

THE DOUBLE

"It's astonishing all the good
stuff Pelecanos can pack into
one unpretentious book."
—*New York Times Book Review*

A SPERO LUCAS NOVEL

GUIDE
READERS' PICK
INSIDE

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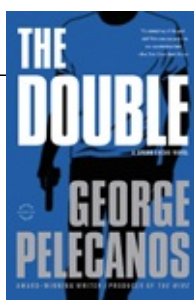
THE
DOUBLE

A NOVEL

GEORGE
PELECANOS



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Now some men like the fishin' and some men like the fowlin'

—And some men like to hear a cannonball a roarin'.

—“Whiskey in the Jar” (traditional)

ONE

Tom Petersen sat tall behind his desk. He wore tailored jeans, zippered boots, an aquamarine Brooks Brothers shirt, and an aquamarine tie bearing large white polka dots. His blond hair was carefully disheveled. His hands were folded in his lap.

Spero Lucas, seated in a chair before the desk, was dressed in slim-cut Dickies work pants, a plain white T-shirt, and Nike boots. Lucas, Petersen's investigator, took in the criminal attorney's outfit with curiosity and amusement.

"What is it?" said Petersen.

"Your getup," said Lucas. "There's somethin about it."

"I only wear a tie when I'm in court."

"Something else."

"Think of your father. It'll come to you." Petersen looked down at the contents of a manila file that was open on his desk. Beside it sat other files heaped inside a reinforced hanging folder. The package was thick as a phone book. "Let's get back to this."

They were discussing the case of Calvin Bates, a Petersen client. Bates had been charged with first-degree murder in the death of his mistress, Edwina Christian.

"Where was the body found?" said Lucas. He opened the pocket-sized Moleskine notebook he carried and readied his pen.

"I'll give you this short file when we're done."

"You know I like to take notes. The details help me work it out in my head."

"Edwina's body was discovered in Southern Maryland. A wooded spot in Charles County, off the Indian Head Highway. Are you familiar with that area?"

"I put my kayak in down there from time to time."

"Edwina had been missing for a week. Once the police actively began to look into her disappearance, Edwina's mother pointed them in the direction of her lover. Bates was a multiple offender who'd been having an off-and-on extramarital relationship with Edwina for years."

"Both of them were married?"

"Bates was married. Edwina was single."

"How'd the police find Edwina?"

"Bates led them to her in a roundabout way. He was in the High Intensity Supervision Program, run by Pre-trial Services."

"HISP. I'm familiar with it. Bates was already up on charges?"

"Drug charges. Nothing violent, but he'd been violated, and he was looking at return time."

"So he was wearing a GPS bracelet."

"On his ankle. The device records longitude and latitude coordinates every ten seconds and uploads them each minute to a database run by a private company under contract with HISP."

"What company?"

“It’s called Satellite Tracking of People. Orwellian, don’t you think?”

~~“*Touch of Evil* is one of my favorite movies.”~~

“Spero, sometimes you work too hard at being an aw-shucks kind of guy.”

“It serves me well. So, the company was called STOP.”

“You ex-military do love your acronyms.”

“And the law went to STOP to collect the data on Bates’s whereabouts.”

“Correct. The data was plotted onto a satellite-based map, progressed in real time in a video format. The results are accurate to within fifty feet. If the bracelet wearer is in a vehicle, its movement can be tracked as well.”

“Let me guess,” said Lucas. “The autopsy on Edwina Christian determined a general time of death. The coordinates on Bates put him down in Southern Maryland, where Edwina’s body was found, that same time. Right?”

“It gets more damning. Bates had reported his Jeep as being stolen around the time of Edwina’s disappearance.”

“Model and year of the Jeep?”

“Two thousand Cherokee. Same as yours.”

Lucas drove a 2001, but there wasn’t enough difference in the model years to mention. It was the boxy Jeep with the I-6 engine, still seen in great numbers on highways, beaches, and city streets, though the car had not been produced in eleven years.

“The Jeep was found in D.C.,” said Petersen. “It had been doused in an accelerant and lit on fire. The Mobile Crime Lab guys had little to work with. No shell casings were found. No prints, no hair follicles. They did find brush and debris lodged in the undercarriage, which suggested that the truck had been recently driven off-road.”

“As they’re engineered to do. How’d the police find Edwina’s body?”

“The GPS coordinates led them to a farm alongside acreage that was heavily forested. They observed tire tracks on a dirt road leading into the woods. The imprints matched the tread patterns of the tires of the burned Jeep.”

“How’d they find Edwina *exactly*?”

“Technology got them to the area. Nature led them to the body. The detectives saw buzzards circling over the treetops. They eyeballed the general location of the buzzards and walked into the woods. Edwina had been shot once behind the ear at close range, a small-caliber slug in her brainpan. She’d been picked over by the wildlife pretty thoroughly.”

In the file, Petersen found several photographs, original size and blown up, and pushed them across the desk to Lucas. The photos were of the tire tracks found in Charles County. “Notice anything?” said Petersen. When Lucas did not reply, Petersen said, “The tires are kinda fat for that model Jeep, aren’t they?”

“Doesn’t mean anything. I have eighteens on mine. But I’ve seen twenty-twos mounted on those lifted Cherokees as well.” Lucas stared at one of the photographs. There was something there, but the reveal was yet to come. “Can I walk with these?”

“I made this file for you. I’ve got the State’s discovery material as well if you want to have a look at it here in the office. Three hundred and fifty pages’ worth.”

“I was gonna grab some lunch.”

“Stay here and read some of the material. I’m going over to Carmine’s on Seventh. I’ll bring you something back.”

“Calamari with red sauce, please.”

Petersen waved his hand dismissively. "Peasant food."

"Don't sleep on squid," said Lucas. "It sounds like they've got your boy Bates dead to rights."

"Not yet," said Petersen. "But I'm playing an away game. The trial's in La Plata. I've never worked in that courtroom, and I don't know any of the black robes down there. I need your help. Anything you can give me."

"You think Bates murdered her?"

"That's irrelevant to me."

"What would be his motive?"

"Edwina's mother claimed that Edwina was trying to break up with him. That she decided she was done running around with a married man. Possible scenario? Bates couldn't deal with the breakup. She didn't want to be with him, she wouldn't be with anyone else. Something like that."

Lucas stood. His back was beginning to feel the discomfort of sitting in one of the hard chairs on the uneven planked hardwood floors of Petersen's office. The attorney refused to modernize the room of the nineteenth-century row house, set on a corner of 5th and D, near the federal courts. He said he preferred to keep its "integrity" intact.

"*Between the Buttons*," said Lucas, as it came to him, looking at Petersen's shirt and tie. At Petersen's suggestion, he'd been thinking of his late father, Van Lucas, who had owned an extensive Stones vinyl collection, from their first eponymous release through 1981's *Tattoo You*, which man Lucas's father included, believed to be the last Rolling Stones record that mattered.

"Very good," said Petersen. "Charlie Watts is wearing an outfit like this in the cover photo. Of course, he's also wearing a double-breasted overcoat in the shot, but it's a bit hot for that today."

"But why are you dressed like him? Do you subscribe to *Teen Beat*, too?"

"I'm partial to *Tiger Beat*."

"Why that record?"

"Just having fun. It's a very cool cover, and an underrated album, especially the UK version. 'Backstreet Girl' is one of the most beautiful songs the lads ever cut. The Beatles never recorded a song so honest or so real."

Lucas had no skin in the Beatles versus Stones game, and offered no argument. In musical matters, particularly classic rock, he deferred to Petersen, who played no instrument but was a bona fide music freak. A few months back he had taken his annual trip to Jazz Fest, where he typically took in both weekends of the event and crawled back with sunburn, a headache, and ten extra pounds.

"Well, you look real spiffy," said Lucas. "Like a hairstylist on Carnaby Street. Or something."

"And you? Where did you buy that T-shirt? It's not Fruit of the Loom."

"American Apparel."

"And I'm guessing it's a medium, not a large. You're wearing it a size too small."

"For the fit. Your point?"

"Your look is just as studied as mine, in its own way."

"Don't include me in your club. I woke up this morning and threw this on."

At an inch under six feet, Lucas was not particularly tall, and at 175, his summer weight, he was not imposing. Nor was he a strutting peacock. His hair was black, kept short by a Nigerian barber named Afrikutz on Georgia Avenue, and he wore no jewelry, outside of his crucifix and *mati*. He was not stunningly handsome, certainly not in the manner of his brother Leo, who was one year older and looked like a young Denzel. But he had something. When he walked down the street or into a bar, women noticed him. Some of them got damp. He had recently turned thirty-one, and he was as lean as a cut, and fit as the day he walked out of boot.

“Which reminds me,” said Petersen. “While I’m out getting you lunch, no fraternizing with m interns.”

“Right.”

“Have you seen Constance lately?”

“No,” said Lucas.

“I had planned on promoting her here.”

“Guess she had other plans.”

“Whatever happened between the two of you, she didn’t want to cross paths with you anymore. That’s why she left this office. When you have an opportunity to be with a quality young lady like Constance... A woman as choice as her doesn’t fall into your hands every day, Spero.”

“We had fun,” said Lucas. “I liked Constance.”

He knew that she was special. But he had been to bed with another woman while he’d been with her. He hadn’t promised Constance, directly or implicitly, that he would be faithful. He was a young man making up for lost time. He was sorry that it hadn’t worked out between them, but he had little remorse.

Petersen looked at Lucas, a marine veteran of Iraq who had fought in Fallujah, where the fierce house-to-house combat of the war, perhaps any war, had occurred. A man who’d left his youth in the Middle East and come back looking for a replication of what he had experienced there every day: a sense of purpose and heightened sensation. Petersen sensed that there were night-black shadows beneath the surface of his investigator’s cool facade. He was fond of Lucas, at times close to fatherly, but in personal matters, out of respect, Petersen didn’t push him.

“On the Bates thing?” said Petersen. “Get me something.”

Lucas said, “I will.”

That evening, Lucas smoked a little weed, then grabbed his newest road bike, put it up on his shoulder, and walked it down the stairs of his crib. Summer nights were his favorite time to ride.

Lucas rented the top floor of a house on Emerson and Piney Branch Road, in Northwest, a four square backed to a bucolic stretch of alley in 16th Street Heights. His landlord, an elderly fourth-generation Washingtonian named Miss Lee, lived on the first floor. His rent was reasonable and there was ample space for his bikes and kayak, which he hung from hooks on the back porch. When Miss Lee asked, he performed routine maintenance on the house and sometimes he did so unprompted. The setup, a country spot in the city, was perfect for him, though he suspected that his peace would soon be disrupted. A huge Mormon church had been erected across the alley in the past year and was due to open its doors. For now, though, all was quiet.

He had recently bought a used Greg LeMond bike from a friend who was about to leave the country for redeployment to Afghanistan. It was a righteous machine, but he didn’t care for its rainbow colors, and he wasn’t into labels. Immediately he degreased, sanded, primed, and painted the tubes and forks a flat black. He kept the red wheels because he found them hot. It was a fast bike, significantly quicker than the one he had been riding for years.

Lucas swung onto his saddle, put his feet in the clips, and took 14th all the way downtown, then crossed over into Northeast via K Street, and over to the 400 block of H, where he locked his bike to a post and entered Boundary Road, a restaurant on the edge of the thriving Atlas District. Unlike the rich corridors of U and 7th Streets, which had benefited more quickly from the construction of the Metro and its subway stations, H Street had taken forty years to be reborn after the ’68 fires. Lit-up business

establishments and the sounds of conversation and laughter on the street said that it was flourishing now.

Boundary Road was an airy two-story space: brick walls, a distinctive chandelier, low-key atmosphere. Lucas had a seat at the bar. The night manager, Dan, frequently played reggae and du through the house system, an added attraction for Lucas. Plus, he could come as he was—tonight in black mountain-bike shorts and a plain white T-shirt—and not feel out of place. He ordered a Stella from the bartender, a friend named Amanda Brand, who had called and asked to see him. He had silent-bounced for Amanda in other establishments, so they had a history. She also knew of his side work and what he could do.

“You eating tonight, Spero?” said Amanda as she served him his beer.

“I’ll have that flank steak, medium rare.”

“We’ll talk in a little bit, okay? I’m half in the weeds.”

“I’m in no hurry,” he said.

He listened to the Linton Kwesi Johnson coming through the system and drank from the neck of his cold beer. At the end of the full bar he noticed a nice-looking woman sitting alone. Their eyes met and hers did not cut away. It was he who blinked and lowered his gaze. He was typically a man of confidence, but her bold nature disturbed him. The next time he looked back at her she was getting up off her stool. He watched her walk toward him, heading for the restroom. She wore black jeans, black tank top, and brown motorcycle boots with a T-strap and buckle. Her chestnut hair was shoulder-length with cognac highlights. She had a strong, prominent nose and as she passed he saw her bright blue eyes, brilliant even in the low light of the room. She was tall, curvy, and full-breasted, built like a sixties movie star imported from Sweden or Italy. As she passed he studied her shoulders, her arms, and her back, and Lucas’s mouth went dry. He had a long pull off his beer.

Amanda returned with his meal. The bar crowd had thinned out somewhat.

“Eat,” she said, nodding at his steak.

Lucas dug in and had his first taste. He swallowed and said, “What’s up?”

“I have a friend, a woman named Grace. She’s had a little trouble lately. I think you might be able to help her.”

“What kind of trouble, exactly?”

“Man trouble. Not unusual for her, actually. Grace seems to attract a certain kind of guy. She’s divorced, with a long line of cumsack boyfriends. They don’t stick around long.”

“Maybe it’s her.”

“If I didn’t know her, I’d say the same thing. Thing is, she’s a good person. She works for one of those feed-the-children nonprofits, even though she has a law degree and could be doing a lot better.”

“So her flaw is her choice in men.”

“This last guy she got tangled up with? If he’s not a sociopath, he’s in the next zip code.”

“I’m no leg breaker.”

“This is in your wheelhouse. He stole something from her, and she’d like to have it back. She suspects it wasn’t the first time he took her off. But she can’t prove it. The police won’t do her any good. She needs some private help.”

“What’d this gentleman take?”

“A painting. That’s all I know. But I think he stole a lot more from her than that.”

“Emotionally, you mean.”

“You’ll get it when you meet her.”

“Is she aware of my cut?”

“I told her that you take forty percent.”

~~“And if this turns into something, you’ll get a piece of my recovery fee yourself, for the referral.”~~

“Not on this one, Spero. Like I say, she’s a friend.”

“Give me her contact information,” said Lucas. “And the contact information of that woman sitting down there on the end of the bar.”

Amanda turned her head and saw the woman, still seated alone, a drink before her. “Does your periscope ever go down?”

“I like to live a full life. Do you know her name?”

“Grey Goose martini, rocks, three olives.”

“Maybe I should buy her one.”

“That’s original.”

“I never said I was clever. Just determined.”

“Sure you wanna spring for the high shelf?”

“Please ask her if she’d like a drink, on me.”

Amanda drifted. Lucas watched her make the pitch to the woman, and shortly thereafter the woman gathered her phone and shoulder bag. She left money and something else on the bar before she got up. Her eyes briefly found his as she passed by, and her lovely mouth turned up in a hint of a smile. And then she was gone.

Amanda returned. “She politely declined your offer.”

Lucas spread his hands. “See? I don’t always win.”

“But the thing is, you pretty much do.” Amanda placed a beverage napkin on the bar in front of Lucas. “She left her digits for you, handsome.”

He looked at the name and phone number, folded the napkin, and stuffed it into a pocket of his shorts. “Sometimes a fella just gets lucky.”

“What is it with you?”

“I don’t know.” And this was true. He was always somewhat surprised when a woman was interested in him. It wasn’t like he was trying.

Lucas stood and reached for his wallet. He left twenty on thirty. If Amanda wasn’t going to take a bite of his fee, at least he could treat her right.

“Thanks, Marine.”

“My pleasure.”

“Do me a favor. I’m going to give you Grace’s contact information. Call her.”

“I’ll hit her up.”

On the bike ride uptown, Lucas thought of the woman at the end of the bar, the challenge of a new job, the comfort of a payday, the night of sleep that was to come. Sex, work, money, and a comfortable bed. Everything he dreamed of when he was overseas. A guy didn’t need anything else. He shifted into a lower gear and found his groove. It had been a good night, filled with promise.

He couldn’t know of the trouble yet to come.

TWO

The next morning, Lucas read the *Post* while sitting on the back porch of his apartment as a robin tended to her nest in the eaves and a pair of mockingbirds tormented a cat crossing the alley. In Metropolitan, an article detailed the noted drop in homicides and higher closure rate under the stewardship of Chief Cathy Lanier. A cultural shift, a civil servant-based economy mostly immune to the recession, and gentrification had played a role in the city's resurgence as well. Still, for many, tragedy was not stranger, and several high-profile murders, both long ago and in the not-too-distant past, were on the mind of Washington's residents.

The vicious murder of Catherine Fuller, a ninety-nine-pound housewife and mother, in a Northeast alley in 1984 was perhaps the most brutal and senseless crime in D.C. history, emblematic of a decade gone wrong. Fuller had been beaten to death and sodomized with a metal pipe for fifty dollars and the cheap rings she wore on her fingers. Her ribs had been broken, her liver torn. Several young men went to prison for the crime, and those who were still alive were now being retried. Allegedly, confessions had been coerced, false testimony given, evidence suppressed. The retrial, for some, had reopened wounds.

The loved ones of Nori Amaya, found murdered in October 2009 in her apartment at the Woodne, her fingernails removed to erase DNA evidence, had yet to find justice or peace. Nori's killer was like the wind, and questions of investigative neglect persisted. Similarly, closure had not come to the friends and family of Lucki Pannell, eighteen, shot and killed in a drive-by. Racist reader comments on the *Washington Post* notwithstanding, Lucki was not a thug or corner girl, but a straight, vivacious high school student whose murder remained unsolved. District Councilman Jim Graham, when asked to comment, said that the victim was "in the wrong place at the wrong time." Lucas could only shake his head when he'd read the quote. Wrong place? Lucki had been on the porch of her own house where she was shot.

For Lucas, the most haunting murder of late had been that of Cherise Roberts, found in a Dumpster, strangled, with traces of semen on her face and in her rectum, blocks north of Cardozo High School where Lucki Pannell had also been enrolled, in March. Cherise had been a student of Leo Lucas, an English teacher at the school. After her death, Leo had counseled many of the students who had been her friends and classmates. Spero, who had seen much death, had done the same for Leo over beers on many late nights, and he knew Leo remained deeply troubled by her murder. Cherise's killer still walked free.

Lucas ate some breakfast and packed a lunch. He lashed his kayak to foam blocks fitted on the crossbars of his Cherokee, stowed his bike and paddling gear, and drove down to Charles County, Maryland, via Route 210, which most still called the Indian Head Highway. The trip was only thirty some miles south of the Capital Beltway, but culturally much further. He saw fundamentalist churches, Harley-riders with Confederate flag decals on their helmets, barbecue joints whose smoky made his mouth water, and many liquor stores. Lucas turned on Mattingly, the last possible left before

hitting the entrance to the Naval Surface Warfare Center.

Lucas unloaded his boat near Slavin's Launch, on Mattawoman Creek, and pulled the green Wilderness Systems fourteen-foot touring kayak down to the waterline. Fishermen, county locals, came from the shore, while others used boats of various size and horsepower from the launch. Mattawoman was one of the richest fishing areas of all the Potomac River branches, home to largemouth bass, perch, river herring, and shad. It was a pristine area for paddlers as well.

Lucas approached a man who had just now pulled an aluminum V-hull out on his trailer. The man had a great belly and pants held up by camouflage suspenders showing geese in flight and shotgun barrels pointing out of tall grass.

"How was it out there?" said Lucas.

"This creek is a fickle bitch," said the man. "I caught twelve healthy bass in one day, just a week ago, but today, nary a one. I did get these bad boys, though. Come see."

Lucas went with the man to the side of the boat and watched as he reached over the gunwales and removed the cover on a Styrofoam cooler. In it were a half dozen long, fat fish whose bodies were scaled and marked in the manner of pythons. Lucas had not seen anything quite like them.

"Snakeheads," said the man, grabbing one firmly with one hand and opening its mouth with a set of pliers he had removed from a hip sheath. Lucas saw rows of sharp teeth.

"What the hell?" said Lucas.

"Don't know how they got introduced to these waters, but they're here to stay. They're predators but nothin preys on them. And the females carry hundreds of eggs in their sacs, so it ain't like they're going away. Know what else? They got legs." The man smiled at Lucas's wide-eyed expression. "That's right. They can walk on land."

"What are you gonna do with them?"

"Oh, I'll grill 'em up. I don't take nothin from out the water that I don't eat." The man looked at Lucas's kayak and grinned. "Don't fall in. These suckers bite."

Lucas paddled out into the creek, going left, away from the Potomac, deep into the freshwater marsh, along bottomland forest, wetlands, and acres of American lotus. He powered through wet grass with his stroke even and sure, the sun hot on his shoulders and back. He saw bald eagles in their distinctive gliding flight, and many egrets, and turtles, and a water snake swimming in an S-curve across his bow. After forty-five minutes the veins had popped out on his forearms and biceps, and his back had a pleasant ache. He pulled in to a sand berm at the end of a small island and beached his boat. From a collapsible cooler in the stern bulkhead he retrieved a spicy salami sandwich and a cold bottle of beer. He sat on a blanket, which he'd spread over shells and goose poop, and ate and drank under the spotted shade of a sparsely leafed tree, looking out at the sun mirroring off the creek and the deep green forest of oak and pine on a nearby shore.

On the paddle back to the launch, Lucas saw three more snakes cutting through the water. This was unusual and disturbing. Once, when he was a kid, he had awakened from a nightmare to find his father sitting on his bed. He told his dad that, in his bad dream, he had been chased by a snake, and he could not seem to get away.

"Only one snake?" said Van Lucas.

"Yes," said Spero.

"Then you got nothin to worry about, boy. The Greeks say that when you dream of one snake, it's your friend. More than one, it means something else."

"What does it mean when you see more than one snake, *Baba*?"

"Something bad's about to happen," said his father. "But not to you. Now, you go back to sleep."

“Don’t leave me, okay? Stay here.”

“I’m not goin anywhere, son.”

Twenty years later, while in the desert in Iraq, Spero saw two horned vipers sidewinding up a dune at dusk, and felt a melancholy drop in his stomach. Van Lucas died the next day, in Washington, of the cancer that had slowly eaten his brain.

By the time he had loaded his boat and gear, and taken a bike ride on a railroad trail, it was late afternoon. Lucas drove back up the Indian Head Highway and, with the help of his GPS system, found the wooded area where Edwina Christian had been discovered. The forest was set back from acres of farmland, currently yielding a crop of soybean. The road that led into the woods was not a road exactly, but a cut-through in the field, worn down to dirt by years of use.

Lucas put his Jeep in 4WD and drove onto the road. Using the photographs he had brought with him, he found the approximate spot where Calvin Bates had allegedly left tracks from his Cherokee. Lucas parked his own Cherokee there. He got out and used his iPhone to take photographs of his vehicle in position. He studied the blown-up photographs of the Bates tracks, and compared them to the images on his phone. He then retrieved a twenty-five-foot Craftsman tape measure from his vehicle and took the width of the road, and the distance-width between his tires. He entered the numbers into the Notes app of his phone.

He had something now.

When Lucas got back to his place, he did some research on his laptop, then called Petersen and told him what he’d found.

“You’re talking about the wheelbase,” said Petersen.

“No,” said Lucas. “The wheelbase is the distance between the center of the front wheel and the center of the rear wheel. I’m talking about the axle track: the distance between the centerline of two tires on the same axle.”

“The width.”

“Basically. Just from eyeballing the photos of the tracks, and putting my truck in the same spot, it looks to me that the tracks laid down on that road were wider than a Jeep Cherokee would leave.”

“It looks to you.”

“Go to the discovery and check it out. The police report will have the recorded distance between the tracks. Compare that distance to the axle-track specs on a 2000 Cherokee. I can damn near guarantee that the two measurements will differ. We’re talking about a bigger vehicle, a heavy-duty truck or one of those oversized SUVs that nobody actually needs.”

“You’re saying what?”

“I don’t know that Calvin Bates didn’t kill that woman. Maybe he did, and maybe he took her down to those woods in his truck. But the tracks they found were not consistent with tracks from a Jeep Cherokee that year and model.”

“What about the tire tread?”

“Any specific tire can be mounted on thousands, tens of thousands of different cars. Right? If you bring that up to a jury...”

“Thank you, Jack McCoy.”

“Just sayin.”

"It's something," said Petersen.

"I'm not done," said Lucas. "I'll talk to Edwina Christian's mother next. The transcripts of her interviews were a little off. You notice that?"

"She's had problems. She was once a police officer in PG County, but she left the force under a cloud. Something to do with a credit card scam."

"I'll get on it."

"Tonight?"

"No, not tonight. I've got an appointment with a woman."

"I should have known."

"Not like that. Business."

"One of your side jobs?"

"I'll talk to you soon."

Lucas ended the call and sat down in his favorite chair, set next to a side table holding books. He watched the dim light of dusk outside his windows, and felt a familiar stirring inside him. He looked again at his phone, scrolled through his contacts, and found the name and number he had entered the night before. He touched the number on the screen and waited.

"Charlotte Rivers," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"It's Spero Lucas. The guy at the bar of Boundary Road. White T-shirt, black shorts. You know GQ's Man of the Year?"

"I remember you."

"And I you."

"Hold on." He waited, and soon after that he heard the closing of a door.

"Hello?" said Lucas.

"I'm here."

"Thank you for, you know, being so nice last night. Giving me a chance, I mean. I should have come over and introduced myself."

"You tried to buy me a drink instead."

"I admit, that was clumsy. I was a little intimidated, to tell you the truth."

"By me?"

"You're a beautiful woman. I was sweaty from a bike ride, not properly dressed. I wasn't exactly my best."

"But I left you my phone number anyway."

"I know. Why?"

"I'm not sure myself."

"Listen..."

"What?"

"Can I meet you sometime, for coffee, or whatever you'd like? I promise I'll come correct."

"I have some time tomorrow evening," she said. No hesitation. She suggested a time and place. Lucas wrote it down and they ended the call.

He stared stupidly at his cell. He thought of her walking past the bar, black tank top, black jeans, brown motorcycle boots, exquisitely built, those brilliant blue eyes, that upturned mouth with the hint of a smile. Lucas had swelled and he felt flushed. The last time he'd gotten an erection while talking to a girl on the phone, he'd been a teenager. But this was a full-blown woman, not a girl. There was something about Charlotte Rivers that heated him. Maybe she was just another challenge, and he was hot with the thrill of the new.

He had an appointment with Grace Kinkaid. He took a shower and began to think of Charlotte and her throaty voice. He tried not to fall in love with a bar of soap while he was in the stall. —————

THREE

Grace Kinkaid lived on the 2300 block of Champlain Street, in Adams Morgan, in a newish condo building set on the slope between Columbia Road and Florida Avenue. Her place was orderly, gender-neutral at first glance, and minimally furnished. The walls were painted in pale shades of green and gold.

Lucas and Grace sat on her balcony in fold-out chairs, a small black table between them. Below them, in the light of a streetlamp, a father and son kicked a soccer ball back and forth.

On the table lay a manila folder. Grace was drinking Chardonnay from a large glass meant for red wine. Lucas had gone with ice water. From inside her living room, music played through her open sliding glass doors. Her stereo dial was set to 89.3, WPFW, the jazz station broadcasting from a building on Champlain, a half block north of where they sat.

“The painting,” said Lucas. “Can you describe it?”

“Take a look at it,” said Grace, opening the folder and pushing it across the table. The top sheet, one of many papers in the file, was a photograph of a framed oil painting mounted on a wall painted light green. Lucas supposed it had been taken while it hung in her condo.

“It’s nice,” said Lucas, to move the conversation along.

The painting was of two men, one middle-aged, one young, shown from the bare shoulders up, both of them looking directly into the eyes of the viewer. The middle-aged man had a gaunt face, receding hairline, and a beard. The young man was clean shaven with a full head of black hair. The artist had painted a black backdrop for the older man and a brown backdrop for the younger one, giving the effect of separation within the frame. The portions of their chest and arms that showed were creamy white, while their necks and faces were burnished from the sun. Workers, thought Lucas. That and the vaguely east-of-Europe features of the men, brought to mind one of those Russian proletarian posters... or something. He liked the painting, but he had no idea what he was looking at. Lucas didn’t “know” art.

“It’s called *The Double*,” said Grace. “The artist is Loretta Browning. Born in nineteenth-century America, studied in New York and Chicago, moved to Paris after the First World War. Known for her portraits, landscapes, and still-life paintings. Died in California, mid-twentieth century.”

“You say she was known.”

“Not *well* known. Up until recently, that is. Some scholarly reassessments and a few key gallery showings have elevated her reputation to the general public in the past ten years.”

“And elevated the worth of her paintings.”

“Considerably. I got the painting fifteen years ago.”

“So you bought it relatively cheaply.”

“I didn’t buy it at all,” said Grace. “It was a gift from my uncle Ron before he died. He said, ‘Take good care of this, honey. It’s going to be worth a lot of money someday.’ He was right.”

“How much is it worth?” said Lucas.

“I had it assessed before it was stolen. The man who came here and looked at it said it was worth somewhere in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand dollars.”

“That’s a pretty exclusive neighborhood.”

“I know.”

“And your uncle just gave you the painting? Why?”

“After my parents passed, my uncle became the father figure for me and my brothers. Then he came out as a gay man, officially, and my brothers, who weren’t the most enlightened guys at the time, sort of rejected him. My uncle was a fair guy and he offered the painting to all of us. But my brothers looked at it, connected the images to Uncle Ron, and saw a picture of two gay guys. They felt that it promoted a lifestyle, and they didn’t want it in their homes, what with their babies and all. Like the painting could corrupt their kids. Me, I just liked the way it looked, so I took it. Of course my brothers’ feelings on the issue have evolved, just like our president’s, but it’s too late.”

“It’s too late for them to cash in because you own it.”

“I used to own it.”

“What happened?”

“I believe it was stolen by a man I was in a relationship with. A guy named Billy Hunter.”

“Like it sounds, I assume,” said Lucas, scribbling the name in his Moleskine notebook.

“Yes,” said Grace. “I’m gonna have another glass of wine. Would you like something besides water?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t drink?”

“Not when I’m working.”

“Please don’t let me drink alone. I have some things to tell you that are somewhat difficult for me to talk about.”

“Okay. I’ll take a beer if you have it.”

“I have a variety.”

“Anything that’s not light.”

He watched her get out of her chair and, because he was that kind of man, watched her behind as she walked, somewhat unsteadily, into her apartment. She was a woman nearing her forties, or already there. Black hair undone, olive green slacks, a short-sleeve tangerine peasant shirt, simple sandals. Grace was attractive, with green eyes and an aquiline nose, but the eyes were needy, and her arms were too thin for her frame. Grace was untoned, with the spent look of a woman whose weight loss had come from stress.

She returned with a bottle of Dogfish Head and her own glass, refilled to the rim. Lucas guessed that Grace, on her third wine since he’d arrived, had a drinking problem. He’d seen the pattern in his mother, who had developed a dependency on alcohol after his father died.

Grace retook her seat and crossed one leg over the other.

Lucas sipped from his bottle. “That’s good. Thanks.”

“So,” she said.

“Tell me about Billy Hunter.”

“Where to start? I met him at the Safeway up on Columbia Road, by the vegetable and fruit bins. He asked me how to buy a ripe avocado, and the secret to a good guacamole. I thought it was a chance encounter. I now think it was a setup.”

“He followed you there?”

“I was a mark.”

“How so?”

“I’ll get to that later. ~~Billy asked me out for coffee or a drink. I accepted. He was funny, he seemed to be a gentleman, he was handsome in a marina rat sort of way: tan, blond, blue-eyed, and fit. He was my body type, too. Strong legs, low center of gravity, powerfully built.~~” She paused.

Lucas nodded awkwardly. “Go on.”

“The next night, we met down at Cashion’s.”

“Columbia, off Eighteenth. I know the spot.”

“I guess I had one too many glasses of wine. I don’t normally take a man home with me on the first date, but I did. We made love that night and frankly it was wonderful. He was good in bed, with staying power. Tender when it was called for and rough when I wanted it to be.”

She watched Lucas, whose eyes had gone down to the pages of his open notebook.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?” she said.

“I’m fine.”

“What I’m telling you is pertinent to the story. You’ll see where I’m going with this by the time I’m done.”

“Go on.”

“I started seeing him regularly. After that first night at Cashion’s, we never went out. Billy always came to my place and it was always the same thing. We were in the bedroom minutes after he walked through the door. And we stayed in there for hours. Whatever tenderness he’d shown that first time was gone. He knew what he was doing. When he was in bed the light that I had seen in his eyes initially, the playfulness, was gone. He enjoyed wearing me out. There wasn’t any lovemaking involved. He took me like an animal, and I liked it.”

Lucas reached for the bottle of beer and took a pull.

“I’m forty-two years old,” said Grace. “I’ve been with my share of men, but never anyone like him. When I wasn’t with him, I was thinking of him. *Obsessing* is a better word. Preparing for the next time he’d come over, debating what to wear, how to fix my hair, all of that. I wanted to please him. All my planning and preparation, and he didn’t even notice. He’d walk in, point to my outfit, and say, ‘Take that shit off.’ He’d put me right on my back. He’d put me on all fours, sit me on the bathroom sink, stand me up against a wall. I climaxed repeatedly, and every time I did, he laughed. It was like he’d won. For his part, he could only get there if I put him in my mouth. Then he’d get dressed without saying much as a word and leave. You’d think I wouldn’t allow myself to be treated that way, but I found myself desperate for him to come back. And also dreading it. Because I was aware what he was doing to me. I ate very little. I drank more than I ever did before. I began to lose weight. I knew that I was just a receptacle to him. I knew it and I didn’t care.”

“You never went to where he lived?” said Lucas, just to say something.

“No. He said he had a housemate he was trying to get rid of, that the atmosphere wouldn’t be right.”

“So you don’t know his address.”

“I don’t.”

“Or where he worked.”

“All he said was that he was in finance.”

“You communicated by cell?”

“Yes, we texted back and forth and sometimes I called him.”

“You still have that number?”

“Yes, I have it.”

“Give it to me.”

Lucas wrote it down. "Did you see a credit card of his? A driver's license?"

Grace shook her head. "The one time we went out, he paid the tab in cash."

"So you don't know if his name is actually Billy Hunter."

"I can't be sure," said Grace. She picked up her glass and stood abruptly. There was sweat beaded on her face. Lucas's shirt was also damp. "I'm ready for another glass of wine. Would you like another beer?"

"I would."

"Meet me inside. It's cooler in there. Bring the file with you, okay?"

She disappeared into her condo. Lucas sat for a few minutes, digesting their conversation, then followed her inside. The volume on the stereo had been turned down very low. She was on a couch sitting before a glass table, where she had placed a fresh glass of wine and a new bottle of beer. Lucas dropped the file on the table and sat beside her. He noticed that Grace had run a brush through her hair.

"Are you shocked?" she said.

"Not at all," said Lucas, telling a lie. "How did this all end?"

"I came home one day to find that I'd been burgled."

"The painting was gone."

"Yes."

"Just the painting?"

"Yes."

"Was your condo broken into?"

"Nothing was broken. He had a key. I suppose he could have made an imprint of mine in putty, like thieves do. Or had one made off an original, then returned it discreetly. I keep an extra in a bowl by the door."

"He, meaning Hunter."

"Of course."

"You're certain?"

Grace shrugged. "I haven't heard from him since the burglary. Stealing that painting was his way of screwing me again, one last time. It's in character for him, don't you think?"

"You tried texting or calling him?"

"I did, and I got dead air."

"He was probably using a burner," said Lucas.

"What?"

"A disposable cell. Let me ask you something: did you and Hunter ever discuss the value of the painting?"

"We never talked about the painting at all."

Lucas thought this over. "You said that you now think this was all a setup. That you were a married man. How so?"

"There are additional papers in that file. Take a look."

Lucas opened the file and withdrew a set of pages paper-clipped together, a series of printed e-mails between Grace and someone named Grant Summers. The earliest dated e-mail, from Summers to Grace, read:

Hello,

I am selling this beautiful, well-maintained forest-green 2003 Mini Cooper S because m

brigade will deploy for 14 months to Afghanistan. I'm under enormous time pressure cause I need to sell it fast, that is the reason I sell it so low. It is immaculate condition, non-smoker, well maintained, and hasn't been involved in accident... I have the title, free and clear, under my name. It is gently used with only 69,320 miles!!

It is still for sale if you are interested, price as stated in the ad: \$2,990. The car is in Troy, NY, and in case it gets sold to you I'll take care of shipping. Let me know if your interest, e-mail me back!!

I've attached 90 photos.

Thank you,

Grant Summers
4th Combat Engineer Battalion
United States Marine Corps
One team, one fight

Below the name and battalion designation, the sender had included a replication of the Marine Corps insignia. Lucas felt his eyes narrow.

"I was looking for a Mini Cooper," said Grace. "My pre-midlife crisis. I could have bought a new one, but I'm a bit of a bargain hunter. I found an ad for one on Craigslist that looked like a great deal. It was the exact color I wanted, too."

"That's how they rope you in," said Lucas. He knew the rest but he allowed her to tell it.

"I e-mailed him back," said Grace. "I asked if we could speak over the phone, but he returned with a message saying that deploying marines aren't allowed to use a phone. He suggested we use an authorized third party for the escrow; I think it was Google Checkout."

"I suppose he took the liberty of opening an account."

"Right. Said he'd give me a five-day period to inspect and test-drive the car before the escrow account would release my payment to him. In that way, I would be protected... No disappointment," he said. "He'd ship it free of charge with the title and two sets of keys. The money would have to be wired via Western Union. I was wary, but it was the car I really wanted at a very good price."

"Did you do it?"

"I tried. Drove over to my bank, withdrew the cash, and went to the nearest Western Union office. She was all set to wire the money when the lady behind the counter, nice Pakistani woman, talked me out of it. She'd seen this scam worked before. When I came home, I called the FBI and reported the whole thing. The guy on the other end of the line took my name and number but he never called me back."

"The Feds don't have the time or manpower to chase a couple of thousand dollars down a rabbit hole."

"Is this a common crime?"

"It's the Nigerian four-one-nine scam," said Lucas. "So named for that country's four-one-nine area code, after this type of Internet crime. Shame the Nigerians get tarred for the car thing too, but there it is. Why do you think Hunter was connected to this?"

"One night we were talking," said Grace. "One of those pointless conversations about what we'd do if we hit the lottery. Billy said, 'You could buy that Mini S you've always wanted.' And then he got that weird look on his face, like he knew he'd messed up. How would he know I had my eyes on a Mini Cooper S? I never told him. But Grant Summers knew, and I had given him my home address for the shipping of the car. Later on it made me think, maybe Billy Hunter and Grant Summers were the same

man. That he saw me as an easy mark after the car thing and followed me from here to the Safeway that first night.”

“Did Hunter have a foreign accent?”

“No.”

“Most of the guys who pull these car scams are foreigners. Just by reading this top e-mail, there are several mistakes in the tenses and verbiage. That tells me that English was a second language for Grant Summers.”

“You don’t think the two events are connected?”

“I don’t know. It’s a stretch. But I’ll look into it. That is, if you decide to hire me.”

“Amanda said you get forty percent.”

“I take it in cash. In this case, that equals eighty thousand dollars, based on the assessed value of the painting. It’s a lot of money, Grace.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“Frankly, I find it odd that you would spend eighty grand getting back a painting that you got for free.”

“Actually, I don’t have the eighty yet. But I do have a buyer for the painting. Assuming you retrieve it for me.”

“A buyer,” said Lucas, trying to keep the skepticism from his voice.

“A serious collector has given me a pledge, in writing, that he’ll purchase it for two hundred thousand dollars. When I sell *The Double*, I’ll cut your eighty thousand out of the payment.”

“This is real?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. But you could take that money and buy a fleet of Minis, brand new and loaded, and pay retail this time.”

“It’s got nothing to do with money,” said Grace. “I want to see that painting on my wall again, only for a little while. In a way, he raped me, and he won. I need to take something back from him. When the painting is hanging on my wall, I can get started with my life again.”

Lucas wasn’t so sure. Grace Kinkaid’s washed-out eyes, her pencil-thin arms, her increasingly slurred speech all told him she had a long way to go before she’d ever be right. “You want me to provide some references?”

“Not necessary. Amanda says you’re competent and straight.”

“So I’m hired?”

“Yes.”

He touched his finger to the file. “Can I have this?”

“It’s for you,” said Grace, and she looked him over. “I hope you’re as advertised. Billy’s all kinds of twisted.”

“Thanks for the work, and your confidence.” Lucas picked up the file and stood. “I’ll be in touch.”

FOUR

The following morning, Lucas worked at home. On his laptop, he typed in the names William Hunter and Bill Hunter and searched for them via his premium People Finder program. He came up with several hits in the District/Montgomery County, PG County, Maryland/Northern Virginia area, which folks now called the DMV. He recorded the most recent addresses of all the listings and, where available, the phone numbers, and made some calls.

Lucas reached a couple of men, discounted them due to age and their responses, and made a note to follow up on those William Hunters he couldn't reach. But he was not encouraged or particularly hopeful. Billy Hunter was most likely a fake name the predator had created. It had come to Lucas the tail end of the previous night, when he had returned from Grace Kinkaid's apartment, smoked some herb, and sat thinking, expansively, in his living room chair.

Billy Hunter = Pussy Hunter.

A sociopath would create a name like that deliberately, and laugh about it.

Lucas opened the file Grace Kinkaid had given him. He looked at the e-mail from Grant Summers regarding the sale of the Mini Cooper S. Lucas figured that Summers's e-mail address, ending with @msn.com, had been set up as a throwaway, as scammers tended to use companies like MSN, Yahoo, and Hotmail, which required no verification for the setup. Without a subpoena, which he had no chance of obtaining, tracing the address back to a specific computer or person would be impossible.

Lucas Googled and Bing-searched the address, and came up with nothing. He took the next step: e-mail tracking. Using three of his investigative database searches, IRBsearch, LexisNexis/Accurint, and Tracers, he attempted to identify the owner of the Grant Summers e-mail address. Again, nothing.

He was pretty sure the message had been sent from an Internet café in Paris, London, Amsterdam, but for shits and grins Lucas highlighted the Grant Summers e-mail address and clicked on Options. A dialogue box opened, and at the bottom of the box there appeared a section, displayed in very small letters, called Internet Headers. There he found a series of numbers: the originating IP address of the Grant Summers e-mail. Using Melissa Data, he was able to locate the city, state, country, and zip code of origin, as well as the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of the e-mail origin. Looking at the information, he felt both high and caffeinated. He Google-Mapped the coordinates and came up with a row house on a local street. The location lookup was not an exact science, and there was a chance that this was not the house he was looking for, but it put him on the block, enough for a neighborhood canvass. Grant Summers, whoever he was, might well have been a foreigner, but he was operating his car scam out of D.C.

Lucas saved the data.

He did four sets of forty push-ups on rotating stands, and two hundred crunches, his prison workout and daily ritual. He took a shower, dressed in utilitarian clothing, and drove his Jeep over to Prince George's County, where he had arranged an interview with the mother of Edwina Christian.

Lucas made a low hourly wage working for Tom Petersen, and he was looking at an eight-

thousand-dollar payoff on the Kinkaid job. A smart guy might have prioritized the work. But Lucas liked to honor his commitments, and he had promised Petersen he'd get him something useful before the trial. Also, he was curious.

Virginia Christian lived in a boxy brick apartment building in Hyattsville, off Ager Road, near the Northwest Branch of the Anacostia River. Lucas sometimes passed through this area on his long bike rides out to Lake Artemesia, and while pedaling through the partially wooded area of the neighborhood he always took care. Gang signs were sometimes spray-painted on the paved trail, and often he came across groups of young and not-so-young men smoking weed and drinking beer in the middle of the day. It wasn't the marijuana or the alcohol use that bothered him, as he partook himself. There had been several rapes and assaults on this stretch of the bike trail the past few years.

Virginia Christian let him in to her apartment, which smelled of nicotine and fried food, and led him to a breakfast table. She was in her midforties, heavily made-up, large of leg and back, large featured, with treated, tinted hair worn in waves and touching her shoulders. Rolls of excess weight showed beneath the lower portion of her deep red blouse.

Over the phone, Lucas had simply identified himself as an investigator, as he always did, which implied authority without detail or explanation, and Virginia had immediately said, "For who?" Lucas gave up the fact that he was working for Tom Petersen, the attorney defending Calvin Bates, who was charged with her daughter's murder. Surprisingly, she said he could come on over and talk. She had been a police officer at one time, she explained, and she understood the process, adding, "And the game."

The stale smell of alcohol came off Virginia Christian as they talked across the table. It was early and the scent could have been a remnant of the night before. If so, it had been a long night of drink.

"You mind?" said Virginia, pausing before lighting a Newport that she had extracted from a deck.

"Not at all."

Lucas opened his notebook and uncapped a pen. Virginia used a blue butane lighter to put fire to her cigarette.

"So y'all trying to get Bates off?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm an investigator working for the defense. And I'm very sorry for your loss."

"So am I."

"I mean you no disrespect."

"I was in law enforcement myself. You're just doin your job."

Lucas wondered if she had been good police, and where and why she had gone off the path. Petersen had mentioned something about a credit card scam. The indiscretion had gotten her booted off the Prince George's County force, but she remained in the same line of work: Lucas had noticed a shirt with a security-company patch on a coat tree by the front door.

"Thank you for your consideration," said Lucas. "I'll make this brief."

"Go ahead."

"Edwina had been dating Calvin for how long?"

"Years, on and off. She was straight, had a steady job as a receptionist at an orthopedist's office in Greenbelt. Went to church regular. Smoked a little get-high and hit the clubs now and again, but that was all. Like a lot of women, she made poor decisions with regards to men."

"With Calvin, you mean."

"Bates was married, and he was in the life. Boy dealt chips. She knew it was wrong to be with

dude like him. I told her to leave that man and find someone who was right. She was trying. Started to see someone else, but Bates wouldn't leave her alone. He must have had somethin I couldn't see with my naked eye, 'cause she always went back to him."

Lucas stopped writing in his notebook. "I read something in the transcripts. In your interview, you indicated that at one point Edwina said she wanted to take care of Calvin. Is that right?"

"Edwina felt sorry for him, I guess. Looked at him like some kind of project. On Sundays, the preacher at our church blew her up with all that redemption stuff. How we got to support our men through the good and the bad, do the Lord's work in our relationships. All that." Virginia dragged on her Newport and exhaled smoke. "For her trouble Bates shot her in the head and dumped her like a dog in those woods."

Lucas looked at his notes. "You said she was seeing someone else. Was this at the time of her death?"

Virginia nodded. "Man named Brian Dodson. Auto mechanic, works in a shop over by Cottage City on Bladensburg Road."

"What's the name of the shop?"

"Handy's."

Lucas took down the information. "Like handyman, right?"

"Yes. Dodson's a quiet man, goes to work every day. Owns his own house in Colmar Manor. She met him at church, where he went regular. Edwina was too young to see the value in all of that. She liked the idea of runnin with a dangerous type, I guess. I remember what that was like. I liked 'em dangerous when I was young, too."

"I don't remember you talking about another man in the transcripts."

"I learned from my own years in law enforcement, when the lawyers do their interviews, you don't offer up any information 'less they ask for it specific. Besides, that detail isn't pertinent. I know who killed my daughter, and so do you. I don't hold it against you for trying to earn your pay, but please. That GPS device Bates wore put him down at the site of the murder, close to her time of death. Why would a city boy like him drive down to the woods of Charles County, at *night*? Why would he buy up his car? He was trying to destroy evidence is why. Like a lot of these fools who take their criminal cues from TV, he saw that shit on *CSI*."

Lucas agreed with her about Bates. It looked like he was right as rain for the murder of Edwina Christian.

"Anything else?" said Lucas. "Something you didn't tell the police or prosecutors?"

"Nothing comes to mind," said Virginia, a hint of warmth in her eyes. "I'll answer anything you ask, if you care to get particular. But don't expect me to do your job for you, Lucas."

"Call me Spero."

"What kind of name is that?"

"Greek."

Virginia ashed her Newport. "Hmph."

Lucas closed his notebook and stood. "I appreciate your time. And again, my sympathies to you and your family."

"Bates killed my baby," said Virginia. "Bank that."

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