decision, and fast. Jeremy's entire future was at stake. And although concealing evidence may be sheer madness, revealing the kilo of cocaine hidden in Jeremy's bedroom would send their son to prison for a very long time. Would jeopardize his education, his entire future. Would stack the cards against him before he'd even had a chance. Not to mention the hell of a detention center.

“We have to—”

“get rid of this dope,” Nikki finished.

They were united. A bulwark against danger.

Sebastian grabbed a couple of bags of coke - for once they agreed on something - and threw them into the toilet in the adjoining bathroom. Nikki was right beside him, tossing the other half of the “stash” into the bowl.

The bell rang for the third time.

“Go open the door. I'll be right there!”

With a nod, Nikki headed toward the stairs. Sebastian flushed the toilet. The water was having trouble dissolving the

cocaine. Instead of being flushed away, the plastic bags seemed to be stopping up the bathroom pipes. Sebastian flushed again. It only made things worse. Horrified, he watched the dangerously high cloudy water - threatening to overflow.