

A short visit ...

The dirty light of a murky dawn was just beginning to seep into the inky stairwell leading to CedrosCM's basement apartment.

A few hours earlier he had fallen asleep on his army-surplus cot. The small TV in the corner by the front door had been left on all night but the volume was turned off, so it didn't disturb his fitful sleep. CM rarely listened to the sound anyway, only stared at the hypnotic images. The screen emitted a flickering curtain of blue-grey light that threw dancing shapes on the walls. One might have thought the Earth's magnetic field had shifted and Aurora Borealis was now shimmering inside CedrosCM's London flat, his "base of operations," as he grandly called it.

An empty can of spaghetti—last night's dinner—was lying in the sink, along with an unwashed spoon. The flickering TV was running a game show sponsored by the popular laundry detergent, Bam! Excited contestants jumped up and down, vying with each other for small cash prizes.

The movements beneath CM's eyelids were interrupted by a sound—a slight scuffling at the front door. The lids stopped moving and one of them opened part way.

"Must be my old friend, Mr. Rat," he mumbled, "coming home from market."

More scuffling, louder now.

CM raised his head just as a fist-sized rock smashed the narrow window beside the door. As the rock landed on the floor a black-gloved hand punched a wider opening in the jagged glass, then reached through carefully and unlatched the door. Two dark figures swarmed into the room, switched on electric torches and shone them directly into CM's startled face.

"What the bloody hell are—"

"Shut up! You don't talk 'til we tell you to, mate. You just listen and you listen good—if you fancy them two kneecaps of yours, that is."

CedrosCM started to protest but the other intruder jammed a

wadded rag into his mouth and slapped him across the face. Then both men pulled him up by the arms and taped his wrists and ankles with several layers of white athletic tape.

“Mmm-mmph!” protested CM, but he only received another slap for his effort.

“Now shut up and listen. We ain’t got much time. The boss don’t like this crap you been writin’, get it? He wants you to dump the Bakersfield shit. Says you gotta pick some nice place, like Liverpool or Manchester, maybe Hounslow or Bath. Could even be London. Any place but Bakersfield. You got that? But make it nice and pretty. So it’s real simple, fuckhead, what I’m telling you: You gotta write that dumb fuck out of Bakersfield to somewhere else by tonight. Get it?”

CM could only nod his head. The rag made his mouth dry and he wanted to ask for a glass of water, but he thought better of it.

The other brute, whose name was Giles, had been dying to say something as well, but since Alfie always did the talking Alfie got to talk first, naturally.

“Yeah,” Giles finally blurted out when Alfie had finished. “By tonight. Get it? You dumb fuck?”

And just for emphasis, and to establish his own credibility, Giles kicked CedrosCM in the shin.

“Mmmm-mmph!?” CM objected, obviously in pain.

But before he could push the rag out of his mouth with his tongue, to cry out for help, Alfie and Giles were already walking out of the apartment, breathing heavily, their boots crunching on the broken glass.

As they reached the doorway, Alfie pushed the television off its stand. It crashed on the floor and the cathode ray tube exploded with a sound like popping corn. Smoke hissed from the broken hulk of the plastic cabinet.

“Oh, sorry, mate, was you watchin’ that?” said Alfie.

Not to be outdone, Giles left the door standing wide open.

CM stared after them, shaking. At the bottom edge of the open door, something caught his eye. It was the dark shape of a skinny rat,

possibly the same one he had seen the night before. CM succeeded in working the rag out of his mouth, spitting with distaste. He took a deep, wheezing breath and coughed once.

The sound announced CM's presence to the rat. Its eyes glistened like drops of black oil and its whiskers twitched continuously, as it took in the bound human figure at a glance.

"So, you're back, are you? Done scavenging for the night? Make yourself useful, then, and give me a hand, mate. Chew this tape off my wrists and ankles, and I'll give you that cut of cheese I promised. Come on now, in you go. Come on, it's in the fridge." There was a quaver of entreaty in CM's voice.

The rat paused at the threshold of the dank apartment, sniffing the air, then, as if making a decision, it turned on its tail and trundled off into the dwindling shadows.

After a few minutes of struggle, CedrosCM managed to free himself by slicing the tape on his wrists with a sharp piece of broken plastic on the TV cabinet.

He was still shaking, quite upset by his rough treatment at the hands of Alfie and Giles. Who was their boss anyway? Arthur Compton? Impossible. Zane Sharp? Not likely. Hollingsworth? Hmmm. No, not Hollingsworth. It could have been the boys at Transition, but what did they care where Arthur Compton ended up or who he was now?

No, it had to be someone higher up. Someone in the Narrative Section.

He was walking out of the loo, zipping his fly, when it hit him.

"Of course! Yes! It was that heartless bastard, Truffington. Had to be. Or maybe even Brabazon. The two little Lord Fauntleroy's, their snot-filled noses up in the air— Lord this and Sir that! Yes, Your Highness, No, Your Lordship."

CedrosCM rubbed his wrists. They were red where the tape had dug in, cutting off the circulation during his torment. He drew a glass of water and took a slow, pensive sip.

"There's got to be a way I can get back at them," he said aloud, vowing revenge in vague, as yet unspecified terms. But he was brought up short by an alarming thought, a shaft of wisdom disrupting

the lurid pleasure of his vengeful fantasies like an arrow.

“Wait a minute, CM. Don’t forget your new friends, Alfie and Giles. You can’t just march into Truffington’s office and demand a pound of flesh. In the first place, he doesn’t owe you any flesh—you owe him. In the second place, you won that bloody lottery, and if you don’t come up with another hundred words by tonight, why, Mr. Alfie and Mr. Giles will be paying you another courtesy call. Only this time they’ll bring their English Willow cricket bats.”

CM shuddered.

“Besides, you don’t want to become the next Deathling Crown Lottery prize yourself, do you?”

As a bachelor living alone, CM was accustomed to these dialogues with himself. It had never occurred to him that both voices—and a plethora of others—resided in the same breast. So he carried on the conversation with all the seriousness of a tormented victim receiving the counsel of a trusted friend.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right there,” CM replied. “I don’t want to end up in Arthur Compton’s shoes. It’s bad enough writing him all over the map when he’s got no idea who he is or who’s doin’ stuff to him. He better not find out.”

“Now you’re making sense, CM,” the voice said soothingly.

“Right, right. I don’t even know if he’s still in Transition. Maybe he broke out and he’s walking the streets of London right now, in his hospital Johnny, with no memory and no ID. Wouldn’t that be something?”

“So, what would be the best thing for you to do now, CM?” The Socratic voice was leading gently.

“Now? What I should do now is . . . take Alfie’s advice and write Zane Sharp out of Bakersfield.”

“That’s good, CM, now you’re talking. Are you going to explain to Zane what you’re doing?”

“Explain? Hell, no. I don’t owe him explanations. A hundred bloody words, that’s all I owe anybody.”

“Hmmm,” the voice replied. “Perhaps.”

“What? Perhaps what?”

“Well, it’s just that you want Zane Sharp to cooperate with you, don’t you?”

“Why should he cooperate with me? I write and he does what I tell him.”

“Yes, of course. It’s just that so many writers have said that their characters take on a life of their own. I shudder to think what might happen if Zane Sharp got up on the wrong side of the bed one morning, so to speak. And what if he were to pick up a newspaper and discover that *you* won the prize and *you’re* the one narrating him? That he’s alive only because he’s being narrated? And you with your name and photo plastered all over the front page?”

“You just leave that to me.”

“Sure, CM. You know best. After all, you’re the writer, right?”

“Damn right. Now let me get to work. I’ll have me an early lunch down at the pub—let’s make it bangers and mash today, smothered in onions, and maybe a pint or two—then I’ll find a new place for Mr. Zane Sharp. Some place nice and pretty, like Alfie said, maybe even balmy. Yeah, that’s it, nice and balmy.”

The voice had nothing to add to this sensible plan. It was as though the two voices had now become one, and CedrosCM suddenly realized he was alone in his flat.

He dressed quickly, stepped daintily over the broken glass and around the overturned TV, didn’t bother to lock the door, trudged up the steps and followed the smell of meat and grease down the block to the Bucket O’ Blood, which was already open for business.

Unlike last night, however, when he had to borrow Nigel’s touchy-feely pad, this morning CedrosCM brought his own second-hand laptop. No more wasting time with last minute appeals to Truffington or the Royal Commission. He would take care of Truffington and Brabazon later. Today he would get a good start on the story—a couple of pints and he’d be ready to go.

As he pulled the familiar door handle at the Bucket O’ Blood, a picture suddenly began to form in his mind of what he was going to do with Mr. Zane Sharp.

Revision . . .

CedrosCM sat down and opened his laptop and called out his order to Colin, the longstanding, long suffering barkeep at The Bucket O' Blood, while he quickly pecked out a revision of his first submission. No one said revisions were not allowed even in first drafts so here he was hard at it following the train of his idea as it choo—chooed across his mind's eye.

First, he'd scuttle Mr. Zane Sharp back from Bakersfield to Transition, make him Arthur Compton again and have him—as Compton—escape. Those clowns at the Commission would have a bird over that! That's the ticket!

Cedros typed away not giving any thought to word limits or logic knowing that he'd be satisfying someone else's displeasure with his narration set in Bakersfield, but relishing the sense of power in his fingertips he now knew he had. How will they react when Mr. Compton appears . . . ?

Here, his musings were cut short as Colin dumped the plate of bangers and mash on his table and managed to splash beer foam onto CedrosCM's computer.

“Jesus, Colin, you'd think after all these years you'd have some grace in the serving department. Now look what you've done. And I'm under deadline! Fetch me a towel, man, and quick, before these suds fry my lappy.”

“Serving ain't my gig, CM, that's Jinny O's specialty and she's late as hell. Out partying too late, that gal. She's gonna get herself in some real goose wallow if she don't watch herself. Know what I'm saying?” Colin had his hands on his hips, his dirty apron hanging like a sheet off his bouncing belly.

“Fuck it, Colin. Stop side-tracking and get me the damn towel.” Cedros turned his lap-top over and shook out what suds he could, his face twisting and contorting as if that would help, hoping against hope the computer had saved his precious words. As he shook the computer he wondered: *Where in the narrative process did the actual effect take*

place? As he wrote? After his submission? Where? When?

Fallout . . .

Truffington looked up from his desk as his secretary, Owen Darby, craned through the doorway.

“What is it, Darby?” Truffington was in a gruff mood this morning.

“Excuse me, sir, but Lord Brabazon is here to see you.”

“Brabazon? Here? What the blazes is he doing out and about at this hour?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t know. He wouldn’t give me a hint, but I can tell you he looks like he’s brassed off—uh, in my opinion, sir.”

Truffington was about to reply when Brabazon shoved Darby aside and marched into the room.

“That’ll be all, Darby,” snorted Brabazon, whose face was glowing like a bed of coals. Brabazon walked stiffly toward Truffington and slammed a newspaper down on the desk as Darby scuttled out of the room.

“What’s all this rubbish?” Brabazon demanded.

Truffington deliberately reached for his glasses, buying time. He wanted to defuse whatever it was that had got Brabazon’s goat. Taking care to adjust his glasses, he finally reached for the tabloid—a tattered copy of *The Sun*—and focused on the enormous headline:

**“DCL SELL-OUT TO BAKERSFIELD!
BRABAZON SHOULD RESIGN!”**

Truffington quickly scanned it silently, then began to read it aloud: “DCL Sell-out to Bakersfield! Brabazo—“

“Yes, yes, I can read well enough, you blithering idiot, that’s why I’m here!” interrupted Brabazon, approaching apoplexy. “I want to know what this is about! You’ve got a bloody traitor on your staff somewhere!”

“Hmmm” was all Truffington could muster at the moment. His mind raced like a lab-rat trying to escape the maze.

“Well?” Brabazon knew Truffington was dragging his feet. “What are you going to do about this? You’ve got to stop the leak and stop it fast!”

“Yes, I can see we might have a leak somewhere, Lord Brabazon.”
 When things got tense between these two noblemen, all class camaraderie broke down—it was strictly dog-eat-dog. And since, as Royal Commissioner, Brabazon was top dog, Truffington was reduced for the moment to servile bowing and scraping.

“Well, certainly, Your Lordship, I’ll drop what I was doing and get on it bang off. Of course, we do have a staff of over four hundred here, so it might take a while.”

“I don’t care if you have to sack the entire rotten lot of them. Go round up a bunch of Piccadilly pedophiles to staff your bloody Section if you have to! Just find the leak and stop it!”

“Your Lordship,” Truffington began, but Brabazon was beyond all reason. And with not so much as a fare-thee-well he executed a crisp military about-face and marched out of Truffington’s office, slamming the door as he left.

At once crestfallen and outraged, Sir Randall reached for the button under his desk and buzzed Darby into the room.

“Yes, sir?”

“Darby, I want an organizational chart of the entire Narrative Section, a duties-and-responsibilities list, an operations flow-chart, office and personal phone records and a print-out of all email accounts. While you’re at it I want a complete list of all employees’ spouses and lovers—current and jilted—a list of recently fired employees, plus anything else you can think of. Get Nelson from Personnel to give you a hand. On second thought, Nelson is a suspect. You need an outsider. Someone you can trust.”

While Truffington was rattling off his demands, Darby madly scribbled on a small, cream-colored pad. At the first opportunity he looked up and said, “Excuse me, sir, but what is our mission?”

“Our mission, Darby, is to find the bastard responsible for *this!*”
 And he thumped the wretched scandal sheet with his fist.

“Oh yes, yes, I see, sir,” said Darby, nervously retracting his neck after reading the garish headline. In the process, his left shoe slowly ground a depression in the thick carpeting of Truffington’s office.

“Yes, now I understand the problem, sir. I wonder if perhaps we should put Alfie and Giles on the case?”

“Are you out of your mind, you bloody fool? For all I know those two morons are the ones behind this!” Truffington was showing signs of overheating—beads of sweat had formed on his lower lip, his neck was red and the carotid artery pounded visibly. He jammed a finger behind the Windsor knot on his tie, and pulled the starched collar forward to allow some heat to escape.

“Is it hot in here, Darby?”

Darby glanced quickly at the thermostat on the wall.

“Emmmm, it’s actually a bit chilly at the moment, sir. Shall I turn it up?”

“No, damn it! Never mind that. We’ve simply got to get some professional help, Darby. Someone with no connection to the Narrative Section. Must stay well clear of all that muck.”

“Well, sir, if you don’t mind my suggesting, there is a bloke I tip a pint with every fortnight or so. Right handy with his fists, too. Specializes in computer searches, investigations, that sort of thing. Name’s Reginald. I could call him in, if you’d like.”

“You say he’s private?”

“Yes, sir, got his start with Scotland Yard, he did. Most discreet chap. Tight-lipped. He could tell a pretty tale or two but you’d never get him to talk. Took me two years just to find out what he did.” Darby ratcheted himself up onto his toes. It was all he could do to avoid clicking his heels like a Nazi officer.

“That’s just the ticket, then,” murmured Truffington. “Tight mouth, hard fists, quick brain. Outsider, independent. Yes, just the ticket. All right, Darby, call your man—Reginald, was it? But make sure he keeps it mum or I’ll hang him out to dry. This is no time to be muddying the waters. Your Reginald must be the very soul of discretion.”

“Very good, sir. I’m sure he will be, sir. And the press?”

“Oh, yes, the stinking press.” Darby’s phone had already begun ringing in the other room. “That’ll be the hyenas now. Yes, Darby, just issue a standard boilerplate denial. Keep them at bay for a while.

Reel in this Reginald of yours, and then go fish up those records for me. Now snap to it!”

“Yes sir.” Darby backed out of the office and quietly closed the door. Back at his desk, he picked up the phone and dialed a number by memory.

“Reggie? Darby here. Got a job for you, mate, a real plum. Get on over here as soon as you can.” Darby listened for a moment. “Oh, yeah, yeah, no problem there. Big budget, all expenses, no holds barred. But you’ve got to jump on this one, mate, or the plum goes to some other lucky bloke.”

Darby slammed the phone into its cradle then picked it up again and dialed Maintenance. “Fergus, it’s Owen Darby. Say, I need a couple of folding tables up here in Truffington’s office as soon as you can get them here. What? No, forget the boiler for now. I need those tables. Top priority. Then you can go back to your bloody boiler.”

He slammed the phone down again—a totally unnecessary gesture. But Darby was developing a bad case of the willies, and slamming down the phone helped. Next he began pulling out file drawers, thumbing through the index tabs and drawing up a quick list while waiting for Fergus to bring up the tables.

Meanwhile, Sir Randall Truffington III, scion of wealth and privilege, overseer of the coveted Deathling Crown Lottery, slowly swiveled his chair until he faced the window behind his desk. Steepling his fingers, he gazed at the dreary London skyline.

“When I find the bastard, I’ll kill him,” he muttered venomously. “Or her.”

Truffington's Dream . . .

After his nerve-cracking run-in with Lord Brabazon, and a day spent spitting out spiteful orders to Owen Darby, Sir Randall Truffington III decided to forego his usual stop at the Charter Club in favor of a quiet evening in his study. After all, Brabazon was the last person he wanted to run into—and he was sure to be at the Club.

“The usual, sir?” It was Quirino, Truffington’s Portuguese driver.

“No, Quirino, we’re going straight home tonight. Call Adélia and ask her to put a little snack together, would you?”

“Of course, sir.” Quirino rolled up the window inside the Bentley and called his wife to warn her that Lord Truffington would be dining at home.

“Tonight? But no time to cook!” Adélia complained.

“Just do somet’ing quick, Adélinha, *só alguns petiscos*. Just some snacks.”

So Adélia hurried off to the kitchen to put something together.

Once at home, Truffington stepped into his slippers, donned his paisley smoking jacket with the worn velvet collar, and sat down to Adélia’s version of a quick “snack”—*rissois, croquetes de carne, pasteis de bacalhau*, and a chilled *copo de vinho verde*.

Then he withdrew into the dark-paneled study illuminated by sconces and a floor lamp. Having provisioned himself for the long haul with a Lalique crystal decanter of Macallan single-malt and his favorite Glencairn diamond-cut whiskey glass, he sank into his tufted leather armchair, lifted his feet onto the matching ottoman and took a slow sip of Macallan.

It had been a foul day, but Truffington finally allowed himself a satisfied sigh.

Molecule by molecule, he thought, savoring the rare spirits.

Finally ready for work, Truffington drew a black folder onto his lap. CedrosCM, the Narrative Section snitch and the London tabloids—not to mention Brabazon—may have ruined his day, but they were not going to ruin his evening. He ran his fingers over the gilt embossed crest on the cover, in this case, the Royal Arms of

England—three lions passant gardant in pale Or armed and langued Azure. The label on the folder had been executed in Darby’s perfect calligraphic hand. It consisted of two lines: *DCL Grand Prize: Mr. Arthur Compton*, and *Winner: Mr. CedrosCM*. Below that was a clerical notation and date with a Narrative Section emblem stamped over it in purple ink.

The folder was slim, compared to others, since CedrosCM had only submitted a few narratives to date. What bulk there was consisted mainly of administrative forms, waivers, legal boilerplate, field interviews and the like. But tonight Truffington was not interested in administrative details so much as the stories themselves, especially the characters. To tell the truth, he had been troubled about this case well before Brabazon had barged into his office this morning. Something about it was nagging him, though he couldn’t say what.

The next sip of Macallan began to undo the feeling of a hangman’s noose around his neck. Inching in the direction of mellow reverie, he turned the pages slowly—reading, sipping, thinking.

The first pages provided background on Arthur Compton, former CEO of Reticular Medicinals. *What the bloody hell are reticular medicinals, anyway?* Truffington wondered. He kept thumbing. *Nickname: Bulldog Compton. Must mean he’s a tenacious bastard. That’s how you get to be CEO of anything these days. Got to be a tenacious sociopathic bastard, a bit like Brabazoom perhaps—yes, Bulldog Brabazon. Humphh!*

Well, that was an unexpected bit of bile coming from Truffington, who usually got on well enough with Old Boy Brabazoom. But the outrageous display at the office this morning was over the top, really—*totally unnecessary!* Truffington sipped and fumed. The Macallan, it seems, had not yet completely erased the bitterness of the day. Finding nothing new in the Compton material, he pulled out a different sheet, one of CM’s narrative posts. He had just begun reading when something pulled him up short.

“Hello, what’s this?” he said *sotto voce*. He looked again at the text and saw a reference to Zane Sharp and Mississippi.

“Wait a minute, something’s off-kilter here.” He shuffled the papers again, adjusted his reading glasses and looked more closely still. “It can’t be.” Comparing the dates on two different pages, he read aloud from the Narrative Section file copy:

“Zane Sharp. Gender: Male. Age: 43. Height: 185.42 cm (6’ 1”). Weight: 65.77 kg (145 lbs.). Birthplace: Biloxi, Mississippi. Siblings: 9. Occupation: Odd jobs. Marital status: Single. Smoker? Yes. Alcohol? Yes. Illicit drug use? Yes. Criminal record? Yes (see attached sheet). Current domicile? Bakersfield, CA, USA.”

A typical file, one of thousands. What had hooked Truffington’s attention and had him wriggling like a fish, were the *dates*. According to the sheet in his hand, Zane Sharp had entered the Narrative Section’s administrative force-field two weeks *before* CedrosCM had invented him, according to the date on his narrative submission.

To compound the mystery, a Post-It note had been slapped onto the bottom of the biographical page. Dashed off in a hasty scribble, it read: “Just arrived at Transitio—” The word was obviously meant to be “Transition,” but was unfinished. Instead, it abruptly trailed off in a sharp sloping line that creased and tore the paper.

“Hmmmm. Something fishy going on here,” said Truffington, descending to the vernacular. “Possibly even foul play!”

Though it was against his policy, Truffington reached into his pocket and withdrew his cell phone, which he had turned off. No cell phone use after hours was the law. But this situation was different. He speed-dialed Darby’s number. This was an emergency-only procedure between the two of them.

“This is Darby.” A loud clatter rang in Truffington’s ear from the background tumult.

“Darby, can you hear me? Truff here. Where the hell are you, man?”

“Me?” answered Darby. “I’m down at the ... I’m at the Bucket O’ Blood, sir. Just having a pint with Reggie, the private eye—I mean, Reginald, the detective.”

“Oh, you mean your man, Reginald? Yes, yes, that’s good. Well, listen, I know it was a long day, but I want you to do something for me.”

There was a pause. “Of course, sir. Anything. You can always count on ol’ Owen Darby, you can, yep.” A slight slur suggested the fourth or fifth pint.

“I want you to go to the office and dig up anything you can on Mr. Zane Sharp. But Darby, I need all information *prior to* his appearance in CedrosCM’s first posts. Anything at all. And call me on this number when you’ve got it. What? No, I don’t care what time it is. Just call.” Another pause. “Well, then, wake me up, for God’s sake!”

Truffington pressed the Off button, dropped the phone into his pocket and reached for the crystal decanter. The sumptuous spirits flowed into the Glencairn glass in a warm burble, but not the whole glass this time—Truffington needed a clear head. Once the glass was empty he leaned back, steepled his fingers out of habit, and closed his eyes. *Just going to rest my eyes for a moment.* His mind had slowed appreciably after the frenetic pace of the day, along with the loosening effect of the scotch. *Must separate fact from fantasy in this mess.* His hands fell onto his belly. *Not possible. Compton. Zane Sharp. CedrosCM hadn’t written him yet. Dates wrong. Foul play ...* His chin slumped onto his chest.

Truffington’s eyelids twitched and flickered like bat wings. He was dreaming.

... a graveyard, maybe a dump ... dead bodies here and there ... an abandoned building ... the door opens ... several shambling figures emerge ... they approach me ... Arthur Compton in front—short, squat, powerful ... next comes Zane Sharp, gristly and bony ... another figure, non-descript—it’s CedrosCM, the idiot Prize Winner ... their joints are loose, as if about to fall off, and their movements are jerky and stiff, but they keep shuffling toward me ... I think they’re out to get me ... I try to run ... can’t ... they’re getting closer ... the scene changes ... a crowd is gathered to watch a hanging ... someone mounts the scaffold, a rope around his neck ... I see the face ... it’s me ... the trap-door springs open ... I drop through the hole.

“Arghhhhh!” Truffington shouted frantically as he jerked awake. He looked around, panting. His head wobbled slightly, then came to rest. He stared at the empty glass and the bunch of papers that had fallen on the floor. As he leaned down to pick them up the cell phone rang. He hesitated for three rings, clearing his throat, then answered.

“Truff”—he cleared his throat again—“Truffington.”

“Darby here, sir. I’ve got what you wanted.”

“Well, what is it, Darby? Skip the preamble, just tell me!”

“Seems our boy Zane Sharp has quite a record: assault and battery, petty larceny, grand theft auto, solicitation, malicious mischief, attempted bank robbery and, emmm, impersonating an officer.”

“Sounds like a lovely chap. Where’s he from?”

“Well, that’s the thing, sir. The forms all say Biloxi, Mississippi, but there’s no real birth record, at least none that I can verify. I checked all the databases, Scotland Yard, Interpol, FBI, world-wide. No aliases, but no records either. It’s like he just dropped out of the sky.”

“Where is he now?”

“It gives his domicile as Bakersfield, but his last known whereabouts as ... London.”

“What about Transition? Did you check Transition?”

“Yes, sir, I checked. That’s another funny thing. Some mix-up apparently. Hard to know what’s straight. All hell seems to have broken loose down there. You know about Compton’s escape? Well, that coincided with what may be Sharp’s last known sighting. But they can’t get anything out of Clive Harbaugh. He seems to have gone off a bit, sir.”

“What do you mean, ‘gone off’?”

“I mean gone off in the head. He seems to have lost his marbles—temporarily, at least. Doc Schroeder is treating him at the moment. Promises he’ll bring him around, snap him out of it.”

“Well, yes, if he doesn’t snap him altogether, that is. Schroeder’s a windbag, Darby, everybody knows it—and a dangerous one at that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But never mind that. As soon as Harbaugh ‘snaps out of it,’ I want his full report. Nothing else from Transition?”

“Afraid not, sir. It’s a royal mess down there.”

“So, we’ve got a criminal named Zane Sharp running loose, but he doesn’t have a past beyond Bakersfield. Who knows what CedrosCM is up to? And Arthur Compton escaped from Transition, but nobody knows where he is either.”

“Correction, sir. Reginald told me they’re holding Compton down at Police Headquarters.”

“What? They’ve got Compton?”

“Yes, sir. They’re holding him now, sir.”

“Well, make sure they keep him there, Darby. I think we’d better plan a little visit to Police Headquarters in the morning. Call the night desk right now; make the arrangements. We’ll convene at my office at 10:30 AM, then caravan to Police Headquarters for an 11:00 AM interview with this so-called ‘Bulldog’ Compton. We’ll find out just how tough he is.”

“Very good, sir. Will that be all for now?”

“Yes, Darby, that’s all. Now go get some sleep. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir. Good night, sir.”

Truffington rang off without a reply.

Outside, a lone street-light, dwarfed by overhanging London plane-trees, shone up through the second-floor window, casting blurred shadows of the quivering leaves onto the ceiling over Truffington’s head.

He called out for warm milk with brandy, having forgotten that Adélia had already left.