

Ch1 The Conspiracy Conspiracy

My dorm room is so much nicer since my roommate finished going nuts. Fruitloops' tics and outbursts weren't just distracting—they made the room shrink. But early in the second semester she barricaded herself in until campus security pulled the hinge pins and carried her out tied to a stretcher. Since then it's been blessedly quiet and almost spacious. If that makes me sound like an unsympathetic bitch, that's because you've never spent three months in a 14 by 12 room with someone randomly tossing fits.

MIT is hard on freshmen who fall behind. Fruitloops, for example, was perfectly ordinary when the school year started. If she hadn't been Miss Social for the first two weeks she would have had a better chance. As she struggled to catch up to a fast moving train of work and the pressure mounted she slowly acquired an approximation of Tourette's. She's not alone. We have bedwetters, random screamers, and folks like me who just wake up crying every so often.

I'm getting saner, and not just because Loops is gone. With less than two weeks to the end of year one, I have a sort of giddy optimism that there might be a snowflake's chance in hell I'll make it though four years of drinking technology through a firehose.

Now I can shift my worry to money for next year. I'm here on the modern equivalent of my own nickel—I'm a 21 year old freshman because I had to delay matriculation and work a year to afford year one. My folks can't help much, and there aren't many merit scholarships for women with an abysmal high school record. MIT costs about sixty K per year, and they gave me forty K in support based on need. Hey folks, I need another twenty K! And that's without any expenses other than food, tuition, and this lovely room in Baker house.

I got here because I did clever high school science projects that attracted a mentorship from an influential professor of physics at MIT. Absent that happy accident, I'd be flunking out of Bumfuck Junior College on my way to a career in the exciting food service industry.

The best thing MIT did for me so far is teach me how to study without downing Ritalin until my teeth chatter. At home I'm the poster child for ADD, but here in Geekville I'm at the mundane end of the neurologically challenged spectrum. The study methods

they taught me worked like gangbusters from day one. Why didn't they teach this shit in kindergarten? I coulda been a contender.

This afternoon the dorm proctor, Harold, stuck his huge noggin in my door. Harold is ground zero for geek. Big head, skinny body—a human bobblehead. His hair looks like it was gnawed short by cats. Wears thick glasses with clear plastic frames that slide down his nose and get pushed back up with the regularity of a slow metronome. He always wears an un-ironed blue cotton dress shirt buttoned to his scrawny neck with a collar two sizes too big. Wrinkled grey high-water chino slacks. Weird multi-strap brown leather sandals over white athletic socks with two stripes on the cuff.

"Who does your wrinkling for you?" I said. First thing that came to my mind.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Never mind, I'm working on being clever. What do you need?"

"You have a phone call on the house phone. A Mr. Holzman. He says it's about a job."

The only Holzman I know is Julius Holzman, a criminal lawyer. He kept me out of some serious shit last year. A chill knifed up my spine and raised the hair on my neck. Something has gone

wrong, and if things go seriously wrong I could be doing next year's classes by mail—from prison.

I blitzed down the hall, ignoring Harold's questions. I lifted the receiver of the old land line phone from the reception desk.

"This is Sam" I squeaked.

"Sam, I can tell by the stress in your voice I worried you. My call has nothing to do with last year other than it was an opportunity to see firsthand how effective you can be. I have a client that needs some help, and I thought of you. The job pays well with a nice bonus for success. I'd greatly appreciate it if you could come discuss this today."

My heart rate dropped and tension drained from my shoulders.

"What time today?"

"Well, actually, as soon as you can get here."

Half an hour later I was on an MBTA bus headed down Mass Ave to Mr. Holzman's office. A cute guy sat across from me on the transverse five-person benches that run over the wheel well. I glanced at him a few times. OK, more than glanced. Bright blue eyes, short blonde hair, residual tan and a little muscle definition. A surfer look, or as close as anyone gets to that in Boston. He caught me looking and grinned at me. Cheeky bastard.

He leaned forward and said "How is your day going?"

I dug frantically for a clever reply. Geek girls don't develop autopilot for flirting. I'm invisible to a lot of guys. Round face, too much forehead—I'd do bangs but they give me zits. Mouse brown fuzzy-curly hair. Good eyes, basic brown but they look sleepy, which I claim is sexy. Glasses of course, perched on a nondescript nose, and totally kissable lips, though they haven't been used for that nearly as much as I'd like.

"So far so good," I said in a voice an octave higher than normal. Arrrgh! At least I got that out. Less than a year ago I would have just looked at my shoes. Of course, back then I wouldn't have been caught looking at him.

He leaned back and looked toward the front of the bus. Didn't find anything more interesting and turned back to me.

"So what do you do?"

"Student," I said. Smooth talker.

"Yeah? Me too, where do you go?"

Lie or don't lie? I suck at lying. Add that to the list. Learn to lie.

"Ah, er, MIT."

He nodded, pulled a paperback out of his backpack and started reading. Nudged out by "The Great Gatsby." I was sure I could see his lips moving, but it might have been my vengeful imagination.

My stop came and I got up and pulled the signal cord.

"I guess it's goodbye then, I'll never forget our time together."

He said "Huh, what?"

I got off the bus. Saved my best line for the exit. Story of my life.

Mr. Holzman's office was on the first floor in the front of a three story brownstone building on Mass Ave. about a mile from Harvard Square. It looked like a residential apartment building that had been converted to professional office space.

The waiting room was small but nicely appointed with two grey wingback chairs and a black leather couch. The dark wood floor contrasted with a maroon oriental rug in the center. I smelled lemon pledge and a waft of Vick's VapoRub. I gave my name to Mr. Holzman's receptionist. Undoubtedly the source of the Vicks. Before I could lower my butt to the comfortable-looking couch she rasped "Don't sit. Go right in. Mr. Holzman is ready for you."

I pivoted clumsily, nearly pitching onto the couch, dropped my jacket and backpack in one of the wingbacks, and stuck my head in the door of Mr. Holzman's large and impressive office.

A big hardwood desk competed for domination with some casual seating—like a living room. Beautiful cherry bookshelves covered much of the wall area, interspersed with several nice landscape paintings and a windowed corner with a window seat. It looked like a nice place to spend time.

"Come on in Sam, take a seat and let me fill you in."

Mr. Holtzman is a compact, trim looking man with a physique made for business formal. Today he wore a perfectly tailored black suit, crisp white shirt with a plain gold collar pin and a red silk tie that looked like it cost more than my entire wardrobe.

"I have a client whose daughter has gone missing. I have a fine investigator, and my client's position elicits cooperation from the police, but none of them have gained traction with the people who might know where Andy is. I'd call them counter-culture if this were the sixties, but I don't know what to call them these days. Conspiracy theorists I guess."

"Andy?" I said.

"Yes, short for Andrea, though she hasn't answered to that since she was four. A delightful girl, very bright, very

independent. And I'd probably say beautiful, though I get distracted by tattoos and piercings."

"Why do you suppose I'd do any better than the police or your investigator. Here's my only tattoo." I pulled my sleeve up to display the dot on my bicep. "Soon as the needle touched me I came to my senses. Other than also answering to a boy's name, I'm straight geek. Counter-culture people would think I'm a narc."

"Counter-culture isn't the right word, it's not a hippy movement. You're the right age, I know you're persistent, and you have courage. I think this conspiracy stuff is pretty technical, so you'd fit in. Chemtrails, the Rothchild's control Wall Street, 911 and the marathon bombings are false flags. That kind of stuff."

"What do you mean by chemtrails?"

"That the contrails airplanes leave are really chemical sprays, that the world government is spraying us all for some nefarious purpose. Andy was convinced of that, she was adamant about it."

"That seems kind of nutty."

"Yes, it does, but there are a surprising number of people who believe it. Andy was in contact with several groups, we don't know how many. Her father was considering psychiatric care, but she disappeared."

"Sounds like a reason to leave. How old is Andy?"

"She's 20."

"So an adult woman with funny ideas leaves home to avoid getting tossed in a nuthouse. Am I supposed to help kidnap her so she can be committed?"

"Of course not, Sam. If Andy wants to leave home she can, but we doubt that she's a runaway. It's possible, some factors point to it, but I personally doubt she is. I'll give you the brief to study and put you in touch with my investigator. You're unlicensed, you'll have to work under him so I can hire you, but you'll enjoy that. He's a good man, he has resources and experience you don't have."

"Bottom line, why do you think she's not a runaway?"

"Runaway's don't generally send their Yorkshire Terrier home by UPS with it's throat slit."

Mr. Holzman opened a file folder and slid an eight by ten photo across the desk. I looked at the dead dog with rumped newspaper around him. My gut told me there was something wrong with the picture. Well, more wrong than just a cute little dog, dead in a box. I looked at it closely for a few minutes and it came to me.

I said, "Whoever did this probably hung the dog up by it's back legs. Cut it's throat, and immobilized it while bled it out. There's no blood on the body, just a wash of it up the dogs chin. If they let the dog hang, or even didn't hold it firmly, it would thrash and blood would be all over the head and body. That tells me they are comfortable killing something harmless and innocent in a deliberate way. Was there a ransom demand?"

"No, nothing else yet."

"Then I don't understand the purpose of this message. Is someone creating a reason for her father to look harder? No matter, I'm in, I think we better find Andy. And we better do it quickly before she comes home the same way."