 Encyclopedia Brown and the Case of the Equitable Agency
by celeria

Summary

FOLLOW THE CONTINUING ADVENTURES OF THE SUPER SLEUTH IN SNEAKERS

Some stolen books ...  
An application to join the FBI ...  
A two-car accident ...  
Professional troubles in Washington, D.C. ...  
An unfair verdict ...  
And a surprising request from the last person Encyclopedia Brown ever thought would need his help!

These are just some of the trials Encyclopedia Brown and his friend Sally Kimball face in their years away from Idaville. Are you ready to see what happens in the next chapter of their lives? Read along and try to solve the cases with them -- and if you get stuck, some of the answers are found at the bottom of the page!

Notes

Thank you to LJ users helenvalentine and kate_nepveu for their quick and helpful beta of this story!

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Case of the Bogus Bookseller

For months now, police officers across the nation had been wondering: What had happened to Idaville?

Idaville looked like many other beautiful seaside towns its size. It had lovely white beaches, churches, and a synagogue. It had two delicatessens, three movie theaters, and four banks.

Idaville, however, only *looked* like other towns. For nine years now, nobody, grown-up or child, had gotten away with breaking the law.

Police officers from Maine to Hawaii respected the police force of Idaville. They especially respected its chief of police, Chief Brown. They thought that he must be the smartest police chief in the country, perhaps the world.

Chief Brown was a fine man. He was smart and brave. His officers were smart and brave. But Chief Brown knew that he was not the only reason for Idaville's spotless record. And the hardest cases were not solved in police headquarters—a stunning new glass-and-granite building downtown, built to honor the impeccable record of Idaville's finest—but in the Browns' red brick house on Rover Avenue.

The real brains behind Idaville's crime crackdown was his son, eighteen-year-old Encyclopedia.

Over dinner, Chief Brown would tell Encyclopedia about the latest case that was puzzling him. Encyclopedia would solve the case before dessert. He usually needed to ask only one question.

Chief Brown would have liked to honor Encyclopedia with his own glass-and-granite building. He would have liked the statue in the lobby to be one of his son, spitting water from his carved ceramic mouth. (Instead, it was a statue Chief Brown thought was supposed to be J. Edgar Hoover.)

But who would believe him?

Who would believe that his finest case-cracker couldn't even drink legally—and, Chief Brown was quite sure, never had?

So Chief Brown said nothing.

Encyclopedia, for his part, had rarely said anything about the help he gave his father. Only his best friend and junior partner, Sally Kimball, knew without him having to say. He had never wanted to seem different from the other fifth—or sixth, seventh, tenth, twelfth—graders.

But there was nothing he could do about his nickname. He was stuck with it.

Only his parents and teachers called him by his real name, Leroy. Everyone else in Idaville called him Encyclopedia.

An encyclopedia is a book or set of books filled with facts from A to Z. Encyclopedia's brain was like an encyclopedia. He had read more books than anyone else in Idaville, and he never forgot what he read. His friends said he was better than a library. He didn't shut down fifteen minutes before bedtime (although sometimes Mrs. Brown told them not to call so late).

For eight years now, Chief Brown had been taking his toughest cases home to his soup and his son.
But now Encyclopedia was eighteen years old, a young man, two months into his freshman year of college at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His emails home were filled with paragraphs about his classes and his new friends, the clubs he had joined and the food they ordered late at night. He assured them that he was brushing his teeth, checking the balance in his bank account, and looking both ways before he crossed four lanes of traffic and the T tracks. He wrote of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, English composition, and vector calculus, not questions about his father's cases.

For his part, Chief Brown was trying not to worry his son. Encyclopedia deserved to have a good time in college. The Idaville police force had survived, and would continue to survive, without him.

They were surviving. But they were no longer excelling. Sometimes it took them weeks, even a month, to solve a single case. His officers were discouraged. For nine years, they had begun to expect and then assume that Chief Brown would have all the answers. Chief Brown and Mrs. Brown had kept their secret too well.

Sometimes, after a particularly late night, Chief Brown would stop in the hall outside his son's room and look in at the perfectly tidy desk, rug, twin bed. Encyclopedia had always kept his room neat, but it felt different now. It felt sterile, as if the room were hermetically sealed and waiting for Encyclopedia to come home.

Chief Brown felt that he was waiting too.

He decided to send his son an email that night.

October in Massachusetts was cold. Encyclopedia Brown supposed he should have known to expect this, but he was surprised each morning when he left his dorm room. He had had to buy another sweater and his first pair of gloves.

His roommate—a huge, hulking redhead who had grown up in Maine and towered over him by five inches—laughed at him every morning when he mentioned how cold it was. "You southerners," was one of his favorite taunts, which he alternated indiscriminately with, "You sound like a little old lady."

Buck Boorington would not have been his first choice for a roommate. Encyclopedia had realized that the instant they met over the mountain of unpacked bags in the middle of their too-small dorm room. He had already lined up his books on a windowsill and was trying to calculate the most efficient method of putting all his clothes in the closet and drawers. Buck carried up yet another load of what looked like enough Ramen noodles, beef jerky, and beer to feed an entire football division and dumped it in the middle of the room. The bottles clinked musically. "Hey," Buck had grunted, as if noticing him for the first time. "Name's Buck."

"Buck?" Encyclopedia had repeated, taking his hand. "Is that short for something?"

"Butch Boorington, Junior." Buck had thrust his chin out proudly. "Named for my dad, so they call me Buck."

"Buck," Encyclopedia repeated again. "Nice to meet you."

Buck rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever." He studied the neat row of books behind Encyclopedia's laptop on the windowsill. "What's your name, Mr. Brain?"

Encyclopedia was reminded powerfully of Bugs Meany (who, he was pretty sure, was going to fail out of the University of Florida this year, his third on academic probation. He had made Sally
promise to keep an eye on Bugs once she got to campus. Sally had groaned and punched one fist into the other palm. "It's bad enough, Encyclopedia," she had said, "that you're going to MIT, and I'm going to the same school as Bugs Meany."

"You should go somewhere else," Encyclopedia had said. "Somewhere out of state."

Sally had sighed impatiently. "It's not the same for me, Encyclopedia. You know that. I can't go that far away. Money's tight.")

Buck looked at him expectantly. Encyclopedia had cleared his throat. "Call me Leroy."

* *

And now, two months later, he was still getting used to being Leroy. It was true that his teachers had always called him by his full name, so it wasn't strange to be called Leroy in class. Nor was it strange to be called Mr. Brown, by the professors who were more formal—his father, after all, had always been Chief Brown.

But it was strange to hear his friends shouting out, "Leroy, man!" in casual situations, like on the street or in the Stratton Student Center or at a party, over a keg. It made him feel even less like Encyclopedia Brown.

He wasn't the only one, he knew. His friend Joe, the first time they met in calc, introduced himself as "Please call me Joe." He was Joseph Brochard III, and it turned out he'd been called Josie all his life, a nickname he was only too happy to drop now that Joseph (his dad) and Joe (his grandfather) were no longer around. And Rod had been called by his middle name all his life, and was sick of being one of eight Michaels in a classroom. Lots of people changed when they went to college. Lots of people tried out something different. But it was still hard to get used to.

Which was why, after a meeting of the Undergraduate Mathematics Association and an abnormally tasteless dinner at Ashdown, Leroy was glad to get back to his room and wake his laptop. He was even gladder to see that Buck wasn't around and that he had an email from his father.

From: chiefbrown@idavillepd.org
To: ldbrown@mit.edu
CC: formerenglishteacher@gmail.com
Date: Tue, Oct 5, 3:32 PM
Subject: The Case of the Burglarized Books
Mailed by: holmes.idavillepd.org

Leroy,

I hope you are well and continuing to work hard in your classes. In your last email you mentioned that you think your psychology class is giving you more insight into the reasons why criminals fail to complete well-thought-out plans yet successfully commit spur-of-the-moment crimes. Care to elaborate?

Your mother and I miss you and are looking forward to seeing you at Thanksgiving.

I was hoping you might be able to take time away from your studies and help me with a
Last Wednesday, Officer McDonald and I responded to a call at Donny's Books. Mr. Rose, the owner, contacted us to report a robbery. When Officer McDonald and I arrived, we found the store and Mr. Rose unharmed, but several dozen books had been stolen. In addition, three very valuable first editions of classic novels, which were on loan to Mr. Rose for a special display, had been taken. Nothing else was damaged or harmed.

Leroy knew which bookstore his father meant. Donny's Books was a new bookstore downtown that had opened only a year ago. They sold both new and used books and had a much bigger selection than any other bookstore in town. At the same time, though, Mr. Rose went out of his way to make the store seem homey and welcoming. He had hung a little silver bell on the front door and had a station for free coffee and tea in the back corner. When the bakery next door had day-old goods, they donated them to Mr. Rose and he set them out with the coffee.

Mr. Rose said that he had been alone in the store that day. He has two assistants, but neither of them works on Wednesdays. Mr. Rose was in the front of the store, cleaning. He unlocked the glass display case where he was keeping the rare books so that he could dust it. He had his back to the door. He didn't hear anything, but he realized that someone was in the store with him. He felt someone poke him in the back with a gun.

The robber told him not to turn around. He guided Mr. Rose at gunpoint behind the front counter, blindfolded him, made him kneel down, and tied his wrists and ankles with heavy twine. Then he went back to the front of the store. Mr. Rose thinks there were at least two robbers. He heard them loading books into boxes.

Mr. Rose was not sure how long he was tied up. He said he had heard nothing but silence for a long time, but he was afraid to move in case the robbers were still in the store. Once he thought he was safe, he managed to work the twine loose. It was several hours before he got free and could call the police.

There are no security cameras on Broad Street outside the store. Mr. Rose has security cameras on the inside of the store, and he gave me the tapes. However, the feed cuts out about fifteen minutes before the robbery. Because of this, Mr. Rose thinks it might be one of his employees. We are checking out both his assistants, but have not been able to find out anything definite yet.

Dad

P.S. I took Officer McDonald on a stakeout recently. He did much better this time.

Leroy read his father's email twice, then closed it and went back to his inbox. There was also an email from his mother.

From: formerenglishteacher@gmail.com
To: ldbrown@mit.edu
CC:
Date: Tue, Oct 5, 5:14 PM
Subject: Re: The Case of the Burglarized Books
Mailed by: gmail.com
Your father hasn’t eaten his soup in three days. I am getting tired of taking it out of the fridge and reheating it. Please give him a hand. I love you.

Mom

Leroy reopened his father’s message, sat back in his desk chair, and closed his eyes. He always closed his eyes when he did his hardest thinking.

After a minute he opened them and hit Reply.

From: ldbrown@mit.edu
To: chiefbrown@idavillepd.org
CC: formerenglishteacher@gmail.com
Date: Tue, Oct 5, 7:46 PM
Subject: One question

Mailed by: outgoing.mit.edu

Are there any other exits to Donny's Books, besides the front door?

In the morning he checked his email before he went off to his first class.

From: chiefbrown@idavillepd.org
To: ldbrown@mit.edu
CC: formerenglishteacher@gmail.com
Date: Wed, Oct 6, 5:08 AM
Subject: Re: One question

Mailed by: holmes.idavillepd.org

Leroy,

There are two emergency exits—these are required by law, for fire safety reasons—but both sound an alarm if you open the door. Mr. Rose does not believe that the robbers left that way.

Leroy glanced at the clock on his computer. He had just enough time to write an email before he had to leave for class.

From: ldbrown@mit.edu
To: chiefbrown@idavillepd.org
CC: formerenglishteacher@gmail.com
Date: Wed, Oct 6, 7:26 AM
Subject: One question
Don't believe anything Mr. Rose says, Dad. He knows exactly who the robber is!

Who was the robber?

*(Scroll down for the solution to The Case of the Bogus Bookseller.)*

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**Solution to The Case of the Bogus Bookseller**

The robber was Mr. Rose, the owner of Donny's Books. Encyclopedia knew as soon as he read his father's notes that he was lying.

Mr. Rose said that the robbers tied and blindfolded him. To embellish his story, he said that he was so scared that he was afraid to move for several hours, until the store was completely silent. That explained why he hadn't called the police right away.

Impossible!

Mr. Rose had hung a bell on the front door of his store, remember? He would have heard the bell ring when the robbers opened the door and left. And the robbers could not have left by the emergency exits, which had alarms.

Armed with Encyclopedia's knowledge, Chief Brown checked out Mr. Rose. He found that Donny's Books was in financial trouble. Mr. Rose had stolen the books, planning to sell them to recoup some of his losses.
Mr. Rose was fined for filing a false police report. Chief Brown recovered the rare books.
The Case of the Academy's Answer

Six Years Later

During his six years at MIT, Leroy settled into a comfortable routine of solving cases by email and phone for his father. He also worked hard in school. He completed his B.S. in mathematics in three years, then stayed at MIT for an M.S. and Ph.D in Nuclear Science and Engineering. "Why nuclear science?" his mother had asked him, flabbergasted, when he first started the program.

"Why not nuclear science?" he had countered.

"Are you interested in nuclear technology?" his father had asked with a frown.

"Sure," Leroy had said. "I read a book about it."

Chief Brown had raised an eyebrow. "This isn't like reading a book about diamonds or the Wild West, Leroy," he had said. "You're at a stage in your life when the interests you pursue will affect the course of your life."

Mrs. Brown had nodded as she served meat loaf and baked potatoes. "That's right," she said. "You know I went back to school to get re-certified to teach after you went to college. While I was there, I took a course in Shakespeare, and now I teach the senior-level literature courses. That's an opportunity I wouldn't have if I'd taken a different class."

In truth, he couldn't explain his decision to his parents, not when he didn't completely understand it himself. He knew that he wanted to apply to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. But applicants had to be at least 23 years of age, and he figured killing time on a Ph.D was as good as anything. And the FBI loved agents with a diverse background. Was engineering diverse enough? He wasn't sure. If his mother had her way, he figured, she'd probably have pushed him toward a degree in fine arts.

The year he finished his Ph.D, Leroy came home for Christmas. He ate dinner with his parents, then got on his bike and rode over to Sally Kimball's house. She and her parents and three older brothers and dog and two cats were all in the kitchen, laughing and putting away the clean pans and filling up the dishwasher as fast as they emptied it. Her face lit up when she saw him, and Mrs. Kimball hugged him, and Mr. Kimball shook his hand and said to say hello to his parents.

"I don't know why you still insist on riding that thing around," Sally groused as they went outside. She folded down the back seats in her SUV and threw his bike in, then slammed the door. "Where do you want to go? Want to hit the Gaspar? I think Benny said he and Jody and Billy were all going there tonight."

"Er," Leroy said, climbing into the passenger seat and fastening his seat belt. "Well—I don't know. Want to just hang out? How about at Mill Creek?"

"Mill Creek?" Sally wrinkled her nose. "How old are you, ten? And it's December, Encyclopedia. It's cold."

Sally, and Charlie and Billy and Jody and Pinky and all their friends, had never stopped calling him Encyclopedia. He had once tried to point out that Leroy was a lot shorter and easier to say. It hadn't worked, just as his mother had always appeared equal parts amused and confused by the choice of Encyclopedia as a nickname for her son.
"It's not cold," Leroy said, looking out the window as they passed one of the banks. The digital temperature sign read 57. "It's fifty-seven degrees. You haven't experienced cold until you feel the wind coming off the Charles River—"

"Okay, cut it out with your smug northerner statistics." Sally flipped on her turn signal and headed out of town toward the land that surrounded the creek. "But if I freeze, you'll have to explain to Professor Rains why I'm missing his class next month."

"You got into that Estates & Trusts course you needed, then?"

"Yes, but I wish I hadn't! It sounds incredibly boring. Still, we're supposed to 'broaden our exposure' or something like that." She pulled into a parking space behind a picnic table. "Okay, northern boy, you're lucky I've got a beach blanket in the back of this car. Go get it."

Leroy groped behind the seat for the blanket Sally had mentioned. "If you don't want to be an estate planner, what kind of law do you want to practice?"

"Criminal. Litigation. Something rewarding. I don't think there's anything very rewarding about helping rich old people decide which million goes to which worthless kid, do you?"

Leroy had read enough books to know that criminal law wasn't all like Law & Order, but the more he thought about it, the more it seemed to suit Sally. At least, it was the closest she could get to beating up people in a legal, state-sanctioned way. He tucked the blanket under his arm and slammed the door, then followed her over the grass. Sally was still the best athlete and the prettiest girl he knew, which wasn't saying much since there hadn't been a lot of women in the Nuclear Science and Engineering program. She knew that she was a good athlete and wasn't modest about it. She never said a word about her looks, although once she had pointed out that being pretty meant she had to know how to beat people up.

"Is Bugs still in the program?" he asked, spreading the blanket out on the bank of the creek where they'd fished and camped and cooked out dozens of times over the years. He'd even solved a case here once or twice.

Leroy had been fascinated two years ago when Sally sent him an enraged email, telling him how the University of Florida had been stupid enough to allow Bugs Meany into the Levin College of Law. He was in Sally's year because he'd taken some time off after college to work as a paralegal. That wasn't saying much, Sally insisted; after all, he was two years older and dumber than a box of pasta. When he turned up in some of her classes, the emails kept coming. Bugs put gel in his hair. He wore button-down shirts and khakis. He still used tigerleader@gmail.com as an email address. He went by Bernard now. Sally delighted in continuing to call him Bugs in front of as many female law students as she could find.

Leroy had had no idea that Bugs's real name was Bernard Gregory, or that he even had a real name. "People change in college," he kept saying to Sally, but he had to admit, imagining Bugs as a Bernard taxed his considerable brain.

Sally scowled, stretching out on the blanket. "Yeah. He's going to be in my Estates & Trusts class. He's probably the reason I couldn't get in at first. That no-good, rotten little—taking up a seat in the course—a waste of space …"

"Okay, okay," Leroy said. Privately he thought that Bugs probably was a no-good, rotten little, but it was best not to let Sally get started, or she acted like she was ten and Bugs was twelve again.

"So?" Sally asked expectantly.
"So, what?"

"So, the FBI! Have you heard yet? Did you get in?"

Leroy smiled. "I got in."

They weren't the hugging kind of friends. Sally was even less huggable than Duke Kelly (who, Leroy had heard, was now a plumber in Glenn City). But she hugged him anyway, a quick squeeze around his shoulders that surprised and pleased him. "That's so exciting!" she said. "When do you ship out?"

"Gosh, Sally, it's not the military," Leroy said. "I start at the Academy next month." He grinned. "Just about the same time you're getting up close and personal with Bugs in Estates & Trusts."

"Hmmmph." Sally crossed her arms over her chest. "I hope you have better classmates than I do."

It turned out that Leroy's classmates weren't the problem. They all seemed nice, intelligent, ambitious as hell. One thing that surprised him was that they weren't all fresh out of college or graduate school. You had to be between the ages of 23 and 37 to apply to the FBI, but the average age appeared to be closer to 32.7. Some of these men and women were coming from previous careers, or service in the military, or other branches of the government. He wasn't the only one with a Ph.D. He wasn't the only engineer. He wasn't the only smart one.

He wasn't even the only Brown. His class supervisors called everyone by their last names. Since there were several other Browns, he became Brown, Leroy D. Often this was punctuated by another, much longer phrase, such as, "Brown, Leroy D., this is the time to be working on case exercises" or "Brown, Leroy D., please stick to the web-based schedule."

It didn't help that one of the other Browns was a golden girl—literally. She was tiny and had long blonde hair. More than once, Special Agent Donaldson would say, "Brown, Kristen A. has it, folks!"

Still, there were times when it was worth it. The first time they went out on Hogan's Alley, training with firearms—unloaded, of course—it was both like and unlike what you saw on TV or in movies. This was real. This was what he desperately wanted.

He wasn't completely comfortable being Brown, Leroy D., though. He'd just been getting used to being Leroy.
The heart of Bugs Meany pounded with a great longing.

It was to get even with Sally Kimball.

But Bugs never lifted a fist. Every time he thought about it, he felt weak in the stomach, as if he were twelve all over again.

Sally Kimball had been the prettiest girl in fifth grade and the best athlete. She continued to be the prettiest girl and the best athlete right up through twelfth grade. By that time, of course, Bugs was on to bigger and better things, smooth-talking chicks over kegs at the University of Florida. None of them ever beat him up for picking on a Cub Scout. Cub Scouts! Who needed them? The only thing Cub Scouts were good for was being trained to be Tigers.

Bugs had been annoyed and dismayed when he realized that Sally was also a law student at the University of Florida. He then felt eager for about five minutes, hoping that he could show her how much he had changed. Those hopes were dashed when he held out his hand to her and said, "Call me Bernard, please," and she spent the next five minutes laughing hysterically and weaving down the hall, drunk with hilarity.

The thing was, everyone else called him Bernard now. His parents. His professors. His friends—Duke, who lived over in Glenn City with his wife and his little girl; Rocky, who was in prison; Spike, who was serving his third tour with the Marines in the Middle East.

Sally Kimball still called him Bugs. She no longer beat him up with her fists, but she could outshine him in class any day. And every time he heard her, or so much as looked at her, he felt twelve years old and filled with rage again.

Leroy and Sally were both home on a weekend at Christmas. Leroy was having dessert with Sally and her mother and trying to come up with some funny stories about the FBI that weren't barred by his security clearance when the doorbell rang. Sally's mother went to open it and came back with Charlie Stewart, who looked shaken. She said hello to Charlie and then headed into the kitchen.

"Charlie!" Sally exclaimed.

"Charlie!" Leroy stood up. "Great to see you." He held out his hand, and Charlie took it, but his face was ashen.

"Charlie," Sally said, "what's wrong?"

"I think I'm in trouble," Charlie said, joining them at the table. "I need help."

"How did you know Encyclopedia was here?" Sally asked.

"Mine?" Sally managed to look surprised and proud all at once, and Leroy remembered how she had almost outsmarted him with the story of the Great Merko, years and years ago. "What's wrong?" she repeated.

"It's Bugs."

"Bugs." Sally groaned. "I should have known."

"I think I made a mistake," Charlie said. "I might lose my job."

Leroy sucked in his breath. He knew how much Charlie loved his job. Charlie had sped through his undergraduate degree in biology and applied to dental school right away. He'd finished last spring and had found a job as a junior partner in an established dental practice in Pittfield. Because there were already four senior partners, Charlie often took on the duties of a hygienist. He loved everything about it.

"What happened, Charlie?" Sally asked. "And why do you need my help?"

"I might need legal advice."

Sally blinked. "I'm only a third-year student."

"So is Bugs," Charlie said. "Just listen. I'll explain everything."

Charlie began his story. "It started this morning when Wilford Wiggins came in for an appointment."

"Wilford!" Sally groaned. "Two for the price of one."

Wilford Wiggins was a lazy 32-year-old high school dropout. He lived in Idaville with his parents and had more get-rich-quick ideas than pimples on a teenager. Leroy and Sally had spent most of their years in Idaville stopping Wilford's schemes and plots.

"Wilford came in for a routine cleaning," Charlie said. "While I was doing it, I found a small cavity in his right permanent maxillary first premolar, number five. Boy, it was a shame because that one is usually such a beaut. They have a nice shape—"

Sally cleared her throat.

"Sorry," Charlie said. "Anyway, I told Wilford that we should take care of it right away, before it got any worse. He agreed. I told him I would have to give him an anesthetic. After I was done, I said he should have someone pick him up from the office, because he shouldn't drive after having nitrous oxide. It's not illegal, but we recommend that people don't, especially if they've never had it before. He said he'd be fine. On his way home, he got into a car accident and crashed his car."

"I don't understand," Leroy said. "If he crashed his own car, why is he blaming you?"

"He didn't crash just his own car," Charlie said. "He hit someone else. Everyone is fine, but Wilford's blaming me. He says I didn't properly warn him of the risks of nitrous oxide."

"But you did!" Sally said.

"That's what I said, but it's going to be his word against mine. None of the other dentists were in the exam room with us today."

"How did Bugs get involved in this?" Leroy asked.
"Wilford hired him," Charlie said. "He wants Bugs to be his lawyer."

Sally snorted. "That's a laugh! Bugs couldn't argue his way out of a paper bag."

"I wouldn't be too sure," Charlie said.

At that moment the doorbell rang again. Mrs. Kimball went to answer it again. This time she showed two people into the dining room, Bugs and Wilford.

"Well, if it isn't a little reunion of Idaville's finest," Bugs said. "Mr. Brains. Miss Muscles. And Mr.—Molars."

Wilford crossed his arms over his chest and snickered. Charlie glared at both of them. Sally stood up from the table and made a fist with her right hand.

"Easy, Sally," Leroy cautioned.

"That's right. Easy, Sally," Bugs said. "Remember, you're not a minor anymore. You lay a hand on me and I'll slap you with an injunction—"

"Oh, quit while you're ahead, Bugs," Sally replied, rolling her eyes. "I know how you did in Criminal Law. Anyway, Wilford can't hire you to be his lawyer unless you've finished law school and passed the Bar, neither of which you've done."

A muscle in Bugs's jaw twitched. He cleared his throat. "Actually, I'm only lending my assistance in order to help Mr. Wiggins file a suit on his own. And I believe Mr. Wiggins has quite a solid case here."

"How so?" Charlie burst out, stepping forward. "I informed your client of all the risks. I suggested that he call someone to pick him up. He's the one who went out and totaled his car!"

"I beg to differ," Wilford said. "You never informed me of any risks. And you certainly didn't say I couldn't drive."

"Anyone with half a brain knows you shouldn't drive after you have anesthetic," Sally snapped.

Bugs grinned triumphantly. "DeGennaro v. Tandon," he said. "If a patient lacks the full spectrum of information required for give informed consent, the responsibility falls upon the medical provider."

He raised his eyebrows. "In this case, your client, Dr. Charles Stewart."

"What did you do, look that up on the internet?" Sally asked. "We live in Florida, in case you've forgotten, Mr. Brawns. Connecticut cases aren't controlling in this state. Ziegler v. Tenet Health System! Charlie disclosed the risks and responsibilities to your client! Wilford's the one who ignored them, so Charlie didn't create any zone of risk here."

"Okay, okay," Leroy interrupted. He was getting a headache. He was pretty sure this was the way Sally had felt all those years when he spouted off little-known facts that solved cases. "Wilford, why don't you tell us your side of the story?"

"Don't mind if I do." Wilford helped himself to a chair and the rest of Leroy's pumpkin pie. "This morning I went in for a dentist appointment. Dr. Stewart here told me that I had a cavity and he would have to suck it out."

"The term is extract and restore," Charlie cut in, "not 'suck it out.' "
"Wilford was using layman's terms," Bugs said. "Go on, Mr. Wiggins."

"Why thank you, my dear Mr. Meany. As I was saying, Dr. Stewart told me he would have to treat the cavity. He then proceeded to use nitrous oxide without discussing the risks. After he finished, I gave him my insurance info and then drove home. He never said I shouldn't drive."

"I certainly did!"

"I was feeling a little groggy, but I was sure I could handle it," Wilford went on. "I was sitting at a stop light downtown when the car in front of me stalled. The driver had to turn over his engine again. It was so loud that I was startled. I jumped and my foot slipped off the brake and onto the gas. I ran into the car in front of me. But I never would have if it weren't for Dr. Stewart and his laughing gas here."

"Legally, you're at fault if you rear-end someone," Sally said, narrowing her eyes at Bugs and Wilford. "Everyone knows that."

"Mr. Wiggins was incapacitated by Dr. Stewart's neglectful actions," Bugs said. "We'll meet you in court if we have to."

"Why don't we go take a look at your car first?" Leroy suggested, rubbing his forehead. He wished he'd polished off that pie before Wilford got his fork in it. "Did they tow both cars away?"

"They had to," Bugs said. "It was tragic. Mr. Wiggins' vehicle was new, and now it's sitting at Pollard's Towing."

"Let's walk over there," Leroy said, going to the closet to grab Sally's jacket for her. It wasn't that cold out, certainly warmer than what he was accustomed to up in D.C., but Sally persisted in believing that December was winter and you should wear a jacket.

Pollard's Towing wasn't far from Sally's house, on a large lot away from the downtown area of Idaville. The five of them were quiet as they walked over—Bugs radiated smugness, Charlie nervousness. "What do you do now, Wilford?" Leroy asked when they were nearly there. He was half unnerved by the silence, and half genuinely curious as to whether Wilford had ever managed to cheat anyone out of his money.

"I specialize in pre-owned vehicles," Wilford said.

Sally snorted. "You're a used car salesman?"

"We prefer the term 'automotive specialist,' " Wilford said.

Pollard's Towing was surrounded by a high chain-link metal fence and lit with bright overhead lights, to discourage anyone from trying to break in and steal one of the many piles of junk parked carefully in the lot. "There's mine," Wilford said, pointing to a beat-up green Ford. Its nose had been crushed so that it resembled a cross between a chameleon and a bulldog. There were also dents in the back doors and the roof—dents that Leroy was sure hadn't come from rear-ending someone.

Sally barely covered a snicker. "That's the new car you're so concerned about?"

"Mr. Wiggins specializes in vintage automobiles," Bugs said pompously. "It's new to him."

Leroy eyed the half-crumpled Ford. "Where is the car you hit?"

"That one." Wilford pointed again. The Ford's victim was a Nissan Leaf. Although the back of the
car was also crushed, it somehow looked better than Wilford's car. The tires were new, and the light blue paint caught the overhead floodlights and flashed like glitter in the gloomy yard.

Bugs cleared his throat. "Dr. Stewart will be served tomorrow," he said. "Of course, we could settle this out of court if he were willing to avoid the hassle."

Charlie blanched. "I can't settle out of court," he hissed to Sally. "I don't have enough medical malpractice insurance to cover this."

"Don't bother, Bugs," Leroy said. "You and Wilford told a good story. But Wilford can't be much of an automotive specialist if he overlooked one very important detail!"

What did Wilford overlook?

*(Scroll down for the solution to The Case of the Derelict Dentist.)*

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**Solution to The Case of the Derelict Dentist**

Wilford overlooked the fact that the car in front of him, the car he rear-ended, was a nearly new Nissan Leaf—an electric vehicle, which does not run on gasoline.

Wilford said, "The car in front of me stalled. The driver had to turn over his engine again. It was so loud that I was startled."

But electric cars have very silent engines. Most people have trouble hearing them on a quiet street, never mind in the middle of traffic. From his own car, Wilford could not have heard the Leaf starting.

When Encyclopedia pointed out his mistake, Wilford confessed. He had been advised of the risks of
nitrous oxide and driven anyway. He was groggy and accidentally hit the gas instead of the brake.

Charlie kept his job. Sally gave Bugs some case citations involving vehicular law. And Encyclopedia was reassured that Wilford was no better at cheating the citizens of Idaville than he had been as a teenager.
Sometimes, when Special Agent Leroy Brown was sitting in the bullpen—a sea of neatly ordered desks piled with unordered files, papers, memos, phones, computers, and food—he thought about his friends and what they were doing with their lives. Charlie Stewart, of course, was a dentist in Idaville. Pinky Plummer was a small animal veterinarian in Milwaukee. Sally was an Assistant State Attorney in Jacksonville. Benny Breslin, amazingly, was still in school, working dutifully through his medical degree; he wanted to go into research and specialize in sleep disorders. Even Bugs Meany, Sally told him, was gainfully employed, working as a public defender in Gainesville, where he and Sally had gone to the University of Florida. Sally had commented with a snort that he mostly defended frat boys, jocks, and other people she wouldn't have gone near in college.

Leroy thought that every one of his friends, even Bugs, must be having a better time than he was.

Not that he was having a bad time. He wasn't. He loved the moment every morning when he stepped into the office, the unassuming beige building with its rows and rows of uniform windows, more like a parking garage or a prison than the most distinguished law enforcement agency in the world. He loved closing a case, turning over the closed file of finished paperwork to the Assistant Director. (This was merely a formality, as now most paperwork was handled electronically.)

Between those two moments, there was very little he loved.

He had thought being chosen for the Perry task force would be an honor, that it would excite him again. It hadn't.

"How's it going, Boy Wonder?" Kristen asked, shoving a stack of files away from his face and slamming a cup of coffee down on the desk so hard that it splashed. "Got anything on the Crystal City leads?"

Leroy merely raised his eyebrows in greeting and handed her a tissue to wipe up the spilled coffee. Kristen was the Brown, Kristen A. from their Academy days. She had known him well enough and long enough to know that he didn't like anything spilled, splattered, or splashed on his workspace. True, there were enough papers dripping off his desk to look like a white waterfall. But paperwork didn't dry sticky. Coffee, doughnuts, iced lattes, sodas, and all the other things Kristen brought him did. He hadn't been able to figure out how she ate so much and stayed so tiny.

This coffee didn't compare to any iced latte. It was from the coffee pot in the staff room, which was filled and drained several times a day. This cup tasted like it had been sitting there since last night. He took a sip and tried to hide his grimace.

"I've followed up on everything," he said. "None of it was worthwhile."

"Damn." Kristen took a sip of her own coffee. "You're telling Glenn, not me."

Special Agent in Charge Matthew Glenn was their boss—Leroy's and Kristen's and all the other Special Agents in their division. He had hand-chosen Leroy and Kristen for the Perry task force, as a reward for their good work on the other cases. "It's not the best thing, you two," he had said, glancing skeptically at them over an open file that either was all about them or had nothing to do with
them. "You're too similar, both coming out of the same class at Quantico. But you're the best in your class. The best your age. You know that. We want you in."

At the same time, being the best hadn't helped them so far. The Perry task force was working around the clock on the kidnapping of Diane Perry, a rich, unlikable heiress to her father's considerable fortune. William Perry was a devastatingly wealthy corporate entrepreneur whose entire fortune appeared to be channeled into supporting his daughter and helping her to have the best time possible. Now all his money couldn't do a thing to get his daughter back. Diane Perry had been missing for— Leroy glanced up at the whiteboard that was updated every hour—three weeks, two days, and seven hours. Leroy knew that the longer she was gone, the more unlikely it was that they would find her alive.

"You tell him," Leroy countered. "I had to go chase all kinds of ghosts over in Crystal City. The least you could do is deliver the bad news."

"But I'm the one who brought you this delicious coffee."

"I'm the one who was here until two a.m."

Kristen sighed. "You don't play very well with others, do you, Brown, Leroy D.?"

She meant it as a joke, and he knew it, but for some reason it bothered him. He cast his glance around the room, at the other agents coming and going. Some of them were also working on the Perry kidnapping. Some worked in pairs, as partners. Some routinely consulted with specialists outside the FBI. But it wasn't quite like what you saw on TV, the intrepid agent hanging out by himself in the basement or flying across the country or tracking down a serial killer in the middle of nowhere. An FBI agent was never alone.

He pushed his chair back, shoved his coffee mug at her, and picked up a manila folder and a flash drive. "Fine. I'll tell him. Stay put."

Glenn rated a much nicer, and more private, office than anyone else on the floor. Leroy knocked in a perfunctory manner, then stepped inside before Glenn finished waving him in. "I've followed up on the packet of leads from Crystal City," he said, setting both items on Glenn's desk. "I'm sorry, sir, but I have nothing to report."

Glenn scowled, although he didn't really look surprised. "Yeah, Brown L., I figured as much. I'll handle the cleanup from here."

Glenn always said his name like "Brownell." He called Kristen "Brownkay." Sometimes Leroy wished that Kristen hadn't come up from Quantico to FBI headquarters with him.

"Listen, I think we've done about as much with these leads as we can," Glenn continued, barely looking at Leroy. "Why don't you go join the profilers. They're meeting over in Conference Room A right now."

"Profiling isn't one of my strong points," Leroy hedged. "I think I'd be more useful in the field."

Glenn raised both his eyebrows and his head and gave Leroy an immovable stare. "And I said you'd be most useful in profiling, Brownell. Get moving. And take Brownkay with you."

"Sir," Leroy said, "I really think I'd do better if I went out canvassing with Agent Donnelly—"

The file that Glenn was reading hit the desktop with a floppy sound. "And I said that you'd do better if you did what I told you. Let's get one thing straight, Brownell. You're smart. But I've got a
hundred other smart trainees out there who would kill for this opportunity. *You are not in charge here.* You might be someday. But you're not yet. Now go get Brownkay and for god's sake don't make me say this again."
"My client is willing to deal," said John Hagen. ASA Sally Kimball sat across the table from him, arms crossed, staring with dislike at his client. "Client" was too good a word for him, she thought. It conjured up images of people who went to ad agencies and fancy spas. Randolph Corey was none of those things, and it made Sally's skin crawl to be sitting across the table from him.

Then again, Hagen wasn't much better. Sally narrowed her eyes. She knew his type; he was just like Bugs Meany, with a few more smarts and a better suit. Hagen was pompous and self-righteous, cocky and arrogant. He thought he had a legitimate way to get Corey off with a slap on the wrist, something that Sally was never going to let happen.

"I'm not really interested in what your client is willing to do," Sally said, ignoring her coworker, ASA Eric Barbarosa, who had a warning hand on her arm. "We already have the results of the SEC investigation into your business dealings, Mr. Corey. That would be bad enough. I'm sure sitting around under house arrest for a few years would be hard enough for you. But we also have evidence that you not only fired Catherine Marklein when she threatened to blow the whistle on you, you made threats against her, you stalked her, you attacked her, and you murdered her. Prison is much worse than house arrest, Mr. Corey. There aren't many white collar criminals in prison."

"Mr. Corey has told me that you don't have the whole story," Hagen said with oily patience. Sally wanted to squeeze his neck until the greasy words all fell out of his mouth. She squeezed her own fist into a ball under the table. "Mr. Corey is willing to provide evidence—"

"I don't care what Mr. Corey thinks he can provide." Sally tossed her pen down on the table and stood up. "I have all the evidence I need. I have witnesses. I have testimony. I have three kids who don't have a mother because of your client's actions, John. This meeting is over."

She stood up, loaded her briefcase, and walked toward the door.

What happened next happened fast, but she couldn't be sure what happened. She saw Corey getting up from the table, moving toward her. Sally blinked, she hesitated for less than half a second, and then she hauled back and punched him. He staggered backward, the blood vessels under his eye blooming red almost immediately. It was only then that she registered that he was still cuffed.

"Kimball!" Barbarosa was on his feet immediately, his hands on her shoulders, both comforting and restraining her.

"Are you okay, Randolph?" asked Hagen, holding his handkerchief to Corey's eye.

Corey nodded, glaring and squinting in Sally's direction. "No thanks to her."

Hagen smiled, a slick, unsettling smile. "Control your coworker, Mr. Barbarosa."

Barbarosa shoved Sally behind him, keeping his body between Sally and the two men. "He moved toward her," he said. "She felt threatened."

Hagen gave both of them a smug look as he stood up. "Well, I guess we're done here, Ms. Kimball. Thank you for meeting with us. We'll see in court whose evidence is stronger."
Seven weeks later, Sally stood in court across from the witness stand, Barbarosa at her side. They were on their feet. Corey and Hagen were on their feet. The jury foreman was on his feet and was reading the verdict. The words "not guilty" throbbed like a physical pain in her heels and up her calves.

Hagen's smile was triumphant and sardonic across the aisle as he walked across to shake their hands. Sally wanted to kick him, which they hadn't even been able to do metaphorically. She settled for squeezing his hand as hard as she could, until he actually winced a little through his smile.

"Hey, it's okay, Kimball. You win some, you lose some." Barbarosa squeezed her shoulders in a manner that she thought was meant to be comforting. "Look, this was only the murder charge. He'll almost certainly be convicted on the fraud charges."

"Small comfort," Sally said, watching Catherine Marklein's husband and children file out of the courtroom, their heads down, trying to avoid the microphones that were being shoved in their faces. "Is there really any justice in this world?"

Barbarosa patted her shoulder. "You know there is," he said. "It's what we do."

She knew what he meant, that dispensing justice was their profession. But she heard something different. *It's what we do*, she thought as she cast a last glance around the courtroom, *that constitutes justice.*
The Case of the Surprising Supplication

One Year Later

Leroy Brown dropped an empty paper cup in the trash, then straightened a file folder on the edge of his desk. Everything was neat, which made him feel better. The phone on the hook. The files on his computer desktop. The pillows plumped in each corner of the couch. The office smelled vaguely of lemon-scented disinfectant cleaner and old, over-roasted coffee beans from the Maxwell House factory a few blocks away.

He wasn't expecting a client for another half an hour, so he was surprised when the buzzer rang and the door opened. "Come in—" he said, and then stopped. The person at the door wasn't the man who had called earlier, his voice distorted with grief, trying to track down his fifteen-year-old son. The person at the door wasn't even a man at all; it was Sally Kimball.

"Hi," she said, looking around. She sounded both uncertain and disapproving all at once. "Boy, you picked an awful place for an office, Encyclopedia. This part of town looks seedy. And what's with that bail bondsman across the street? Who thought turquoise would be a good color for an office?"

"Location is everything." Leroy said, still too staggered at the sight of Sally to figure out an appropriate reply. Besides, none of the books he'd ever read had much to say on the subject of what color one should paint one's building. "Besides, where better for a private investigator than near a bail bondsman?"

Sally rolled her eyes. "That doesn't make sense. Bail bondsmen are usually near the courthouse."

"You'd know that, not me," Leroy pointed out.

Sally shrugged.

"So what are you doing here?" Leroy thought to ask. He cleared his throat. "Don't tell me you're looking for your runaway son too."

Sally looked a little confused, then shrugged again, as if she knew that that was what passed as a joke for Leroy. "I came to see you. You've refused to see me since you moved here. You've refused to see your parents or Charlie or anybody. What's going on with you, Encyclopedia?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that." Sally advanced on him. Leroy blinked and took a step back. "Something is! You quit the FBI! You moved back to Florida! You have a Ph.D in some kind of ridiculous engineering, Encyclopedia. You were a Special Agent. If you were sick of living in D.C., surely you could have come up with something better to do than this."

"What makes you think there's anything wrong with what I'm doing?" Leroy asked, annoyed. "Not all of us can be out saving the world and prosecuting the unworthy the way you are, Sally."

Sally's eyes darkened briefly, and Leroy wondered if she was going to shoot something back. Instead she said, "Just tell me why here. Why are you doing this?"

Leroy looked around helplessly. "Want to sit down?" Sally shrugged again, and he motioned her toward the sofa that the catalog had described as being the colors of "harvest gold and amber." As far as he could tell, it was tan. "Do you want something to drink?"
"No thanks."

"Okay." Leroy sat down on the couch, too. "It's hard to explain."

"I've got time."

"You do?" Leroy glanced at his watch in surprise. It wasn't even two in the afternoon. "Are you on lunch?"

"First you, then me."

"Fair enough." Leroy looked up at the ceiling for a minute, then down at his hands. "You're right," he said at last. "I was a Special Agent. But it wasn't … it wasn't what I thought it would be."

"Oh, come on," Sally scoffed. "Are you kidding? It wasn't 'what you thought it would be'—what does that even mean? So what? It's what you wanted all your life—"

"You're right," Leroy cut in. "It was what I wanted. Or, I mean, what I thought I wanted. I mean … I don't know what I mean. I wasn't happy there."

Sally frowned. "But you were good at it."

Leroy wondered how she knew he was good at it. Sally had visited him a few times in D.C. She had even met Kristen, who was still his closest friend from that time in his life. But she'd never seen him at work.

"Because," Sally said in response to his silence, "you're good at everything you do."

It was the first compliment he could remember her paying him. The song of his childhood was Sally scornfully telling him, "Because you are a boy." How different this sounded, coming from her mouth in a grown-up tone. "Sure," he said with a shrug. "I was good at it. But I could be good at a lot of things. Why is this any less worthy than working for the FBI?"

It was Sally's turn to look at her hands. She didn't answer.

"You now," Leroy said. He noted that although it was the middle of the working day, Sally was wearing jeans and a pair of sandals. He wouldn't be a very good detective if he hadn't noticed that. "What's going on with you?"

Sally took a deep breath. "I quit at the State Attorney's office."

Leroy wasn't shocked, but he was surprised. "And you're the one complaining about me?" He raised his eyebrows at her. "Why?"

"I lost a case," Sally said simply and quickly, as if she really expected him to let her off at that.

"And?"

"And …" Sally's voice trailed off. "And, I guess I don't know either. He should have been convicted, Encyclopedia. He did it. I know he did it. He knows he did it! But the jury let him off. It was wrong, what he got away with."

"Wouldn't it have been better to stay?" Leroy asked. "And make things right?"

Sally's eyes flashed. "I could say the same to you."
They sat there for a minute, at opposite ends of the couch, not talking, not looking at each other, feeling the weight of their dreams and expectations for each other, not sure what to do now that those were gone.

Leroy finally broke the silence by asking, "So what are you doing here?" She stared at the floor, and he added, "If you're not looking for your runaway son, that is."

Sally managed a half laugh. "Not hardly," she said. "No, I came because you haven't returned any of my calls. And I came because …" She hesitated. "Well, I'm out of a job. And I thought you might need a junior partner again. And a bodyguard." The ghost smile on her face turned hopeful as Leroy grinned back.

Leroy had a sudden memory of Sally, ten years old, the day after she had told him the story of the Great Merko. He had lain awake at night, knowing just how close he was to saying the wrong person. Picking the wrong answer. Being shown up by a girl, a newcomer, the best runner and baseball player he'd ever seen, the prettiest girl he'd ever met. Anyone who could almost do that, he guessed, was worth keeping around.

The next day, he'd ridden over to her house on his bicycle and asked her to be his junior partner. Now he held out his hand, palm up. "Full partners," he said. "How about that?"

Her smile was wide and real now. "You'll have to change that sign, then," she said, putting her palm against his and squeezing gently. "Leroy Brown and Sally Kimball, Presidents."

"Yes," she let go of his hand and surreptitiously wiped hers on her shirt, as if his had been sweaty. "Should I call you Leroy now?"

He made a loose fist, realizing with embarrassment that actually yeah, his palm was a little sweaty. "No," he said. "Call me Encyclopedia."

Sally was the one who insisted on moving to a different building. She claimed that it was because she didn't like the smell of rotten coffee beans in the morning, but Encyclopedia was pretty sure it was all because of the turquoise bail bondsman. They found a place over on Market Street, near the courthouse. Encyclopedia didn't care one way or the other where they staked their office, and Sally liked it because she still got to see her old coworkers on a regular basis. Eric Barbarosa, whom Encyclopedia liked a lot, sometimes came over for lunch and always had a laugh teasing Sally about being a dispenser of vigilante justice.

Jacksonville was the largest city in the state of Florida, so Encyclopedia wasn't surprised that cases poured in regularly. He was surprised at how many of the cases were missing-persons cases. Missing husbands, wives, teenagers, babies, cats, dogs. Being a private investigator was nothing like it was on TV or in the movies. It had that much in common with being a Special Agent. The difference, Encyclopedia thought every morning and every evening, and sometimes in between, was that Sally was the only one he was accountable to. Sally and himself.

The biggest surprise came on a Wednesday in May. A man had called and made an appointment to come in, but hadn't left a name. At 7:45, the door opened, and in walked Bugs Meany.

Encyclopedia meant to shake his hand, compliment him on his suit, and forget their rivalry of nearly twenty years ago. He opened his mouth, and instead, "Bugs Meany!" was what fell out of it.

"Bugs?" Sally stuck her head out of her office, and her own mouth dropped open. "Bugs Meany!"
It's Bernard now," Bugs said, an edge to his voice. "I called this afternoon. Is this a good time?"

"No—uh—yeah," Encyclopedia stammered, still finding it hard to get over the sign of Bugs—Bernard—Meany, walking toward the harvest-gold-and-amber sofa as if he hadn't spent years sparring with Encyclopedia and Sally on a daily basis. "Please, sit down." Professional courtesy kicked in, and he said, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No. No thanks." Bugs sat down, and for the first time, Encyclopedia noticed how tired he looked, how frustrated. He folded his hands together. "I called because I need your help."

An inelegant snort sounded from Sally's office. Encyclopedia kicked her door closed, not very casually, and sat down across from Bugs in an equally harvest gold chair. "What can I do for you, B—Mr. Meany?" There. That was good. He could call Bugs Mr. Meany and then he'd never have to reconcile himself to the idea of Bugs as a Bernard.

"I need you to find someone." Bugs's voice was thin and he fumbled around in his back pocket for his wallet. "A woman."

Definite snickers were coming from Sally's office now. Encyclopedia wished they'd gone for that soundproof office building after all. He said, "Excuse me," marched over to her office, stuck his head in, and said in a furious whisper, "Sally, either grow up or shut up." She pressed her lips together, wiped her eyes, got up from her desk, and followed him out to the waiting area.

"Sorry about that," Encyclopedia said, giving Sally a warning look. "Who is it, Mr. Meany?"

"My wife. Her name is Fanchon." Bugs handed a wallet-sized photo of a woman to Encyclopedia. She was pretty, with dark blonde hair and a rangy build. She was holding hands with Bugs in the picture.

"Okay," Encyclopedia said, handing it to Sally. "Give me her particulars and all the info you have, and we'll—"

"Wait," Bugs said. He was looking a little green around the gills now.

"There's more?"

He didn't say anything for a long time. "Well?" Sally prompted, an edge of the old irritation in her voice, when Bugs still didn't speak.

"Also a boy." Bugs handed another photo to Encyclopedia, who glanced at it in a perfunctory way. The boy was maybe two. He had dark hair, dark eyes, and crooked teeth. Nothing special, except—

"Our son," Bugs was saying.

Sally made a noise, but whether it was a gasp or a laugh, Encyclopedia couldn't tell. He kicked her swiftly, a preemptive strike. "Your son and Fanchon's?" he said. "Have I got that right?"

"Yeah." Bugs rubbed a hand over his eyes. "You know Fanchon. She's from Idaville too. She was born in France. I think she might be trying to go back there, with Tiger."

"Tiger?" This time Sally's voice definitely bordered on amused. "Your son's name is Tiger?"

"His name is Thomas!" Bugs shouted. "Look, cut the crap, would you, Kimball? For god's sake, get
over it. Either you guys help me find my son or else I'll take it to someone else who will!"

Sally actually flushed. Her face turned a dull, faded red under her freckles. She rubbed her leg, where Encyclopedia had kicked her a few more times. "I'm sorry, Bernard."

Encyclopedia let out his breath in a slow hiss. He hoped that Sally's embarrassment did the trick and she would shut up about Bugs already. "Why come here?" he asked. "You're still down in Gainesville, aren't you? Couldn't you find someone closer to home?"

"Sure." Bugs scowled. "But you guys are the best," he muttered. "You know that."

Sally, fortunately, was silent. Encyclopedia pushed down all the words in his mouth and tried to find the right ones. "I'm sorry too," he said. "Tell me everything you can about her."

Bugs nodded. His voice was hoarse. "What do you need to know?"

"Start with her particulars," Encyclopedia prompted. When Bugs looked confused, he elaborated, "Name, date of birth, hair color, eye color, all that stuff."


"Bernard," Encyclopedia said, "that's not going to help. Work with me here, okay? What does she do now? Where does she work?"

"At the University of Florida. She's a professor. An assistant professor. She's in the Criminology & Law department. She's got a Ph.D. She's a great teacher. Her students give her great evaluations every semester."

The pride and frustration in Bugs's voice were both evident. Encyclopedia wavered between feeling touched and wishing Bugs would just get on with the important details. But maybe these were important to him. "So she teaches full-time? Does she do anything else?"

"She volunteers every Tuesday at a domestic violence shelter downtown. Peaceful Pathways. And she spends a lot of time with Tiger. He's at the Baby Gator during the day—that's the daycare center on campus. She usually drops him off in the morning and then picks him up after her last class. Then they're together in the afternoon and evening."

Encyclopedia nodded and wrote all that down in fast, terrible chicken-scratch. "And what can you tell me about Tiger? Do you have other family in the area who take care of him? Friends?"

"No. I mean, yeah—friends. But not really family." Bugs passed a hand over his eyes. "My parents are still down in Idaville. Fanchon's moved back to France after she went to college. We see Mom and Dad pretty often, but not every day or anything. She has lots of friends—people from work, friends from college and grad school. And of course, we have couples we're friendly with in the neighborhood. She's got more, you know, close friends than me."

"So the last time you saw her was yesterday morning, before you both left for work." Encyclopedia looked down at his notes and squinted, trying to reread them. "Has there been anything unusual about her behavior over the past few days?"

"No. Everything's been normal. Over the weekend we took Tiger to the Museum of Natural History. He loves it there. I mean, as much as a two-year-old can love anything. Fanchon's the one who really loves it. And then she had to go to a volunteer training on Sunday. She sometimes helps out—"
Sally cleared her throat. Although she'd shut up, Encyclopedia guessed that she wasn't in the mood to hear any domestic rhapsodizing about what a wonderful wife and mother Fanchon was. "Bernard, have you filed a police report?"

Bugs nodded wearily. "Sure, but you know how police are. They took the info. They said they thought she'd come home. They said that in the majority of cases, a missing adult either comes home—like it was a misunderstanding or something—or left of her own accord."

"Which do you think it is?" Sally asked quietly. "Are you concerned that something has happened to her, or do you think she left of her own accord?"

Bugs bristled. "We've had problems," he said. "Who hasn't? But to take our son—I don't think she'd do that."

"Give us your contact info," Encyclopedia said. "Tell us the best way to get in touch with you, in case we need more information. We'll get started tomorrow morning." He and Bugs both stood up, and they shook hands. "We'll find your son."

"Go over the notes with me again," Encyclopedia said the next morning, rubbing his eyes. He walked over to the coffee pot and poured himself another cup. "What did Bernard say Fanchon said the last time she left the house?"

"Encyclopedia, come on. We've been at this for hours. We're never going to figure it out by going over Bernard's notes." Sally finished her own coffee in one final swig. "Look, what we should do is get out there like real PIs, the ones you see on TV, tailing people in cars and tracking down Catahoula leopard dogs, and we'll find them that way."

"All the evidence is in there," Encyclopedia said. "Just like it always is. It's there somewhere, in what Bernard said."

Sally shook her head. "It's not always like that, Encyclopedia. You can't always find the answer from words. Sometimes you just have to go out and look."

"Look where?" Encyclopedia pressed, walking into her office and leaning down to stare at her computer monitor. "Where did he say she was born? What was the name of that city where she went to college? Did you write down the town where her parents—"

Sally's hand shot over his eyes like a mask. "Encyclopedia. Stop. Get on the phone and call Hodgins over at Capital One and put a notice on her credit cards. I'll see if I can call in a favor over at Bank of America to put one on her ATM card."

"I already did that," Encyclopedia said. "I've also got a call in to her cell phone provider, and to the State Department to see about tracking Tiger's passport."

A rush of emotions darted across Sally's face: amusement, admiration, discomfort. She started to say something, then stopped. "Why Tiger's passport? Why not Fanchon's?"

"It's too old," Encyclopedia said. "Hart said it was issued eight years ago. She doesn't have an RFID chip in it. But Tiger's was issued less than a year ago. If Hart is willing to share that information with us, we can probably track them that way."

Sally raised an eyebrow. "Really?"
"Really." Encyclopedia tilted his head and looked at her. "What's the problem? You're the one saying we need to do something to find them. I thought—"

"I—I know." The discomfort had taken over Sally's entire face now. "It just—it just seems wrong, somehow. Tracking down a little kid …"

"This is what we do," Encyclopedia reminded her. "Bugs is the client. He wants us to find her. That's our job."

"I know." Sally looked down, hit a few keys on her keyboard, and pushed away from her desk. "Okay, then, I think that's all we can do from here. I say we drive down to Gainesville and start poking around."

"Great." Encyclopedia spun out of her office. "You lock up. I'll meet you out front."

Sally raised her eyebrow at him again. "And who said you get to drive today?"

*#

Driving through mid-morning traffic to Gainesville reminded Encyclopedia of why they didn't usually take long-distance cases. It was hard enough getting around Jacksonville to do this kind of thing. The ninety-minute drive southwest made him miss the days when all their cases took place within the bounds of Idaville and you could get there on foot, by bike, or occasionally on a bus.

To her credit, Sally was much more patient in traffic than Encyclopedia was. Encyclopedia used to take the Metro pretty often when he lived in D.C., but Sally had been driving in Florida for most of her working life. He supposed—grudgingly, to himself—it was better that she insisted on driving.

"Where do you want to start?" Sally asked, as they got onto 24 West. "Work?"

"Makes the most sense," Encyclopedia said. Bugs had told them that Fanchon was teaching three courses this semester. Her specialty was forensic entomology, which pretty much fit with what Encyclopedia remembered of Fanchon. He was dubious, however, about their chances of successfully interrogating a bunch of criminal justice professors. Both he and Sally were licensed private investigators, which wouldn't mean anything to a bunch of people who made it their job to teach people what questions to ask and what questions not to answer.

He was right. They found three faculty members in their offices, and all of them shot down their questions as firmly and unfeelingly as if they were swatting a fly. Then Encyclopedia and Sally tried Human Resources, Campus Safety, and the Baby Gator childcare center. None of them were forthcoming, either. Since Encyclopedia figured that most early childhood educators had little experience with police proceedings, he had a hunch that one of Fanchon's coworkers had called ahead.

"Well, that was a bust," Sally grumbled as they got back in her car. "Where to now?"

"Let me look at the notes and think about it." Encyclopedia reached for the laptop computer and opened it up while Sally wandered across campus to find some coffee. Name, date of birth, address, social security number, basic background details, all of that was here. Bugs had spoken of her work, her friends, their son. They could check with her friends, but running around like that would take hours, and most of them were probably at work right now. If they were couples, friends of both Bugs and Fanchon, they likely wouldn't know any more than Bugs had. And if they were friends of just Fanchon, they probably wouldn't tell them any more than her coworkers had. Encyclopedia closed his eyes, did his hardest thinking, and then his brain snagged on something Bugs had said when
Sally asked about Fanchon's daily routine. He opened his eyes and scrolled down to what he was remembering, then quickly looked up an address in Sally's GPS.

Sally came back up to the car with two paper cups just as the impersonal female voice was reciting the address he'd keyed in. "Well?" she asked through the closed door. "Did you think of anything?" she asked, her voice getting louder as he leaned across the driver's seat and opened the door for her.

Encyclopedia nodded and reached for both cups so that Sally could slide back inside. "I've put in an address," he said. "We're going there. Remember, Bugs said Fanchon volunteers at the Peaceful Paths women's shelter on Tuesday nights, and that's why he didn't expect her home early?"

"Right," Sally said, buckling her seat belt. "You think they might know something?"

"They might," Encyclopedia said. "And they might be less cautious about talking to us." He covered the lid of his cup with his palm as Sally gunned the engine and squealed out of the parking lot, the GPS speaking quickly to keep up with her. "What do I owe you for the coffee?"

Sally took her eyes off the road long enough to give him a strange look—half annoyance, half he couldn't tell what. "Nothing," she said. "It's on me."

The Peaceful Paths administrative offices were only a few miles away from the university, basically a straight shot down a wide tree-lined street. When they got there, Encyclopedia introduced himself and Sally, but left off the fact that they were private investigators. When they were shown to the office of a Lynda Mollison, the volunteer coordinator, Encyclopedia introduced them again as "Leroy Brown and Sally Kimball. We're looking into the disappearance of Fanchon DuBois."

"Dr. DuBois?" Lynda stood up, her hands clasped to her chest. She was in her fifties, Encyclopedia guessed by the combination of lines on her face and too-bright blonde hair. "Oh, no! What's happened? When did she go missing?"

"We're not sure," Encyclopedia said, giving Sally a cautioning look, warning her not to give away too many details of their meager investigation. "Last night, her husband reported that she hadn't come home on Tuesday night. He said she volunteers here on Tuesdays, and we wanted to know if she came in as usual this week."

"She didn't," Lynda said, bowing her head, "and that's very unusual for Dr. DuBois. She's very dependable, always shows up on time. She even came in early last week. We count so much on our volunteers, you know. There's only so much that the paid staff can do, especially with the budget cuts this year—well, you'd know too, of course. Anyway, I left a voicemail on her cell phone when she didn't come on Tuesday. I was worried that something might be wrong—maybe her son had gotten sick or something. But I never guessed she might have just disappeared! What do you think happened? Have you found any leads yet?"

"Not yet," Sally stepped into the conversation, giving Encyclopedia an indignant look, as if to rebuke his lack of trust in her. "We're looking in several directions at the moment. Ms. Mollison, how well do you know Dr. DuBois outside of work?"

"Oh, not well," Lynda said. "She's been volunteering here for about three years now, ever since she and Bernard were married. He's just the nicest man! Some of our residents—well, you know, I can't say too much, but he's assisted us with several legal situations, always pro bono. It's the least he can do, he says. He doesn't have the time or the interest to come in like his wife does, but he's very generous with his legal expertise—are you all right, Officer Kimball? Is it Officer?"

"Uh, no," Sally said, putting a hand on her chest. Her face was red, a combination of disbelief and
embarrassment. "Detective."

"Ms. Mollison," Encyclopedia said smoothly, stepping over Sally's lie of omission, "can you think of anything else that would help us locate Dr. DuBois? Anything she's ever said?"

"No, not really. I'm sorry," Lynda said. "Like I said, I didn't really know her outside of Peaceful Paths. She was very dedicated to her job. You might try some of her colleagues at the university."

"We'll do that," Sally said. "Thank you."

Since it didn't seem practical to stay in Gainesville, tracking down the friends Bugs had mentioned and dropping in on them unannounced, they decided to go back up to Jacksonville right away. Sally was quiet in the car.

"You're quiet," Encyclopedia finally said as they passed Baldwin. They'd been driving in silence for over an hour, which was unusual for them. He could tell something was bothering Sally, but he wasn't sure what.

"Yeah," she said unhelpfully.

"So what's the problem?" Encyclopedia asked bluntly. Over the years, he'd found it was easier to be blunt than obtuse. This still provoked groans of, "You're such a boy" from Sally, but it was better than tiptoeing around the subject and trying to second- and third-guess what she meant. He'd noticed it didn't seem to work as well with other girls.

"I'm not sure." She hesitated. "It's nothing."

It didn't look like nothing. Encyclopedia leaned back against his seat and studied her. Her fingers were tight on the wheel. Her brow was furrowed, not deeply, but lightly, as if one or two small worries had been bothering her for days. Her shoulders were hunched a bit in the way they always were before she made a breakthrough on a case. He knew all this because he'd spent so many hours with her; he could picture her posture of fear and concern better than he knew his own.

She drove a few more miles before she burst out, "What if we're wrong, Encyclopedia?"

"Wrong?" Encyclopedia raised an eyebrow. He hadn't developed a solid enough theory for it to be right or wrong. "About what?"

"About Bugs. About Fanchon." Sally was growing agitated now, more visibly so. "Do you think he's telling the truth, Encyclopedia?"

"The truth?" Encyclopedia repeated. "About what? Fanchon disappearing? Why would he lie? If she hasn't disappeared, we'll find her at home. He wouldn't pay us to tell him that."

"Not about that." The full measure of Sally's impatience focused itself on Encyclopedia now. "About —the other stuff."

"What other stuff?"

Sally was quiet for a moment; then she said, "Hear me out on this."

"Okay."

"Fanchon is a respected professor with a son and a happy life, right?"
"Sure."

"Then all of a sudden she disappears without warning."

"Right."

"Respected people with happy lives don't just disappear for no reason, Encyclopedia. I've prosecuted these cases. I didn't always win, but in situations like that—there's a reason they drop off the face of the earth."

"I'm not sure what you're getting at, Sally."

"I'm getting at Bugs." Sally's voice was shaking now, but whether it was with anger or fear or something else, Encyclopedia wasn't sure. "Encyclopedia, if he's—if he's abusing her, or Tiger—if he is, I think—"

"Bugs?"

"You don't think he's capable of it?" The tremor in Sally's voice was definitely anger now. "Come on, Encyclopedia, the first time I saw him he was beating up a Cub Scout! People like that—they don't grow out of it!"

"It seems like he has," Encyclopedia said, but uncertainly. Could Sally be right? He thought back to Bugs's posture in the office last night, his devastation, his anger and impatience. Had he been angry at Sally for needling him? Or angry at Fanchon for getting away and taking Tiger?

"I was in school with him, Encyclopedia. You weren't. He can't have changed all that much."

"Some people do."

"And most people don't. Most violent criminals reoffend the second they get out of prison. And we keep giving them second chances. Think of all the second chances Bugs has already had. He's used them all up. I don't believe him."

"Bugs isn't really violent. Not like that—"

"Hello? Beating up a Cub Scout? A little boy younger and smaller than he is? You don't call that violent?"

Encyclopedia closed his eyes. He did some more hard thinking, but he didn't get anywhere. His thoughts chased and circled each other the rest of the way back to Jacksonville.

Sally said nothing else until they were back at the office. As they were pulling into the parking lot, she said, "I'm not sure, Encyclopedia. I might be wrong. But if I'm right—if I'm right, I don't think I can work on this case. It would be wrong to help Bugs find them if all he's going to do is hurt them again."

He looked over at her and saw that she was dead serious. For a second, he remembered the way Barbarosa always teased her: "vigilante justice." But apparently, vigilante protection was part of her repertoire too.

He nodded. "I know what you mean," he said. "But until we know for sure, Bugs is the client. We continue the investigation, Sally. If something turns up against him, we'll report it to the police, and they'll do their job."
"Oh, come on! In domestic violence cases—"

"Besides," Encyclopedia cut in, not in the mood for a list of statistics about cases solved and dropped and settled out of cord and juries hung, deadlocked with no recourse, "if Bugs were really abusing her, why would he come to us to find her?"

Sally stared at him. "Encyclopedia, she's got their son. She's probably trying to protect him, and Bugs wants him back—have you taken leave of your brain or something?"

Her comment stung for two reasons, but mostly because he had to admit she was right. He took a deep breath. "We continue the investigation," he repeated. "This isn't a fifty-fifty guess, Sally. We don't have enough evidence to drop it on a moral objection." He hesitated. "If we find some, we'll talk."

Sally glared at him, then reached across his chest to open the door for him. "Fine," she said, her voice and her posture hard. "See you tomorrow."

*

In bed that night, Encyclopedia lay under the covers with his eyes closed.

Bed was the only place where he couldn't always close his eyes to do his deepest thinking. Sometimes he had to keep them open, because otherwise he'd just fall asleep. Tonight Sally's comments kept running around and around in his brain, and he had his eyes closed because he wished he'd fall asleep.

"He can't have changed all that much … if I'm right, I don't think I can work on this case … it would be wrong to help Bugs find them if all he's going to do is hurt them again."

He wanted to believe Bugs. Bernard. He wanted to believe that the grown-up Bugs was as different as he was, that Bugs really fit into his suit and his profession and Lynda Mollison's opinion of him. The problem was, he couldn't really think of anything firm that would refute Sally's suspicions. Sally, after all, had a lot more experience with Bugs and with abusive criminals than Encyclopedia did.

He squeezed his eyes shut tighter. He allowed the events and the words of the day to swirl in his brain, a muddled eddy like dirty clothes in wash water.

"All the evidence is in there," he'd told Sally. "Just like it always is. It's there somewhere, in what Bernard said."

And then he remembered. Something Bugs had said, before Sally cut him off.

"And then she had to go to a volunteer training on Sunday. She sometimes helps out—"

Encyclopedia had assumed he was talking about Fanchon's volunteer job at Peaceful Pathways. But Bugs had also said that Fanchon volunteered there every Tuesday. He hadn't said sometimes. He and Lynda Mollison had both said every Tuesday. Lynda Mollison had said it was unusual for her not to show up.

So where did she sometimes help out?

Encyclopedia opened his eyes and glanced at the clock. It was after three a.m. He reached for his cell phone, hoping Sally hadn't turned hers off when she went to bed.

She answered on the fourth ring, panic and grogginess vying in her voice. "H'lo?"
"It's me," Encyclopedia said, already sliding out of bed and reaching for the jeans he had left on the floor a few hours ago. "Get dressed and meet me at the office."

There was a pause. Then she mumbled, "Encyclopedia?"

"Yeah." He had to put the phone down to pull a T-shirt over his head. "Look, how about I pick you up. I'm on my way."

When he got to Sally's apartment, he rang the bell four times. When no one answered the door, he used the spare key that she'd given him months ago. He entered the building and went up to her apartment, knocked briefly, and then unlocked the door, wondering if she'd fallen back to sleep.

She hadn't—she was up, dressed in yesterday's clothes, and blinking sleepily—but she looked downright grouchy. "You'd better have something really good," she said around a yawn, "calling in the middle of the night and waking me up."

"I do," Encyclopedia said, nearly bouncing with the feeling of having a real theory. It might not solve the whole case, but it meant something, he was sure of it. "Put on your shoes and let's go."

Sally yawned again. "Encyclopedia. It is the middle of the night. All the normal people are asleep. We can't do anything at the office. At least tell me what kind of a brainstorm you had."

"Okay, okay." Encyclopedia sat down on Sally's couch and outlined what he'd remembered: Bugs had said Fanchon volunteered every Tuesday, Bugs had said Fanchon volunteered sometimes.

"There's something else we have to check out," he said. "Something besides her work and the domestic violence shelter. Where else do you think?"

"I think you're jumping to conclusions," Sally said flatly. "Or hopes. You want to believe there's some other explanation. You want to believe Bugs, Encyclopedia. I could see it all over you the night he was here."

Encyclopedia shook his head. "Think about it, Sally. Lynda Mollison said she came in early last week. She didn't say anything about seeing her on Sunday, or any kind of training."

Sally began to look more awake, and grudgingly respectful. "You must have some idea," she said. "You wouldn't wake me up at three-thirty to brainstorm."

Encyclopedia nodded. "I do. We were talking about the museum then. What if she volunteers there? She might be a docent or something. It would make sense, given her background in entomology. And if she's got friends there, they might know where she is."

"You're probably right," Sally said. "But couldn't this have waited till morning?"

"It is morning," Encyclopedia pointed out. "Besides, we need to do some research. I want to make a list of every other natural history museum within, let's say, a 300-mile radius of Gainesville. And then I want to drive to Gainesville. If we leave early, we can beat morning rush hour and be there by the time the museum opens in the morning."

"Okay," Sally said. She went into her bedroom and brought out her laptop, which she handed to Encyclopedia, and then she turned on her desktop computer in the corner of the living room. "You take the north, and I'll take the south?"

It didn't take Encyclopedia very long to come up with a list of museums in the northern half of
Florida. There weren't that many. In the interest of completeness, he branched out and included museums that didn't have anything to do with natural history, even though he was pretty sure Fanchon wasn't qualified to volunteer at an art or Air Force or railroad museum. He got addresses and directions. He got contact information. He even looked to see if the Florida Museum of Natural History had a list of its docents or volunteers or guest speakers on their website, but either they didn't or Fanchon wasn't important enough to rate a mention.

When he finished, it was after five and his eyes were swimming. He shifted the laptop off his lap, brushed off his warm jeans, and turned to the desk to ask Sally how far she'd gotten. She was fast asleep, her arms on the desk and her head on her arms.

He could have acted like a real jerk again, woken her up and insisted they go now. Instead, he glanced again at his watch, as if the time might have jumped forward by more than two minutes, and then picked up the blanket from the couch. He draped it over Sally's shoulders and touched her hair lightly. She didn't stir.

He went back to the couch and stretched out. He'd given her the only blanket, but he was too tired to be picky right now. A couple more hours of sleep wouldn't hurt. But he made sure to set the alarm on his cell phone.

Encyclopedia had a good feeling in his bones as they started out for Gainesville again. He hoped it was an omen that they'd solve the case. That, and the fact that they wouldn't have to make this drive again.

He'd insisted on driving today, and Sally was still too sleepy to argue. She had pointed out that there was no sense in leaving at five a.m. to beat the Jacksonville and Gainesville rush hour traffic. Even if they did, and got to Gainesville at six-thirty, the museum wouldn't be open then. As anxious as he was to get going, Encyclopedia had to admit she was right. Sally could be annoyingly logical at times.

By eleven o'clock, they were pulling into the parking lot. The Florida Museum of Natural History was actually located on the campus of the University of Florida, which Encyclopedia hadn't realized yesterday when they were at the Criminology & Law department. He was a little uneasy about that. He hoped the staff at the museum wouldn't close ranks around Fanchon and shut them out again.

His hopes were dashed when they met with the volunteer coordinator, Earl deCoop.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but it's strictly against our policy to give out information about our volunteers."

Sally opened her mouth indignantly. Encyclopedia saw her and headed her off at the pass by clasping her wrist. "Thank you, Mr. deCoop."

He ushered her out of the museum lobby and back into the parking lot. "I have stuff in the back of my car," he said. "Let's change."

"Got it," Sally said without needing further details. "Who am I today?"

"Someone respectable," he joked, opening the trunk and shoving a navy blue duffel bag at her. "I think there's a suit in there. And heels. I've got one too."

"Heels?"

"A suit."
Reattired, they went back into the museum. Encyclopedia looked both ways to be sure Earl deCoop wasn't hanging around. The coast was clear, so he motioned to Sally and they entered the main part of the building.

"Where should we start?" Sally murmured out of the corner of her mouth.

Encyclopedia found a map and stood in front of it, considering. There was a list of temporary exhibits and a list of permanent exhibits. "Let's try the Butterfly Rainforest first," he said. "If she volunteered here, it was probably in an area she knew something about. If we can't find anyone there who knows her, we'll make our way around."

"Got it."

The sign on the main doors said that the museum opened at 10:00 a.m., but at this hour there were few visitors. Encyclopedia figured that most of the children were still in school and their parents still at work, and this wasn't exactly a booming tourist time for Florida. Nor was Gainesville a booming tourist city. They located a man whose nametag read "Charles Graham" and below it, in smaller letters, "Education Assistant."

"Hello," Encyclopedia said, approaching him. "I was wondering if you could help me out today."

"Certainly! Welcome to the Butterfly Rainforest. Is this your first visit to the museum?"

"No," Encyclopedia said, reaching for Sally's hand and drawing her toward him, "actually, that's part of what I'd like to ask you. I'm David Brownkay, and this is my wife, Sarah."

"Nice to meet you." Charles looked a little confused.

"You too, Charles. We're actually looking for a person. The last time we were here, we met the nicest education assistant, a woman named Fanchon. She was here with her little boy. We also have a son who's two, and the two of them just hit it off—I was surprised we weren't asked to leave!" Encyclopedia said with a practiced laugh.

Sally squeezed his hand and gave him her biggest smile. "Now, David, I'm sure Charles has seen plenty of other little boys with a lot of energy in this job."

"I sure have," Charles said with feeling.

"Didn't I tell you?" Sally turned her smile on Charles. "Anyway, Charles, the two of them seemed to get along so well that we wanted to arrange a playdate, and Fanchon gave us her cell phone number, but I'm afraid we've lost it. It's really a shame because, you know, the boys had fun playing together and my husband and I"—Encyclopedia wasn't completely sure, but he thought she might have batted her eyelashes at Charles, if that was what it was called when girls did that—"would just love to get to know her better. Would you be able to tell us how we could contact her?"

Charles' face dimmed. "I wish I could, Mrs. Brownkay. But she doesn't volunteer here anymore."

"She doesn't?" Encyclopedia said, schooling his features into a mask of pleasant surprise. "I'm sorry to hear that. It was just a few weeks ago that we met her."

"I know. It was real sudden. I saw her on Sunday—we had a volunteer training—and she only stayed for a few minutes, to tell us that she was moving."

"Oh dear. How sad," Sally said, managing somehow to sound like someone's maiden aunt. "Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"
"Down south somewhere," Charles replied. "Maybe Titusville? She said they were thinking of buying a place on the coast, farther south."

"They?" Encyclopedia struggled to sound casual. "You mean she and her son?"

Charles gave him a funny look. "Well, yeah, but her boyfriend too," he said. "Marc's come in a few times with her. Nice guy. He treats her son like he were his own."

After that it was simple, almost depressingly so. It took one call to Bank of America to verify that Marcus Fox's ATM card was last used in Cocoa. Encyclopedia called Bugs with the news. He didn't say anything about the circumstances of Fanchon's disappearance, only that he had located her. Encyclopedia's careful omission was all for naught because Fanchon came back two days later, insisted that she had only left briefly to investigate the possibilities with Marc, and told Bugs that she wanted a divorce.

Bugs told them all this when he came in to drop off their check. He looked drawn and exhausted. His skin looked like it had been stretched and then squeezed, a wrinkled old man's face.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Encyclopedia said when Bugs had finished. "I'm sure, with this stunt, you have a good chance of getting custody of your son."

"I'd better." Bugs scowled, and instantly his features changed, making him look twelve again rather than two hundred. "I've already got the best team I could find working on it."

Encyclopedia shrunk back a bit as he shook Bugs's hand. Bugs might be Bernard now, but judging by the expression on his face, Encyclopedia wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that team of lawyers.

After Bugs left, Encyclopedia closed out the case. He made detailed notes about the resolution in his file and passed off the financial paperwork on Sally. "Your turn tonight."

"Oh, gag." Sally took the check and the papers Encyclopedia handed her. "Thanks for nothing."

Encyclopedia regarded her across the desk for a moment, then sat down in the comfortable chair in front of her desk. "You were right about Bugs," he said. "In some ways, he hasn't changed."

Sally sighed and looked at him directly. "And you were right about him too," she said. "In some ways, he has."

"Everybody does," Encyclopedia said, trying not to sound too smug. "Look at you."

Sally nodded. "Look at you."

They studied each other for a moment, and then Encyclopedia broke the gaze. He rubbed his palms on his jeans for a moment. "Listen, what do you say we forget the paperwork until tomorrow?" he suggested. "Want to get something to eat?"

Sally studied him appraisingly for several more seconds, and just when Encyclopedia was beginning to squirm, she smiled. "Yeah," she said. "I'd like that."

They shut down their computers and turned off all the lights and went outside. Tonight it was Sally's
She fumbled for her key, the streetlights bouncing off the fall of her hair and the ring of keys in her hand, and he watched her fight with the stubborn lock that they kept meaning to replace.

"You coming?" Sally asked, heading toward her car.

He couldn't explain what kept him standing there, looking at the front of their office and the sign on the door for an extra minute. She came back to stand beside him, and he was not surprised when he felt her squeeze his hand, a flicker that got stronger as they both stood there, reading the sign.

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End Notes

I am a librarian, not a dentist, a lawyer, an FBI agent, a used car saleswoman, or a private detective. Any mistakes are my own (though I do want to thank Veronica Mars for giving me a better idea of what PI does than The X Files did of giving me an idea of what an FBI agent does).

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