

## Chapter One

“I can’t believe it—you actually have a client.”

The Consulting Philosopher shifted his substantial weight on the office’s velvet draped divan and looked up from the tattered paperback in his hand at the astonished expression on his assistant’s endlessly charming face.

“Your wonderment is exceeded only by my own, JP,” he replied, his deep voice easily audible in every room of the sparsely furnished flat. “But let’s reserve our absolute astonishment for a client’s payment of cash.”

Sitting up, he smoothed the front of his golden-dragon-embazoned red robe and asked, “And who is this mystery client who has broken the curse of cruel mockery we’ve suffered since putting out our consulting shingle?”

“I don’t know, but she must be really desperate,” JP exclaimed, and the Consulting Philosopher chortled ruefully. “Your steadfast faith in the value of my services is the shield that protects me from the slings and arrows of outrageously unfair fortune.”

“Of course I have faith in you,” the young woman replied earnestly. “But nobody pays for philosophy.”

“You may well be correct in that,” he muttered. “It’s nothing short of miraculous that I’m not swathed in orange robes, rattling my begging bowl outside the fruit vendor’s stall.”

Arising to pace his usual figure-eight route in the office’s faded blue Persian rug, he said, “After all, look how Goethe toiled as manager of a great estate for years, or the destitution, relieved only by gifts of sake, endured by Ryokan in his hovel atop Mount Kugami.”

“You just made a small fortune in the stock market,” his assistant blurted, destroying his attempt at self-pity. “Goethe and Ryokan should be so lucky.”

“Trading options requires the utmost application of disciplined philosophy,” he countered, and then sighed theatrically. “Nobody pays for what they don’t value. And so I’m forced to extract value from a mindless market.”

“Nobody feels sorry for you,” JP said sharply, and her pout was too delicious to overlook.

“I absolutely adore the way you immediately annihilate my every attempt at feeling sorry for myself. Wild things don’t feel sorry for themselves, and I’m grateful to you, JP.”

“Why don’t you teach me how to make a small fortune in the stock market?” she retorted.

“I did distribute a handsome slice of my winnings to you,” he noted in a wounded voice.

“You are very generous,” JP said in her delightful Mandarin-tinged accent, “but the fisherwoman wants to learn to catch her own fish.”

“Now we’re finally making progress,” he thundered. “You want to master trading, and the pathway to that mastery is through philosophy. I am teaching you, dear clever and bighearted JP, but you don’t yet recognize the lessons.”

Pausing at the window to gaze out at the windswept waters of San Francisco Bay, he continued, “Why just yesterday I spoke at length about a particular insight of your countryman Zhuang Zhou, a Taoist insight that is a direct pathway to mastery of volatility and risk. But you were bored by the discourse, I saw it in every fiber of your being.”

Cutting off her protest, he continued. “I understand, truly I do; yours was the boredom of someone whose primary interest is practicalities. You are a practical young woman, anxious to make her own way in the world under her own power. I recognized this in you in the first moments of our first meeting, and

that is why I outbid every other conceivable employer you might have contacted. I admired your drive, your bright intellectual light, and your sincerity, by which I mean the particular Chinese character known as *makoto* in Japanese, which combines sincerity, truth and authenticity in one splendid unity. I admire you enormously, JP, and I want the fisherwoman to catch whatever fish she desires in her net."

Blushing most fetchingly under this weight of praise, JP looked down and said quietly, "I really don't see how some dusty old Taoism helps you make money."

"That is the trick, isn't it?" he said softly, and then shifted gears. "Did the mystery client make a general inquiry, or did she ask for an appointment?"

"An appointment."

"And how did you respond?"

"I told her your schedule was booked but we'd try to squeeze her in."

"Excellent. And that's no exaggeration, given my current analysis of Alexander the Great's philosophy of warfare. It's devilishly interesting work, comparing his principles with those of Grant and Nelson. Quite different characters, of course, facing considerably different military challenges, but it's fascinating to ponder the unifying themes. If you want to master risk and volatility, there's almost no better place to start than Alexander, Nelson and Grant, though I suppose Genghis Khan and Napoleon must be included as well."

The bent figure of an elderly man emerged from the entry doorway, surprising both occupants of the office. "Poppycock, everything you told that greedy girl is poppycock," he berated the Consulting Philosopher. "You don't use Taoism to make your money. I've watched you. You don't have a system." "I have the system of no systems," The Consulting Philosopher countered. "And please stop sneaking in so soundlessly. You get all too much satisfaction from startling me."

"Don't con the girl. You trade on instinct," the old man snarled. "That can't be taught. I'm waiting for you to crash and burn, but you're a lucky devil."

"Instinct is the Tao, that's the whole point," the Consulting Philosopher said sternly. "And though it can't be taught, it can be learned. *Praxis* becomes intuition which becomes instinct."

"Poppycock," the old man replied. "And that greedy girl will get what she deserves—nothing."

JP pouted most fetchingly and the Consulting Philosopher sighed. "For someone of Chinese heritage, you have an astounding lack of appreciation for the graces and wisdom of your culture."

The elderly gent grunted and waved the comment off as if it were an annoyingly persistent wasp. "You exaggerate everything. I'm only part Chinese." Gazing at JP, he added, "They're all greedy, the younger generations. All they want is money."

"I take it you lost at online poker again?"

JP politely muffled a laugh and the foul mood of the elderly gent deepened. "Have your fun at my expense, Caverlock. When you're wiped out and can't afford to have your pretty little Chinese assistant around, don't come to me looking for sympathy."

"Dicky, you're ruining a very rare and precious good mood. JP informed me the consulting business has its first client. Two years of patience has finally been rewarded."

"Must have been a wrong number," Dicky scowled.

JP corrected him. "It was an email."

"OK, a wrong email," Dicky replied sourly.

The doorbell chimed, and all three exchanged anxious glances. "Dicky, I can't let your foul mood destroy my enterprise. Lock your polyglot Pacific self away in the spare room or you shall lose the only mahjong partner you'll ever have who loses so often and so gracefully."

As Dicky shuffled reluctantly away, Caverlock hissed, "And JP is not greedy. She merely wants to make her own way."

Turning to his slim assistant, he eyed her from head to toe, taking in her long black hair, blue jeans and teal-hued blouse. "We must give a positive impression of competence, and if not competence, then confidence will do. JP, have you ever worn a dress to work here?"

"No."

"I thought not. A pity. Some variation of the California denim office attire would be most welcome."

Sniffing the air, he asked with restrained anxiety, "Is the scent of our morning incense still in the air?"

The doorbell rang again, and he stage-whispered, "JP, pull your glorious tresses into a businesslike ponytail in the event this is the mystery client. If it is the client, usher her in, offer her green tea or Sumatran coffee and then sit beside me. Take copious notes about her and what she says on a yellow legal pad. If you reckon I missed something important, speak up or I shall be very cross."

Straightening the sleeves of his dragon-emblazoned red robe, Caverlock readied himself with a deep breath. Straightening her glossy black ponytail as instructed, JP whispered, "Why do you let that horrible old man around?"

"To remind us of what we must never become," he whispered back. "Now take a deep breath and answer the door."

## Chapter Two

Female voices filtered in from the entry, and a moment later JP led a striking young woman into the office. Beyond youth but far from middle age, she was not as tall as JP or Caverlock; her expression betrayed her nervousness, but her lack of makeup and erect posture gave a strong impression of self-control. Her dark hair was cropped to her shoulders, and she wore a bright yellow dress with black trim, a summery impression quite at odds with the autumn caution of her manner.

Taking in the multitude of paintings and prints adorning the walls and the bookshelf crammed with travel mementos and artful tchotchkes, she turned to Caverlock. Her hazel-green eyes widened as he approached to greet her warmly with a formal handshake.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss..."

"Victorine Greenwell."

"Ah, an excellent name," he replied. "I must disclose that my middle name is Victor, so we have at least one small commonality."

Unsure how to respond, Victorine turned to the expansive windows and gazed out at the windswept Bay. In profile, the source of her attractiveness became clearer; her features were agreeable, her mouth fetchingly kissable if one was invited to do so: but it was her green-brown eyes, alive with an uncommon intelligence, which rendered her magnetic.

"A blustery May day," Caverlock commented, but their client remained silently pensive. JP cleared her voice and asked, "May I get you some green tea or coffee?"

Before their guest could respond, Caverlock said, "I hand-grind the Sumatran coffee myself, adding some Ka'u beans to brighten it up a bit. The green tea is aromatic and a revelation."

"Green tea, thank you."

As JP headed for the kitchen, Caverlock instructed, "JP, let's use those *wabi-sabi* Japanese tea cups, thank you."

Turning to Victorine, Caverlock remarked, "Let me assure you that everything said here is in the strictest confidence, and nothing is audio-recorded. We have only our written notes."

By way of small talk, Victorine said, "You have quite an eclectic collection of art."

"Flotsam and jetsam, really," Caverlock said modestly. "I'm drawn to things with a philosophic connection of course, though I confess the connection is often obscure. For example, I love that print of

a British folly, a faux Greek temple ruin built for the amusement of 19<sup>th</sup> century gadabouts. To me, it evokes Hume and Athens, quite a combination.”

JP set the rough-glazed earthen-colored cups on the room’s round inlaid teak table, and the three sat down in utilitarian Shaker style wooden chairs.

“Now let’s hear your situation, Miss Greenwell, in whatever context you reckon most insightful.”

Victorine sipped the green tea and gazed appreciatively at the earthen glazed cup.

“I’m not really sure why I’m here,” she said hesitantly.

“Ah, well, then we’re all on the same page,” Caverlock exclaimed, and the first hint of humor softened his guest’s tense expression.

“I suppose it was ‘leave no stone unturned.’”

“An excellent strategy,” Caverlock assured her. “Now just imagine us as trustworthy friends and go from there.”

Victorine paused hesitantly and then steeled herself to begin. “My fiancé Drake Darcy went missing ten days ago. I contacted the police first, of course, but the missing persons bureau found nothing—no police reports of an unknown victim, no abandoned vehicles, nothing.”

“But of course you didn’t stop there,” Caverlock prompted her.

“I hired two private investigative agencies and they both reached the same conclusion. Worst-case scenario, Drake died accidentally in some remote location or was murdered.” Pausing to regain her composure, she said, “Their second theory is that Drake chose to leave his identity behind and assume another one elsewhere, possibly overseas.”

Resolutely continuing her account, she said, “The police told me it’s not that uncommon.”

JP looked up from her notetaking and Caverlock said, “And so failing to locate Drake, you find it difficult to resume your life without knowing what happened to him.”

“Yes,” Victorine said. “I can accept he made a new life somewhere, but I’d like to know why.”

Caverlock sipped his tea appreciatively. “I take it you find the worst-case scenario unlikely.”

“Drake is not a secretive person,” Victorine explained. “He didn’t trek off alone in the wilderness, he did things with friends or with me. As for being murdered, of course some horrible chance meeting could have occurred, but there’s no evidence of that.”

“And how is his family taking this?”

“They’re devastated,” Victorine replied. “He’s everything his family values: generous, thoughtful, diligent, bright, ambitious, loyal. His sister is distraught; they’re very close.”

“They’ve undoubtedly hired their own investigators,” Caverlock said, and Victorine nodded confirmation.

“No evidence of other intimate relationships, no digital crumbs from bank accounts or social media?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing erased before he vanished?” Caverlock asked.

“Nothing. It’s as if he walked into a time warp. There was a half cup of coffee on his desk at home, his dirty laundry is in the hamper, his deleted email wasn’t even emptied, and his mobile phone was on his desk.”

“Most curious,” Caverlock commented. “I take it Drake is employed?”

“Yes, at a marketing firm here in the city.”

“Has he been there long?”

“Since he graduated from university,” Victorine replied. “He’s a senior vice-president now.”

“A remarkable achievement,” Caverlock observed. “Does he travel much in his position as senior VP? Domestic? Overseas?”

After a thoughtful pause, Victorine answered, “He travels regularly to Washington D.C. because the firm has contracts there, and occasionally to Europe and Asia.”

“Have you ever accompanied him on these trips?”

“No. They’re usually just a few days and there’s no time to play. He’s promised me we’ll go for a real vacation later this year.”

Her measured demeanor broke, and she looked down until she recovered control.

JP looked up from her notes and said, “Sorry to ask, but have you set a date for your wedding?”

“Yes, in September,” Victorine replied.

Caverlock nodded thoughtfully before breaking the grim silence. “Naturally, people have suggested you to get psychological counseling as the solution to this terrible puzzle, and naturally, you’ve refused to accept that as the end-game.”

“Yes.”

Unable to sit any longer, Caverlock eased from his chair and began his figure-eight pacing on the faded blue Persian carpet. “Unconventional problems require unconventional means, which is why you’re here.”

Victorine considered this and replied, “Yes, I suppose that’s right.”

“I preface my comments in this manner because my approach may strike you as beyond the boundaries of what we might call conventional unconventionality.”

Victorine pondered this disclaimer and said, “You have my permission to pursue any line of inquiry that you feel has any chance of success.”

“Thank you,” Caverlock replied. “I discern two paths which we should pursue simultaneously. One is Wittgenstein. Now you as remember from Philosophy 101, Wittgenstein reckoned that all the great philosophic problems could be solved by the study of language. He changed his mind later in life, but that is not our focus here. I propose that you turn over all of Drake’s correspondence going back at least a year, not just including intimate correspondence but especially intimate correspondence. Are you able to do that?”

Victorine blanched but steadied herself. “Yes, if it’s absolutely necessary.”

“It is absolutely necessary, for just as Wittgenstein intuited, if something other than a tragic bolt from the blue occurred, then the language of his correspondence must hold subtle clues that will be visible to those who grasp Wittgenstein’s core insights.”

Victorine accepted this and JP’s eyes widened in mild surprise.

“Wittgenstein was not limited to abstractions,” Caverlock observed. “He built a house with his own hands. This inquiry is intensely and entirely practical.”

Swinging round to the window, he said, “Next, we must dig deeper into the digital trail left by Drake, for the world is now digital and even an aging dinosaur such as myself understands it is well-nigh impossible to erase all digital fingerprints.”

“The private investigators already looked into that,” Victorine said, and Caverlock waved her statement aside. “They only looked for the obvious bread crumbs. They’ve found none, which is of monumental importance. I am confident no one looked at the meta-level and meta-meta-levels because few have the skills to do so.”

“And you do?” Victorine asked with visible skepticism.

“No. but I have a fellow who does. Unfortunately he doesn’t come cheap. What is your budget for this inquiry?”

The question flustered Victorine and she bit her lip again. “I paid the private investigators by the hour. I have some resources, and Drake’s family might help once I’ve spent all my money.” Glancing uncertainly at Caverlock, she asked, “Will it be terribly expensive? I don’t know that I can sell my flat quickly enough.”

“We would never let you sell your flat to pay us,” JP announced, and her sympathies were clearly fully engaged.

Caverlock gave her a reprimanding glance and said, "We will certainly endeavor to keep expenses to an absolute minimum, but some travel may be necessary."

Victorine withdrew her checkbook and asked, "Will a month of my salary be enough to start?"

"Thank you for your trust in us," Caverlock remarked. Turning to hide his wink at JP, he accepted the check and folded it in his robe pocket.

Victorine's tense expression softened into a faint smile. "I trust you will return any money that isn't spent directly on the investigation."

"Of course," Caverlock replied. Glancing at JP, he added, "In fact, your funds will be held in escrow, untouched, until the investigation yields some satisfactory results. However I feel obliged to mention the possibility, however remote, that expenses may far exceed this initial retainer."

JP frowned in disapproval, and Caverlock strode to the bookcase. "JP, you need only summarize my comments here, which will serve as disclosures I deem necessary for Ms. Greenwell to understand."

Pausing by the shelving, Caverlock gazed contemplatively at the chaotic mix of hardbound and paperback books and the profusion of mementos before speaking. "When I was a boy, I contracted a chronic illness and was delivered—dumped might be more accurate, but considerably less charitable—to my aunt's rural abode for the many months of slow recovery."

Touching a hardbound volume of Aristotle's works, he said, "My aunt was kindly, her husband less so, and they were away most of the day working. Their house held only four books: a weathered Bible, an untouched single-volume encyclopedia, and two well-spattered cookbooks. With nothing else to occupy myself, I read the Bible cover to cover, then the encyclopedia and then the two cookbooks. This left me with a curious curiosity and a knack for rather decent scratch scones."

Victorine shifted uncomfortably on the wooden chair, and Caverlock said, "I apologize for the roundabout discourse, which JP tolerates out of the goodness of her heart, but there is a purpose here."

Taking a small cast bronze skull from the shelf in his hand, he said, "Alas, poor Yorick, a fellow of infinite jest and most excellent fancy."

Setting the bronze piece down, he resumed his pacing. "Two biblical stories apply to your case, Miss Greenwell. The first is the account of an adulteress confronted by an accusatory mob. The conniving officials seek to convict Jesus by his own words by asking him to pass judgment on the poor woman, who by the rules of the day would be stoned to death by the assembled mob of men."

Caverlock stopped and turned to face his client. "Jesus knelt down and traced some figures in the dirt, which to our great loss went unrecorded. He then said, 'let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' And in this way, he provoked each man's conscience to serve as judge. Convicted by their own consciences, the mob dissipated, and Jesus forgave the woman but asked her to sin no more."

Victorine absorbed this performance with subdued interest, and Caverlock continued. "My point here is that we must be prepared to forgive what many might view as unforgivable. We do not know the circumstances of Drake's disappearance or decisions, but until we know the full circumstances, we must assume he acted in good faith to make the best possible choices given the situation."

Victorine accepted this without comment and Caverlock stopped by the picture window to gaze at the flags along the Embarcadero billowing in the breeze.

"The second story relates to Jesus arising from the dead. While we may reckon his disciples and friends were overjoyed by this miracle, they were in fact terrified to find the rock closing His tomb pushed aside and His resting place empty."

Caverlock turned to gaze at Victorine. "My point is two-fold. We must be prepared not only for the worst possible news, but to be dismayed to our core by what we find."

His sober tone caused JP to lose her reserve. "We don't know anything yet, so why scare us with these stories?"

"Actually, JP, we know quite a lot already. We know that nothing we know adds up. People do vanish, but with sufficient effort and time, some bits of evidence—physical, digital, accounts of

witnesses, security camera footage, and so on—generally turn up. Yet conventional investigations have found nothing. That in itself is peculiar. No, I think we already have enough in hand to conclude that the waters are deeper and darker than the other investigators have suggested.”

Victorine’s expression telegraphed alarm, and Caverlock said, “It would be irresponsible in the extreme to dismiss what we do know. Don’t you see the structure of contrivance? The cold cup of coffee, the undeleted emails, the lack of any trail of crumbs—it’s too perfect to be spontaneous.”

Warming to the topic, he said, “As Merleau-Ponty observed, we are experiential beings. If Drake, by Miss Greenwell’s account a non-secretive person, set out to remove every trace of his disappearance, how could he carry it off so flawlessly on his first attempt?”

Caverlock approached the two seated women and paused theatrically. “As Husserl noted, there are limits to science as an epistemological discipline. The relevant text, for your edification, JP, is titled *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.”

His deep voice filling the room, he said, “My point here is that we are dealing not just with observable evidence but with a web of unseen forces.” Looking directly at Victorine, he said, “Drake struck you as not a secretive person. That makes him the ideal person to hold secrets.”

JP’s looked up from her yellow legal pad at Victorine, whose expression betrayed her surprise. “Doesn’t it strike you as peculiar,” Caverlock continued, “that someone clever enough to orchestrate such a thoroughly puzzling disappearance would fail to leave a trail of evidence that suggested a conveniently believable explanation?”

Picking up his rough-glazed tea cup, Caverlock drained the contents and set the cup down with enough force to rattle the tabletop. “Just as Plato’s famous cave holds only shadows, we have only shadows. And my point here is that what’s missing is more important than what we see. Put yourself in Drake’s shoes. For some reason, he feels compelled to disappear for a time. Others may assume he has disappeared forever but there is no reason to assume it is anything other than a temporary fix to a very pressing problem.”

Refilling his tea cup, he said, “The first thing you would conjure up is a plausible cover that explains your sudden disappearance: an urgent business trip, an old friend is terribly ill in some distant jungle, that sort of thing. The very last thing you would do is arrange such a perfectly mysterious disappearance that everyone would immediately start investigating your whereabouts. There is nothing more alarming than an inexplicable vanishing, and so the person doing the vanishing would avoid that at all costs. Yet this is what we have: a carefully contrived disappearance.”

Victorine shook her head in a show of skepticism. “But wouldn’t there be some evidence of Drake’s secret life, if that’s what you’re proposing?”

Caverlock resumed his pacing. “I realize the suggestion that your knowledge of your fiancé is imperfect is disturbing, but you must confess that Drake, or whomever arranged his disappearance, has all but issued a cry for help. How else can we explain the extraordinary lack of a cover story or a trail of crumbs that lead to a plausible explanation?”

Victorine’s tone was again one of alarm. “Are you suggesting someone spirited Drake away?”

“I am simply observing that this disappearance has been carefully contrived to send a meta-message, and that this contrivance might be the work of Drake or of an organization—perhaps his employer or some organization as yet unknown.”

Caverlock resumed his restless pacing and said, “JP, make careful note of this. The very core of philosophic inquiry is to ferret out the unstated assumptions hidden within a narrative and expose them to the bright light of logic—not just formal logic, but the logic of one thing following another in a sequence which makes sense. Even the most ineffable mysticism of the Taoists follows a narrative from specific assumptions about the way the world works.”

Gazing at the two women, he added, “I relish your skepticism, for you are questioning my questioning. And this is how we progress.”

Returning to the cluttered bookshelf, Caverlock scanned the rainbow of paperback spines. "I would dearly love to find a particular quote by Tacitus at this juncture, but alas." Picking up a small fabric camel from the shelf, Caverlock toyed with the memento while he spoke. "What are we to make of the absence of action from Drake's employer?"

"But I didn't say anything about his employer's actions," Victorine protested.

"Precisely," Caverlock replied. "A key employee vanishes without a trace, and the employer performs an empty round of suitably anxious handwringing but does nothing you reckoned worthy of reporting."

"They said they were letting the authorities handle the investigation."

"Of course they would say that," Caverlock replied. Setting the miniature camel back on the shelf, Caverlock asked, "Would you say that Drake was a well-organized person, tidy about record-keeping and money, that sort of thing?"

Victorine pondered the question and replied, "Yes, he's well-organized, but not to the point of being obsessive."

"Splendid," Caverlock said. "I presume he has his own flat, and that you have the key?"

Victorine nodded, and he issued her instructions. "I need you to bring every scrap of paper in his home desk, a complete copy of every file on his laptop and every text in his mobile phone and his private correspondence with you—letters, emails, texts. This afternoon would not be too early. Time may be of the essence."

Arising from her chair, Victoria said, "I'll do my best to get it all here before five."

JP set her legal pad and pen on the table and escorted Victoria to the entry. Caverlock turned the pad around and read JP's first neatly printed note: "Client looks like a movie star."

JP returned to the office and gave her employer an appraising look tinted with admiration. "You're better at this than I thought."

The Consulting Philosopher smiled broadly and commented, "I have endeavored, largely with little success, to reveal that philosophy is the most suitable foundation for tackling complex problems. Now you finally get to see philosophy in action."

Caverlock's cheerful demeanor faded and he added somberly, "JP, I strongly suspect this case is a monstrous iceberg adrift in a stormy sea. As yet we only faintly discern the visible 10%, and we see that only through a thick fog. We shall need every moment of your waking time and every spark of your prodigious intelligence to sort through the mass of evidence that will be delivered to us this afternoon."

A creaking of the hardwood flooring announced the return of Dicky from his involuntary banishment. "I saw your client," he announced with satisfaction, as if it were a moral victory over the forces of repression. "Quite a looker."

Caverlock responded forcefully to the intrusion. "I can always count on you to reliably give voice to the coarsest animal spirits," Caverlock commented as he brusquely shooed Dicky out to the entry. Dicky's parting shot was cut off by the slamming of the heavy carved-wood entry door, and Caverlock returned to the office muttering epitaphs in a foreign tongue.

"JP, be sure to lock the deadbolt when you come and go. We must keep Dicky out of the flat for the duration of this case."

His young assistant registered her satisfaction with this banishment and asked, "Where do we start?"

Pacing to the low side table adjoining the divan, he opened an age-darkened metal box whose surface had the texture of coarse sandpaper. Sorting through rolls of euros, renminbi, yen and dollars, he withdrew a thick roll of bills bound by a rubber band. Peeling off a sheaf of bills, he handed the cash to JP and instructed, "We start with restocking provisions. We shall need to keep our strength up, and so please get whatever brain food you desire in Chinatown, with an extra portion to share with me, and buy a box of my favorite *char sui bao* from that hole-in-the-wall bakery, you know the place. We also



need fresh ginger, *yao choy* and scallops for the wok, kimchi, *sato imo* for my *nishime*, which I recall you viewed quite favorably, and please snag whatever you need for your superb braised green beans and *Ants Climbing a Tree*. Oh, and have the delivery service conjure up four *lau-laus* and a container of poi. We shall undoubtedly be eating in for the next few days.”

### Chapter Three

JP sat cross-legged in the middle of a semi-circle of neatly separated piles of papers occupying the center of the office floor. Exhaling in frustration, she said, “I don’t even know what I’m looking for.”

The Consulting Philosopher wordlessly completed his tai chi routine on the faded blue Persian carpet and stood in silence for a moment before replying. In contrast to JP’s blue jeans and floral poppy-patterned blouse, Caverlock wore gray slacks, a black belt around his ample waist and a button-down pinstriped Oxford shirt.

“Let’s be grateful that the tax code has trained everyone in business to automatically save every receipt, no matter how trivial. At least we have material to work with.”

Kneeling down beside his assistant, Caverlock said, “We’re not looking for something, we’re looking for holes in the narrative that don’t make sense.” Taking up a loose pile of receipts, he methodically glanced at each one. “Consider this trip to Paris. Business class airfare, a night in a hotel in the 16th arrondissement, a TGV ticket stub and then another night at an airport hotel three days later.”

“You see the holes, JP? Why a small hotel in the 16<sup>th</sup>, which is not convenient to the airport, train stations or their client’s offices in the 7<sup>th</sup>? And where did Drake go for the three missing days? We have a TGV stub to Nimes in the south and nothing else.”

JP arched her back in a feline stretch, and her long glossy black hair shimmered as she resumed examining the documents. “Maybe he’s having an affair.”

“That’s one possibility,” Caverlock agreed, “but his lover would have to jet around the world meeting him in various places on limited occasions. Hardly the ideal romance.”

“Maybe he’s with a different woman each time, or with a man,” JP said.

“I admire the breadth of your suspicions, we must leave no possibility unexamined. Any of these would leave a trail of bread crumbs—a receipt from a meal, a text message, an email. Secret lives add a layer of complexity that’s difficult to manage, and leakage is inevitable. The less the leakage, the likelier that some organizational protocols are in place to limit the leakage.”

“I don’t follow you,” JP said.

“Think about leading a secret life, JP. Managing occasional secrets comes naturally enough, but managing a complicated secret life takes practice,” Caverlock explained. “This is why organizations have protocols for employees to follow. If we can’t find any leakage between his secret life and his ordinary life, then the odds favor his secret life is an organizational one.”

JP’s eyes widened. “You mean like a spy.”

“Not necessarily a spy, but performing some duty or service that must remain confidential. It could be a corporate role, for example, above and beyond his visible position.”

“But he could be a spy,” JP insisted. “He went to Washington D.C. more often than anywhere else.”

“D.C. is a hub of all sorts of government business and technology,” Caverlock replied. “The odds of him being caught up in an official intelligence web are low.”

“But the odds go up if we don’t find bread crumbs.”

“Yes. But one trail such protocols can’t cover is our everyday use of language. This is why I’m poring over his texts, emails and letters to Victorine. You have the easier task, JP, despite its many difficulties. You are seeking unexplained holes in travel itineraries and trails of bread crumbs that don’t match the

official narratives of a business trip. I am seeking the equivalent of neutrinos, subtle changes in his vocabulary and tone that would indicate some internal conflict or crisis coming to a head.”

Tapping her tablet computer approvingly, he said, “We can’t organize all these threads without a database. So enter each question we have—why the small hotel in the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, where did he go from Nimes, where did he stay in the south, and so on—and whatever we know about the cover story: the client in Paris, any reports he filed on the trip, and so on. Then we can start cross-referencing correspondence and receipts, and start filling these gaping holes.”

Caverlock clambered to his feet and pensively scanned the gray skies above the bay.

“We have an epistemological inquiry here,” he said, and his deep voice once again filled the room to bursting. “Epistemology is the study of how we come to know the world around us, and ourselves, and in this case, a man we have yet to meet and his life leading up to a most mysterious disappearance.”

Warming to the topic, he said, “When we say we know someone, what are we claiming to know? Not just various bits of data, but the story of their life, a narrative that ties together their motivations, goals, values and primal urges, and exposes their weaknesses. How do they handle errors of judgment and the misfortunes that come with living? And most importantly, how do we come to learn all this?”

Turning to JP, he exclaimed, “I have the most astounding thirst for a strong coffee. May I get you a tea or coffee?”

“OK,” JP replied noncommittally as she flipped through another pile of receipts. “I see what you mean. His trip to Tokyo is also full of holes.”

“Splendid,” he remarked. “Patterns may emerge. But our larger puzzle is why Drake was drawn to a secret life in the first place, and what he extracted from leading that life.”

Entering the kitchen, Caverlock put on the electric kettle and then placed his bulk in the doorway. “JP, I make very few non-work-related demands of you, but could you crack open the window when you’re having those pungent pickles with your congee in the morning? I would tuck into them myself later in the day, but I’m not prepared for that particular assault at dawn.”

“Sorry, boss,” JP replied, but her tone undermined the sincerity of her apology.

Emerging some minutes later with two white coffee mugs on a lacquer red tray, Caverlock set the tray on the round inlaid teak table and said, “JP, please join me for a short break from your arduous task.”

JP arose, bent down to stretch, effortlessly touching her toes and then took a chair opposite her employer. “And I struggle to touch my knees,” Caverlock noted wistfully as he handed her the mug. “I made it with sweetened soy milk, as you like it, and here are some of those Hong Kong biscuits you favor.”

While JP crunched on a thin cookie, Caverlock flopped onto the divan and returned to the topic of the moment. “Now this is critically important to our work, JP, so pay strict attention. If you devote yourself to this case for the next few days, I promise to give you an immensely insightful lesson on how to make boatloads of cash in the markets.”

JP nodded and sipped her coffee appreciatively. “We have two points here,” Caverlock began. “The process of knowing ourselves and other people is not like the process of learning grammar or how to construct a boat. The human mind and experience is opaque, unknown not just to observers but to ourselves. The human mind does not have a nice little transparent library of traits, conflicts, motivations, and so on. There is no book that gives us perfect knowledge of an individual. We must parse all this out the hard way, by objective observation and an intuitive search for truths, truths which may change as the individual changes.”

Caverlock cracked one of the cookies in half and dipped a piece in his coffee. “My second point is the average person assumes this is a job for psychology, which seeks to categorize individuals with test results, as data is reckoned to be more reliable than other means. But data collection is blind to the

deeper dilemma of how do we come to know how and why a person ends up in a place where disappearing is the only viable solution?"

Sipping his coffee, Caverlock continued. "You are young, but you have lived long enough to observe that people claim to hold certain goals and values dear, but their actions reflect entirely different goals and motivations. Our own conscious motivations may not align with what we actually choose to do."

Gesturing at JP, Caverlock said, "You mentioned spying. Some spies thrive on the illicit thrill of getting away with betraying the trust of others. That their secret life is morally reprehensible seems to add to its appeal. Others go down what appears to be a modestly intriguing path that leads, step by step, into a thicket they cannot escape. I fear we can't make any real progress unless we can assemble a collage of Drake's motivations, goals and the forces that have apparently swallowed him whole."

Caverlock paused reflectively, and added, "We can know all sorts of data about him and know absolutely nothing about him or his situation."

Arising from the velvet-draped divan, mug in hand, Caverlock gazed at his youthful assistant. "JP, we haven't discussed your family much, have we?"

JP shrugged and bit into another cookie. "My family is normal," she said. "Not interesting."

"Yet I know your father is still alive."

JP nodded noncommittally, and Caverlock's deep voice softened. "You never speak of him as you do your Mom, your Aunty and your maternal grandmother, and so I know he isn't part of your life."

JP took a sip of coffee and tried to mask her growing discomfort.

"I would be bursting with pride if I had a daughter as fine as you," Caverlock said, and the sincerity in his voice electrified the air. "I don't know that I can ever fully forgive him for not appreciating you."

JP looked down, and Caverlock added, "That's probably why I enjoy serving you so much. As I was unappreciated as a child, I recognize it in you. People love you, but they don't appreciate you. And I cannot help but appreciate you."

Returning to the divan, Caverlock said, "You see, this is how it works. Each person can only know others through the lens of their own experience and self-knowledge. We can only come to know Drake and Victorine through the imperfect lens of our own experience."

JP wiped the tears from her eyes and chided him. "You're a bad boss. You made me cry."

"Yes, I deserve to be punished, and so I'll force myself to open a bottle of champagne at day's end."

The mobile phone laying on the inlaid table chirped, and Caverlock hastened to answer it. "Ah, Carlito, at last we speak. I have a critically important project for you that pays handsomely."

Caverlock listened and then said, "Yes, come over immediately. Fifteen minutes will be enough."

Ending the call, Caverlock remarked, "I don't believe you've met Carlito. Or does my memory fail me?"

"No," JP replied.

"He's young, about your age I would reckon."

JP was silent, and Caverlock considered the absence of a reply. "JP, if you have a boyfriend, or acquire one, I'd be grateful if you'd bring him round—or her, if that's the case. I promise not to pry, and to be on my best behavior. I would be honored by your trust."

"Boss, I'm trying to concentrate."

"Sorry," The Consulting Philosopher apologized. "Of course you have an absolute right to privacy. Forgive the intrusion, I suppose reading Drake's love letters to Victorine put me in a romantic frame of mind."

JP set down the receipts and submitted to the temptation of curiosity. "Don't you feel bad, reading their private letters?"

"Not really," he replied. "I put myself in an objective frame of mind and remind myself this is a serious business. Besides, I have my own romantic experiences, and so I'm a sympathetic reader."

JP stole a glance at Caverlock. "Have you been married?"

“Twice,” Caverlock answered. “Once for practice and later as a necessity.”

“For practice? Did she think it was practice?”

Caverlock smiled at JP’s righteous indignation and said, “No, of course not. We were drunk with infatuation, supremely confident it would last forever, and that our lives would be drenched in creative endeavors and splendid adventures. We would be intellectual free spirits like Simone and Sartre, minus all their sordid affairs.”

“And what happened?”

“Youth ends,” Caverlock said with unaccustomed simplicity.

“Do you have any photos of her?” JP asked, her curiosity now fully piqued.

“I suppose I do,” Caverlock replied a subdued voice. Taking up a folder, he shuffled through folded papers. “This is modern intimacy,” he remarked. “Hand-drawn hearts on Post-It notes, snippets of conventionality in phone texts and an occasional love letter typed out on a computer.”

Extracting one longhand letter, he remarked, “The French put great store in handwriting, as do I. One must never give a typed note the same veracity as the hand-written one.”

Unable to resist, JP arose and came to look at the letter in Caverlock’s oversized weathered hands.

“JP, what is the Chinese word for ‘inscrutable’?”

JP shrugged and read the longhand letter with intense concentration. “Do you think he really loves her?”

“Actions speak louder than words, and he abandoned her without explanation for what we hope was a very pressing reason—pressing enough to overcome his attachment to her.” Stabbing a line with his index finger, he said, “But words are still important. Here is the most interesting line: *‘I’m drawn to the mysterious and inscrutable, and long to know all of you.’*”

JP puzzled over the line. “Why is that more important? Because it’s poetic?”

“True, there is something of the German Romantic here, a line self-consciously composed while listening to the *Moonlight Sonata*, far from the object of one’s affection, or even a bit of Russian passion, something a character in Pushkin might say, or even Pushkin himself.”

Caverlock’s brow furrowed, and he murmured, “But remove the ‘long to know all of you’ and it has the pre-ordained quality of Augustine, a force that cannot be denied. He could be describing the urge that drew him into a thicket he cannot escape.”

“Boss, you’re talking in circles.”

“Just thinking out loud, JP. Why didn’t he just write ‘mysterious’ and leave it at that? Why use ‘inscrutable’? Why not ‘enigmatic’ or ‘inaccessible’? Is he describing Victorine, our reserved and intensely private client, or is he describing himself?”

“Boss, you’re going overboard. It’s just one line. What about the rest of the letter?”

“The rest is also interesting, of course, but I’ve read all his letters, emails and texts, and he never used ‘inscrutable’ elsewhere, and certainly not in a line designed to be profoundly romantic to a woman who would, beneath her controlled exterior, be moved by his desire to know all of her, not just the attractive surface bits that have drawn a host of shallow suitors.”

“How can you read all that in one line? You’re just making stuff up,” said JP accusingly.

“Not at all, JP. He’s telling her that he recognizes she has uncommon depth, that is to say, an internal life rich in complex feelings, observations, dreams and self-awareness, and that unlike her other suitors, who seek a conquest or trophy, he must know all of her, even the parts she has kept private from everyone else, lest they trample her most secret and fragile gardens.”

“No wonder your first wife fell in love with you,” JP remarked. “You can really talk.”

Caverlock made a slight bow in recognition of her praise and continued his analysis. “My second wife also loved me, and I was besotted with her, but let’s focus on Victorine and Drake. Recall that what we’re seeking are the truths that delivered Drake to his as yet unknown fate.”

Handing JP the entire page to read, Caverlock said, "He's also telling her that he is drawn to the mysterious and inscrutable as a general rule, not just to her. In other words, whatever has ensnared him was also a challenge, just as she is."

Taking up his figure-eight pacing once again, Caverlock concluded, "And so we discern a declaration of his ontological core, who he truly is, and perhaps a subconscious plea for understanding and forgiveness. In a way, he could be telling her, *I am drawn to the mysterious and inscrutable, including this secret project; please forgive me, for it is as unstoppable as my desire to know all of you.*"

Caverlock continued pacing in silence, and JP carefully returned the letter to the folder.

"Victorine is profoundly disturbed not just by his disappearance," Caverlock said with conviction, "or by the terrible awareness that he has successfully hidden his secret life from her, but by the possibility that his attraction to mysterious challenges is far stronger than his love for her. That is, even if he surfaces, he'll soon be off chasing another mystery, or even worse, another inscrutable beauty."

"I'm starting to hate this guy," JP murmured darkly.

"Now JP, let's be charitable. I am sure the unhappiest moment of Drake's life was leaving Victorine with nothing but an unnerving vacuum. The conflict within him must be crushing."

JP swept her long hair over her shoulder and began twisting it in a ruminative braiding.

Pausing in front of his slim assistant, Caverlock said, "Who is to say that each isn't testing the other's devotion? After all, his disappearance throws down a challenge to Victorine. Will she seek him out, or abandon him?"

"We still don't know what his secret life is about, or why he disappeared," JP observed. "Shouldn't that be our focus?"

The doorbell rang, and Caverlock brightened. "Yes, and perhaps we can now make progress on that front."