

## A Wrong Number

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The phone rang at 3:00 a.m., and Hall didn't *think* the phone was supposed to be that damn loud. In the split second during which he bolted upright like a catapult being fired, he had a vision of someone sneaking into his apartment, turning up the volume knob on his phone, sneaking back out again... and *then* calling. More trouble than it was worth, and yet—

The phone rang again. The sound was like machine gun fire. Deb pulled the covers over her head. They'd been married for five years, she'd been living here for seven, but at certain times, their home reverted back to being simply *his* apartment, and this was one of those times. Hall staggered for the phone—three long steps, and he took them all in a single, crashing, exhausted leap lest the phone shriek a third time.

“Hello?”

He listened to the voice on the other end of the phone. It was low, threatening, and speaking to the entirely wrong person. Hall listened for a bemused moment and then interrupted his caller: “Hey, hey. Do I *sound* like someone named Monica? Probably not, I'd guess.”

“For crying out loud, don't engage him in conversation.” From under the covers, muffled but audible.

“Well, I can't do that because I don't know anyone named Monica,” said Hall, into the phone. Deb sat up. Hall was listening again. His expression seemed to communicate that the man on the other end of the line didn't believe him. “Well, if I come across her, I'll certainly warn her, but it's going to be tricky because I have no idea who you're talking about. Hello?” Hall listened for one more second and then hung up.

“What was that about?”

“A psycho announcing his intentions. To the wrong person, as it turns out. I wouldn't want to be this Monica person.” Hall got back into bed.

“What did he say he was going to do?”

“He wasn't specific but I didn't get the sense that it would include a candlelight dinner. He said he was ‘out and coming back.’ And to watch for him. Creepy.”

“Out of jail?”

Hall thought about it. “I guess. What else could you be out of? ‘I fell in a hole, but now I’m out and coming back.’ Doesn’t sound quite right.”

“Brr.” Deb pulled the covers around her neck and stared at the ceiling.

“Sounded drunk,” Hall added, intending it as a measure of comfort. But then he realized there was nothing comforting about that fact. He then decided he didn’t need words to comfort her, and he held her around, which turned out to be the wiser choice, and soon they were both asleep again.

The phone rang at 4:00 a.m. this time and Hall, springing awake, thought, *This guy probably doesn’t have a day job*. He lurched for the phone and reached it before it could ring a second time.

“This isn’t Monica!” he said by way of greeting. Deb had migrated under the covers again.

Hall listened. Then he said, incredulously, “Because you called here *last night* looking for her! Jesus.” And hung up.

“What’d he say?” Muffled from under the covers.

“He thought he had found a flaw in my argument. If I’m not Monica, then how did I know he was *looking* for Monica? Yessir, he sure thought he had me there.” Hall got into bed and the phone rang again.

“Goddammit.” Back to the phone.

“Just unplug it!” Under the covers but no longer the least bit muffled.

“That’s what I’m going to do as soon as I say—” Hall picked up the phone “—you have the wrong number! There is no Monica here. We’re unplugging the phone. Goodbye.”

Slam. Hall unplugged the phone and let the cord drop behind the dresser, and instantly regretted that because he would need a fishing rod or a mutant rubber stretchy arm to get it back out of there, but the hell with that, he could deal with it tomorrow. Or *later*, to be more exact. Hall got into bed, feeling horribly awake but determined to pretend he was tired and on the verge of sleep. He closed his eyes and began the charade. Out in the apartment, the kitchen phone rang. *Let the answering machine get it*, he

thought, and then realized he had just unplugged the phone that was connected to the answering machine. The phone in the kitchen rang and rang. Hall pulled the covers over his head.

The third night, they waited for the call. They had both come to see it, in only two days, as inevitable, like the delivery of the morning paper. It was, thank goodness, Spring Recess, and they both had the next five days off. There were essays to be graded and lesson plans to sketch out, of course, but none of the actual arduousness of getting up and going to school. And, frankly, even the essays and lesson plans were on hold. The kids were waiting until the last minute to do *their* homework, after all.

The third night, they rented three Jackie Chan movies and watched him fight bad guys with everything he could get his hands on—a chair, a fire extinguisher, a *stapler*.

Thankfully, the call came earlier than on the other nights: 2:00 a.m., as the credits were rolling on the last movie. Deb was ready. She made herself sound like a person who had moments ago been in a deep sleep: “...Hello? Yes?” She pulled the phone away from her ear all of a sudden. Hall could hear garbled lunatic squawking coming from the receiver.

Deb hesitantly listened again, tried to get a word in edgewise, gave up and listened some more. Eventually she found a gap to squeeze in the line she had been saving up for all night: “Well, Jake, you can just come here if you want, but I’m moving out this weekend and you’ll never find me, so tough nuts.” Outraged lunatic squawking in reaction to this. “I’m hanging up now, Jake. Bye bye, love.” And *finis*.

Hall said, “Jake?”

“He introduced himself this time,” said Deb. “In case this Monica person has more than one psycho out to kill her.”

“He threatened to kill you?”

“No, he threatened to kill Monica, who he thought was me. He is a deeply unhappy individual.” Deb took a deep, ragged breath—she was more rattled than she wished to let on.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I hope we dissuaded him. Not just from calling here again, but from trying to find Monica, whoever she is. If he thinks she moved, maybe she’ll be okay. Maybe he’ll give up.”

“You really think he’s coming here to kill her?”

“He made that pretty clear.”

“Yeah, but why would he announce it? And warn her? Maybe he’s just trying to scare her.”

Deb shrugged, unconvinced. “He’s obviously crazy. And he was just as obviously drunk. He was calling from a bar, I think—you could hear it in the background.”

“Well, hopefully you threw him off the track and you’ve saved this Monica person from having to deal with this nutjob. Not that we’ll ever know.”

“Mmm.” Deb was sort of looking past him absently, off on some mental tangent. Then she said, “I’m really tired. Bedtime.”

Five minutes later, in bed, staring at the ceiling, she said, “I’ve been trying to think of a way we might track her down...”

“Who? Monica?”

“...but I can’t imagine how we could do that,” she finished.

“Yeah, are you kidding? We don’t know her last name, or anything about her.”

“Her phone number is probably close to ours.”

Hall rolled over so he could gawk at her. “Even if her phone number is one digit off, Deb, which digit? In which direction?”

“I know.”

“And that’s a pretty enormous assumption in the first place. She could be some girl he met in a bar, he asked for her phone number, she wrote down the first seven digits that came to mind, and we won the lottery.”

“I know, I know,” said Deb, in the tone of one who had already been down this same path.

Not that Hall noticed. The absolute enormity of the task of finding Monica had fired his imagination. “Hell, that might not even be her real first name. We couldn’t possibly know *less* about this girl.”

“Except that someone is coming to kill her,” Deb said evenly. “And *we’re* the ones getting the warning. Monica doesn’t know anything about it. She might be in for a very big surprise.”

That stopped Hall. When you put it *that* way, with the image of some woman walking blithely through her life, unaware of the looming danger, it was hard to resist. Of course Deb would want to track down this person.

“Well,” said Hall. “First of all, I’m still not convinced this guy would be stupid enough to call his would-be victim to announce her upcoming murder. He’s a crank. And even if he’s not... I just can’t fathom how to do it.”

“I know. It’s okay. Let’s go to sleep, I’m totally exhausted. Waiting up for the call was a dumb idea. Better we had slept until the phone rang.”

“If he thinks she’s moving, and that he won’t be able to find her, maybe you’ve put him off for good. Maybe it’s already over,” Hall said. He knew he didn’t sound very convinced of this.

“Well, we’ll know tomorrow night, won’t we?”

The next morning over breakfast, Deb said, “We could call the police.”

Hall nodded. “I thought of that, too. And tell them what?”

Deb took a spoonful of cereal and said nothing.

Hall was trying to focus, not very successfully, on the grading of essays. Thirty-three essays on the topic of “The Importance of the Constitution.” Seven of the first ten began with the same first sentence: “The Constitution is very important,” differing only in the creativity of the spelling. Hall’s mind kept drifting, primarily over to Deb, who was on the phone and getting increasingly upset as she paced back and forth across the living room.

“Listen, I know I can order Caller ID,” she said, and not for the first time, “but what *that* means is there must be some way of recording who has called a given phone line. Do you understand?” If this representative of the phone company understood, he or she would be the first. Deb had been at this for a while.

Deb fought on, and the calmness of her voice was belied by the expression on her face, which was one of murder. “I may *indeed* order Caller ID, but I don’t have it presently. And what I need is to know who has called this line recently. In the *past*. The phone numbers of the people who have called this telephone line over the last several days. There *must* be a way of doing this.”

*The Constitution is important because it gives us our freedoms.* God have mercy. Hall was getting a headache. He wanted to tell Deb just to give up already, but he knew from past experience that that would be a pointless waste of breath. She had sunk her teeth in, and good. If they could figure out where this guy Jake had been calling from, maybe they could get a toehold into his identity, and thus into Monica’s. It was, they both knew, a huge, huge stretch, and now Deb was being stymied before she even took the first step. This did not surprise Hall. Phone company representatives traditionally were the last people on Earth to know how to use their own gigantic, all-encompassing network.

And just like that, something clicked into place in Hall’s brain. Yes. He knew someone who knew the phone system better than the phone company itself. Didn’t he? It was very possible. Adam Dulaine. Gangly, with a long neck, sitting in the back of 5th period Social Studies drawing elaborate fantasy comic-book characters. It was generally believed that Adam was some kind of genius at computers, already programming in seven different languages. Whether that was true or not, Hall had no idea—most of the kids were techno-savvy, and most of the teachers were technophobes who mourned the passage of the old-fashioned ditto machine. Of course Adam would look like a genius, by comparison.

But in an odd moment a few months back, Hall had gotten it into his head, towards the end of class, to ask about his students’ weekend plans. Adam had said, “Oh, you know. Hang out with friends at Citicorp.”

Hall had said, with some surprise, “You hang out at a bank?” Adam had simply blinked at him, as if he had accidentally said too much and dared not say more.

Hall had since learned that the Citicorp building was an officially unofficial hangout for computer hackers of all kinds. That seemed to give some credence to the Adam-the-genius theory.

And weren't computer hackers continuously breaking into the phone company's network?

And was Hall sitting here contemplating asking one of his students to *commit a crime*?

Yes. That would certainly go over well, when they were all caught. Hall could see the headlines already. He gave his head a brisk shake in an attempt to clear away the last minute's worth of thought, and dove back into Rebecca Pointman's considered opinion of the first amendment.

Deb was asking to speak to a supervisor. Deb was almost certainly being told that the supervisor was out to lunch, until next Thursday. Deb, in a surprise twist, abruptly gave up and hung up on whoever she was talking to. She flopped down on the couch, the very picture of defeat.

"Holy smoke," was all she said, and the phone rang. It was still in Deb's hands, and she immediately answered. She then sat upright, which caught Hall's attention. She sat this way for several moments, looking like she was receiving a moderate electric shock. Then she said simply, "Yes, I heard you." And hung up.

Hall looked at her, baffled.

Deb said, "That was him. Jake."

Hall instinctively looked at a clock. It was just after 2:00 p.m. "So early? What did he say?"

Deb said, "He said he ran into one of my friends today. That Bunny says hello."

"Bunny? There are really people named Bunny?"

"And he said not to bother calling her for a while. That she wouldn't be home."

"Oh." Hall considered this. "I guess you are taking that in the worst possible way."

"And he told me not to worry. That I'd be seeing her soon enough."

The Citicorp building is a giant, elegant, glassine skyscraper on Lexington Avenue in the 50s. It is set back from the sidewalk, facing the corner, thus creating a large plaza in front that hosts brown-bag lunchers every weekday, often to the

accompaniment of the daily street musician. It was heading towards dusk when Hall and Deb exited the adjoining subway station.

“This whole thing has put a rock in my stomach this big,” said Hall, using his hands to indicate a fairly substantial rock. The plaza wasn’t bustling, but there was the odd cluster of kids here and there, sitting and smoking and chatting. A lot of kids, if you really took a step back and looked at the big picture.

“What does he look like?” asked Deb.

“Like all of these kids, actually. I don’t see him specifically, though. Let’s walk around the block.”

They walked furtively past a group of skinny young men, who silently watched them before resuming their conversation.

“If you really think this is a bad idea,” said Deb, “then maybe we should just go.”

“Fine with me. The subway’s right over there.”

“Hall!”

“Oh,” said Hall. “That was rhetorical. I see.”

“You can just talk to this guy. See if there’s a way to get this information without... you know.”

“Doing something illegal! Breaking into a major corporation’s computer system!”

“Yes. That.”

“If we can find him, we’ll talk to him. If not, it’ll have to wait until I see him in class, although I’m having a hell of a hard time envisioning keeping him after class so I can ask him if wants to crack into the phone system for me. As extra credit.”

“It might be too late by then,” Deb said.

“Well, I’m definitely not calling him at home. That crosses some unidentifiable line. *Another* line, different from the one we’re crossing *right now*.”

“Maybe,” Deb said, glancing back at the Citicorp building. “Maybe you can ask one of the others if this guy doesn’t show.”

Now Hall could not help but gape. “Ask some strange kid? If he can help me break into the phone company’s computers? Even if he could do it, he wouldn’t give me the time of day. They’ll think I’m a cop.”

Deb glanced at him. “Hall, they are not going to think you’re a cop.”

And *now* Hall had the idea he was being insulted. “Why not?”

Deb rolled her eyes. “Maybe it’s because I already know you’re not a cop, and that’s why I can’t picture anyone thinking you are one.” That assuaged him for a millisecond, until she added, “Anyone on *Earth*.”

Hall frowned. He couldn’t find a way to argue that *lots* of people *routinely* mistook him for a policeman, so he said nothing. And besides that, here was Adam Dulaine, of all people, emerging from a nearby deli and walking his way. He was chatting with a second fellow and lighting a cigarette, and he walked by Hall and Deb without so much as a glance. Hall moved to intercept and mentally set his phasers to “stun”.

“Adam,” said Hall, which all by itself made Adam’s head wrench around to see who was addressing him. “Time for a pop quiz. You *do* have a #2 pencil on you?”

Adam seemed on the verge of reacting to Hall’s mere presence when he was brought up short by what Hall *said*: A pop quiz? In the middle of Spring Break? In the middle of a city street? And so instead of saying the obligatory “Mr. Hall!”, he just stood there, frozen. Adam’s compatriot, who had even less idea what was going on, looked like he was deciding whether or not to run.

Adam regained his senses and finally said it: “Mr. Hall! What are you doing here?”

Hall shrugged, gesturing to the city around them. “Just taking a walk. This is my wife, Mrs. Hall. This is one of my students, Adam Dulaine.” An awkward handshake followed this introduction. “Since you’re here, though, Adam,” Hall continued, “I’ve got a question for you. If you have a minute.”

Adam blinked. What was this now? But he said, “Um, sure.”

“Come walk with us. It’ll just take a sec.”

Adam turned to his friend. “I’ll, uh. I’ll be back over in a moment.” The friend, apparently a mute, nodded and walked briskly off. Adam turned back to his out-of-place teacher. “So. What’s up?”

“Well, it’s an odd question,” said Hall, starting to walk, away from the Citicorp building. Deb put on a face like she wasn’t even a part of this, and walked slightly behind the two men.

“I’ve heard around that you’re good with computers. Things like that. Mr. Malone brought it up one time, said you helped him reboot or something.”

Adam shrugged, clearly waiting for the point of all this to emerge before he committed himself one way or another. Hall took a breath and waded in a little further. “Well, it’s funny, you know Caller ID? The thing you hook up to your phone and it tells you who’s calling?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, we just got it,” said Hall, telling not a lie but a near-truth, since they planned to get it shortly, “and somehow we got it into our heads that it would even tell us who called us in the days before we bought it. Like, you’d plug it in, and there’d be all these old phone numbers on it, stretching to the last few weeks.”

“Oh,” said Adam. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“As we found out,” Hall said, nodding. “What I’m curious about is, if there’s *any* way to find out the numbers of people who called us before we had Caller ID installed.”

“Hell, even Caller ID won’t work if the person choosing you purposely blocks his number.”

“Well, let’s pretend the people calling me don’t know that.” Hall certainly hadn’t known that. And he doubted Jake did.

“Why?” Adam asked. “Who’s calling you?”

Hall made an ambiguous waving-of-the-hands gesture. “It’s sort of a long story. It’s not really that important. I was just curious.”

“Well. There is a way. I can look it up if I knew your phone number.”

“You can?”

“The only thing is..., um.” Adam glanced up at the sky. “It’s not something I’m *supposed* to know how to do.” Hall was just figuring out how to respond to that when Adam continued, all in a hurry, “I don’t really do it much anymore anyway. Crack the phone system. It’s like, yo, I’ve *seen* this amusement park, right? I’ve been on all the rides, you know?”

Hall said, “So just how illegal is this? Am I asking you to jaywalk or am I asking you to murder somebody?”

Adam smiled cagily. “According to who? You hear the phone Moes talking”—Hall thought, *the phone Moes?*—“and we’re doing, like, a jillion dollars in damage every year. That’s bullshi...” Adam shut his mouth with a snap. Apparently, confessing to a minor felony to his teacher was no problem for Adam, but one simply did not swear.

“All right,” said Hall. “I don’t want to do anything that’ll get either of us in any trouble. I don’t want to break anything or steal anything. But if I could find out who’s been calling me over the last week or so, and if you think you can do that without doing a jillion dollars in damage, I’d like to ask you to do that.”

Adam shrugged. “Sure thing. You have to give me your phone number. I don’t guess you’re going to pay me or anything.”

Hall hadn’t even thought of that. Somehow, paying for this service seemed far, far worse than merely soliciting it. “I’ll tell you what. Next time I see you drawing comic books in my class, I won’t scream at you.”

“You don’t scream. You just make fun of me.”

“Then I won’t do that.”

“You can, I don’t care. I’ll do it as a favor. You’re a good teacher.”

Hall was absurdly touched, and, for a moment, speechless. He finally found simple politeness: “Thank you, Adam.”

“This means, though, I’m going to have your phone number. That doesn’t worry you?”

“Well, if I start getting crank calls, I guess I’ll know who it is, won’t I?” said Hall. And he thought: *I mean, more crank calls.*

They had the numbers the next day—Adam must have gone straight home to work on this little extra-curricular assignment. Hall thought of him in action, and was presented with the image of this skinny young man, concentrating mightily, surrounded by large black boxes, wires snaking every which way in multi-colored bundles. But of course that was ridiculous, as out-of-date as imagining Adam doing his homework with charcoal on the back of a shovel. Adam’s hacking activities probably consisted of him sitting on the couch with a laptop, a single wire leading to his cable modem, and one eye on the Cartoon Network.

Adam called at eleven o'clock the next morning, which would normally have been fine, but Jake had called again, at 4:00 a.m. These late night calls were getting to him—Hall felt like someone had pulled a large wool sock over his head. How could they forget to turn off the phone at night? And yet they did. Hall and Deb were still in bed when Adam called, and you could hear the enthusiasm in his voice—he was *calling a teacher at home*. A totally alien concept.

“I got them,” he said. “It was easy. What’s your e-mail address? I’ll send them to you.”

So now Adam the computer hacker had his home phone *and* his e-mail address. But fifteen minutes later, they had a list of 23 phone numbers, and that woke Deb up fast. She was elated.

“No names,” Hall noticed. “Just the numbers.”

“Well, gimme,” said Deb. “How long can this take?”

Not long, as it turned out. There were only eight out-of-state numbers, and three of those were her parents. Two of the remaining numbers were the same, and Deb remembered that Jake had called two times in a row at one point. She called the four numbers in rapid succession: No answer; no answer; no answer; and then, just for variety, a wheezy voice inviting her to leave a message. Deb hung up. Great.

Deb padded back into the bedroom looking frustrated. Hall had given up on going back to sleep but could not quite bring himself to get out of bed, and so he was laying there reading a book.

“Stupid,” said Deb. “No answer at any of them. One was an answering machine, the rest were probably all pay phones. Well, of *course* he’d be calling from pay phones. I don’t suppose they hand you a cell phone as you leave prison a free man.”

“We don’t really know that he was ever *in* prison,” said Hall. Deb gave him a glare normally reserved for obstinate students. “Well, we *don’t*,” said Hall.

“He said he was out and coming back. Out of what?”

“Out of the army? Out of the cult that kidnapped him years ago?”

She ignored him. She was looking at the list of numbers. “I’ll bet these are all bars. He was definitely calling from a bar that first time I spoke to him. He goes somewhere, gets drunk, and gets another urge to threaten Monica. Couldn’t your guy get

the names of these places? Or where they are?” Hall opened his mouth to reply, but Deb said, “But I can see where they are. I have the area codes! This first one is in Los Angeles. Oh!” And she ran out of the room, and Hall closed his mouth again.

Yes, God bless the Internet. Deb sat down at the computer, tapped a few keys, and up popped the answers. And not just using the area codes—Deb had found a reverse directory, had typed in her list of phone numbers, and immediately got some results. In this way, she was able to trace a distinct eastward course for their friend Jake. He did indeed start in Los Angeles, at a bar called, simply, Pete’s. The next night, he called (twice) from Las Vegas, from Rudy’s Bar and Grille.

After leaving Vegas, Jake had made a big leap and wound up in Grand Junction, Colorado, at a place called Dry Well. What kind of name for a bar was *that*? To Deb’s mind, a bad one. Anyway, the next day, Jake had made it to Denver, Colorado, where he had called *not* from a bar, but from the residence of one Harold Manz. It was from Harold’s phone that Jake had announced that he’d run into Bunny, almost certainly to Bunny’s great dismay.

By this time, Hall had padded in, in socks and boxer shorts, and was looking over Deb’s shoulder as she typed.

“Well, I guess we know he’s driving,” he said.

“Unfortunately, yes. He should be here in a few days. Sooner, if he really floors it.”

“So what’s the plan?”

Deb shook her head. “I don’t know. Call these places again a little later, I guess, see if I can learn anything.”

“Well, what about this Harold Manz guy?”

“What about him?”

“I don’t know,” said Hall. “It just seems significant—that’s the one place he calls from that’s not a bar. And that was the one time he didn’t call in the middle of the night, God bless him.”

“So he stayed with a friend. Or a relative! What if Jake’s own last name is Manz? Oh my God!” And, zing!, she twirled around in her desk chair, back to the keyboard. The

Internet has any number of online phone books, covering the whole blessed country... and not one minute later, Deb discovered that there wasn't a Jake Manz to be found anywhere. Or Jacob.

"That doesn't mean there aren't any. It's not perfect."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Deb.

"If the guy really has been in prison, it's not likely he's had a phone number at all—not lately."

"There's a bunch of J. Manzes," she said. "None of them in Los Angeles, none in New York, none in Colorado. Here's one in Maine, but I don't suppose that'll amount to anything. I'll call, I guess. I hope this Monica person is willing to chip in to pay our phone bill if we save her life."

Hall was staring at the list of places Jake called from. L.A., Vegas, Grand Junction... "You know," he said, "If we assume for a moment that he actually killed this Bubbles person..."

"Bunny, not Bubbles. And I've *been* assuming that."

"Then Bunny probably lives in Denver, not Grand Junction or anywhere else he'd been. That was the only time he called in the afternoon, and he called specifically to mention Bunny. Jesus, he might have been calling from Bunny's own house."

Deb thought about it. "Bunny Manz?"

"What last name goes after Bunny and makes it sound reasonable? Her real first name was probably Gladys."

"All right," said Deb. "So what does this get us?"

"It gives us enough," said Hall, "to go to the police. Don't you think?"

It took a while to find someone who would speak to him. But Hall was patient. He had become increasingly discomfited by this whole matter, especially since the possibility arose that someone named Bunny had really been murdered. They'd been holding this particular hot potato for several days now, and here was an opportunity to pass it off into someone else's lap.

After giving him the phone numbers of a few different precincts around Denver, Deb went back to the Net to scour the Denver newspapers for any signs of Bunny's name.

Hall took a breath and dialed. "Police," someone answered.

"Yes, hello, I may have some information about a possible murder." Hall thought that was an intriguing opening statement.

"Do you know the name of the officer assigned to the case?" It was a woman, secretarial and efficient.

"I don't, no, I'm sorry."

"Okay. The name of the victim, then."

"Bunny," said Hall.

There was a small pause. "Last name?" she said.

"Um. I don't know for sure. It might be Manz."

"Spell that?"

He did, and there was a longer pause, and then she said, "All right, I'm going to pass you through to our CrimeTips hotline. Just follow the instructions." Hall suddenly understood she meant to pass him off to a recording, but as he said, "No wait!", there was a click, and the phone started ringing all over again. Hall hung up.

All right. Hall dialed a different number and took a different tack.

"Police," someone answered.

"Yes, hello. I would like to report a murder." The direct approach. Deb even stopped what she was doing and stared at him.

"Where are you, sir?"

Whoops. "I am in New York City. But the murder is probably in Denver."

"Probably?"

"I mean, it *is* in Denver."

"Please hold." A click, and suddenly Hall was listening to the radio. He slapped his forehead. *Probably*. They were going to send him to the Crank Phone Call Answering Service.

He was about to hang up and try again when a brusque male voice answered.

"Sergeant Davis."

Hall was astonished and took a moment to get back in the moment. “Yes. Yes. Sergeant Davis. I’m afraid I may have some information regarding a murder that took place in Denver.”

“All right, go ahead.”

“It’s, um.” Now that the moment had come, he wasn’t quite sure where to start. “It’s a little complicated. The murderer, if he really did kill someone, has almost certainly left your jurisdiction by now.”

There was a little pause. “*If* he killed someone?”

He really had to stop saying that. “I’m pretty sure he did,” Hall said lamely. “Listen, let me just ask you a question. Have you heard of a murder victim discovered in the past couple of days with a first name of Bunny?”

There was another little pause. Hall sensed that the ground was only getting shakier with Sergeant Davis. “Bunny?” said the Sergeant.

“I am absolutely serious,” said Hall, because it clearly needed to be said.

Sergeant Davis apparently decided to see where this might be going. “If someone named Bunny has been killed in the past 48 hours, you believe you would have pertinent information regarding that crime, is that right?”

“That’s it precisely,” said Hall, relieved.

“All right. I don’t know about anything like that out of *this* precinct. I think I would remember that name. Do you have a last name?”

“I’m afraid I don’t. It might be Manz.”

“It *might* be. May I ask how you came by this information?”

“You certainly may,” said Hall. “We’ve been getting calls from someone named Jake, who believes incorrectly that my wife is someone he knows. He’s dialing a wrong number and doesn’t know it, or something. And he called yesterday from Denver, from the home of, err...”

“Harold Manz,” said Deb.

“Right, Harold Manz,” said Hall. “And he announced that he had ‘run into’ this Bunny person, and that we shouldn’t bother trying to contact her anymore for a while. But that my wife would be seeing her soon. Which seemed pretty threatening to *me*.”

“Uh-huh,” said Sergeant Davis, non-committal.

“He’s made numerous threats in the past, thinking my wife is someone named Monica. We actually think he’s coming across the country to hurt this Monica person, whoever she is. And he may have hurt or killed this Bunny person as well.” *Bunny person*. That was a bad phrase to use in what was supposed to be a serious story. Hall bit his lip to prevent a truly inappropriate snort of laughter. That would have brought the conversation with Sergeant Davis to an abrupt end.

“So you think this man Jake called from, um, Bunny’s apartment,” said the sergeant, still taking this seriously for the moment.

“We think it’s a possibility. I have the address here...” Hall gave it to him.

“But you believe this man Jake may no longer be in the Denver area.”

“Probably not,” Hall admitted. “He’s been moving pretty fast. He started in Los Angeles only a few days ago.”

“And may I ask how you know that?”

That stopped Hall, and good. *Because I hired a teenager to hack into the phone system*. Although Hall specifically did not pay Adam any money, so he didn’t hire anybody. But that distinction would probably be lost on Sergeant Davis.

And then Hall said, “I have Caller ID!” Greatly relieved. And while it still wasn’t true, it would be true sometime tomorrow, and that was good enough. The Caller ID box was sitting here blandly, waiting to become useful.

“Do you have a last name for this Jake fellow?”

“No. I can’t tell you how much I wish we did. He’s been calling from pay phones, mainly. Bars. Before using Harold Manz’s phone, he called from a bar in Grand Junction named the Dry Well.”

“Dry Well?” Hall heard a subtle upshift in the sergeant’s attention level. It made him nervous.

“Yes...” he said.

“Hold on a minute,” said the sergeant, and suddenly Hall was listening to the radio again. Hall had the distinct feeling he was not going to be happy when Sergeant Davis came back.

Deb was looking at him. “What’s wrong?”

Hall said, “I’m on hold. Forget the Denver newspapers. Search the Grand Junction papers.”

“For anything in particular?”

Hall nodded. “Dry Well.” Deb gave him a look—*what is this about?*—and swiveled back in her chair.

Sergeant Davis returned. “Are you there?”

“Yes, still here.”

“What did you say your name was?”

Hall hadn’t said his name, and didn’t like this sneaky “What was that name again?” method of extracting it. Still, what was he supposed to do? “You can call me Mr. Hall,” he said.

“Hall? Mr. Hall, Grand Junction had an off-duty cop killed in Dry Well two nights ago. He and another man were stabbed to death during a bar fight.”

There had been a part of him desperately clinging to the idea that this was all just a magnificent misunderstanding, and that Jake really was en route to treat Monica to dinner at The Four Seasons. Hall could see the last strand of hope for *that* scenario swirling right down the drain.

“Well,” said Hall, just to show he hadn’t fainted.

Sergeant Davis suddenly had a lot more questions for him, but none he could answer. Did he have a description of Jake? No. Jake hadn’t called and described himself. Did he know what kind of car Jake was driving? Did he have a last name for Monica? No and no, and no to a few more questions besides that. When Sergeant Davis was satisfied that Hall’s ignorance was complete, he took Hall’s phone number and told him to expect a call from a Grand Junction detective, who would presumably have still more questions that Hall would be helpless to answer. After some tense closing pleasantries, Hall hung up and sat down, feeling drained and deflated.

He thought he might just go back to sleep, but as that thought entered his brain, Deb said, “Here it is.”

He had nearly forgotten she was in the room. “Here what is?”

“The Dry Well,” she said, looking at the computer monitor. “The story.”

Not wanting to, he stood up and looked at the monitor. Yes, here it was: Off-Duty Cop Slain at Local Bar.

A late-night bar fight has left two people dead, including an off-duty policeman. Patrick Bodin, 36, a twelve-year veteran of the Grand Junction Police Department, and Leopold Jankowski, 25, of Fayetteville, were pronounced dead on arrival after having been stabbed repeatedly during what was called a “brutal” bar fight. Police are said to have a description of the assailant, but no suspects are in custody.

Witnesses at Dry Well, on 275 Parkland Highway, described an argument between Jankowski and another man, which quickly turned violent. As the two men fought, Bodin stepped in to intercede.

“He said he was a cop and tried to break up the fight,” said Dry Well owner Theodore Zeller. “I think [Jankowski] had been stabbed at that point. We didn’t even see he had a knife until there was all this blood.”

The suspect apparently stabbed Bodin repeatedly, and then escaped the bar.

According to police spokesperson Harriet O’Donnell, police are said to be looking for a large man “6 feet or more, with brown hair and a goatee.” The suspect was seen leaving Dry Well in a silver Ford sedan.

“Well,” said Hall, again.

“You still think he’s just out of the army?”

Hall ignored that. “They know what kind of car he’s driving. He leaves the bar a bloody mess and hightails it out of there—how long could it be before they find him?”

“This happened two days ago!” said Deb. “The policeman you just spoke to didn’t seem to think they’d caught him, did they?”

Hall frowned. “No.”

“He might not even be in that car anymore. Isn’t that what criminals do? They switch cars right after the crime?”

“I have no idea,” said Hall. “Besides, it doesn’t sound like this guy knew he was going to commit a crime. He’s in a bar, he gets into a fight, he’s got a knife and he uses it. If it were *planned* I can see him setting things up so he can switch cars, but not the way it actually worked out.”

Deb was looking at him wide-eyed. Hall didn't know why. "What? What'd I say?"

"He called from Dry Well, right? That's how we got the number."

"Well, yeah," said Hall.

"What time did he call that night?" She spun around in her chair again and went through the papers on the desk, trying to find the printout of Adam's e-mail. She found it and scanned it.

Hall was thinking. "That was a couple of nights ago, when we watched the Jackie Chan movies."

"He called at around two o'clock our time, one o'clock in Colorado. That was the night I pretended to be Monica and told him I was moving. He was furious when I said that. I mean, it was scary."

"I remember."

"So he hangs up the phone and within the hour he's in a bar fight and two people are dead," she said.

Hall thought he got it. "So, what, it's *our* fault? I don't think so."

"Not entirely, but—"

"Not *remotely*," said Hall. "You pretended to be Monica so we could throw him off this woman's trail. We were trying to save this woman, whoever she is. *You* didn't stab anybody. There's no way any blame lands here. If Jake did this, the man is crazy, that's the beginning and end of *that* story."

Deb nodded, grudgingly. "All right," she said.

Hall rubbed his eyes. These damn late-night phone calls. He hadn't slept til 11:00 a.m. since college—he felt he was in some other time zone. Zaire, or something. "All right, then. So what's next. What are we trying to do here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... what are we trying to do? What's the goal? We're not trying to intercept Jake. He's in a car somewhere in the midwest. We're trying to warn Monica."

"Okay," said Deb. "But how do you want to do that without finding out who Jake is? All we have is her first name."

“Well, I don’t see where tracing Jake’s route is helping us. It’s just making us realize how much time we don’t have.”

“I was just trying to get *any* information,” Deb said, a bit defensively.

“Yes. You’re right. Who knows *what* will help us out. Lead to something. But what do we do now?”

“Well, I’m going to call the bars a little later,” said Deb. “That first bar, in Los Angeles, maybe he was a regular there until he skipped town.”

“I thought you thought he was in jail.”

“So he gets out of jail, goes to his old haunt. Why not?”

Hall shrugged. “Hey, if it works, fine with me.”

“If he was in jail...” said Deb, trailing off and staring into space.

Hall waited a few patient seconds, then said, “Yes...?”

“How’d he get out?”

“They do let you out eventually, in most cases. What, you think he escaped?”

“I have no idea.”

“That might have been on the news, even in New York. I don’t think prisoners escape from jail every day.”

Deb shrugged. “I think it makes the national news when they break out as a group, like those seven guys in Texas. I’ll check the papers in Los Angeles. But, no, I think if he was in jail in the first place—”

“You doubt it?”

“No, but you’ve been inserting ‘ifs’ into everything I say, I thought I’d save you the trouble. *IF* he was in jail in the first place,” she said again, “I think they let him out. His sentence was up, or whatever.”

“So how do we find someone named Jake who got out of a jail in L.A.?”

“With more phone calls,” said Deb, with a sigh.

What she wanted, she figured out after a while, was a parole officer in Los Angeles. If Jake really had been let out of jail, he was bound to have one. Deb didn’t know why this guy was in jail in the first place, but it probably wasn’t for having too many parking tickets. A guy like that, he’s going to have a parole officer. Someone, in

fact, who right now was probably wondering where Jake had run off to. He's probably not allowed across state lines, Deb thought. And he *definitely* wouldn't be allowed across state lines for the purpose of killing people.

And so while Hall dozed off on the couch to her repeated litany of questions, Deb threw herself into deep, tangled bureaucracy of the California Penal System, where she ran into one brick wall after another. Finding Jake's parole officer turned out to be just as difficult as finding Jake himself. Even the people who clearly *wanted* to help her (not that there were many of these) were thrown for a loss when they discovered that all Deb knew of her mystery man was his first name. They just didn't have a way of finding the right parole officer given so little information.

After three frustrating hours of this, she gave up. She hung up the phone and paced. Leave it to Hall to fall asleep right when she needed to talk this out with him.

There had to be a way to find this guy. There *had* to be.

Not knowing what else she could do, she picked up the phone again, and called Harold Manz's number. She didn't know what she might accomplish, and she certainly wasn't prepared when a slightly wheezy, tired voice answered with these surprising words:

"Hello, Monica."

It took her a second to find her voice, and then when she did, she couldn't make it make sense. All she said was, "How...? How...?"

The wheezy voice said, "I've got Caller ID. I recognized your number."

"But it's not Monica's number! It's my number!"

Silence from the voice as he tried to work this out.

Deb said, "Look, is this Harold Manz?"

"Yeah...?"

"My name is not Monica. Monica doesn't live here."

"So, what," said Harold. "She hasn't moved in yet?"

Exasperated, Deb said, "She's not moving in here! We don't even know her!" She steadied herself. "Look. I'm trying to find Jake. You're friends with Jake, aren't you?"

"You don't know who Monica is, but you know Jake?"

“We don’t know who Jake is either,” said Deb, and instantly regretted that as Harold lapsed into yet another palpably puzzled silence.

Finally he said, sensibly enough, “You just *asked* for Jake.”

Deb took a deep breath. “Yes. Yes, I did. Look, let me just start from the beginning, okay?”

“Awright,” said Harold Manz.

So Deb spelled it all out for him—the late-night wrong numbers, the drunken threats from Jake, and Deb’s attempt at thwarting Jake by pretending to be Monica.

“You told him you were Monica, and that you were moving,” said Harold.

“Yes.”

Harold, out in Denver, sighed. “Well, whatever-your-name-is, you have a problem. A big problem.”

“I do?”

“Your message to Jake got a little bit garbled. What Jake told me when he got here was, Monica had moved, and this was her new phone number, and he told me to get online and figure out the address.”

Deb felt all her blood slowly transmute into something thick and cold. She looked around for a chair, but they were all at least three steps away, and it didn’t occur to her that she could walk to any of them, so she stood there. “You gave him my address?” she said in a whisper.

“I thought I was giving him Monica’s address.”

“You gave him my *address*?”

“And he’s on his way there, young lady. So as I say, you have a problem. Jake... this is not a good person.”

“Did he kill Bunny?” Deb asked. “He called from your apartment and made it sound like...”

Harold, again sounding tired and set upon, said, “Yes. He probably did.”

“And you gave him what you thought was Monica’s address, so he could go there and kill her?”

“Look, missy,” said Harold, not sharply. Deb didn’t think Harold had it in him to sound sharp. He just sounded profoundly weary. “You haven’t met the man. I’m not going to tell him no.”

“All right,” said Deb, her head spinning. She had a great deal more to say on the subject of ethics and abetting murderers, but time was short and she had a lot more she needed to know. She glanced over at Hall, still snoozing deeply on the couch. Oh, was *he* in for a surprise when he woke up. “All right,” she said again. “Can you at least tell me why? Why is he so angry at Monica? Why did he kill Bunny?”

There was a small pause, after which Harold reluctantly said, “Well, seeing as you’re involved in this now, I can tell you what I know.”

He said: “I knew Jake when I was in New York. Jake and Monica both. I didn’t know them well, but, uh, I sold them things. You know?”

“You’re a drug dealer,” Deb suggested.

There was a long silence. When Harold spoke again, he said, “If I was a drug dealer... and I’m not saying I am... but my understanding is that drug dealers do not generally admit to being drug dealers over the telephone.”

“Oh,” said Deb, in a small voice. She was at last aware that she was wandering through a world where she had no experience whatsoever.

“Anyway, I knew them both,” said Harold. “Jake’s a big, *big* fella. Worked as a bodyguard, I heard, and a bouncer. Sometimes, just so you understand what you’re dealing with here, he would simply beat people up for money. You know? People would get behind on their loans and suddenly, there’s Jake.”

Deb was more and more dismayed. She wanted just to hang up the phone—cut off Harold Manz and go to the supermarket, find something nice to cook for dinner. Lead the normal life of a schoolteacher on vacation. How had things come so quickly to this point?

Harold was still talking. “So, the way I heard it, he was gonna go out to L.A., and break into movies. He told me about it once, this plan of his for getting rich. He was gonna take Monica and a friend of her’s out there, and make... you know.”

Deb thought she did. She closed her eyes. “All right,” she said.

“Not hardcore stuff, actually. I remember he was very clear about that, when he told me about it. He wanted to make those silly T&A movies they show on Cinemax at 3:00 a.m. That’s what he was going to do.”

“So I guess he went out there.”

“Yeah, he did,” said Harold, “That was a long time ago. What I heard was, he tried to rob a bank, while he was out there. Guy who told me this said he tried to raise money for his movie by *robbing a bank*.”

“Geez.”

“Well, it didn’t work, and he was arrested and that was that. I wouldn’t know nothing about what happened next, except that Jake showed up yesterday on my goddamn doorstep, here in Denver, and told me the rest. And don’t think I was happy to see him.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that Monica and the other girl testified against him, that’s what.”

“Oh,” said Deb. So there it was, as simple as that. His girlfriend helped put him in jail, and now he was coming here to get his revenge.

Harold said, “That’s it in a nutshell. He told me Monica had moved and gave me what he thought was her new phone number, and told me to get him an address. He remembered I knew computers and the Internet and all.”

Deb said, “What’s his last name?”

Another pause from Harold. “You didn’t hear it from me,” he said gravely.

“No. Of course not.”

“You sound like a nice person, so I’m going to tell you. Jake Schmidt. That’s his name.”

“All right. Thank you.”

“If I were you, I’d get out of there for a while. Go stay with friends. Let the whole thing blow over. He’ll get there, he won’t find Monica, and he’ll leave. Toot finis.”

Deb said, “At least I have a few days before he gets here. Assuming he’s still driving.”

One final little pause from Harold Manz. “Oh,” he said. “I guess there’s one more thing I should tell you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Hall opened his eyes and found himself staring at the couch cushions. Aha. Right. He had fallen asleep. Well, that wasn't very surprising, was it.

He flexed the kinks out of his neck, and rolled over on to his back, and saw Deb sitting there, in a chair, a foot away from the sofa, her arms crossed and a solemn expression on her face. Just sitting there, staring at what had been Hall's sleeping form.

"Um," said Hall. "Did I miss anything?"

Three minutes later, Hall was pacing around the room. Stomping, really. One of the things Deb loved about her husband was his ability to find some shred of humor in even the direst, bleakest circumstances... not that things had ever gotten particularly dire or bleak for them. There was the time they got a flat tire in an extremely rough part of town. That was about it for dire and bleak. Until now.

And Hall wasn't finding anything humorous about it at all. "It makes no goddamn sense," he said again.

"I know," said Deb.

"He called here thinking it was her phone number! We told him she was moving... away from this number. Away! To someplace else!"

"I know," said Deb.

"How did he manage to turn it around and now she's moving *to* this phone number?"

"He was drunk. He misunderstood."

"But he had the phone number in the first place! If he had a phone number, and he thought it was Monica's, then Monica must *live here!* And so when you told him you were moving, she must therefore be moving away!" He thrust out his hands in a gesture of, *Do you see? Do you see how simple this should be?*

"I know," said Deb.

"But now this guy is coming *here?*"

Deb nodded sadly. "And it gets worse."

Hall's expression of astonishment widened yet again. It now threatened to exceed the very boundaries of his face. "Worse? Worse how?"

Deb took a deep breath. “He’s not driving anymore. He took a plane from Denver.”

Hall stopped pacing. Deb could almost *see* this new fact, and all its terrible ramifications, sink into her husband’s brain like an invisible, razor-sharp surgical tool. At first he just looked paralyzed, and then he slowly found the sofa and sat. “A plane,” he said.

“Harold Manz gave him money,” said Deb. “Jake threatened him, or maybe Harold just wanted to get rid of the guy. He gave Jake money for a plane ticket.”

“When was his flight?”

“He didn’t know. It might have been last night. It might be today.”

“So he could be in New York *right now*.”

Deb nodded. “Yes.”

Hall shook his head. He massaged his temples, pressing them hard with his fingertips. “All right. What’s the next step in our brilliant plan to save this total stranger?”

“Don’t say it like that,” Deb said. “I didn’t know this could happen. How could I know?”

“I’m not blaming you,” said Hall, not at his most convincing. “You did what you needed to do. But now we’re in a hell of a bind and I can’t think of a single possible thing to do about it.”

“You have to call the police again. The guy you spoke to out in Denver. He killed a cop out there. We have his full name now. For all we know, he’s sitting at the Denver airport waiting to be picked up.”

Hall nodded. “All right,” he said. “Let’s get this guy already.”

To Hall’s tremendous aggravation, Sergeant Davis was not at his desk when Hall called. This new guy, McGinley, had also heard about the policeman killed at the Dry Well, so Hall was able to grab his attention fairly quickly. Hall gave him Jake Schmidt’s name, and told him that Jake was probably a fugitive from California, and *furthermore* told him that Jake might very well be sitting in the Denver airport, waiting for the police to squash him flat. That last bit was McGinley’s cue to say, “Thank you very much for

this fantastic information,” and hang up and start doing productive things. But no. First McGinley wanted to know why some guy out in New York had all this information, so Hall had to go through the entire five-act opera all over again, wasting still more time.

Hall finally convinced McGinley to get out to the damn airport already, and if Jake wasn't waiting in the airport lounge like a sitting duck, to at least find out what flight he was on. How many tattooed six-foot-tall musclemen paying for their plane tickets in cash could there possibly *be*? McGinley promised he would call back when he knew something. Hall looked at the clock as he hung up and saw that it was nearly 5:00 p.m. What had happened to this day? This was some dandy vacation they were having.

Deb, back at the computer, said, “You know, let's assume he's already in New York. Right?”

Hall frowned. “Great. Let's assume that.” In truth, Hall already had been. It had been a good 24 hours since Jake had gotten plane fare from Harold Manz.

“If that's the case, we do have one small thing in our favor.”

“I can't imagine what that might be.”

“We live in an apartment complex. When you look up our phone number in the reverse directory—which is the same thing you'd see on Caller ID—you just get the general address. Jake doesn't know what apartment he wants.”

Hall thought about it, and sat up a little straighter on the sofa. Deb was right—surely that was good news. But what did that do for them? “So what does he know? Just the general address?”

“Uh-huh.”

“All right. Let's think about this. He thinks Monica lives at this address, but he doesn't know precisely where. What does he do?”

“I guess he does a stakeout,” said Deb.

“What, he just camps out across the street?”

“Why not,” said Deb. “Some guy sitting in a car. Who'd notice?”

“He has a car? He's arriving by plane.”

“I don't know. Maybe he'll rent a car. Or steal one.”

Hall nodded. It made sense, as much as anything about this made sense. “All right. Let's go see.”

Deb gawked at him. “See?”

“Let’s go see if there’s a big bruiser type sitting in a car across the street.” When Deb only continued staring at him, Hall said, “He doesn’t know what we look like. And if he’s there, we’re not going to point at him and say LOOK, IT’S JAKE SCHMIDT. We’re just going to calmly keep walking and call the police on the cell phone.”

She thought about it. “Okay. Can you dial your cell phone with one hand?”

“Um. I believe so. Why?”

“Because I am going to be holding your other hand very tightly.”

“It’s going to be okay. We’re just two people getting some Chinese food. Which isn’t a half-bad idea, actually. Let’s go.”

Jake wasn’t there. Or if he was, he had that detective stuff down cold. Deb and Hall’s apartment was in one of four buildings fit together around a courtyard. There were only two ways in to this square—the main entrance, graced by a sweeping proscenium and wrought iron gates, similar to that of many war-era buildings in this neighborhood; and a little side entrance around the corner that a stranger might not even notice.

Hall and Deb came out the main entrance and looked around. Lots of cars parked on the street as usual, but no one seemed to be in any of them. They walked down the block and around the corner, because that was the way to the Chinese restaurant and also to see if Jake was scoping out the side entrance. Again, no dice. Parked cars, yes. Brooding, hulking maniacs *within* in those cars, no.

Which was fine. Deb loosened the industrial-strength grip she had on Hall’s hand, and the two of them walked calmly down to the restaurant. Hall tried to remember if he’d had anything else to eat today, or whether his steamed pork dumplings were going to be a very late breakfast. He suspected the latter.

They retrieved their food and walked back, and again kept an eye out for Jake, but all was calm and peaceful on this cool spring night.

Up in the apartment again, they opened up some windows, and Deb got out the plates and silverware. Hall hoped there might be a message on the answering machine, a call from Denver saying they had picked Jake up at the airport, and that was that was that. But no. Hall was disappointed but not surprised.

They sat down to dinner. Hall's stomach was by now informing him that this was, in fact, the first bit of food he had contemplated all day. He raised the first forkful of dumplings and rice to his mouth, and at that moment was struck by a thought so horrific that he was surprised his brain didn't simply explode. He dropped his fork and sat back in his chair, gaping at his wife.

Who looked at him and said, "What? What is it?"

"The reverse directory. Caller ID. You look up our phone number, and it shows the building address, but not our actual apartment number. Right?"

"Right. That's what I said. What's wrong?"

"Doesn't it show a *name*?"

"Wh...?" Deb said. And then she got it. She turned gray. "Oh, crap."

"It does, right? It says HALL in big fat letters."

"Yes." Deb grew paler.

"Same as on the directory outside our front door."

"I didn't think about that. He can match the name and find out right where we are."

Hall sprang from his seat, threw open the drawer that had attracted all kinds of miscellaneous garbage, and dug around for labels and a marker. "I think it's time to change our name," he said. Shouldn't the labels be in this drawer? Of course they should. But the junk drawer was filled with junk, and the junk you needed was *never* the junk at the top. He tossed out handfuls of stuff, threw it to the floor. Ah, there they were. He grabbed the labels and a thin magic marker and sprinted out the door and down four flights of stairs. This was not a wait-for-the-elevator situation.

He gave silent thanks for the fact that their building directory did not trap their names behind a locked glass panel. He stepped outside, heard the door snick shut behind him, and realized he had just locked himself out. No matter. He peeled off a label, placed it over the name HALL, uncapped his marker, and paused.

A name, a name, a name. His brain was still reeling from the deadly simplicity of their near-mistake. He saw the two of them putting their feet up, comfortable in the false knowledge that Jake could never pinpoint them. Jake walks up to the door, glances at the

directory, and rings the buzzer without a second thought. Or waits until someone lets him in, and then comes right on upstairs. What a goddamn mess that would be.

Anyway—why was he standing here? Write a *name*, any name! His brain finally coughed out the word DAVIS, and he wrote that on the little label. Breathing a sigh of relief, he capped his marker, turned around, and saw a large man taking the last couple of steps toward him. He was holding out a picture—a professional headshot of a young woman.

“Excuse me,” said Jake, “have you seen this person around here?”

It was over in the very next second. If he had seen Jake coming from further away—even four or five steps further away—maybe he’d have recovered his wits fast enough. But Hall was so focused on the directory that Jake may as well have fallen out of the sky, and for that first second, all he could do was gape. And that second was enough to give it all away. Hall still tried, of course. He glanced at the picture—*so that’s Monica*, he thought—and said in a raspy voice, “Uh, no, no, I don’t think so. Who is she?” He tried on an expression of casual curiosity that fit him like a bad suit.

Jake stared at him, and Hall knew it was over. Frowning, Jake advanced on him, walking up the remaining stairs of the stoop. Jake looked at the package of labels in Hall’s hand, then looked at the directory, and saw the one label that was clean and shiny and new. So much for his brilliant attempt at camouflage. Jake reached out and peeled off the label. HALL stood out underneath.

“So,” said Jake. “You’re the new guy.”

“You’ve got it wrong,” Hall said quickly.

“Do I,” said Jake. “Where is she?”

Hall wondered if there was something he could say—a single, clear statement that would cut straight through the cat’s cradle of misassumptions that had led to this moment. Nothing came readily to mind.

“I’m going to ask one more time,” said Jake.

Hall suddenly said, “Jake! Do I look like someone Monica would go out with?” The description of Jake they had compiled was perfectly accurate—he towered over Hall, and the tattoos on both muscled arms came to just below his shirtsleeves. The newspaper

had given Jake a goatee, but he didn't have one now. Hall guessed he'd shaved it off after the murders in Grand Junction, in a small attempt to look less like an escaped fugitive. Hall wasn't exactly little and was in decent shape, but he was just a dachshund compared to Jake's Doberman Pinscher. "Do I look like her type?" he asked when Jake only stared at him.

"You look like a place to stay," said Jake. "A place to hide. But I found you, didn't I. Is she upstairs?"

Like a chess player heading toward the endgame, Hall saw several things he could and couldn't do. And one thing he could *not* do was simply claim that Monica wasn't home. Jake would want to wait for her. He'd want to wait in the apartment. Hall was presently locked out, and the only way in was to buzz Deb, upstairs. So if Monica wasn't home, who was buzzing him in?

And forget trying to convince Jake that Monica wasn't here at all. That road led nowhere.

Jake looked side to side, and Hall understood he was scoping out who else was in the courtyard. Looking for potential witnesses to what was going to happen next. The courtyard was empty. "This is the last time I ask," Jake said, gripping Hall's shoulder.

"All right," Hall said. "She's upstairs."

"Let's go. I don't want you. Just her."

Hall turned and rattled the door to the lobby. It was, of course, locked. He made a show of patting his pockets for his keys. "Uh," he said. "She has to buzz me up."

Jake stared at him, then reached over and tried the door, confirming it was locked. He peered inside, and examined the door for a moment. He must have been deciding whether or not to break one of the small window panes. But Jake must have known that doing so would bring the police over for a visit, and quickly. Hall thought the police might be coming by anyway, if everything worked out as he planned.

"Do it," said Jake. "But don't signal her in any way. If she doesn't buzz us in, you're done."

Hall took a breath. He reached out and pushed the button beside HALL on the directory. He prayed that Deb would not simply buzz him in without first using the intercom.

This prayer was answered, and Hall moved steadily on to the next: That Jake would think this was Monica's voice. Luckily, the intercom was so old and staticky that the voice could have belonged to just about anybody. "Hello?" it said.

"Monica!" said Hall. "Buzz me up. Monica, I'm locked out."

There was a pause just long enough that Hall began to sweat. The voice then crackled again: "Who is this?"

"IT'S HENRY. MONICA, IT'S HENRY. BUZZ ME IN." Henry was his real name, one he hadn't uttered in years. In fact, the last time he had said that name was probably to Deb herself, who had refused to keep dating him if he didn't tell her. Well, he told her. And now he was telling her again. And he hoped she understood why.

There was another pause, and this one drew out to a point where Jake returned his hand to Hall's shoulder to keep him from running. Hall was just about to reach for the intercom again when the door buzzed. Jake opened it immediately.

"Let's go," he said.

They walked to the elevator... and Hall walked past it, to the stairs. He didn't want to get in close quarters with Jake and whatever weapon he surely had on him. "Elevator's always slow," he said in explanation, and started walking up the stairs without waiting for permission. Jake followed.

How long would it take for the police to get there? Surely, *surely* Deb had called them during that intolerable pause. Could Hall drag this out until they arrived? He didn't see how. He was already walking up the stairs as slowly as he dared. He glanced back at Jake as they rounded a corner on to the next flight, and he saw that Jake was now holding a knife.

"Listen," Hall said, wondering what he was going to say.

"Shut up," said Jake. They reached Hall's floor. Jake pulled him close. His eyes looked up and down the hall. Once again, no witnesses. Hall thought bitterly that Jake must have had the luck of the devil throughout his cross country spree, and that lucky streak didn't seem to be ending here. Jake said in a low voice, "My beef is with her. You want to try to get in my way, I'll be happy to leave two corpses instead of one. She ain't your wife, she's nothing more than some stripper you managed to get home with you. I'll

be here and I'll do what I have to do, and then you can call the police, but it won't matter because I'll be gone."

Looking into Jake's eyes, Hall knew that Jake was simply trying to keep him calm. He would kill them both, Hall was sure of it. Jake would leave no one to call the police. But hopefully they had already *been* called. Could they already be in the building? If they were rushing up the stairs, they were doing it on tiptoes.

"That the door?" Jake asked.

Hall, helpless, nodded. Jake shoved him toward it. The stalling was done. Please, God, let the police get here. Let Deb have gone down the fire escape. Let there be a way out of this.

The door was closed. Hall turned the handle and was surprised to discover it unlocked. What? What was she thinking?

Jake pulled him back. Jake wanted to enter first. Hall said, "No," and tried to push back. It was all going wrong. Where were the police? Why did Deb leave the door open? Did she seriously not understand his message—his *pretty damn unsubtle message*—at the intercom? "No," he said again. "Listen."

Jake didn't want to listen. He pulled Hall away as easily as one pulls a child off a merry-go-round, and threw him roughly to the floor. Hall's head hit the wall, and there was an accompanying silent fireworks display. Jake went through the door, knife at his side, a slanted smile on his face.

He had to call to Deb. Somehow, his warning at the intercom wasn't enough. She didn't realize the danger. She'd left the door open. He rose to his knees and prepared to scream.

But Jake screamed first.

Hall didn't see what happened, exactly. But he figured it out when the softball bat connected with Jake's face a second time, and at the point the screaming *ended*. Jake hadn't made it three inches over the threshold. He crumpled to the floor. The door swung the rest of the way open, and Deb was standing there, pale and shaking. But apparently she knew how to swing a bat.

"Thank God he was the first one through," she said. "I was so scared, I think I would have smacked you just as good."

Hall shakily completed the trip back to standing up. “Why don’t you give me that bat,” said Hall, “and go find something so we can tie this guy up.”

“Here,” said Deb. She held up some clothesline. “I thought ahead.”

Dazed, Hall took the rope from her, and tried to think how best to use it. Jake was out cold on his belly. Hall took his arms and began tying them behind his back. “When are the damn police going to get here already?” he said.

“Oh,” said Deb. “I should probably call them.”