

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



I-40, wire to wire by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | SEP 2018

I-40, wire to wire

by Mike Bozart

© 2018 Mike Bozart

“I got it!” the 34-year-old, goateed, sandy-blond-haired Caucasian American exclaimed into his cell phone as he motored northward away from Wilmington (NC) on a cool, fog-in-patches April (2015) morning. “It’s in the trunk.” *Why, I’m sure it is. Bet it’s under the spare tire. Sweet! Already got a blip on my map. Perfect.*

“Great! Any issues last night on Figure Eight, [Island] Cliff?” a middle-aged, male, Amerasian voice asked.

“None whatsoever, Turk. That beachfront house – or, I should say mansion – was vacant and the alarm system was indeed deactivated just as you said. The forty-yard [approximately 37 meters] swim across Mason Inlet in a black wetsuit was a piece of cake, even on the return leg with the floating case. I hit it right at slack tide – no current to speak of. My total out-and-back time: fifty-five minutes. Never saw a soul. Slept like a baby at Shell Island Resort. [on Wrightsville Beach Island] No nightmares.” *Excellent. Most excellent.*

“That’s great to hear. Ok, where are you right now?” 4:02. [AM] *Add three hours. So, it’s 7:02 where he is. I guess the sun is already up there. / I’m sure that he wants to know.*

“I just passed Exit 420. What an exit number, huh, Turk?” <cough-cough>

Turk chuckled. “No doubt, Cliff.” *Hope he doesn’t get stoned. Not now. Not while he has it.*

“Yeah, man, I just started on I-40 West. Just passed the sign for Barstow. [CA] Only 2,554 miles [4,110 km] to go.” Cliff laughed for a few seconds. *How many days will it take? / Well, he’s being honest so far. Though, I’m glad that we’ve got him tracked. Never know how one will act with a stolen, multimillion-dollar item in their possession.*

“So, you decided against flying back?” *Is he crazy? / What a long-ass drive! Hope he doesn’t get pulled over.*

“Absolutely, Turk. Going through the Wilmington airport, [ILM] or any American airport for that matter, is way too risky. It could be detected. Could also get snared in a random bag search. No need to fret, though. I’ve got some nice stimulants; I’ll be fine.” *Sure hope that wasn’t a ‘famous last words’ proclamation.*

“Well, don’t speed on that speed.” Turk chuckled. “You don’t want to get pulled over. Drive like an old lady going to mass on Sunday.” *Turk is paranoid.*

“Yeah, I hear ya, Turk. You can relax; I’ll take it easy on the speedometer.” *He better. / How in the world does a Kor-Am [Korean American] wind up with a name like Turk? I bet it’s a convoluted story. Maybe ask him later.*

“Just curious, what kind of car are you in, Cliff?”

“A nondescript sedan – a rental car. Just a blend-in-with-the-rest-of-traffic vehicle, Turk.”

“It’s not a white, 2011, trunk-dented Ford Focus, [the car of supreme interest in the novel *Gold, a summer story*] is it?”
What?

“You’re somewhat close, Turk; it’s a ding-less, shiny, black, 2014 Ford Taurus. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m not fully awake yet.” *Oh, that’s right; it’s only four AM in Bakersfield. [CA]*

“Well, I’ll let you get back to sleep. I think I’ll spend the first night in Nashville.” *We shall see.*

“Ok, safe travels. I’ll check back with you in twelve or so hours.” *I’m sure that he will. / ‘Don’t you dare wander off, sport!’ But even if he does, it won’t be an issue. My man in Charlotte could quickly intercept him and recover the booty.*

<click>

The Tuesday traffic in the already verdant, flat-as-Florida, pastureland-and-pine-forest Atlantic coastal plain was light. Cliff stopped at a south Raleigh convenience store for gasoline, more coffee, a bag of powdered-sugar-coated mini-doughnuts, and bladder emptying. It was 9:40 when he glanced at his cell phone in the parking lot. *Making pretty good time. And, no texts from the nosy ex. Thank God! Feel wide-awake now. Could drive all the way. Ok, let’s not get carried away. Big payday in three or four days. Might have to wait a little longer. Surely in a week’s time I’ll be sitting pretty. Sitting on a mountain of cash. Then I’ll celebrate with a no-holds-barred strumpet in [Las] Vegas. Maybe that Philippine one again. Oh, what was her name? It began with an ‘L’. Layah! How could I ever forget? ‘Supsup jamo, kano?*

Oo?' [*Much sucking, American? Yes?* in the Cebuano dialect]

The splendid driving weather continued as Cliff passed through the piedmont and into the foothills. Deep Purple's *Highway Star* came on the classic-rock Hickory radio station. He lowered the front windows and sang the third verse. After scaling the Blue Ridge Escarpment, he was soon closing in on Asheville. He mused as he looked over his right shoulder as he passed Exit 53 for I-240. *Ah, Little San Francisco of Southern Appalachia. With almost as many spangers. [slang for 'spare change' beggars] Wonder if that hempstress [sic] is still turning tricks on Patton. [Avenue] What was her name? Judy-Lynn? Is she still there? Just keep heading west. Onward to riches.*

At exactly 2:02 PM, Cliff crossed the state line and entered the mountainous side of Tennessee. He had gone 300 miles (483 km) since his last stop. Surprisingly, white-line fever had not hit him yet. However, hunger – hunger for real food – had started to make itself known. His stomach growled. An hour later he was eating pizza in an independent restaurant in near-downtown Knoxville.

The mid-20-something, svelte, cute, chest-proud, caramel-highlighted-dark-brunette, inner-left-forearm-tattooed-with-a-small-bleeding-heart, mostly Native American (Cherokee?) waitress was curious about him. *I've never seen him before. He's kind of handsome. Looks like he has a nontraditional job. Wonder where he lives. Could I just ask him? He probably won't care. Just be casual. / Is she a faux-hemian? [a slang term for a fake/false bohemian] She's certainly a sexy thang. [sic] Why is she staring at me?*

When she returned with an iced tea refill, she popped the question. "And where might you be from, stranger?" *That sure was bold of her. / No wedding band. Wonder if he's been divorced.*

"Well, it's a long story," Cliff replied with a bordering-on-cocky grin. *Oh, puh-lease, mister. Spare me.*

"Why, do you have multiple, far-apart residences?" she enquired. *She'd be good in a courtroom. And in a bedroom.*

"I bet that you're a journalism major at UT. [University of Tennessee] Am I correct?" *An astute guess. But, he very*

slickly changed the topic. Why is he evasive about his hometown? I smell a fish here. Something's up with him.

"I was." She suddenly looked kind of sad. *Poor girl.*

The conversation died. The waitress turned and went to another table. *Wonder if she flunked out. Was she caught cheating? Or, did she simply run out of money for tuition? College is so damn expensive nowadays. Highway robbery.*

While waiting for the check, Cliff began to doodle. He subconsciously drew an oval-shaped object on a quadrant of the pizza's parchment paper with his last, eight-for-a-dollar, blue-ink, ball-point pen.

"What's that?" the 5'-5" (1.65-meter-tall) waitress startlingly asked, seemingly from out of nowhere, a few minutes later from over his left shoulder. *Was she watching me? For how long? Was I mumbling aloud? Not sure. So egg-engrossed.*

"Cherub with Chariot," Cliff blurted after a short pause. *Why did I say that? Not real smart, Cliff. Oh, relax; 'twas probably harmless. / Must look that up later.*

"Ah," the waitress sighed. *Yeah, this guy is up to something below-board alright. I can sense it.*

Cliff paid his bill and left her a big 111% (\$20) tip. *Maybe the extra loot will help her out. No need to be stingy; I'll be rolling in cash soon, very soon. Wouldn't mind rolling around with her, too. No, better move on before my mouth does some real damage. Time to get back on that long-as-eternity road.*

A pleasantly uneventful 174 miles (280 km) later, Cliff was coming up on Nashville. He still felt fully alert, but he had to pee and refuel. It was 5:31 when he looked at his cell phone in the just-off-the-interstate convenience store parking lot. *Only half past five? Oh, that's right; I'm now in the Central Time Zone. Still feel ok. Still excellent driving weather. Could make the Mississippi River. 'Memphis, here I come!' Beale Street or bust.*

Cliff was parking across from B.B. King's Blues Club at 8:38 PM. It was a warm darkness; the tangerine-colored sun had set over an hour ago. *Made it. Day one of the drive gets an A+ grade. Not many cars. Maybe it won't be too crowded.*

While walking to the double-doored front entrance, he did some quick math in his road-weary head. *888 miles [1,429*

km] in the books. Over a third of the way there. Meet Turk on Friday somewhere in the Mojave Desert around lunchtime. I got this. No sweat. Easy work now. Piles of C-notes [\$100 bills] await.

Cliff took a seat at a small, round, corner-dark, under-balcony table in the sparsely filled music hall. He was soon nursing a Yeungling beer while eating some French fries. Fatigue had finally caught him. He listened to three songs by a local soul act, and then decided to call it a day. *I'm completely shot. Time for some much-needed shut-eye.*

Just before nodding off in his hotel room on the banks of the turgid, snowmelt-filled, storied American river, he got a mysterious text from a restricted number, which read:

Cherub with Chariot, also known as The Angel with Egg in Chariot, one of the long-lost, much sought after, imperial Fabergé eggs. It was crafted and delivered to Czar Alexander III of Russia in 1888. Is that what you were referring to, Mr. Clifford Wesleyan Robinson, Jr.? By the way, my name is Karen. Hope to hear back from you. Don't leave me stranded on a cliff, Cliff. Oh, thanks for that generous tip. It really helps.

He was stunned; his drowsiness was put on hold. Cliff's mind sputtered along, trying to string the tapioca beads together. *Ah, it's from the waitress in Knoxville. I just knew that she was the investigative type. She's already got my full name and my cell number. Should have paid in cash. And, she already knows my prized possession. Oh, crap! This is not good. Wait. Hold on. Back up. Stop and think this through. She doesn't know that I really have it. How could she? There's no way. Just relax. Just go to sleep. 'Please don't leave me stranded here on a cliff, Cliff.' Caution: She could quickly become trouble. Bigtime trouble. Maybe text her some misdirection in the morning; send her on a wrong way with her digital magnifying glass. Oh hell, I'll just fire something back right now. Yeah, why not?*

Great guess, Karen. It's actually the name of a racehorse that I'm considering placing a huge bet on this weekend. Goodnight. All the best.

Just as he fell asleep, his cell phone rang. *Oh, no! Is she already calling me? I bet she's psycho. I always seem to find them. Every single time.*

"Hello, this is Cliff."

"How did the day go, buddy?" Turk asked. *Oh, it's him.*

“Good, man. Really good. No issues. Made it all the way to Memphis. Quite beat now. I plan on being in Barstow at noon on Friday.”

“Excellent, Cliff. I’ll let you sleep. I’ll tell you the good – or, make that better – news tomorrow morning.” *Even better news?*

<click>

Cliff stared at the stucco ceiling, wondering what Turk would tell him in twelve hours. *Is he going to meet me halfway? A transfer in Oklahoma City? That sure would be nice. Is he flying into Memphis? No, he would have told me that. Has a bidding war broken out for it? Will I ...*

<snoring>

It was nearly eleven hours of dense, couldn’t-remember-a-single-dream-fragment-for-his-life sleep for Cliff. When he finally arose at 8:38 AM, he noticed a text alert on his cell phone. It was from none other than Karen.

Ok, Cliff, I’ve thought this situation over, and it doesn’t involve any horseracing wagers. Here’s how it will work from now going forward: You will text me a photo that is indicative of where you are at 9:00 AM and 9:00 PM CDT every single day, beginning this morning, and continuing for one week. That’s it. Very easy, right? Just don’t text your photo before 8:45. And don’t wait too long. Because if there’s no pic by 9:10, that’s when I will – unfortunately – have to call the cops. We don’t want the police involved, now, do we? Pass the test in flying colors and win me over, captain. Have an eggcellent [*sic*] day. xoxox Karen

He was shocked. His neural circuitry shorted-out for a few seconds. *What the fuck?! ‘have to call the cops.’ Why? She’s crazy! I knew it. Why did I have to pick her restaurant? Why did I have to sit at her table? Why did it have to be her shift? And, why in the world did I have to doodle that Fabergé egg and say its name to her? Why?! Why did I do that?! Why?! Well, can’t undo it now. No rewind and delete.*

Cliff took some deep breaths. His heartrate slowed. Soon, courtesy of the compact, setting-on-the-back-of-the-dresser, pre-loaded coffee maker, he had a nice cup of steaming-hot black java in his right hand as he watched the local news segment on the flat-screen TV. However, his mind quickly drifted back to Karen and her latest text. *If she called the cops, what would she tell them? What could she tell them? ‘There was this thirty-something man in my restaurant*

yesterday who drew an egg-like sketch on a sheet of baking paper and said it was the Cherub with Chariot.' The police would be like 'So the hell what, lady!' Hold on. Has the theft been released to the media? Is it in the internet news? Need to do a Google News search with the keyword phrase: 'stolen Fabergé egg'. Yeah, let's do that right now.

But before Cliff could begin his online research, another text flew in. This one was from Turk.

Going to be busy today with a heavy hitter. The prognosis gets even more lucrative. A much bigger payday for us. Call you tonight. Drive safely.

And before he could reply to Turk, another text had landed in his cell phone's virtual inbox.

Cliff, just a friendly reminder, darling. You've only got 13 measly minutes to snap that pic in front of your present address or mile marker. (Are you driving right now?) I really don't want to see you in a cage. You don't want that, do you? I'll give you until 9:15, because I'm feeling generous on this wonderful Wednesday morning. xoxox Karen

Cliff switched off the TV. *Some really good news, and some really BAD news – awfully bad news. Would Karen really call the cops? Maybe so. Can't chance it. A police search of the Taurus might occur. How to deal with this crazy chick? The clock is ticking. Eleven minutes. She's crazy enough to do it. Better just snap a selfie in front of the hotel. I'll be out of here ten minutes later. Even if she tries to sic a goon on me, I'll be long gone. Let's out-crazy her. Let's take a ridiculous pic. An egg in hand. Yeah, that's it. Well, better get moving.*

Nine minutes later in the parking lot in front of the wall-mounted hotel sign, Cliff took a photo of himself holding a hardboiled egg that he had swiped from the continental breakfast room. He sent it to her just as the time advanced to 9:14. *Hope there isn't a delay in the transmission. Hope this satisfies her insanity. Should I send some text, too?*

Cliff then texted her a caption.

A man and his egg.

Two minutes and twenty-two seconds later, his phone chirped. He had received another text from the manic waitress.

Perfect. You're one for one. Thirteen more to go, ace. xoxox Karen

Once back in the Taurus after a quick shower, Cliff did his text-delayed research while the engine idled with the air conditioner blasting. It was already muggy, and the high was expected to be a summerlike 84°F (29°C) in Memphis and in Little Rock (AR), the next city on his westward escape route. There were no reports of any stolen Fabergé eggs in recent history, just articles on those that had never been found – like the encased one now hidden beneath a storage compartment inlay on the right side of his rented sedan's trunk. *Still in the clear. Karen is certifiably mental. Must play along with her for now. And later, vanish after payday. Maybe disappear somewhere in Baja. [Mexico] Yeah, that's the ticket.*

As Cliff approached the I-40 bridge over the Mississippi River, he noticed The Pyramid off to his right. It had a big logo on it. *So, it's now going to be a Bass Pro Shops megastore. When did this go down? [June 2010] Guess I need to get east more often. Opens in three weeks. Need to tell Lewis. [a truck-driver pal who plied I-40] This is right up his alley. He'd be a kid in a candy store.*

Thoughts of Karen inquieted Cliff's mind as he passed the farmland of eastern Arkansas. *Sure hope she stays true to her word. This car cannot be searched. It can't happen.*

When he crossed over the milk-chocolate-brown St. Francis River, he received a text alert on his thin, silver-and-black cell phone, which was now resting on the passenger seat. *Wonder what Karen wants now. Does she want me to take a pic with an egg balanced on the sole of my right shoe while standing on my head? Why'd I just think that? Bet she wants me to take a photo of 'the' egg. Gosh, hope not. If so, it would be time to hightail it to the border. Or, meet up with her. And abduct her. And then what? I couldn't kill her. Would be nice to slip her the old wonder worm. I'm sure she can fuck like crazy. All the unstable ones can. Maybe she would welcome this. An epic, super-dramatic adventure. She wants in. I can feel it. She probably wants the next photo to be of us together in a hotel bed. Is she still in Knoxville? God, I hope so.*

Cliff picked up his phone and nervously clicked the open button. There indeed was a text from a female – but it wasn't Karen. His ex-girlfriend had sent a lovely missive.

Already screwing some skank, are you? I hope your pecker falls off and you die of AIDS! Very slowly. And very painfully. I HATE YOU!!!

Cliff guffawed. *Never thought I'd be happy to see a text from Amy again. Now, where'd I meet her? A diner in the Southwest. But, where? Ah, yes, Gallup. [NM] How could I forget that greasy spoon? Though, I almost did. Maybe this speed is cooking my memory. Need to cut back.*

With a white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel and an intense expression, Cliff pulled off near Little Rock for gasoline, coffee, and energy bars. He then began to head northwest toward the Ozark National Forest on I-40. As he passed a lone, rundown, rusty mobile home in a piney tract, he mused about the occupants. *Wonder if anyone in there noticed my car passing. Just one of thousands. Wonder if he/she/they are content. Sometimes the poorest people are the happiest. Sometimes millionaires commit suicide. I won't be one of them. No way, José.*

Before he knew it, he was going around Fort Smith (AR). Traffic was light to moderate at 1:05 PM. Soon he was in Oklahoma. After passing a weigh station, he saw the mileage sign for Oklahoma City. *178 miles. [286 km] That's less than three hours. Arrive about four o'clock. Stop there? Look up some old friends? No, not this time. Let's just keep going. Amarillo [TX] or bust. Maybe get there just past eight.*

Cliff's second leg went without a hitch. At 8:11 PM he had a room in a two-star motor lodge that was just a quarter-mile (0.4 km) off the interstate. At 8:49 he snapped a pic in front of the retro-neon cactus sign and sent it to Karen sans egg. He was too tired for absurd comedy. And, he was way too worn-out to go eat a proper dinner; the snacks and sandwich remains would have to suffice.

Three minutes later Karen replied.

Two for two. You're still at 100%, which means the cops are at 0%. You are making me love you even more, mystery man. Question: Where did your eggceptional [sic] journey start, dear?

Cliff pondered her inquiry as he lay on the comforter-covered bed. *Guess it's harmless to give her a non-exact, slightly cryptic answer. Maybe she'll like it, and then cease for the night. Sure would be nice. Too exhausted to deal with her.*

The end was my beginning in coastal North Carolina. Very tired now. 727 miles today. Goodnight, sexy lady of intrigue.

Karen fired back 67 seconds later.

Exactly 1170 kilometers. Well, close enough for our unfolding odyssey, chief. So, doing I-40, wire to wire, are we? Going to Hollywood with that egg? It's bound for an actor or producer, am I right? I'll let you sleep. You can answer tomorrow morning, dear. Our day is coming. xoxox Karen.

Cliff looked at Karen's latest text. He read it six times. And then promptly fell asleep to the sound of the passing trucks. With his shoes still on.

Thursday morning in Amarillo was a very refreshing 54°F (12°C) as Cliff engaged on some make-them-yourself waffles in an alcove off the hotel lobby. It was 7:34 AM when he started walking back to his room. *Just take a quick shower and get rolling. Wonder what happens today. Hope Karen doesn't get too kooky. As for Amy ... Turk never texted or called last night. Wonder if something is up.*

As soon as he had locked the hotel door, he texted Turk.

All still good?

A reply came back just 58 seconds later.

Yes, all good here in Bakersfield. How is it in Amarillo?

Cliff replied immediately.

A nice, cool morning. Welcome relief after the heat of yesterday. Will be shooting to make Kingman [AZ] today. No issues. Egg securely ensconced in trunk. Well hidden. Still smooth sailing. All good.

Two minutes later, a return volley had landed in his court.

That's great to read, Cliff. You'll clear \$1.3M. Drive safely.

A brown Texas horned lizard scurried along the exterior windowsill, trying to get to a sunny spot to warm up. It stopped and looked at Cliff, which unleashed a flood of uncertainty into his brain. *I never told Turk that I was stopping in Amarillo. The car is definitely being tracked. Or, is it me via my cell phone? Is there a GPS [Global Positioning System] chip on the egg? Doubt that. If the first intruder got to the egg, he would have just taken it. These guys love the two-step process. And, why not? It has worked out nicely so far. Might make this my final run. When one gets greedy, one gets caught. If the payout is really over \$1M, I'll call it a day, and go live somewhere cheap. Not Cabo San Lucas itself, but somewhere nearby. But, can't get*

*too remote, or I'll become prey for los bandidos salvajes.
[the savage bandits' in Spanish]*

After breakfast at a fast-food eatery, Cliff was driving west once again. He looked at the dashboard clock; it was 9:03. *Crap! Forgot to send a pic to Karen. Must pull over at the next mile marker.*

At the Exit 37 sign on I-40 for Vega (TX), Cliff took a selfie from the emergency lane. He included a droll line of text.

Going to California with an egg in my heart.

At 9:11 his cell phone alerted him of a received text. It was from his Tennessee tormentor.

Oh, Cliff, that was witty-witty. 3 for 3. Eggtraordinary, [sic] dearest one. Guess what? (I'll tell you.) I'm now only 121 miles [195 km] behind you, mission commander. Late lunch in Albuquerque? I'm buying this time.

Cliff almost drove off the highway into an arroyo when he read Karen's text. He was hyperventilating. *What to do now? She's following me. This is insane. And just my rotten luck. What do I text back? Better just call her. Yeah.*

"Hello captain, are you enjoying this?" Karen gleefully asked. *Is she kidding?*

"Karen, you've broken the rules. You were supposed to stay in Knoxville until I returned." *Rules? Returned? Ha!*

"There was no such rule, dear, and even if there was, I have the right to change or rescind it," she declared petulantly. *I'm trapped. How did this happen? Must think. Fast. Why not meet her and plow her? That would probably set her straight. What's the harm in that? She doesn't know where the egg is; she'll never find it. But, she's going to want to stay with me. That's fairly obvious now.*

"Sure, we can meet in Albuquerque," Cliff agreed after a short pause. "I'll ease up on the throttle; back it down to fifty-six." [MPH; 90 km/h] *56? Yes! He's odd, too, beneath that just-another-cool-dude persona. I knew it.*

"Thanks, Cliff. I slept in an Oklahoma City hotel room last night. Alone, I assure you. How was Amarillo last night? Were you alone, too?"

"Ok and yes," Cliff bleakly answered.

“Did you check out the Cadillac Ranch on the way out of town, dear?”

“I forgot to look to the left this time, Karen.”

“No biggie. We can see it together soon.” *Together? Oh, boy. It's going to be hard to shake her.*

“Karen, I'm not sure that you want to get mixed up with me. I was once in a mental hospital with homicidal thoughts.” *That should scare her off. / Yes!*

“I love it! Who do we have to kill to keep this egg? Who is chasing you?” *At the moment, just you, crazy lady.*

“Karen, I really don't have a Fabergé egg. I certainly wish that I did. This has been fun, but I think this is where it ends.”

“Clifford, if you are not in Al's Quirky Cue & Brew on 1st Street at three PM – remember that New Mexico is an hour behind; it's in the Mountain Time Zone – expect to see flashing blue lights in your rear-view mirror by dusk.” *How and why did this happen? Why me? Why?!*

<click>

At that very moment, Cliff passed the halfway point of historic Route 66, just off to his right in the small town of Adrian (TX). *I'm in hot water now. How to deal with her? I've got to meet her. That's what she really wants. Yeah, let's just meet her in Albuquerque at that brewpub. Maybe a couple of beers will change her mood. She has to drive her vehicle; thus, she can't jump in mine and start rummaging. But, what if she drinks too much and wants to ride with me to a hotel room in town? Darn! I wanted to finish the day in western Arizona – not in central New Mexico! Well, way too many variables to try to predict. Just see how it plays out. Maybe catch a lucky break.*

The Land-of-Enchantment driving day was sunny, dry, and mild. It was only 61°F (16°C) when Cliff turned off the engine to eat lunch in a downtown Albuquerque diner. It was now 11:58 MDT.

The chili verde was excellent and satiated his mid-day hunger. While slowly sipping a sweetened iced tea, Cliff thought about what might be happening in 2½ hours. *Will she really be coming alone? Pretty sure. Who could stay with her in a car for that long? She seems to really believe*

that I have that fabled egg. But, why does she believe this so fervently? He then replayed all the moments in the Knoxville pizzeria. Where did I tip my hand and lead her to think that I had that renowned egg in my possession? I just don't see where. Did she just happen to have that Fabergé egg on her mind for some reason? But, why? It's so baffling. So maddening. And ultimately, so unfortunate.

He then got up and left. Once outside in the dry, cool, bright sunshine, Cliff decided to go for a little walk. He was soon passing Mantalities [sic] Sports Bar. He re-read the sign. *What a name! I bet he caught some flak for that sexist moniker. Wonder what the story is. May as well kill some time here.*

Once seated at the bar, Cliff watched replays of yesterday's Major League Baseball games on an ESPN-tuned, mounted-above-the-rows-of-liquor-bottle-shelving, nearly-as-wide-as-the-Grand-Canyon TV. *So, the [San Francisco] Giants beat the [Arizona] Diamondbacks last night at Chase Field 5-2. Off to a 1-2 start. Well, 159 games to go. Wonder if the rattlesnakes [Diamondbacks] can match the magic of that [World-Series-winning] 2001 season. Don't think it's happening this year.*

The bartender, a Caucasian, mustachioed, black-haired dude of about Cliff's age, broke his national-pastime reverie. "What are we drinking today, partner?"

"What do you have on tap – any local lagers?" Cliff queried.

"Sure do. I recommend Opuntia Knocks. It's made with prickly pear cactus juice. Smooth, but with an insidiously delayed, barb-of-the-scorpion flourish." *Barb of the scorpion? Is this guy a beer reviewer on the side?*

"You sold me. I'll take a pint." [473 mL]

Two minutes and a new Hispanic American customer later, the bartender was setting a tall stein down in front of Cliff. "There ya go. Enjoy."

"Say, uh, how did this place get its name? Is the owner an unabashed chauvinist?" *Did the owner have mommy issues? Yeah, bet that's it.*

"Here's the short version of the long story: He was dared to go with that name. And, yes, some local women's groups

had a fit at first. But, get this: He then helped some lesbians open up a bar on the other side of town called Womentalities.” *Huh?*

“You’re shitting me.” *He’s got to be pulling my leg.*

“Nope,” the bartender stoically replied. “The city residents are pretty much ok with it now, but tourists who just see one without the other sometimes get bent out of shape. Well, until someone explains it to them, just like I did for you.”

“Bizarre. Albu-quirky [*sic*] living up to the nickname.”

“Yep. So, are you from out of state?” *I’m certain that he is.*

“Yeah, you might say that,” Cliff responded after taking a sip. *What kind of answer is that? Something is up with this guy. Is he on the run from the law? / This beer is pretty good.*

“Got to run along, pal. The new guy is here for training. Jan will take care of you.”

“Ok, big thanks for the dope on the name.” *Dope? Is he a drug dealer? Maybe that’s it.*

The time tranquilly passed by as the loop of baseball highlights repeated. Jan provided him with another pint, but she wasn’t much of a talker. Some 80 minutes later, he laid a \$20 bill on the clear-coated piñon pine bar and made his way back to the short-term-leased Ford Taurus.

At 2:48 Cliff had a window seat at the Karen-designated tavern/billiard parlor. He ordered the same beer that he had at Mantalities; he really liked it. At exactly 3:03:03, black-topped, light-on-makeup, very-focused-looking Karen appeared with a medium-size, purple, soft-shell suitcase in her left hand. She pulled up a chair at his small table and grinned. *Miss Trouble is now here in the flesh.*

“So, we meet again at last, Cliff. Tell me, did you miss me?” *Here we go.*

“All fifty hours and change, pretty lady,” Cliff replied nonchalantly. *Just play along. Just hum her song. For now.*

“I’m not a ‘my appearance is my net worth’ kind of gal,” she curtly divulged. *Bet he thinks that I’m some dingbat ho. [urban slang for whore]*

“Never assumed that – not for a single minute. So, what happens now?” *Bet it’s not good for me. / I’ve got him right where I want him: in plain sight.*

“I’m going with you to the end, my adventurous love eternal; yes, I’m going with you to Barstow, captain. I’ve already turned in my rental car. From here on, I’m with you on this epic, nefariously clandestine journey.” *Oh, dear. What to do with her?*

The waitress came back and took their food orders. The cold-cut sandwiches arrived just four minutes later. They ate in silence, though their minds were racing.

Cliff then took a big gulp of his yellow-tinted beer. “Karen, why do you think that I have that Fabergé egg?” *Well, my loose-lipped loverboy-to-be, you just confirmed it.*

“I overheard you muttering ‘I’m going to be a millionaire’ as you doodled away on that piece of paper in my restaurant. And then you named your ornate egg sketch. Such a unique name. I immediately researched it. Cliff, my darling, don’t ever try to be a spy or secret agent; your mouth would get you hung on your first assignment. But, no need to worry anymore, dear; I’ll do the talking – and more importantly, the non-talking – from here on. Be grateful, love; I’m saving you from near-future ruin.” *Whew! I’m going to have to ditch her somehow. Maybe drug and gag her. I want to ball her like no tomorrow first, though. Get my just due for this predicament. Hope she doesn’t have a nasty, sexually transmitted disease. I’m condom-less. And, stopping for such would be awkward.*

“Oh, I see.” Cliff made an ok-you-win facial expression.

“We’ve got to get going, don’t we?”

“We sure do. I was supposed to be in Kingman tonight. But, Flagstaff will suffice, I guess.”

“Who are we meeting in Barstow tomorrow?” *Wow! She knows the whole deal it seems. But, how?*

“We find out when we get there, Karen.”

“That sounds scary, Cliff.”

“You wanted adventure, sweetheart; well, it comes welded to suspense,” Cliff retorted.

Once back on I-40 West, Cliff just looked straight ahead with a defeated man's countenance. He sighed as they passed Continental Divide.

"You look sad. Do I make you sad, Cliff?" *Must bite my tongue.*

"No, I'm just tired, Karen."

"Cheer up, honey! We've got this. And, I'm going to rock your mast tonight in Flagstaff." *Mast?*

Cliff gave her a lecherous smirk. *He wants it, and he shall get the whole show. He'll never forget me. Ever.*

It was a clear-and-already-quiete-starry twilight when they rolled into the parking lot of a three-star, two-story hotel near the downtown railroad tracks.

Karen looked at the dashboard clock that displayed 8:17. "Don't think this time is right, Cliff." *Oh yeah, most of Arizona ignores Daylight Saving Time. Only the Navajo Nation partakes.*

"You're right, Karen. Flagstaff's Mountain Standard Time is the same as Pacific Daylight Time; it's 7:17."

When they exited the car, the bone-dry, calm-but-chilly, 44° Fahrenheit (6.7°C) air was a shock.

"Some cool down," Cliff announced.

"Glad I packed a jacket," Karen replied.

Things quickly warmed up in the room. Karen went all-out freaky on Cliff. *She's just as wild as imagined, but in some ways it feels like an act. Oh, don't overanalyze; just enjoy it.*

When Karen went to the bathroom, he placed his wallet, keys, and cell phone under his pillow.

After a second round, they watched the 10 o'clock local news together in bed. Cliff crashed hard during the weather segment. Karen had dropped a strong, tasteless sedative in his beer thirty minutes prior when he was in the bathroom.

Karen then searched the room for his cell phone. In her third minute of foraging, she found it. Cliff's snoring continued unabated as she carefully extricated his cell phone from

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

