



BASHERT

a novel by Lior Samson

BASHERT

Also by Lior Samson

The Dome

Web Games
(forthcoming)

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a novel by Lior Samson

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Set in Optima with Lucida Sans heads and title in Mitzvah.

To Lucy, my bashert, whose believing buoys me through my days, and to Frank Samson, z"l, my father, whose lessons in responsibility still reverberate.

~ ~ ~

*In memorium
David Arthur Hahn, 1944-1976*

Prologue

THE DOOR WAS UNMARKED. Every other door along the gray-green basement corridor had a number, as did, to the best of Mitchell Rossing's knowledge, every door to every office, lecture hall, bathroom, or storage closet anywhere on campus. He ran his hand through his sandy, crew-cut hair and stared. He had passed the door on his rounds for weeks without paying any notice, but now, intrigued, he reached for the master key on the ring hanging from his belt.

Mitchell was not supposed to have the master key, but then Mitchell was not even supposed to be at MIT, much less working the night shift as a janitor. In the student records, he was a nineteen-year-old sophomore physics major, class of '66, living, until recently, in Burton House, one of the on-campus dorms; in the personnel records of Buildings and Power, MIT's maintenance and custodial services department, he was twenty-two, a resident of Somerville. To a few close friends—a very few—he was a brilliant, bored kid from Milwaukee who had faked his high school records to get into MIT at the age of sixteen. His friends fully expected him to graduate in a few years at the top of his class. Or end up in jail.

The master key had been easy. By comparing every office key he could get his hands on, he had deduced what he

needed to file away to turn one of his restricted keys into a master that would open any door he wanted.

He glanced up and down the hallway, listening for a moment to the muffled chuffing of a vacuum pump in one of the labs. When he was sure no one was coming around the corner, he inserted and twisted the key. It didn't budge. He jiggled it in and out a few times before the pins dropped into place and the cylinder finally turned.

The door was unexpectedly heavy, and Mitchell had to heave his chunky body against it to get it ajar. He slipped in and partly closed it behind him before turning on his flashlight. The room was narrow and deep and appeared to be nearly full of metallic cylinders in waist-high wooden shipping frames.

"Holy shit!" he whispered as he backed quickly out of the room and closed the heavy door after him. The resonant bang, like the closing of a vault door, echoed down the empty corridor.

Part One: Karl

1

THE DISTANT THRUMMING grew louder as the gurney bounced and rattled down the endless gray hallway. Karl's head hurt and his back ached. What was he doing here? How had he gotten here? He struggled to sort out his surroundings. A nurse leaned over the gurney, a look of concern and annoyance on his face. Suddenly, an astringent mix of aftershave and disinfectant assaulted Karl's nostrils, jerking him fully awake. The gurney dissolved beneath him, and the hospital corridor morphed into the gray and gold interior of an Airbus 340. With courteous impatience, a Lufthansa flight attendant stood beside him, holding out a hot towel saturated with the airline's strangely medicinal signature scent.

"Nein, danke, no thanks," Karl said, waving the towel away while still struggling with his sense of disorientation. For reasons he had never fully deciphered, hospitals had become a recurrent element in his dreams whenever he traveled. They had fascinated and repelled him ever since his emergency surgery as a young man in college.

He twisted around to check the lines at the lavatories four rows back. He was hoping there would be time to wash up and shave. He fiddled unsuccessfully with the elaborate array of buttons on the seat control but managed only to get

his seat part way toward vertical before he gave up and muscled himself erect. A consummate techie, Karl prided himself in his ability to decipher any new technology, but he had a special place on his personal blacklist for Airbus engineers, who, in his opinion, never seemed to get the human factors right, an opinion he was more than ready to express to any traveling companion fortune might put in the adjacent seat.

The line at the toilets was still three deep when the seatbelt light flashed on and the captain came on the PA to request that everyone return to their seats. Karl, one of those rare Americans who truly believed that rules and regulations were for the greater good of all, was the only one who headed back to his seat. As he squeezed past the flight attendant he nodded toward the queue at the back, smiled, and shrugged, as if to say, "What can you do?" It seemed to Karl that modern society, particularly in his own country was drowning in entitlement, in people who thought themselves somehow exempt from the rules.

Karl pressed button after button on the control unit in the arm of his seat until it was finally restored to its fully upright position. He sat down and settled in. He was already thinking about his Plan B, a stop at the Lufthansa lounge before leaving Frankfurt airport. The whole trip had been improvised: an unplanned response to a last-minute call from one of his oldest clients who wanted him to sit in on a product review at the request of a subcontractor in Israel. It did not impress him as cost effective and was not likely to be all that interesting, but he hated to turn down good money.

Boston-Frankfurt was yet another routine that Karl Lustig had mastered in his enduring struggle to order the chaos of his peripatetic life. The moment he boarded the flight, he

would reset his watch to European time, stare at it for a few moments, then shake his head saying aloud, "Whoa, it is getting way past my bedtime." Resetting the mental clock, he called it. Rejecting the trendy tee-totaling approach to air travel of the water-bottle toting set, he always accepted the proffered champagne before takeoff, followed it once airborne with two glasses of whatever passably good German white was being served, and then collapsed into dream-tormented sleep for the remaining five hours over the Atlantic.

As other passengers downed the last bits of what passed for breakfast in an era of airline cutbacks and minimalist amenities, Karl flipped absent-mindedly through the duty-free catalog, then drifted in and out of sleep until the plane hit the tarmac.

The flight, which had been delayed out of Boston for never-specified mechanical reasons, was more than an hour late, so by the time Karl reached the maze of Terminal 1, Frankfurt Airport was becoming an absolute zoo awash in every variant of the human animal. Even the Lufthansa business-class lounge was wall-to-wall with travelers between flights. Karl pushed through a knot of Russian businessmen to reach the bathrooms. On returning, he looked around for a vacant seat. Seeing none, he headed toward the racks of newspapers and searched for the comforting peach color of the *Financial Times*. Slipping one under his arm, he strode back past the courtesy desk and headed down the stairs again. With his laptop over his shoulder and his monogrammed Tumi trailing behind him, Karl zigzagged through the crowds, stopping briefly at the Hertz Gold counter to pick up his keys before heading for the car park.

A light dusting of dry snow, as fine as confectioner's sugar, eddied and swirled on the road as he pulled onto the A3 heading toward Nürnberg. The sun, now risen just above the tree line, sparkled through the airy waves of crystal washing over the Autobahn, creating tiny evanescent rainbows. Accelerating hard, Karl deftly shifted into the high-speed lane with one hand while tuning in "*Antenne Bayern*" with the other. The mostly American rock interspersed with light chatter in German provided just enough stimulation to help keep him alert without distracting him from the demands of driving.

Traffic was heavy but steady at a hundred-and-forty for several minutes before some perturbation sent a double dotted red line of flashing brake lights zipping toward him. Karl smiled. He slowed and expertly shifted lanes in the quick ogive favored by European drivers. To him, this was sport, like a sort of 3D video game requiring three-sixty-degree situational awareness and hair-trigger reflexes. Nearly two hundred kilometers-an-hour one minute and down to eighty the next, with only a car length or two between you and the Mercedes in front. For Karl, the only child of two engineers, it was not a matter of thrills but the challenge of meshing with precision as one more cog among thousands in the fast and fluctuating German highway machine.

Totally absorbed in his driving, Karl almost missed the exit sign for the *Rasthof Weiskirchen*, the rest area that had become his customary stop for coffee and pastry enroute. He checked his mirror, then slowed quickly, calibrating his braking by the blue-and-white striped marker posts streaming past, counting down each 100 meters, all the while conscious of the Fiat on his tail that followed him onto the exit ramp. Once in the rest area, he drove past the pumps

and the café to park his blue Audi well down the lot and away from other cars. He tucked his newspaper under his arm, and headed back to the café, striding briskly in the crisp air.

Inside, the café was bright and noisy. A line had already formed in the self-service area, but there were still plenty of empty tables, particularly in the central non-smoking section. As Karl grabbed a tray, a middle-aged woman in business attire pushed ahead, limping slightly, to slip into line behind him, just edging out a group of loud-talking young Germans. As he slid his tray along past the glass cases filled with sandwiches, pastries, and salads, he fished out a ten-Euro note from his passport wallet and placed it beside his plate. Hearing the woman behind him mutter something in English, he turned just in time to see her fish a credit card from her purse and lay it on her tray. She smiled at him and said, almost apologetically, "I meant to stop at the *Geldautomat* to get some cash. I really hate to charge just a cup of coffee."

Karl nodded and smiled back. Then he noticed her credit card and laughed.

"What?" she said.

"Just this." He fished his wallet out of his jacket again and placed it on his own tray, opened to show an identical credit card: MIT Alumni Association. "Good school," he said with a nod.

"You went to MIT? What course? When?"

"Course 6, class of '67. You?"

"No way! I was class of '67, too. Course 2. I can't believe this. What a coincidence. Imagine the odds. Here we are in the middle of Germany, and...and a classmate just happens to want coffee at the same time at the same rest stop." She

said the last with just the faintest hint of sarcasm, almost as if she didn't believe in mere coincidence. "Fate maybe?" she added with a grin and a tilt of her head.

As she talked, Karl studied her, tracing the lines of her boyish, pleasantly plain face. The auburn highlights in her thick, short hair and her makeup—more than Karl usually liked—showed attention to detail, as did the Hermes scarf pinned artfully around her shoulders. She managed an elegance that made her seem taller than she was. He might have pegged her as being in her mid-forties had he not already known when she graduated from college.

"It really has been a long time," he said. "It was all numbers to us back then, but now I don't even remember what course 2 means. Not that that sort of thing makes a lot of difference in the long haul. As for me, I may have been an EE major, but I never actually did any electrical engineering. I got completely corrupted by a course whose number is still etched in my mind: course 6.41, Introduction to Automatic Computation. It was a life changer. Once I'd written my first Fortran program, I was hooked. Then my fate was sealed by way too many weekends wasted programming on a PDP-1 computer in the basement of building 26. I've been a computer geek ever since in one manner or another.

"Oh, sorry for being rude and not introducing myself properly. I'm Karl Lustig." He put out his hand.

She took it gracefully but firmly. "Maryam Cashman. Good to meet you. What brings you to Germany in the dead of winter?"

"A couple days of meetings in Nürnberg." He shook his head. "Really crucial." He made quotes in the air with his fingers. "You?"

“A trade fair, *Spielwarenmesse Nürnberg*. I’m a buyer for a chain of children’s stores.”

“Ah, yes, the famed International Toy Fair. So, it’s your fault I couldn’t book a room within 20 miles of my meetings,” he said with a wink.

“I suppose then the least I can do is buy you breakfast. No, I insist. *Bitte, alles zusammen*,” she said to the clerk, gesturing at both their trays. “I hope you don’t mind. Would you like to join me over coffee?” She nodded toward a table in the center section with a “*Nichtraucher*” sign on it.

He let her lead the way. She emptied her tray on the table, then slipped it down beside her chair. “Mechanical,” she said as she sat down.

“*Wie bitte?* Er, I mean, say what? You have to forgive me, I’m in my ‘It’s-Tuesday-so-this-must-be-Germany’ mode.”

“Mechanical engineering, course 2, my major at MIT. That ultimately led me into industrial design. In fact, I studied at the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* in Ulm, here in Germany, then got into toys and games. But that’s another story. *Sie sprechen gut Deutsch*,” she said, praising his German.

“*Nur ein bißchen*. Only a little. *Falo um pouco de Português*. *Jeg taler en lidt Dansk*. I speak a little of a dozen languages and not much of any. I suppose it’s iconic. My life has always been a lot like that: a little of this, a little of that, a little here, a little there. Never a lot, but always enough to manage.”

She held her mug in both hands and sipped slowly at her coffee. “So, let me guess. You are a consultant.”

“Yeah, sometimes. Is it the sign on my forehead? Also sort of a journalist. I write a column for a rag called *iTech Weekly* and have a blog that draws pretty well. The column,

advertising on the blog, and a gig now and then for Microsoft or GE or whatever keep me in beer money. Things are not as hot as they were a few years back with the millennium bug scare, but I'm doing all right. Not exactly what I would really want to be doing, but I do get to travel—although more than I would like some of the time. Still, with nothing really to tie me down it's not a bad life."

"You're not married, then," she said, a statement more than a question.

"No. I was...briefly...when I was young. Too young, really. And you?" He snuck a quick glance at her left hand. No ring. She shook her head and took another sip of coffee. "Are you a road warrior, too?"

"In spurts," she answered. "Mostly to major fairs or to check in on a supplier that is not performing up to par. Haifa is home for me now. A long way from Cambridge, but life can take unexpected twists and turns. The voyage begins with such brilliance and direction, doesn't it? In college you think you are going somewhere, somewhere in particular. Usually it's somewhere big. Then you end up in Haifa, buying and selling toys." They both laughed, a quiet puff of a laugh.

"Haifa, huh? It's a real mess in the Middle East these days, isn't it?"

"You can leave off 'these days.' We have had a lot of practice in living with conflict. Maybe too much. Crisis can become habit, just another part of everyday life. Of course it has gotten even messier since your president decided to take on Iraq."

"He's not my president. We didn't even elect him, he just took office. I don't know about you, but my life has certainly gotten a lot more difficult with all the extra security stuff

now. Business travel is certainly more work and less fun, not that there ever was a heap of fun in sleeping sitting up."

"So, what exactly would you like to be doing, then? If you could pick anything in the world, what?" She tilted her head and looked at him expectantly.

"Am I being interviewed for your blog? You do have a way of getting to the point," he said with another quick laugh. "Okay, that's all right, I like that. I think. Well, I suppose I would be writing. Novels. Giving Dan Brown a run for his money. I have a dozen files on my laptop with the first pages of what I am certain could be best sellers, really, but somehow I never get around to writing the rest of the pages. I keep promising myself that I'll spend time writing on the plane or in my hotel room but then I break my promise and..." He trailed off. "You know how it is."

"Maybe you ought to aim higher," she said.

"What? Higher than Dan Brown? Higher than the best selling author since God?"

She looked at him earnestly. "Well, David Mamet for literate dialog. John Irving for subtle character. Or Francine Mathews for fast-paced complexity."

"I know Mamet and Irving, but not Mathews."

"You should check her out. But Brown is a good plotter." She looked briefly out the window behind him then smiled broadly at him. "That's plotter, not plodder."

"Uh huh. What about you? What would you be doing?"

"I don't know, but it's time I was getting out of supply-chain management," she said, absent-mindedly swirling her coffee. "Yes, it is time. I think I've had more than enough of the toys. And the games. Everything has gotten so complicated lately. It all seemed so much simpler in the beginning."

“Speaking of beginnings, MIT really was such an amazing place when we were there, wasn’t it? MIT. The ‘Tool and die works,’ as we called it then. We thought we were ‘tooling’ away at our studies so hard we would die. I suppose it still is amazing, but you always remember your own years in college as the glory days. Anything was possible.” She paused, taking another sip of coffee while staring intently past him out the window. As soon as Karl noticed, she shifted her gaze back to him.

“Do you remember the hacks?” she asked. “Inspired insanity, so many brilliant stunts! I think my favorite of all time was The Great Pumpkin hack. You remember that one? The undergrads who pulled it off had to work feverishly in teams to dangle black painted sheets from the Great Dome and rig the floodlights with orange gels in the few minutes of dusk before the outside lights were turned on. When the floods on the Dome did come on, Boston was treated to the sight of the Great Pumpkin rising across the Charles River.”

“I didn’t see it myself, but I heard about it. I do remember this one guy,” said Karl, “a real character, the consummate hacker. He was absolutely brilliant. And absolutely crazy, I suppose. Also rather charismatic in a geekish sort of way. He drew people to himself, drew them into the circle of his plots and machinations. Do you remember how everything was a ‘comm,’ like the Judicial Committee was JudComm? Well he had formed this unofficial cadre of pranksters that called itself HackComm. They fancied themselves real masters at orchestrating over-the-top stunts.

“One morning the first subway train into the Kendall Square Station fails to stop. The engineer puts the brakes on full, but the train just sails right on through the station and finally stops halfway across the Longfellow Bridge to Boston.

They found lithium grease spread along the tracks. The spokesperson for the T went on and on about how dangerous the stunt was but failed to mention that they had found a handwritten sign at the exact spot where the train had finally skidded to a stop. The guys who pulled it off had done their physics homework and knew it was safe."

Maryam smiled broadly. "No shortage of chutzpah, that's for sure. Although actually it wasn't a sign, just a chalk mark running across the tracks at the point where the front of the first car would stop." She paused, then added, "If I remember correctly." She paused again. "Yes, MIT was sure a hotbed of hackers, a lot of smart kids with no sense of limits. You don't happen to remember the name of that guy, do you?"

"Mmmm, Michael something. No. Can't think of it now. Funny. I can picture him. He had this easy-going good nature and a knowing smile that never left his face. I was just a freshman, but we became friends for a short while, even planned some hacks together." He stopped for a moment, deep in thought. "I lost interest in it all before he did. Maybe I was starting to grow up. Or maybe I just was carrying a heavier course load. I was on a scholarship and didn't want to lose it."

She nodded with an understanding smile. "Do you ever wonder what happened to the hackers? Like this guy. Did he ever grow up? Did he succeed? Or end up in jail? What would you imagine, Mister Next Dan Brown?"

"Never thought much about it. I have no idea where he went or what he did. I have never been very good at keeping track of people. Always moving on, I suppose. Next job, new clients, new apartment, that sort of thing. I think I have always been too busy thinking about what lay around the next curve."

"You know, you could just make it up. The life of an errant genius could make a good novel, don't you think? You could call it," she paused, feigning deep thought, "maybe something like 'Catch Me if You Can.'" She arched her eyebrows as she gave him a silly grin, then glanced out the window over his shoulder again. As if suddenly remembering a forgotten appointment, she quickly pushed herself back from the table. "Well, I better be hitting the road if I'm going to have time to check email before my first vendor meeting. Oh, good luck at Siemens."

Karl started to ask how she figured he was headed for Siemens, but she was already out of her seat and collecting her things off the table. He rose, too, smiling. "Maybe we'll bump into each other in Nürnberg," he said hopefully.

"Doubtful," she said as she brushed past him. "I've a really full calendar this week. But good luck with your novel. I'll look for word of its publication in the alumni news." She winked, then headed for the parking lot.

Karl nodded to her back as he watched her leave, first noticing how she favored her left leg slightly, then shrugging his shoulders for no particular reason. He sat back down to finish his coffee and scan the *Financial Times* before picking up his wallet and bussing the tray back to the drop-off point.

As he returned to his car, Karl didn't notice his new acquaintance watching from a Fiat squeezed in among the lines of parked soft-sided trailer trucks with Eastern European license plates. He was long gone on the Autobahn when the driver rolled down the window and squinted up at a man's face, too silhouetted against the brightening sky to make out, and said, quietly, with a mix of resignation and uncertainty, "Lev?"

THREE DAYS OF CONSULTING all day and mandatory business dinners every night had taken their toll on Karl, who was, despite his gregarious professional persona, an introvert at the core. He also hated the end-of-day return flights from Europe, preferring the brutally short night of the outbound flight to the one ungodly long day on the way back. To make matters worse, for some reason his anticipated upgrade to business class had not cleared, so he had been stuck in cattle class with the tourists and those whom he thought of as the business and professional also-rans.

At Logan Airport, he dragged himself through the serpentine lines of immigration and wearily handed his passport and customs declaration to the agent, who glanced at the passport and said, mechanically, "Welcome back, Mr. Lustig. What took you to Germany?"

"Same old same old, meeting with clients."

The agent scanned the passport nonchalantly, turned the declaration over and marked a red swirl on it.

Karl had expected more scrutiny on his return, given the heightened security, but was actually most anxious about the "food police" from Agriculture. The dogs who sniffed his bag, however, were obviously more interested in drugs or explosives than the cheese he was bringing back from

Germany. He zipped through the green line without a hitch, then stopped off in a men's room to freshen up. Alone in the room, he studied himself briefly in the mirror, giving his tousled salt-and-pepper hair a quick brush and straightening his tie before deciding to take it off altogether. He thought about getting the brush-off from the woman he had met at the rest stop and wondered, as he studied his face, whether he was just getting too old and unappealing. A loner, that's what I am, that's my karma, he thought, as he left and headed for the vast concrete gloom of Logan Airport's Central Parking.

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In the tunnel heading for Boston, traffic was already past peak, but Karl had to twice flash his brake lights at some guy tailgating him. One way or another, there were headlights in his rearview mirror all the way to his Beacon Hill apartment. He was just making the final turn into his street when the lights in his mirror started flashing blue.

Shit, what now? Karl thought. He pulled over as best he could on the narrow street lined with parked cars. He watched as the officer walked up beside his car and shined his flashlight in.

"May I see your driver's license and registration, please?"

Karl stretched to get his registration from the glove compartment, then pulled his wallet from his jacket. His driver's license was not in its usual slot. He checked through the wallet, then started fishing around in his pockets. "I, uh, can't seem to find my license at the moment. I just flew in from Germany and I seem to have mislaid it." He handed his registration to the officer, who studied it under the flashlight.

"Are you the owner of this vehicle?"

"Yes, I'm Karl Lustig. Here, I can show you my passport."

“That won’t be necessary. But you had better find your license or get a replacement right away. Do you know why I stopped you? Your left taillight is out and the brake lights are not working. I’m not going to cite you for driving without a license, but you had better get those lights fixed right away. Okay?” He handed the registration back.

“Yes, thank you, officer. I will. I’ll take care of it right away. My license is probably in my luggage. I’ll find it.”

Karl obsessed over the license and the broken light as he drove the last block and a half. In the small parking lot behind his building, he left the car running as he unloaded his luggage from the back. To his surprise, both taillights were working. He groaned as he thought of the hassles ahead. He knew that a loose connection somewhere in the wiring harness could be the devil to track down.

Even though he was bone tired, once in his apartment, Karl started following his coming-home ritual to the letter, carefully hanging his coat on its hallway peg and his suit jacket in the bedroom closet, moving books from one row to another on the bookshelves lining the hallway to make the proper space for the new novel he had been reading on the plane, sorting the mail, and finally checking his messages. There was a reminder on the answering machine from his editor to check in about the book he was writing plus a couple of messages with only background traffic noise quickly followed by a disconnecting click.

The driver’s license bothered him most. He was not one to misplace things, and he had never before in his life lost his license. After zipping through his email, he spread his folding suit bag open on the bed and started checking every pocket and compartment. He put the heavily wrapped *Butterkäse* secreted with his shirts into the cheese drawer of

his refrigerator, then slid the two bottles of German reds, a Dornfelder and a Lemberger, into the bottom of the little climate-controlled wine keeper in his living room.

As he unpacked his sports jacket, he checked the pockets for the missing license. In the left side pocket his fingers closed on something cold and metallic. He pulled out a small, filigreed cylinder on a silver chain; it danced and glinted in the overhead light. At first he was unsure of what he was looking at, then recognized it as a mezuzah. What in hell is this doing in my jacket? he thought. How did it get there? And whose is it?

Karl walked slowly into the living room, set the mezuzah down on his coffee table, then went to the kitchen to pour himself a glass of viognier from a bottle in the fridge. He returned and slumped down on the couch to stare off into space and slowly drift into an exhausted and anxious sleep. He dreamed he was stuck in economy class with a planeload of kibbutz-bound college students on an El Al flight to Tel Aviv.

KARL WAS AWAKENED by the tweeting of his cell phone. The caller ID showed “out of area.” He looked at the time and guessed that it might actually be from overseas. Probably Dieter Braun calling from Siemens to follow up on their meeting. He flipped the phone open and put it slowly to his ear. “Yes?” he said.

Traffic noise. Click.

He closed the phone and put it back on his belt clip. Time to get organized, he thought. What day is it? What do I have to do? Take a shower and change, for one thing. Oh, yes, the teleconference with David.

David Edelmann was his editor at Harrison-Interbooks. Karl, who was nearly a year behind on delivering a book manuscript, dreaded even talking with David. Like his unwritten novels, Karl’s latest technical book—on the arcana of client-side scripting for Web applications—was only a few thousand words of notes and reams of good intentions. Another apologetic, excuse-filled chat with David was the last thing Karl wanted. He cradled his head in his hands for several seconds. He had long believed that he was immune to jet lag, but in recent years was finding his belief eroding. Mornings like this one sorely tested his faith.

After a quick shower and change of clothes, he marched into the kitchen to pour himself the last cup of coffee from the pot he had, as usual, stashed in the fridge before leaving for Germany, then shoved the mug into the microwave. As he waited for the coffee to heat, he absent-mindedly fiddled with the mezuzah. He had, of course, seen them before, but he had never actually held one. He was surprised when the end came off in his hand to reveal the scroll inside. He pulled it out and unrolled it. The tiny piece of parchment paper was covered with minute Hebrew letters that meant nothing to him but carried the mystique of an undeciphered message in an alien script. He twisted it tightly and stuffed it back into its case.

“Now there’s an idea,” he said out loud. He looked across the room at the digital clock on the microwave. “Just enough time to make it to David’s office.” Years of living alone had left Karl with the habit of talking to himself, which he struggled, not always successfully, to keep in check when he was around others.

He stuffed the mezuzah in his pocket, then quickly transferred his coffee into a travel mug. In the living room, he grabbed his car keys off the end table, reached for his laptop beside the sofa, and headed out the door.

Leaving Boston, Karl had to resist staring upward at the dizzyingly elegant patterns formed by the cable stays of the Zakim Bridge. Both his parents had worked on bridges, and this one had become one of his favorite local sights. To him it was the near-perfect expression of an engineering aesthetic that his parents had always preached, one that crafted beauty from purpose.

Heading toward David’s office in Woburn, Karl found the northbound traffic on I93 to be particularly heavy for after

nine in the morning, and it was several minutes before he became fully aware of the identical black Lincolns crowding him in front and behind. He switched lanes and slowed. They jockeyed for position and soon were boxing him in again. Damned Massachusetts drivers, Karl thought, even limo drivers are obnoxious these days. He was so preoccupied with the two cars that kept crowding him, that he almost missed his exit.

He checked his mirror, flipped on his signal, and made a quick “S” onto the off ramp, all in a single move. To his surprise, the car on his tail followed expertly. Karl shook his head. It was beginning to seem like he was being followed. A phrase from his in-flight reading flashed into his mind: surveillance awareness. He’d been surprised to find the Francine Mathews spy thriller in an airport bookstore. Remembering that the author had been mentioned by the woman at the *Rasthof*, he had bought it on impulse. No, this is ridiculous, he thought, a paranoid hypothesis if ever there was one. Still, he supposed, there should be a way to test the hypothesis.

He eyed the car on his tail while waiting to make his left turn into the traffic on the one-way street. He tromped the accelerator to pull precisely into a break just big enough for one car, then signaled and zigzagged expertly across three lanes of traffic and into the far lane. As soon as he cleared the underpass, he pulled into the breakdown lane, then guiltily and cautiously backed up to the onramp to head north again on the Interstate. When he reached route 128, he took the southbound exit of the cloverleaf, then looped again to reverse direction back toward his exit from I93. Just like the Autobahn, he thought, only here all the rest of the people on the road are Boston drivers—idiots.

There was no sign of his escort when he turned into the industrial park, but he deliberately passed the entrance for Harrison-Interbooks and pulled into the second driveway. He parked behind the first building, locked his car, and crossed through the trees that separated the two sections of the park. Ducking behind a van, he waited and watched. Nothing. He felt silly.

At David's office on the second floor of the Harrison Building he knocked, then opened the door to peek around it with a grin on his face.

"Wow. To what do I owe this?" David said, rising from behind his glass and chrome desk and extending his hand to Karl. The desk was an island of modern-design order amidst a reef of chaos, with stacks of books and papers all but surrounding it. David's pastiche of plaid jacket, turtleneck, and blue jeans—sartorial testimony to his artsy past—were a better match for the messy perimeter than for the corporate center of his little atoll. Like Karl, he harbored fantasies of writing a great novel, or at least a best seller. Like Karl, he invariably deferred to the demands of "real" work. "You haven't been to my office in years. I thought we were having a teleconference this morning. I was just about to ping you at your apartment."

Karl grabbed a chair and pulled it close to the desk. "This may seem a bit odd, but, well, we've been friends and have worked together for a lot of years."

David ran a hand through his curly hair and raised his eyebrows. "That sounds like a lead-in for a favor if ever I heard one," he cracked.

"No. No favors. Just thought you'd be able to tell me something about this?" He reached out and opened his hand above David's, dropping the mezuzah into it.

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