

Sample translation from

A Woman Lost by Charles den Tex

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Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

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Interrogation room 1

Date: day 1

Time: 08:12 a.m.

Present: Detective D. Walten, Detective S. Jonse, Mr. H. Bilderman

HB: Where is my lawyer?

DW: He's on his way. Mr. Kruger has been notified, and he'll be joining you shortly. But first we have a couple of questions – general questions, background information.

HB: Such as?

SJ: Do you know Mr. Da Silva?

HB: Of course I know him. You can look it up. It's public information.

SJ: How do you know him?

HB: We worked together in the same company.

DW: And what company is that?

HB: The Compile Group.

DW: Right. The Compile Data Defense Group, that's its full name.

No one spoke. Bilderman had repeatedly asked what this was all about, why he had been arrested and brought in. He got no answer. His fingerprints had been taken – a formality, they called it. Now the two police detectives were looking at some papers in the folder they had placed on the table in front of them. They exchanged brief glances, as if they were trying to agree on how to proceed.

SJ: Can you describe your relationship with Da Silva?

HB: In what way?

SJ: Was it good or bad? Professional or friendly? Or something else?

HB: Good. Professional. He was a good friend and colleague. We respected each other. Until the day the plan stopped working. Until protocol was broken.

DW: What happened that day?

HB: Can I make a phone call?

DW: To your lawyer?

HB: No, I know he's coming. I'd rather call someone that matters.

SJ: And may we know who that is?

Bilderman thought for a moment. The one person he had wanted to call, Jan van Plancken, was gone. Van Plancken could have put a stop to this charade before it went any further. He had the power to shut down the whole absurd investigation. Had. No more. That route was cut off for good. Van Plancken was gone. The best he could do was call the only associate left, although she probably wasn't all that eager to hear from him.

HB: Her name is Gründer. But I'm afraid she won't be of much help.

SJ: No. Probably not. I'm sorry, but I can only let you make a call after your lawyer has been here, and that may take awhile.

Jonse stood up and produced a small, clear vial with a Q-tip inside.

SJ: Do you mind if we take some DNA?

HB: Go ahead.

Jonse took the Q-tip out of the vial and came up to him, waiting for Bilderman to open his mouth.

SJ: This will only take a second.

He felt the dry Q-tip glide and turn along the inside of his cheek.

SJ: Done.

AN ULTRASHORT SKIRT

In a dark corner between two buildings – a pharmacy and an office – lay a body. Pale neon light shone on part of the sidewalk; the closest street light was broken. What he saw looked like a bare foot. Although he was driving slowly, he had no more than a glimpse. It took a few seconds before it registered in his exhausted brain. A foot? He stopped and backed up down the empty street. The foot was still there.

He pulled the car up to the curb, turned off the ignition and took another look, as if he couldn't believe it. From close up he also saw the leg that was attached to the foot. A woman's leg, unmistakable. He got out. Just beyond the reach of the night's artificial light he saw her lying face down, one leg pulled up slightly, her arms over her head as if she were warding something off. She didn't move.

"Hello," he said, not too loudly, so as not to startle her. No reaction. Stepping closer, he could smell the sour odor of vomit mixed with urine and beer, odors of the night. It was three-thirty. The bars had been closed for over an hour. Another half hour and the cleaning crew would be here. He bent over and touched her, giving her shoulder a cautious nudge.

"Hello?" he said again.

As he moved closer, the urine smell was more intense. He shook her gently and carefully rolled her over so he could get a better look. Half on her back, half on her side. A young woman, late twenties, in an ultrashort skirt and a crop top. No shoes, no jacket. Clumps of vomit in her long hair and on her top. The few garments she was wearing were wet and torn. It looked as if someone had pissed on her. She wasn't dead, she was unconscious. He could see her breathing. Maybe she had had so much to drink and had taken so many pills that she was totally stupefied. Because that's what she was.

He looked around at the deserted streets, and hesitated. He couldn't just leave her like that. What he actually should do is call the alarm number and have an ambulance come, but the emergency services detested these kinds of cases. Binge drinking was a summer nighttime sport. You want to play, you've got to pay. It's your problem. They'd pump her stomach and put her back on the street. And then? He had to do something, with her lying there like that. He had found her and he couldn't just walk away. Yet he hesitated. What if questions were raised. What if *she* raised questions. Then it would be his word against hers, and no matter what he said, he'd never be able to come

up with a satisfactory explanation, even if it was only because he didn't know what had happened. He grabbed his phone and took a couple of quick shots. The harsh light of the flash bounced off the buildings in the empty street. He walked around her and took one more picture from the other side. Then he pulled the car up halfway onto the sidewalk, right next to her, and opened the back door. He grabbed her under the armpits and hoisted her up, trying to get her to stand on her own legs, but as soon as he loosened his grip she collapsed. He threw his arm around her waist and pulled her against him, taking one step with her, then another, but it was hopeless. Her limp muscles refused to cooperate; there was no chance of getting her into the car. She kept sliding away. After the third attempt he laid her down on the sidewalk, the muscles of his arms burning from the effort. He opened the tailgate of his old Opel Meriva hatchback, picked the woman up, one arm under her knees, the other behind her back, and stretched her out inside. She didn't even groan. It was only then, with her lying in his car, that the full impact of the stench reached his nostrils. Now his own clothes were full of it; the stains were visible on his shirt. Nothing to be done. The little ceiling light shone on the woman in his trunk. A beautiful woman, even in this condition.

He closed the tailgate and walked back to where he had found her to see if any of her possessions were still lying on the ground, a bag or a cell phone or something else. He used the flashlight from his own phone to illuminate the dark corners. Nothing.

It didn't make any sense to take her to the hospital. The woman had nothing with her, and without proof of identity it would just be more complicated. If he were to drop her off there, they'd give her a brief examination and hand her back to him. He had brought her there, after all. So he might as well take her now.

He drove home slowly. What a coincidence, he thought, that he happened to be driving down that street, on that night, at that time. If his discussion with Fabian had turned out differently he would have gone home much earlier, and he would have avoided this very street, with all its nightlife and bustle. If he had driven just a little faster, he probably would never even have seen her foot. Or if it had rained. If ...

Now she was lying in his car.

NO EMOTION, NO ANGER, NO PANIC

Money was a thing, and they had a chronic lack of it. Everything they wanted was expensive, or too expensive, so stealing became their day job. Sem and Rafik could steal anything right out from under you. And this job was pure gold: twelve hundred euros for a single cell phone. Cash. They wanted to see it all upfront before handing the piece over.

They had been approached a week before, just outside the club behind the boardwalk. The club everyone went to. Music to blast your blood vessels. Pills and chicks. This heavy man had come over to their scooter and pointed to a blond bitch. Long legs, short skirt. Could they steal her phone? With the PIN code? Preferably so she wouldn't remember what hit her. That got them laughing. Not remember. How would they do that?

The fat man didn't laugh. He had a pill that would do the trick, he said. It's that easy, man.

"First the phone," the man said. "I want to see it before I pay."

Sem opened his backpack, took out the phone, handed it over to Raf and took a step back to give himself some room. At least that's what it looked like. But actually it was to shift the attention away from himself. In his backpack he had papers, a screwdriver, a pocket knife. And his gun.

Rafik put the phone on the table. "We're service providers, right?" He didn't trust this guy. He was too fat, and he had a deep scar across his face that made it impossible for Rafik to tell what he was thinking. They had done the job and finished it clean, not rushing in like a couple of amateurs. They had been careful.

A black Audi was waiting outside. Their own scooter was parked near a rear entrance. They had kept out of sight until one man got out, the fat one. He was alone, as they had agreed. Only then did they walk through the empty rooms, without making a sound, until they found him.

The fat guy pointed to the phone, but he didn't touch it. "Is that it?"

Sem and Rafik had raced from the seaside resort to the city without stopping. Of course this was the phone. *The* phone. What did this asshole think?

Rafik nodded.

"Okay." The man looked at them defiantly, as if he were trying to challenge them. Rafik knew what to do. Don't react, just stand there, keep your mouth shut and stare right back. He could keep it up for minutes at a

time. Only Sem could beat him at it, and Sem was standing behind him like a statue.

“Did you fuck her?”

“Bitch collapsed in the street.”

“And then?”

“Stuck her in a corner.”

“Didn’t try anything?”

Sem was twenty-five and looked twenty. Rafik was twenty-seven. Together they could get any girl they wanted, dark or blond, but they had kept their hands off this one. She was too far gone.

“What kind of pill was that?” he asked. “Knocked the chick right out, like, totally.”

He got no answer. The man grabbed the phone and turned it around in his big hands.

“Were you guys in her hotel room?”

“What would we be doing there?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you? Going shopping.”

“Just think about it. We are on a scooter, okay, we came straight here. Do we have bags and suitcases with us? Do you see anything like that? No. So?”

“But you have the key to the room.”

Rafik was silent for a moment. He didn’t even blink. “Twelve hundred euros was the deal.”

The fat man turned the phone around once more and pushed the button to activate it. A blue light shone from his hand. “PIN code?”

“Zero, zero, zero. Zero.” Rafik laughed. It was a joke, to remind the guy of his responsibility. Time to pay up. Right now, cash on the barrelhead. Only then would they give him the PIN code and clear off. They had brought the phone. Now it was his turn to deliver.

“Money?” asked the man. He pronounced the word as if it were something strange. “What do you guys need money for? So you get a couple of euros. Then what?”

Sem and Rafik exchanged glances. This wasn’t good.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Twelve hundred,” Rafik said. Incredible how he could keep his voice so steady. No emotion, no anger. Pure business. Only if you knew him could you detect the slight edge of panic.

SHE DIDN'T NOTICE A THING

He carried her inside and stood in the kitchen indecisively, the woman in his arms. She was too disgusting to be put to bed as she was or even to leave in her clothes, so he walked to the bathroom and set her down with her back against the wall, lowering her carefully until she was sitting on the tile floor. In less than three seconds she fell over. He went out to the terrace, brought in a plastic chair, and shoved it into the shower. Then he picked her up again, put her in the chair, and took a step back. She wasn't sitting; she was half hanging over one of the arm rests. There was no getting around the next step: he had to undress her and wash her, or all this was pointless. Under other circumstances there was nothing he'd rather do with such a beautiful woman: take her clothes off and have her naked body in his hands. But now he felt awkward, and thinking about it only made it worse. This wasn't lust, this was care. Nurses and homecare workers did this every day, so he could do it, too. He pulled her shirt over her head. She wasn't wearing a bra, and her breasts stuck out unimpeded; he took note of the smears of vomit between them. Then he put his arm around her, held her upper body close to his and found the fastener of her skirt at the base of her back, opened it, hoisted her up a bit, pulled the zipper down, and soon the skirt was off. A faint smell of feces. Don't think about it. He grabbed her panties, a red thong, lifted her up again and tried to pull them down to her knees in one stroke. The thin fabric tore in his hands. He quickly gathered up the dirty clothes and tossed them in a corner. Tidying up would come later; at least for now the first steps had been taken. He looked at the woman hanging helplessly in the plastic chair.

Next step: water. He rolled up his sleeves, took off his shoes and socks, and stood beside her in his bare feet. With the showerhead in his hand, he turned on the tap and waited for the water to warm up. It splattered in all directions. In nursing care this was probably a routine that was carried out thousands of times a day. He had never done it before, washing someone else, someone who didn't cooperate, and it quickly dawned on him that it would be better to take off his own clothes, too. His shirt and pants. Standing there in his boxers, next to the woman – that was just as bad. Ridiculous. What difference did it make? So off with the boxers. For the first time she responded: she groaned, moved a bit, and slumped back down. It wasn't sexy, yet it was in a way. In any case it was confusing.

First the hair: apply shampoo and wash. The dried globs dissolved and were rinsed away. Her face was clean. He brushed her hair back and noticed she had a small wound on the side of her head, just above the temple. It didn't look that serious. She had probably hit her head when she fell. A scab had already formed. He carefully dabbed it clean, then lifted her out of the chair a bit and washed her whole body: her back, her breasts, her bottom and her crotch. Every now and then he felt the beginnings of an erection, but the lifting and washing were hard work, and by the time he began rinsing her and then turning off the tap his hard-on had long disappeared.

He used a large towel to dry her off: her legs, arms, hands. No ring, he noticed. And no white circle around her finger where a ring might have been. Details. He rubbed her body until she responded again, briefly, and tried to pull her to her feet. She took two steps, after which he had to catch her once more and carry her to the bed. His bed. He had no other. He pulled the blanket up over her. Tucked in like that, she looked more vulnerable than naked. He stayed with her for a few minutes, her gentle breathing was the reassurance he needed. He turned off the overhead light and walked back to the bathroom. Still naked himself, he tidied everything up, dried himself off again and wrapped the towel around his waist. There seemed to be no end to the things he had to do, big and small, and it was those very activities, those necessary tasks, that suited him best, pushed his thoughts aside. Caring for the woman had made him forget the discussion with his partner Fabian that had gone so badly. He worked until he stood in the hallway of his house, tired and despondent.

Only now did it occur to him that he had brought someone into his home without giving it a moment's thought. Usually he planned for something like that. Made preparations. Everything under control, from cufflinks to condoms. What others got to see of him had to be worked out to the smallest detail. Prior to every visit he made sure his house was straightened up, without a sign of his work anywhere. Only Fabian knew what he did, and that's the way it had to be. He cleared away his papers, put his attaché case in a closet, locked it, and put the key in the cutlery drawer in the kitchen.

He tiptoed down the hall, casting a glance into the bedroom to make sure everything was all right. The woman lay there peacefully, sound asleep. Now it was his turn. He tried to install himself on the couch, tossing and turning left and right, adding a few pillows, and finally gave up. The couch was too short and the armrest dug into his calves. He longed intensely for his bed, his own bed. Then he let the towel drop to the floor and crept in beside the woman under the blanket. She didn't notice a thing. He did, though.

DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING

Five hundred euros, ten fifty-euro notes. It didn't look like much. If you laid the notes on top of each other they didn't even make a stack. It wasn't enough. Twelve hundred euros, that's what they had agreed to. They had come through with their part of the deal, and now the fat guy had to pay up.

"The phone isn't worth anything without the PIN code, so even this is too much," said the man.

They stood there facing each other in silence. If they gave him the code before he paid the full amount, they wouldn't get the rest of the money. Sem waited. He was the driver, always cool, always calm. He could steer his scooter as if there was no other traffic on the road. Panic was foreign to him. Rafik did all the negotiating. He was the talker, the fixer, but now he didn't know what to say. If they were going to maintain their leverage, they couldn't just give the merchandise away. The man took a step forward, but Rafik was faster. He snatched the phone from under the man's nose and put it back in his pocket.

"No money, no goods," he said. "We have a deal and we all have to stick to it. That's the way it works." With the phone in his possession he had more room to negotiate, and he knew what to say. "And the deal is only the whole deal, not half the deal. Otherwise we might as well have no deal at all, you get me?"

The man said nothing.

"I said, you get me?" Sem repeated.

"Better than you think." The man had had enough. He had to have that phone, and with the right code. That would close the deal. No loose ends. That's the way he had always done it, and that's how he was going to do it today. He put another five hundred euros on the table. A thousand altogether, enough to divert them, and while Raf looked at the money, Sem saw the man reach back with his other hand. Even before Sem could react, Rafik grabbed the money while the fat man drew a pistol and aimed the barrel right at his head. "Put the phone back. Then we have a clean deal. You don't know me, and I don't know you. Put it down, take the money, and walk away."

This is where the pain started. Sem heard it and felt it. Draw a gun and then tell them to walk away, that didn't make any sense. If they did that

they'd get a bullet in the back. A gun is the end of the story. With a gun it became a hard choice: him or them. Not all three.

Rafik didn't give an inch. "Fuck you. Twelve hundred, or no phone."

The fist with the butt of the pistol struck him upside the head. He staggered. The man grabbed him and twisted an arm around his throat. Rafik gasped for breath.

"Never say fuck you, not to me." The fat man jammed Raf's face against the wall and squeezed even harder. He tried to grab the phone with his free hand. Rafik struggled, kicked backward, missed, and pressed his arms tight against his body so the man couldn't reach the phone, screaming through the suffocating grasp that was tightening around his neck. The man began pounding the wall with his head. Everything started spinning, until a sharp, loud crack ripped through his panic and tore it to shreds. Instantly the pressure on his neck slackened. The man slumped down and shrieked, blood streaming from his arm. His gun fell to the floor. Rafik inhaled deeply, sucking the air back into his lungs and watching as Sem pushed the barrel of his own gun right into the man's face.

"Just do what we agreed to and we'll be done. Shit, how hard can that be?" Sem turned to Rafik. "You okay?" he asked, carelessly keeping his weapon trained on the fat man.

"Fuck," said Rafik.

"Is that good or bad?"

"Jesus, man, what you gonna do now?"

The groaning man tried to staunch the flow of blood from the wound on his arm.

"And now what? Now what?!" Rafik clambered to his feet and dragged Sem away from the man. "Have you thought about that? Of course not. You never think. We just gonna leave him here? Take his money? And then what? Lets get out of here!"

Sem listened to his friend. Raf always saw things with crystal clarity. He had shot the man, and now everything had changed. That was already true when the fat man started in on Rafik. Sem couldn't let that happen. He and Raf were bros. If they left the fat man here, he'd find them and take revenge.

"Give me the phone," Sem said. In a flash he punched in the PIN code and walked to up to the man with the phone in his hand. "What's so special about this thing?" he asked. "What are you looking for? What do you want to see?"

The man started cursing. Sem ignored his outburst until he'd had enough. He jabbed the wounded arm with the barrel of the gun. The man cried out in pain.

“Shut up and answer, pussy. Here.” He held the screen of the phone up to the man’s face. “What are you looking for?”

Carefully the man raised his good arm and touched the screen with his index finger. To settings. To networks. To Virtual Private Network. Connect. Every touch of his finger sent the phone deeper into the cloud, where the woman they had stolen the phone from kept information that was meant for no one else, where she exchanged messages with other people that couldn’t be traced. Sem followed all the choices and connections, and saw the woman’s secret life become visible bit by bit. At first it looked like a whole lot of nothing, messages that didn’t make any sense.

“This,” said the man. It was a message with a link, a sender and a receiver. No more than that. “And ...” He touched the screen again, hit Signal and scrolled through the messages. “And this,” he said. Another link. Sender: COMPILE.

“Who’s that?”

“None of your business.”

Sem clicked away the image, turned off the phone and popped out the SIM card. The fat man was right, strictly speaking: it was none of his business. Yet he wanted to find out as much as he could – with his gun in his hand, his Shadow CZ 75, 18 rounds. He had only shot it once before. One bullet. And that had hit its mark. It wasn’t because he wanted to shoot people, but some people weren’t meant to walk the face of the earth. They were losers, whatever, they had to keep their hands off him. After the swimming instructor there had been others. Why they always had to have him was a mystery. Most of the time he could just walk away and ignore them. He had gotten very good at avoiding undesired contact. With a little help he could act as if everything was normal, for a while. A little school, a little money stocking shelves, stealing stuff, and every now and then locking himself in his room because the pain wouldn’t go away, and it never took long before it all came back, the memories, the shit.

Then he met Bram. Bram was different. He ran a small gang in Gouda, fourteen guys who followed him in a city where Sem was a stranger. Bram was nine years older, and he had a gun that he was proud for Sem to see. He put his arm around Sem’s shoulders.

“I can really use a kid like you,” he said, and that was exactly what Sem wanted to hear, to be told he mattered. Bram could take him away, away from The Hague, away from the neighborhood, away from all the people he didn’t want to see anymore. Bram promised him a position in the gang, although he couldn’t become a member just like that, of course. He had to do something to earn it.

“I can do anything. Just name it.” Sem wanted so much to believe he was worth something. He had to take a test, carry out an assignment for the leader of the gang. For Bram.

“You won’t just be a member of the group. You’ll be my assistant,” Bram said. He took off his clothes, and Sem understood what he meant. Too late. Bram did what the swimming instructor had done years before, only Bram did it harder and longer – in the midst of all the dirty clothes and the worn-out clubhouse furniture. Sem had no weapon, and Bram was bigger, older and stronger. He wasn’t afraid of the boy he was raping, which made him careless. Partly hidden under his jacket that lay on the old couch, the couch that Sem was wedged against, was the gun, and Sem focused all his attention on the small corner of the gun’s butt that was visible to him, he didn’t take his eyes off it. He waited until Bram was finished and out of him, loudly telling him how great that was and that he never wanted another assistant, he waited until he heard Bram walk away – one step, two, three – until the distance was big enough. Only then did he grope for the pistol, pull it out, examine it, see the safety catch, and aim it, holding it in both hands as he had so often seen on TV. Arms outstretched, stifling the pain, dry rage in his head.

Bram laughed nervously. “You don’t even know how those things work,” he said.

“How hard can it be?” asked Sem. He clicked the safety, pulled the trigger and shot. Bram hurtled backward, smacking the floor, the blood pouring out of his chest. The sound was much louder than Sem had expected. The power of the shot reverberated in his arms. In a single second Bram’s life was over, and Sem was overcome by an enormous calm that filled his body. A benevolent calm. A calm he had never known before.

He put on his clothes, stuck the pistol in the waistband of his pants, filched the money that Bram had in his pants pocket and slipped out of the clubhouse, walking through the streets of an unknown suburb until he came to a bus stop. He sat on the narrow seat in the back of the bus, the hard steel of the gun pressing against his back. No one knew he had been there.

Now, almost eight years later, he was holding the same gun in his hand. Ready to use it, waiting for the right moment. Sem knew nothing about a soul or a heart or religion, let alone about trusting other people. He was already broken by the time he was ten, abused by the swimming instructor until he was fifteen, and since then he had lived as if he were two people, maybe even three. The hardest and strictest was the one he listened to. And one thing he knew for sure: he was never going near another swimming pool.

The fat man started screaming: “Hey! Over here! In the factory! Those sons of bitches have shot me!”

Sem whipped around and saw the man holding his own phone to his ear with a superior grin on his face, as if he actually believed he was the boss in spite of everything. Boss.

The prick. One phone call and the shit would only get deeper. One phone call and there’d be no time to think, no time to solve anything. Sem aimed his gun and looked the fat man in the eye. Rafik tried to hold him back, grabbed his hand, almost pulled him off balance.

“RAF!” he screamed.

Raf let him go and stepped aside. They both knew there was no other way out. Sem took one more look and shot. The man’s head slammed against the wall with enormous force, blood splattering from his face. Sem shot his own feelings to smithereens, insofar as he had any feelings left. First Bram, now this guy. It was a repetition, not exactly the same, but even so.

Raf cursed.

Sem knelt down next to the man and emptied his pockets. A few more bank notes, a wallet and the man’s phone. He wiped the phone clean, laid it on the floor, and stomped on it so hard with the heel of his shoe that all that was left were splinters. He gave the wallet to Rafik, who took it with a trembling hand. He kept the roll of bank notes for himself. Then he picked up the thousand euros still lying there and wiped the table clean.

“Done,” he said, and grabbed Raf by the arm. They ran through the empty halls to the back of the factory.

Gone.

SHARED INFORMATION IS WORTHLESS INFORMATION

Making a huge racket the men stormed into the hall, dark clothes, heavy shoes, two of them wearing caps with the visors pulled down over their eyes. From under that cover they looked at the mess before them: at Berry, lying on the floor next to a large table, blood on his clothes and around his body, a red-black hole in his forehead. All the life was gone from his mutilated face. They were too late, had had to come from too great a distance, because this was something the boss had wanted to do by himself.

Cautiously they walked up to the dead man. Their initial panic was quickly displaced by anger. Why hadn't he taken them with him? Eddy, Ruud and Deef: it was their job to tidy things up for him, to protect him when necessary. They didn't know what to do. Berry always had everything under control – and now this. Deef started to cry and curse, both at the same time. A large pool of blood had formed under Berry's back, and they had to do their best not to step in it. Ruud and Eddy looked around for a dry section of floor so they could get a closer look, and they squatted down next to their boss. Eddy reached out and touched the body.

"Is he dead?"

"What kind of a stupid question is that?"

"Somebody has to ask."

"If there's more blood outside him than inside him, then he's dead, I think."

Berry could no longer tell them what to do. He could no longer direct them, give them guidance. From now on they'd have to do it themselves. Make their own choices.

"Who did this? Where are they?" shouted Deef. "Where?" He started running from one side of the hall to the other.

"We have to get him out of here," said Ruud.

"And then?"

"You want to leave him here?"

The response to every plan they came up with was "no." Taking Berry's body with them was just dumb. Letting him lie there was no option. Calling the police was against their principles and against Berry's, even though he was in no position to object. Deef seemed to be in shock. He said nothing,

while tears streamed from his eyes. Ruud had lost it. Eddy bent over Berry's body and tried to roll him over. Three hundred pounds of dead weight were not exactly cooperative.

"Give me a hand," he said.

"With what? What are you doing?"

"Looking for his car keys and his papers."

That calmed them down, gave them a purpose. Eddy started searching but only found the keys. Then with horror they noticed how much chaos they had created. Not only was a dead man lying there, but now it was obvious that the body had been dragged. There was blood everywhere, his clothes were torn, and their own bloody footprints were visible on the concrete floor.

Again, Eddy was the one with a plan. Straighten things up, wipe out their tracks, take off their shoes, leave the building in their socks and scam. Back to the Sports Café, where they would call 112, anonymously. They couldn't do anything else here. Berry was dead. If they took him along it would only make things more difficult, and that was against the boss's rules.

"Take off your shirt," Eddy said. "You, too." All three of them stood there bare-chested. "And now start wiping."

Eddy demonstrated. He dropped to his knees and began wiping away his fingerprints and footprints from the floor. Making big arcs from left to right and back again, as if they did this every day, they worked until not a trace was left.

"Anyone can see this has been cleaned," said Ruud.

"Fine."

"It looks suspicious."

"Of course it's suspicious, dickhead. There's a body lying here. It doesn't get any more suspicious than that. What would Berry say? Think about it. What would Berry say?"

"Keep it simple. Don't leave any calling cards."

They left the yard and left no traces. Eddy would drive the car from the yard to the pavement, while Ruud and Dreef swept the tire tracks away with their fingers, cursing such stupid work but glad that Eddy knew what had to happen. It was about thirty feet to the paved part of the parking lot. Deef swept and swept, cramps in his arms, his eyes aching from the dust and from crying, as if his tears were full of acid. Berry was the man. Berry had taken him off the streets. Berry had taught him to keep his mouth shut, had taught him he could find peace by shutting himself off.

"Peace isn't something you get," Berry had told him. "It's something you have to take. From somebody else if necessary. And keep it simple."

It wasn't easy keeping things simple. Just pointing at something could make it complicated.

Deef cursed and swept. Three more feet, three more times back and forth. He wasn't sure who had murdered the boss, but he had an idea. Somebody was going to pay for this.

THE STREET IN HIS POCKET

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Rafik couldn’t stop. “Fuck!” They had cleared out before Berry’s men arrived, but everything else had gone wrong. He couldn’t even think of what the advantages might be. Money, of course, but not with a dead man attached. Murdering the fat man had made the money worthless.

Sem had climbed onto the scooter, Rafik behind him, and had calmly ridden out of the yard. Didn’t rev the engine. Rafik closed his eyes and let Sem carry him to safety. They went to one of the little Hague restaurants that opened early and ordered coffee and fried eggs, waiting in silence for their breakfast to be served.

“Sure gives you an appetite,” said Sem, eating with gusto.

“Fuck,” said Rafik once more.

They had taken just under two thousand euros from the man’s jacket and pants. The money was burning a hole in his pocket. They had also stolen the phone. “We gotta get rid of that thing,” he said.

“Don’t agree.” If the fat man was willing to pay twelve hundred euros to two guys he didn’t know from Adam, then it was worth a lot more to somebody else.

“He didn’t want to pay us at all,” said Raf. “He wanted to take the phone and get us out of the way. That’s what he wanted. The phone and his money. And it’s just a Samsung Note. For a couple hundred euros you can get a brand new one.”

“It’s what’s in it, Raf. That’s where the money is, and we’re gonna get at it.”

“And then what? What do we do then? Do you know? Look around for a buyer? Where? If we find a fence, we’ll be dealing with the fat guy’s friends and they’re not gonna pay us, though. What they want is revenge.”

Rafik was swimming in risks. There were way too many of them. Since coming to the Netherlands with his parents at the age of seven he had already been through too much. Forever moving, from refugee center to bad neighborhood, from colorless flats in high-rise buildings to little rooms in split-up apartments. They were constantly searching for a house of their own. The Moroccan family had started out in the French *banlieues* and ended up in The Hague. They spoke French and a little English, and with that they tried to keep their heads above water. By the time he was twelve Rafik had the whole street in his pocket. He was arrested for robbery and beaten up because they assumed he hadn’t been able to keep his mouth shut.

They kept an eye on him at the Child Protection Agency, where they were too stupid to realize what he was doing or who he was doing it with. He spent entire afternoons regaling social workers with stories about how bad it was living with his parents, and he made it all up right in front of their eyes. He was the great communicator, the king of the fairy tale, the master storyteller. Until he met Sem.

“A good story,” said Raf. “If you have a good story anything is possible.”

“There is no story,” said Sem. “You live and then you die. Where’s the story?”

“People have to believe you. If they believe you, you can do whatever you want.”

“I can do that already.”

“Money is trust and trust is a story. So if you want to earn money, you have to have a good story. With a good story you can be prime minister of this country. Come on, man!”

“Stories are shit.”

“You’re shit yourself,” said Rafik.

“That, too.”

Rafik was an optimist. If he banged his head into a brick wall he’d be shaken up for a couple of days, never really long, and then just keep on going. Sem didn’t know what was behind this, no more than Rafik knew anything about the swimming instructor or Bram. No details, no looking back. There’s only one side to everything, the front. Forward.

They made a good team, the talker and the driver, the boy with the words and the boy with the handle bars. When his father finally spoke enough Dutch to understand what Rafik was telling the Child Protection Agency, the world split in two.

“Your mother and I have never hit you,” said his father, and with one unexpected wallop he slapped his son in the face. “But from now on I will.” His father’s anger came from a very deep place. After all the adversities they had fled from he did not understand his own son, who apparently attached no value to anything except lying. The falsehoods he had told about his father and mother, about the climate of domestic violence that he, the poor son, had to struggle with, were a personal betrayal. He hit him so hard that Rafik came to Sem with a bleeding wound.

Now, more than ten years later, they sat over a meal of fried eggs and coffee. Sem shoved his plate aside and began searching through the things they had brought with them. He found a driver’s license and read it aloud.

“Berry Fak,” said Sem. The fat man’s full name was Bartho Jan Maria Fak. “Catholic, of course. They call everybody Maria.”

Interrogation room 1

Date: day 1

Time: 10:03 a.m.

Present: Detective D. Walten, Detective S. Jonse, Mr. H. Bilderman

DW: Can you tell us about the day things went wrong. How did you put it? The day the plan stopped working. The day protocol was broken.

HB: Such as? What do you want to know?

DW: What happened.

That was a day he would never forget, the day she disappeared. Glassy-eyed, he had stared at a screen on which there was nothing to see and nothing changed. The buttons along the edge of the screen were not lit, the options were not available. Next to the black field in the middle that took up most of the image area there were two columns with functions that could be toggled on and off. Ten in total, two rows of five: Speed, Will, Concentration, Hearing, Vision. Next to these: Pulse, Blood Pressure, Respiration, Adrenaline, Lactic Acid. On another screen there were figures for blood levels and hormones. Above these columns was a dashboard with fields for technical information: Accessibility, Quality of contact, Signal strength, Location. All those fields were empty. There was no information, no accessibility, no signal, the location was unknown. Their agent seemed to have disappeared. Over and over again the operator clicked with the mouse on same button: Search for connection. Impatiently they waited for the computer to respond, each time hoping the familiar message would appear: ... Checking quality of connection ... Identification ... Connected to ...

"Has the mission been completed?" he asked.

"Unknown."

No signal. No connection.

"Is she active?"

"Unknown."

No signal. No connection

No news was bad news. The very worst news.

"On or off?"

The operator clicked and started opening log files.

"I can't say for sure. Just before she disappeared she was on."

There was reason to believe that when she disappeared the system had also shut down; the two things – disappearance and shut-down – were not linked. Frankly, it would be better if they were: if the system was off, the likelihood of their secrets being discovered was very small. If it was on, that was a different story: then the likelihood of discovery was menacingly great.

"When?"

More than eight hours before, the signal had disappeared and the connection was broken. That had never happened before. She was always accessible,

anywhere. That was one of her unique traits. Without accessibility they couldn't operate. There was no control and no access to the information she had collected and stored.

"Where did the last signal come from?"

With a couple of clicks the operator had a map on the screen showing the streets of a seaside resort on the Dutch coast. On the map was a pin. The operator pointed it out. It was an intersection. The pin was located on the corner, in a side street without cameras, without surveillance.

No image.

A little over two hours after the signal had disappeared, someone from the organization had been at the site. Not a trace of Number 1 could be found. Nothing.

If there was no connection, there could be no maintenance. Every two days there were updates, software improvements, bugs eliminated, everything monitored, and if something wasn't working right it was fixed. She couldn't carry on without those updates because her system was still too young. Each week, the software was adapted to the experiences she had gained in the field. One glitch, one unforeseen error, could cause the whole structure to break down. If that happened, she herself wouldn't know who she was. Her real past and her implanted past would collide. If something went wrong, she could lose control. And that's what Bilderman wanted to avoid. He was the chairman. It was his responsibility. He had to know what had happened and where she was, as soon as possible.

"Did the signal disappear because of an error? A bug? A malfunction? Or was it deliberately deactivated?" he asked.

In the last case, she would have been made consciously untraceable. That would mean that the mission had failed, that she had been taken over. In that case she would have to be shut down.

"We're not that far yet," he said. His long, lean figure towered over the operator. He was the chairman of the Compile Data Defense Group and boss of the telecom and data-infrastructure division. Everything having to do with data fell under his direct control: data storage, data analysis and crunching, data technology, infrastructure and communication. Everything. He decided what happened and when it happened. No one else. And it was on that very point that tensions arose within the group, his authority was called into question.

"Does Tennen know about this?"

"He's ready, if she should turn up."

"Phone?"

"No contact."

"Tracking?"

"None."

The SIM card must have been taken out of her phone. Not only had she disappeared, but she had done it deliberately.

Bilderman fell silent and looked at the two detectives with a detached expression. He would never say a word about this here.
“That information is classified,” he said.

LANDVIEW

Sem rode the scooter to an address deep in the part of The Hague where the decent people of the city never ventured. He made his way to the end of an alley and stopped next to a shed.

“Where are we?” Rafik asked.

“Somebody I know lives here. We’ll be okay.” They couldn’t go home anymore. They didn’t know whether the fat man had been telling the truth when he said he didn’t know who they were. It was safer not to believe guys like that. So they had to go into hiding, even if it was only for a couple of days. New phones, new clothes, new laptop, and then back to the grid incognito. On the lookout from a bunker and keeping their eyes peeled.

“And this is the bunker?” Raf asked, and he pointed to the house and the sign hanging in front of it: LANDVIEW PENSION.

The pension was run by Ada Eenvoud, a woman from Suriname with a big heart and a penchant for extreme privacy. “The sister of my swimming instructor,” said Sem. He could always go to her if things got difficult. Ada had caught her brother in the act and had taken Sem away from him. Her brother had stuck it out for two more months in the same city and then had left, back to Suriname. Ada had made life impossible for him, and Sem was convinced that a pedo like that wouldn’t be able to show his face anywhere in Suriname either. Sem hadn’t reported him. He’d never had anything to do with the police. Ada’s wrath was more effective. She had pulled a few strings, and the matter-of-fact way that she stuck up for Sem, no questions asked, was his salvation. There were things in his head that had broken down and that he simply ignored, and in time a whole new past had been layered over them.

Ada was his rock. She was a little taller than him. She looked like bamboo, but she was all iron. Mist and light. She let you see what you had to see and kept the rest hidden. She was hard and flexible. You couldn’t touch her.

“So, my boy, have you come to live with me?”

“Couple of days. That okay?”

“Always. And who do you have with you?”

“Raf. I told you about him.”

“Ah. The Muslim?”

Rafik stared at the dark woman. Her piercing eyes wouldn’t let him go. “Is there also a Mr. Eenvoud?” he asked.

“None of your business.”

The spacious double room on the second floor gave them a sweeping view of a residential neighborhood. It wasn't called the Landview Pension for nothing.

“I don't need to live on the sea,” said Eenvoud. “Too much water. Not for me.”

Shower and toilet down the hall. Two beds. They had the clothes on their backs, the stuff belonging to the woman and to Berry, and they had money.

“What are we doing here?”

“Waiting, keeping our eyes peeled.”

“Keeping our eyes peeled? For what, we're not going out.”

“If they find us, we're finished.”

“And you know what that's like?” The death of Berry Fak, the second shot, cold-blooded and hard, was still ringing in Raf's ears, haunting him.

“Because the guy is dead, really dead, okay?” He said it, and he didn't say it. There was one word he didn't say. Murdered. That's what he didn't say.

Working in silence, they laid out everything they had brought with them. The woman's phone, her bag and its contents, a wallet with some money and bank cards. Jenna Brank. Sem picked up the phone, inserted the SIM card and turned it on. With the PIN code they could open everything that was stored on the phone and study it. He opened the apps one by one. Calendar: empty. Contacts: three numbers. Raf wrote them down. Messages: appointments with only the times noted, no names or addresses. Call history: the same three numbers listed under contacts. The last call she had made was four days ago. In her mailbox was the e-mail with the link that Berry Fak wanted as well as a couple of business e-mails having to do with meetings and appointments. No personal contact with anyone who might be a family member, a girlfriend or a boyfriend.

“Social cripple,” said Raf.

“Or she had another phone somewhere else, one for business and one for herself.” He turned the phone off and popped out the SIM card so the phone couldn't be traced.

From Berry they had a bit more stuff. They had his papers, his cash, a bank card and a credit card, neither one with PIN codes. There was a medical insurance card, a discount card for the drug store, a Bonus Card for the Albert Heijn supermarket, a driver's license and an identity card. Raf put all the cards back in the wallet. The only thing interesting to them was the money. The rest was useless. He picked up the paper on which he had written the three numbers from Brank's phone. They were faced with a

choice. They could keep the money, destroy everything they had from Brank and Fak and throw it away, so that after a week or two they might be able to surface again with money in their pockets. Or they could do something else.

“Seems to me we’ve got something here, bro. This is gold.”

Typical Sem, who used too few words to put his thoughts together. And lost sight of the story. “We have something we think could be gold,” said Raf.

“Is. This is gold.” Sem was at the mercy of his own intuition. The first step was to call the numbers from the phone’s memory. “See who picks up.” One of those people would be willing to pay for the phone. “All I have to do is call. But not with this phone. And absolutely not with mine.”

THE NEXT MORNING

A desolate expanse stretches out before her as the wind moans overhead, a stinging dryness tightens her skin. Standing beneath a brutal sun, she tries to catch hold of something, something she can't see. It's soft and it doesn't move. The moaning turns to screaming. The sound is not that of the wind. It's a voice that cuts through her ears, that begs and shudders and explodes with pain. That's what she clings to: the dying despair, and powerless rage. With all her might she tries to resist it, pushing against it with her whole body, but the weight grows stronger and stronger and she is small, so small.

Trembling, she opened her eyes and saw the unshaven face of a man. The man was awake. He lay facing her. The images from the nightmare were still vivid, as if she were seeing double, the man in bed and the desert. She tried to understand where the images came from, but she didn't recognize them.

"Hi," he said.

"Yvette," she said.

"Are you Yvette?"

She didn't know what he was talking about. He was looking at her as if they shared something nice, something she knew nothing about.

"No," she said. Yvette was the first thing that came to mind. "Where is Yvette?"

"You were alone."

"Where?" She was lying in bed. Not her bed. Probably his bed, not a hotel. Naked. She was naked. Her brain was connecting the dots with exasperating slowness. She, in his bed. She didn't know where or what or who.

"Did we ...?"

"Have sex?"

She felt very wicked, deeply worthless, physically broken, but not from sex. That's what she hoped, because she had no memory of that either. She shut her eyes and tried to gauge the state of her body. She was dizzy, sick.

"Did we have sex?"

"What do you think?"

"Please just answer me."

"No." He had an odd look in his eyes. "I wanted to, but you were in no shape for anything."

Just what she needed. "Why don't I have any clothes on?"

She threw the blanket off and tried to stand up. No sooner had she pulled herself upright next to the bed than things began to go wrong. Her head started spinning, her stomach shot up to her throat, and she groped for something to hold onto, her hands flailing blindly in the air. Then she staggered and slapped her hand over her mouth to hold in whatever was about to come out.

The man jumped out of bed and caught her. Soon she was kneeling with her head over the toilet bowl while he held her steady. She had the dry heaves. Her stomach had been empty for a long time but her body was busy processing something, and no matter how hard she tried she couldn't figure out what it was.

In no shape for anything. The man had not lied. Shivering, she stood up and he threw a bathrobe around her. Then he pulled on a pair of jogging pants, took her to the kitchen and sat her down on a kitchen chair. Elbows on the table, head in her hands, pain in her body.

“If you aren't Yvette, then who are you? What's your name?”

She groaned. It was worse than she thought. She had gone with him without telling him who she was.

“Jenna.”

“You sure?”

His question stopped her in her tracks. Why did he doubt her name?
“Why are you asking me that?”

“Then who's Yvette?” He fell silent. The confusion was written all over her face. She no longer knew what to think or say.

“Sorry,” he said. “Back up. I'm Luc. Luc Beaumann. Beaumann, that's half French for good-looking guy.”

“Are you French?”

His standard joke had had no impact. “My father is from Israel and my mother is from Alphen.” That eliminated any suggestion of mystery.

“Alphen?”

“Aan den Rijn. And you?”

The conversation came to a halt. Jenna thought and thought and thought, but she found nothing. No city, no address, no street name.

“You do come from somewhere, don't you?”

Desperately she shook her head, harder and harder, as if moving it that way could reawaken her memory. The only thing that came back was a stabbing headache.

“You don't know?”

She didn't dare say so. If she were to admit she didn't know, it would get much worse.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “At least we know you’re Jenna.”

The reassurance was only half successful. “How did you get me into bed?”

He didn’t answer. The sun was shining through the window, bright and intense, and it extended the silence with its warmth and light. Blinding light. Actually she was glad he didn’t answer, that he let the silence fall. She wasn’t even interested in his answer. It couldn’t possibly be anything that would make her happy.

“Coffee?”

Just the sound of the word “coffee” made her stomach churn again. Stumbling, she ran to the bathroom and dropped to her knees in front of the toilet bowl, embracing it with both arms. The security of cool porcelain. Smell of toilet freshener and water. Tiles. The tiles on the floor and the walls made her intensely happy. Tiles were good, clean, gleaming and hard. She loved these tiles. Luc sat down next to her on the floor and waited.

“This probably isn’t a good time, but we really have a few things to discuss.”

He put an arm around her shoulders and she instinctively tried to free herself from his grasp. She didn’t want his arm. She didn’t want him to touch her. She tried push him away and instead slid to the side. No control. Her right leg slowly slipped out from under her. Now she understood why the pressure on her arms was so great and why he had put his arm around her. She cursed. Her thoughts had become detached from her body, as if the connection between them had evaporated. She wanted to pull her knee back, her arm dropped away, she lost her balance and almost toppled over. He grabbed her arm and held her upright.

She was stuck. She didn’t know what she wanted. She didn’t even know where she was. “What happened?” she asked.

“You want the long or the short version?”

“I want my clothes.”

“Bad idea.”

She hoisted herself up and could only remain upright if he held her. Not moving was the best option, motionless in the bathroom. When the dizziness subsided she pointed to the bedroom. He brought her back to the bed, step by step, took off her bathrobe and helped her under the blanket. She felt a nameless resentment. Hatred. Something had happened and she didn’t know what it was. But one thing she was sure of, very sure: she had to find Yvette, as soon as possible. That name lit up in her head like a panic button.