

When an isolated but brilliant CIA engineer is asked to help turn cats into surveillance devices, he soon learns that his new co-workers are even more bizarre than his new assignment. Which, naturally, is why he begins spying on them.

Acoustic Kitty

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“Technical Specialist Arthur Monroe,” Kricks said, “this is Special Agent Wyman Coleman. He’s from Field Ops. Seems you’ve somehow managed to get yourself selected for some kind of special project. Even though nobody asked me if you were available. And nobody even told me that Agent Coleman was coming to visit you today.” These last comments clearly were directed toward Coleman, even though Kricks continued to look at Monroe.

“I wasn’t aware of any special project,” Monroe said.

“Don’t care,” Coleman said, wobbling forward and wedging his shoulders through the doorway and around Kricks. “Special project is aware of you. Welcome aboard, soldier.”

“I’m not a soldier,” Monroe said.

“Don’t need excuses, pipsqueak,” Coleman said. “No room for ‘em on this project. You know what you get when you make excuses?”

“Um...no.”

“Bay of Pigs.”

“I don’t get it.”

Coleman looked slightly perplexed. “Field Ops is not a joke, son.”

“I’m sorry,” Monroe said. “I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Coleman stared at Monroe for a moment. “Doubts,” he said, to nobody in particular. “I have doubts.”

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Chapter 1

Washington, D.C.
April, 1967

Yevgeny wasn't allowed to open the window to his office. Most days, this fact of his professional life didn't bother him. Today, it was driving him crazy.

It was mid-April in Washington, one of the few cities he'd experienced with weather as consistently dreadful as Moscow's. But on this particular day, the world outside his window looked downright delightful.

The sun shone on the park across the street from the embassy. A slight breeze danced its way through the few leaves that had begun to sprout on the trees. People in the park were walking around with their jackets draped over their arms.

It was a gorgeous day. And Yevgeny's windows were bolted shut. For that matter, he was fairly certain they also were bulletproof. That, he didn't mind. Americans were a bit too gun-crazy for his taste.

Still watching the park, he picked up his phone and dialed an extension.

"Sokolov," said the voice on the other end.

"Boris," Yevgeny said in Russian. "It's Yevgeny. Do you have a lunch meeting today?"

"I do not believe so. I was considering a haircut."

"Forget the haircut. We should go for a walk in the park."

"The park? The one across the street?"

"Yes, the one across the street. Have you looked out your window today, Boris? It is like Kiev in the spring. The air would do us both good."

"Will I be able to bring a sandwich? I brought a delightful sandwich today. I was very much looking forward to eating it."

Yevgeny rubbed his forehead and rolled his eyes. Boris was always worried, first and foremost, about food. "Yes, you may bring your sandwich."

“And you will have your own sandwich? Mine is not large.”

“Yes, I will have a sandwich of my own. Meet me downstairs in ten minutes.”

“Will it be safe? Perhaps we should bring security.”

“Look at the park, Boris. It is populated at the moment by squirrels and cats. We will be fine. I just want to enjoy some fresh air. I don’t want to have to fill out security request forms simply to take a walk. You worry too much, Boris.”

“The Americans, they allow their citizens to carry guns. The Clint Eastwood, in his movies, he is always shooting.”

“Boris, those movies are garbage. And the stories, they occur 100 years ago.” Gun-crazy Americans be damned; Yevgeny wanted to feel that breeze on his old man’s scalp.

“But in America, Yevgeny.”

“Just meet me downstairs in ten minutes.”

Boris hesitated. “Okay,” he finally said. “It would be nice to walk in a park, yes?”

“Yes. Very good. I will see you then.”

“Do not forget your own sandwich. Mine is not large.”

“Goodbye, Boris,” Yevgeny said as he hung up. God forgive you if you happen to ask Boris for a bite of his sandwich because his looks good and you have none. You will hear about it from him for decades.

~

“You were right, Yevgeny,” Boris said. “It is delightful today. Hard to believe in this time of year. This is my third winter in this godless city, and never have I seen a day this perfect in April.”

“This is why I suggested we take a walk today,” Yevgeny replied, unbuttoning his shirt sleeves and rolling them up. “You see? Sometimes it would not kill you to listen to me.”

“I would listen more often if you were not wrong so often.”

“And to think I once suggested that you marry my sister,” Yevgeny said. “She was fortunate you said no.”

“Your sister, she was the size of a buffalo. I was the fortunate one.”

“The doctors say she has a condition,” Yevgeny said. “It is not her fault.”

“Her doctors must be American. Americans never want things to be their fault.”

“True.”

“You brought your sandwich?” Boris asked.

Yevgeny turned his head slightly so Boris could not see him roll his eyes. “Yes, I brought a sandwich.”

“What kind?”

“Chicken salad.”

“They make salads from chickens here?” Boris asked.

“Yes. It is not really a salad. It is chicken, mayonnaise, and...I don’t know, other things. It is good.”

Boris gestured toward a nearby bench. “We should sit. I will try your chicken salad.”

~

On another bench in the same park, a young man named Vic Tombrowski took a bite of his own sandwich – his was salami and turkey on rye – and froze in mid-chew.

His eyes had spotted something after he’d taken the bite. The two men on the bench, who appeared to be arguing over a sandwich, looked exactly like Yevgeny Repin and Boris Sokolov.

Vic stared in disbelief. During all the time that he had spent in the park, observing the Soviet Embassy across the street, he had never once seen Repin or Sokolov exiting the compound on foot. It was always by car, with a full security detail.

And yet, there they were, less than 100 feet from where he sat with his salami and turkey on rye. He wasn’t even technically on duty. He had been assigned today to observe the Embassy from a nearby rooftop, but it had been such a nice day that he decided to enjoy his lunch in the park.

Vic was dying to get closer, to get a better look, to confirm with total certainty that the two men were Repin and Sokolov. The way they seemed to be arguing over Repin’s sandwich – it appeared as though Repin was refusing to allow Sokolov to take a bite of it – was giving him doubts. But he’d seen their pictures enough times to know that it was them. Sokolov was raising his voice as he continued to reach for Repin’s sandwich, and he was clearly arguing in Russian.

Vic debated with himself for a few moments, then decided that trying to get closer was too risky. He didn’t want to blow his cover. Instead, he jumped up from the bench and sprinted at full speed toward the nearest pay phone.

~

“Look at that,” Yevgeny said, gesturing toward the young man running headlong out of the park. “You are making such a scene that you are driving others entirely out of the park. Clearly that man had grown weary of your irritating voice.”

“I do not understand why you are being so difficult,” Boris said. “I simply am wanting a bit of the chicken salad. You are at fault for your selfishness.”

“You have not shared a sandwich with me since the war, you old hyena!”

“This is why I did not marry your fat sister! Your family is overrun with stubborn dogs!”

“Here, you mule!” Yevgeny said, shoving the entire sandwich into Boris’s hands, causing chicken salad to ooze out from between the slices of bread. “You have ruined my appetite! I do not wish to eat it. I hope you suffer food poisoning!” He shifted his weight on the bench so that his back was facing his companion.

Boris looked down at the half-smashed sandwich in his hand, then looked at Yevgeny’s turned back. He had been about to say something else, but instead closed his mouth and carefully scooped a spilled hunk of chicken back onto the sandwich before taking a bite and chewing it slowly.

The men sat in silence for several moments as Boris chewed. The warm breeze fluttered the paper around Yevgeny’s sandwich.

“This sandwich,” Boris said, “it is shit. Here,” he said, setting it down on the bench.

Shifting back around, Yevgeny glared at Boris as he picked up the sandwich.

“You were right about the park, though,” Boris said. “It is lovely today. We should eat here often.”

“Tomorrow I am bringing soup,” Yevgeny said as he bit into his mangled sandwich.

“Soup?” Boris asked. “What kind?”

Chapter 2

Arthur Monroe closed the door to his apartment and tried, for the tenth time since waking up that morning, to forget about last night. He wasn't going to be able to concentrate on his work if he kept replaying what he heard in his head. Marie had been...well, she had been on fire. No other way to put it. He might have heard it all even if he hadn't planted microphones behind her headboard.

He hoped he could find a way to set it aside by the time he got to work. The problem with the Soviet compound wasn't going away. Not that the problem was his fault. He couldn't help it if the field agents couldn't figure out a way to plant the bugs in the compound. But he was expected to deliver a solution. Field agents always expected the Science and Technology guys to perform magic when they themselves couldn't get a job done. Of course, when the S&T guys routinely performed such magic, the field agents accepted all the praise for a job well done.

Comes with the territory, Monroe reminded himself. Being invisible is better than being shot at.

Monroe hoisted his briefcase, which felt heavier than usual. He expected to be working late that evening and had packed two sandwiches and three apples instead of the usual one-and-two. Another day, another sandwich. In today's case, two sandwiches.

He scuffled down the steps of his apartment building. Halfway down, he spotted Marie near the mailboxes. Marie was by far his favorite neighbor. She was a little too much of a free spirit for his tastes, but he loved the way she was put together. Skinny but not too thin, and with long toned legs that she showed off at every opportunity. He had often wondered how good her long blond hair would feel if it were brushing against his skin, even though he was entirely certain it never would.

Apparently Marie was just now digging yesterday's mail out of her box. Arthur stole a quick glance at the curves under her sweater and the tightness of her skirt, then nailed his gaze to the floor. It was hard to look her in the eye. A girl like her had to think there was very little that was appealing about a guy like him. He was too short. He wasn't fat, but

not really in great shape either. His hair was dark and unruly and always looked like it had been recently exposed to a Category Four hurricane. About the only thing he had in his favor was that he didn't have to wear glasses. Just his luck that he could see precisely how delightful Marie's body was but not have a chance at actually making contact with it.

"Morning," Marie said as Arthur dashed past. He felt his cheeks flush as he sped by her, heaving open the heavy front door before escaping into the street. She watched him go, perplexed as always by her upstairs neighbor's decidedly anti-social ways.

Arthur wondered, not for the first time, if Marie knew about the microphones. No, he decided. Her greeting was too normal, too everyday. He wasn't surprised that she was in a good mood. He would have been if he were in her place.

Monroe ducked into the Dunkin Donuts on the corner and ordered his usual, a small coffee with lots of cream and lots of sugar. The woman behind the counter handed him a large black coffee. Arthur looked at it for a moment, hoping the cream would start floating to the top, to turn the coffee his preferred shade of beige. Instead, it just stayed black. It was like looking at a cup of piping hot anger.

The woman who had handed him the coffee, a heavy-set woman with a jaw like a suitcase, noted the hesitation. "Got a problem with your coffee, sir?" she asked. To Monroe it sounded like a threat.

"No," he said as he hefted his briefcase and dashed for the door. The woman with the jaw like a suitcase watched him go, convinced that he must have done something perverted that she was fortunate enough not to witness.

Traffic wasn't too bad. The highway wasn't nearly as backed up as it sometimes got. Monroe was only cut off three times and given the finger once. He didn't respond. He heard about some guy in California who gave someone the finger on the highway. The other guy turned out to be an ex-con who enjoyed administering beatings. The guy who gave the finger spent the next year in a coma. Something like that.

Monroe never gave the finger to anyone on the highway.

As usual, Monroe had a difficult time finding a parking spot and ended up parking near the back of the lot, practically a quarter-mile from the front door. He reminded himself that his inability to wake up early lately wasn't his fault. Marie and her boyfriend – what was this one's name? Dave? Dale? Dick. Yeah, that was it. Dick. That figured. Marie and Dick had gone at it until nearly midnight. He didn't

understand how Marie could have sounded so cheery this morning; she probably got less sleep than he did.

Monroe liked to get in early. Most of his coworkers rolled in between 8:00 and 9:00. He preferred being at his desk by 6:30. But since Marie moved in five months ago, he'd barely been able to get to the office by 8:30. As a result, instead of getting a decent spot near the front of the lot, he was resigned to slumming it in the back of the lot with the lazier people. He usually stayed later to make up the time, but that didn't help when it came to getting a good parking spot.

Monroe promised himself that he wouldn't listen that night. He would get to bed early, like he used to do, before Marie and her carnival of lust set up camp in Mrs. McCloskey's old apartment. Mrs. McCloskey never told anyone that she thinks she gives her best head when she's tripping on acid. Mrs. McCloskey was easy to turn off.

Marie was not.

Monroe sighed. He knew better than to tell himself he wouldn't listen.

~

The guard at the building's entrance said good morning to Arthur, as did the guard stationed by the reception desk. As usual, both were courteous but not exactly friendly. At CIA Headquarters, security guards who are too friendly tend to not stay security guards at CIA Headquarters for very long. It was generally considered a wise career move for a guard to aim his sidearm a visitor at least once a month. Not that the lack of friendliness bothered Monroe. He appreciated it, especially since he had so far managed to avoid having any weaponry aimed at him.

Monroe flashed his ID to both guards and didn't say anything in response to their terse greetings. He didn't understand why so many people said good morning to him. Marie, the guards, the scary woman at the donut shop. More people should appreciate silence.

The woman sitting at the reception desk, the actual receptionist, now there was someone who appreciated silence. She'd given up on saying good morning to Monroe years ago. After a while, she had even stopped bothering to make eye contact. Monroe had a great deal of respect for her ability to properly interpret nonverbal signals. She was truly a rare bird. Whatever her name was.

~

Monroe flipped on the light to his lab and listened for a moment to the low hum it gave off. He was fortunate enough to have his own lab. It was small, but he didn't mind. It was easier to keep clean, and he liked a clean lab. On that morning, he noted with some disdain that the lab was not quite as tidy as usual. He'd rushed out the door the previous evening, knowing that Marie had a date, and her dates always ended up the same way. He hadn't wanted to miss it, so he didn't clean up quite as thoroughly as he preferred to.

The bug he'd been working on was still in the clamp, directly under the magnifying glass that was similarly clamped into place above it. He was getting close to finishing it and hopefully would be able to begin field testing in a couple more weeks. It was his best effort yet, almost as small as a quarter and only a quarter-inch thick. Monroe leaned in to peer at it and remind himself where he'd left off last night.

"Trying to see if it has tits?" boomed a voice, causing Monroe to jump.

Mitchell Kricks stood in the doorway and laughed, rubbing his crew cut with a beefy hand. As usual, Kricks was wearing a tie that was both too short and a total mismatch with his short-sleeved oxford shirt. No matter how old he got, he always managed to look like a neighborhood bully who had been forced to wear his father's shirt and tie. "Sorry, Monroe, that was just too good of an opportunity to pass up. You looked like you were about to lick that damn thing. You shoulda seen yourself jump. Priceless!"

Monroe said nothing.

"Damn, boy, sometimes you are simply no fun," Kricks said. "I've met livelier corpses. You sure you aren't simple?"

"Yes," Monroe said, waiting for Kricks to get bored and leave. It was a tiresome game that Monroe had to play every morning. He once made the mistake of engaging Kricks in a conversation, and for the next two weeks the man kept coming into his office and talking non-stop. Monroe had stopped saying anything back to him after the third day. It had taken seven more for Kricks to notice.

"You coulda fooled me," Kricks said. "How much longer till you finish that thing, anyway?"

"Two weeks," Monroe said. "Maybe three."

"Try for two," Kricks said. "Anderson's latest is turning out to be hunk o' shit. It's small enough, but it picks up every god damn thing in the room. Even picks up all the god damn noise from the street outside. All that ambivalent noise."

Ambient noise, Monroe thought. The word is *ambient*. Kricks considered vocabulary to be a detail not worthy of his robust attention.

“Anderson’s bug, it’s shit. I make better bugs on the can after hitting El Guapo’s on Nickel Burrito Night.” Kricks burst out laughing. “Get it?”

Monroe said nothing.

“Damn, boy, ain’t you ever heard of a joke? Anyway, we gotta show the boys upstairs that we’re making some progress down here in the pits, and right now you’re it.”

Monroe shrugged.

“Aren’t you just a regular Jerry Fuckin Lewis this morning,” Kricks said. “You are one strange bastard, you know that? Well, whether I think you’re weird or not, you’re gonna have to be my sign of progress this quarter, so get going on it. Maybe I’ll grab a couple of Anderson’s guys to give you a hand.”

“No,” Monroe said with more urgency than he’d intended.

“They’ll let you get the thing done quicker. I’m sending a couple guys down.”

“They’d just slow me down. I’ll have it done next Friday.”

Kricks paused. He squinted at Monroe, as if he could divine further understanding of his employee if only he could focus on him more clearly. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m gonna hold you to that promise. Next Friday.”

“Next Friday.”

“It’s lucky for you that you’re the best I’ve got,” Kricks said. “Say hi to all your buddies for me,” he added, gesturing toward the equipment strewn across the tables in the lab as he turned to leave.

Monroe looked back at his bug and sighed. Next Friday. He hoped Marie kept to her usual schedule and didn’t start in with Dick until after 9:00. Maybe he could catch the second round. There was always at least a second round. Sometimes even a third if Marie had had enough to drink.

~

Monroe pushed open the door to his apartment and glanced at his watch. 9:45. He’d put in better than a 12-hour day and was exhausted. But he smelled the incense burning in Marie’s apartment – her incense always stunk up the entire first floor, to the eternal aggravation of

everyone living around her – and she only lit incense when she was having sex.

Monroe hurried up the steps. Maybe he wasn't too late after all.

He quickly undid his tie as he unlocked his front door. He hurried to the listening station and yanked off the tarp that covered it during the day. He never noticed anymore that all the furniture in that part of the living room was covered with similar tarps. The paint cans had similarly been stacked around the room for so long that he had gotten into the habit of setting his Coke on one stack of them.

He flipped the station on and waited as the lights dimmed, then came back to full brightness. He was continually surprised that nobody ever asked him about the frequent power surges in the building. The wiring wasn't designed to support a listening station that required large amounts of power upon startup. Three times he'd blown fuses, which was why he kept a full supply of them in his coat closet.

Monroe headed to the fridge while he waited for the station to finish warming up. This version, a custom model he'd built himself, only took about 30 seconds to warm up. Plenty of time to grab a Coke out of the fridge and pop the top.

The sound of knocking on his door froze him halfway to the kitchen. He dashed over to the listening station and reached for the power switch, then thought better of it and left the power on. He scrambled to get the tarp over the station.

"Mr. Monroe, I know you're in there," the gravelly voice from the hallway said.

Monroe sighed and slowed down, taking his time to finish putting the tarp over the station. Corkels could wait. Old bastard.

"Mr. Monroe, I need you to come look at my toilet," Corkels croaked from the hallway. "It's been running all night and won't stop. I've had to wait until nearly 10 o'clock for you to get hoooooome, so now I need you to please fix it."

Monroe slid the chain off the door and pulled it open. "Mr. Corkels, is it something that can wait until morning? I had a long day at work and I'm really tired."

Corkels looked like he hadn't shaved in three days. His thick gray-black beard appeared rough enough to chew through wood. The faded blue plaid robe had fallen open, exposing the man's pale chest and curly gray chest hairs. It took a force of effort for Monroe not to stare at the disturbing vision of the frail man's revolting flesh.

“No,” Corkels croaked, causing the Marlboro attached to his lower lip to bounce like a stripper’s cleavage. “It’s driving me *crazy*. You need to fix it tonight. Don’t make me suffer for the fact that you agreed to take on the super’s job in your spare time.”

“Hang on,” Monroe said with a sigh. “Let me go into the back and grab my toolbox.” He walked toward his bedroom.

Corkels stepped halfway through the door while he waited. “Some super you are,” he grunted as he peered at the tarp-covered furniture. “You’ve been painting that same wall for months. I’m beginning to think you’re never going to finish it.”

Monroe emerged from his bedroom with his sizable toolbox in tow. “I never get time to finish the job,” he said. “Too many toilets to fix.”

“Lazy is a bad thing for a super to be, Mr. Monroe,” Corkels said, pulling his robe closed.

“Lead the way, Mr. Corkels,” he said.

~

By the time Monroe returned to his room, he was exhausted. Sighing heavily, he grabbed a Coke out of the fridge and pulled the tarp off of the listening station. He sat in front of it for a moment, then glanced at his watch. 10:25.

Taking a pull of the Coke, he hesitated. It occurred to him that he should get some sleep. Screw it, he thought, sliding the headphones on. He reached over to the unlabeled switch that represented Marie’s apartment – he didn’t label any of the switches, forced himself to memorize which switch represented which apartment – and flipped it up.

He immediately heard the sound of a bed creaking. Monroe sat up in his chair, considerably more awake now. His free hand went to the right earphone, pressing it against his ear as he took another drink from the Coke.

Creak. Creak. Creak.

Dick was going at a pretty good clip. Or maybe it was Marie who was doing the moving. Either way, it was far too rhythmic to be mistaken for anything else.

The sounds of Marie moaning and almost growling came over the headphones. Monroe had flipped in just in time; she usually didn’t start getting noisy until right before her big finish. Dick began making some

kind of noise as well, but Monroe tried hard to ignore it. He never liked it when Marie's partners made noise.

Dick moaned loudly and said something that sounded like "Creamed spinach casserole." Dick always spoke during his climaxes, Monroe had learned, but never anything intelligible. Two nights ago it had been something along the lines of "My monkey is the bushman."

Once Dick was done with his latest ecstasy-induced statement of gibberish, the creaking noise immediately slowed, then stopped. Other than the strange outbursts, Dick was generally quiet. Marie's last boyfriend – what had been his name? Mark? No, Alan. Mark was the guy before that. Monroe had a hard time keeping them in order. Anyway, Alan had been one of those guys who felt the need to describe in excruciating detail what he was doing to his partner. "I'm boning you so hard," he'd say, or "I'm grabbing your *tits*." Monroe could never figure out whether Alan said those things out of bewilderment that he actually found a girl willing to let him do those things to her, or simply because he felt the need to have points of emphasis made during his carnal performances.

Things had gone quiet in Marie's apartment. Monroe took the final drink of his Coke and set the empty bottle down on the nearby stack of paint cans. He pressed the headphones to his ears and turned up the volume just a tad. He was careful not to turn it up too far. He once made the mistake of jacking up the volume on a bug, only to have someone in the bugged room walk past the concealed microphone and sneeze loudly. It had sounded like a shotgun blast to Monroe, and his ears had rung for nearly five days. His doctor had told him he was lucky he didn't have a pair of ruptured eardrums.

Sometimes Monroe wondered if having intact eardrums were actually lucky in his case.

"That was a lot," Marie said. "See, baby, I told you those herbs would help."

"I think I hit your dog," Dick droned. He always sounded like he was seriously incapacitated by some kind of illegal substance. Tonight was no different.

"Serves him right for poking his nose around every time we're in here. Here, use this. You want something to drink, baby?"

"You have any Coke?" Dick said.

"You want a Coke at 10:30 at night? It'll keep you up half the night. Besides, I don't buy that stuff. Nothing but a bottle of chemicals."

Monroe looked at his empty Coke bottle and wondered if the chemicals in it could possibly be worse than whichever ones Marie and Dick ingested earlier that evening.

“Good point, man,” Dick said. “Water’s fine.”

“Okay...you stallion,” Marie cooed.

“You know what would be good right now, man? A cheeseburger. With mayonnaise. And onions. And...whoa, doggie, hey, stop licking that...”

Monroe flipped the switch for Marie’s apartment back to the down position. The during part was fine. The after part, he could never really stomach. The only thing less appealing than hearing Dick moan was hearing him talk.

As tired as he was, Monroe wasn’t quite ready for bed. The Hendricksons down in 1D were sometimes entertaining, if only because they were two of the most unpleasant people he’d ever encountered, and hearing them curse each other out for hours on end was fairly entertaining. He flipped their switch up.

Nothing. A little snoring, off in the distance. Monroe flipped the Hendricksons’ switch back down.

He hesitated for a moment, then flipped up Mr. Corkels’ switch. At first he heard nothing, so he dialed up the volume a touch. A faint noise was steadily repeating. Monroe pushed the volume up another touch. The noise became more distinct. It was...wet, somehow. Rhythmic, and wet.

Corkels was beating off.

“Oh God,” Monroe said, jabbing off the switch to Corkels’ apartment and simultaneously yanking the headphones off. Next time I’m down there I’m taking out that bug, he thought as he shut down the station’s main power.

Chapter 3

Monroe happened to pass Marie in the hallway again the next morning. She was in a long tie-dye t-shirt, heading back to her apartment with the day's copy of the *Washington Post* tucked under one arm. Keeping his head down, Monroe noticed that the shirt, while long enough to keep her decent, did a poor job of covering her slender legs.

"Morning," she said in her slow, somewhat dreamy style as she passed. Mistaking Monroe's glance at her legs to be a glance at the newspaper under her arm, she tapped it with her free hand and said, "Gotta keep close watch on what authority is up to, you know?"

Monroe flashed a perfunctory half-grin at her – it actually was more like a quarter-grin – and kept walking toward the door and out into the street.

~

Monroe had been at work for several hours and was deep in focus on a schematic when he heard a loud knock on the frame of the door to his lab. He didn't bother to look up. Kricks always knocked on his door frame. The more Monroe would appear to be in deep concentration, the louder Kricks would knock, hoping to see him jump.

"What can I do for you, Mitch?" Monroe said, still hunched over his sketch.

"Nothing," Kricks said. "Somebody else wants to see you." The way he said it seemed odd. It told Monroe that something was up, and whatever it was, Kricks didn't like it.

Monroe looked up from his schematic and turned around. Behind Kricks, in the hallway, was a brick wall of a man, leaning on a cane. Despite his mostly bald head – what little was left was trimmed shorter than most toothbrushes – he didn't look old enough to need a cane. His bland dark suit told Monroe that he definitely wasn't somebody from the S&T wing of the building.

"Technical Specialist Arthur Monroe," Kricks said, "this is Special Agent Wyman Coleman. He's from Field Ops. Seems you've somehow managed to get yourself selected for some kind of special project. Even

though nobody asked me if you were available. And nobody even told me that Agent Coleman was coming to visit you today.” These last comments clearly were directed toward Coleman, even though Kricks continued to look at Monroe.

“I wasn’t aware of any special project,” Monroe said.

“Don’t care,” Coleman said, wobbling forward and wedging his shoulders through the doorway and around Kricks. “Special project is aware of you. Welcome aboard, soldier.”

“I’m not a soldier,” Monroe said.

“Don’t need excuses, pipsqueak,” Coleman said. “No room for ‘em on this project. You know what you get when you make excuses?”

“Um...no.”

“Bay of Pigs.”

“I don’t get it.”

Coleman looked slightly perplexed. “Field Ops is not a joke, son.”

“I’m sorry,” Monroe said. “I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Coleman stared at Monroe for a moment. “Doubts,” he said, to nobody in particular. “I have doubts.” He turned on Kricks. “You can leave now.”

“I can, huh?” Kricks said. “Gee, thanks. But I still haven’t heard how I’m supposed to meet my group’s deadlines when I’m down one of my better engineers.”

“Ever been shot?” Coleman said.

“No,” Kricks answered slowly.

“Want to be? I’m armed. Enjoy shooting people. Haven’t gotten to in a while now.”

“You can’t shoot me,” Kricks said, though something in Coleman’s gaze caused him to take a step toward the door. “I’m a supervisor.”

“Only makes me want to shoot you more.”

“You’re a maniac,” Kricks said, taking another step toward the door. “Who’s your supervisor? I’m not going to take this.”

“Assistant Director Henderson. Phone’s right there,” he said, pointing to the dust-covered one on Monroe’s seldom-used desk.

Kricks’ expression changed to one that Monroe had never seen. He had the look of a man who thinks he’s picking up a bag of trash and realizes that instead he has lifted a bag of disgruntled live snakes. “I want him back as soon as this project, whatever it is, is done,” he said, trying but failing to retain his dignity.

“You’ll get him back when we’re done with him,” Coleman said. “Might be a while. Go do something else now.” He made a shooping motion with his free hand.

Kricks opened his mouth to say something more, then seemed to think better of it. Shooting a look at Monroe, as if the situation were somehow his fault, he left.

“Absolute disgrace,” Coleman said, looking around the lab. “Man’s not capable of running a kindergarten, much less a department in the finest intelligence agency this planet has ever seen. And you manage to be his subordinate?”

“Yeah.”

“Doubts,” Coleman said, addressing the walls again. He shook his head. “No matter. Team’s selected. Moving forward. Right?”

Monroe shrugged. “I guess. I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know.” It had been a knee-jerk-reaction thing to say.

“Low self-esteem. Unfortunate. No room for low self-esteem in Field Ops, pipsqueak. Knew a man once who was burdened with self-doubt. Got shot. Tragic.”

“He got shot because he had self-doubt?”

“Of course. I shot him. Can’t have self-doubt on my team. Owns a gas station now. Good man.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really confused. What’s this project you’re talking about? I haven’t heard anything about being transferred.”

Coleman looked Monroe up and down, from head to foot and back up to eye level. “How many pushups can you do?”

“On a good day?” Monroe smiled, enjoying his little joke.

Coleman didn’t answer. He just stared at Monroe, waiting for an answer.

Monroe’s smile faded. “None,” he said.

“None? Are you crippled?”

“No.”

Coleman stared at Monroe again with an expression of mild disbelief. “Come on, I’ll arm-wrestle you.”

“I’m sorry?” Monroe asked.

Coleman ignored the question, yanking a nearby stool and pulling it up to the table next to where Monroe was sitting. Coleman heaved his way down onto the stool in a way that was so awkward Monroe was afraid the man might collapse to the floor.

He dropped a beefy arm onto the lab table with a loud thump and lifted the forearm up so that only the elbow was touching the steel surface. The fingers of his hairy hand wiggled in Monroe's face.

"I really don't want to arm-wrestle," Monroe said.

"Negative," Coleman said. "Can't work with somebody unless you've arm-wrestled them."

"I've never arm-wrestled anybody I've ever worked with."

"I beat Bulgaria's top arm wrestler once in a bar in Bucharest."

"Isn't Bucharest in Romania?"

"Your arms are sticks. I'm surprised you can even lift a glass of water. Come on, pipsqueak, time for *mano y mano*."

Monroe realized the man was not going to take no for an answer. He sighed and put his elbow on the table. Coleman wrapped his meaty hand around Monroe's.

"Haa, okay. Here we go. Ready?"

"Sure," Monroe said.

"One...two...three?"

Coleman sent Monroe's hand crashing onto the table almost instantly, with enough force that it made most of the equipment on the table bounce.

"Owwww!" Monroe said, yanking his stinging hand back. Coleman shot up off the stool, stood tall, and raised his arms above his head. "Sweet American victory!" he shouted. He then pointed at Monroe and yelled, "Ha! Son, you arm-wrestle like you're Swiss. Are you Swiss?"

"No."

"Might want to check to make sure. Usually the Swiss aren't very interested in admitting to it. They tell you they're German. Your folks tell you you're German?"

"My mom is half German."

"There you go." Coleman grabbed his cane. "Show up in Assistant Director Henderson's office at one o'clock."

"I still don't know what this is about," Monroe said, rubbing his throbbing hand and hoping nothing inside it was broken. "Who's Henderson? Why does he want to see me?"

"Sorry, pipsqueak," Coleman replied. "Henderson wants to tell you that himself. Don't worry. Lots of glory in this mission."

"Glory?"

"Of course. Assignment's no good if it doesn't have glory. This one has enormous amounts."

"Of glory."

“Affirmative. Glory. Marvelous American glory. Your nation will be proud.”

Monroe had no idea how to respond. The two men looked at each other for a moment.

Coleman broke the silence. “You’re good with bugs?”

Monroe shrugged. “I suppose so, yeah,” he said. “Speaking of which, I’m supposed to finish this prototype by next Friday. How long...”

“Negative,” Coleman said, picking up and inspecting a voltmeter.

“No offense, but I’m really having a hard time understanding you.”

“You’re not finishing that proto-whatever by next Friday. You’re on special assignment. The other thing is irrelevant.”

Monroe looked at the sketch in front of him. Suddenly this special project idea didn’t seem so bad. “But I won’t know what this project is until I meet with Henderson?” he asked.

“Affirmative,” Coleman said, shifting his weight around on his cane as he headed back out of the lab. “Your consistent bewilderment needs to go. I don’t tolerate the bewildered. Act like you’re in charge and you will be. Advice from me to you. You’re welcome.”

Monroe watched him leave, then glanced at the clock. It took him a moment to realize that he had three hours to kill before his meeting. He looked back at his sketch, then grabbed a file folder, slid the sketch inside, and tossed the folder into his filing cabinet. For the first time in his tenure at the CIA, Arthur Monroe left his lab to enjoy a three-hour lunch.

~

Every day, on his way to and from work, Monroe passed a little diner. He had passed the diner every day for years but had never eaten there. Every morning and afternoon, he wondered how good the food was there. He imagined it being full of diners between the hours of 11 and 1, all of them rubbing their bloated bellies as they walked out afterwards to suffer through another afternoon at work, when all they really wanted to do was take a nap.

The diner had been empty when Monroe had arrived. He was served by an openly hostile fat woman whose yellowed name tag identified her as Patsy.

Monroe wanted a chicken salad sandwich, but without the tomatoes that the menu said would be thereupon. He ordered the sandwich and asked for the tomatoes to be held.

“You can just pick them off,” Patsy said, writing on her pad.

But the tomato juice will be on the bread, Monroe thought. Slime and seeds.

“I’d really just prefer no tomatoes at all,” he said. “Please.”

Patsy had lowered her pad of paper and stared at him. For a brief moment, Monroe feared that she might strike him. Instead, she simply turned and sauntered back into the kitchen.

When the sandwich arrived, Patsy practically shoved the plate into his midsection. She glared at him again with the kind of contempt people usually reserved for the homeless. He waited until she left before lifting the top piece of bread to begin picking off the twelve tomato slices he found there.

After he had finished and paid his bill, making sure to leave a generous tip lest he anger the already discontented Patsy, he stood outside the diner and looked at his watch. His first-ever three-hour lunch was only thirty-seven minutes old.

Monroe looked around the parking lot. It was still mostly empty.

He looked around at the area around the diner. Traffic on the road, a few nondescript buildings, and several weed-infested fields, the mere sight of which made his allergy-riddled sinuses twitch.

Monroe got in his car and drove back to work.

Chapter 4

Assistant Director Henderson's office was nicer than Monroe was expecting. He'd never been inside an AD's office. It even had a waiting room with enough space for six comfortable chairs and an L-shaped desk, at which sat Henderson's secretary. She appeared to be in her mid-fifties and practically reeked of professional assistant-ness. Floral, shapeless dress, salt-and-pepper hair stacked into an invulnerable helmet, faux-pearl necklace, the whole bit.

The name plate on her desk read DOROTHY. No last name. That was how it was at the CIA. Men had last names on their plates; women, all secretaries and receptionists, had none.

"May I help you?" Dorothy asked.

"Arthur Monroe," he replied. "I have a one o'clock appointment with Mr. Henderson."

"Very good. Have a seat. You're the first to arrive."

It only took a few minutes of waiting for Monroe to become thunderously bored. His three-hour lunch had exposed him to a level of boredom he never knew existed. After leaving the diner, Monroe had bought a *Life* from a drugstore and sat in his lab. *Life*, as it turned out, was as boring as actual life. President Johnson had visited Britain. Jackie Kennedy had attended a party. Some woman with no legs had learned how to surf. An article about Roger Maris was the only one that held his attention. His life, apparently, had been fairly miserable since he broke Babe Ruth's home run record. The article improved Monroe's mood somewhat. He ended up reading it twice.

Sitting on one of the chairs in Henderson's waiting room, Monroe glanced at his watch. 12:56. He looked around. No magazines on the end tables. The only pictures on the walls were of President Johnson and Vice President Humphrey and a painting of Niagara Falls. Monroe looked at the painting of the Falls and tried to imagine going over it in a barrel. The thought of the drop made him a little queasy.

Another look at the watch. 12:57.

The door leading from the hallway opened and a short man with an ample belly and curly red hair burst in. Monroe recognized him but couldn't remember his name. He was another employee of the

Directorate of Science and Technology, but in a different group, Specialized Electronics. Monroe worked in Surveillance Electronics. Only in the Agency could the phrases “Specialized Electronics” and “Surveillance Electronics” be considered to mean vastly different things.

“Hi there, ma’am,” he said to Dorothy in a booming voice. “Jimmy Kendall here. I have a one o’clock with the Assistant Director.”

Dorothy glanced at Kendall’s badge, then at the large appointment book laid on her desk. “Thank you, Mr. Kendall,” she said in a tone that managed to strike a perfect balance between interested and uninterested. “We’re still waiting for other members of the party to join us...”

“Hey, I didn’t know I was coming to a party!” Kendall interrupted. “How about...um...that?” he said, his enthusiasm bursting against Dorothy’s stone face. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m a little nervous. Sometimes I make jokes when I’m nervous. It keeps me from getting too nervous, because when I get really nervous, I get all sweaty and gassy and I can’t shut up.”

Dorothy’s expression refused to change. “You can take a seat while we wait for the rest...for everyone to arrive,” she said.

“Am I in trouble?” Kendall asked. “You can tell me. I can take it.”

“Sir, I just make the appointments. You can take a seat.”

“Okay,” Kendall squeaked. Monroe could see sweat beads glistening on his scalp.

Kendall turned toward the chairs and saw Monroe. His face brightened with such force that Monroe found it mildly alarming. “Hey there, fella,” Kendall said, snapping his fingers. “I know you. Hang on, I’ll come up with the name. I’m a name guy. Never forget a name.” He made a popping noise with his lips and snapped his fingers a final time. “Morrison!” he said, jabbing a finger Monroe’s way.

“Monroe,” he replied.

“Yeah, right. What did I say?”

“Morrison.”

“I was close! I told you I’m a name guy,” he said with a dismissive wave. “Andy, right?”

“Arthur.”

“Close again! See? Never forget a name.” He ambled over and dropped himself in the chair next to Monroe’s. “So how are things? You’re in surveillance, right?”

“Yeah. They’re good.”

Kendall grinned at Monroe and nodded his head.

“Thanks,” Monroe added.

“For what?” Kendall said.

“Um...for asking. You know. About how things are.”

“Oh, yeah! Right. So things are good?”

“Yeah.”

“Super. So are you in this meeting with the AD, too?”

“Yeah.”

“Are we getting fired?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. I was told this was about some kind of new project.”

Kendall snapped his fingers again. “Oh yeah, that’s right! Maybe I’m not in trouble. Oh, that would be so good if I wasn’t in trouble. Mom wouldn’t be able to handle it again. Last time she hit me with an iron, right in the neck.”

Monroe winced. “Really? That had to hurt.”

“You’re telling me. She could have at least let it cool first. But hey, that’s a mom for you. Always caring enough to hit you with an iron. So what do you think it’s about? The project, I mean? All that Coleman fella would say is that it was a special project, and that there was glory involved. Glory! How about that? I’ve never worked on anything glorious. I think it sounds fun.”

“I suppose so,” Monroe said. “To answer your question, I don’t think I know any more than you do.”

“I don’t know why they aren’t telling us anything,” Kendall said. “You don’t think they’re sending us behind the Iron Curtain, do you? I couldn’t handle it if I were behind the Iron Curtain. I hear they don’t have toilet paper there. I need toilet paper.”

Monroe took a long look at Kendall. “They’re not sending you behind the Iron Curtain,” he said.

“You think? I hope not. I’m allergic to vodka. It makes me turn all red and puffy, and then I throw up everywhere. That’s all they drink over there, I hear.”

“I think that’s just Russia. Not the whole Iron Curtain.”

“Yeah?” Kendall asked. “That helps, I suppose. So did you arm-wrestle him? That Coleman fella?”

“Yeah,” Monroe said. His hand was still sore from the experience, and he absent-mindedly rubbed at it.

“You got whipped too, huh?” Kendall said, noticing the gesture and pointing at Monroe’s sore hand. “I thought that guy was going to pop the tendons right out of my shoulder and use ‘em for a necktie. I was

certain that he broke my arm, but I went to the emergency room and they said that I need to stop bothering them.”

Monroe really had no idea how to respond, so he said nothing.

“So you don’t know what this is about?” Kendall asked.

“No, I’m afraid not.”

Kendall fell silent for a moment. Monroe appreciated it; he was quickly finding Kendall’s energy to be exhausting.

Then Kendall began making a soft whimpering noise. Monroe had to resist the urge to groan audibly in response.

The door from the hallway opened again, and through it came Coleman and a man wearing a suit so expensive that Monroe didn’t have to see his visitor’s badge to know that he didn’t work for the Agency.

“Hello, Agent Coleman,” Dorothy said. “Hello, Dr. Westcott.”

Dr. Westcott, a well dressed, tall man with a long, angular face and sweeping white hair, did not bother to acknowledge Dorothy’s greeting. He shot an impatient glare around the waiting room, spotted Kendall and Monroe, and very literally looked down his nose at them.

“Hello Dorothy,” Coleman announced. “Such a fine, broad-shouldered woman. How are you on this wondrous afternoon?”

“I’m fine, thank you, sir,” she said with professional blandness. She pressed a button on her intercom. “Mr. Henderson?”

“Yes, Dorothy,” said the voice through the intercom.

Coleman wheeled around and saw Monroe and Kendall. He jabbed an almost violent thumbs-up at them. “Afternoon, soldiers,” he said. “Glory awaits, does it not?”

Monroe shrugged.

“Exactly what kind of glory do you mean?” Kendall asked. “Because I really need toilet paper.”

“Everyone for your one o’clock is here,” Dorothy said into the intercom. “Shall I send them in?”

“Yes, thank you, Dorothy.”

“Son,” Coleman said to Kendall, “I don’t know what on God’s green earth you’re talking about, but there’s no room in my CIA for a whiner with a wiping problem. Shape up!”

“I see your agency spared no expense in finding the absolute best men for this project,” Westcott said, apparently to Coleman, though his gaze never wavered from the door to Henderson’s inner office.

“The Agency brooks no criticism,” Coleman noted.

“I don’t have a wiping problem,” Kendall said. “I just...”

Dorothy cleared her throat loudly, effectively ending the conversation. She stood and almost ceremoniously walked toward the door to the inner office. The formality of it made Monroe suddenly feel nervous. He'd almost forgotten that this meeting represented uncharted professional waters for him.

Dorothy opened the door. "You gentlemen may go in for your meeting," she said.

"Thank you," Westcott said, striding in ahead of Coleman. As Coleman walked in behind him, he turned toward Kendall and Monroe and jabbed a solemn thumbs-up toward them. He mouthed the word "glory," then went inside.

"I guess we're up, huh?" Kendall said as the two of them stood.

"I guess so," Monroe said.

Henderson's office was even nicer than his waiting room. Mahogany was everywhere. The huge desk, the numerous bookshelves, even the six-chair conference table, all mahogany. Monroe wondered which was greater, his annual salary or the cost of the mahogany.

Henderson stood up behind his desk and walked around. He was a remarkably short man, maybe five-foot-three at most. What he lacked in height he made up for in sheer girth. The man had the physique of a partially melted bowling ball. His head was topped by a flowing mane of hair so perfectly white that Monroe wondered if Henderson dyed it.

"Sit, gentlemen," he said, gesturing toward the mahogany table.

Everyone sat. "Good to see you again, Morton," Henderson said to Westcott. "How's Ethel?"

"A total lunatic," Westcott replied without humor. "She seems bent on spending me into bankruptcy, and if I could legally kill her, I would." His tone left some doubt as to whether or not he were kidding.

"If you change your mind, let me know," Henderson said. "Maybe we could bury the two of them next to each other!" He burst out laughing, as if he had just told the funniest joke in the history of jokes.

"Nah, they'd probably enjoy that too much," Westcott said, clapping Henderson on the shoulder. "As loud as they are when they're together, we'd probably get complaints from the gravediggers about all the noise!"

Henderson and Westcott laughed uproariously. Monroe and Kendall looked at each other, wondering what they were missing. Coleman simply sat still and watched them, like a man waiting for a bathtub to fill.

Eventually the two older men's laughter faded. "So has everyone here met?" Henderson asked.

“We’ve met enough,” Westcott said. “This one is obsessed with toilet paper,” he said, jerking a thumb at Kendall.

“I am not,” Kendall said.

“Really, Walter,” Westcott continued, ignoring Kendall entirely, “I don’t know how you expect me to work with some of your people. I can barely tolerate Agent Coleman. Now you add to my team a sniveling man obsessed with toilet paper...”

“Am not!”

“...and the other one hasn’t said a peep yet, but I’m not expecting much.”

“My team,” Coleman said.

“I’m sorry?” Westcott said. “I hadn’t yet mentioned gunplay, so I assumed you weren’t paying attention.”

“Not *your* team,” Coleman said. “My team. Facts are important things to keep straight, doc.”

Westcott sighed as if he’d just been informed by a director that a 34th take was needed on his last scene. “Forgive me, Agent. *Your* team. Which of course could not exist without me. I don’t see anyone else raising their hand for your rather gruesome little experiment here.”

“Morton,” Henderson interrupted, “I thought I had made it clear to you that this project was in no way gruesome.”

Another sigh. “Yes, of course. Not gruesome. I forgot where I was for a moment.”

“Morton,” Henderson said, his expression growing more serious, “that’s quite enough. We are here for business.”

“My apologies,” Westcott said. “I simply wanted to weigh in with my...concerns.”

Coleman’s eyebrows shot up. “Concerns,” he said, glancing at Monroe and Kendall and nodding.

“Hey,” Kendall said. “Why are you looking at me when you say that?”

“Gentlemen,” Henderson barked, “That’s enough.”

Westcott raised his hands in surrender and stopped talking. Coleman seemed not to notice the rebuke at all and continued to keep an eye on Kendall.

Henderson turned his attention to Monroe and Kendall. “I’m sorry, gentlemen. As you probably have surmised, you’re at the disadvantage here, being the new members of an elite covert operations squad...”

Kendall whimpered and elbowed Monroe under the table. He kept doing it until Monroe smacked his hand away.

“...but I’m getting ahead of myself. Introductions are in order. As I’m sure you know, I am Assistant Director Walter Henderson. Yes, the same Walter Henderson who coordinated the Sub-Carpathian Assault of 1928. I’m sure you were wondering. I’m asked about it all the time.”

Henderson fell silent for a moment and stared at Monroe and Kendall.

“Um, yes,” Monroe said. “We, uh, had just been talking about the Sub...um...the Assault. In the lobby. Right, Jimmy?”

“It’s one of my favorite assaults,” Kendall said. He was sweating profusely.

“Is it now?” Henderson said. “That’s very good. Good to see a young Agency man keeping in touch with his history.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now then, as for the others in the room, you’ve met Agent Wyman Coleman here. He’s the lead Operations agent on this project. He will be ensuring that the project stays on course and will report all progress to me.”

“In charge,” Coleman said, jutting his thumb into his chest and eyeballing Kendall, Monroe, and in particular, Westcott.

“And this,” Henderson continued, “is Dr. Morton Westcott. He is an old friend of mine – as well as a friend of the Agency - and happens to be the president and CEO of Westcott Research Corporation. I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

“It’s my favorite corporation,” Kendall blurted.

“He will be the surgeon on this project. Three decades of veterinary surgical experience, sitting right here at this table.”

Kendall tentatively raised his hand.

“Mister...I’m sorry, I don’t yet know which of you is Mr. Monroe and which is Mr. Kendall.”

“I’m Jimmy Kendall, sir.”

“Very good. Mr. Kendall, this isn’t fifth grade. If you have a question, just ask.”

“Sorry. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“What is your question, Mr. Kendall?”

“Are we going to be maiming animals?”

Henderson stared at Kendall. He seemed to be weighing his answer. “Who told you that?”

“Nobody,” Kendall said, his eyes widening with panic at apparently having stumbled across something he shouldn’t have. “I’ll stop asking questions. I promise. I’m sorry. I know better than to ask questions. I

don't know what got into me. Please don't fire me or send me where there's no toilet paper."

"See?" Westcott said.

"I think we're getting ahead of ourselves," Henderson said, still staring heavily at Kendall. "I'll finish the introductions, then we can begin discussing the nature of the project. Morton, as I assume you have surmised by now, these are the gentlemen from the Directorate of Science and Technology who will be participating in the project."

Westcott grunted in disdain.

"Mr. James Kendall, I'm told, is quite competent in the field of remote control electronics. And Mr. Arthur Monroe – you are Arthur Monroe, I assume?"

"Yes," Monroe said.

"Very good," Henderson said, shooting a glance at Coleman. "Mr. Monroe is trained in the area of surveillance technologies."

"What exactly does that mean?" Westcott said.

"He builds bugs," Henderson replied. "Microphones in the houseplant, that sort of thing."

"Ah," Westcott said.

"Very good then," Henderson said. "Now that we've all been introduced, let's get started. I want you to know that each of you has been specially selected for this project. You each have a unique set of skills that will be absolutely imperative to the success of the project. You should be honored to be here."

Coleman caught Monroe's eye and jabbed a quick thumbs-up at him.

"I also am obligated to say," Henderson continued, "that this project is absolutely top secret. Each of you has been assigned temporary clearance simply to even be in this room today. You will keep that clearance for the duration of this project, and only in regards to the project. Not a word of this goes outside this room. A very limited number of people are aware of the project, so if there is a leak, it will be easily found, and definitively closed. Does everyone here understand?"

Monroe and Kendall nodded. Coleman gave an exuberant double thumbs-up. Westcott continued to look bored.

Henderson continued. "As Mr. Monroe here is aware, we're having a problem with surveillance at the Soviet Embassy Compound in D.C. Despite repeated efforts to conduct effective in-building surveillance, we've thus far been unsuccessful, wouldn't you say, Mr. Monroe?"

"Yes, that's right," Monroe said, suddenly concerned that he was about to be blamed for something.

“And why is that, Mr. Monroe?” Henderson asked. “I of course know the answer, but I’d prefer if you explained it for everyone’s benefit.”

Monroe coughed. “Well, I’m told that the Soviets aren’t allowing anybody into the building unless they’re full-time employees and native Russians. No contract workers of any kind. They have embassy employees perform maintenance, paint walls, everything. Our guys can’t pose as undercover maintenance workers. And they host no diplomatic events there at all, so we can’t get anyone in posing as a party guest. I’m told we simply can’t get in there to plant a bug. I only know because I’d been asked to develop a bug that can either be somehow inserted into the building from a distance, or can pick up audio from outside the embassy. Which of course is impossible.”

“Who’s working on that mission for Ops?” Coleman barked.

“I don’t know,” Monroe shrugged. “I never meet the guys who use the bugs.”

“I could get a bug in there. I once planted a bug in Stalin’s bedpan.”

“Yes, thank you, Agent Coleman,” Henderson said. “We’ve all heard your Stalin’s bedpan story enough times here.”

“Not a story,” Coleman said. “Glorious and true. And from what I could tell, he was a very ill man. Disturbing work.”

“As Mr. Monroe was saying,” Henderson said, “we seem to have run out of options for putting the Soviet Embassy under surveillance. And we don’t dare to try any sort of break-in. The compound is too well guarded. However, there are some relatively new developments. The Russians have started getting sloppy, and it represents an opportunity for us. Our observation teams have recently noticed two very high ranking officials, Yevgeny Repin and Boris Sokolov, leaving the compound several times a week. They stroll through the park across the street from the facility and often sit on benches to chat. It’s not unusual for them to spend an hour chatting on those park benches. But if anyone approaches, even within 50 feet or so, they simply stop talking. We can’t get a microphone close enough to record whatever the hell it is they’re saying.”

“They’re professionals,” Coleman said, as if he were introducing the concept to the others at the table.

“Sir?” Monroe asked.

“Yes, Mr. Monroe?” Henderson replied.

“Why haven’t we tried planting a bug on the bench? Or on all the benches in the park?”

“After the first couple times Repin and Sokolov started visiting the park, a full security detail started coming with them. They keep everyone else at a distance. They also started sweeping the benches every morning. If we had something planted, they’d find it, and Repin and Sokolov likely would never enter the park again. We can’t risk losing this opportunity. We realized that we needed to find a way to monitor them that did not involve a fixed-location microphone or rely upon a miked agent to get close enough to pick up their conversations.”

“Are we sure they’re discussing sensitive information?” Monroe asked. “If I were them, I wouldn’t discuss anything important in a public...”

“They’re Russians, son,” Henderson snapped. “These people don’t care to talk about the weather, or their wives, or how the Redskins are playing. They only have one thing on their godless Soviet minds, and that is the total destruction of this fine nation.”

“Fine nation,” Coleman repeated.

Henderson glared at Coleman, who grinned broadly in return.

Monroe glanced at Kendall, who was staring at Henderson and Coleman like he’d just been struck in the head by a thrown rabbit.

Henderson continued. “As we continued observing the Soviets from a safe distance, we noticed something else. We noticed...cats.”

“Cats,” Coleman repeated, nodding his head.

“Cats, sir?” Kendall asked.

“Lots of them,” Henderson said. “Wandering in the park. Strays. Filthy, and one of them walks in circles almost incessantly, but yes, cats. And we noticed that a couple of the cats would walk right past the bench where Repin and Sokolov often sit. Repin has even gotten into the habit of carrying small amounts of kibble in his pocket to feed the cats with. So now the cats seek them out.”

“Kibble,” Coleman said, almost to himself, as he continued nodding.

“So when I started reading about these cats in the reports,” Henderson said, “a light bulb went off in my head. I thought, ‘Why don’t we plant surveillance devices on the cats?’ But the field agents noted, rightly so, that there was no place to hide a bug on these cats. Since they’re strays, they aren’t wearing collars. The only option would be to hide it in the animal’s fur. But fur is too short to truly conceal a bug, and there’s a very good chance the cat would clean it off not long after we attached, if we were able to attach it at all. The idea of doing something with the cats seemed so perfect...but we couldn’t figure out how to do it. We were stumped.”

Monroe glanced at Coleman and Westcott, looking for signs that Henderson was goofing around. Apparently he wasn't.

"We realized that instead of focusing on how to get a bug *on* a cat," Henderson continued, "we needed to start thinking about how to get a bug *in* a cat."

"You're kidding," Monroe said before he could catch himself.

"The Central Intelligence Agency never kids," Henderson said with a glare. "The Constitution is not a joke book, son."

"No sir," Monroe said.

"The approach is simple," Henderson said. "The Russians feed the cats, encourage their presence. All our cat would have to do is walk up to them, enjoy a bit of kibble, and sit nearby. And we would be able to hear every word those filthy, atheist reds are saying."

"Kibble," Coleman said, nodding again.

"Of course, cats are not terribly easy to train," Henderson said, "but we don't expect that to be a problem. That's why we have you on the team, Mr. Kendall," he added, gesturing toward a very surprised-looking Jimmy.

"Me?" Jimmy said. He seemed to appear more ill by the moment.

"Absolutely. You're an expert in remote-control systems."

"Well, yes, I build remotes to control little cameras, but..."

"Excellent," Henderson interrupted. "I have complete faith in your ability to figure something out for our acoustic kitty."

"I'm sorry," Monroe said, a look of confusion creeping onto his face. "Our what?"

"Oh, my apologies," Henderson said. "I got a bit ahead of myself there, didn't I? That's the name of this project," Henderson continued. "Project Acoustic Kitty. Came up with it myself. Congratulations on being assigned to the team, gentlemen."

Monroe stared at the man, not realizing that his jaw was slightly open.

"Are you sure you have the right Jimmy Kendall?" Kendall blurted. "It's a fairly common name..."

"I'm fine with it if we happen to have the wrong Jimmy Kendall," Westcott said. "This one may be defective."

"I am not defective!" Kendall shouted.

"I'm afraid you'll just have to consider me skeptical about that," Westcott sniffed.

"Meanie," Kendall said.

"Imbecile," Westcott shot back.

"I'm armed," Coleman growled.

"Gentlemen!" Henderson shouted, staring everyone into silence.

"Fine," Coleman said, relaxing in his chair. "I never get to shoot anybody any more," he grouched.

"You gentlemen are going to have to work this out," Henderson said. "If you're going to survive being sequestered together, you're going to have to find a way to work together. And nobody is allowed to shoot anybody," he added, looking at Coleman.

"Sequestered?" Monroe asked. He didn't like the sound of that word at all.

"Of course," Henderson said. "As you might imagine, a project of this nature needs to be kept under extremely tight wraps, even from others within the Agency. It would be difficult to maintain total secrecy here at Langley. People see cats here, they're going to wonder why. There are no cats in the intelligence industry. We're more of a dog culture."

"Dogs," Coleman said, seeming to have calmed back down.

"Besides," Henderson continued, "we don't have proper facilities here for all the work that will need to be done. No veterinary operating rooms, that's for certain. So, I've arranged for facilities in an offsite location. You'll stay in a nearby hotel for the entire time, until the project is finished."

"We won't get to go home?" Kendall asked.

"Not until the project is finished, no," Henderson said. "I'm sorry. The project must be completed outside the view of Langley. We don't need this leaking to the public. And it gives each of you extra motivation to be quick about your work. I want a prototype completed as soon as possible. The weather will only stay warm for five or six months at most. That's when Repin and Sokolov are most likely to spend lots of time in the park."

Monroe glanced at Kendall. The man looked like he was about to cry.

As for himself, the notion of leaving his apartment unattended for any length of time, much less an entire summer, was terrifying.

"How far away is the lab?" Monroe asked.

"Cape Girardeau, Missouri," Coleman said.

"Missouri?" Kendall shrieked. "Why Missouri? That's got to be a thousand miles away."

"There aren't many adequate facilities in out-of-the-way places in this country," Westcott said. "This particular lab also happens to be very

close to a highly reputable animal-testing supply facility. And it has the benefit of being located very far away from curious eyes in Washington.”

“Yes, you can thank Dr. Westcott here for the location of your project,” Henderson said. “I was just going to send you to a site in West Virginia, but he convinced me that the site in Missouri was better. I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but there are very good reasons for it.”

“But,” Kendall said, “who’s going to feed my birds? I can’t trust my mom. She just switched back to Jim Beam.”

“Suit yourself,” Westcott said. “The fat one wants out.”

“Hey!” Kendall shrieked. “I’m not fat. You are an angry, angry man.”

“Mr. Kendall,” Henderson interrupted, “don’t worry about your birds. I’m sure they will be fine. If it will make you feel better, we’ll make arrangements for them to be fed.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Or we’ll buy you new birds upon your return. One of the two.”

Kendall whimpered.

“Don’t worry about it, Chubbsy,” Coleman said. “It’s a nice town. Seen it. Very nice. Teacher’s college nearby. Lots of college girls. None are attractive, though. Thought I saw an attractive one once. Turned out to be a shrubbery.”

“My poor birds,” Kendall said, mostly to himself. “Do you have birds?” he asked Monroe.

“No,” Monroe said.

“There’s nothing wrong with a grown man having birds, you know,” Kendall said.

“I didn’t say there was,” Monroe said.

“I love birds,” Coleman said.

“You do?” Kendall asked.

“Fun to shoot,” Coleman replied. “Excellent when fried.”

Kendall gasped in horror. “You’re a bad, bad person.”

“Not my fault birds are tasty,” Coleman said.

Kendall ignored him, turning back to Monroe. “Who’s going to feed my birds?”

“Why do you keep asking me?” Monroe said.

Henderson stood up. “Gentlemen,” he shouted, catching everyone’s attention. “If there aren’t any questions, then this meeting is adjourned. Remember, none of this can be repeated outside these walls. Betraying the trust of this office will have dire consequences.”

“Pow!” Coleman said with a gleeful grin, pointing finger guns at Westcott, Monroe and Kendall. “Pow pow!”

Westcott, Monroe and Kendall stared in stunned silence at Coleman as he blew on his fingers and pretended to holster them.

“I was thinking more along the lines of dismissal,” Henderson said.

“Are you sure he should be licensed to carry weapons?” Westcott asked.

“He’s passed all the tests,” Henderson said. “At any rate, I’m very glad you’re all on board. Your plane leaves at 8 a.m. Sunday from Dulles. I’m looking forward to seeing your first prototype, gentlemen. May God be with you.”

When an isolated but brilliant CIA engineer is asked to help turn cats into surveillance devices, he soon learns that his new co-workers are even more bizarre than his new assignment. Which, naturally, is why he begins spying on them.

Acoustic Kitty

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