

PART V



Dan, most writers feel a special attachment to New York, and I'm no exception.

Of course, Gotham has figured in many of my recent thrillers. But even in my "Kush Boys of Detroit" stories it was always a presence.

I'll bet you remember the final scene of "The Auto Heir Apparent"—where the boys unmask the mysterious figure who made claims to the Dodge fortune:

"See? He's an *imposter!*" Tommy crowed. "If he *really* lived in New York, he'd *know* you can buy the Sunday Times there on Saturday night!"

Now that Tom Kush has grown up and become a crime-solving actuary, those tales of the rough-and-ready Kush Boys seem innocent, almost quaint.

But I still enjoy re-reading them now and then.



After breakfast, Ken left in the drizzle for his midtown meeting.

Isabelle went back upstairs, ordered a pot of tea from room service, and settled in to catch up on TV. At ten, C-SPAN would be airing the series premiere of “Senate Confirmation Hearing on the Nomination of Susan Schwab to be U.S. Trade Representative.”

But well before that, the FBI was at her door.

They wanted to know about some phone calls made to and from this room.



“So Ken,” the Chairman said, “what’s your ‘second opinion’ of these twenty authors?”

Ken tossed the folder across the desk. “I can’t tell you anything based on this.”

“Why not? Our esteemed Mr. McGregor could, with no credentials *whatsoever*.”

“Alan: he had them each fill out a personality quiz from *Parade Magazine*.”

The Chairman turned conciliatory: “Help me out here, Ken. We’re going to shoot down Douglas’s cherished plan. I thought you’d lend a bit of dignity to the proceedings.”

Ken winced and looked away. “If you want a hatchet job, go find somebody else.”

But in the end they reached an agreement. Ken would say that full profiles would be the best thing to do. Alan would note there simply wasn’t enough time left for that, and regrettably they’d have to pass on McGregor’s proposal.

The Chairman rehearsed this speech. He even struck his palm with folded eyeglasses for emphasis.

During the meeting, Ken would mainly observe the Publisher’s behavior. The Chairman was worried about him.



“Of all forms of transportation,” I said to Kate,
“guess which one is used by *the largest number* of
American commuters.”

“Trick question, right?” she asked.

“Maybe. Go on and try: you’ll never guess.”

“Mmmm,” she said, “I’ll guess ‘elevator’—since
we’re riding in one right now.”

I needed to time these things better.



Pith Helmet Press. The bustling office was everything I imagined, its reception area a monument to the imprint's proud tradition.

Over the sofa, a lighted Mercator map showed the current time in *every part of the world* – even places like India where they're a half-hour wrong. Another wall held a glowing treasury: shelves and shelves of *National Geographic*.

Opposite that, the real glory: A display case crammed with four decades' worth of Longitude Awards. And dozens more of their predecessor, the Stanleys.

How ironic, I thought. After years of trying to get a manuscript INTO this place, now I'm trying to take one OUT.

"Tom Kush to see Douglas McGregor," I told the receptionist. "I don't have an appointment, but Doug and I have spoken. I can wait."

"He's got an all-day meeting, but he might come by during the breaks," she suggested.

I sat and opened a handsome waiting-area book: *Surveying Pins from the Collection of Mary and George Bloch*.

Kate was deep into her old Pléiade edition of Proust.



Across Sixth Avenue, FBI sharpshooters had also set themselves up in a hotel room. They had removed the through-wall air conditioner and carefully snipped away some vanes from the housing for a clear shot.

When the Kushes came out of the office building, agents below would neatly intercept them and push them into the car at the curb.

From the hotel, they would watch. If it *wasn't* a clean arrest, the sharpshooters would provide the necessary backup.

They'd been warned—there was a good chance this would turn ugly.



The receptionist brought us coffee on a tray and headed back to her desk. Leggy in jeans and heeled sandals, she wore a tight top that seemed to be a men's ribbed undershirt.

When she sat down at her desk Kate nudged me. "Do you think she's cute?" she whispered.

"Hmm. In an intelligent, lean, sexy-without-makeup sort of way: yes."

"What's with the Mona Lisa tattoo?"

"Look closer: it's an *L.H.O.O.Q.*," I explained. "Hey, is it okay for me to look at her?"

"I think so—as long as she keeps those *glasses* on."



Zak hadn't slept much, but after he took a couple more pills he found he could stand in one place for hours at a time.

His doppelganger in the mirror: his Jim Morrison.

Draw. Each time they were in perfect synch.

And perfect balance. One can shoot but can't kill; the other can't shoot but can't die. *And I can think all this bullshit and know it's bullshit and watch myself believe it, all at the same time. Like a moth circling the light and smacking the ceiling until it drops.*

The floor was writhing with centipedes and silverfish.

Hey, J-i-i-i-m M-o-o-orrison: let's go out for a little walk.



The Driver was having a really bad morning.

With the clock radio blaring salsa, he woke to find his partner had vanished. The note said “see you down at breakfast.”

This guy knew nothing. You don’t show your face on a job any more than you need to. Besides, these midtown buffets cost a fortune—way more than the *per diem*. He’d better not charge it to the *room*.

But that wasn’t the worst. When he’d hauled him back upstairs, the door was propped open by a linen cart. A few minutes and \$50 later, he watched the partner devour a bagel. With a full mouth the guy asked, “Do you think she noticed the rifle?”

Irritably, the Driver went over to the window and started fiddling with the air conditioner again. It was stuck halfway out of its housing, flakes of rust on the carpet around it. “Hey, you know what we need?” he said. “A *Phillips screwdriver*.”

“The funny kind like a little cross?”

“That’s right: the funny kind. Here’s a twenty. Why don’t you go find a hardware store and buy us one?”

The Driver closed the door behind him, bolted and chained it, and then dragged the media cabinet against it for good measure.



When the FBI left her room, Isabelle put C-SPAN on mute and made a call to Washington. Surprisingly, she had Senator Levin on the line within minutes.

“Isabelle *Davidson!*” he said with a politico’s warmth.

“Carl, you *remembered* me.”

“Remember?” he chuckled. “How could I forget *the only person I ever lost an election to?*”

Isabelle had canvassed tirelessly for McGovern in ’72, and the Senator always told this story with a little laugh.

But he never seemed to think it was very funny.

“Now Carl,” she reminded him, “we *both* went to the state nominating convention.”

“You didn’t *lose*,” she explained. “You just . . . *came in second.*”

Levin cleared his throat. “Isabelle, I’m sure you didn’t call to lord it over me again,” he said smoothly. “What’s your concern?”

“I’m calling about *police state* tactics . . . and my family.”



The phone rang. “Pith Helmet Press,” the receptionist answered, then switched to German. It rang again: she answered in French and segued into Arabic.

Now she was chewing somebody out in Farsi. “Iranian writers,” she sighed after hanging up.

When the mail arrived, she slouched in her chair, hands in her jeans pockets. “Hi Roy,” she said. “Got anything for me?”

Roy put a pile of thick 10x13 envelopes on her desk. “Just the usual.”

She grabbed the stack and started to shuffle through it on her lap.

“You know what?” he said. “I wish I could just open all these manuscripts, put em in their SASEs and mail them right back to the authors. I’d save you a lot of trouble.”

She held up one of the envelopes and eyeballed the return address. “Roy,” she said distractedly, “don’t trouble your little ponytail over me.”



Zak finally noticed his phone vibrating.

He'd been busy.

He was concentrating on *what could be more surreal than firing a pistol into a Grand Central Concourse?*

It was Angela. She had her Jack Russell manuscript. A manuscript on a leash.

“Meet me in the lobby?” she asked. “I’m so excited.”

Now *that* was one messed up girl. She was crazy and she didn’t even know it.



As Brownie was adding pins to his map of Manhattan, the name “O’Malley” came up on his phone console again.

“Brownie here. Hello—*Johnson*,” he said.
“*Psych!*”

“OK, you win,” Johnson grumbled. “Look, we’ve got Robbie L. in for questioning again. Any ideas?”

“Hang on a sec.” Brownie unfolded a note he’d just been handed. After reading it three times, he tapped his pencil on the underlined words—The Hill.

“Hello? Do you want me to call back later?”
Johnson asked.

Brownie took a deep breath.

“Johnson,” he said slowly, with a slight lilt, “what do you say we try a different approach? Assume Robbie’s *not* lying—what would you do?”

“You mean ‘reverse mindology?’”

“No, really. What if he wasn’t lying? Take your time.”

“... I’d see what that other security camera had—the one behind him.”

“Good. Yes, that’s good. Why don’t you get the video? And transmit it to our imaging lab. In, oh, the next *ten minutes*, say?”



When the receptionist came back from the conference room, I was waiting at her desk.

“Excuse me,” I said, “but you have something of mine here.” I pointed to the envelope with my manuscript.

She looked incredulous. “Jack Russell’s book?”

“My pen name. I’m claiming this as my manuscript,” I said boldly.

She said nothing, so I played my trump card: “And I have the backing of the *United States Postal Service*.”

With a flourish, I produced a mail receipt and held it next to the stub on the envelope.

“See?” I said. “Every one of these certificates is uniquely numbered, with two portions, each bearing that *same identifying code*. Look at these numbers. They match *exactly*.”



Holding that slip, I was transported back in time to the Back Bay Post Office.

“Charlene,” the clerk had called out loudly, “I need your help here.”

Raising his voice even more, he said, “*Just how do you mail the manuscript of a future bestselling novel?*”

I was a little embarrassed by all this attention. Everyone on both sides of the counter seemed to be watching and listening.

The Supervisor yelled back as she approached: “Well, Leo, is it insured?”

“*Bingo!* You have asked the perfect question,” Leo shouted. “Because what we have here is a regular *conundrum*. In one sense,” he said, looking at me for confirmation, “in one sense, it’s worth *millions of dollars*. But—and at the *very same time*—it’s really nothing more than a stack of *used printer paper*.”

Charlene folded her arms, leaned on the counter, and gave me a long once-over.

“Certified,” she said, and turned on her heel.



Johnson and O'Malley looked at the cleaned-up image they'd downloaded from DC. Robbie L. *hadn't* been lying: the smudge in Kate's hand really was just a Blackberry.

O'Malley clicked on "+" a few times. Now they could see the message she'd threatened to send, like a large print edition of itself.

Johnson gave a low whistle. "Wow, that is *blistering*; I hope she never complains about *me*."

O'Malley slapped him on the arm. "Hey, I've already checked on that," he said, reaching in a file drawer.

He sat on the edge of the desk and held up two Strive for Five survey forms.

"Here's the first," O'Malley said, laying it on the desk like a playing card. "She rated us '4' for the packages incident."

He placed the second one alongside it. "Now look at this. The stolen bag? She wrote in a five-*plus*."



The housekeeper knocked loudly for a long time, then opened the chained door and yelled in. “Don’t you hear me in there?”

Finally, one of the FBI sharpshooters went to quiet her down. “I’m busy right now,” he said in stage whisper. “Please go away.”

“You those FBI men, right?” she said.

“Where did you get that idea?” he laughed.

She wrinkled her forehead. “Don’t be silly; everyone in housekeeping talk about it. It’s a *big day*.”

He decided to ignore this. “What do you *want*?” he asked.

“Your friends upstairs, those other FBI? You should help them. They don’t get the conditioner out so easy.”

She peered into the room behind him. “See, you do a *nice* job. But they got trouble.”

“Did you say *upstairs*?”



Now it was a standoff. The receptionist and I stared at each other. The package lay between us on the desk.

In my hand, I held the numeric key authenticating my ownership. In her hand, a strappy Jimmy Choo sandal, its 5-inch stiletto menacing my face.

“Careful with that,” I said quietly. “You could poke someone’s eye out.”

Suddenly, a large, unshaven man burst into the room. “Angela, what’s going on?” he said.



“Douglas,” she answered, not taking her eyes off me. “You’re just in time.”

So that was McGregor! Now I could clear everything up.

“*Buonorotti Anagram* came in today,” she went on, “and this guy’s trying to steal it.”

Before I could explain, with a great howl McGregor lunged at me and dragged me to the floor. And as Kate dived in to separate us, Angela ran off with the package.



“Did you hear that?”

The FBI sharpshooter kept looking through his scope, limbering up his fingers one hand at a time.

“I said, *did you hear that?* They’re calling us off.”

Without changing position, he said “No, I didn’t hear that. And you didn’t either. We have agents to protect.”

“They’re *calling us off!*” he hissed. “Something’s happened and they’re calling off the backup.”

“Screw it. Maybe you heard wrong.”

After a minute of silence, he sat back and looked up. “Okay, okay. See if they’ll confirm it. And ask them what the hell is going on upstairs?”



The elevator door opened. Barefoot and out of breath, Angela saw Zak across the lobby and pointed to a spot to meet.

“This is it! *The Buonorotti Anagram!* But we have to get out of here: they know I took it.”

Zak turned away from her, pulled out his pistol, and fired a warning shot into the ceiling.

He slowly swung around. The commotion in the lobby died out as everyone hit the deck.

“*You’re . . . all . . . under . . . arrest,*” he commanded in the silence.

“Zak, what are you *doing?* We have to get *out* of here.”



Everything went red when he hit her, and she could smell the blood even before it started to pour from her nose and mouth.

“You little *bitch!*” he screamed. “What are *you* doing?”

He grabbed her above the elbow and shook her hard. “You think you can be *two people?* Do you?”

She shrieked. “*Zak, what are you talking about?*”

He jammed the muzzle into her ear. “Don’t *lie* to me, bitch! Do you want to be *two people?* . . . *Do you?*” He pulled her close and twisted the gun at her head. “Say yes.”

“I *don’t know*. . . *I . . . yes!*” she sobbed through the blood.

“Okay . . . that’s better,” he said quietly. “That’s good. Don’t worry. You can be two people. Two people is fine, you know? It’s just that one of them . . . has . . . to die.”

Holding the gun at her ear, Zak walked Angela across the lobby. He put his foot up and kicked the handicap access plate.

The door swung open and a smell of wet sidewalk came in. Slowly they stepped outside, into gunfire.

EPILOGUE

A week later, AmeriMedia announced Douglas McGregor's departure "to pursue other interests"—which in this case he actually had. After a few days' rest, Doug started using his severance package to buy up obscure software patents. He plans to sue Microsoft for a big piece of their MS Office revenue, going back at least to 1994.

Soon after that, Ken Davidson also left AmeriMedia, deciding he'd done more than a lifetime's worth of pop mindology. Now in semi-retirement, he's working with Angela's father on a book project: a study companion for *The Anxiety of Influence*.

The ballistics report cleared the FBI: both bullets had been fired from the Driver's rifle. The agents on the ground received citations for their work. So did Johnson and O'Malley.

The Driver was actually a very good shot, so Zak was lucky to be caught in the FBI's trap and jerked aside. But Zak is being held for long-term observation and faces pretty serious criminal charges later on.

After a week in the hospital, Angela was released and moved in temporarily with her father. She has bridgework and reconstructive surgery to go through, but ultimately she should be fine.

The incident left The Undermind in a shambles. Easily captured in his barricaded room, the Driver turned state's evidence. He produced a long list of names and an impressive paper trail for the prosecutors.

His partner plea-bargained to pay for breakfast out of pocket and was let go.

Dan, I was sorry to read that *The da Vinci Code* played to a sullen reception at Cannes, and then

dropped out of sight after a promising first weekend in release—even without McGregor’s negative efforts. I hope you *still feel great* about the runaway success and notoriety of the book, though.

If it’s any comfort, you’ll notice that *The Buonorotti Anagram* has not appeared. And it won’t. Now that I’ve finished Ken’s exercise with the yellow highlighter, I see my book really *was* mostly copied. All that’s left is a 6,000-word story, which I’ve attached as an appendix.

As a further annoyance, Dollar messed up the billing. They omitted the drop-off fee but hit us with a much higher charge for mileage instead. Kate’s been working on this by phone and email ever since.

Talk about life’s little lessons: if we’d taken our own car, we could have saved the rental, the extra fees, the \$75 we paid to have that car towed in, and now this hassle factor.

And Dan—since we had to spend extra time in New York, guess what? I got a *parking ticket* back home on street-cleaning day.

END