



The Phantom Corpse

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Family of Man Press

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CHAPTER ONE

The Phantom Corpse

Testing the lore, small boys tried to fry eggs on the sidewalks. Barefoot teen boys in low slung, baggy shorts, strutted, bare chested, in the vicinity of girls. It had been an unbearably hot, June day there in the city. Undulating waves of heat rose from the streets and distorted the view. The air hung heavy, dripping in humidity, only adding to the insufferable discomfort for those who lived and worked there. The elderly remained inside – the lucky ones close to fans or air conditioners. Dogs panted, tongues extending limp from their open mouths. Cats sought shadows and slept on their backs paying even less attention than usual to those around them. With nightfall, a breeze developed out of the north and wove its way through the damp air around tall buildings to moderate, somewhat, the lingering heat.

There on the roof of the building in which Mark and Amy lived – separate apartments, although Mark couldn't understand why – the evening air seemed bearable. When circumstances permitted, they often spent their quiet time together up there, usually pursuing some combination of studying, socially relevant conversation and intimate moments. They were college juniors, each enrolled in a final summer course – the only obstacles left on their roads toward senior standing. Amy dreamt of a one person show at the Museum of Art and Mark's hope was to be responsible for the next seismic leap in internet science. Between scholarships and grants they would both graduate owing virtually nothing. Their forever love was clear, but they had only occasionally talked about marriage.

Life had been good for them – supportive middle class families, jobs as teens for spending money, honor roll academic performance, "B" list social lives, and they had grown up generally happy and contented, developing a robust social conscience. Some would call their lives unremarkable. Some would call them safe. In their minds, they both characterized their first two decades as having been

acceptable, tilting toward boring, consumed by preparation for the future. They were looking forward to lives filled with guarded excitement and some degree of celebrity as they moved on into adulthood. Just how a gentle souled painter and a timid brainiac would find those things, completely escaped them.

By ten o'clock, it was dark up there ten stories above the street lights and blinking, pink and green neon signs. They had spread their blanket in the usual spot on the east side of the enclosure that surrounded the tops of the ventilation ducts. The area had been in the shadow, protected from the afternoon sun, so the tar and chat surface remained cool – relatively speaking. There was a power outlet in a small covered box for use by maintenance from which Mark had run a more or less permanent extension cord to power the desk lamp they left in place there. It was secluded and private, although in nearly three years there at their hideaway they had never encountered another soul.

So, it was startling and a bit unnerving when the door opened in the small, frame structure at the top of the stairwell some twenty-five feet west of them. The shadowy figure of a large man exited onto the flat, black, surface. He stopped briefly and looked around, randomly moving the beam from his flashlight one place and then another. Presently, he stepped off toward the west edge of the roof. A two-foot-high wall extended up from the brick sides of the building, enclosing the roof area as if it were a huge pen. Its design was strictly cosmetic and offered no real protection from falling over except, perhaps, to toddlers and turtles.

Mark had immediately turned off their light. He and Amy watched, remaining hunkered down, out of sight. The man walked with a limp – more accurately, he drug his left leg and foot – step, slide; step, slide. Neither of them remembered having ever seen him before.

“You don't think he's going to jump, do you?” Amy whispered grasping Marc's arm.

“Can't know that.”

“Should we let him know we're here?”

“Never confront an unknown being in the dark – a hard and fast rule by which I've managed to stay alive for almost

twenty-two years.”

Mark’s single act of bravery during that span of years had been rescuing a cat from a tree. It belonged to the grandmother of a girl he had taken a shine to in 8th grade. He climbed the trunk, hesitantly scooted out onto the branch, pulled the animal close to his chest and made his way back to the trunk and down to the safety of the ground. The girl thanked him. The grandmother kissed him on his cheek. That was just the reverse of the scenario he had anticipated. Mostly, at that point, he had just been thankful his pants were still dry.

Presently, the door at the top of the stairs opened again and a second man stepped out onto the roof.

“Isn’t that the building Super?” Amy asked.

“Hard to see in the dark and shadows. Oh. Yes. I think it is.”

“This is odd, don’t you think?” she said.

“Probably wouldn’t be if we understood the reason.”

Amy rolled her eyes. Mark had a way of denigrating supposition, opinion, and speculation, which sucked much of the pleasure out of conversation from Amy’s perspective.

The super – his name was Henry, Henry Roberts – crossed the roof directly toward the first man whose sizeable silhouette continued to face away from them looking out into space across the narrow alley to the taller, brick building beyond.

“Mr. Johnson?” Henry said hesitantly as if asking for confirmation.

He drew to within a few feet of the big man, who turned and faced him. Henry reacted with surprise.

“J.B. What are you doing here? I was told to meet a Mr. Johnson here about some new clue he had in the swindle of our clients.”

The big man raised his sizeable flashlight and struck Henry on the side of his head. His knees buckled and his body sprawled across the wall. The big man reached down, lifted Henry’s legs and slid him over the side. Presumably, he fell onto the ancient brick pavement in the alley below. Being unconscious, Harry made no sounds as he fell. Mark listened for the anticipated splat. Amy covered her ears. Neither

discerned any telltale sounds except when Limp Man tossed the flashlight after the body.

The big man looked over the side as if studying the situation and gave a meaningful nod. He returned to the stairs and reached for the door knob. Mark managed to muffle a sneeze. The man hesitated and looked in their direction, then turned, entered the stairway and pulled the door closed.

“We need to get a look,” Mark said getting to his feet and pulling Amy with him.

“What if the man returns?”

“Why would he?”

“To see who sneezed, maybe!”

“I mostly covered it, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes. I suppose it could have sounded like the wind.”

Mark kept a tight hold of Amy’s hand and they walked to the edge of the roof and looked over.

Down at the level of the alley there were several naked bulbs alternating sides – west and east. One was directly below them and lit the scene more or less adequately.

“There he is,” Amy said pointing out the obvious.

“But look where he landed, way over to the right of where he went over the side.”

“You’re right – by what, fifteen or twenty feet?”

“Close to that,” Mark said.

“How could that be?”

“I’m thinking he may have bounced off the balcony directly below on the 8th floor. That could have changed his trajectory.”

“It could be, I guess,” Amy said.

“What apartment would that terrace belong to?” Mark asked.

“Well, mine is four windows to the right of it. That puts two apartments between my place and the one with the balcony that he hit. That would be 818, I guess.”

“Isn’t that empty?”

“Yes. That’s right. Been empty for over a month. Students, who left it in late May.”

“Let’s drop our things off at your place and then see if we can get inside and take a look. If he hit the metal railing,

there may be pieces of torn clothing or blood or flesh.”

“Yuk!” Amy offered, sounding very girl-like to Mark. “What we need to do is call the police,” she said.

“We probably will, but first let’s make sure it was Henry. To do that we need to get down to the alley. It isn’t as if he could possibly be alive, so a few minute side trip into 818 won’t be endangering him.”

“Okay. I guess that makes sense.”

“First, let me get some pictures from up here with my laptop. I installed a super- high-res camera. It just might give us something I can enlarge – get some detail.”

From several different angles, he took shots of the body and of the railing just below them. That done, they gathered their things and approached the door.

“What if the man is waiting in there to see if the person who sneezed is going to use the stairs?”

It had been Amy. She was typically the voice of reason between them.

“I doubt if he’s waiting around to be found by the police – dead bodies that have plummeted ten stories into an alley do get police attention, you know.”

“I’m frightened, Mark.”

“Here’s our plan, then. The light is always on in there in the stairway. If we see him, we both rush him and push him down the stairs, immediately, before he has time to think.”

“Not much of a plan, but I guess it’s all we have.”

Mark opened the door slowly. It squeaked. He put his finger to his lips and said, “Shh” as if that would stop it. Amy smiled, but in the darkness, it escaped Mark. It was just as well, she thought.

The stairway was steep with twelve, high rise, wooden steps. At the bottom, it opened through a pull-in door into the wide hall that ran north to south through the center of the tenth floor. They took the elevator to the eighth and dropped things off in Amy’s apartment. Mark kept his flashlight and laptop. A few minutes later they were at the door marked 818.

“We’re sure this is the apartment, right?” Mark asked.

“Yes. I refigured it on our way down.”

“Did you notice that 818 is the same upside down or backwards as it is right side up?” Mark asked as if truly

interested.

“I guess I was too concerned about being booked for breaking and entering to consider such possibilities.”

Mark shrugged, not conceding it hadn't been well worth the consideration he had given it.

“Should we knock?” Amy asked.

Without responding, Mark knocked, but really didn't wait before squatting to address the lock. From his rear jeans pocket, he removed a set of tiny tools, which he used when working on computers, preparing to try his skill at picking it.

Amy reached out and tried the knob. It turned. The door opened. Mark shrugged again and offered a sheepish grin. They entered. Taking his lead from Amy, he tired the wall switch. The room remained dark. He turned on the flashlight and they made their way across the empty living room and through the open bed room door to the rear wall. Mark slid the glass door open and they stepped out onto the four by eight-foot balcony. They looked down.

“What the?” Mark offered.

“The body is gone,” Amy said. “How can that be? Could the police have already been here and left?”

“Not likely. Not even ten minutes has elapsed since we first saw it sprawled out down there.”

“Then what?” she asked, not requiring or expecting a useful response.

“It has been moved,” Mark came back realizing that had supplied no useful information.

He turned to his right and began examining the black, wrought iron railing.

“Got stuff here,” he said.

“Stuff?”

“Blood and flesh and threads. Let's take some samples.”

“Samples? Why?”

“So, we can solve the murder.”

“That's why we have a police force, beloved one. Besides, wouldn't we be tampering with evidence if we collect the samples?”

“We'll just take some of it – leave part of everything we take. That way they will have everything we have. I'll take

some pictures first.”

“When did we become detectives? I don’t remember that entry on the path we drew for our lives last winter.”

Mark overlooked the question and comment. He took out his handkerchief and pocket knife. He scraped portions of what they found clinging to the railing onto the cloth and tied the four corners together. He stuffed it inside his T-shirt for safekeeping. There was, as he had announced, blood, flesh, and threads – perhaps a hair. Amy turned away and shuddered while he looked one last time to be sure he got part of everything there was to get.

“Blue and red threads and a torn section of cloth. Look.”

She turned slowly not at all certain it was a good idea. It was actually a small piece of material – not an inch long and less than that wide. She pointed.

“It is part of a hem – see, there. Like from the bottom of a shirt, I imagine – a red and blue shirt. Snagged on the rough head of that bolt.”

“Good take on it, Amy! Sherlock would be proud of you. Too bad he’s still at Holmes or we could consult him.”

Amy tipped her head as if to recognize the witticism and let it drop. She wondered how many hundreds of times – thousands of times – she had done that during the twenty years they had known each other.

They reentered 818 and left – they had been there less than five minutes. In the hall, they walked toward the elevators – there were three. As they approached the doors, one of them stopped there on 800. Mark wrapped Amy in his arms, moved her into the shadows against the wall, and administered a long, kiss, hoping to disguise the two of them from whomever might exit onto the floor. It had been a good move. It was the limping man with another man. As if according to Mark’s plan, they ignored the lovers and walked to the door of 818. Mark and Amy entered the elevator. Mark pushed ‘1’ – street level.

“That was much too close,” Amy said.

“How was the kiss?”

“You’re impossible, Mark.”

It was reason for a playful slap to his shoulder.

They were soon in the alley. Accompanied by animated pointing, they discussed where the body had been and soon believed they had pinpointed the spot on which it had to have landed. Limp Man and his accomplice appeared on the balcony up above so they flattened themselves back against the wall and waited in the shadows. The men remained on the balcony for nearly ten minutes. Drops of liquid fell to the bricks right in front of them. Mark ran his finger across several of the spots and put it to his nose.

“Bleach,” he said moving his finger toward Amy’s face. “They are cleaning up the evidence. It’s good we collected some, see.”

He took her lack of response as her whole-hearted agreement. The men left.

“Will they come back out into the alley?” she asked

I doubt it. Why revisit the scene when the cops are likely to show up at any moment?”

It made sense.

“Shall we call the police now?”

“I have several thoughts related to that. One is, if Limp Man suspects that somebody witnessed the murder, it is likely he will come looking for them – us: the sneeze, the two of us in the hall and maybe being seen down here from up there on the balcony. If our names appear in a police report, we could be in danger. Before we make a final decision about that, let’s take just a few more minutes to snoop around – just a couple.”

With his flashlight lit, he moved out away from the wall and squatted down to get a closer look at the ancient paving bricks that were the alley floor.

“Not only no body, Amy, but no signs of one. I don’t understand how that could be.”

“Me either,” Amy said.

Mark stood up and kicked at the brick pavement. (It was a guy thing!)

“I can see how he could have had somebody waiting down here to remove the body, but you know it had to have splattered all over the place on impact – blood, flesh, probably brains.”

“You paint horrible images, Mark.”

“Sometimes reality *is* horrible.”

Mark took pictures of the alley floor at the suspected point of impact. The paving bricks had been laid down fifty years before and were well worn with corners rounded or chipped. They had originally been set on a bed of sand, sides touching sides. Over time, the seams had accumulated all manner of dirt and grime. Mark assumed it would represent a cultural anthropologist's dream.

"Stand back and just look at the bricks," Amy said.

Mark did as she had suggested.

"What am I looking for?"

"For one thing, the rule about prepositions at the end of sentences."

They exchanged a smile and a quick peck to the lips – it had been Mark's move. Amy continued.

"But, look here – at the spaces between the bricks right here where we think the body hit."

"What? Oh. I see. The cracks are empty – not filled. I don't understand."

"I know. How? Why?"

"I think the how and why are obvious. It's the when and by whom that's immediately important," Mark said.

"Fill me in, then."

"Well, Limp Man had accomplices waiting down here, meaning the method and timing as well as the victim were premeditated. They removed the body and then replaced the bricks that were covered in evidence. They didn't want any indication that there was ever a body here. No body, no proof of murder. It called for an ingenious plan and precise preparation well ahead of time."

"Assuming that's true," Amy said, "Limp Man had a thorough and well-conceived plan and it was carried out all quite professionally – efficiently, for sure."

Mark looked around uncomfortably.

"I guess we don't know for sure that he *didn't* see us," he said. "Up on the roof, in that hall, even down here from up on the balcony. We wouldn't have been part of his well-orchestrated plan. If he thinks we could be an unaccounted-for problem – however remote – we can bet he'll come after us. We need to get out of here, I think – just in case."

Police cars pulled into the alley from each end and

stopped as if to block entrance or exit. A man in street clothes – shirt, tie, slacks – got out of one and walked toward them unbuttoning his collar and loosening his tie. He seemed to be in no hurry. Approaching them, he introduced himself as Detective Jackson. His badge bulged from his belt.

“You the ones that reported the body?”

“No, sir. Body?” Mark replied as if puzzled.

He glanced at Amy and she returned his puzzled with puzzled.

“We had a report that a body fell from somewhere up there onto the alley down here.”

“Here?” Mark asked looking around and playing dumb – not always an easy thing to do when you sported a 150 IQ.

The detective took out his pad and read a name.

“Jessica Colquitt? Apartment 420. Report says she saw it fall right past her balcony door and when she looked down she saw it sprawled out here in the alley. You live in the building?”

Mark took it upon himself to continue responding.

“Yes, we do, for nearly three years. Students.”

“You live together?”

“No, sir. Separate apartments.”

“What are you doing down here in the alley at this hour?”

Amy fielded that answer. She had a few moments to prepare for the obvious question.

“I’m a junior art student. My final project is to be a collection of pieces I am calling, ‘Perspectives’. Tonight, we are getting photographs of the patterns of the bricks here – in the semi-darkness we can preserve wonderful images with shadows and interesting contrasts.”

As if to support her story, Mark brought up several of the pictures he had just taken of the alley floor. The detective looked at them briefly and nodded.

“I suppose it’s useless to ask if you’ve seen the body, then.”

“I suppose so,” Mark said adding to his best puzzled look.

Detective Jackson took their names, addresses, phone numbers, and so on.

“Elevator?” he asked.

“Take that door straight ahead to the lobby. Elevators on the left.”

“Do they go to the roof?”

“No, Sir. They stop on ten. To get to the roof take the stairway you’ll see across the hall from you as you exit the elevator. The door, remarkably, marked, ‘ROOF’.”

The detective managed a quick smile and chuckle.

“Thank you. You better leave this area now. Forensics will be along any minute. They tend to get cranky when a death is reported and there’s no body for them.”

“I can imagine.”

“Oh, one more thing. You two know the building. If it fell past apartment 420, about where would it have lit?”

Mark pointed up and down the building, arm fully extended as if figuring it for the first time. He moved ten feet to his right.

“This row of balconies is the 20 numbered apartments, so probably about here I guess.”

Having estimated an unimpeded drop past the balcony, the spot he indicated was, in fact, a dozen feet south of the actual spot.

The forensics van pulled in behind the detective’s car. Jackson went to meet them. Mark and Amy returned to her apartment.

Inside, Amy collapsed onto the sofa, arms extended to each side.

“That was stressful.”

“That was invigorating! Let’s look at the pictures. A great story you spun for the cop, by the way. That alone gets you an ‘A’ from me.”

It was worth another kiss. Virtually anything was worth another kiss from Mark’s perspective. He became serious.

“How about this? Since Mrs. Colquitt will give the police a complete statement about the falling body and seeing it on the pavement, our statement really isn’t needed. From what she will tell them they will have the whole story.”

“Except the part about us witnessing the murder itself and being fully capable of identifying the killer and who was killed.”

“Yes, that, I suppose. Still, they have lots to go on – a place to start without any of that. I suggest we wait a while longer to offer our additional details. By then we may have identified Limp Man and solved it all for them.”

“I suppose. Twenty-four hours and then we revisit the situation, alright?”

“Sounds good.”

“I do have one more question,” Amy said. “Limp Man tossed his big flashlight over the side after the body. Why do you suppose?”

“Hmm? He did and let’s think about it. How about something like this? The flashlight was the murder weapon undoubtedly having Henry’s hair and blood on it. If Limp Man were stopped on his way back down stairs he wouldn’t have wanted to have that on his person. So, in order to distance himself from the weapon he dropped it over the side. It was lying beside the body in our first picture.

They moved through the individual photos on the screen. Those from the roof generally all showed the same thing: the body on the alley floor, sprawled out face down, arms and legs spread at odd angles.

“I can blow that up. Don’t know if I can focus the dead guy’s features. Certainly, will be able to get a good rendition of the clothing. If we can gain access to the security cameras in the lobby we can check the clothes against Henry’s and see if we can make a match. Without a DNA match it’s as close as we will be able to come with no good pic of the face.”

“What will we do with the evidence you took off the railing?”

“Keep it in reserve, I guess. Probably share it with the cops later. Probably should keep that refrigerated, don’t you think?”

“Not in *my* refrigerator!”

They moved on through the pictures just looking more than commenting.

“Go back three pictures,” Amy said at one point.

It was one taken down in the alley.

“Okay. What?”

“There,” she said pointing. “What are those marks on the bricks surrounding the ones we believe have been set in

place of the originals – streaks, scratches, maybe?”

“My studied opinion is they are streaks or scratches, maybe.”

Amy hit him with a throw pillow. He seemed pleased. Oddly, boys enjoyed getting aggressive reactions from girls – regardless of the bodily pain it might involve. It was a law of nature.

“I think we need to get these onto a flash drive and into my big desk top computer. Then we can manipulate them – enlarge, contrast, clean up.”

“Okay. You go do that. I need to get to bed. Have my eight o’clock in the morning. I’ll see you after class at noon. I have coupons for subs, okay?”

“I guess. I’d rather cuddle and stuff, you know.”

“You’d rather cuddle and *stuff* than eat or breathe. Time for that later.”

Mark settled for a peck to his lips and returned to his apartment. He lived in 911. It was on the front of the building – east – and overlooked a busy boulevard. The street noises really didn’t rise to his level – well the occasional wailing fire truck or blood curdling EMT ambulance sounding much like the sirens on the SS vans in old black and white WWII movies.

He had an elaborate complex of computers and related devises – all deductible as educational expenses. If it could be done digitally, Mark pretty much had the capacity to do it. The laptop contained both stills and videos of the pavement and balcony. He briefly considered popping up one of the bricks in a graphics program, adding features, a cane and top hat and having it dance. The urge passed. If Mark acted on all of his whimsical ideas there would be no time for the more necessary aspects of living – like snuggling.

He stripped to less than the law allowed and got to work. He had no class the following day. Fifteen minutes later there was a knock at his door. It was a powerful knock, an end of a fist hammering knock, certainly not a knuckle knock; it was not Amy’s – anyway, she had a key. Who would be coming to his place in the early hours of the morning? He slipped into his robe – hung beside the door for just that sort of a ‘can’t-answer-the-door-naked’ emergency. His first thought was his most unpleasant thought. It was all that made sense

– Limp Man and his thugs had already somehow located him.

CHAPTER TWO

They Would Have Highly Intelligent Children

The outside lens in his peek through hole was broken rendering it useless. Still, like a neurotic mouse in a recently modified maze, each time he continued to try to look through it. Mark had planned to rig a camera out there, but that had become a casualty of his busy schedule (and the more than occasional snuggle). He hoped he would live to take care of that. He dialed 9-1 from 9-1-1, held his thumb at the ready over the final 1, took a deep breath, and eased the door open. He relaxed his thumb. It was Detective Jackson.

“Sorry to bother you, son, but I believe I failed to hand you my card so you can contact me if you think of anything related to the phantom corpse that apparently plummeted some hundred feet and then got up and walked away.”

Mark accepted the card.

“No luck finding it, I take it. Thank you for the card. I’ve just started going through the pictures I took down there. I figured maybe they would contain something of use to you – blood, guts, brains, the usual ‘fell to his death off a balcony onto the pavement’ sort of stuff. I will certainly be in contact if I scrape anything up – well, so to speak.”

Jackson ignored Mark’s attempt at humor. He had heard similar attempts a hundred times.

“Off a balcony, you say?” Jackson asked.

“Seems most likely don’t you think?” Mark said.

“Jumpers usually prefer the roof,” Jackson came back. “If nobody is missing from the apartments on the alley side of the building, I’ll lean toward the roof – a place to where a non-resident might find his way.”

“I see. You think it was a jumper – a suicide?”

“Spinning possible options at this point. We have officers going door to door asking questions. I told them to skip your apartment and Amy’s. By the way, the building superintendent doesn’t seem to be in. Any idea where I might locate him?”

“No, sir. I have virtually no contact with the man. Pay my rent electronically. Can’t say I’ve even talked to him in the

past several weeks. Sorry. I think there are some emergency numbers on a list beside his door down on the first floor.”

“Found them. Mostly utility and repair companies. Thanks, though. Can I get your email in case I need to contact you?”

“Sure. Let me jot it down.”

Mark found a scrap of paper, wrote the information and handed it to Jackson.

He turned to leave and Mark closed and locked the door. He shed the robe and went back to his desk. His heart rate and respiration gradually returned to normal. *He* returned his attention to the screen. The old bricks in the pictures were multicolored in mottled hues that ran the gambit from dull reds, through tanish-whites, to dark orange – all subtle, pastel tones, dulled even more from decades of wear and grime that clung to their surfaces.

Mark often thought out loud. It was how his parents learned he could talk as he lay in bed one night.

“When Amy saw the bricks close up on the alley floor they probably actually led her to consider the ‘project’ she had mentioned to the Detective. That’s how she saw the world – a continuous series of artistic challenges. It’s how it had flowed so quickly and naturally in response to his question.”

His attention was drawn to the picture with the streaks or scratches Amy had pointed out. They were similar in color to that of the bricks on which they were etched, only not the same as the bricks on which they had left their marks. Perhaps they did pop up at night and dance around leaving marks behind from their tap shoes. It allowed more of a furrowed brow than a smile.

He began making a list: “Entry one – Why recent streaks and why were they slightly different colors from the bricks on which they rested? A scrape should merely uncover whatever lay beneath the surface – more of the same colors. Whatever it was had apparently been left from something that had been sitting on top of them, leaving *its* color behind.

“The vehicles that frequent the alley all have rubber tires, which would not leave such marks - scrapes. A wheelbarrow with a metal wheel might, but I haven’t seen one of them since the pictures that accompanied the story of

Farmer McGregor and Peter Rabbit.”

It had been a book Mark had loved as a little boy. It was the first book he had read on his own when he was three. That had been a good news/bad news event. Good that he discovered he was able to read. Bad in that he was dragged off to a psychologist’s office to be tested for some gifted preschool program. He hated being forced to be creative. It made no sense. He resisted by shedding his clothes in class and picking his nose. Oddly, he had thought, those ploys had been treated with equal levels of disdain.

As he studied the pictures, one other thing hit him. The streaked bricks were the ones that surrounded those that he and Amy assumed had replaced the originals.

“It could be that the replacements had been stacked there and, after the others had been removed, had been slipped off into the area needing to be filled. That could have resulted in scratches and streaks and could have come from bricks of slightly different hues. The timeline necessary for completing such a task bothered him.

It led to an obvious question they had not yet raised: “Where did the replacement bricks come from?” (And, another: why a guy with a 150 IQ was unable to master the ‘no prepositions at the end of a sentence’ rule!)

He smiled about that and made another note: search the pavement in the alley for a section of missing bricks. That also bothered him. Everything else about Limp Man’s plans seemed to have been so well arranged; leaving a section of the alley floor empty of bricks would not fit that. Perhaps the bricks that had been removed had been re-laid in the section from where the replacement bricks had been taken. But, they would still contain the evidence. Unless they had been cleaned. There hadn’t been time to clean them. Maybe the replacements came from some other block in the long alley that ran between Blunt Street on the north to Maynard Boulevard on the south – that would be a stretch of at least ten blocks. It was becoming complicated. He recorded all those possibilities on his list. He would remember it all, but it was easier to have something for Amy to read so he could better use his time than regurgitating it all for her.

He was able to enlarge the pictures of the bricks many

times. Even at that, he found nothing resembling leftovers from a splattered body. That, of course, only worked to support his hypothesis about the brick switch. Several of the enlargements offered magnificent blurs of swirling colors and textures he knew Amy would drool over – over which Amy would drool!

He enlarged the first picture of the body he had snapped from up on the roof and was able to clearly distinguish individual bricks around its periphery. From that he could determine exactly where it had been sprawled and his bet was it would be right where the brick exchange had taken place. Working from the dimensions of the paving bricks – five inches by ten inches – he determined the size of the space in which bricks had been substituted. It was a more or less trapezoidal area, ten feet long by six wide. It lay on a diagonal –SE to NW.

“I’ll get specific pictures of that area in the morning and begin a search for the source of the replacement bricks. I think we will soon have something solid to provide the police. The continuing problem is how to do that without getting our names involved.”

The next morning, he slept until noon. Amy let herself into his apartment while he was in the shower.

She poked her head into the bathroom.

“Hey. You pull an all-nighter?”

“Not really, well, almost I suppose. Got in bed about four. Found lots of stuff. Open the folder on the desk top titled LIMP.”

She scrolled through the information and pictures and by the time he appeared she had seen it all. Speaking of seeing it all, she tossed him his robe.

“What is it about you needing me to stay covered up?”

“I guess I like to keep the mystery alive.”

“Big mystery. We took baths together ‘til we were six.”

He flashed a big grin and tied the belt.

“You find my list?”

“I did. I added a couple of things – not so much to-do stuff as information. The guy who got tossed over the side called the Limp Man by two initials – right?”

“Right – J.B. as I recall.”

“That’s what I remember, too. He clearly knew the man. Were you able to show it was the super – Henry Roberts – in the alley?”

“Here’s what I was able to do.”

He bent over from behind her and brought up the picture of the body he had snapped from the roof.

“Here he is in the original. Here at 5 times enlargement and here at 10. Gets blurry, but let me separate the head – a side view – and enhance it like this.”

“That’s Henry, alright,” she said. “I’m surprised his face is in such good shape.”

“He must have lit on the other cheek. I imagine that is a mass of unrecognizable mush.”

Amy put on a shudder.

“I was wondering last night if we should keep printed copies of the good stuff,” he asked.

“You got it all saved in a half dozen ways I imagine.”

“Of course – two flash drives and several hidden files in your painting of Old Main.”

“Then let’s not print anything yet. Hard copy is too easy to find if anybody really came looking.”

Mark nodded. It had been his thought also, but he didn’t mention it.

“So, what do we know for sure?” she asked, standing and beginning to pace.

Amy was a pacer while thinking. Mark was more the flop somewhere on his back and wait for inspiration type. She began speaking. Mark took the chair at the computer desk.

“We know there was a murder. We know the victim was Henry Roberts and that he was the super of our building. I wonder how long he has – had – been here. We know he was killed by a big man with a limp who Henry called J.B. We know J.B. had help because he couldn’t have done all that was done in such a short time – a ten-minute window at best. We know a section of bricks was replaced and you have found the exact section. We know the body hit a railing on the way to the alley, which threw it off course to the north. From the railing, we have samples of thread, a small section of cloth – probably from Henry’s shirt – and a sample of flesh and such. We know that J.B. with the help of a second man cleaned off

the railing. We probably know that Henry was lured to the roof with some false information about some promise of a new clue in something he referred to as the Baxter Swindling Case. The way he approached the figure by the edge of the roof didn't indicate any fear or hesitation. Henry didn't appear to be armed as if he were expecting anything untoward."

Mark continued.

"We *don't* know where the replacement bricks came from, but we have a good chance of finding it. We don't know what happened to the body. We don't know the name attached to the initials, J.B. We don't know Henry's history. We don't know anything about the motive – the problem between them. J. B. seemed to feel no need to explain his reason because he just turned around and bashed in Henry's head with no explanation."

"And here I thought it was with a big flashlight," Amy said, giving Mark some of his own foolish.

He smiled.

She continued.

"That sounds more like he just wanted Henry dead than that he was out to take revenge, right?" Amy asked.

"Hadn't thought of that," Mark said, "but I imagine it's right. In revenge, he'd want to make his victim squirm first, to be certain he knew the 'why' before he lowered the boom – that what you mean?"

Amy nodded.

"More business and less emotion involved."

"If it had been revenge, maybe J. B. figured any necessary suffering had already been administered," Mark said.

Mark paused just a moment and then had another thought.

"Maybe J.B. was just a disinterested hit man with a job to do – no real connection to Henry."

"But, Henry called him J.B. remember. He apparently knew him."

Mark nodded. That tied it down a bit better – to some acquaintance they might be able to locate.

"Sure wish I'd have had presence of mind to get J.Bs. picture."

“We have what we have,” Amy said.

“Now you’re sounding like me. Stop that!”

Amy ignored it.

“I brought subs for lunch. In your fridge.”

“How about you spread the feast while I get dressed.”

He tossed his robe over her head.

“You’re impossible, Marcus Antonio Davis.”

“And that’s what you love about me!”

She went to the refrigerator. Mark had one final comment, offered in a raised voice from the bedroom.

“Just don’t confuse the sack I put the evidence in with the sub sack.”

He thought it was hilarious. Amy, not so much.

She dumped the contents of two small sacks of chips onto a napkin on the low table in front of the sofa and took a seat, waiting. Presently, Mark joined her with things to say as he pulled on his T-shirt.

“We also don’t know what we should share with the detective or when. I suppose that technically we are withholding evidence – you think?”

“Like you said, everything we have they’ve had the chance to find out.”

“Except the part about our witnessing the murder, the victim’s identity, and the initials of Limp Man – the murderer,” Mark added.

“And the photo of the body on the pavement before it was removed,” Amy said growing the list of things they probably really should share.

They remained quiet, thinking and eating, for some time.

“Meat ball. My favorite. Thanks.”

“I know. Not mine. Your welcome.”

“So,” Amy said at last.

“So,” Mark began. “We seem to have two avenues we need to explore. First, is the physical evidence – the scraping from the railing and locating the bricks that were removed. Second, the personal stuff – who is J.B., what can we learn about Henry’s past and what is the connection between them – why was he killed?”

“More basic than any of that,” Amy said, “why in the

world are we letting ourselves get involved like this? It's a police matter."

"For one thing, it's exciting – meets some requirement of my testosterone level. For another, it's a new kind of challenge. For *still* another it's to protect us from any retaliation Limp Man slash J.B. may be plotting against us."

"First, you may not have noticed, but I have virtually no testosterone driven needs, and second, couldn't the police handle number three about protecting us better than we can?" Amy asked, really stating it as fact.

"Not sure. Who has the completed set of useful evidence at this point – the cops or us? It's Monday. How about we extend our original 24-hour window to a few days and if we don't solve it we go to the police?"

"How many is several?" she asked.

"Say, three – that would give us until Thursday morning. But if we are almost there on Thursday morning we can choose to give ourselves another day."

"I suppose," Amy said just a hint of exasperation in her tone. "It's how it will be whether I agree to it or not."

"You saying I'm pig-headed, bossy, and foist my agenda on you?"

"Well, yes, all of those things, but your lovability factor is so high I can usually ignore those things."

"Usually?"

"Yes, *usually!*"

"I suppose we could just shove the whole investigation and spend the next three days in bed."

"That is your answer to all problems – large and small."

"So, you're saying?"

He nuzzled her neck. She playfully slapped his face and set an agenda.

"Let's go looking for bricks we suspect have been transferred somewhere. Forecast says maybe rain tomorrow. Need to find what we can find before that."

They finished lunch.

"Why do you suppose J.B. chose that way to kill Henry?" Amy asked.

"Hmm. Good question. I suppose it left fewer incriminating clues. A bullet could be traced to a gun. Even a

knife can often be specified as to type and size. Hanging would leave fibers from the rope in the neck. A beating would leave blood on the club or whatever. Poison might be traced to the buyer. Lift a guy over the edge and drop him ten floors and what evidence is there to lead the authorities to the killer?"

"When you spin possibilities like that I never know if it means you've been thinking about it or if they just somehow pop up out of your twisted psyche!"

"I will plead guilty to whichever endears me to you the most."

Amy allowed a five minute, lingering kiss and grope. She'd give him one thing – from their first real kiss at twelve, she'd never had better than his. Of course, her sample of other possibilities was tiny – she had dated very few other boys. She had noted, however, that some boys' kisses were strictly selfish – all for them. Mark's were altruistic – he had taken time to learn what she liked and even in his most passionate moments he put her first – or at least on a par with himself. Listening to her friends talk about their experiences, Amy came to believe he was one in a million.

A few minutes later they were at the door to the alley – middle of the building on the west side. The immediate area of the supposed body landing was cordoned off with yellow tape. It included that alley door. They reentered the building and exited through the south door at the end of the first-floor hall. There was no police presence.

"I don't think the cops are taking this thing seriously," Mark said.

"The only thing they have is the word of an eighty-year-old woman with cataracts that said she saw the fleeting, half-second image of a body falling outside her glass, balcony door, through the dark near midnight."

"I suppose you're right, although Henry *does* seem to be missing."

"So, what? The police have no reason to believe Henry is the body."

"Beauty on the outside and world class brains on the inside," Mark said. "I am the luckiest boy in the world."

"And *don't* forget it. And about that *boy* thing – when

are you going to begin thinking of yourself as a man?"

"I always do when I'm alone with you in the dark. I will be happy to demonstrate."

"You really are impossible!"

"I'd rather think of myself as improbable, I mean look at this – brilliant, creative, witty, insightful, and a magnificent lover all wrapped up in this absolutely average looking body. *That's* improbable."

They rounded the building – it occupied most of the block north to south – and entered the alley. It put them some two hundred feet south of where the body had landed. The brick pavement ended just to the south, allowing a two lane, one-way, east to west street. It continued on the other side of that street. They turned north toward the back door and strolled the alley searching for another section of misplaced or missing bricks. They moved on some fifty feet.

"Are we brilliant or what?" Mark said pointing down, in close to the building.

He knelt and ran his fingers across the surface.

"I must say I really thought they had just been taken away," Amy admitted. "They are the wrong colors in a subtle sort of way. Can you compare the colors of the surrounding bricks here with the colors of the replacement bricks we think we found?"

"Got it here on the screen. You're the color expert. What's your take?"

He held out the laptop so she could peruse the picture.

Amy glanced back and forth for just a few moments.

"Certainly, could be. Compare them with the ones that would have been removed."

"Here."

"Seems like a lock to me," she said. "These belong there and those belong here."

Mark handed her the laptop and took a sizeable screwdriver from his rear pocket.

"What's that about?"

"Let me show you. First, notice the grains of sand clinging to the tops of these bricks – the ones we think were originally under the body?"

"Yes, so?"

“No sand on the ones around them, here, see.”

“Hmm. Okay. Or any of the others anywhere in the alley, actually.”

Mark pried up one of the sandy bricks.

“Wow! Look, there and there.”

“I see. The top of this one is not warn, but the underneath side is. It has been placed here top-side down.”

“That accounts for the sand being engrained into the surface – that side has been pressed into the base layer of sand for fifty years.”

“So, I see it, but why have they been turned over?”

“I think turning over a few more may answer that.”

One at a time he removed several bricks, turned them over, and photographed them before replacing them.

“Here’s what we’re looking for,” he said after examining the fifth brick. “See! More evidence. Flesh and brains, I’d say. We need something to collect it in.”

“Kleenex?”

“Great.”

As Mark worked at taking scrapings from a half dozen more bricks, Amy put it all together in words.

“So, the bad guys took bricks from here and put them up there, top side showing to make the replacement less obvious even though the colors aren’t an exact match. They first stacked them around the edge of the area they were going to replace, making scratches as they slid them into place. They removed bricks, with the evidence on them, down *there* and re-set them up *here*, top down, to hide the evidence. Do you know how much planning had to have gone into this?”

“I’m beginning to,” Mark said. “No dummy involved that’s for sure. I’m still really bothered by how all of that was completed in such a short amount of time. We were at the drop site no more than ten minutes after the big splat.”

“You are absolutely terrible, Marcus Antonio Davis!”

Mark shrugged and smiled.

“About that,” Amy said.

“*That*, meaning using all three of my names the way mom only did when I was about to be in BIG trouble?”

“No. The *time* thing. Let’s see The pictures you took first, from up on the roof.”

Mark pulled them into a collage and held it out to Amy who studied them.

“There! Blow up that one.”

He did.

She pointed.

“Look! Up against the wall of the building.”

“I’ll be. Had neither seen it nor noticed it in any of the pictures. Bricks stacked against the wall right there within easy reach. So, the body fell; the body was removed; the bricks were removed; that supply of replacements bricks in the stack against the wall were moved by one person to the area around the open space in the pavement; they were slipped off – leaving the scratches – and reset. While one person attended to that the second moved with the bricks on south and put them back in the hole created when those in that stack had been removed probably just minutes earlier. The body was taken away.”

“Are we brilliant or what?” Amy said.

“Our babies will be soooooo smart,” Mark said.

“I’ve read recently where 90% of a child’s intelligence comes from the mother.”

“Then ours will most certainly have a lock on it, mama!”

Amy suddenly looked puzzled.

“A good theory, but how could he – they – have known how many bricks to bring – to stack – before they knew how many they would need to remove?”

“Hmm. One possibility – maybe the only possibility – would be they estimated what they would need and then added extra to make sure. Any left overs would have been taken back with the ones they removed from the impact area.”

“Like we have said, it was some smart cookie,” Amy said willing to accept Mark’s explanation.

With the bricks back the way they had found them, Mark took several more pictures. They returned to his apartment and placed their scrapings into a new zip lock bag – insensitively labeled, ‘Splash Site’ – Amy said – and stashed them on the lower shelf of his nearly empty refrigerator.

“None of this evidence is doing anybody any good sitting here,” Amy said.

“What are you suggesting?”

“Don’t we at least need to let the police know where to look to gather their own evidence?”

“I suppose so, but we must do it in a way that won’t identify us as the source. That is key here. For all we know, J.B. could be a rogue cop, himself, and will have access to all the evidence and statements and names of those of us who provided them.”

“I think you are becoming paranoid – a brand new side of your personality.”

“I’d rather characterize it as just being reasonably cautious – unless you find paranoia irresistibly sexy and it gives you the overpowering urge to tear off all my clothes and ravish me.”

“Your head is never more than a centimeter away from your reproductive urges, is it?”

“And that, my good lady, is why the human species still exists.”

Mark’s contention got a set of raised eyebrows. It represented both her acknowledgement of the probable truth in his contention and her inability to fully understand the ever-present male compulsion to fast-forward beyond hand holding.

“So, the sharing of evidence thing?” Amy asked.

“Jackson knows I take pictures so we need to avoid pictures as any part of it.”

“We use description, then. We can do that. Type it up in a common font on common paper and mail it to him.”

“Maybe not to Jackson. Just the cops, generically. Jackson might make the ‘him and us’ connection,” Mark pointed out.

“That’s good. So, how do we sign what we send them – Zorro or Clem or Fanny Brice?”

“Probably isn’t necessary. Not likely anybody else will be sending them anything.”

“We could number each contribution,” Amy suggested. “That would indicate it was all coming from the same source without needing a name or anything.”

“Excellent! Shall it be the numerals, 1, 2, 3 or written out as one, two, three, or first, second, third?”

“I’m thinking the simpler the better – 1, 2, 3.”

“First, we should tell them about the brick switch, I

suppose,” Mark said.

“And the evidence they may still be able to find on that railing,” Amy added. “That’s the basic stuff.”

“And that the railing has been bleach-scrubbed,” Marc added.

“Right.”

“Okay, bricks and railing will be our offering #1,” he said. “I’ll type it up, you can edit it and I’ll run it down to the mail pickup box. They’ll have it first thing in the morning. We’ll need a stamp with no finger prints on it. I’ll buy a pack of three from the machine in the lobby. How about a fingerprint-free envelope?”

“I have a box of letter size envelopes. We can take one out of the middle to assure no prints, I suppose. Latex gloves all around.”

“Let’s go to your place, then. I’ll grab my laptop. You can paint for your Senior Exhibit while I begin ferreting out whatever the web has to reveal about Henry.”

Fifteen minutes later message number 1 had been composed, printed, folded, enveloped, stamped and mailed.

“I feel better now that we’ve done that,” Amy said while Mark helped her into her painting smock.

“Good. Me too, actually. Let’s see what I find on Henry.”

They worked separately for half an hour. Amy offered one of her patented sighs.

“What’s up?” Mark asked getting up and moving to her side where she was standing at her easel.

“Thought I had this woodland scene finished, but it’s missing something.”

“Shall I tell you what it is or do you need to stew about it a while longer?”

“Tell! Tell!”

“How about this? You have a mass of little pin pricks of red down in the lower right representing flowers. How about if you balance that by landing a red bird up in the trees on the top left?”

She followed his suggestion and stood back to view it.

“I knew there was a reason I kept you around. That’s just what it needed. You stick with me and I’ll make an artist

out of you.”

“You’d really pull me down to your level?”

She offered a peck to his cheek and got back on topic.

“You find anything interesting, yet.”

“Maybe. I’ve been trying to learn about Henry. He seems to have popped into existence nineteen years ago. Didn’t exist before that. How old would you say he is – was?”

“Fifty-ish?”

“My take, too. That would have put him in his early thirties back then – when I found the first mention of him. I find two previous places of very short term employment for him – a janitor at a hospital here in the city and an employee at a moving company, also here in the city. He started here at our building eighteen years ago.”

“Didn’t last long at those first two jobs.”

“Not only that, he changed residences when he changed jobs. He lived in what was a flop house while he was a janitor – both on the far north edge of the city. Then he moved to the central – the old part – of the city when he started with the moving company. That only lasted a few months before he landed here.”

“I guess we didn’t know him well, but he didn’t seem incompetent, did he?” she said/asked.

“No, if anything he seemed really well organized and, at least for me, he always took care of things immediately – efficient almost to a fault. I never had to remind him about anything.”

“My experience, too. Hmm.”

Mark re-voiced it as a question.

“Hmm?”

“Well, since there is no record of him before, it seems that Henry Roberts is not his original name. If you were trying to transition from one name – or life – to another, wouldn’t it make sense to quickly move from place to place trying not to leave a trail? A few months at the hospital and then a few more with the moving company before finding a permanent place.”

“Interesting. Let me see if I can find a thirty something year old missing man at about that time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if he had been somebody else, it stands to reason that person would have most likely disappeared at the same time Henry came to life.”

“In that case, he could be from Timbuctoo,” she said sounding disappointed.

She began preparing another canvas. Mark followed a hunch. Ten minutes later he stood up, did his Rocky dance complete with crowd noise, and waltzed Amy around the room.

“I suppose all of this means something,” she said, happy to be participating in whatever it was.

“I found him. I know I found him!”

CHAPTER THREE

A pool of blood quickly formed around his body.

Mark took Amy by her hand and led her to the table and his lap top. He sat and she watched over his shoulder.

“Okay. Here was my thinking. We agreed Henry was a well-organized person – maybe even compulsively so. If such a person were to change his name, he just might feel the need to keep some order to it. So – and here comes the part where you are supposed to be amazed – I turned his name around. Henry Roberts would become Roberts Henry. Dropping the ‘S’ to form a real first name I got Robert Henry. I searched that name as a missing person between 18 and 20 years ago. I didn’t find anything.”

“And when is it I am to become amazed?”

“Stick with me, here. I tried several alternative spellings. Henry can be spelled ‘Henri’. And, bippity boppity boo, there it was – Robert Henri. Went missing nineteen years ago from Cedarville, 150 miles south of the city. He was an accountant, married with a daughter.”

“Okay. I am becoming appropriately amazed. But how does that help us?”

“Think about it. Why does a person leave home, change his name, and not let anybody know the who, where, or why of it?”

“He wants to disappear.”

“Yeah! Wants to or *has* to.”

“Has to?”

“He was an accountant. Maybe he embezzled money from a client and then absconded with a million dollars or something.”

Amy was skeptical.

“And as a millionaire he chose to work as a building super here in the city?”

It had definitely been a question.

“It could have been less than that,” Mark said still protecting the essence of his contention.

“It’s worth looking into for sure,” she said. “How would we do that?”

“Not sure. Maybe news stories – police reports or court cases?”

“Go for it,” she said and returned to her easel. She loved to watch the passion with which her guy pursued things that really caught his interest – that included her, of course. Those thoughts provided inspiration as her blank canvas stared back at her.

She began applying bright colors – it would be called ‘Passion’. There were curves and swirls and swatches that ran off into space. There were stylized lightning bolts. There was the overlapping of fully incompatible colors merging into vivid, unnamed hues. *That* was her beloved. His most effective path to solving a problem always appeared reckless and chaotic right up to the moment the solution appeared full blown and fully accurate. Mark was a flamboyant risk taker – inside his head, although almost never out in the real world. She didn’t understand how he managed to pursue both paths and always keep his feet firmly planted in reality.

They worked on, pursuing his and her particular paths in the moment.

“You realize it’s already five?” Mark said after sometime.

“Didn’t! Did you determine that by a clock, hunger, or level of hormonal excess?”

“All three, I guess. My stomach growled, I looked at you, and glanced at the clock on the screen.”

“Your growling stomach reminded you of me?”

“Everything reminds me of you, my dearest, sweetest, center of my universe.”

“Nice save, Nerd Boy. Shall we fix something here, order in, or go out?”

“How about pizza?”

“So long as I get pineapple on my third.”

“It’s Un-American to put fruit on a pizza.”

“But . . .?”

“But, of course you can, er, may. How about we go up the block to Antonio’s?”

“Sounds good. You love that place, don’t you?”

“Hey. I share a revered middle name with it.”

Mark closed his laptop and stood.

“Just let me get dressed – oh, I am dressed – your worst influence on me – my dearest, sweetest, center of my universe.”

Amy ran a comb through her hair. She pulled Mark close and ran it through his as well. That had not been the content of his sudden, pulled-close, fantasy. He helped her out of her painting smock.

“I don’t have to stop with your smock, you understand,” he said pulling her back close to his front.

“I understand, but you know I always feel more romantically inclined after pineapple.”

“I didn’t, but let me run right out and buy you a Plantation in Costa Rica. I’ll be able to do that, you know, when I’m an internet billionaire at thirty.”

“I have to wait around until your *thirty*?”

It garnered a sarcastic smile.

“Anyway, you would have no idea what to do with a billion dollars, Marcus Antonio.”

“Add pineapple topping to a billion pizzas for you?”

They were soon downstairs and left the lobby through the front (east) door. Antonio’s was a block north.

“What you painting on just now? I didn’t peek. You were humming Stars and Stripes Forever. I was looking for the brush to come right through the canvas.”

“Finished it. I think I’ll call it, *Passion*.”

“So, a still life of a pineapple.”

She laid her knuckles into his shoulder.

“That’s always been a problem for you, Amy.”

“What?”

“Confusing passion with the administration of excruciating pain.”

“You love it and you know it.”

It had been unremarkable when they were stick figures as kids, but since puberty it had packed a sting that lingered on for some time. Regardless, he would not pursue it.

Antonio’s was a small hole in the wall run by a tall blond man named Olaf – well past retirement age even though he would never consider it. The interior was rough laid, dark red brick with mortar oozing from the seams. There were eight, wire-legged tables for two or three with matching chairs.

There were red and white checked table cloths appointed with red cloth napkins. Each table sported a candle sprouting from the neck of a wine bottle. The lighting maintained a constant twilight inside, which added to its charm.

Olaf had taken a liking to the youngsters and always 'forgot' to charge them for their drinks saying he'd catch them next time. He *never* did. There was usually 'something he needed to have them 'taste test' for him. They *always* did, with pleasure. They got him a can of his favorite pipe tobacco for Christmas – Kentucky's best presented inside a Norwegian label. Amy had ethical reservations about contributing to his respiratory demise. Mark figured so long as he didn't have to put up with the smoke in *his* air it was Olaf's decision. The man would smoke his pipe, whether they got him the tobacco for it or not.

"The usual, Olaf, and don't forget to charge us for the drinks today," Mark said as they took their favorite table in the shadows toward the rear.

"I saw you coming. Almost ready."

They made small talk with the man and he soon delivered an appropriately loaded delicacy.

Amy and Mark had things to discuss. Olaf was good about not intruding on his customers' privacy.

"So, really, do you think J.B. has any idea we saw him?" Amy asked.

"What we know is that I sneezed, he heard it, although we don't know how he characterized it, and he decided not to pursue it – at least at that moment. It would have interrupted his carefully devised, time-sensitive plan."

"Do you think he could find us if he came looking for somebody?"

"I don't know how, and I have thought about it. Nothing of ours was in sight. *We* were not in sight. Can I try a bite of the pineapple?"

"You always do. Maybe by asking around, he could find out that we spend time up there – on the roof."

"How? Does anybody really know that? We've never met anybody up there."

"Maybe somebody sees us coming and going – entering and leaving the stairway up there on ten. Maybe

somebody knows, but has decided to give our privacy while we are up there.”

Mark raised his eyebrows.

“Interesting, I suppose. We’re always careful not to open the door if anybody else is in the hallway.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll try to just stop worrying about it,” Amy said offering a sigh of unclear meaning.

That lofty goal wouldn’t last long.

Twenty minutes later they left the café and stopped out onto the sidewalk.

“Oh, oh!” Amy said. “Across the street. Isn’t that J.B.?”

Mark took his time and nonchalantly moved his head in that direction.

“We got such a poor look at him in the dark, but that guy is certainly in the ball park. We need to see him walk, I guess. You saw him better than I did down in the hall when he came out of the elevator. I had my face toward the wall. You sure it’s him?”

“Pretty much. Yes.”

Mark snapped several pictures with his phone.

The big man stepped forward to hail a cab. Step, slide, Step, slide. It left no doubt.

“Should we follow him?” Amy asked.

“He’ll be long gone by the time we can cross the street and get a cab of our own.”

“What’s that store he came out of?”

“The door is between two large windows,” Amy pointed out. “One reads, ‘Tailor’, and the other one ‘Discrete Investigations’.

“Maybe he’s a private eye.”

“Or maybe he just hired one,” Amy said.

“OR, maybe he was paying for services already rendered for having tracked down Henry/Robert for him so he could do the man in.”

“We need to find out who this J.B. character is.”

“I’ve been trying much of the afternoon. Everything comes to a dead end – so to speak.”

They began walking back toward their building.

“Did you find Henri’s partner’s name down in Cedarville?”

“I’m pretty sure I found the name of the company – *Bobby Baxter’s Accounting Firm*. It was mentioned in an article about Robert Henri going missing – a tiny piece in the Cedarville weekly newspaper. Only a dozen sentences. He was born and raised in Cedarville. Married with one daughter. I got his home address and not much more. The firm was in Cedarville. Didn’t say how many employees there were. I searched for a website. Three is one, but it was confusing. Apparently, it was sold soon after Henry’s disappearance. It is now owned by Sam and Jerry Smith although it kept the old name. I can find no reference to the former employees, but there is a short paragraph about the firm’s history. That’s where I got most of the information: Started by Baxter, Henri bought in a few years later as a junior partner, sixteen years later it was sold. Like I said, must minimal stuff.”

“If there was something like embezzling involved, wouldn’t there be articles about that in the papers?” Amy asked.

“Interesting. I was so into looking I wasn’t thinking. Since it didn’t mention anything like that in the article or on the website, it probably wasn’t that, you think?”

“Seems reasonable. Like you keep reminding me, though, the internet and websites and such were nothing at all back then compared to what they are today.”

“Still, if there was stuff there, it is most likely still there, somewhere,” Mark said with some renewed enthusiasm. “What other tags could we search?”

“Cedarville – Crime and court cases, within those dates?”

“Probably the best avenue open to us. Very good.”

It was going on seven. They returned to Mark’s apartment after stopping at Amy’s place to pick up her Art History book and jammies. Mark wanted to use his desk top because it was loaded with dozens of programs that might be useful. She read. He punched keys and clicked his mouse. From time to time he would read or summarize things out loud. Amy might or might not comment.

“I was bothered by why Henry doesn’t have a family now – here with him. So, I searched divorce notices several years both directions from his disappearance. Nothing. Then

I went through the obituaries. Just now I came upon one for Maggie Price – about the right age and at about the same time that Henry disappeared. It was attributed to the primary notice in the Tribune from here in this city. I just found that original. It listed Janie – no last name – as her deceased daughter. It gave no cause of death – that’s odd isn’t it?”

“I think so. Usually obituaries at least say after a lingering illness or died unexpectedly or as the result of a vehicular accident – something. Did you look at others listed there to see what they had to say about the nature of the deaths?”

“I didn’t. You are on fire today, young lady. Let’s see. Very interesting. You’re right. They all mention some cause of death. Hmm? Okay. I’ll search for articles the week before to see if there are any that mention her. Not sure what to look for.”

“Try police reports or homicides or suicides or even accidents.”

“Your dark side is suddenly coming to the surface. Perhaps your next painting should be *Apocalypse*.”

“That a challenge, my Nerd Boy?”

“I learned better than to launch any such suggestion long ago.”

“Oh, oh,” he said distress in his tone. “At the bottom of the obits is one for Janie Price, age ten – mother, Maggie Price.”

Silence for some time.

“Nothing really tied to them. Wait a minute. There was a car accident on the date of their deaths, however. Went over a cliff up north of the city. Apparently, no reason for a car to be at that out of the way site. A woman and daughter were killed – in a rental. Maggie Price was the woman and Janie, listed as her daughter.”

“Which paper?” Amy asked.

“Springfield Herald.”

“So, some distance north of our city. Cedarville is south.”

“You’re saying I’m stretching it?”

“I’m saying if you are correct we have a lot of things to explain – a rental, an accident 200 miles north of Cedarville,

wrong names, and none of them tied to Robert Henri.”

“We got started down this path because we’re trying to link Henry with J.B.” Mark said. “How could the deaths of his two family members play in it all – if in fact they are his family members? And, what’s with the wrong names?”

“No idea, although, we know our J.B. killed the Henry/Robert/Super guy. That probably means he is capable of killing the woman and daughter. Whatever it was between Henry and J.B. would have had to have been mighty serious if he really did kill all three of them.”

“But it was eighteen years between the deaths of the woman and child, and then Henry the other night. How can that be explained?” Mark asked.

“Maybe we are getting ahead of ourselves? Like we said, the names don’t even match.”

She thought for a moment and then continued.

“So, we can either let it go for that reason or we can ask why they might have changed their names. Henry changed his, remember.”

“You are at least half detective, Amy.”

“Probably more than that. An artist is caught up in one constant search for what should go where and how big and what hue and form it must be.”

“Never thought of it that way.”

“You, too, you know,” Amy said. “Always thinking about how things can be improved on your www thingy. You’re always saying, ‘what if’, or ‘if only’, or ‘if we’d just dump that whole’ . . .”

“Okay. So, we have anointed ourselves super sleuths. Now we just need to prove our competence.”

“You have an eight o’clock class in the morning, Mark. If we’re going to have any snuggle time we need to get to it.”

“I wonder if anybody else refers to it in that way – snuggle time?”

“Really? That’s your take away from my come-hither remark?”

“That detective lurking inside me, Amy. Hard to suppress sometimes.”

Five minutes later it had been made quite clear that it really had not been all that difficult to suppress.

The following morning Mark was gone by the time Amy came to life for the third time. It was going on nine. She found a box of pastries on the kitchen counter. There was a note – corny but sincere; Sweets for my sweetie.

“He may revolutionize the internet, but he’ll never write the great American novel.”

She shook her head and kissed the note, then put on the coffee and started down to the lobby to get the mail. As she exited the elevator she met Detective Jackson who was accompanied by several bag and case toting assistants.

“Morning Detective.”

“Good morning. Amy, right?”

“Yes, sir. Good to see you again.”

She stepped through the doors to be on her way. He turned and called after her.

“If I were to ask you if there was a – not sure what to call it – a busybody here in the building would anybody come to mind”

“I really don’t know the other residents very well. Mark and I pretty much keep to ourselves.”

“So, nobody, then?”

“I’m afraid so. Mrs. Colquitt – you’ve met her – always enjoys spreading the gossip over her homemade muffins. Not sure if you’d consider that being a busy body. You might score a couple of goodies and a cup of coffee if you’d drop in on her, though. I suppose that Henry – the building Super – really knows the most about what’s going on up and down these halls.”

“Still haven’t found him. You ever hear him talk about people or places away from here.”

“No. He installed a new shower rod for me soon after I moved in three years ago, but that’s the only time I’ve spent more than ‘hi and goodbye’ time with him when passing in the halls. Hope he’s okay. He keeps things spotless around here as you can see.”

Jackson returned to the elevator – his colleagues had held it for him. Amy moved off toward the mail boxes. Once the elevator doors closed, however, she returned to watch the floor numbers. It stopped at the eighth floor.

‘He has our information and he’s checking out the

railing in 818.'

She had to wonder if he really didn't suspect them as the source of the information, or if it had been a charade to make her think he didn't suspect them. If he did, it might really not be good for them. *Who* would try to disguise such a thing; the guilty party! They hadn't considered that.

She and Mark had an understanding not to call or text when the other was in class, but it took all of her resolve to restrain herself. It was 9:30. Mark wouldn't be home until close to eleven. She returned to his apartment, poured coffee and uncharacteristically had a second sweet roll.

Amy was petite, pale, and had been blessed with naturally wavy, black hair. She had brown eyes. Her features were pleasant, made less so, she thought, by her granny glasses. She watched her weight constantly just on general principles. Weight was not really a problem. Mark, on the other hand was six feet tall and slender. He could have been Olaf's grandson with long blond hair, blue eyes and red cheeks. Perhaps that was one reason the man had taken to them. He could eat six times a day and never gain an ounce.

By ten, she was out of the shower at her place, dressed, and had settled in at the window seat to study. Just three chapters left, all filled with things she was required to know about the most famous of the dead painters from eras past. She wondered if the fact she found it boring and relatively meaningless meant she was not a true artist at heart. Painting was her passion so she soon convinced herself that probably didn't matter.

Not having realized how fast the time had passed, she was startled when Mark came through the door. She had actually found the chapter interesting. Surprise, surprise!

"I got stuff," she said using Mark's often used phrase. "Jackson is in the building – probably with his forensics team. They're up on eight – or they were."

"Our information made its way to him, then."

"Right. He made a point of chatting me up – I met him when I left the elevator down in the lobby – the mail run. He wondered if I could point him in the direction of a busy body – his term."

"And you said?"

“Mrs. Colquitt and Henry.”

“Excellent. You didn’t introduce anybody he didn’t already know about.”

“I got the idea he might really suspect us as being the ones who sent the letter,” she said.

“Did he say as much?”

“Oh, no. Actually, quite the opposite. Just a feeling I guess.”

“I was thinking. We have the rest of today and all of tomorrow free – no Wednesday classes. How about a field trip?”

“To Cedarville?”

“And, up to Springfield. I’ve hit a blind spot on everything Henry. Maybe we can learn some things about his life and family down there. Then, the cops in Springfield should have information about the accident up there and the victims – the place the car was rented, spot of the accident, stuff like that.”

“I’m game. How big are those cities?”

“Cedarville’s just a little place, about 10,000. Springfield is considerably larger – 50,000 or more.”

“Which direction first?” she asked.

“How about south – it’s a hundred and fifty miles. We can make it a long day and sleep back here tonight. Then, start out north early in the morning – that will only be an hour trip up the Interstate. We can poke around and be back with lots of the day left.”

“Lunch?”

“Call Olaf. He’ll bring it out to us as we drive past. Kind and size is up to you so long as it’s traditional crust, part of it is Italian sausage and it’s large.”

By noon they were south of the city. Amy drove so Mark could use the laptop. Mark fed her – she insisted, so she could keep her hands on the wheel.

“I want to see what we can find out about Maggie Price. Maggie could be a nickname for Margaret – Margaret Henri. Janie could be from Mary Jane – Henry’s daughter’s name. Henry stuck close to his own name when he took a new one. He could have followed the same process for his wife and daughter.”

“Why give them different last names?” Amy asked.

“No idea except that would separate the three of them even further if they were hiding from somebody.”

Mark continued to search the news articles in the Cedarville papers. He rambled on about what he was finding.

“Back in the era we’re looking at, the paper didn’t have an on-line edition. It seems that later on they scanned each of the print pages and put them on line in folders by the date of the edition, recreating each paper over a period of ten years. There’s a note saying editions that are further back than that are available in the office on microfiche. Not sure what that is.”

“Sort of like film on reels, I think. One page per frame, maybe. Pretty old fashioned.”

Mark nodded. He’d look it up later.

“They reproduced the whole paper – ads and all,” Amy asked.

“Yes. Oh. Good point. See if I can find ads for the accounting firm.”

It kept him both busy and quiet for some time.

“Here we go, Amy. Robert Henri, Chief Accountant and Jim Bob Baxter, owner and Investment Counselors at Bobby Baxter Accounting and Investment Firm.”

“Jim Bob, as in J.B. maybe.”

“Or, James Baxter as in J.B.,” Mark pointed out. “A problem, though. Four accountants are listed and two of them are J.B.s – Jerry Beaumont and Jason Battles. We seem to have J.B.s coming out our wazoos.”

“Vulgar!”

“Sorry.”

“Options, I guess,” she said trying to make the best of it. “Where do we begin down here in Cedarville?”

“How about the newspaper office? It says it’s on Main Street.”

A few minutes later they were moving slowly down Main looking for the newspaper office.

“Thar she blows,” Mark said pointing.

Amy parked right in front and they got out.

It was a 1940s building of dirty, dark brown, brick and stone with arched windows and doors. At four stories it was the tallest building in sight. At the base of the six, cement

steps, was a sign indicating handicapped access at the rear of the building.

“It appears to me that *this* is the handicapped access – steps that are incapable of allowing a wheel chair or person on crutches to enter – the entrance is, therefore, handicapped by definition. Accessible alternatives need a different name – Universally Accessible Entrance or something like that.”

“Write your congressman.”

“I will and you know I will.”

She rose up on her tiptoes and planted a gentle kiss on his neck.

Inside, they approached the front desk ‘manned’ by a young woman about their age. She spoke as if her friendly tone were genuine.

“May I help you?”

“No,” Mark began. “Well, what I meant was I’m wondering if there is a reporter that’s been around for 20 years or more. We’re needing information about several things that happened back then.”

“Jake – Jacob Andrews. Let me just alert him to look for you and you can go on up.”

When she put down the phone she explained.

“Jake keeps to himself up on four at the rear. Take the steps – no elevators except for deliveries at the rear. Call out his name when you get to four and he’ll direct you.”

They followed her directions and climbed the stairs.

“Jake! Mr. Andrews?” Mark called.

“Clear to the rear. I’ll be the one with the pipe.”

The fact was, he was the only one – pipe or not. It had been intended as a joke – one they had no way of understanding until they saw him, pipe in hand, in his isolation. That floor presented row after row of ten-foot-high, open steel shelves filled with boxes. Jake had carved out a twenty-foot square section at the rear between two, floor to ceiling windows on the back wall. The furnishings included a huge wooden desk, a half dozen old, green metal, four drawer, filing cabinets, three, substantial, wooden tables stacked high with papers and a half dozen captain’s chairs similarly occupied, mostly with books.

He stood and offered his hand. Jake had seen sixty.

His thinning white hair was mostly uncombed, although he brushed it back from his forehead as Amy came into view. His offering toward chivalry, they assumed. Half lens reading glasses clung to the lower portion of his nose. His square-ish face offered a scowl that was built in as original equipment. His attempt at a smile did little to change that.

"If I should know you I don't remember. That's how I begin every conversation with folks who have braved the forest of musty boxes out there and arrived safely, here in my dust-laden kingdom."

He indicated the area with a sweep of his arm. Jake was immediately likeable.

"No. You don't know us. This is Amy and I'm Mark. We're students up at State College and have undertaken a project we think you may be able to help with if you can spare a few minutes."

"My last two bylines dealt with a house filled with abandoned cats and the over-fishing of Blue Lake. Believe me, I have time. I'd offer seats, but you see the problem."

"We prefer the floor anyway. Please, return to yours."

"I think we are going to get on well," he said. "What's up?"

"You start," Mark said turning to Amy.

"Okay. Well, back between 18 and 20 years ago several things happened here in Cedarville. A man named Robert Henri – an accountant – disappeared. The accounting firm he partnered in also closed – Baxter Accounting and Investments. He had a wife and daughter who we cannot locate – no trace in fact. I guess we are wondering if you can shed light on any of that."

"How much time do you have?"

"Ready to camp for the night if necessary," Mark said slipping out of his shoes as if to prove his words. He opened a new page on his laptop for notes. Amy was pleased he had stopped with the shoes.

"The Jim Bob Baxter case. Messy at best. Henri and Baxter were partners – Baxter owned probably seventy five percent. Several years into their relationship, Henri discovered Baxter was defrauding some of their largest clients. He confronted Baxter about it. Henri later said, Baxter

beat him to a pulp because of it, probably leaving him for dead in the alley behind their office. Baxter had an unsavory reputation as a hot head clear back to his teenage years. Henri went to the police and eventually to the prosecuting attorney. There were witnesses to the beating that eventually came forward. Baxter was tried and sentenced to eight years for fraud and two more for assault – he served all of it but two months – let out that much early due to overcrowding. During his time in prison he earned himself the reputation of an unruly inmate. It was reported he was in lots of fights. He was a big, strong man. It was Henri's evidence and testimony that built the case. After his conviction, he was given one month to get his life in order before reporting to do his time at State Prison. During the final week of the trial – it lasted almost four – Henri suddenly disappeared leaving his wife and daughter behind here in Cedarville. Clarifying, it was immediately after Henri's testimony was finished that he disappeared. I mean he vanished! I had one interview with his wife and she had no information about it – at least that's what she said. Then, a month after that, she and the daughter disappeared. It was generally thought that Henri had gone into hiding to avoid the hit, which it was rumored Baxter had put out on him, and that his family later went to join him. That was never verified because none of the three of them were ever heard from again."

"Lots to digest there," Amy said. "I have to assume you have a theory."

"I do."

Jake stood and began pacing, sucking on his unlit pipe. He moved to one of the windows and stopped, looking out as he formulated his response.

A shot rang out from outside. The window broke at shoulder height. Jacob stumbled backward and fell to the floor. A pool of blood quickly formed around his body.

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CHAPTER FOUR

German Spies? Really!

Two men burst in on the scene from the stairs. Mark's first impulse was to be sure they were not bearing arms. They weren't.

"Need 9-1-1, somebody," Mark called to them.

His quick take of the situation suggested additional shots could be coming so he pulled one end of the big desk out, blocking Jake from the window.

Amy was already kneeling beside their new friend.

"Looks to be hit in the shoulder – upper left chest sort of. Lots of blood."

Mark shed his T-shirt, folded it several times, and handed it to Amy. Kneeling beside him, Amy had opened Jake's shirt to expose the wound. She understood Mark's intention, and, folding it one more time, she placed the shirt over the wound, pressing hard to control the bleeding.

The two men introduced themselves as employees of the paper. They said their names, but neither Amy nor Mark paid attention to them. More employees gathered, but stayed back, clearly more there to gawk and wring their hands than help.

Within five minutes two EMTs were there, pulling a gurney.

Mark glanced at his watch and directed a puzzled look at them.

"Fire station is just across the street," one of them said clearly understanding what was on Mark's mind.

"Stay low," Mark suggested. "Could be more gun fire."

They rolled Jake onto his right side to take a quick look. A local policeman arrived. The EMT spoke to him.

"Bullet went clean through. Missed the heart and lungs. Bleeding is mostly external."

The policeman – *Jimmy*, as it turned out – looked around. Mark approached him.

"Amy and I were here with him at the time of the shot. He was standing there in front of the window – in close, facing out. The force of the shot propelled him backwards and he lit

on his back. His head took a good bounce off the floor. I imagine that's why he's unconscious. From the effect of the impact, I assume it was a large caliber bullet. I suppose we need to look for that slug."

Without waiting for a response, Mark walked back to the first tall, metal, shelf. Like the others, it was filled top to bottom with cardboard boxes, which in turn were filled with copies of old newspapers. He turned and sighted from the window. The policeman had followed him understanding what he had in mind. Mark talked while he searched the boxes that were within easy reach on the lower shelves.

"Shot had to have come from the roof of that building just to the east. Only place high enough to enter the window at a generally horizontal trajectory. That your take on it, Officer Jimmy?"

There was nothing dull about Officer Jimmy. It was just that Mark's mental wheels turned at a far faster pace than most. Jimmy studied the remark, nodded and added his own comment.

"It would mean a slightly upward trajectory, I think. That roof is a few feet lower than this floor."

An EMT overheard and verified the officer's comment.

"Entered two inches lower in front than it exited out his back."

Mark took him at his word and moved his search to the upper shelves. The two of them spotted the hole at the same moment. Mark pulled a stepstool into place and the policeman climbed up and handed down the box. Mark carried it to the corner of one of the large tables. Together they opened it – Mark cut the sealing tape and Jimmy unfolded the four flaps. They began removing the top layers of neatly stacked papers.

The hole was about five inches from the top. The slug had come to rest about three quarters of the way through the box – front to back. Mark was sure that later it would seem humorous – it had come to rest on an obituary section page.

"Lots of power behind a slug this size," the officer said twirling it slowly between his thumb and index finger. "Could take down a deer at two hundred yards."

He dropped it into a plastic evidence bag and wrote on

it.

“I’ll go check out the rooftop – may get lucky and find the brass casing presenting a nice big fingerprint.”

Mark had a question.

“I suppose there is no chance that bullet is left over from some other shooting is there?”

“Good question. However, this slug left a trail of wet blood on the paper and it was still warm when I first picked it up. It’s the one we’re after, alright.”

Jake regained consciousness as he was lifted onto the gurney. He turned his head toward Mark and Amy who were standing their arms around each other’s waists, watching.

“Looks like I was shot? Feels like I was shot. Should I have frisked you two?”

He managed a faint smile.

“From the roof of the building behind this one,” Mark said. Through the window and into your shoulder.”

Jake replied.

“One thing for sure, this is one interview I will never forget.”

One of the EMTs explained to him that they were taking him to the hospital.

“The kids will come along,” he said. “We hardly got started.”

“We’ll follow along and talk again when we’re allowed,” Amy said.

Jake offered a nod and directed one more comment to the EMTs.

“Consider these two my next of kin so treat them right.”

He offered a wink and then closed his eyes to rest.

At the hospital, the surgeon worked on Jake for nearly an hour. The wound was described as *a clean through and through*. He refused to stay overnight so Mark and Amy became his transportation.

“Home, I assume,” Amy said again manning the driver’s seat.

Mark sat with Jake in the back.

“Hell no! All my records and notes are in my office. Park in the alley behind the building and we can take the service elevator.”

“And then we’ll see you home,” Mark said.

“I got a bed and keep clothes there. I often spend the night.”

Once they had managed him upstairs, Mark helped Jake change into a clean shirt. Mark had been appropriately clad throughout. Amy had bought a shirt for him in the gift shop at the hospital – It read: *Go Big Blue*. Neither had any idea what it meant, but figured it was probably connected with local high school sports. Mark took it one step further, postulating they were the Blue Devils – that indicated by the horns sprouting from the top of the blue G.

“Okay, where were we?” Jake asked once he had been eased into his desk chair. “Oh, yes. Amy. The file cabinet there. Fifth from the side of the desk. Marked, *Disturbing*.”

“Disturbing?” Mark asked smiling.

“Some stories never seem to add up or leave something hanging – Disturbing.”

“I see. And this Baxter thing was one of them?”

“Definitely. It may well have been the one that required that file, even.”

Amy opened the top drawer.

“The folder marked Baxter, I assume.”

“There are three marked Baxter. Bring them all. One thing you two need to know right from the start.”

“Yes,” Mark said ready to take notes.

“Getting shot in the shoulder hurts like hell.”

It produced smiles – at the remark, not the pain. Jake understood.

“The hospital sent pain pills,” Amy said.

“Later. He continued speaking.”

“Baxter was a shyster – that’s slangified German for a person whose business dealings are unscrupulous, fraudulent, or deceptive. Literally it means one who defecates. That was never evident in his manner, however. He came at the world with a big smile and a glad hand. He handled the investment side of the business and Robert Henri the accounting services. They both had some sizeable accounts. By all reports, Henri was as honest as the day is long. In addition to caring for his clients, he kept the books for the firm. About four or so years into their partnership, Henri began sensing

something was wrong – the exact nature of what he found I don't recall. At any rate, Baxter had 'cooked' the books someway. Henri came to find out that Baxter had systematically defrauded his investors out of nearly four million dollars over the years, explaining the losses as good companies having gone bad due to changes in the economy.

"Henri confronted Baxter. Baxter threatened his life if he revealed anything – that's according to Henri's testimony at the eventual trial. Henri disregarded the threat and promptly went to the prosecuting attorney here in town with all the evidence. Several of those who had been defrauded were prominent citizens so Baxter was arrested and the case moved to trial rapidly. Henri had all the ducks in a row before he took what he had to the prosecuting attorney. It was a slam/dunk, to use a baseball metaphor."

He waited for them to smile at his little joke.

"Easiest conviction he'd ever had. In addition, Baxter also faced charges stemming from a beating he gave Henri. There had been witnesses. Two years of his sentence were for assault and battery.

"Baxter was found guilty on both charges and was sentenced to ten years' total in prison. The judge allowed him a month in which to get his affairs in order before presenting himself at the prison to begin his sentence. Henri had already disappeared before the trial was over. A few weeks later his wife and step daughter left town telling friends they were going to live with Marjorie's sister in Canada. They would send an address later. Nobody ever heard from them again. I have found no trace of any of the three of them."

"You referred to the girl as his step daughter?" Amy said posing it as a question.

"Yes. His wife had been married before and lost her husband when he was in the military."

"Do you know how Baxter came by his limp?" Mark asked.

"Limp? I know of no limp. Like I said he was a big, strong man."

The young people exchanged a look. Amy took up the conversation.

"How was Baxter referred to locally – the name he was

called?”

“J. B. for as long as I knew him.”

“And Henri?”

“Always Henri, often misspelled. It had been that way since grade school.”

“As far as you know did Henri have any enemies?”

“Henri? Enemies? No. None. He was a kind and likeable person. He married Margaret about two years after her first husband died. May I know why you are interested in this twenty-year-old case?”

“First, it’s cases,” Mark said. “Second, we are not ready to share that with anybody yet.”

“But, *you* will get our exclusive story when the time comes,” Amy hurried to add.

“Just don’t get yourselves killed over it,” Jake said. “By the way, do you think my shooting has anything to do with whatever it is you’re into?”

They looked at each other.

“I don’t know how,” Amy said. “I certainly hope not.”

“Well, there is one ‘how’, maybe,” Mark said. “You could say we ran amok of Baxter, but we can’t be sure he knows it was us. But, if he does and if he followed us here, and if he found us speaking with you and if he didn’t want that, then perhaps there could be a connection.”

“Baxter’s here, now, free?” Jake asked.

“We’re pretty sure. Amy, can you sketch him for Jake?”

A few minutes later she handed it to him. While she had been drawing, Jake retrieved a sheet from one of the folders. It was an article that had appeared in the paper when he had been arrested and contained a photograph.

“Same guy – no doubt – unless he has a twin or a doppelganger,” Mark said.

Jake nodded and went on.

“The limp bothers me. Had to have happened in prison. He was a terrible prisoner according to all reports. Always in fights. Jimmy, the officer who arrived up here right after the shooting, spent some years as a guard at the State Prison. He might know something about that.”

“Jake! Jake Andrews!” someone called out from the top of the stairs.

“Back here,” Jake answered, his forehead furrowed. Then in a quiet voice, he offered an aside to his two young companions, “I don’t recognize the voice and I never forget a voice.”

He opened his top, left desk drawer, removed a small handgun and slipped it into the sling he had acquired at the hospital. He motioned for Mark and Amy to move closer to the wall.

A young uniformed officer peeked at them from around a shelf.

“Officer Brandon. The captain assigned me to you, Jake. He’s taking no chances with your safety. He says you’ve made more than your fair share of enemies over the years. Specifically, he remembers a man named Baxter who threatened you once because he thought your reporting was biased against him and *for* somebody else.”

He set a small suitcase on the floor beside him.

Jake moved his eyes in Mark’s direction and frowned. The intent was not immediately obvious. That lasted only a moment.

“I just need to make sure you really are a cop, you understand,” Jake said. “This should do it – what’s the police station’s phone number?”

The young officer smiled – 266-2677 – the last four numbers spell out c-o-p-s.”

“Is there a rest room up here?” Mark asked.

“Far corner,” Jake said, pointing.

Mark left.

Amy stayed not entirely sure what was going on.

Jake made small talk with the officer.

Mark returned offering the circular, okay sign, with his index finger and thumb from behind the officer. He had called the number and inquired about the officer’s authenticity. It was on the up and up, right down to the mole on the young man’s chin. His respect for the sly old reporter grew. It was mutual.

The young officer grinned.

“I can give you my mama’s number, too, if that will help.”

“You knew what they were up to?” Amy asked.

His smile grew.

“They don’t let just anybody into the academy – IQ has to at least be larger than your hat size.”

“And here I thought I was being quite clever,” Jake said.

“Oh, you were, sir. The fact that I figured it out takes nothing away from your cleverosity – is that a word?”

“Uncover a chair and take a seat. It appears you’ll be here for some time. Did the captain say anything more about who he suspected as the shooter?”

“I asked him that very question. To quote him exactly, sir: ‘That SOB – referring to you, Sir – has made more enemies in these parts than the general who burned the town to the ground during the Civil War. I can think of a dozen who’d like him dead without even heating up my brain cells’. End quote. Other than that, there was only that reference to the Baxter fellow.”

Jake chuckled and nodded.

“The captain and I do go back a long way. I could say the same about him, you understand. Sometime ask him about Alexandria from our weekend in Newport – no, on second thought I’m sure your career in law enforcement is far too important.”

The young officer shrugged, not about to take sides in such a round of contentions.

“Unless you have something else for us, I think Amy and I will leave. May we have your phone number in case we need to contact you? *May we contact you?*”

Jake handed over his business card. As an afterthought, he also handed one to the Officer.

“Here,” he said pointing to one of the three folders. “This one contains photocopies of the most important things I gathered on the case – like a case and trial summary. Return it to me when you’re done with it. Copy anything you want to.”

Amy started to respond.

“Thank you, we’ll . . .”

Jake interrupted her. “Please don’t say you’ll guard it with your life. That went out with the black and white movies about the underground in World War Two Europe. Your lives are far more important than any of this.”

“We will remember that, although it seems you may just

be doing that very thing – guarding something with your life.”

Mark picked up the folder and they walked back toward the stairs. At the top they met workman carrying glass to fix the window. Amy was relieved that would be taken of. Mark didn't really make the connection. He was already deep into formulating a new list.

They hadn't mentioned the auto accident in which the mother and daughter had been killed thinking it was best to check it out first. They picked up drive-through lunch at, 'Percy's Pullets,' a local chicken place, and headed back north.

"I suppose the gun used to fire at Jake won't be traceable from the bullet," Amy said.

"High powered hunting rifles aren't your everyday kill-the-guy-next-door-you-don't-like sort of weapon, I suppose," Mark said. "We'll see if a casing turns up, I guess."

"What do you think? Can there really be some connection between us and Jake getting shot?" Amy asked knowing they didn't have the kind of evidence her guy would demand. She was surprised at his response.

"If there is a connection, then it means Baxter *does* know about us. That's very scary. I'd rather believe it's that old score he had to score with Jake – the biased reporting thing."

"What could he know?" she asked.

"Well, if he followed the sneeze trail and determined from somebody that we are often up on the roof at night, he could be fairly sure that if anybody saw the murder it would have been us. If, however, he only saw us nosing around the alley – taking pictures of the bricks after the body had been removed and the new bricks set – then he might just think we're nosey college kids."

"Or, that we saw the body in the alley and maybe saw it being moved," Amy came back.

"I hadn't thought of that. He did have a chance to maybe see us when we were in the alley and he was up on the 818 balcony."

"I still don't understand why he would go so far as try to kill Jake," Amy said.

"Some folks get so wrapped up in taking revenge that

after a while, reason plays no part in their plans.”

“But the man was convicted on Henri’s testimony, nothing from Jake.”

“You’re right, Amy. For all we really understand about it all, if it were Baxter or one of his lackeys, they might have been just as willing to shoot either or both of us if we had appeared in a window. They may have thought they were, in fact. Or, it might have been motivated by something else entirely.”

“Like what sort of ‘something else?’”

“The murder of Henri, recently, and/or the murder of his wife and daughter back when. He can’t believe it’s a good thing to have questions revisited.”

“Did the article you found about the mother and daughter’s accident indicate foul play?” Amy asked.

“No. It did say the cliff over which their car drove was nowhere near a road and it left that hanging as something odd and unexplained. But, it didn’t indicate any thoughts about foul play.”

“None. I have to think the unusual circumstances had to leave a lot of unanswered questions for the authorities, however.

“A high cliff I imagine,” Amy said as if thinking out loud.

“Again, it didn’t say. When we get home, I’ll search deeper for more information. Surely, I can find where that cliff is. We can go look it over ourselves, tomorrow.”

“I guess the unstated possibility, here, is that we believe Baxter might have been responsible for their deaths, as well.”

“I guess so. The time line fits – it happened after the conviction for the white-collar crime and before Baxter presented himself for prison. I wish we knew the exact sort of threats Baxter might have made against Henri.”

“I suppose a transcript of the trial would include threats if they were made in court or attested to by witnesses,” Amy said.

“From what we know about Baxter he is far too smart than to go off halfcocked and make threats in front of witnesses. Henri’s testimony about it would just have been one man’s word against another’s.”

"I guess you're right. We probably have no way of verifying them."

"Unless . . ."

Amy interrupted.

"You just got that, '*Amy you're not going to like this*' look in your eye."

"Didn't know I had one of those. I imagine, then, you have been able to save my butt on more than one occasion because of it."

Amy merely raised her eyebrows.

"Anyway, we have determined that Henry or Robert was a careful, meticulous, well organized man. People with those traits would be likely to keep diaries."

It had been a roundabout way of asking a question.

"So, you have more breaking and entering on your mind?"

"I'd rather think of it as 'necessary clandestine entering for the greater good.'"

"The police will still interpret that as illegal."

"Where's your famous spirit of adventure?"

Amy assumed it had been rhetorical since she was quite sure she had none.

They parked in the garage beneath their building and walked up to the first floor where the super's office sat on the south-east corner. There was a supply closet next to it that was always open – mops and buckets, brooms, step ladder, basic tools and other things the residents could borrow.

"Should I ask why we are going into the closet?" Amy asked.

"You should always ask whatever is on your pretty little mind. More to the point, close the door behind us. It can be hooked from the inside to give residents some degree of privacy when in here looking through their belongings."

Mark turned on the light and pointed to the ceiling.

"Opens into the space between floors where the air ducts and conduit run."

"And?"

"And, I have noticed a similar opening in the Super's office. I'm figuring to go up through this one and down through the other one."

He spread the step ladder and climbed until he could work with the trapdoor in the ceiling. It was hinged so it opened into the space above. He moved up another two steps.

“Drat, we need a flashlight.”

“Like one of these on this shelf?”

Mark looked down with no comment and reached to take what Amy was offering.

A moment later he had pulled himself up inside the darkness and crawled across the fifteen feet of plywood flooring through the four-foot-high space to the other trapdoor.

“You coming?” he called down to Amy.

“Not unless my presence is absolutely necessary.”

“Let me give it a try alone, then. I’ll keep you informed on the phone so I don’t have to yell.”

The second trapdoor was also hinged. He pulled it up and laid it back out of the way. He hung his head over the edge. Using the flashlight, he quickly scanned the room and then let himself down, hanging for only moment before dropping to the floor. It was an eight-foot ceiling so his drop had been minimal. He would need to stand on something to return. He walked to the door and flipped on the lights.

“So, where would Henry have kept his private things?” he mumbled. “Possibly in that bottom drawer of his desk – the one with the lock.”

He tried it and found it couldn’t be budged. He took his mini tool set from his pocket and presently had the drawer open. Things were arranged in hanging manila folders – each label neatly typed.

Mark had no idea what label he might be looking for. His fingers walked their way across all of them. There was nothing marked diary or journal or, ‘Attention Mark, this is what you want’.

He called Amy and relayed what he had and had not found.

“It may be a long shot,” she said, “but what about a CD or flash drive?”

“Good possibilities, but where?”

“Some place close to his computer, maybe?”

“Yes. That would at least seem to make sense.”

Mark searched in silence for some time, eventually reporting to Amy.

“One flash drive, but remember, flash drives weren’t available twenty years ago, when all of this came down.”

He inserted it into the computer and opened the file, continuing to talk on the phone.

“It contains nearly a hundred files. None are obviously what we are looking for. The largest file looks like his address book – a whole lot of Latino Friends the way it looks. I wonder why. Pasty white Henry didn’t even faintly resemble our south of the border Americans. None of my business I’m sure.”

“He probably wouldn’t make the label obvious, you know,” Amy suggested.

“I can copy it and bring the copy along with us. When we’re finished we can destroy it. That way it won’t really be like stealing, right?”

“I can live with that considering our lives may be at risk, here.”

“I need to find something to stand on so I can reach the opening in the ceiling and get out of here.”

“Or, you could walk out the front door and lock it behind you.”

“You women are so practical. You suck all the fun out of this cloak and dagger stuff.”

Five minutes later they were up in Mark’s apartment, examining the file names on the copied flash drive, disappointed they were finding nothing that seemed useful.

“Maybe we are approaching this all wrong,” she said. “We are assuming what we are looking for would be in his diary or journal. Maybe it is all separate like in something titled ‘Baxter’s threats to me and my family’.”

“But we didn’t find anything like that, Amy.”

“Maybe we did. It bothered me when we first ran across it. It was back toward the top of the list. There: *Back Poison*.”

“Back poison? What about that?” Mark asked.

“First, it makes no sense so it must mean something else. Second, how about ‘back’ for Baxter and ‘poison’ as a substitution for prison?”

“I guess we’ll see. Let me open it.”

He double clicked it.

"It's gibberish," Mark said. "Look at this."

"I suppose one more indication it is something he wanted to hide and therefore probably important."

"It would seem so," Mark agreed. "I suppose that is actually good, isn't it?"

"You've loved codes since you were old enough to know they existed," Amy said. "Go for it."

Mark pulled up the word processing program.

"Okay. First line: *Wm Wvvpimyomh pg yjr Yjtrsyd zks,rd Nscyhr z,sfr Shsomdy Z,r smf Z,u Gs,o;u/*"

He entered it on the black page.

"Except for the odd punctuation, it looks like a cryptogram," Amy said.

"Still could be – a variation – I suppose, but, because of that punctuation, I have another idea. Watch and, once again, prepare to be amazed, Joy of my Life."

Amy had been standing behind him and she leaned down so she was ear to ear with him watching the screen. He began plunking in the letters as he explained.

"From the way the upper case letters are arranged, I think that first line is a title, maybe. Let's see."

The decoded message appeared on the page as he typed.

An Accounting of the Threats James Baxter Made Against Me and My Family.

"How in the world! That *did* amaze me – again."

Mark lifted his face toward her like a baby bird awaiting sustenance. She accommodated him with a peck to his lips.

"Watch," he said. "I place my fingers on the keyboard one key to the right of where they should be and see what happens when I type the actual message using the touch keyboarding technique."

Out printed the coded message.

"It is actually quite a simple technique. To decode, one enters the coded message with his fingers one place to the right of normal placement."

"Bobby Lipphart and I used it to exchange secret messages when we were ten.

"Why would Henry have used such a simple code to

hide what appears like it is going to be such important information?" Amy asked.

"Most of the hiding was done in disguising the file so it wouldn't easily be discovered. It would, of course, be found when all his files were examined. It needed to be easily translated by the authorities at a time like this, but not by Baxter. I'm sure a good cryptographer would have had it decoded before I even sensed what it was all about. I learned about it in a book I read about German spies during WWII – the spies in WWII not me in WWII."

"I got that. You can stop amazing me now. Let's get to what it has to say."

///

CHAPTER FIVE

One humungously long paragraph.

The message turned out to be a composite of a series of threats, which Henry contended Baxter had made against him. There was no means presented for verifying them. Baxter had been careful. There were two main threats: First, if Henri went to the police Baxter would kill him. That occurred the first-time Henry confronted the man with his evidence and clearly had not happened immediately – not before Baxter went to prison. The second, dated after Henry’s testimony – was more of a promise than a threat; Baxter *would* harm his family in retaliation for what Henry had done. The accompanying note stated that it had been delivered at the court house in a whisper by one of Baxter’s associates.

Henry went on to explain how he had arranged new names for himself and his wife and daughter, but did not state them. He didn’t specify how he had done that, but there were several avenues – do it himself by using names he found in the obituaries, or purchase identities from people who trafficked in them.

The final line in the entry was puzzling: *Mark Twain would flash a smile in my direction.* It had been set off as a separate paragraph.

“Another clue of some kind?” Amy asked.

“That’s my guess since, on the surface it makes no sense in or out of context of the rest of the message. No idea where to go with it. You?”

“Does that shift your fingers thing do anything when you type in Mark Twain?” Amy asked.

Mark entered it: ,stl yesom.

“Doubt if that’s meaningful. It was a good idea, though. I was named after Mark Twain – have I ever mentioned that?”

“Only maybe a thousand times. I keep waiting for the mustache to sprout.”

“I know everything he ever wrote – that was published.”

“Maybe something will percolate to the surface about it.”

“Maybe.”

"I do have one question about it. How did your parents get Marcus out of Twain's 'Mark'?"

"Mom's mom – my grandmother – was Italian. I think grandma twisted mom's arm a bit. She was always disappointed her daughter didn't marry an Italian – and worse yet, a Unitarian."

"Did not know that. Thank you. You going to insist on Italian names for our children?"

"I'm leaning more toward Norwegian – Olaf or Helga."

"Pizza man would be happy."

Mark (Marcus) offered a smile, but nothing suggesting he wanted to further that conversation.

"By the way, did you lock the Super's door when you left?"

"I don't remember."

"That's a rarity – you not remembering something."

"I was probably thinking ahead to snuggle time. That often discombobulates all functions above my navel."

He looked at her and sighed.

"I better go down and check. I don't think I closed either ceiling door, either."

"I closed the one in the closet and replaced the ladder," Amy said. "I didn't even think to look over at the other one."

Downstairs, Mark tried the door to the Super's apartment. He found that he had not locked it. He took the ladder from the closet into the apartment and locked the door behind him, not wanting to be interrupted while he was in there handling the problem. He climbed the ladder and closed the trapdoor. On his way down, he noticed the book case and studied it for the first time. The books were arranged alphabetically by author. There it was, ***Twain, Mark, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer***. He pulled it off the shelf and opened it, feeling rather sure it would contain something relevant to the case.

He worked through it one page at a time not sure what he was looking for. He figured maybe there would be a folded sheet with information that would implicate Baxter in the deaths. He had been convicted of crimes against his clients and Henri. Nothing related to the *disappearances* of Henry or his family had been raised at the trial.

Mark looked for letters or words that were marked, but found none. Twain was clearly connected, but how? He understood that literally the words 'mark twain' referred to the second mark on the line that measured the depth of the water in the river and signified two fathoms, or twelve feet, which was the safe depth for most heavily laden steamboats. So, it might have been related to 2 or 12 or maybe line or rope or river or boat. Perhaps it referred to somebody named Tom or Sawyer. Nothing but raw, unlikely, possibilities came to him. He returned the ladder, made sure the Super's door was locked, and rode the elevator back to the ninth floor carrying the book.

"I took care of everything down there. Brought back Henry's copy of Tom Sawyer – the only Mark Twain book I found. I paged through it, but nothing popped out that seemed helpful. Thought your better trained eye might see something."

He tossed it onto the sofa beside her. She picked it up and began paging through it.

"We still going north tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'll try to get a better fix on that cliff. For one thing, I think we need to visit it. Maybe we can luck out and find another Jake up there at the newspaper office."

"Think we can manage to get him shot as well?"

Mark let it go.

"I was wondering if we should call him to see how he's doing," she said.

"He may be sleeping."

"That's really why I didn't go ahead and make the call. Tomorrow, then."

"How about if you work my laptop and find a good map of the area between here and Springfield? I'll use the desk top and search for the name of that cliff."

They each got to work. Thirty minutes later Amy had printed out three maps – one was a 'tope sheet' – a topographical map – showing elevations and points of geological interest. She took them to Mark and stood behind him.

"I can find nothing other than an article that refers to a police report that says the accident occurred two miles due

east of County Route 246 and eleven miles south of Springfield. Any way to locate such a place on your maps?"

"Should be."

She spread them out on the desk beside the computer and began commenting.

"No mile scale on the topographical map, but there is on the other two. Eleven miles south on 246 would be right here at the jog in the highway. There isn't a road going east from there, however – at least none is shown."

"Estimating the spot on the topographical map it would be right about here – you think?" he asked.

"Right. Problem is whether that eleven miles is by highway or includes the two miles cross country to the east," she said.

"Or, it could be a straight-line distance from town to the cliff."

"Let's look at all those possibilities," Mark said. "Measure out two, nine and eleven miles on the edge of this index card. Then we can move it around and mark each option."

They soon had those things accomplished. They compared the spots with the topographic map. Two miles east of 246 there was a ridge that suggested significant height. The elevation lines merged indicating that a cliff was a real possibility. It stretched on for some five miles north and south.

"That's a lot of territory to explore," Mark said.

"So, maybe we need to head for the newspaper office up in Springfield, first. Somebody may be able to narrow down the area for us."

"Good idea. Better get to bed."

"That's your solution to all problems."

"Think of a better one?"

"I guess not right now."

* * *

They were on the road north by seven o'clock the following morning, deciding to take 246 rather than the Interstate. Amy navigated with the maps while Mark drove. He slowed as they neared the 'turn off' stretch they had located the night before. The maps were accurate in that

there were no roads of any variety off to the east. There was, however one spot where there were wide wooden gates on each side of the narrow blacktop.

“That could be a crossing for farm machinery,” Mark said. “I suppose a car could easily pass through to the field and make its way to the cliff on east.”

“Shall we try it?” Amy asked.

“We’re only a few miles from Springfield. Like you said, it might be better to check out what somebody at the newspaper knows first.”

She nodded and they drove on.

The paper occupied a relatively new building on the south side of the city giving them quick and easy access. The sign indicated they opened to the public at eight. It was eight. They found themselves at the glass front door just as an older gentleman was unlocking it from the inside.

“Sir,” Mark began. “Who should we talk with about a news story from nearly twenty years ago?”

“Sam. Been here almost as long as I have. Sam’s the reporter who digs up the dirt and I’m the janitor who cleans it up.”

He chuckled at his little joke. They wondered how many times he had used it. They smiled and also managed chuckles. He seemed appreciative of their response.

“Follow me.”

Shortly, they were at an office door. The old man knocked and went ahead and opened it, motioning the two young people on inside while he remained in the hall.

Sam, as it turned out, was retirement age, red headed with dark rimmed glasses and female – Samantha they assumed.

Amy introduced them and then spoke.

“If you have a few minutes we are in need of information about a car accident nineteen or so years ago. It took the lives of a mother and child, south of town. The car reportedly drove over a cliff well off the road.”

“I remember. My editor wanted me to treat it as suicide. Didn’t make sense to me that way. I probably still have my story file. What was the name . . .? Franklin? Johnson? Hammond? Price, I think. Yes, Price.”

How she had followed a path from Franklin to Price escaped them. They chose not to ask.

She went to a file cabinet and after some moments of running her fingers across the tops of manila folders, she extracted one – an inch thick. She returned to her desk and motioned for her visitors to pull chairs close in beside her. She started through each sheet.

“That’s right. The name on the woman’s ID was Maggie Price. It was embossed on an aluminum social security card in her wallet. None for the girl – about ten years old. There was a problem about that, however. The name and address on the ID was bogus – fake. Fingerprints were not available – bodies were burned – and didn’t provide any identification through several data bases. There were no matching missing person reports. It was soon relegated to the dead file by the police, and as far as I know has never been reopened. They leaned toward suicide initially partly because of the metal id – figured its purpose had been to identify the body after an expected inferno at the bottom of the cliff.

“Police report said the car had been driven for some distance across fields east from the county road to the cliff – crossing through several gates from field to field.”

“Does that cliff have a name that might show up on a map?” Mark asked.

“Not that I know of. During the investigation, it was referred to as the cliff on the Meyers Farm. That cliff goes on for many miles on south of there – maybe five, I imagine – and some north as well.”

“Any reason to suspect foul play?” Mark asked.

“Aside from a mother doing such an unthinkable thing to herself and her daughter, you mean? There were several things that caught my eye, but the investigators made nothing from them.”

“Like?” Amy asked.

Sam shuffled to the back of the folder and removed several photographs.

“The Accident Scene Photographs. What do you two see?”

They studied them for a few moments.

“Foot tall grass bent over like where the wheels of a car

had flattened it – two rows like the tires on two sides of the car,” Amy began.

“And?” Sam asked pressing for more.

“Oh, and this second picture – not like the first. Grainier.”

“That is mine taken with a throw away camera popular back in that era.”

“Okay,” Mark went on, “anyway, it shows another set of car tracks, as if the car was turning in a circle and at the edge of the picture they cross another set of tracks – narrower the way it looks.”

“Let me put it in perspective,” Sam said. “Here. Look at my drawing. These are the tracks of the car that went over the cliff – one set that headed straight across the meadow for the cliff. These over here to the south are the ones in the second picture. The tracks show a vehicle turning around back some twenty-five feet from the edge of the cliff - making a circle and crossing the set from the other car. Look at this picture.”

“Your camera again, I take it.”

“Yes. Compare what you see here with what you see here.”

She pointed back and forth between the first and third pictures.

“Not sure what you mean,” Amy said.

“Maybe I do,” Mark said picking them up and holding them close. “Look here at the end of the circle – those tracks are super wide – much wider than the ones taking a straight track up close to the edge of the cliff. I’m thinking what you thought was that there were two vehicles. The one to the rear tried to stay in the tracks made by the first one and it then turned around and, when heading back out of the field, again tried to stay in the tracks made when they came in. Hard to do that, so, the tracks not only grew wider, but varied in width from place to place as the driver did better and worse at sticking within the tracks.”

“That was my take, young man, but the police didn’t buy it. By the time the car was first found a week had passed since the crash. It was found by hunters and there had been heavy rains in the area. The police attributed the wider tracks

to the grass along the edges of the tracks having been beaten down – bent over – by the rain.”

“Your theory is that there was a second vehicle – probably bad guys with nefarious intentions.”

Sam elbowed Amy.

“Nefarious? The boy come with a dictionary?”

It was worth chuckles. He wouldn’t have used the word if he hadn’t had good reason to think she would know it – she was a writer. Mark continued.

“They forced the woman to drive to the cliff – following her close behind – and somehow managed to send that car over the side. Then they turned around – making the big circle in the grass – and drove back to the highway the way they had come.”

“That’s basically my take, yes. Another piece of evidence the investigators wouldn’t accept is shown in this picture. It was taken back some ten feet from the edge of the cliff.”

“A dark spot on the ground?” Amy asked.

“Oil, I contend. Look at the first picture. See the half dozen smaller spots between the tracks in the grass?”

“So?” Amy asked.

“My question was – is – could those spots be oil leaks – drops?” Sam said. “If the smaller ones along the trail were oil, then the larger one could represent a spot where the car stopped and sat for a time right at the edge of the cliff before being sent over it – it would have leaked more at the same spot when stopped.”

“Stopping to give time for one of the bad guys to get out of the car before sending them to their doom,” Amy said.

“Or, doping them so they wouldn’t resist,” Mark added. “Were their tox screens done on the bodies?”

“Only minimal. Death by falling forty feet off a cliff and exploding into a fiery inferno doesn’t usually leave evidence in the blood or cause the authorities to doubt the reason for the deaths.”

“No alcohol or drugs?” Amy asked. “Seems like sloppy police work to me.”

“I’ll give the police that – they did check for those things in the bone marrow where it had been protected from the heat

and flames, but after eight days, I'm told many things dissipate even from that blood. Plus, the marrow check is often inclusive, anyway."

"Should have been traces of chloroform or some such thing," Mark added. "They must have been put to sleep or they wouldn't have just sat there and let the car take them to their deaths. I assume there were no signs of them having been tied into the car."

"No. Their seatbelts had been unfastened, however."

"Only adds support for Mark's drugging theory."

"Let me take a picture of your picture of the dark drips along the path and work on them a bit. You didn't see them when you walked the area?"

"It had rained pretty hard a day or so prior to that time," Sam said.

Mark soon had the picture enlarged and clarified.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"I see a thick black liquid on the greenish grass with some of it dropping off the blades onto the ground," Sam said clearly impressed.

"I see it too, but I'm not sure how it helps in any way," Amy said. "Wouldn't the police vehicles have matted down the grass, too?"

"I can vouch for the fact they didn't," Sam said. "They parked well back and the car was eventually removed from below and not raised back up to the cliff. The yellow tape between stakes remained there cordoning off the field for weeks."

"What it seems to tell us for sure," Mark said, "is that there was another vehicle with wider tires involved, and that the compact car had an oil leak."

"How do you figure?" Sam asked.

"No black spots in the turn-around area."

"Very good. I hadn't thought of that."

"So, the only reasonable explanation is that the people in the second vehicle were up to no good," Amy said summing it all up.

The other two nodded.

"Any pictures of the car?" Mark asked.

"I only have three. The police have many more. Here."

She lay them down on the table as if dealing Black Jack.

“Look at the rear view,” Mark said after just a few moments. “The trunk is crushed in just above the bumper.”

“So? It tumbled down a high cliff. It’s bound to be crushed here and there,” Amy said.

“Two things about that,” Mark said. “First, a car under power sails out away from the cliff on its way to the surface below – it doesn’t bump its way down. But, look closely. It seems that’s where the front bumper of a big SUV might intersect with the back of a compact car during the process of ramming it and pushing it over the cliff.”

The women nodded.

“There would seem to be an abundance of indicators of foul play,” Mark said.

“What about the bodies?” Amy asked. “Aren’t there pictures to use for identification?”

“The bodies were burned beyond recognition,” Sam said. “No help there. One adult female and one pre-pubescent female according to the coroner’s report.”

“Jewelry?” Amy asked.

“I don’t know, but I can find out. I’ll have to make a call.”

Five minutes later she had the answer.

“The woman was wearing two rings – diamond and wedding band – earrings, and a neckless. The child wore an ankle bracelet – charms. The detective is sending me pictures. Here they come now.”

“Forward them to me,” Mark said.

Sam handed her phone to him and he took care of it.

“Did they trace the car back to an owner,” Amy asked.

“The car was a rental from an agency here in Springfield. Metal dashboard VIN plate. They copied the renter’s driver’s license, plus the passenger name for insurance purposes. Here’s my copy of their copy.”

And the names were?” Mark asked.

“Maggie and Janie Price. The address was Princeton, New Jersey. Bogus as I said.

“If we just had pictures of Henry’s family, Amy said. “We might luck out and be able to match the jewelry.”

“Henry?” Sam asked unfamiliar with the name in the

present context.

“We think the two females were the wife and daughter of a man we know by that name.”

“I see,” Sam said clearly shifting gears. “They look to be expensive pieces of jewelry. There might be insurance photos if you have access to family records.”

“Great idea,” Amy said, turning to Mark.

“Maybe a folder in his files. You’d have had no reason to consider it before.”

“There were none labeled insurance or photos. I can recite what there were if it would help.”

Sam turned to Amy.

“For real. He could do that?”

“Give him a moment and he will recreate every syllable of our conversation from the moment we got up this morning to what I have just said.”

“Ah. You a couple – aside from this investigation, I mean.”

“Since we were two years old.”

“Your children will be both beautiful and brilliant.”

She gave them that look women give in such a situation.

“One dose of beauty and two of smarts,” Mark said looking that way at Amy.

“That pretty well gives you what I have,” Sam said.

“Can you mark the place of the accident on this map – the cliff?” Mark asked.

“I think so. Let’s see. There. Right there. She circled it in pencil.”

“We appreciate your time and if you want, we will keep you apprised of our progress.”

“Yes, please do. Thank you. I’m not above sharing bylines.”

“Thank you.”

She handed Mark her card.

“I already put my number and email in your phone just in case,” Mark said.

Sam nodded and walked them to the door of her office.

It was a few minutes after nine. Amy drove so Mark could work on the laptop.

The wooden gates they had noticed earlier turned out to, indeed, be the place the car had left the road on its way toward the cliff.

They drove east through the fields, needing to open two additional gates along the way. The cows paid little attention to them although their small, tan car was eyed amorously by one of the bulls.

“Watch out!” Mark called pointing to a good-sized rock.

Amy maneuvered around it.

“That, or one like it, could have been the culprit,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“The rock that damaged the oil pan or line on the rental car and caused the drips. That bothered me – rentals are kept in tip top shape.”

“Another hypothetical,” Amy said. “The case seems to be filled with long lists of hypotheticals.”

They stopped twenty yards from the cliff and walked the area, looking over the edge. Nothing stood out as remarkable, but they were glad they had stopped. Looking down on a forty-foot fall from above was daunting. By ten thirty they entered the city and by eleven were back in Mark’s apartment.

There was an email from Jake in Cedarville. He had information about Baxter’s stay in prison. It confirmed that he was always in trouble – rule infractions and fights, mostly. On one occasion, he had been the subject of a severe beating by a half dozen other inmates and it left him in the hospital with a severely damaged leg and hip. That was the point when he began limping.

Jack failed to say how he was doing – that sounded like him. Amy returned the message to ask about his health. They received a one word reply. “Okay.”

“I had hoped by this time we would have more information to send to Detective Jackson,” Mark said.

“We have lots of stuff, but nothing we can make relevant to the case,” Amy said.

“I’ve been thinking about what Sam said about the insurance photographs of the jewelry,” Mark said. Henry was a careful man – a financially savvy man. He would have had those very kinds of pictures. Question is, where?”

“Maybe he had a secret compartment or something in his apartment where he kept such important things,” Amy said.

“It is a possibility. It could also be in a Bank Lock Box. There is a check book in his desk drawer – The First National Bank – but I don’t see how that will help us. No way that we can gain access.”

“My head keeps coming back to the Tom Sawyer thing,” Amy said. “His phrase was stated oddly, didn’t you think?”

“Mark Twain would flash a smile in my direction,” Mark repeated. “It is odd, I suppose. Any ideas about it?”

“*Mark Twain would smile or Mark Twain would smile at me*, would both seem more appropriate – more grammatically reasonable.”

“I agree and what do those alternatives leave out? What was added to make the odd part?”

“Flash!”

“That’s my take, too. Flash, like in lightning or fireworks, or explosion . . . I’m dry. You?”

“When you flash a smile you often show your teeth?” Amy said.

“I think that’s all nowhere stuff.”

“Seems like it.”

“Maybe I need to go back over the flash drive and see if I can find some hidden file. Hardly five percent of it was used.”

“Did you just hear yourself?”

“I imagine I did. What did *you* hear?”

“I heard something about Mark Twain associated with a *flash drive*.”

“Interesting. Yes. A good possibility. A second flash drive, possibly,” Mark said continuing to think out loud.

“So, think about this,” she said. “You only found one book by Twain. How could that book point us to a flash drive?”

“That does seem to be the question. Hmm.”

Mark picked up the book and began talking about it.

“This copy was printed in 1952. Expensive hard back copy, cloth covered cover. Heavy paper. Twelve-point font. Still in excellent condition. No picture on the cover – just the

name of the book and author. Probably had a full color jacket originally. Thicker than it needs to be for the number of words – about 74,000 as I recall.”

He opened the book and held it out at arm’s length hoping to get some new perspective. He held in at a variety of angles not really knowing why. Something slid out from under the spine covering. Amy picked it up.

“I’ll bet you a billion dollars on something,” she said. “Old Mark T. never could have guessed the spine of one of his books would someday hold and hide a flash drive. Look at this.”

“I see. I feel pretty dumb for not have thought of that. It’s said he often carried an extra cigar in the spine of the book he was reading. Dumb! Dumb! Dumb!”

“The flash drive is a different make from the first one,” she said. “So, they were probably purchased at different times.”

“Interesting observation. Let’s crank it up and see what we have.”

He moved to the desktop and slipped it into a port.

“No folders – all individual entries – we just may have hit the mother lode here –mostly jpegs the way it looks. A few word files. The first word file is labeled to make sure it remains at the top – *aaaaainfo*. Opening it. There. One humungously long paragraph. It begins:

Information regarding threats to my family and me from James Baxter. Also, pictures of my wife and daughter and certain possessions that might be in their possession as they flee to Canada.

It was dated and provided an explanation or description of each picture.

“Let me get these other files open. . . Looks like pictures of the same jewelry found on the bodies plus some more. Several pictures of each person. Several sets of bogus identification papers are here including the ones his wife used to rent the car.”

“I think we finally have things to share with Detective Jackson,” Amy said.

“Here are two audio files I missed when I first scanned down things. Let’s take a listen.”

Amy moved in closer to make sure she would hear. The recording was poor, but could be understood.

The first was a recording of what seemed to be the original threat that Baxter made at the time Henri confronted him about the bookkeeping irregularities. The other voice – presumably Baxter – reacted to Henri’s accusation with loud and emotion-laden threats. The second file was a similar exchange outlining how Henri’s family would be hurt since he had testified. It was not Baxter’s voice but, stupidly, said the message was from Baxter. It was whispered apparently at the court house if Henri’s story was to be believed.

“Probably recorded on a micro-tape recorder back then and subsequently transferred to a computer file,” Mark said. “I can clean them up a little. The cops can do a better job. Not sure we can get a voice match from them the way they are now.”

“A file at the bottom of the list marked, Greatest Sorrow. It’s a word document. Let me open it.”

They read it together, silently. It offered a copy of the Newspaper article from the Springfield paper telling about the deaths of his wife and daughter. The accompanying note implied he somehow knew it had been Baxter – something more than his threat, though it offered no further information – certainly no proof.

“How sad,” Amy said.

Mark got up and pulled her close. They stood there together for some time as Amy wept.

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CHAPTER SIX

Two Snuggles In One Evening?

Ten minutes later:

“I think we will need a written summary of what we have found to send to Jackson,” Mark said. “We should probably put the flash drive back in the book and the book back in Henry’s office. We can direct the cops to it and point out the connection to the accident at the cliff. I’ll copy the files first. Think we should ask Jake and Sam if they will leave our names out of it for now – assuming they will be contacted?”

“That’s probably a good idea although I’m sure they will anyway. If the police need us we’ll come forward though, right?” she asked. “Of course, with this evidence they shouldn’t need us. I wonder where they are in their investigation. Not sure how to find out.”

“We’ll think on that. I’m sure Sam will help if we can figure out a way. One more thing in the summary – which I assume *you* are writing,” Mark said, “we need to indicate it was Henry who was the phantom corpse that apparently got up and walked away and suggest they compare DNA from the underside of those bricks with samples they can find in his apartment here in the building. They will have already matched what they found on the railing with what they found on the bricks.”

“What if they didn’t find anything on the railing?” Amy asked. “We believe it was scrubbed with bleach.”

“Hmm. We have some of that and we have video of me scraping it off the railing. Let’s look at that video and see if I can be identified from it. It’s mostly just my hands and you forced me to wear latex gloves – thank you by the way.”

They examined the recording. If they cut out the first fifteen seconds in which Mark’s lower arms were visible it would be fully anonymous. At the end, Amy had panned the shot back toward the open door to capture the scene and identify the apartment. That tied the railing to 818 pretty neatly, they thought. It was day and time stamped.

“How do we get the railing stuff to the police?” Amy asked figuring her guy already had it worked out.

“Leave it in a small box on the Super’s desk, marked

something like, 'Addition to #2'. We'll stick to our plan and mark your summary #2."

"Leaving things in the Super's office might tie it too closely to this building and therefore to us. Maybe we should mail *it* as well – along with the summary."

"Probably right. Need to go to a post office to do that."

"The branch on 15th isn't far away," Amy said. "Let's get things ready. There were some small boxes in the closet beside the Super's place."

"It probably really isn't even necessary for the cops to know the body hit the railing is it," Mark said.

"I suppose not, but we have it so they should have it. It might answer some questions about the condition of the body."

Mark nodded really feeling the same way.

Amy wrote the summary. Mark procured the box. He removed the plastic bag of evidence from his refrigerator and packed it – the small evidence bag inside a larger bag with ice cubes. Amy showed Mark what she had written. He had no suggestions. They folded the single sheet of paper and placed it in a zip bag, which they set on top of the rest. The lid slid down over the bottom and they sealed it all together with packing tape. So as to not draw unwanted attention at the Post Office they added a bogus return address, which they were certain did not exist there in their neighborhood.

Amy went to the counter and paid in cash – a large amount she thought to send a package just half way across town. The woman working the counter didn't question any of it. Amy was relieved. She was a terrible face to face liar.

"I'm still bothered that we haven't provided Jackson with our photo of the body on the alley floor," Amy said.

"I know. In the end, we can do that if it's needed. I'm wondering how we might be able to find that body."

"Us? Ourselves? We? You and me?"

"We're doing all the rest of the work for them. It would just be a nice finishing touch – personal satisfaction. I wonder how we can find out where Baxter is staying."

"You're getting scary!"

"We could just find his place and not make any decisions to go further until after that," Mark said trying to

soften his suggestion.”

“But, since we *will*, even over my protestations, how do we start?”

“How about back at that building we saw him coming out of when we left Antonio’s?”

“As I recall there was a choice between a private investigator’s office on one side and a tailor’s shop on the other,” Amy said.

“Let’s go get a pizza. We can keep our eyes on the place from there. It was just across the street. Some brilliant plan is bound to pop into mind.”

They chose to forgo their usual lover’s table back in the dark corner, for one at the front window. Olaf was puzzled, but didn’t ask.

Mark talked while they ate.

“Baxter hailed a cab, remember.”

“Yes, I remember – a Red Top Cab, I believe.”

“Right. Cab number was 2121 – your age and mine a year ago. How can we convince the cab company to tell us where they took Baxter that afternoon?”

“Pretend to have something he left behind at the store?” Amy offered as if a question.

“Great!”

“But which store?”

Mark began with an observation.

“I can tell you for sure that big man does not use tailors. His clothes don’t fit properly in any dimension. I’m thinking the investigator’s office.”

“Okay. What could he have left behind?” Mark asked.

“Something that could be identified with him. A check book or credit card?”

“Needs to be something without an address or they would have been able to return it directly,” Mark said.”

“A book then – with his name it.”

“Good.”

“I can supply pretty much the exact time the cab picked him up,” Mark said.”

“We probably shouldn’t be too accurate with the time. Most people would not remember so precisely.”

“Good, again. I’ll give a window – say fifteen minutes?”

“That’s good I think.”

“I can block my phone number when I call. If they ask why, I can say as a private investigator I just do that routinely. Anything else you can think of?”

“I guess not. Sure you want to do this?”

Mark rolled his eyes and looked up the cab company’s number. He placed the call.

“Yes, Sir. This is Ted at Discrete Investigations on 15th Street. On Monday, between five forty-five and six o’clock a client of mine took a cab from my office. He left a book behind – looks to be a first edition of Hemmingway so we want to make sure we find him. We believe his name was Baxter and my son is pretty sure the cab number was 2121 – he just turned twenty-one. I wonder if you could tell me where you dropped him. That might give us a starting place in getting the book back to him.”

Mark listened.

Mark responded.

“The reason we don’t have his address or number is because he just dropped in to find out about our services – a first contact.”

Mark listened some more, elevator music.

Mark responded again.

“Sure appreciate your cooperation. From now on, we’ll make certain we call Red Top for our clients who need a ride. . . . Your welcome.”

He hung up, smiling.

“4769 Mount Hampton Road. Any idea where that is?”

“Afraid not.”

“I’ll find it on my tablet. . . . Let’s see . . . Far west edge of the city. We’ll have to take the car.”

“I wonder if it’s a residence or something else.” Amy asked.

“Let’s see if Google can answer that for us. . . . It’s in a warehouse district. 4769 looks to be two stories and very old. Flat roof. Windows on the first floor but only skylights on the second. Maybe just one big 20-foot-high open space.”

“Sounds creepy!”

“I wonder what an investment consultant would have to do at a warehouse,” Mark said.

“Seal up a body in a box and ship it off to Timbuctoo,” Amy came back.

“Waaaay too many late, late movies in your youth, young lady. Although, it makes some sense in terms of hiding a body there. Let’s wait ‘til after dark and go look it over.”

“Why after dark? Couldn’t we see better in the light?”

“So, could Baxter – see us.”

“It just seems like this should be something for the police.”

“So, do I go alone?”

“Of course not, and that *is* a form of blackmail, you know.”

“Of course it is. And, it’s worked well since fourth grade. You’ve always been too nosey to stay out of things.”

“I would rather have been called inquisitive.”

“That would have been a better choice. Sorry!”

They returned to their apartment building through the alley and were surprised to meet Detective Jackson and a photographer back there.

“Detective. Didn’t expect to ever see you again,” Mark said. “What’s up?”

“I have an alley fetish and find this one particularly stimulating.”

“You’re not going to tell us, you say.”

“Nothing to hide, I suppose. I guess you know the building super, Henry Roberts, showed up.”

“What?”

“I figured you would have seen him around. You haven’t?”

“No, sir, we haven’t. When was this?”

“This morning. Dropped by the precinct. Said he’d been out of town and when he returned he found out about the investigation. Came in to offer his help.”

“Well, that’s good to hear – that he’s back. We haven’t run into him, but we’ve been in and out a lot. Is he here now?”

“No idea.”

They managed hurried goodbyes and moved on inside, huddling in the hall.

“It couldn’t have been Henry,” Amy said.

“Who, then?”

“I have no idea, but something is wrong.”

“Let me at Jackson one more time,” Mark said.

They waited five minutes to help cover his upcoming story and then returned to the alley.

“Detective. Are you certain it was Henry who came in? We’ve just asked around and nobody here on the first floor has seen him. His door is locked. It’s never locked during the day when he’s here. Did you speak with him, personally?”

“I did.”

Mark pulled up the picture of him that had been on the Sawyer flash drive.

“This is the man you spoke with?”

Jackson studied it for a moment.

“I’d sure say so. His hair wasn’t that long but . . . what’s on your mind?”

“It just seems odd he wouldn’t come back here where he lives if he were back in town, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps. He said he was leaving again for the rest of his vacation.”

“When he’s on vacation the management company always provides a replacement who stays here on site. You want the company’s number?”

“Okay. Yes.”

“Let me send it to you. . . . There!”

“Wait if you have time,” Jackson said. “I’ll call now and get this straightened out so you don’t have to be concerned.”

It seemed quite considerate of him, or, perhaps, he was covering up some other motive or suspicion,” Mark thought.

He made the call. From the side of the conversation to which they were privy, they could tell things were not as they had appeared. He hung up.

“Well, I’m not sure what’s going on,” Jackson said. “They confirm that Henry isn’t supposed to be on vacation for another nine months. Let me get his picture sent to me here. Give me a minute.”

“You have Henry’s picture?”

“Everybody entering the station gets their picture snapped automatically. I put a copy in his report. Just be a minute.”

He chuckled as he worked at sending a text message.

"You should see my grandson send a text. He's only nine, but he's ten times faster than I am."

Mark smiled to himself – his great grandmother was ten times faster than Jackson.

Several minutes passed. The picture arrived.

"This is your Super, isn't it?" he asked.

The young people looked at each other. Mark answered.

"Sure looks like him. Sort of poor resolution, but it does look like him."

"Well, there is sure something going on with him," Jackson said. "Let me call him."

Mark watched as he poked in the number.

"Sir, that's not Henry's number."

"It's the one he – or the person – gave me."

"Let me send you the one he gives out to the residents to find him when he's out of the building."

"I'll try it while you wait on yours," Mark said.

"It's ringing," Jackson reported. . . . "No answer."

"I got no answer, either."

"Well, I don't understand what's going on, but we'll look into it. Thanks for your help. Keep in touch – especially if he shows up, okay."

"Yes, certainly."

They rode the elevator to Mark's apartment.

"Still several hours until time to leave for the warehouse," Mark said. "Snuggle time?"

"I think we need to get our ducks in order."

"That's ducks in a row," Mark corrected.

"Confucius say: He who corrects the woman in his life certainly can't be serious about snuggling," she came back.

"*In order, in a row, what's the difference?*" Mark said humorously hoping to remove any chill from the snuggles. "Just what do you mean, though – ducks?"

"For one thing, what will we be looking for at the warehouse?"

"Clues."

Her knuckles stung!

"Well, for one thing," he managed, rubbing his shoulder,

but getting serious, “the body, I guess. Not really sure what else there could be – other than Baxter, of course. Like Detective Masters says in those mystery novels you read, “We’ll know what we’re looking for when we find it.”

“It appears you’ve stooped to reading them, too.”

“I feel it is my duty to take an interest in those things my lady cares about.”

“You are so full of it!”

“But it only makes me more loveable, right. Anyway, those are darn good stories.”

He moved in behind her, drew her close, and nuzzled her neck. She didn’t resist.

* * *

By seven thirty they were heading west across the city toward the warehouse district.

They parked two blocks away from the address and walked, remaining in the shadows close to the buildings. They had opted for dark sweat suits and hoodies and each carried a flashlight. Mark had taken his small backpack, which he kept stocked for hiking. The inside was dark as they viewed it from the front and the east side of the large building. In addition to the main entrance and the two, double-tall, garage doors in front, there were several doors arranged randomly along the side. The warehouse stood no more than ten feet from the building that sat to its east. They turned in between the buildings and tried each door unsuccessfully as they moved toward the rear.

When the door furthest to the rear would not open, Mark took out his little tool kit and went to work.

“Got it!”

“You’re getting lots of practice lately.”

He offered a quick smile and pushed the door open, slowly. He stuck his head inside and looked around.

“Dark,” he said.

Amy giggled, thinking it was humorous.

“And you expected it to be . . . ?”

He ignored her and they entered, closing the door behind them, quietly. He whispered.

“Let’s turn on the flashlights. Keep them headed pretty much straight down so the beam won’t be easily seen.”

“You expect somebody to be inside?”

Mark shrugged – not really the way to communicate there in the dark.

Just inside, they stopped and listened. There was not so much as a rat scurrying away from the lights. They raised the beams and surveyed the area. It was mostly empty with scattered crates and metal barrels closer to the front. Several vehicles sat back ten yards from the garage doors. The rear third of the floor was hard packed dirt. The front, century old cement.

They walked forward. As they neared the front they gave a cursory examination to the crates and steel drums they passed. The crates were all open. The drums had open bung holes on top probably indicating they were empty. Mark could easily tip the several he tried, confirming that was the case.

The first vehicle was a pre-nineteen-thirty Ford – Model A, Mark thought. It was up on blocks with no tires. The second was a high riding, twenty to thirty-year-old SUV and sat directly in front of one of the overhead doors. The third was a small pickup of 1990s vintage with new tires. It appeared operable.

The garage doors were secured with slide levers that slipped into the walls on each side. They turned back toward the open expanse inside the building and faced the vehicles. Mark moved his light back and forth across the front of the SUV.

“Anything about that look familiar?” he whispered.

“I have no idea what you’re referring to.”

“Let me get some pictures, first.”

He worked while he spoke, handing over his flashlight to Amy.

“In a minute, we’ll look at the picture Sam had of the rear of the car that went over the cliff. I’m thinking the indentation in the trunk looked like it could have been made by the bumper on this one. See. It’s a specially made bumper – more like a flat beam some ten inches high and it has three vertical, square bars welded there, six inches apart, close to the center. The right turn signal light is broken; most of the glass is gone. Spider webs inside it. Been that way some time.”

"I see what you see, but I don't remember the pictures of the car well enough," she said.

"Get a plastic zip bag out of my back pack and take a sample of that broken glass. One little piece will be plenty. I'll take a picture of your hands removing it. Wear gloves."

They soon had that accomplished.

"I want to get fingerprints from inside – the wheel and door pulls. You will find some powdered sugar in the back pack."

"You carry sugar in your hiking pack?"

"*Powdered* sugar – packs more sweet to the teaspoon so I need less and not as heavy as regular."

"Who but you?"

Mark dumped a small amount of the sugar out into his palm and blew it against the wheel and door pull.

"Got prints on both surfaces. Let me get pictures of them."

They went to the small truck and using the flash light, Mark examined the bed.

"That what I think it is?" Amy asked.

"That dried, black remnant of a pooled liquid, you mean?"

"Yes. That."

"I'm betting on blood. Could be from a deer or other animal, I suppose, but I'm betting on Henry. They had to have some way of removing the body from the alley. A small, nondescript, pickup would be ideal. Let's scrape some samples of the black stuff into a bag. I'll take a video this time. Here's my pocket knife."

"Look there," Amy said. "A bonus, I'm thinking."

"What?"

"Small chunks of bricks – seem identical to the bricks in the alley."

"Like they also used it to transport the bricks back and forth in the alley. Yay, Amy!"

They moved on.

"You take the barrels and I'll take the crates," Mark suggested.

"Take them where?"

"Clown! I mean just see what there is to see."

They went their separate ways.

"I got nothing here with the crates," Mark said after a few minutes, walking to where Amy was finishing with the barrels along the west wall.

"Look here," she said pushing on one as if to try and tip it up.

"Something in it and the hole is plugged with a wooden peg."

"The peg has been freshly cut, probably from a small length of two by two."

Using his knife, Mark removed the peg. The stench that exited the barrel in an audible puff, was horrific. He replaced the peg.

"Something dead?" Amy offered as if a question.

She covered her nose with her hands.

"Something several days' dead," Mark confirmed. "The top or lid or whatever on this barrel unscrews like a jar lid – see there."

"You're not going to open it, are you?"

"No. Just wanting to make sure a body could have been placed inside. Most of the ones in here have steel tops welded in place with a screw-in-place metal plug in the bung hole. We need to mark the drum. Get the can of glow in the dark spray paint out of my back pack. I'll tip the barrel up far enough so you can spray a spot on the bottom to identify it."

"How about if I paint the letter 'J' for Jackson?" she said.

"Good touch. Go for it."

Just as Mark resettled the drum into place there was a noise from the rear left of the building. As if by instinct, they squatted down behind the barrels.

"Sounded like a door opening and closing," Amy whispered.

"That's how it sounded to me, too," Mark said answering whisper with whisper. "We left it unlocked."

"That might prompt a search of the place – it not being locked," Amy said.

"If you put a key in a lock and turn it, it's easy to miss the fact it was already unlocked," Mark said.

A light – a bare bulb – came on at the rear of the huge

room, close to the door. It revealed an open staircase leading up to the second-floor area, which was enclosed. That floor protruded no more than thirty feet out from the back wall and was supported from beneath by massive posts.

“An office or living area, I suppose,” Amy said.

“I suppose. I’m thinking Baxter’s place.”

“Somebody’s climbing the steps,” Amy said. “Looks to be a big man.”

“A big man dragging one leg,” Mark said leaving no doubt about the sudden, dangerous turn in their situation.

A light came on in a window in the middle of the second floor above. The light by the door went off.

“At least he didn’t set out looking for us,” Amy said. “I’m thinking we can outrun him for sure.”

“Yeah. Probably. But if he has a gun, and you can bet he does, I doubt if our hand held ‘lasers’ here are going to be much of a match.”

The inside of the warehouse remained dark.

“Time to take our leave, I think,” Mark said. “Let’s head clear over against the east wall and duck down below the windows while we move ourselves toward that back door.”

They were within a few yards of the door when Mark tripped over a metal bucket. It made quite a racket. They hunkered down remaining still. The light came on at the base of the stairs. They looked up. Baxter was standing in the door opening at the top, a silhouette with light to his back.

“Hurry, Amy! He’s spotted us.”

A shot rang out. Then another and another. The window beside the door shattered. Mark pushed Amy outside ahead of him and slammed the door shut. He took her hand and pulled her along on the run across the rear of the building to the east, then back north toward the street. They reached the car without further incident.

A few minutes later Mark was driving them east toward their apartment building.

“Never been through anything like that before,” Mark said pulling down the hood on his sweat shirt.

“I would hope not!” Amy said, doing the same. “You weren’t hit, were you?”

“No. You?”

“No. Do you think he recognized us?” Amy asked.

“In our hoodies from that distance I can’t see how he could have. But, he has to wonder why somebody would be in his building.”

“That would be two somebodies. Burglars, I hope is what he thinks,” she said.

“Yes, and that’s probably a good guess in that district. Nothing will be missing when he checks.”

“It may prompt him to do something with the body right away, though – just to be on the safe side,” Amy said.

“I thought about that, too. I guess we need to get lots of information to Jackson.”

“And in a hurry,” Amy said, agreeing. “Maybe it’s time to go directly to him with what we have. Time is becoming important all of a sudden.”

“Get a pad and pencil out of my back pack. We’ll list everything and then stop at an internet café and get it off to him still this evening. That way it can’t be traced to us.”

They provided him the address of the warehouse and the Baxter connection. They identified the barrel containing the body. They suggested the connection between the SUV and the car that went over the cliff with Henry’s wife and daughter. They mentioned both Jake and Sam as sources of information.

They parked and entered the internet place. Before they sent the message, Amy had an additional point to make.

“I’ve been thinking about the man who presented himself as Henry at the police station. Do you have both the police picture and our picture of him?”

“Sure do. Give me a sec. . . . Here. I’ll put them side by side. What?”

“Look at the ears.”

“What? The *ear*. Only one shows.”

Amy pointed to the feature she had remembered.

“I see. The Henry at the police station has lobes that are attached to his face. Our Henry has lobes that hang free. The other guy is a look-alike – I mean a really good lookalike.”

“Not as good as we thought at first. See the noses – slightly different widths. The eyes – the man at the station has eyes that are iridescent blue – like contacts, I’m guessing.

And the part in their hair – our Henry’s is right down the middle. The lookalike’s is slightly to the right – his right.”

“Good eye, art major. And maybe one more thing. There on the neck of the lookalike – is that part of a tattoo showing above his collar?”

“It is. Good eye, yourself, my Sexy Nerd Boy.”

“You know how aroused it makes me when you call me Sexy Nerd Boy?”

“Of course, I do. Why do you think I call you that?”

“Two snuggles in one evening?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time as I recall.”

Mark put on a dramatic sigh.

“I suppose if duty calls I must be willing to make the sacrifice!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

You ever been shot at before?

The following morning when Mark opened his eyes, Amy was lying beside him, her head propped up on her hand, looking at him. She reached out and brushed back his hair.

“Is it still there?” he asked managing his first smile of the day.”

“What?”

“My face. You seem to be babysitting it. Just wanted to make sure it was still there.”

He reached out and pulled her close.

“It’s seven,” she said playfully resisting – “Thursday morning. We both have eight o’clocks this morning. I’ll go get ready at my place. Don’t you even consider going back to sleep.”

He did, but, not being one to miss a class, he rolled out and made ready for the day.

They lived just three blocks from campus so five minutes got them to Old Main and seven to anywhere on the high-rise campus. In between the college and the apartment building was *Stef’s Subs*. Stef was a way shortened version of Stephanopoulos. It was all they knew about the name since the owner was clearly Italian. They met there for lunch.

“Good class?” Amy asked scooting in close beside Mark and offering her lips.

“Good enough. This week we’ve been exploring the Dark Web – a gosh awful place with stuff going on you’d never believe. I’ve been there and I’m not convinced I believe it.”

“I won’t ask.”

“Please don’t. How was your morning?”

“Nothing about art history really turns me on.”

“Glad I have no competition there.”

“You have no competition from anywhere and after twenty years you should realize that.”

“Well, there was that month you were with Tommy Randolph when we were sophomores in high school. He said he kissed you.”

“As I recall that was the same month you were with Mary Beth Jones and the way she told it, you two kissed *a lot!*”

“Kisses are strange things,” Mark said becoming philosophical. “The mechanics of a kiss is pretty much the same from one to another, but they are really quite different – intensity, gentleness, meaning, responsiveness. With some people, it’s like they think your lips and mouth are there for them to use – exploit – period. That’s how it was with her. Others – well, mainly you, considering my limited experiences in such matters – make it a really mutual thing. I don’t know how to explain it further than that.”

“I understand. We have learned how to work with each other to make it wonderful for both of us. All our intimate times are like that – mutual, caring, unselfish. That’s the word about some romantic partners – they are selfish, just participating for what’s in it for them.”

“Glad we have that settled. Now, about that ‘all our intimate times’ stuff.”

She pushed his advance away, playfully.

“How about ‘what’s next on our murder case’ instead?”

Marks phone rang. He looked to see who the caller was. A text.

“From Sam. I sent her a text earlier. Asked about the possibility glass from a turn signal might have been found at the cliff. This is her response – almost two hours from when I sent mine. She must have had to make some calls.”

“Well, what does it say?”

“Let’s see. She says: ‘How in the world? Yes. Frosted glass. From a Ford SUV of that same year. A good-sized chunk. Authorities figured it was from some prior incident there since it didn’t match the make of the Price car. Don’t keep me in suspense.’”

“I better get right back to her before she incinerates in her chair.”

He sent the message.

“It means we need to get those fragments you collected to Jackson as well.”

A substantially built man entered and took a seat some distance from them. It was nobody they recognized.

“I’m reminded that I saw a large man on campus this

morning and just for a moment my heart leaped up into my mouth,” Amy said.

“Sorry about that. Perhaps a convention of large men. He has not indicated he knows about us – as *us*, anyway.”

“But he has several pieces of the puzzle if he chooses to put them together,” Amy said. “Last night, the two of us in his building, could have cinched it for him – the two kids who spend time on the roof, the two kids kissing in the hall, the two kids below the balcony right after the murder and the two kids running from the warehouse. We’re the only two kids our age from the apartment building that spend time together.”

“But what would be the spark to set him trying to put it together. First, he would have to be convinced somebody witnessed the murder.”

Amy extended and legitimized the thought.

“Or, witnessed any part of the proceedings – moving the bricks, cleaning the balcony, removing the body. And, if he makes us to be the ones at his warehouse he’d have to ask why we were there and the only answer would have to be related to our knowledge of the murder and his relation to it.”

“Suddenly, ravishing your lips here in a dark corner seem less important than staying alive. Let’s get back and try to warp this thing up.”

They entered the building through the front door from 15th street on the east side. There was a ten-foot-wide hallway that extended front to back, through to the alley, and a second hall of similar width that ran the center of the length of the building from north to south. The mail boxes were to the right of the front door. The super’s apartment was down the longer hall on the southeast corner of the building. It was the door on *that* apartment that was closing as they turned left toward the elevators.

Mark put out his arm as if to prevent Amy from falling off a cliff just in front of them.

“What’s that about?” he asked.

“Maybe Jackson looking into the information we sent him from the internet café.”

“Could be, I suppose,” Mark said. “It would be a very rapid response, however.”

“Should we take a look?”

“I suppose if it’s Jackson we can tell it like it is – that we saw the door close and wondered if Henry had come back. We did tell him we’d let him know if we saw Henry.”

“And if it’s Baxter and or one of his goons?” she asked.

“Run like hell out the front door into the busy street.”

Mark took Amy’s hand and they approached the door. He reached out and tried the knob.

“Locked. I doubt if Jackson would have closed it let alone locked it.”

“So?”

“So, let’s knock. If it’s a bad guy he probably won’t answer, will he?”

“*Probably* is not really very reassuring.”

Mark did not take that as a ‘don’t proceed’ suggestion. He knocked.

There was no response.

He knocked again.

Still no response.

A shadow crossed the peep hole from the inside. Mark pulled Amy out of view and moved them back down the hall to the center of the building and around the corner toward the rear.

“Interesting,” Amy said.

“Interesting?”

“Yes, look. The stainless-steel doors on the elevators reflect things on the opposite wall. If we move over toward the other side of this hall, I’ll bet we can see the Super’s door.”

They moved together. She had been correct. Against the west wall and a few feet toward the front door, there it was. It was nothing like a clear image, but the door was there. If it were to be opened, they would be able to see it.

They waited.

They waited some more. People came and went. They did their best to appear to be deep in conversation. Mark removed his tablet from his backpack and they looked at it as if it were the focus of their remarks.

“Door’s opening,” Amy said.

Mark snapped a picture of the reflection.

The figure of a man emerged and turned to close the door. It put his face in profile. Mark looked around the corner

in a quick peek and retreat move.

“It’s Henry’s lookalike. I’m going to approach him.”

“Why?”

The question was lost in among Mark’s thoughts. He motioned for Amy to remain where she was.

“Hey, Henry. Been trying to find you. The AC is stuck on high in my apartment – 911.”

“911. Okay. Later this afternoon okay?”

He kept his face averted and turned toward the door as he spoke. The unfortunate part was that Mark couldn’t get a full-face view of him. The fortunate part was that he could see the earlobe and the tattoo on the back of his neck. He wondered what he should do.

The man turned and left through the closest door – the one at the south end of the building. Amy hurried to meet Mark.

“So?”

“So, he came and he left. Let’s go inside.”

He opened the door and they entered.

“It’s been trashed!” Amy said looking around.

“It certainly has,” came a commanding voice from the open door behind them.

They turned, both bathed in adrenalin, really expecting to see Baxter and having no idea how to react.

“Imagine meeting you here,” Mark said.

It was Detective Jackson. He took a step inside and surveyed the mess.

As if by instinct, Mark pulled up the most recent pictures on his tablet.

“It was the lookalike – the one no more than two minutes ago. I approached him here at the door as he left. I got several pictures.”

He handed over the tablet and Jackson paged through them.

“A mirror?”

“The doors of the elevators across the hall.”

“Ingenious.”

“It was Amy’s doing – the art thing I suppose.”

Jackson nodded.

“Can you send those to me?”

“Consider it done. The folder will be labeled *LAL Pics* – Lookalike pictures.”

“Lookalike?”

“Let me explain,” Mark said.

He took time to describe how they had determined the current iteration of Henry was not the original Henry. Then, Amy filled in the backstory.

“We were coming home from class and spotted him entering the super’s apartment. We waited around the corner until he left – couldn’t be sure at the time who he was and we didn’t want to get into something that was beyond us. When he opened the door to leave, Mark, *recklessly*, approached him. We could see his profile and figured if it were Henry we’d welcome him back and call you. If it weren’t Henry – the lookalike instead – we would play along like we thought it was Henry, and then call you. Didn’t have time to make the call yet. It seems he was looking for something in here wouldn’t you say?”

“I would. Any ideas?”

“About what,” Mark said, feigning puzzlement.

“What he was after.”

“My best guess is something that wasn’t easily located. He didn’t have a box or any sort of package with him when he left if that’s of any help.”

“We haven’t touched anything,” Amy added. “I suppose we should get out of here and let you get to work.”

Jackson gave no response as he walked the room.

“Let us know if we can help,” Mark said.

They left and were soon in Mark’s apartment.

“He really trashed that place!” Amy said.

“Why do you suppose? What could he have wanted? It seems he is more involved than just having been hired to play a part.”

“Think about it,” Amy said. “He probably wants the same things we found – anything that would connect Baxter with the murders of Henry’s family.”

“I wonder how that works,” Mark asked.

“That?”

“When somebody gets swindled like Baxter’s clients, but there is none of the money available to pay him back. I

guess the victims just lose the money?”

“Let’s call Jake and ask him. We need to check in and see how he’s doing, anyway.”

She began placing the call before she stopped speaking.

“Hey. Jake. Mark and Amy here. How things going?”

“The *two* of you sound a lot like just *Amy*. I’m fine, although I do find myself shying away from windows. Other than my health and growing phobia do you have some additional concern?”

“We want to find out what happens regarding the losses Baxter’s clients suffered as a result of his swindle. Did they just lose it all?”

“The court liquidated all of Baxter’s assets and divided that up in proportion to the losses each one experienced. In his case, it was a paltry sum – under a hundred thousand dollars against the four million as I recall. Baxter was pretty shrewd and those millions of dollars were never recovered. Upon release from prison he is under orders to pay a quarter of his income into a repayment fund. It will never repay the losses, however.”

Mark went on to explain about the lookalike, the ties they thought they had found between Henry, Baxter and the accident at the cliff, and the recent trashing of Henry’s apartment.

“We were just trying to figure a reason for the attack on his apartment,” Mark said ending the explanation.

“Two possibilities come to mind. If they are working together, the same face guy and Baxter could be looking for any more evidence Henry might have kept in reserve to protect himself from Baxter’s revenge. Or, if same face is flying solo, he could be looking for where Baxter stashed the millions and thought Henry might have had information about it.”

“Thanks for your input, Jake. We’ll let you get back to avoiding windows.”

Jake chuckled as he hung up.

“It may be time to search the files on the flash drives more thoroughly to see what else we may be able to find,” Mark said.

“I feel the need to make a list of questions so I know where we’re headed – what we’re looking for,” Amy said. “I can’t hold it all in my head.”

“Good idea. Let’s start by listing everything we believe we know. You take notes.”

Mark began summarizing.

“We witnessed Baxter – alias Limp Man – murder Henri Roberts – alias our Robert Henry. We saw the body on the alley floor. We saw him cleaning up evidence on the balcony railing on 818. We found out about the switch of the bricks in the alley, first to get rid of the evidence at the spot where the body hit the pavement and then to hide that evidence by turning the bricks at the second location.

“From matching the jewelry and the fake IDs on Henry’s flash drive, we have established that the woman and probably the girl in the accident at the cliff were Henry’s wife and daughter. We also think we have pretty solid evidence that the SUV in Baxter’s warehouse is the one that pushed the car over the cliff and sent the occupants to their deaths – the bumper mark and the broken turn signal glass.

“We also think we have evidence in the form of blood and pieces of paving bricks that we have located the back of the truck used to remove the body from the scene and transport the bricks from place to place.

“We have reason to believe Henry’s body is in a barrel at Baxter’s warehouse.

“We have established that there is a lookalike for Henry and believe he is in Baxter’s employ since he showed up at police headquarters as if to prove he was still alive after he was actually dead by murder.

“We can’t be sure if Lookalike has some additional motive now – like being after the millions Baxter stashed or getting some solid evidence against Baxter so he can blackmail him. Possibilities include Baxter’s involvement in the cliff accident. Make a note to us; we need to verify ownership of that SUV.

“We think we may have reason to believe that Baxter suspects that we have incriminating information about him – our frequenting the roof, being under the balcony while he cleaned it up, our escape from his warehouse last night.

“Then there are some questions we haven’t been able to answer:

“What is Baxter’s relationship to the Private Investigator with the office across 15th from Antonio’s Pizza? Could be as simple as having hired them to locate Henry for him.

“Who shot Jake? We think it was Baxter. If so, was it something other than a coincidence that Jake was shot while we were in Jake’s office with him? And, how would shooting Jake benefit Baxter? Also, I guess, did Baxter intend to kill him or just wound him and why – either way?”

“What was Lookalike doing in Henry’s apartment? Also, I suppose, was he really the one who trashed it or could it have been somebody else before he got there?”

“I suppose by now Jackson should know about the warehouse and such. He didn’t mention finding Henry’s body when we saw him earlier. Hmm. Maybe we need to go out to the warehouse again and see if we can determine if the cops have been there. We did send that info by email just in care of the precinct. Maybe for some reason it didn’t get to Jackson.”

“He did show up at the Super’s apartment this afternoon, though,” Amy pointed out.

“But that could have been just part of the normal investigation.”

“I suppose. Okay. I’m up for a field trip.”

They had soon entered the warehouse district and again parked several blocks away. They moved through an alley so they could approach Baxter’s place from the rear. When they were still half a block away, a taxi passed them and stopped near the door of the warehouse that they had used to enter and exit.

“There!” Mark said. “Back into that recessed doorway so we can’t be seen.”

The taxi honked. A few minutes later Baxter appeared at the door and entered the cab. It pulled straight ahead and just beyond the building turned right, back toward the main thoroughfare.

They went to the door. It was locked. Mark soon had it open. A quick check showed that the barrel in question had not been moved, the plug was still in place and it was heavy when Mark made an effort to tip it.

“So, the cops haven’t been here yet,” Mark said.

“Why are you whispering?”

“I have no idea.”

The three vehicles remained where they had been.

“Let’s see if we can get into the second floor in the back,” Mark said.

Amy gave no response, but followed him back to the flight of stairs. The door at the top was unlocked. Mark pushed it open and felt for a light switch. It was right where it should have been.

They found themselves in a large room – apparently one of at least two that spanned that area above the first floor. There was a door on the wall ahead and two windows in the front from which the first floor could be viewed.

“A combination office and place to live, the way it looks,” Amy said.

There were counters and shelves and file cabinets. There was a bed and a recliner and across the back wall a kitchenette area with a table and chairs. The floor and walls were bare planking. There was a dropped ceiling, which softened the basic cold nature of the steel beam and corrugated aluminum construction.

“And just why are we up here?” Amy asked sticking hand-grasping-the-back-of-his-belt close to Mark.

“To see what there is to see.”

“That in no way really answered my question, you know.”

Mark was standing at the metal file cabinet, finger walking across the folders in the top drawer.

“Travel!”

“That a wish, direct order, or a finding?”

“Clown.”

He removed a folder. It contained brochures and schedules from airlines and cruise ships.

“Well, this is interesting! A first-class airline ticket from St. Louis to Mexico City by way of Dallas.”

“For Baxter?”

“No. Get this. It is in the name of Henri Roberts and is dated tomorrow!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

So Many Possibilities!

“What’s Henry’s ticket doing here in Baxter’s place?”

“It presents a humorous image,” Mark said.

“Humorous?”

“Yes. A flight attendant insisting that a steel barrel belt itself into the seat before takeoff.”

“Warped!”

“But you’ve known that for decades. Check my thinking, here. The ticket was the first thing in the folder, in front of a dozen other things. That means it was probably put into the folder last, right.”

“Most likely, I’d say. And extending that it could be something that was taken from Henry’s apartment when it was torn apart a few hours ago.”

“What could it mean?” Mark asked. “Why would Henry have a one-way ticket out of the country? Was he leaving because he wanted to or because he was fleeing for some life and death reason?”

“Remember,” Amy said, “the management company told Jackson that Henry wasn’t due for a vacation for another nine months. It means something fishy is, or was, going on.”

“Maybe when he learned Baxter had been released from prison he thought it was time to move on – again. He had years to arrange another new identity and place to live. He seemed to be good at that.”

“What about other folders in there?” she asked.

“Mark continued his search.”

“Identity?”

He slipped out another folder.

“Interesting. Three passports. Henry’s photo on each of them, but three different names – Robert Henry, Henri Roberts, and Paul Witherspoon. Each shows a different address – one in Springfield, one here in the city and the third down in Cedarville.”

“One more interesting thing,” Amy said looking at the folders in the cabinet. “The tabs on the two you removed have typed labels. The others in here are printed in ink.”

“You’re thinking another indicator they were removed from Henry’s file in the Super’s apartment,” Mark said. “Those labels are all typed.”

He hurriedly glanced through the rest of the folders in that drawer.

“That was a great catch, Amy. The rest all have hand-printed labels.”

“I suppose there would be fingerprints,” she said.

“Including mine, now.”

“I see.”

“The question remains, why are those folders here?” Mark asked.

“Try this. Either Baxter got them before Lookalike arrived to rifle the apartment or the two of them are in cahoots – like we have thought – and Lookalike brought them to Baxter – under his shirt, maybe. That could have been one reason he kept himself facing away from you. Baxter, being the thorough and precise sort of person we have found him to be, added them to his own files – hiding them in plain sight as it has been called.”

“The passports would only work for Lookalike, not Baxter,” Amy said.

“I guess that suggests it was he, not Baxter, who was planning to leave the country. Again, why? There was a folder – let’s see – yes – here.”

He removed it and opened it on the table. It was thick and clearly old; the tab was creased and flopped. It had been taped to reinforce it.

“Well used,” Mark said pointing to its condition. “Tab labeled in hand printing – *Financials #2*.”

“What’s in the very front of that one?”

“An index card with several strings of numbers on it. Each set is labeled, sort of: BA/fnb, PW/fnb,

“And it’s a newish card,” Amy said.

“Meaning?”

“It’s probably been used only recently.”

“Hmm. Could be.”

“What do you suppose the entries mean?”

“Pretty straight forward, I think,” Mark said. “The number of digits in the first string fit the configuration of bank

account and routing numbers. The second is a combination of letters, numbers and characters.”

“A password?”

“That’s my take on it. And the FNB is probably First National Bank. Seems odd that would be necessary. Surely anybody could remember that. The compulsion to be complete, perhaps.”

“Anyway, back to the meaning of all that,” Amy said.

“Lookalike flies to Mexico, has a bank there access the account on this card and has money transferred into a new account down there.”

“If that’s the case, why not keep that card *with* the passports?” Amy asked.

“Excellent question. Maybe he did – a copy. Let’s go through the passports page by page.”

He opened that folder and they each took one to examine.

“Got a copy of the card here, the Robert Henry, edition,” Amy said.

“None in this one.”

He searched the third one.

“Nor here.”

“So, it seems Robert Henry – actually Lookalike – is flying to Mexico City with the access codes he needed to transfer funds from a bank account at the First National Bank.”

“If that’s true, it raises the question of *what* money?” Mark said.

“Just taking a stab in the dark, but could it be the four million Baxter stole from his clients?”

“Would Baxter trust an accomplice with that information – with access to that amount of money?”

“Hmm.”

Amy began thinking out loud.

“Let’s say that Henry found the money and it was Henry who was making ready to fly to Mexico. One of those passports could legitimately be his – probably the one in his original name since that’s the name on the ticket – Henri Roberts.”

“And, after Henry’s death, either Baxter or Lookalike found the passports and the tickets and spun the plot to go to

Mexico and relocate the money.”

“It means one or both of them had to reclaim the money if Henry actually found and removed it, and that’s an open point – who really has or had the money, Henry or Baxter?” Amy said. “If Baxter found it he could have just flown out of the country himself. If he were in a big hurry to get that money out of the country, and since it takes months to get a passport, he might have chosen to enlist Lookalike and use the ready-made documents,”

“Good points – widens the plot a good deal, however,” Mark said. “I think we have what we will find up here. Just to be thorough, let’s see if we can find what we believe are Baxter’s finger prints – on glasses or wall switch plates or what? I’ll get picture of all these things from the file.”

Amy began looking for likely print-holding candidates.

“There are several beer cans in the wastebasket under the sink,” Amy said.

“Good. Get the powdered sugar out.”

Within a few minutes, they had found prints – two different sets. One can held both sets – the one who got the can from the refrigerator, Mark figured – and the other who received it from the first man.

“The prints on the repeated set are a good deal larger than the other – Baxter’s I’m thinking. He is huge – Henry and Lookalike are small.”

“Let’s try for the glass there in the sink,” Amy suggested. “That should be Baxter’s, don’t you think?”

“Probably. Find some other place while I get the glass. I’d rather have several matching sets so we can be sure.”

Amy found several more likely surfaces – door knobs, a belt and a pair of size fourteen, shiny, leather shoes.

“Okay,” Mark said, “we have only one set from one beer can that don’t match the others. I think we can assume we have Baxter’s plus an outsider’s – maybe Lookalikes.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Amy suggested.

“Okay. Lots of things we can do. For one thing, see if I can access the bank account. For another, see if we can match these prints with those from the truck and the SUV.”

“You have pictures of everything – passports, cards and such.”

“I do.”

As Mark closed the door to the warehouse, a police car followed by an unmarked car pulled up out front. They ran across the open space between the buildings and stopped, peeking back around the corner to see if they could determine what was going on.

“I didn’t have time to relock the door,” Mark said.

“Maybe that will give the police easy access.”

Mark nodded as they continued to watch. It was Detective Jackson and two uniformed officers. A minute later, when they began checking the doors on the east wall of the warehouse, Amy urged them to leave. They did.

Back at his apartment, it took no time at all for Mark to get into the bank account.

“This is a disappointment,” he said. “Only fifty some thousand dollars.”

“Maybe that’s walk around money,” Amy suggested.

“What’s that?”

“Just a little money to help you get settled or to live on for a short time. From one of those Masters mysteries. Once established, he could bring in the rest.”

“Could be,” Mark said. “We may be making up ‘facts’ to fit our conception, however. The most likely scenario, based on what things we are pretty sure we know, would go like this: Baxter embezzles four million dollars and hides it. He takes part of his revenge on Henri before he enters prison by killing his wife and daughter – things to make Henri suffer while Baxter’s away. He plans to take the other part after he gets out by killing Henri, which he does. He hires or teams up with Lookalike. He puts the body in a barrel in preparation for its disposal someway. He steals bank access information from the Super’s apartment. Also, he most likely steals the three passports from there, but we have no clear evidence when any of that was taken. It’s clear the bank account was Henry’s – it’s his name associated with on the banks website. We still have not found the big money. It may be hidden or in another account we haven’t yet discovered. We really do not know who had it, remember.”

“Baxter wouldn’t have put it in a bank, would he?” Amy asked. “All his assets were liquidated to pay off those he

swindled.”

“You’re right. Certainly, not under his name. I think he is too cautious to keep it all together in one place anyway. But, how else could he transfer it out of the country except through banks?”

“Then, like lots of smaller accounts, maybe?” Amy asked.

“That or several hiding places – physical places that provide complete security as well as quick and easy access for him.”

“One of the many things I don’t understand about all this is how Baxter was able to find somebody who resembled Henry so closely. The complexity of the human gene pool tends to work against that.”

“Good question. I’ve mentioned to you about the so called Dark Web – a web set up all quite separately from the one we all use. It’s a place where unimaginable illegal and depraved activities reign supreme. Well, there is at least one place there called *DoppelgangerXX* where you can search for people who look like other people. Not sure just how it operates, but apparently, you pay a fee and submit a picture of a face. It uses a facial recognition program based in some sort of fuzzy logic and sends you up a half dozen similar faces. If you find one you can use they will contact the person for you and if that person is interested in your proposal, he will contact you. You arrive at a fee with that person. It appears that few if any of the people whose faces are stored on that site know they are in the data base, so, I assume, only a tiny percent of them would agree to nefarious acts when they are contacted.”

“So, tell me exactly what you are saying?”

“I’m saying, Baxter could have found our Lookalike on that sort of a site. I’m sure there are many of them – *sites* not Lookalikes.”

“Or, he could be Henry’s twin,” Amy said trying to simplify it.

“Henry had no siblings. I already discredited that possibility. Plus, the ear thing is genetic.”

“What would logically be Baxter’s next move?” Amy asked, then tried an answer. “Get his money and live happily

ever after?”

“That’s probably the idea, alright. In Mexico, perhaps, sending Lookalike on ahead to get things arranged. I doubt if Lookalike’s life would be worth a plug nickel once his part was finished. It seems easy to make people disappear forever down south of the border.”

“So, whatever he’s going to do he’ll probably do soon.”

“That’s how I see it.”

“So, if he knows about us, he’ll come looking for us sooner rather than later,” Amy said.

Mark shrugged – not at all reassured by her revelation or supposition or however it might best be characterized.

“That doesn’t sound like a good way to celebrate the end of our Junior Year.”

“My best hunch is that he doesn’t know about us or he’d have surely shown up already,” Mark said. “Everything seems to suggest he is in a big hurry to conclude things.”

“Is it time to get additional information to Jackson?”

“Probably. Let’s make a list. The passports – we have photos of them. Let’s send our pictures of them along with their physical location in Baxter’s file. Then, suggest that Henry’s account number and password will also be found in Baxter’s file while still in Henry’s file folder.”

“How about your information about the Doppelganger site?”

“Can’t hurt. They might get a positive ID on the man playing the part.”

“Anything else?” she asked.

“How about a note asking if they received our first email. We could also put it to the attention of Jackson with a note saying we – ‘I’ – noticed he was in charge of the case.”

“Let’s get that off by email right away,” Amy said, feeling some sense of urgency. “If it gets forwarded to Jackson immediately, he’ll have some direction while he’s still at the warehouse looking for Henry’s body in a barrel.”

“Consider it sent. I’m routing it through the same internet café we used before.”

“You can do that?”

“Just did. I’m a sexy, genius, nerd boy, remember?”

It deserved a quick peck on his lips.

“Body in a Barrel – I bet we could market a kids’ game with that name,” Mark said.

“Having known you when you were nine, I’d change that to, Bloody, Bludgeoned, Body in a Barrel.”

Mark nodded and smiled remembering the fascination he and his friends had for such things as third and fourth graders. A fantasy based sort of inoculation against the unpleasant aspects of the real world, he figured.

“So, isn’t it about time we went to Jackson and told him what we saw up on the roof that night – Baxter murdering Henry?”

“Getting close, I’d say,” Mark said. “I would still like to tack down all the evidence in the wider case.”

“Wider case?”

“Yeah. The murders of Henry’s family, Jake getting shot, the missing money, the role of Lookalike – we really don’t have any way to tie him to Baxter. We have prints from the truck and the SUV from the warehouse. Let’s see if we can match them with those we found today.”

Mark consolidated all the prints into one file on his desk top.

“We have the thumb print from the flash drive in Tom Sawyer – most likely Henry’s – the prints from the SUV, the little truck, the two sets from the beer can and three different sets from Henry’s file cabinet. We should probably get prints from something very personal just to Henry from his apartment. First, though, let’s see what we have here. We have a thumb print from every set so let me isolate them and pull them into one collage.”

A few minutes later they were perusing a high res print out. The matches were obvious.

“Baxter’s from his room at the warehouse matched those from the SUV steering wheel and door knob as well as one of the sets from Henry’s file cabinet. That one is really clear suggesting it is recent. The one from the flash drive matches the most frequent ones from the filing cabinet in the super’s room – probably making it Henry’s. Look at this! The third set from the filing cabinet match the odd set from the single beer can. How can we establish who that is?”

“I don’t know how to establish it for sure, but I’m betting

Lookalike,” Amy said.

“Good thought. Where else has he been for sure?”

“There was something on one of the prints you didn’t include here. Let’s see the ones from Henry’s file cabinet again. Look. There. At first I thought it was just smudged, but enlarge it. I think it’s one print overlapping another.”

“You’re right. Let’s see. It’s the one we’ve assigned to Lookalike overlapping Baxter’s. That means Baxter was at the filing cabinet before Lookalike, which probably means Baxter removed the passports and ticket before Lookalike was in Henry’s apartment.”

“I wonder which one trashed the place?” Amy asked.

“I’m guessing, Lookalike. Baxter is well organized. His search would be more systematic, don’t you suppose?”

Amy nodded. Mark went back to the collage of prints.

“Look here,” Mark said. “It’s a partial from the door pull on the little truck. Think that could be a match to Lookalike?”

Amy studied it for some time.

“Enlarge it!”

“Okay. Like this?”

They studied the screen.

“Let me try something. I’ll juxtapose the two prints . . . like that. Now, if I can resize and rotate that partial and position it properly . . .”

“Looks like that did it,” Amy said. A perfect match – what there is of it. I don’t know enough about fingerprints – how many different patterns of swirls there are – but those two sure look like a match to me. What is that partial – about ten percent of the full print?”

“About. If it is Lookalike’s, it means he was recently at the truck. Was it during the moving of the bricks and body or was it later while maybe he was snooping around the warehouse?”

“You have a way of complicating really great evidence, you know.”

“Complication is in one’s mind – never in the object,” he came back with a smile.

“If Lookalike is Baxter’s accomplice, it means that even if we use our picture of the body in the alley and testify to seeing the murder, we still would not be safe,” Amy said.

“Baxter could be in custody, but Lookalike would still be on the loose.”

“Unless we can put Lookalike away, too,” Mark said.

“For what, looking like Henry or having faulty ear-genes?”

“As an accomplice to murder.”

“Henry’s or ours?”

“Your resolve seems to be weakening, Amy.”

“No. My resolve to remain among the living is just strengthening.”

“I suppose that’s reasonable. So . . .?”

“One, ‘so’, would be to find out if Baxter has recovered the money he apparently stashed someplace,” Amy said. “Can you find out when he acquired or rented the warehouse?”

“I imagine so. Let me look. I’ve been wondering why it wasn’t sold when all his assets were liquidated to pay off those he swindled.”

It took some time before he found something useful.

“It was purchased by Acme Rentals some 20 plus years ago. Let me look up that company.”

He searched for some time.

“Well lookie here, Amy. Acme Rentals is owned by the Baxter/Henry Accounting and Investment Company. I suppose, then, that the warehouse belongs to both Baxter and Henry. That also explains why it wasn’t liquidated. Somebody missed that connection that I so brilliantly just found.”

“If Henry had access to it, and if he thought that was where Baxter hid the money, he could have searched it while Baxter was in prison.”

“But, we didn’t find any prints that we could attribute to Henry at the warehouse.”

“I suppose he might have worn gloves,” Amy suggested.

“Gloves, inside his own building?”

“I see your point. So, I agree, the absence of his prints seems unreasonable, unless he didn’t know Baxter had purchased the building.”

“He did seem to keep secrets,” Mark said as if to support her contention.

"I come back to why he had a warehouse?" Amy said.

"That gave me an idea, Amy. There is a café not far from the warehouse. Let's go see if somebody there, like the proprietor, can fill us in on the history of that building."

"My stomach churns every time I even think of that building, but that really is a good idea. If it appears to present something less than a health hazard, we can catch a bite."

They gave Jackson another hour to get finished and then left for the café. The police were gone.

The café – *Buster's* – was long and narrow with uncomfortable looking, time worn, dark, wooden booths along one side and stools sporting a generous application of duct tape at a counter along the other. It separated the customers from the grease-laden, stainless steel, cook's domain behind. Large, dull brass, fans with gaudy, green and orange, Tiffany knock off, light fixtures, clung from the twelve-foot ceiling. They sucked up the smoke from the griddle and smokers in the center of the room forcing it back down along the walls. The scent of cigarettes and frying ground beef had somehow never made it into the top five of the *Chanel* perfume line. The clientele was male, including the fifteen-pound cat that grazed the counter ever hopeful of finding some morsel that would meet its apparently less than finicky penchants. It was clean enough to pass Amy's standards so they found a booth up front ordered a two-month supply of cholesterol and salt – burgers, fries, onion rings – and engaged the cook/ server/ owner/ dispenser of wisdom, in conversation.

After offering the pretense of being college students doing a photo story about the history of the warehouse district, Buster became the proverbial fountain of information. Mark had shot a dozen pictures prior to entering just in case.

"Been right here forty-two years. Sleep in the back. Seen 'em all come an' go. Good an' bad. Rich an' poor."

So, he had pretty much been right there for a long time. The rest was not immediately useful. As Mark pulled up a picture, Amy asked what Buster knew about it. Presently, they came to the one of real interest – number three in the sequence.

"Now, that one carries quite a history, most of it less than legal, I guess you could say – cops were there this very

morning. You just missed them. Carried some things away with them.

“Anyway, way back before I was here, it was a distribution center for hooch venders – moonshiners – during prohibition. Story is that they brought the hooch to that building in big tank trucks marked ‘oil’ and they had a bottling setup in there. Then, delivery trucks with false walls and bottoms spread it out through the city to the . . . what were they called?”

“Speakeasies, maybe,” Amy said.

“Right, speakeasies.”

He looked at Mark and hitched his head in Amy’s direction.

“You got a keeper here, son. Don’t never let her go.”

“It is not my plan to ever let her go, Sir.”

Mark and Amy shared a lingering glance.

Buster continued.

Rumor has it, Al Capone, himself, hid out there for a while.

“What about more recently – say the past twenty-five years,” Mark asked.

“It sold about then. Rumor was several of the buildings over there was gonna be tore down so a high-rise apartment building could go up. Nothin’ ever come of it, I guess, ‘cause there it sets to this day.

“Been mostly empty since that time. The past week or so I’ve seen lights on in there. Somebody comes and goes through the rear door on the east side. Some truck traffic – not much, really. A few years back there was a police raid over there – something about a hidden stash of stolen money – a lot of money. I think the bad dude’s name was Bayer or Barnum or maybe Braxton. A CPA who stole money from his clients, I think the story was. I guess he had some connection with the building. The cops dug up the floor in there lookin’ for it I’m told.”

“They find it,” Mark asked.

“Not a nickel was their story.”

“You say just one person comes and goes recently?” Amy asked.

“Can’t really be sure if it’s only one person. In fact, now

that I think about it, I'd say it's at least two – one's a really big man and one's skinny – mostly the big guy. Could be they was both in there together a few days ago. Hard to see the door back there from here. The angle you understand."

"We understand somebody lives there, now," Mark offered.

"Could be – the lights and all recently. Can't confirm that. If there is, he don't use the front door – that I can tell you for sure."

"Ever been in there," Mark asked.

"As a little tike. Smoked my first cigarette and kissed my first girl in there – not during the same year. Place was not being used at those times. Front half is paved with cement. Back area is hard packed dirt – that's what the cops dug up, I assume. There's a second floor over the back twenty-five or thirty feet. Stairs on the east at the rear."

"We peeked in the front window," Mark went on. "Saw an ancient Ford, a more recent SUV and a small, older pick up. Any of them come and go?"

"There was a little gray pick up out of it and then back into it a few days ago. I was really surprised when I saw the big door roll up. Was dark in there so all I really saw was the truck when it left out onto the street."

Mark moved on to the picture of a fourth building, hoping to disguise their real interest. They finished eating, thanked Buster for the conversation and prepared to leave.

"I can keep an eye out on the place over there if you want. Got a card?"

Mark broke a smile.

"You're saying our great plan to confuse the issue of which building we are really interested in didn't work very well."

"Not bad for amateurs, really, but I've dealt with the best over the years."

He chuckled and pushed a small pad of paper across the counter by the register. Amy wrote out an email address that they seldom used.

"You do email?" Mark asked just to make sure.

"Sure do. I moved on into the 21st century right along with www."

They figured they understood his intent.

Five minutes later they were back at their car, which, again, they had parked some distance away. They got in and sat, talking.

“Some hint as to why Baxter bought the warehouse,” Amy said. “The prospect of building an apartment building just before he got sent away.”

“Right. I wonder what Jackson took from the warehouse,” Mark said.

“I suppose that barrel, for one thing. Not sure what else.”

A police car passed them heading west in the direction of the warehouse and café. Behind it was a long, flatbed truck – one trailing a ramp, designed to transport vehicles.

“Coming for the truck and SUV, you suppose?” Amy asked.

“Let’s go take a look.”

“I must say you are becoming much bolder the past week,” Amy said.

“And is that attractive?”

“Up to the point it gets you hurt, yes, I suppose it is.”

Mark squeezed her hand as they walked on. It had mostly been in fun. Whether or not she saw him as becoming bolder or not had nothing to do with their forever relationship.

They stuck to the north side of the street – across from the warehouse. Mark pointed and they entered a small walkway between two buildings. From there they could watch. Their supposition had been correct. The truck backed in close to the front garage door. A policeman opened it from inside. The SUV was pulled onto the truck using a winch. With that secured, the pickup was driven onto the bed and also secured in place.”

“Jackson isn’t with them,” Mark said. “They could be fake, here to remove evidence at Baxter’s instruction. Look at the cab pulling the trailer. It’s a rental.”

CHAPTER NINE

There's a thing-a-ma-bob on the wall.

"Your imagination is running away with your common sense," Amy said. "Look at the license plates on the police car and the flatbed trailer. They both have government plates."

"Good catch," Mark said. "And you're right. It seems like I have been living inside my imagination all week."

"Your laptop just beeped – an email, I assume," Amy said.

She removed it from his backpack and Mark looked.

"From Buster. Says somebody's taking vehicles from the warehouse. I guess he was being truthful when he said he'd keep us informed. And, get this. He says he already informed the cops so I guess we don't need to. Let me respond with a brief thank you."

They waited there until the door was closed and the vehicles drove away.

"All of that was prompted by information we sent them earlier," Mark said. "None of it was from our last email."

"Maybe Jackson took the file cabinet the first time he was here."

"Could be, I suppose. Where do you suppose Baxter is through all of this? There would have had to have been a warrant served to remove things, wouldn't there?"

"I assume so," Amy said. "I think if nobody's home they tack the warrant to the door or wall or something and go ahead as if it had been handed to somebody."

"The question remains, 'Where's Baxter?'"

"If he actually had the plans we have assigned to him – set things up in Mexico – they have essentially had to be scrubbed if he doesn't have access to the passports," Amy said.

"I don't understand why he's stayed this long," Mark said. "If his post-prison list just included kill Henry, pick up his hidden money, and leave the country, he could have achieved all that days ago."

"Unless he doesn't really have the money. Maybe

somebody found it and made off with it. Henry, lookalike, a former colleague or accomplice or goon.”

“Any of that is certainly possible,” Mark said. “It makes me wonder why the Super’s apartment was so thoroughly trashed. If Baxter had the passports, the tickets, and the money, what else was there to look for?”

“Maybe nothing for Baxter, but all of that for Lookalike if he actually got there second – which we seem sure he did. Especially if he turns out to be an independent player in all this.”

“That *would* tend to indicate they were not working together,” Mark said.

“Or they *were*, and since Baxter didn’t find it in any of the easy to access places he sent Lookalike back to tear the place apart.”

“We just can’t make a real connection between those two, can we?” Mark said.

“There are the prints on the beer cans,” Amy reminded him.

“Yes, but no. That’s been bothering me. Let’s say Baxter put the cans in his refrigerator – his prints would have been on all of them. Then, at some point when Baxter wasn’t there, Lookalike went into the warehouse and, among other things, helped himself to a beer. In that case, both sets of prints would be on *that* can even if they had never been there together.”

“I see. You really are a party pooper!”

“And proud to be! Change the ‘You are’ to ‘He was’ and chisel that on my tombstone.”

“I don’t understand.’

“I think it is my mission in life to challenge everybody’s beliefs – not to change them as much as just to make sure they fully understand the implications of what they profess.”

“Oh, that. Yes. *Party pooper*. I just mentioned it.”

“Anyway, back to Baxter.” Mark went on. “If they find Henry canned there in Baxter’s warehouse, I imagine there will be an arrest warrant issued for him. He’s nobody’s fool. I’m thinking he’ll be on his way out of here immediately.”

“Which means, if he suspects we know anything, he’ll have to take care of us before he leaves – like right now. Like

two hours ago!”

“Okay,” Mark began. “Time to get serious. Let’s get some essential stuff together and leave for a while. Chuck and Beth are at her parents for two weeks so their apartment is available down the block. I’m sure they’ll let us use it. Let me call Chuck.”

Mark made the arrangements using the excuse their apartments were being painted and re-carpeted. After it was all over they’d provide the truth of the matter.

Within the next hour, they had packed three suitcases – one for Amy’s things and two for Mark’s – he took as much of the essential computer equipment as he could. Before they left, Mark arranged three mini-cameras in strategic places around his apartment, which he could access with his phone. He had had them for some time, but had not found – made – the opportunity to set them up. (It took all of ten minutes!) They arrived at the new place just after midnight. Chuck had made the necessary arrangements with the security guard. It was a gated building with limited access and immediately felt safer to both of them.

They would live out of their suitcases, remaining mobile if they needed to move on quickly.

“Tell me again how we got ourselves into this mess,” Amy said collapsing onto the sofa.

“Our roof time, Baxter’s murder time, and two inquisitive minds.”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “That reminds me. We missed our snuggle time that night.”

“I suppose we should make up for it before we forget how to snuggle.”

“Like my sexy nerd boy will ever forget that!”

They were interrupted before the very first ‘snug’ could be undertaken. Mark’s phone beeped six times. They looked at each other and he pressed the surveillance ap. He pressed ‘1’ and the view from camera one appeared. It was the one in the living room that faced the front door. Each camera was activated by a motion sensor. The system was of his own recent design and had never actually activated itself before.

“Can’t be good,” Amy said.

“We should have left on a light,” Mark said making a

mental note of it. "Illumination is poor for the sensitivity level of the camera. Next time we'll know that."

"Next time? No thank you!"

"Let me get all three cameras up on the laptop screen. . . There."

"Well, *that* should help," Amy said as the trespasser flipped the light switch and lit the living room.

"He's going into the bedroom. Recognize that back?"

"Sure do. It's the first good view we had of him up on the roof. That's Baxter!"

"On the positive side, we know three things we didn't just a few minutes ago," Mark began. "First, he really does seem to know we're involved; he knows where we – at least, I – live; and, we were really smart to get the hell out of there tonight."

"He shows no hesitation – like he must know we aren't there," Amy said.

"I see what you mean. He offers no weapon and goes from room to room clearly not expecting to find anybody."

"What if he begins going through what you have on the computer?"

"First – well, really second – there are nearly 500 thousand files on it and none are labeled so they could be associated with what's going on. Second – really first – the password is a combination of fifteen letters, numerals, symbols, and random upper/lower case entries."

"I've never been able to figure out how you can remember that."

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

"Not as funny as it might be under less threatening circumstances. What do you suppose he expects to find since his purpose clearly isn't to find us?"

"Good question. I don't see how he could know about the pictures we've taken. Although, if he followed the trail and concluded from things he'd heard that we might have been up on the roof that night, and knows my major, he might think there's some possibility we have pictures of the murder. That's really stretching it, it I think."

"Maybe there is something he was looking for in Henry's apartment that he didn't find and thought we – you,

since he's in your apartment – might have.”

“That’s a reasonable idea. Good, in fact, except I’ve had virtually no contact with him. It seems obvious he waited until we left my apartment. Why would he stick around thinking we’d leave that late at night?”

“Our late-night rooftop hours, maybe – I don’t know. What I *do* know is that it’s a really creepy feeling thinking he’s been watching us.”

“I’ll second that.”

“He just moves around from place to place, hardly even touching anything,” Amy said. “I really don’t understand.”

“He looked behind the couch and under the bed and in the closet and the shelf above in the back and he opened all the kitchen cabinets. What does that tell you?”

“He’s afraid to open refrigerators? Really, I got nothing. You’re clearly thinking something.”

“He’s not looking for a *little* something like a book or flash drive,” Mark said. “He’s only interested in big spaces that could hold something large.”

“Interesting. Large like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know – four million dollars in small bills inside satchels, maybe?”

“That would indicate he doesn’t have the money,” Amy said.

“It would, and answer our concern about why he is still around.”

“Look. He’s leaving,” she said.

Amy became thoughtful.

“So, he’s looked in the super’s place and now in ours. What’s left?”

“The locker at bus station, which the newly discovered key from inside the pillow will fit and reveal all in the final 100 words.”

“What?”

“Isn’t that how lots of those paperback mysteries end?”

“Somehow this doesn’t feel like one of those.”

Mark shrugged.

“A question – really a clue, I guess – remains,” Mark said. “During the moments Preceding the murder, Baxter made no move to get the location of the money out of Henry.

He just killed him – bam! No words. You know what that means.”

“That at that point Baxter didn’t know the money wasn’t still where he had hidden it,” Amy began. “He had just gotten out of prison and went directly to kill Henry – first things first – he’d been stewing about that for ten years. Lots of pent up emotion surrounding that step, I’d imagine. Now, the money’s gone and he realizes that by killing Henry he may have really screwed himself. He must be livid!”

“It also explains the relatively small amount of money we found in the bank account,” Mark said. “We are probably less his *suspects* than we are just folks on his list of possibles that he’s checking out. When he doesn’t find anything, he’ll move on to whomever is next on that list.”

“It would be nice if those suppositions are true,” Amy said. “Problem is, it is all supposition. We don’t dare go about our lives as if it’s all over between him and us, now.”

“You’re right, of course.”

“I’m always right. How could you have ever missed that?”

They had been sitting side by side on the sofa. Amy lay her head against Mark’s shoulder. He set the laptop aside and pulled her close. The apartment was warm so she wasn’t shivering – she was trembling. They fell asleep right there.

* * *

The following morning, they texted Jackson explaining they were no longer at the same place and suggested they communicate by phone if necessary. There was no response, which they assumed meant they were no longer needed – not immediately, anyway. If true, it was a relief.

Suddenly, it was the weekend. They had breakfast in the coffee shop in the lobby of their friend’s apartment building.

“Where do you suppose the money is?” Amy asked.

“I’ve been wondering about that *and* I’ve been wondering where *Baxter* may think it is. We know we don’t have it. Baxter must be pretty sure it isn’t in Henry’s apartment and, now, hopefully not in mine. We don’t know much about possible places, I suppose.

“Just two, really,” she said. “The warehouse or the super’s place.”

“Or, some other place in our apartment building,” Mark said. Henry knew every nook and cranny of that place. There must be dozens of places – the crawl space above the rooms on every one of the ten floors for starters, all of which are accessible from the trapdoor in the ceiling of the communal closet at the north end of each floor.”

“Think about this,” Amy said. “If Henry did find and take the money, wouldn’t he keep it in a place that was close to him and easy to access – like on a moment’s notice?”

“That makes sense, but you saw his apartment – it was essentially dismantled. If not there, then where? I’m quite sure it wasn’t up in the crawl space above his apartment and just to the south was a cement block fire wall right up to the roof. I’d think that would be too obvious, anyway.”

“So, you’re saying someplace that is secure and not obvious, and easy to access on a moment’s notice. What’s left that meets those criteria?”

Mark offered an impish smile.

“A secret room, maybe, and yes, I’m joking – *or* maybe I’m not!”

“Maybe not? What do you mean?”

“Like I just said, every floor has a storage closet – like the one beside the super’s apartment on the first floor. They contain small cubicles along both sides that can be locked – one assigned to each apartment in which to stash extra stuff.”

“And you think Henry used one of those cubicles?”

“No.”

“You have really lost me, then.”

“Work with me on this. How deep are those closets?”

“The one on my floor is fifteen feet, maybe? You mean from the front door to the rear.”

“Right. How deep is the one beside the Super’s place?”

“Maybe ten or a little less – eight maybe. Fewer apartments on the main floor because of the two, east and west halls to the entrances – so, less room needed in that closet.”

“Set that logical reasoning aside.”

“Did *you* really just say that?”

He mounted a sheepish smile and continued.

“Go with me here. The back of that smaller main floor closet butts up against what?”

“The Super’s place I suppose. His front room.”

“We need to get back there. I have two things on my mind. One, your apartment – was it searched like mine was? Second, what other reason might there be for that short communal closet on the main floor?”

“I hadn’t considered *my* apartment may have been entered, but why not. If he knows about us – and clearly he does – why not look mine over as well.”

They loaded the car with the items they had brought along, not knowing how things would unfold. Twenty minutes later they had entered the main floor of their building.

“First, let’s take a look at the storage closet up on ‘Two’ and see how deep it is,” Mark said.

As he expected it was a good fourteen feet deep.

“Now we have something to compare the first-floor closet with.”

“*With?* Really?”

“It’s those common-man usage Devils that have commandeered my grammar. Mr. Platt warned us about them you remember.”

He got a look as they rode the elevator.

A few minutes later they were down at the Super’s door. Mark soon had them inside.

“Is this trespassing?” Amy asked.

“Only if you define trespassing as meaning entering a place you don’t have permission to enter.”

“There’s another definition?”

Mark ignored the reality of the situation. He locked the door from the inside and began surveying the wall that room shared with the communal closet on the other side.

“Hmm?”

“Hmm. I see what you mean,” Amy said. It’s a good fourteen feet long, far longer than the inside dimensions of the closet would suggest should be the case.”

“But exactly like what one would expect from seeing the closet up on Two.”

He began examining the wall, the four feet that extended furthest into the room – the four feet that shouldn't be there according to the inside dimensions of the closet on the other side of that wall. The protrusion of the closet into the apartment leaves an eight-foot-wide wall at its end – about what we'd expect from the width of the closet.

Mark began tapping on that shorter end-wall. Amy frowned at him as if to say how could that possibly tell you anything?"

Mark grinned.

"Another guy thing, like kicking tires. It is only intended to give us time to think."

Amy stood back and looked it over.

"That shorter inside wall which would be the back of the closet, is papered and not painted."

"And?"

"I don't remember any paper in any apartments in the building – everything is painted light gray, tan, or sea green."

"So, *suspicious*, you're saying."

"*Different* is really what I'm thinking. I guess a Super could paper his own wall if he wanted to but it does make it stick out like a sore thumb."

Mark ran his hand across the wall.

"This paper is vinyl if that adds anything to your equation. Sturdier than paper wall paper by about 100 times I suppose."

"Hmm?"

"Hmm?"

"There's a vertical strip of corner molding at the outside corner," she said.

"And a fine place that is for a piece of corner molding," Mark said.

"He tightened up his upper arm awaiting the knuckles. His preparation had been well advised."

"Stand back here with me," Amy said. "What do you see there, in about a foot from where the short wall meets the main apartment wall on the north?"

"Wallpaper?"

"Look beyond the paper."

"Like Superman?"

“Not quite that far.”

“Ah!”

He walked to the corner and again felt – that time funning his palm up and down the surface.

“Like just the hint of a dry wall joint or a crease in the paper.”

He ran his hand all the way down to the floor, confirming his contention.

“And what do we have down here – at the floor against the outside wall?”

Amy moved closer and bent down to, also, examine it.

Mark took advantage of the closeness to plant a kiss on her cheek.

She spoke about what she saw.

“The paper is loose down here. Lays flat back against the wall but close up I can see it’s loose.”

“Can you lift it away from the wall?” Mark asked.

“Yes. There’s a thing-a-ma-bob on the wall behind it.”

“The *contagious* or *harmless* variety of thing-a-ma-bob?” he asked, kidding.

“See for yourself.”

He did and described it.

“A round thing-a-ma-bob, flush with the surface of the drywall. Three inches in diameter. Like a large button of some kind. I’m going to press on it.”

He pressed on it.

“Oh, My! That’s a bit dramatic,” Amy said stepping back.

The outside edge of the papered wall had clicked away from the wall that met it there beneath the molding. Mark slipped his fingers in the crack and carefully pulled it toward him. It swung open like a door.

“It’s hinged right there at that crease you found, Amy – 12 inches in from the wall. Get a flashlight!”

“Or, you could flip that electrical switch on the inside wall,” she offered, pointing.

“Women!” he said.

“That didn’t sound very positive,” she said. “And it seemed like blanket comment.”

“Oh, it was definitely positive. By eleven every male in

the universe learns there is only one acceptable way to say 'women' and that is absolutely, completely, unequivocally, positively."

"I think I've met a few who missed that part of the lecture."

"Could be they were still flabbergasted by the birds and bees portion of the talk."

She smiled and, mounting her tip toes, administered a quick peck to Mark's cheek.

He flipped the switch (on the wall, not on Amy!) There was a set of metal shelves which was playing host to ten, flame-proof lock boxes, each a little larger than a foot square.

"Interesting. None of these is locked. Arranged for a quick getaway the way it looks. Closed, locked or not, they will protect the contents from fire."

"Getaway?" Amy asked.

"Did I fail to mention they are each filled with hundred dollar bills? Let me take a few minutes and make sure that's correct – hundreds all the way to the bottoms."

He had to remove banded sets of 100, hundred dollar bills. To be doubly sure he went through three of the boxes. They were all the same – 100's to the bottom.

"And, there is a large, metal, moving trunk on the floor," she said. "Sturdy looking wheels on one end – handle on the other."

Mark opened it.

"Empty," he said. "I guess the plan was to keep the currency safe from flames until time to cut out, and then quickly move it into the larger carrying case and vamoose."

"You sound so sexy when you speak corrupted Spanish."

"Das ist muy shada, mammoselle."

"What."

"I figured if corrupted Spanish turns you on, a phrase using corrupted German, Spanish and French should send you into clothes rending cart wheels."

It was worth a shared peck to the lips.

"So, now what? Jackson?" Amy asked.

"Not sure. We need to think on it. Let's get this closed up and tend to our needs."

“Snuggle?” she asked.

“I was thinking eat, but I’m willing to delay that, or forego it entirely, at your insistence.”

“I’m hungry as well. Antonio’s?” Amy asked.

“I’m feeling like lasagna.”

“You’re not looking like lasagna – more like a marshmallow sundae.”

“I do need to work on my tan.”

“Speaking of Lilly white skin – which I assume all that was about – Antonio the Norwegian makes great Lasagna. We need to move the car away from this building anyway.”

“When will we be able to move back here do you suppose?”

“Not sure. Before we leave here, let’s check out *your* apartment.”

“How will we know if he was in there? In your place he didn’t misplace a single thing. Just looked.”

“I guess we’ll just have to see what we see.”

They rode the elevator and looked both ways before exiting on the 8th floor.

“This is not good,” Mark said, as they arrived at her door. “It’s ajar.”

They stopped ten feet away. Amy put her arm around Mark’s waist and pulled herself close.

“Let me see if I can look inside. It’s hardly open a quarter of an inch,” he said, gently freeing himself from her. She kept tight hold of the back of his belt not about to be left behind.

He peeked.

He pushed the door open ever so slightly.

He turned his ear toward the opening.

“It doesn’t appear like anybody is in there,” he said.

He pushed the door even further open, giving him a clear view of the front room. He made the universal ‘shhh’ sign with his finger to his lips, as if at that point Amy could have made a sound if she had wanted to. He pointed for her to stay put and he slipped himself inside, crossing the room to the open bedroom door. She always kept it closed. He moved with caution and looked inside, first peeking through the crack where the door hung on its hinges – something all,

great detectives of the late night black and white movie genre did. He entered. He opened the closet door. He looked under the bed. They returned to the living room. She closed the door and locked it. Mark took her in his arms and tried to quiet her shivers – not an easy task since his were matching hers shiv for shiv.

“I think it’s time we call Jackson and level with him about everything we know,” Mark said.

“Before or after Lasgna?”

“I suppose it can wait. We can think about just how to say it – write it out even and maybe call him from Antonio’s,” Mark said.

They entered the elevator. Mark pressed EIGHT rather than ONE.

“What are you doing?”

“I just want to peek out and make sure my apartment is still there,” he said not really having any better reason to offer.”

“It stopped. The doors rolled open. Carefully he peered around the corner quickly pulling back.”

“You got a mirror in that tent you call a purse?” he asked.

She produced one.

“What?”

“Somebody out there leaning up against the wall. I want to get a better look.”

“Be careful,” she cautioned as if that offered anything helpful whatsoever.

He positioned the mirror and was able to get a detailed look at the man. He had never seen him before.

“One of Baxter’s men, maybe,” Amy asked.

“No idea, of course. Can’t really risk approaching him, not knowing.”

“I think we better leave, then,” Amy suggested.

He pressed the ONE button and they were soon out on the street heading for Antonio’s.

“Don’t look now,” Mark said, “but I think we are being followed – one man, about twenty yards behind us.

“The one from up in the floor by your place?” she asked.

“Again, I can’t tell. Let’s just keep walking. If he makes a move on us, we will run out into traffic. That should get us the necessary attention to discourage him.”

“Or, get us killed!” Amy said, not really saying ‘no’ since she had no better idea.

A black vehicle pulled up beside them and slowed, then stopped at the curb. The rear door opened and a commanding voice from across the seat told them to get in, immediately.

CHAPTER TEN

There didn't seem to be much choice – one stranger with his hands in his jacket pockets closing in from behind and a car containing three more requesting their presence inside. Amy entered first with Mark right behind. They had paid no attention to faces.

Mark looked across the seat to the man by the opposite window, ready for some serious conversation about abduction and related topics.

“Jackson! *Detective* Jackson, that is. I don't understand. My best assessment at the moment is that you are somehow aligned with Baxter. I certainly hope you have a friendlier alternative to offer us to contemplate.”

Jackson gently nudged Amy in her ribs.

“Does he come with a translator?”

“He does, but there's an extra charge. Seriously, what's up here?”

“You were being followed by a low life who shared a cell in prison with Baxter. We have had a tail on him the past several days hoping he would lead us to Baxter. *He* is remaining well-hidden, although we have reason to believe he's still in the city.”

“And you just happened to be driving by and . . .”

It had been Mark intentionally dumming down his vocabulary.

“Word on the street is that Butch – that's the name the man uses – had accepted a hit that required him to carry it out today. We've had cars and foot officers tailing him since he left his room early this morning. I have remained in the area today and got a call a few minutes ago, that Butch was clearly following a young couple in the vicinity of your favorite eating place. I put things together and decided to ride in to the rescue. Sorry that I left the white hat behind at my office.”

“Extending that,” Mark said, “just now we saw a man hanging around my apartment. Another one of Baxter's goons do you suppose?”

“No. Actually, that's Pierson – a cop, there to protect

you if you ever came back.”

“Thanks again, I guess. You seem to know way more about us than we figured,” Mark said. “And, *thanks* for that by the way.”

“We were in the process of writing out all the things we have come to know about Baxter and Henry,” Amy went on. “We assume you found Henry’s body in the barrel.”

“We did – thanks. You know you came close to getting yourselves killed. Why didn’t you come to me right away?”

Mark offered their thinking on the matter.

“We figured if our name appeared in a police report, Baxter might have a way of finding out and tracking us down. He seems to have a penchant for doing away with everybody who he thinks might implicate him. It came down to a choice of withholding what we knew until we were certain you could nail him or risk a possibly terminal confrontation with Baxter.”

“I see your logic, even though I don’t agree with the conclusion.”

“You suspected we were the source of the information you were receiving.”

It had really been a question from Mark.

“It was a case in which your smarts out smarted you.”

“What?”

“Your answers to my initial questions that first night were all way too good and came way too easily. When I received the first information from you, your faces appeared in my head immediately. When I received the first photo, I was sure of it. Your work is professional quality – not what the average snoop would produce.”

“It seems to have worked out okay for us, thanks to you,” Amy said.

“I don’t understand how you know about Antonio’s and us,” Mark asked.

“Your email address – the piece of paper you wrote it on for me up in your apartment that first night – back of a flyer from Antonio’s. Later I confirmed the relationship.”

“It’s amazing how you keep all those bits and pieces of information at the ready inside your head.”

“It’s called being an old cop.”

“So, what do you suggest we do now?” Amy asked.

“We can’t pick up Butch on rumor. I’d like to keep a tail on you two for your own safety sake.”

“And – implied in that – is to catch the Butchmiester in the act just before he lowers the eternal boom on us.”

“Well, there *is* that. Wouldn’t suggest it if I didn’t feel confident my men can protect you. He won’t harm you in public. We take down Butch. Butch sings his lungs out implicating Baxter. That, plus the evidence we – well, you two – have collected will send Baxter back to the clink for the rest of his life even if we never recover the money he swindled out of his clients.”

“Let me just get this straight,” Mark asked. “Your men would be there watching us, strictly to protect us and not to, say, arrest us for breaking and entering or removing property that didn’t belong to us from places we had no business being?”

“If they are doing their jobs and watching for Butch I really don’t see how they could be witness to any of those kinds of things. I get the idea there are still things you have not told me.”

“We make it a rule never to spread unfounded rumors, Sir. We have just a little more ‘founding’ to take care of.”

“Well, *if I had heard that* – what you just said – I might have to consider an arrest for withholding evidence, so I didn’t – hear that. You have 24 hours, then I will expect to hear *all* of your suspicions and receive all of your evidence. Remember, we’ll have eyes on you.”

“We can live with that, right, love of my life?”

She looked directly into Mark’s eyes.

“Twenty-four hours?”

Mark crossed his heart. Amy turned to Jackson and nodded. Jackson made a call.

“Drop you at Antonio’s?” he asked, once finished.

“That’s where we were headed, I guess.”

“Two plainclothes on the way. One tall and skinny. One short and dumpy. Street clothes sweat shirts, jeans and sneakers – probably dirty white.”

“We appreciate it. May even be a large pepperoni in it for you provided all goes well,” Mark joked.

Inside the restaurant, they went directly to their table at

the rear. Antonio had drinks and breadsticks on the table. He had apparently seen them in the car at the curb while they were waiting until ‘Sneaker’ boys arrived.

“What else is there for us to investigate? You implied to Jackson that there were things.”

“We haven’t told him about finding the money yet. I want to go back to that secret room. I think we ignored something that was in there.”

“What?”

“All of the flame proof boxes holding the money were identical – all purchased at the same time, I’m assuming. They had identical store labels on the bottoms. I searched down through the money in three of them, remember. Something wasn’t right. I need to check it out.”

An hour later they had made a rather extensive list of additional information they wanted to pass onto Jackson. They added a few questions at the end – loose ends they wanted to clear up even if not absolutely necessary to the case against Baxter.

At the register, Mark pulled out a twenty to pay.

“Can’t take your money for the rest of the month.”

“What? We’ll starve!”

“Some guy with bushy eyebrows and a big nose said your tab was on him ‘til then.”

Mark and Amy looked at each other.

“Jackson,” they said as one.

They took their time walking back to their apartment building, wanting to make sure the ‘Sneaker Twins’ didn’t lose them. Butch didn’t seem to be with them. Perhaps he had ‘made’ the undercover cops. That couldn’t be all bad.

Mark picked the lock – again – and they let themselves into the super’s office. They went right to the swinging wall and opened it. With the light on inside, Amy pulled the door mostly closed. She wasn’t sure why – a safety factor, she told herself.

Mark began emptying one of the money boxes, placing the bundles of bills on the empty shelf just above. He looked puzzled, but just for a moment.

“Got gum?” he asked.

Amy knew better than to ask why and produced a pack

from her purse. Mark unwrapped two sticks and gave them a quick chewing. He removed the wad from his mouth, formed it into a roll an inch long and pressed it against the bottom of the box – on the inside. Carefully, he raised it. A piece of thick cardboard rose with it.

“So, here’s the deal, Amy. When I first dug down among the bills in this one, I noticed this box had a different colored bottom piece from the others. I asked myself why if they were identical. A false bottom, I answered myself. I didn’t want to damage it by stabbing it with a knife to raise it, thus the makeshift, sticky, handle.

“Now, the good stuff, I think . . .”

They both heard it – somebody inserting a key into the front door. Mark pulled the door to a position allowing the slimmest of cracks. He wanted to be able to see out into the room. Amy flicked the light switch, plunging them into darkness, inside the hidden room. He was sure the crack would not be noticed – unless, of course, the intruder knew about the secret room. Then, well, OUCH probably!

It was either Lookalike or Henry, returned from the realm of the departed. Amy bent down so she could see as well. He went right to a cabinet to the right of the computer and set a satchel on the counter. He opened the door and removed several items from the inside. He removed the single shelf at the center then appeared to press, quickly and firmly, on the right side of the back. A false back popped open revealing a series of four inch shelves – six, Amy counted. They were piled with currency – more bundles of bills. Mark quickly estimated that if they were bundles of hundreds, the shelves contained about \$100,000.

Lookalike picked up one bundle and flipped through them slowly, appearing to make an estimate of how many bills per bundle. He then counted the bundles, pointing at them as he mouthed the numbers. He pounded his right fist into his other palm – the universal sign for ‘gosh darn it’ (or something even a bit more profane from the ferocity of the punch).

He was not a happy man. Not to be happy at finding a hundred thousand dollars raised interesting questions, primarily, ‘Why not?’

He looked around the room without shutting the

cabinet. Perhaps leaving the wall out a crack had not been such a good idea after all. The man walked directly at them. On impulse, Mark pulled the door closed. It clicked. It was locked.

Mark whispered.

“Unless Lookalike knows about the trigger we should be safe . . .”

“Unless he has a gun and fires randomly through the wall,” Amy whispered right back.

Immediately, Mark began moving the heavy money boxes, stacking them up against that false wall. Amy helped. It made a stack five feet high and two wide. He moved Amy and himself to a position behind it. She understood from the start – those fire-resistant boxes were thick and Mark’s hope had been that bullets would not penetrate them. For as long as they held their breaths waiting for the worst, Mark was certain they had earned a place in the Guinness Book of Records. Where were those judges when a guy needed one?

They heard the sounds of hands washing across the wall and heard as he pounded one place and another. Perhaps he had heard the click, but not actually seen the wall move back into place. It couldn’t have been open more than half an inch.

Presently, the nearby noises ceased and sounds came from across the room. They both understood – he was filling the satchel with the stacks of bills. He had apparently decided to take what he had located – *something* being better than nothing. He had clearly been given instructions about how to find the secret door in the cupboard, but not the wall. Presently the hall door opened and closed. They assumed he was gone and they would gladly leave it up the sneakers guys to question him or not.

Amy turned the light on. Mark lifted back onto a shelf the box he had emptied. With the false bottom removed he made the discovery he was hoping for – well, at least he was hoping to make some sort of discovery.

“Eureka! Isn’t that what the old gold prospectors are said to have yelled when they made a strike?”

“My knowledge of prospectors from, the era is minimal, I’m afraid,” Amy said. “From what I do know, I suspect you

smell far better than they did.”

It garnered a quick smile. He held up his find – finds – another flash drive and a folded brown envelope.

“If we don’t need to stay in here I suggest we leave,” Amy said.

Mark pulled what appeared to be the wall release lever. It was. The wall popped out that usual quarter inch. He looked before pushing it on open.

“Shh! Somebody is out there. Maybe Lookalike hanging around to see if we were really here – opened and closed the door just for our benefit.”

He continued to look even pushing it open a bit more hoping to be able to see around the corner toward the door. Someone called out.

“Mark! Amy! Where did you go?”

The voice sounded concerned. Lookalike had no way of knowing it would have been them – by name – in the apartment. Mark pushed the door open a bit more with the idea he could close it if that looked to be necessary. The person moved into the center of the room.

“It’s *Tall Sneaker*,” Mark whispered to Amy and opened it wide enough for them to exit.

“Yes. Mark and Amy here. You saw the man leave I take it.”

“Got him out in the hall just in case. What gives?”

Mark indicated for Amy to make the explanation. She did.

Since there was good reason to believe the currency in his satchel was part of the money bilked out of Baxter’s clients, it was seized. Lookalike was taken in for questioning. Jackson was called to take custody of the four million in the fire proof lock boxes, and Mark and Amy returned to his apartment there in the building with their suitcases of traveling personal supplies – the electronic equipment, clothes, etc.

“While I take a look at this flash drive you can look at what’s in the brown envelope,” Mark said.

They worked independently for some time.

“I got receipts and other accounting sort of documents in the envelope,” she said at last.

“Similar things here – digitized. I’m thinking a paper

trail like an accountant would be inclined to keep. There is also a very long series of numbers covering lines and lines and lines in a word document.”

“One of those never to be cracked passwords I’ve heard you talk about?”

“Could be but I think it is too ridiculously long even for that. More than half of them seem to be pairs – underlined together – 10, to 26 – like to join them or make them a set of two”

“Really?” Amy said. “I’m thinking my grandmother could crack that?”

“Crack? What are you talking about?”

Mark seemed puzzled.

“What comes in a quantity of twenty-six?”

“A really, really, really generous baker’s dozen? I have no . . . Oh, like the English alphabet – 26 letters?”

“A possibility. Seems an accountant might be prone to use numbers instead of letters.”

“Like a cryptogram, you mean except the typical letter for letter substitution becomes number to letter substitution. Very good. Remind me to pay VERY close attention to all your special needs tonight. Let me print it out and we can take a stab at decoding it.”

He presented the sheet to Amy.

“I have been developing an alternative theory on all of this during the past 24 hours. Let me try it out on you before we try to do the decoding – in case it may be Henry’s own collection of data – or confession.”

“Confession? From Henry. Does that make any sense?”

Mark arranged his laptop so the camera faced him, he set it to record a video and began with an automatic time and date stamp.

“I figure we might need verification of this – no idea why, really. Anyway, listen to me. Baxter was an accountant like Henry. Apparently a good one to have built such a large, wealthy clientele. It just makes no sense Baxter would have done such a poor job of hiding his misdeeds in the books – so easy for Henri to have found. Apparently, Henry found them with very little trouble and presented them to the authorities.

The DA pinned Baxter to the wall with the information and Baxter's only defense was that he was innocent.

"But, what if, Henry, *not* Baxter, was the one who did the swindling and accumulated the millions of dollars that ended up in the hidden room in his apartment? And that he cleverly framed Baxter. Then, through the years Henry established several identities. He probably set up bank accounts under each one and maybe somehow used them to move the money around. That could have been the real reason he changed names and jobs, not to hide from Baxter. He apparently spent a great deal of time with Latino friends – his address book is overloaded with them. The passport and plane tickets we found were in his name. What if that hadn't been for Lookalike to use, but really was for Henry? What if Lookalike was hired so he could be killed, putting an end to the existence of Henri Roberts/Robert Henry, freeing him to live a new life?

"Wow! I didn't see that coming. If it did happen that way, I'd say Henry was one of the most brilliant bad guys I've ever heard of. What set you thinking in such an off the wall fashion?"

"It was when Jackson said we had answers to his questions the first night that were just too perfect. It hit me that like that, the evidence against Baxter was just too perfect. Baxter was unable to explain away a single one of Henry's accusations – or the supporting evidence Henri said he discovered in the books. They had been perfectly crafted down through the years to point the finger only at Baxter.

"Also, if I were going to do that sort of thing I would try to set up a Patsy, somebody to take the fall, rather than just steal the money and try to disappear with it making me look guilty from the start. Who better for that than the partner with a reputation of being a hot head and something less than honest and dependable over the course of his life? Henry had to know that kind of a man would come after him once he was set free.

"Those are my thoughts. Let's see if we can find out how close I came. Of course, this number code may be something entirely different. Let's begin with the first eight words which are set off like a sentence with a period at the

end. I see there are 30 numbers but really only 18 unique numbers – with the repeats. Print that first sentence out by hand in large numbers across a page – landscape – long way – 11-inch direction.”

“I understood the first suggestion – landscape.”

“Let’s put a comma after each word to keep them separate.”

“Okay. Like that. There.”

19 10, 12 14 10 4, 18 19, 4 6 8, 1 10 20 1 22 21 21, 17
9 10 20, 4 8, 26 22 4 18 5 22.

“Now, we try to substitute letters for the numbers and see if we really do get words that make sense.”

“See that very next standalone letter,” Amy said – the one at the beginning of the next sentence - 18. It has to be either an A or an I. Let’s add that to the line of numbers.”

19 10, 12 14 10 4, 18 19, 4 6 8, 1 10 20 1 22 21 21, 17
9 10 20, 4 8, 26 22 4 18 5 22. 18

“There are two words with two letters each and they share one letter – 19. It clearly isn’t a question so that clears away a number of two letter words for the first one – words like is or if,” Mark said. “Since I’m thinking it is a piece about himself, that standalone 18 is probably ‘I’ rather than ‘A’. That would have the third word start with ‘I’ – is, in, it. Given the context, I think the most likely of those will be ‘it’. That makes the very first letter ‘T’. There is only one common two letter word beginning with ‘T’ – ‘to’. That would make ‘O’ also appear in words two, five and eight. Add those in under the letters and let’s see what we have.

19 10, 12 14 10 4, 18 19, 4 6 8, 1 10 20 1 22 21 21, 17
9 10 20, 4 8, 26 22 4 18 5 22. 18

“This is really too easy,” Mark said. “Think of how many personal documents begin – ‘To …..’”

“You mean, ‘to whom it may concern’?”

“It fits with what we have – the exact lengths of the words. Add in those letters.”

19 10, 12 14 10 4, 18 19, 4 6 8, 1 10 20 1 22 21 20, 17
9 10 20, 4 8, 26 22 4 18 5 22

T O W H O M I T M A Y C O N C E R N
O N M Y E M I E

“So, do you want to fill in the blanks or shall I?” Amy

asked.

“You do the honors my love.”

“To whom it may concern upon my demise.”

“That gives us 19 of the 26 letters of the alphabet with Z and Q being rarities ut leaves only six for us to figure out. This will be a cinch!”

They worked on for nearly a half hour. It hadn't been difficult, but it did take a good deal of mechanical doings.

“I think we are ready for our final chat with Detective Jackson and get this whole thing tied up.”

Mark stepped out into the hall and asked the Sneakers Brothers to call Jackson. A half hour later he was sitting across the kitchen table from them. Mark had made coffee – a 24-hour staple of all third year college students.

Amy began the presentation.

“First, we want to thank you for the protection you've given us, apparently even before we were aware of it. I think you need to hear my hero's description of how he figured it all came down, before we decoded the confession which we are about to hand to you along with the flash drive on which we found it. Several other files signed by the owner of that flash drive will be found on it to verify its authenticity and ownership.”

“I must say two things at the outset,” Jackson said. “You definitely have my attention and this is *really* excellent coffee.”

She adjusted the laptop and played the recording.

“What an interesting take on the evidence. I must say that never entered any of our discussions. I assume you have more solid evidence.”

Mark inserted the flash drive into the lap top and brought up the coded file. He compared it with the one he had printed out and then with the hand printed copy on which they had worked.

“I see, they are the same,” Jackson said.

“It was a simple substitution – cryptogram-type – code. We believe he made it so simple because he felt sure it would not be found unless he was dead, at which time he wanted it to be made easily available. Using the number code at all was undoubtedly just a guard against somebody stumbling onto it.

Thus, he made it simple to decode. Here it is.”

Amy handed the decoded copy to him. He laid it on the table, donned his reading glasses, and began reading it out loud.

To whom it may concern upon my demise. I have always been a stickler for details. I will therefore leave nothing for the imagination in the case of the Baxter Swindling Case. I want to make sure the books balance – exactly – one could say. First, it was I, not Baxter who was responsible for pilfering the funds from our clients. I sprinkled clues to make it appear it was Baxter and then turned him in as the culprit. I did a foolproof job and Baxter understood he had no way of defending himself. I set up a bank account in his name in Montana, into which the syphoned money was deposited – those money transfers from our business into that account corresponded with the book keeping irregularities in case the account was ever located and audited. It wasn't. Seeing no way out, Baxter was resigned to take revenge on me before he went to prison. I had miscalculated there, expecting him to wait until his release. Before I understood his intention, he killed my wife and child. He knew that would devastate me – make me feel eternally guilty because he figured I'd believe that I was ultimately responsible. My plan has been to be in South America – via Mexico City – by the time he is released. A number of details needed to be accomplished slowly so as to not make me appear suspicious. I will leave immediately having learned he will be released several months early. It rushes things, but I will handle it. Over time I have transferred the money from the bank in Montana to several accounts here in the city – a small amount at a time. I set up a half dozen accounts in false ID's I have used. Gradually, from them I converted it into untraceable cash a tiny amount at a time over a dozen years to eliminate suspicion. It will be shipped by cargo container to my address in Argentina. I have an account there with just enough money to keep me solvent until all the arrangements are complete. My plan is to kill Baxter as soon as he returns to the City. I will let him find out where I live and am sure he will contact me. When we meet I will do him in. I have hired a double – could be my twin – to be seen

at my favorite Argentine restaurant at the time I kill Baxter so I cannot become a suspect. When, on the appointed day, my double shows up to claim his payment – he knows how to extract it from the place it is hidden in my room – I will follow him and at some appropriate spot, kill him, leaving my ID on his person. I will no longer exist. Then I will fly to Mexico and hop from place to place covering my path to Argentina. Baxter will be out of my life forever. Over the past ten years I have developed flawless Argentinian Spanish from Argentine natives living here in the city. Since you are reading this, something clearly went wrong with the plan. - Henri Roberts/ Robert Henry

“What went wrong with his plan seems to be that Baxter successfully lured Henry before Henry could lure Baxter,” Mark said. “Just plain sloppy on Henry’s part, I’m thinking.”

“For some reason, I can’t feel bad for Baxter for having been falsely convicted and spending a large chunk of his life behind bars,” Amy said.

“Look,” Jackson said. “We now have him for killing Henry, Henry’s wife and child and, largely thanks to you two, we have a hard and fast conviction coming up. Consider that he just served a tiny portion of the sentence he will soon find himself serving. Premeditated revenge and murders of women and children never find a single sympathetic juror. He will never see the light of day again, as is too often said at the end of dime novels.”

“Dime novels?” Amy asked.

“I suppose I just dated myself. I’m sure you can figure it out. By the way, law enforcement departments all over the country need exceptional computer guys. You should give some thought to that young man. I’ll be good for a glowing recommendation.”

Marc nodded, but made no commitment.

Jackson left – taking a cup of coffee with him. Mark and Amy were surprised at how relieved they suddenly felt. Marc spoke cryptically as he locked the door and turned off the living room lights.

“FSTA!”

“FSTA?”

“Finally, Snuggle Time Again!”