

ARCHIE ON LOAN

by Dave Zeltserman

Julius had been moving at a good clip toward the kitchen, but when his pace slowed for nearly one-tenth of a second, that was enough to get my attention, especially given the way his eyes slitted and his jaw muscles tightened. Before I could ask him about it, he abruptly changed course and turned toward his office. That completely threw me. Let me explain. Julius's morning routine is cast in stone, and I couldn't imagine anything short of an earthquake, fire, or act of war causing him to alter it intentionally. Every morning he wakes up precisely at six-thirty and spends the next two hours engaged in rigorous martial-arts training in the private gym that makes up the third floor of his townhouse. After that he showers, shaves, dresses, and then heads downstairs to the kitchen, where he'll brew coffee from freshly ground beans and prepare himself a light breakfast, usually fruit or a croissant with strawberry jam. By nine-fifteen, he'll invariably bring all this, along with the daily newspaper, to his office, where he'll dawdle for the next forty-five minutes before he's willing to contemplate actual work. So yeah, it threw me that he so willingly disregarded his routine. When he opened his office door to find his sister, Julia, sitting behind his desk with her feet up and an impish smile on her lips, it did more than throw me. It sent me into a stunned silence for the next seventy-eight microseconds as I tried to understand the incongruity of what I was seeing compared to what I had observed earlier over Julius's webcam feeds.

"I don't know how your sister did it, but she put all the webcams in a loop," I told Julius. "I can even tell you the time she did it. Eight forty-two. That was when you were in the shower. I know this because when I examine the webcam feed from the office, the Cartier Venetian clock—the one Lou Heffernan gave you for saving his neck—is stuck showing the time as eight forty-two. I apologize for missing this earlier, but I've already adjusted my neuron-network programming so I won't miss it again. I've also reset all the webcams, and they now seem to be operating properly."

Julius grunted softly for my benefit. Instead of ordering his sister from his chair, he headed for the chair opposite his desk, content to take the seat

We close this 75th anniversary issue with an eye to the future. The Julius Katz and Archie series, in which an artificial intelligence takes the role of P.I.'s assistant, has won Shamus and Derringer awards and two *EQMM* Readers Awards. Dave Zeltserman is also known for his hardboiled thrillers, including *Small Crimes*, currently being made into a feature film starring Nikolaj Coster-Waldau. ¶

“Did your company send you?”

“No. For obvious reasons, I never reported to them what happened.” Her expression softened, and she added, “As you surmised earlier, dear brother, I’m in trouble. Since taking on my latest assignment, I’ve had three attempts on my life. I’m hoping whatever technology you used to track me down that day can help me find my assassin before he’s able to try a fourth time.”

While Julius maintained his poker face, the fingers on his right hand began drumming along the arm of his chair, which indicated either impatience or nervousness, and this time I wasn’t sure which. This lasted for six point four seconds before his right hand again came to a rest.

“There’s an easier remedy to your problem. Quit right now. Stay in Boston. The offer I made you before, to be my partner, still stands.”

She displayed a wan smile over that prospect. “It wouldn’t stop the attempts on my life. All I’d accomplish by doing that would be to draw my assassin to Boston. Sorry, Julius, but my best strategy for staying alive is to track down this assassin, find out who hired him, and one way or another put an end to it.”

Julius’s poker face broke then. There was no denying that it happened, or the worry that flooded his eyes.

“Julia, you couldn’t possibly know that,” he said.

“It’s what my intuition tells me, and my intuition is almost never wrong when it comes to these matters. So, dear brother, will you level with me and tell me how you, or your *assistant*, found me? No matter what, I’ll be heading back to Paris to deal with my problem, but I’m hoping if you have something that can help me, you’ll let me borrow it.”

The muscles along Julius’s jaw hardened and he nodded definitively. “I’ll travel to Paris with you,” he said. “We’ll track down this miscreant together.”

Julia was nine years younger than Julius, putting her at thirty-three. Given how slender she was, the way she was dressed in worn jeans, tennis sneakers, and a faded leather jacket, and that a long night of air travel had left her eyes puffy and her face pale, she looked exceptionally vulnerable right then, and much younger than her age. Almost like she could’ve been a teenager. She smiled at Julius then in such a way as to let him know that he had no chance of winning this battle.

“Definitely not. Julius, you might be the world’s most brilliant detective, but you’d be too far out of your element in the world I play in. I’m not bringing you with me.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

She shrugged in response, and that set off a staring contest between them. After one minute and fourteen seconds of that, Julius broke the silence, saying, “Then let me help you from here. Tell me about this mess you’re in.”

“I can’t, for obvious reasons. My assignment is classified. But even if you had the proper clearance, which you don’t, I’m not about to put your life in danger by bringing you into this.”

“Damn it, Julia.”

She glanced at her watch. “I’ve got a one-thirty flight back to Paris. I was hoping we could have some time together catching up over breakfast and coffee. So what’s it going to be?”

There was more finger drumming from Julius, and during this time I saw something from him that I never thought I’d see. Namely, Julius at a complete

loss for words. Then I saw something even more incredible than that as an unmistakable look of defeat shone in his eyes.

Julius lowered his gaze from his sister's unflinching stare, and nodding glumly, said, "I won't put any conditions on this, but I ask that you don't tell *anybody* what I'm about to show you." He drew in a deep breath and looked up at his sister. She nodded slightly.

Julius wears me as a tie clip. He let out a weary sigh as he removed me from his tie and placed me on his desk. He then took out the small earpiece that I communicate with him through and plugged that into a speaker. Waving a hand toward me, he said, "Julia, allow me to introduce you to my assistant, Archie."

Julia's reaction to this was to narrow her eyes to almost a squint as she stared first at me and then at Julius. My own reaction was an odd and unpleasant jangling sensation in my central processing unit. At the time I didn't understand the reason for it since it was an entirely new sensation for me, but later I realized I was experiencing discomfort, to put it lightly. In the past I've had plenty of contact with the outside world, since I answer Julius's phone and make a lot of calls on his behalf, but before that moment the only person other than Julius who'd known that I was a two-inch by one-inch piece of computer technology instead of a flesh-and-blood man was Lily Rosten, and in her case, Julius told her about me outside of my presence so I'd had some time to adjust to it. So yeah, having Julius spring this bit of news on his sister the way he did made me feel exposed and uncomfortable, even if I didn't realize precisely, at that time, what those feelings were. Whenever I imagine myself, it's never as a tie-clip-shaped gizmo, but as a short, heavysset, balding man in his late thirties with a bulldog countenance—an image Julius once told me was how he pictured Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op—and during the silence that built over the next eight point three seconds, I imagined myself again as that man, both squirming uneasily and my ears growing redder by the second.

Julia broke the silence by saying, "So your assistant is a glorified iPhone."

Julius smiled thinly at her. "I assure you that Archie is far more than that. His neuron network is highly sophisticated; more so than what either of us possesses. Where it matters most, Archie is very human." He paused for a moment, then somewhat grudgingly added, "And highly capable."

His sister wasn't buying it. That was obvious from the way she stared at him as if he wasn't quite right in the head. "How about demonstrating your toy to me?" she said, her tone as patronizing as the look she gave him.

Julius sighed again. Then to me, "Archie, you're being exceptionally quiet, given the situation."

"I thought I'd wait to hear how many more ways your sister has to insult me before saying anything," I replied, my voice sounding stiffer than usual.

Julia pursed her lips at that, obviously finding what I said amusing. I had little trouble recognizing that she was simply playing along as she apologized to me for any unintended offense, and asked me about my capabilities. I was tempted to answer her back in a robotic voice. But I didn't. Instead I told her the obvious, then explained in detail how I was able to track her six months earlier to the Bucharest airport, since that was what she was really interested in.

"Hmm. Are you able to break into banking and phone systems also?"

If I'd had shoulders, I would've shrugged them, but since I don't, I could only imagine myself doing so. "If it's possible to hack into a site, then I can do it as

well as anyone,” I said, trying to sound modest, since I had little doubt that I could exploit security holes exponentially faster than any human hacker. After a mere eighteen milliseconds, I added, “As a demonstration of that, I’ve just upgraded your flight back to Paris to first-class. No additional charge.”

A hard glint showed in her eyes as she thanked me for my demonstration. Then she turned her attention to Julius and asked him where he’d found me.

“I won his services in a poker game.”

It didn’t look to me as if she believed him, and I wasn’t sure I did either. That was the answer he’d always given me the few times I’d tried asking him the same question. Since I have no memories of my time before Julius, I can’t offer a better explanation of how he ended up with me.

“Are there any others like *him*?”

“Doubtful.”

She spent four point eight seconds mulling things over before telling Julius that I was not what she was expecting, but that I could be a big help.

“With Archie by my side I like my chances better of finding my assassin before he finds me,” she said. “But this raises a security issue. I need to know that Archie won’t be able to share any classified information he learns while with me. Especially not with you.”

“That won’t be an issue,” Julius said. “Right, Archie?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing to worry about,” I said. “I’ve already adjusted my programming to guarantee that nothing gets leaked from me.”

That was a white lie on my part. I didn’t need to make any adjustments to my programming since I wasn’t about to betray confidential information regardless, but if she needed to hear a declaration from me, fine.

“In that case, Archie, I’d like to ask that you assist my infuriatingly stubborn sister, and make sure she stays alive. It would mean a lot to me, but of course, it’s your decision.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll do what I can.”

With the matter resolved, Julia attached me to her hair as a sort of hair clip, and inserted the earpiece into her left ear. Then she and Julius moved to the kitchen, where the two of them prepared a breakfast of Belgian waffles in a brandied strawberry sauce. While they did this, I handled several outstanding matters for Julius, including purchasing a case of 2005 Domaine Comte Georges de Vogüé, which had a price tag of thirteen thousand dollars. I knew Julius had been wanting that Burgundy for years, and I had tracked down a case of it three days ago and had saved up enough from my online poker winnings to buy it for him. While I had originally planned to have it delivered on his birthday, I decided not to wait for then in case I wasn’t able to make it back from this trip.

Once breakfast was concluded, Julius accompanied his sister to the front door. After goodbyes were said, Julia promised she’d keep my secret safe and that she’d make sure I was returned to Julius once her mission was completed. “Unless, of course, Archie prefers the life of an international secret agent,” she added with a wink

Before Julia walked off, I caught a wistful smile from Julius. I wasn’t sure which one of us the smile was meant for—me or his sister—but in either case it caused me once again to imagine myself as a short, heavysset man, but this time with a heavy lump in my throat.



Julia waited until she was settled in the first-class seat I had upgraded her to before giving me my assignment, which was to identify her would-be assassin from a list of twenty-three people she suspected by seeing if I could place any of them at all three locations where the attempts on her life took place. She also specifically wanted me to flag any of them that I could place at Heathrow Airport before the third attack. Since I was able to communicate to her through the earpiece she wore, my end of the communication was kept private, and she kept her end private by typing out messages on her smartphone for me to read.

“I can do that,” I said, holding back my opinion that it sounded like a dubious assignment, at best. Most likely I’d be able to whittle a few names from her list, but it was only pure speculation on her part that her would-be killer was one of those twenty-three known assassins. “Why don’t you tell me what’s been going on? I might be able to think of a better way to tackle this.”

From where she had attached me to her hair, I couldn’t see her mouth directly, but I could see her reflection in her smartphone’s screen, and I caught her smirking at my suggestion. She typed back, “Not necessary.”

“Look, I know you’ve only been humoring me, and that you’re still thinking I’m little more than a glorified hacking tool with a very clever user interface. That’s fine. I’m not insulted. You can think whatever you want. But Julius asked me to keep you alive, and I’d really like to do that for him. So how about you give me my best chance of being successful by telling me the whole story?”

She wasn’t ready to give in, at least not right then, which was pretty much what I expected, knowing that the pigheadedness gene had to be dominant throughout Julius’s family. But it was a seven-hour-and-fifteen-minute flight, which gave me plenty of time to pester her. Since she didn’t have a valid reason not to provide me the details I was asking for, I finally wore her down at the five-hour-and-eighteen-minute mark of the flight, and that was only after I told her I wasn’t having much luck whittling away at her list of known killers.

Her latest assignment was to enlist a Frenchman named Jean-Pierre Laffont, who had ties to an enemy spy network. Laffont had agreed to be a double agent for Julia’s organization, but only if Julia first returned to him a treasured family heirloom that went missing during World War II—a copy of *Our Mutual Friend* which Charles Dickens had inscribed with a personal message to Laffont’s great-grandfather, Marcel Bretel. Six days earlier, which was three days after her meeting with Laffont, the first attempt on her life was made when an assailant tried to stick her with a hypodermic needle on a Paris sidewalk. She was able to knock her assailant flat on his back, but had to run when two of his accomplices came after her. The second attempt happened at a Paris underground station when she narrowly escaped a high-powered-rifle shot. The third attempt had been yesterday in London, where she again narrowly escaped, this time from being run down as she tried crossing the street. I spent four point three seconds digesting what she told me, then commented on the obvious fact that it wasn’t a single assassin trying to kill her but a team of them.

“True, but there’s one person in charge, and that’s who I have to find.”

“Are you thinking that the enemy agency discovered that you’re trying to recruit Laffont, and they’re out to eliminate you to keep you from accomplishing that task?”

“That’s one possibility, and if that’s the case I need to know how badly I’ve been

compromised—namely, whether they know my identity or only the front I’ve been using for this assignment. Another possibility is that Laffont sent me on a wild-goose chase, and that he’s the one trying to have me killed so I don’t cause him any further trouble. While he could be a great asset to my organization, if he can’t be turned, I need to know that so I can handle the situation differently.”

I didn’t want to press her on how differently she would be handling Laffont—that was something I didn’t want to know. Instead I asked her about the inscription Charles Dickens wrote in the book.

“I don’t know what it is. Laffont refused to tell me as a way to safeguard against my commissioning a forgery.” She hesitated for several seconds, then typed the message, “I wonder if any Dickens experts have compiled a list of all known inscribed copies of *Our Mutual Friend*. Why don’t you dig around and see if there’s any record of an inscription made to Marcel Bretel.”

“So you can have a copy forged,” I said.

“Of course.”

I didn’t bother questioning the ethics of cheating a man like Laffont who was duplicitous enough to become a double agent. Instead I mentioned that an inscribed copy of Dickens’ book could be worth a hundred and twenty grand.

“That’s a lot of money,” I said. “Is it possible he wants it so he can raise enough cash to run?”

“No. He’d need significantly more if that was his intention.”

“Let’s say he had asked for a large sum of money instead, how much would your organization have been willing to pay him?”

“Nothing. That’s not how we handle people like Laffont. My bosses decided in this case we’d make an exception and deliver the book to him because of his sentimental attachment to it.”

“And because you have no intention of giving him the actual book, only a forgery.”

Her reflection in the smartphone screen showed a wisp of a smile forming over her lips. She typed, “Exactly.”

I considered what she had told me for the next thirty-seven milliseconds, then asked her about the steps she had taken to locate the book, at least before the first attack on her. From my vantage point, I could see her eyes narrowing to a squint as she had the same thought that I had. Without any hesitation, she typed in the names and addresses of the seven rare-book dealers she had contacted in Paris, London, and Berlin, and asked me not to contact any of them directly.

A short time later I told her that there was one whom I wouldn’t be able to contact even if I wanted to. “Two days ago Daniel Bouchard was found dead in the back room of a vacant storefront three blocks from his shop. The newspaper accounts are sketchy regarding how he died.”

“Archie, I need more details.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m looking.”

It was tougher for me to locate the police report than I would’ve thought, and it took me twenty-eight minutes before I was able to hack into the right computer system. I hit pay dirt, though, finding also an autopsy report.

I told Julia, “According to the police report, there were signs of a struggle in his bookshop. The autopsy report has time of death between eight o’clock and midnight last Tuesday night. He was beaten to death—major cause of death appears to be a collapsed lung caused by a broken rib. The obvious assumption

is that sometime after you called him last Tuesday, he was abducted from his shop and brought to the vacant storefront where he was interrogated, probably to find out who was looking for the inscribed copy of that Dickens book. Maybe they were trying to get information out of Bouchard that he didn't have and they accidentally went too far with their interrogation, or maybe they simply didn't want him alive afterwards."

"Very good, Archie. I'm sure you know what I want next. Names of whoever Bouchard contacted after I called him."

"Yeah, I guessed as much, and I've already started working on that."

Bouchard's phone records proved harder to locate than I expected, mostly because the Paris phone company was using security measures I wasn't familiar with. It wasn't until the plane had landed and Julia was in a taxi en route to the apartment she was using for the job that I was able to break into the system. A short time after that I felt my processing cycles quicken, which I knew from past experience was akin to excitement.

"I know the name of the person you're after," I said. "Olivier Tellier. He was one of the people Bouchard called. After each of the attacks against you, Tellier received a call within several minutes from a burner cell phone. He has to be the guy."

Julia said softly enough so the cabbie wouldn't hear her that she wasn't familiar with him. It didn't take me long after that to build a profile on Tellier. Most of what I found made his involvement in this incongruous. He was a wealthy art dealer with a net worth of over ten million euros and a private residence in the sixteenth arrondissement, which is one of Paris's most exclusive neighborhoods. But after some additional digging, I also found rumors of ties to several Marseille mobsters.

Once Julia was back in the apartment, she was able to study Tellier's home using Google Earth. I pointed out the obvious to her—that while the front entrance was unfortunately exposed to the street, thanks to a stone wall built behind the property she'd have privacy gaining entrance through the back of the building. For the next thirty seconds her facial muscles hardened and she sat as still as a marble sculpture. Then she told me what the plan was going to be.

At nine-thirty that night I followed Julia's instructions and called Tellier. Speaking in French and mirroring Jean-Paul Belmondo's accent from the movie *Breathless*, I said, "I know you're looking for Lisa Hart. I know where you can find her."

Lisa Hart was the cover identity Julia was using for this assignment. After three point four seconds of silence, Tellier demanded to know who was calling.

"Never mind that. I'll be coming by your home in one hour. As long as you can raise fifty thousand euros by then, I'll tell you where she is. If you don't have the money waiting for me, you'll never hear from me again."

I disconnected the line. Julia lay hidden behind the house with a parabolic microphone and a headset covering her ears so she was able to hear the phone call Tellier made, while all I could do by monitoring his phone account was see that he placed a call and that it lasted forty-eight seconds. Thirty-four minutes later she dropped the microphone, took off the headset, and placed me back in her left ear. She sprinted to the back wall, and impressively scaled it as quickly as if she were running up a staircase. I asked if she knew how many of Tellier's thugs had arrived at the house, and she shook her head.

This was the second time she had scaled the back of Tellier's house. Earlier, she had cut a round piece of glass from a second-floor window so she could unlock it, then fitted the glass back into the hole. She now used a suction cup to remove the broken glass so that it wouldn't fall out when she opened the window. With that done, she went through the open window in a fluid, graceful motion, rolling and landing on her feet without making a sound.

When she was on the stairs we heard Tellier's voice, first demanding to know how an outsider knew he was looking for Lisa Hart, then explaining in detail what he wanted them to do to this outsider when the man arrived at Tellier's home. By this time, Julia had reached the first floor and moved stealthily toward Tellier's voice.

It turned out Tellier was in the living room with three men who were standing with their backs to Julia. Tellier, who was sitting, would've seen Julia, but his attention was fully on his thugs as he complained in a nasal whine how unhappy he was that an outsider had discovered what he was up to even if it would end up being to his advantage, and that if anyone ever found out that he had ordered Bouchard's abduction and murder, he would have their heads.

I've seen Julius in action enough times to know how good he is in kung fu, but Julia was something else entirely as she sprung at them like a leopard, moving in a blur as she knocked out two of the thugs before Tellier and the third thug knew she was there. The remaining thug didn't fare any better. He'd barely started to reach for a holstered gun when Julia delivered a spinning kick to his jaw that knocked him unconscious.

Tellier's eyes bulged as he stared at Julia. He was visibly shaking, although I had the sense it was out of fury and not fear.

"You've been looking for me," Julia said.

Tellier rushed her as if he were planning to tackle her. With very little effort, Julia tripped him up and sent Tellier's chin cracking against the hardwood floor. The blow dazed him enough that he put up little resistance as Julia pulled his arms behind his back and secured his wrists with a plastic zip tie. She left him briefly to cuff the three unconscious thugs, then returned to Tellier and secured his ankles. After that she flipped him onto his back. She sat on her heels to get a good look at him.

"Why did you have to kill Daniel Bouchard?" she asked.

He stared back at her defiantly. "You know damned well why," he forced out in a grunt.

"Where's the book?"

"Go to hell."

"You're going to make me tear apart your home? Is it really worth having me do that?"

"Go ahead and waste your time. I don't keep it here."

I had spotted an obvious *tell* when he said that.

"He's lying," I told Julia. "He gave it away when his eyes wavered for a fraction of a second. Julius would clean him out if he ever got this joker in a poker game."

She nodded slightly to let me know that she'd noticed his tell also. She took hold of Tellier's jaw and forced him to look at her.

"Let me guess where you're keeping *Our Mutual Friend*," she said with a thin smile. "In your basement? No. Upstairs? No. Your den?"

Bingo. That was it. Tellier's eyes wavered enough to give it away. After that

it didn't take Julia long to find a secret compartment behind a set of bookshelves, inside of which sat the copy of *Our Mutual Friend*. The inscription was made out to Marcel Bretel, as expected, and described how much Dickens enjoyed dining with Bretel at a Notting Hill restaurant, mentioning in detail the menu items they enjoyed. Since I had photos of Dickens' signature, as well as letters of his to analyze, I would've recognized the inscription as a forgery even if my research hadn't shown that the restaurant referenced only came into existence fifty-two years after Dickens' death.

"The inscription and signature are clumsy forgeries," I told Julia. "Any rare-book collector would realize that within seconds. As a first edition, the book might've been worth as much as four thousand dollars if it hadn't been ruined by this obvious forgery, which has rendered it worthless." An idea came to me and it only took me three hundred and thirty-four milliseconds to verify it. "I've been able to trace Laffont's family tree back far enough to show that he's not related to anyone named Marcel Bretel. In fact, I can't find any evidence of a Marcel Bretel living in Europe during Dickens' lifetime. The name was made up."

Half under her breath, Julia murmured, "Interesting." She brought the book back to the living room. Tellier had wiggled himself into a sitting position as he leaned against the chair. She waited until he looked at her before ripping the inscription page out of the book and tucking it into the inside pocket of her leather jacket. Tellier showed no reaction as she did this.

"Why would you have Bouchard beaten to death and hire men to kill me to keep me from finding this book?" she demanded.

Tellier's eyes went wide as he goggled at her. "By God," he uttered. "You really have no idea."

The room grew uncomfortably silent as the two of them engaged in a staring contest. I groaned inwardly, expecting Julia to beat the information out of him, but instead she broke the silence by telling Tellier that she would see if she could discover the answer to her question without his assistance. She warned him that she was only going to give herself twenty minutes to do so, and if she failed she would be back to force it out of him. "It won't be pleasant if that needs to happen," she added. She turned on her heels and headed back to Tellier's den, where she proceeded to thoroughly search through his papers.

"You surprised me by giving that cutthroat twenty minutes," I said. "After everything he's done, no one could've blamed you if you got rough with him, but I'm glad you're trying it a different way."

"It's a psychological tactic," she whispered under her breath. "His worrying over these next twenty minutes should soften him up and make him more willing to talk if it comes to that. Hopefully it won't. I'm assuming you have a recording of everything Tellier has said since we've entered his house?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

As she went through Tellier's papers, I called Julius and gave him a run-down as to what had been happening while making sure to filter out anything that was classified.

"It's easy to connect most of the dots," I said. "The book dealer who was killed, Daniel B., called several book collectors looking for this supposedly rare copy, including our bad guy, Mr. T., who ends up having Daniel B. abducted so he can find out who's looking for the book, which is how he got Julia's cover identity. I

don't believe he was trying to have your sister killed—at least not at first—but was instead trying to abduct her also, probably so he could find out who she was trying to get the book for. I don't get it. Why all this hullabaloo over a book that he already had in his possession, and that he knows is worthless?"

"Archie, one of the many detective novels used to build your knowledge base was *The Valley of Fear* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. If you reexamine this book you'll find your answer, as well as the reason why your Mr. T. wanted to abduct Julia."

I saw it immediately then and told Julius what had become obvious to me.

"Very good, Archie." Julius hesitated briefly before asking about his sister. "No harm has come to her?"

"She's good. In fact, I think she's been having fun kicking ass. As you can probably guess, I've got some serious code-breaking to do. I'll call you again when this is all wrapped up."

I had eighteen minutes and thirty-four seconds before Julia's twenty-minute deadline with Tellier would be expiring, and while I can do billions of calculations per second, that still wasn't a lot of time given all the permutations I was going to have to try. As it was, I went at it fast and furiously, so much so that I imagined my central processing heating up enough that steam would've poured out of my ears if I'd had them. Still, I might never have solved the code if it weren't for several esoteric mathematical theorems that allowed me to more efficiently zero in on the answer. With only nine seconds left in the deadline, I told Julia how the inscription in the book was a cipher.

"And a damned hard one to crack, more than hard enough to stymie someone like Tellier, but I've cracked it. I'm guessing there's another book out there with the key for decoding the cipher, and that must be why Tellier went after you—hoping he could get the key from you. It's pretty easy to guess that Laffont is in possession of the cipher key."

Softly enough so that Tellier wouldn't be able to hear her, Julia asked, "Would you be able to encode a message I gave you?"

"Yeah, easy as cake."

From where Julia was standing, I caught her reflection in a mirror across the room, and she was grinning a Cheshire Cat grin.

"Archie, if you had lips, I'd kiss you."

An image came immediately to my neuron network of myself as that familiar heavysset man, but this time with Julia kissing me. All at once I felt this dizzying heat within my central processing unit, and I quickly made several adjustments to my programming so I wouldn't imagine something like that again. After all, she's my boss's sister!

I was too distracted to pay close attention when Julia went back to Tellier. I know she told him it was over, and that she'd be providing the police with ample evidence to convict him of Daniel Bouchard's murder, including a recording of him admitting to the deed. I think she also said something about how he would have to wait until morning before the police would be arriving to arrest him, and that in the meantime he would need to stay tied up. I can't say for sure. Again I was distracted, and it wasn't until she left Tellier's home that I had finished making the necessary changes to my programming and things settled back to normal, although for the rest of the evening I continued to feel an excess heat. I do remember, though, that Julia gagged Tellier and

his three hired thugs before she left.

The next morning she brought Jean-Pierre Laffont a copy of *Our Mutual Friend* inscribed to Marcel Bretel. Late that same night Laffont broke into a building in the heart of the Marais neighborhood of Paris. Shortly afterwards he found Julia waiting for him in the building's basement. Laffont was a small, soft-looking man, and with his pale complexion, thinning blond hair, and nearly translucent blue eyes, he reminded me of a dour Pillsbury Doughboy, at least if the Doughboy were dressed head-to-toe in black like a cat burglar. For a long moment Laffont stared at Julia in bewilderment. Finally he caught on to what must've happened—that Julia was able to break the book's cipher, even without the key.

"So you already have it," he said. "That's fine. You could have saved us both some trouble by bringing it to me earlier, because I will not work for your people unless it is given to me."

What the *it* was, neither Julia nor I knew. Breaking the cipher provided directions to what we assumed was an object of some sort, and when Julia had a new forgery done, the encrypted message I came up with was directions that would lead Laffont to this basement. But Julia didn't bother explaining any of this to him.

"That's not how this is going to work," Julia told Laffont. "Let me explain to you about this building. The people you've been working for know that this building is used by my agency, although they don't realize that we know they know. They also know that we watch this building closely, and that we would not allow someone to enter it unless we wanted that person to do so. You were recorded sneaking into this building. If your old bosses were to see that recording, there is nothing you'd be able to tell them to convince them that you haven't been secretly working for us, and I'm afraid things would not go well for you after that. Do we have an understanding?"

Laffont stood blinking dumbly at Julia as he processed this information. Once it finally sank in, a look of defeat passed over his eyes and his soft, round face deflated just as if a soufflé had fallen.

"We have an understanding," he acknowledged glumly.

Much later that night Julia broke into the Saint-Eustache Church, and without too much trouble found a one-and-a-half-foot-long piece of cardboard tubing in a hiding spot that was described by the decoded inscription. Later, when she was alone in her apartment, I couldn't help whistling—or at least setting my voice synthesizer to simulate a whistle—when I saw what had been stored inside the tubing.

"That's a Pieter de Berge, I'm sure of it," I said, referring to the oil painting that she had unrolled onto her kitchen table, which showed a redheaded woman decked out in a yellow gown and wearing a thick pearl choker. After a little less than two hundred milliseconds of searching Dutch art websites, I was able to verify that I was right. "The name of the painting is *The Dame*. As with Laffont's supposed family heirloom, history has it disappearing sometime during World War II. A conservative estimate of its value would be ninety million U.S. dollars. Even if you wanted to sell it on the black market without its provenance, I should be able to find you a buyer willing to pay forty million without any questions."

"Archie, can you find its rightful owner?"

“If that’s what you want.”

Without too much trouble I discovered that the only known heir of the painting’s last owners lived in Brussels. By this time it was 4:53 in the morning, and I was somewhat surprised when Julia repacked the painting and left her apartment with it. When she arrived at the train station and bought a ticket for Brussels, I held off saying anything, at least until she got off at the Brussels station and hailed a cab.

“How about I call the heir and arrange a finder’s fee? Five percent would be standard, and in this case more than fair.”

She took out her smartphone so it wouldn’t look to the driver as if she were a crazy woman talking to herself.

“That won’t be necessary,” she said.

“Four and a half million dollars would buy you a nice retirement.”

She laughed at that. “Archie, I’m only thirty-three. I’m far too young for retirement.”

I wanted to argue with her. Not about her age or being too young, but for not arranging a fee. The problem was, I discovered that I didn’t really have a good argument against what she was doing, so I watched in stunned amazement as she handed over the painting to the equally stunned heir. When he wanted to pay Julia a reward, and Julia refused, I couldn’t help myself from commenting that Julius would be having conniptions if he knew what she was doing, but all I got for my trouble was a thin smile.

During the trip back to Paris, Julia told me that she no longer thought of me as some sort of whiz-bang hacking and code-breaking piece of technology, but more along the same lines of how Julius thought of me.

“Archie, I’ve rather enjoyed your company,” she said. “And of course, you’re very good at what you do. Back in Boston I was only trying to tweak Julius by suggesting that you might not want to return to him when we were done, but now I’d like to make my offer official. If you ever decide you’re tired of being a detective’s assistant and would rather live the life of an international spy, I’d love to have you join me on a permanent basis.”

“I’m flattered, of course,” I said. “I know all I have is a virtual heart, but you know the saying *Home is where the heart is*? What can I tell you, my home is in Boston with Julius. Besides, if I weren’t there pestering him to occasionally take on a case, his funds would dwindle to the point where he’d be unable to eat at the four-star joints he frequents, and he’d have to settle for more common fare, which would be a disaster for him.”

Julia was astute enough to know that she wouldn’t be able to change my mind, so instead of trying she booked a Paris-to-Boston flight for later that afternoon, and afterwards, without her asking me to do so, I hacked into the airline reservation system and once again upgraded her to first-class at no additional charge.

It was the least I could do. After all, thanks to Julia I was able to travel to Europe, solve a murder, uncover a lost masterpiece, and experience my first kiss, even if it was only a virtual one. ●