

# The Consensus Murders

By  
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# **THE CONSENSUS MURDERS**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Josh saw humor where most did not. Whether that had been ordained by the name his parents had given him was a point he sometimes pondered. Regardless, the bent had served him well as a source of community celebrity and financial security by way of his daily column in the largest of his city's newspapers. He turned the Bishop's 'circumcision' slip, when he had intended, 'circumspection', into the biggest laugh of the week – something about having long suspected him of being a *closet Hebrew*. Folks were still chuckling from his remark several weeks before when he morphed the Mayor's stumble and fall, on stage, into the lap of Miss Universe, into a comment about how he had heard rumors the man had a history of managing intimate moments with beautiful young women (the city's worst kept secret, at last laid bare). Josh went for smiles and chuckles rather than belly laughs.

Barny – that is, Editor Bascom – stuck his head into Josh's cubical.

“Not your best column this morning, Josh. What's going on?”

“And a good and fruitful morning to you, as well, my most competent and revered Lord and Master.”

“That purple palaver didn't answer my question, kid.”

Josh supposed that a thirty-year-old columnist could, conceivably, seem like a kid to a seventy something editor, but

thought better than using that moment to pursue the ramifications of age-related determiners of personal perception.

“Hey, what can I say? The people in this city just aren’t funny anymore.”

“Then *lie* about them. Readers depend on your ‘*Joshin Around*’ column to brighten their morning and send them into work with a smile on their face and a chuckle on their breath. You’re not getting sidetracked by your fantasy about becoming a real reporter, again, are you?”

“Me, Sir? A *real* reporter. Whatever are you suggesting? Lowly ME?”

“I want to see five great ones in row, now, you hear me, son?”

“Oh, yes, Sir – shoulder to the ground, nose to the grindstone, peddle to the cobblestone, all that stuff – and *more*, if it is required.”

Barny clamped down on his always unlit cigar, pushed air in Josh’s direction, and left, shaking his head. Out of sight, he allowed a smile. They both understood the exchange would alter nothing and only work to solidify the power/defiance relationship that defined their surprisingly productive association.

Truth be known, and somehow Barny seemed to, Josh *had* been off on another tangent. He defined it more like a gentle side-trip than a full-blown tangent, which, on the young man’s continuum of such things, lay about mid-way between, ‘A Strictly Innocuous Side-trip’, at one end to, ‘Our Father Please Don’t Let Me Die Here’, at the other. His response had not been a promise and they both understood that. Some weeks, Josh’s fingers cramped under the stress of being kept crossed behind his back, although he remained diligent in the endeavor.

In a city of a million people, there would be the occasional murder – it was how some humans dealt with interpersonal disputes. Such interchanges were typically between a couple of hoods or gang bangers – nobody of social value was involved – the killed or the killer. That was how Josh saw it, anyway. The dregs of humanity cleaning up its own spawn – undoubtedly a good thing. Legislators were

so convinced of that, that they made it legal for anybody who was skilled enough to wear a hat to get whatever firepower they needed to carry out the cleansing. The fate of children enjoying their lives on the nearby curbs or in parks, apparently played no role in the equation.

It was a point of frequent discussion between Josh and Sally, his long-time special lady. She was a research librarian at the university. *Her* position on the matter was that all human beings were of value and that Josh's take on it was cold, callus and shortsighted. The discussions seldom reached the point of spoiling a sleepover, but suggested stark differences in their outlooks on life.

Sally was positive, trusting, altruistic, and compassionate. It wasn't that Josh could not also be those ways, but they made up his second line of interfacing with the world and seldom became evident until a situation's obvious safety and consistency allowed them. Sally trusted folks until they proved they could not be trusted. Josh expected folks to prove themselves worthy of trust before he offered it. Still, there were areas of undisputed agreement – neither would ever touch, let alone own, a gun. Both would give the shirts off their backs when that seemed warranted.

Within the previous six weeks, there had, uncharacteristically, been murders of two high profile citizens – T. J. Justice, a real estate magnate and Harlow Davis, an aide to the governor. Josh had come to characterize them as assassinations – each accomplished with a high-powered rifle from a rooftop. The victims had been out in the open, clearly not anticipating danger. In both cases, the gunman got away, apparently, without a trace – not surprising, perhaps, considering such things so seldom happened in the city. The police were uncharacteristically closed-mouthed about both incidents. That convinced Josh they must be assuming some connection. Add in the fact that the victims were well above mere hood status, and those deaths came to stand out as a set, a pair, a combine – an irresistible beckoning to a wannabe reporter.

Josh understood he had not been truthful with Barny – the city was no less humorous than it had been for decades; all that just suddenly lay beneath the more immediately

noteworthy shroud of unexplained death in unexpected places.

Josh had his regular rounds; bars, restaurants, precincts, city and state buildings – all the spots that dependably knew what was going on. He had fruitfully depended on them for eight years since joining the newspaper. During those past few weeks, it had just taken people longer to dig their way down to the smiles and laughs. They needed to deal with the newly introduced unnerving realities of life, first.

Josh was patiently captivated by that top layer as he waited for them to negotiate their way through it to the standard, lighter fare he needed to please Barney – and his readers.

There was Chrissy, the Evidence Clerk at the main police station down town, who was always eager to share off-the-record information with Josh. She knew his heart belonged to another, but she was willing to wait around and pick up the shards should it ever be broken.

“Chrissy, my love.”

“Don’t you, ‘*my love*’, me. You only come around when your dredging the bottom of the barrel for a story, and you know it.”

“And am I not lucky that *this* is one of those days.”

She blushed, even though she knew there was not one whit of sincerity in his comment. He assumed she knew. Still, she’d take it and find some way to luxuriate in it that evening.

“Afraid there’s nothin’ funny or juicy goin’ on around here, today, Josh.”

“Just as well. I’m more interested in the two recent murders – Davis and Justice. Upstairs they’re all being tight-mouthed about them. Figured you’d know something they didn’t, or at least have ideas about things they didn’t understand.”

“Maybe one – well, two – things, Josh.”

She leaned in close to the wire-covered, talk-through, window. Josh met lean with lean.

“Casings – thirty-ought-thirty, casings – left behind at both scenes – rooftops. Too sloppy for a professional, I’m thinkin’. Also, both slugs was fired from the *same* rifle.”

“Fascinating. I can always count on you.”

“One more thing, Josh. Strange. There was a odd inscription – like a etching, maybe, stamped onto each casing. Never seen one like it before, and in fifteen years down here I seen most everything. Maybe a foreign manufacturer’s mark?”

She moved a small tablet into position on her side of the counter and wrote on it, tearing off the sheet and rolling it up so it could be slipped out to Josh through the wire.

“That’s the inscription – maybe Spanish or Italian, I’m thinkin’.”

Josh read it aloud.

“*Tibi grata sunt.* I’m pretty sure that’s Latin, which makes it even stranger – unless the Vatican has taken to exporting ammo to offset a recent shortfall in collections.”

He folded the sheet flat, and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket.

“May I have another sheet – blank?”

“Sure.”

She repeated the process. Josh removed a pen from his pocket.

“I forgot your phone number, love.”

She rattled it off. He wrote it on the sheet and placed it, rolled up, in the outer, breast pocket of his jacket. Chrissy seemed confused, but concentrated on the possible, one in a hundred, *plus* side of the exchange. Josh kissed his finger tips and slipped them through the wire where they were met by Chrissy’s – their usual parting ritual.

At the bottom of the stairs he briefly contemplated taking them two at time. He decided against it – not that he couldn’t, of course, but merely because it would have seemed undignified to some.

Near the exit upstairs, the aging guard stopped Josh.

“Cameras caught you receiving something from behind the evidence screen. Looked like a small roll of paper.”

Josh pretended to be uneasy, as he removed the rolled sheet from his coat pocket and offered it to the man who unrolled it and took a look.

“Chrissy’s phone number, I’m embarrassed to say,” Josh said.

The guard grinned and slipped it back into his pocket.

"I guess we've all been number collectors at one stage in our lives," he said patting Josh on the back and indicating for him to proceed on out the door.

Josh had long understood that old men with sputtering hormones and fond memories were always an easy mark for that sort of subterfuge.

Out on the street, he headed north toward St. Archibald Church. He had come by information that one of his pals from high school had recently been ordained and was serving the church as an assistant something-or-other. He wasn't sure what they dared reminisce about, since most of their mutual exploits had been anything but saintly. He would make it work since he needed the man's expertise.

As luck, or fate, or the mysterious forces of the universe would have it, Chuck – recently, Father Charles Faraday – was turning into the church walk from the opposite direction. It had been a dozen years, but they immediately recognized each other.

"Joshua 'Hot Lips' Jamison, as I live and breathe. Great to see you."

His old friend was large of structure, and administered an unpriestly-like lift-him-off-the-ground-and-circle-twice-around, bear hug.

"You, too, 'Flasher' Faraday!"

"You might want to keep that quiet around here. Running naked three times around campus on a dare would take a degree of explanation I probably could not muster. You still a Methodist, by the way?"

"More like a pragmatist, I'd say."

"Want to become a Catholic?"

"You know that would set the church back 500 years."

They exchanged smiles.

"So, nothing's changed, you're saying," Chuck the Father said.

Josh met it with a forced smile and let it drop. Talking religion with a new man of the cloth was not among the top thousand things on his bucket list. The Father continued.

"This a chance meeting or is there some purpose in your sortie in my direction?"

“The wording of the question was a happy reminder of the inane wordplay in which they had engaged as bright teens, eager to make sure all eavesdroppers realized it.”

“I need your expertise.”

“Spiritual?”

“Linguistic.”

“For some reason that’s a relief. We did have some deep and meaningful discussions when we were young, didn’t we? I probably never thanked you for them, but they forced me to think about important issues most teens never invite. I probably owe this collar to you in a way.”

“Latin,” Josh said trying to redirect the increasingly uncomfortable conversation.

“As in *Cesar* or *Mambo*?”

“Cesar. I have a short phrase I need to have translated into English. I think I have it figured out but want to make sure.”

He removed the folded sheet from his pocket and handed it over. Father Chuck read it aloud and continued.

“*Tibi grata sunt*. It is what I will say to you when you thank me for my translation.”

“*You are welcome*, you mean.”

“Very good. I’m thinking Mrs. Riddle’s Spanish class may be at least partially responsible for your linguistic prowess.”

“And you would be right. Thanks.”

“*Tibi grata sunt!*”

“You always did come through on your promises, Chuck, er, Father er, whoever you are.”

“Since it is clear I will never be your spiritual *Father*, Joshy, Chuck, will always be fine between us. You have time to come inside? I believe the Bishop is visiting today.”

He offered an ear-to-ear grin.

“You heard?”

“Wouldn’t miss your column. Your fresh take on the absurdities of life always provides a lift to begin my day.”

“So, life is good for you?” Josh asked.

“Very. You?”

“Pretty much, I suppose.”

“You get married?” Chuck asked.

“Not yet, you?”

They shared an old-day’s belly laugh. Once upon a time it would have required falling to the floor, the holding of mid-sections, and legs flailing in the air. Not so, that day, although both briefly recalled those times with fondness.

“We should get together sometime and get caught up,” Josh suggested knowing they probably never would.”

Chuck just nodded and smiled, understanding the same thing. Their lives had found very different paths. Solid friendships could not move forward based merely on recollections. They shook hands, Josh endured one more lung-deflating embrace, and they parted.

It was after five. Josh was to pick up Chinese for dinner and take it to Sally’s. Why they kept separate apartments he could not understand, but that was how she wanted it and what she wanted pretty well defined their relationship. He understood having her as the primary decision maker was the wisest course of action. Of all the ‘services’ she provided, keeping Josh’s feet solidly on the ground was among the most beneficial.

When he arrived, Sally was in the shower. After being discouraged from joining her to assist in the proper soaping up of her various areas, Josh set the table and arranged the food in serving dishes – Sally had a, “Yuk thing” about scooping food out of cardboard containers. Sometimes she seemed picky to Josh. She would describe it as being civilized. She was undoubtedly correct. Women and men had very different inclinations about such things – both, cardboard containers and soaping.

“My goodness. Real plates and such. Thank you, sweetie.”

She raised onto her tiptoes and planted a quick kiss on his cheek.

“I worked down in the archives this afternoon and got encased in 150-year-old dust and grime. I feel much better now. You have a good day?”

“Editor bawled me out, a priest gave up on saving my soul, got frisked by an old guard at the police station, and allowed myself to follow my possibly employment-ending predilection to be a hard-nosed crime reporter.”

"That's nice."

"Were you even listening?"

"Sure. You took delight in bating Barny and some priest, let a harmless old man feel you up, and committed to solving a series of crimes which is way out of your league. Pretty much same old, same old, the way it sounds."

"I love you, you know, Sally?"

"I do."

"You keep slipping those two words into our conversations. Trying to tell me something?"

Sally shrugged and threw him a kiss across the table.

"Tease," he said.

"And you love every second of it. Give! What have you found out about the murders – sorry, assassinations?"

"Three interesting things. The same rifle was used in both cases. A casing was apparently purposefully left behind each time and those casings bore an inscription – '*Tibi grata sunt.*'"

"That's, 'You are welcome' in Latin."

"I should have known you'd know. Anyway, it was on both casings, so it's clearly a part of the message these killings are supposed to be sending."

"A message above and beyond dead bodies?"

"Yeah. '*You are welcome.*' Who is the killer addressing? Surely not the victims. It would be a lot of useless effort to deliver a message to a corpse."

"Unless they were both dying of some terrible, incurable disease and he believed he was putting them out of their misery," Sally said. "It would have been a message more for family and friends, I suppose, if that were true."

"The old *Angle of Mercy* thing, you're thinking? Interesting. That hadn't entered my mind. If not that, what?"

"I'm sure you have an idea."

"I've been thinking maybe he's – or she's, I suppose – telling the city they are welcome for what he has done for them."

"But wouldn't that imply a cleansing of bad guys? Were Davis and Justice *bad* guys?"

"We need to explore that."

"We, is it, now, reporter man?"

“Of course. We’re a team – a good team. Good teams are composed of members with different takes on things – different skills. That seems to describe us to a T don’t you think?”

“Can’t disagree with that. Okay, so, say we tackle this together. What do I have to offer?”

“Your very special version of tension release after my hard days of work, for one thing.”

“Consider your face slapped.”

“Why? You denying the importance of our sack time?”

“Never. I treasure it like you do. I retract the slap. You should probably find a more romantic term for it, however.”

“Okay – the precious period in which we share ourselves in intimacy and love.”

“Very nice, actually. It’s surprises like that, that keep the romantic fires stoked between us.”

“I’ll work on coming up with a more to the point acronym.”

“I like hearing the whole shebang.”

“TWS, it will be, then.”

“TWS?”

“The Whole Shebang.”

“Your head does work in strange ways.”

“Barny said it was why he hired me.”

“And a wise man he is for having done it. Back to the crimes, I can search news sources for stories about the two men – see if there is any dirt to be found that might lend support to the cleansing idea. One was a real estate guy and one a political aide, right?”

“Right. Justice owns – owned – half of downtown. Davis had the Governor’s ear on every major action he took. He wielded a lot of influence here in our state.”

“Neither of those seems incriminating on the surface,” Sally said.

“Priests have been known to be serial killers – what’s on the surface often doesn’t count. Learning about the victims may help verify a motive, but it will be difficult to tie that to the assassin.”

“It just might be some loon who gets his kicks by shooting random people,” she said, “or it could be a vendetta

against two people that the killer believes wronged him – or, he could be a hit man working for somebody else.”

“You spin possibilities like a cotton candy machine spins . . . well, cotton candy. So far, then, we see four possible motives: some sort of cleansing of some sort of bad guys, revenge for something real or imagined, a professional hit man, or some half-cocked random shooter.”

“And don’t forget freeing them from their incurable affliction,” she added.

“Maybe you can find a record of their medical visits to doctors who specialize in gosh-awful diseases.”

Sally began making notes on a paper napkin. Josh smiled to himself considering how she put them down as uncivilized.

“If it’s revenge,” she went on, “there should be leads in the news stories: maybe lost court cases, foreclosures, political losses or being overlooked for appointments or promotions.”

“Good,” Josh said. “Do you suppose these two will be the end of it?”

“The killings? I sure hope so. Hadn’t considered they wouldn’t. You have reason to think otherwise?”

“Just that if it is a cleansing operation, a city this size must have hundreds of bad guys some single-minded nut-job could consider need exterminating. He could just keep at it until he is caught. Same goes, I suppose, for the one who just get kicks out of killing folks at random.”

Sally put on a shiver.

“Let’s hope not, especially as careful as he seems to be. Gives me the Willies just thinking about it. Random would mean no way to predict his actions.”

“Except in the case of the ‘random’ shooter, one or both of two things appear to be common to all possible motives,” Josh said. “The person either wants to short-circuit justice, believing he could not win a judgment in court, or is lazy or fed-up with whatever approaches have already been used.”

“That’s good,” she said, clearly on board. “I’ll check on failed lawsuits against them. And you’re right, none of those would apply to the random shooter. That possibility remains an outlier in several ways.”

“Outlier – that’s what I’ll be if I don’t get my column written and filed by midnight.”

“You have material?”

“Always.”

“I’ll do up the dishes while you work, and then see what initial leads I may be able to find on-line.”

“And I’ll meet you somewhere between the foot of the bed and the pillows at ten.”

“I’ll be the one just wearing a big smile.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Some days later, as Josh passed Barny's office, he received a thumb's up, which was the highest praise the tough old bird ever offered. Although Josh would never acknowledge it on the outside, he did feel a brief twinge of warmth bloom inside – somewhere northeast of his cockles and just south of his risible.

Using the hand operated delivery elevator at the rear of the newspaper building, he tugged and pulled his way to the research department on the third floor. Considering he had been ordered to stay away from the murder cases, it would not do to be seen making that trek.

"Wayne, old man, old pal, old good fellow. How the heck are you?"

"At this moment, buffering myself against whatever request you are about to throw in my direction. You know the old man has forbidden us to work for you when you go off script."

"Fine. So, you are still able to pass on to me what seems to be the paper's thinking about the two recent murders – that's *our* script not *mine*, right?"

"I suppose. I don't know why I feign compliance with the rules where you're concerned, anyway. You always get what you come for."

"And in this instance, it seems to be a preposition at the end of your sentence. I like how you keep things commonplace, Wayne."

Wayne pretended to ignore the by-play, although the

corners of his mouth briefly belied the fact.

“Two threads of investigation are being followed, the way it seems to me,” he began. “First, that more than a few of the previously unsubstantiated rumors about the dead guys’ connections with the mob may be true. We’ve found some tentative support and it’s my assignment for the week. How that connection would relate to their murders isn’t at all clear. The second path is that we have some nutcase out there who just enjoys shooting at people.”

“Doesn’t the random shooter often unload clip after clip all from the same location?”

“Often, yes, like the California bell-tower sniper a few decades ago, but there’s also the single shot variety – like the DC sniper. He just took out one at a time over a period of weeks – strictly random, but one at a time.”

“No connection to anybody, yet, I suppose.”

“Not that I know of and I’d know.”

“A professional hit?”

“I hear two sides to that. One, that a pro would never leave casings behind – and I have it on good authority that he did – and two, that to make it look like amateur hour, a pro just *might* leave them behind on purpose.”

“Lots of help that is.”

“I know. The cops haven’t released information about the slugs so we don’t know if they are connected to a single gun or not. The thinking here is probably not.”

“Would a pro use the same gun twice?”

“Not unless he was trying to look like a novice, I suppose. In fact, pro hit men often leave the gun behind – always untraceable.”

“What was the shooting distance – rooftop to victim?”

“Interesting. Nobody’s asked that. Both were fired from the roof of eight story buildings, say, 80 feet high. Both targets were on the sidewalk area across a four-lane boulevard from the building, so say sixty feet horizontal. Construct a right triangle and estimate that hypotenuse and I’d say about 100 feet – 33 yards if you prefer. That wouldn’t take a great marksman, especially if he used a good quality scope – laser dot, maybe. I don’t have the wind speed at the times, but guessing it was negligible between tall buildings here on

the city streets.”

“You just figured that *hypot-a-thing* in your head?”

“Sophomore trig, Josh. Certainly, you had it?”

“Mostly, Mary Ann had it and I had her . . . homework.”

“Don’t know how Sally puts up with you. You got a ‘keeper’ there, you know.”

“I do. Handcuff her to the bedpost every night.”

“I’m thinking it’s best I don’t go there.”

Josh raised and lowered his eyebrows, repeatedly, then patted his friend on his shoulder.

“Thanks, old man. As usual, your *no-information* has been greatly appreciated and my inbox does know how to receive short, meaningful messages from the third floor.”

“*De nada* – that’s Spanish from Mrs. . . .”

“Mrs. Riddle’s class. That, I do remember. Carla Rodriguez provided all the motivation I needed to pay close attention that semester. *Besame mi amor. Su piel es tan suave como el terciopelo.*”

“I never know whether to take you seriously or not, Josh.”

“Then my work here is done. Thanks again.”

Wayne had added little to what Josh knew and suspected. It did verify the police were holding the evidence close to the vest. He’d hold Wayne’s schooling on random snipers in reserve in case things inched in that direction. The nature of the shooting might somehow be related to the sniper’s personality or purpose. He was interested – surprised, even – that the reporters hadn’t dredged up the inscription connection. Apparently, Chrissy was being true to him. That was uncomfortable! He didn’t characterize himself a cad. He’d take her a box of candy – maybe not. He’d ask Sally – probably not.

Back in his cubical, he found an email waiting. It was from Sally.

*‘Two years ago, there was a grand jury investigation of Justice for something akin to money laundering. Have no details. It had barely gotten underway when it was quashed – by the governor’s office from what I can tell. Maybe a Davis-Justice connection. Not sure where that gets us unless they were in on bad stuff together. Still looking. Love you.’*

Josh shook his head and spoke out loud.

“Who but Sally would take time to insert a comma after an introductory phrase, in an email? I seldom even get all the words spelled right.”

He checked the rest of his correspondence and left to start making his daily rounds. He soon found himself at the *Table 'n Ale* – a combination bar and pool hall on the south side, not the dregs, but closer to that than to par.

“Hey, look, it’s Joshy!”

He was met by a multitude of raised glasses and cues – “Joshy!” He acknowledged it all with a raised hand. Everybody went back to what they had – or had not – been doing. He loosened his tie and approached the counter, slipping onto a stool – swivel, no back, dark green Naugahyde from the 60’s with subsequent, generous application of duct tape.

“Jake. Things going well, I hope.”

“If a room filled with the same guys, crackin’ the same jokes, and offerin’ the same complaints about the same politics is goin’ well, then consider this Paradise.”

“That good? Great!”

They did the fist-bump thing – clearly a natural reaction for Jake; a less automatic, though adequate rendition, for Josh. Jake passed on a few tidbits he thought were hilarious. Josh took notes with smiles and appreciative comments.

“Wasn’t one of the recent murders down in this neck of the woods?” he asked, at last getting to the point of his visit.

“Five blocks east. Not a safe part of the city for a rich guy. Can’t understand why he was down here.”

“You’re taking about Justice?”

“That’s the one – the one who owns all the buildings.”

“Any ideas floating around here about why he might have been here?”

“Nothin’ substantial. Somebody who saw it all come down, says the man’s limo stopped at the curb and he and two of his men got out and walked back east half a block to a doorway in the old *Triumph Hotel*. Been closed for a decade I suppose. Story goes that as soon as Justice turned toward the door – back parallel to the street – one shot rang out and went clean through him, upper back to lower stomach. His men

dragged him back to the car and it sped off. I hear there's surveillance footage. Don't know if that's true or where it's from. Not pointin' up toward the roof, you can bet on that."

"Bad stuff," Josh said ready to close down the seemingly dead-end exchange. He swiveled on the stool as if to begin moving on, then turned back to Jake.

"By the way, you seen P.J. lately," he asked as an afterthought.

"How'd you know?"

"Know what?"

"That he was the one who saw it happen."

"Oh, a tip from up on 149<sup>th</sup> street. I figured it was just talk."

Of course, he had heard no such thing.

"Not so and I ain't seen him since a few days after it all come down. He may be in hidin' – would be if he's smart. He may be feedin' fish in the bay. You be careful. Nothin' humorous about that shootin', I can tell you that for sure."

Josh turned to the patrons and raised his arm.

"Joshy," came the expected reply in the monotone that appropriately characterized the establishment.

He moved out onto the sidewalk. Josh had known P.J. for many years – an eccentric, maybe forty, maybe seventy, wore a long, bulky, brown overcoat year-round, often barefoot in warm weather, always with a black top hat well beyond repair. He spoke like a professor and who knew, he may have once been one. He had lived in that section of the city for longer than any of the current residents could remember. The odd old gentleman often had funny tidbits that easily found their ways into columns. Josh made sure a ten always traded hands – story or not.

P.J. had several hangouts – overnight stopping places. He headed for the nearest and dearest. That involved climbing a rusting fire ladder from an alley, five floors to the roof. There, P.J. had constructed a lean-to over a grill that passed air from the building – cool in summer and warm in winter. Clever. Josh had never been invited inside but, then, a six by eight edifice was hardly roomy enough for entertaining. Josh was perhaps the only person trusted with that 'address'. He had met the man years before when he

volunteered in a local soup kitchen during his early years of high school. They enjoyed each other's company. Josh liked the autobiographic tales the old gentleman told; it didn't matter if they were true or not.

He stepped off the top of the ladder and wiped the rust from his hands with his handkerchief. He whistled the first twelve notes of Dixie – their long-time password, of a sort.

Uncharacteristically, the muzzle of a shotgun appeared through a slit in the hut.

"Whoa, there, P.J. Just me. Josh. I'm alone like I always am."

The door opened just enough to allow a good view from the darkness inside. Then, all the way.

"Joshua. It seems an eternity since we last conversed. Welcome to my Shangri-La, less the incense, beautiful foliage and scantily clad, porcelain-skinned maidens."

"I don't remember ever seeing the maidens."

"I may have added them in my dotage. What brings you up here – as if I really need you to elucidate?"

"I imagine you don't. I'm looking into the Justice assassination – er, murder."

"I believe assassination *is* the proper term."

"Any idea by whom?"

"Objective case, there – suburb! No idea. It isn't as if a real estate magnate would have armed enemies, is it?"

"It seems he may have – *must* have."

P.J. stroked his imaginary beard.

"One thing that does seem sure, Justice was somehow lured there."

"What makes you suspect that?"

"The *Triumph Hotel* was not his property. It is deep within the waning section of the city. He has no history of buying in such places so surely, he wasn't here to look it over. No. Somebody with a powerfully alluring message was able to entice him down here. He was clearly not expecting foul play or he would not have allowed himself out in the open like that. It had to have been somebody he knew or at least believed he could trust."

"Do you remember about the aborted grand jury investigation some years ago?"

“Yes, although I had not connected those dots.”

“What was it that prompted that investigation, do you know?”

“A competitor made a case to the city attorney that Justice was fronting for the mob – the Russian mob back then – laundering money.”

“What reason was given for backing off the investigation?”

“The complainant was found bobbing, face down, like a bloated mackerel, on the morning tide. No complainant, no complaint. No complaint, no grand jury, I guess.”

“I heard it had been shut down by the governor’s office.”

“That may also have been true. I imagine whoever was behind it was wise enough to approach the problem from multiple angles.”

“You know anything about the Davis guy who took the second bullet?”

“Very little. Long time aid of the Governor. A powerful influence on him, the way I have come to understand it.”

“Any mob connection that you know of?”

“Know ‘about’, would be a better use of the language, there. But, no, not really. Let’s see, I do remember something. More accurately, I remember that I did know something, but am having difficulty pulling it out of the old gray matter. Oh, yes. At least, oh yes, in the fuzzy rendition of it. Something about Davis having changed his name at some point. I’m afraid that’s all I can manage about it. More may ooze to the surface later.”

“Okay, then. I must be on my way. Thanks for sharing your information and postulates with me. Be safe.”

He removed the ten he had stashed in his pocket.

“Here, lunch is on me today.”

“Can’t take it. Civic duty. These are bad goings on. Must be stopped. You proceed with the utmost caution. Such things are not the proper purview of rank amateurs.”

“I assure you, I am the most cautious rank amateur that has ever tried to trod in Sherlock’s shoes. I have Sally in my life now. Not about to do anything to obviate that relationship.”

“We have had fun pelting each other with esoteric

verbiage, haven't we, son? I hope you will keep me informed."

"You can count on it – I mean, indubitably."

Josh hated heights, which meant Josh hated climbing long, rusty, shaky, ladders up the sides of old buildings sporting soft, disintegrating brick. Descending them was even worse. He took a big breath and held it to the bottom – why, he had no idea, but it seemed to render him less open to abject terror. He needed no better reason.

About then, a distraction would have been nice. His phone beeped. There were messages. Two from Sally. *First: 'Justice has his own, private physician. He's been out of the country for two months – not likely to happen if his one and only patient were seriously ill.'* *Second: 'Idea – if assassinations done by an amateur, wouldn't he probably need to practice somewhere with the rifle? I'll bring chicken for supper.'*

Josh tucked away the information from the first message for later. The second had immediate merit – maybe. In a city of a million people, lots of them would be hunters or weekend marksmen. But, if a true amateur were involved, her question might have merit. He would investigate shooting ranges later. He worked his way through his usual haunts. He found himself annoyed by good suggestions for his column as he was seeking information about the darker underbelly of the city that morning. A good, if hackneyed phrase, there, he'd try to remember.

Noon found him settled into a back booth at *Lady's Diner* on Montrose Avenue. He ate there once or twice a week, usually taking a front booth so folks who recognized him might come up and offer him bits for his column. Salisbury Steak, mashed potatoes, green beans – his usual fare there.

With the faithful assistance of his phone, he began tracking down shooting ranges, believing if somebody needed to practice to mount such a dastardly deed, he might choose one of the lesser known or smaller ones for the sake of anonymity. He made a list of six that met his criteria, but wasn't sure of either when he would have time to undertake the tour, or what he would be looking for. P.J. would have pointed out that preposition. Josh smiled as he returned from his distraction. Assassins didn't wear hats announcing their

intentions.

He knew his work had not been up to par at the paper and he owed it to Barny, his readers and himself to get back in gear.

He spent the afternoon collecting stories and had his column for the next morning finished by four. He emailed it to the paper and went directly to Sally's. She would be there at a few minutes past five. Making himself comfortable on the couch, he slipped out of his shoes, jacket and tie, and turned on the news.

Like usual, the first story was hyped out of proportion by blazing, flashing, graphics touting *breaking news*. It seldom was, so he raised his eyebrows expecting something less.

*'Just in. At just past four thirty this afternoon Vlad Antonov, reputed leader of the Russian Mob in our city, was shot dead as he left the Westheimer Hotel where he maintains his south-side penthouse. It appears to be the work of the Rooftop Killer, as he has become known. As yet, we have no information from the police. A press conference has been scheduled by authorities for seven-thirty this evening at police headquarters, downtown.'*

He turned down the sound as he heard Sally at the door. He met her and took the packages she was carrying.

"Did you hear?" she asked.

"About Antonov? Yes. Just now on channel five. There's to be a news conference at seven-thirty. All this seems to be morphing into something more far-ranging than anybody anticipated."

"How can a city protect itself from such a villain?" she asked.

Josh drew her close and they just stood there looking down at the TV as the news caster continued guessing about all aspects of the situation that nobody really understood yet. It was meaningless palaver, as Barny would term it. No matter how much they talked, they wouldn't have anything but conjecture until after the press conference – but they *would* keep talking. Josh imagined seven-thirty would become nine or ten.

"I'll set out the food while you change," he said.

She gave him a peck to his cheek and disappeared into the bedroom leaving the door open so they could talk.

“Got your column ready?”

“Ready and delivered. I think it’s pretty good. The city will need something pretty good by morning. It may seem sacrilegious to be parading ‘funnies’ on the heels of another tragedy. Perhaps I should do a second one that tries to reassure folks.”

“That isn’t your job. Let the editorial page handle that.”

“You’re right. At least this killing seems to point us more in the direction of the ‘cleansing’ motive than the others. If there’s a bad apple on the loose in this city, Vlad’s it.”

“Anything ever been pinned on him?”

“Never. It’s generally believed that several men have taken the fall for him.”

“Why would anybody do that? I don’t understand.”

“Do ten years in prison and receive a million dollars to retire on, or if they *don’t* do it members of their family would be harmed. Motivation’s out there, for sure.”

“I see. What terrible people. I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Here.”

He handed her his tablet.

“Read my column. It’ll be a good dry run about how appropriate or inappropriate it is. Maybe it’ll raise your spirits.”

They took seats across from each other at the small, round table. Sally read. Josh ate. Sally smiled, just a bit. Josh smiled, a bit more. Sally chuckled.

“There you go. We have to find ways of rising above . . . all this. Not sure what to call it. I hadn’t thought of it as terrorism, but that’s sure how it’s effecting people – scared to leave home and be out in the open. Afraid for family members. We can’t succumb to that.”

“You think it *is* some terrorist? Really?”

“Not in the usual sense of the term, but the effect is the same, regardless.”

Sally put down the tablet and began picking at the coleslaw. Josh buttered a biscuit and handed it across the table to her. She smiled and nodded. To understand how much he loved her, she had to attend to those ‘little’ kinds of little things.

“Look at the TV. A new breaking news report. Turn it up,” she said.

*‘Sources tell Channel 5 that the likely shooter has been apprehended on a rooftop just opposite the building at which the shooting took place. Folks, listen to this! The source says it is Judge Claude Medford, long-time circuit judge here in the city. Here is more just handed to me. Let’s see. Oh, my! He has suffered a heart attack and is being transported to Regional Hospital. Our reporters are working their sources for details. I repeat . . .’*

Josh turned it down.

“I know the judge,” Josh said. “It’s hard to believe. I’d have voted for him as the ‘best guy in the city’ if given the chance.”

“How old is he?”

“Pushing seventy-five. His wife of fifty some years died back in January. Word is, he took it really hard.”

“Hard enough to make one last effort to get rid of three of the city’s worst human beings before following her to the grave?”

“Morbid. But, I get your point. And, of course, I don’t know. I suppose it’s a possibility – a judge who, year after year sees the bad guys with great lawyers beat the law. I can see how some well-intentioned public servant with nothing to live for might disintegrate to the point he would don the mien of a vigilante.”

“Suppose his plan, if caught, was to admit to it and take his punishment?”

“If it was, it won’t happen. Look at the new caption.”

*‘Judge Medford dies on way to hospital.’*

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## CHAPTER THREE

Chrissy came on duty at the evidence locker at eight a.m. Josh arrived at eight-ten. He brought candy – his judgement.

“Glad you stopped by – even without the sweets, but thanks,” she began as Josh slid the cellophane covered box through the pass-through. Josh momentarily wondered if anything else was packaged in cellophane anymore. That wonder soon passed.

“Glad, you’re glad? That seems like a good start.”

He flashed his wonderful smile. Chrissy looked down and away but continued.

“Something odd, Josh. You heard they found the judge dying of a heart attack on the roof, but what you didn’t hear was that they didn’t find a gun. It’s all hush-hush so be careful where you spread it.”

“No spreading from me, sweetie. You have any ideas?”

Chrissy was inexperienced in the cultured ways of the world and unschooled in the King’s English, but hiding behind that veil of limitation, was a bright person. Josh frequently encouraged her take on things – urging her to think them through further than she had.

“I see two possibilities: First, he could have had time to hide it before he collapsed. Second, he had a accomplice who took it. Maybe a third, ya know. He hid it so later a accomplice could come and remove it.”

“And just leave the judge behind, you mean?”

“Right. *Jobs* is often more important than them that carries ‘em out. If it was a mob hit, the judge was lucky he

didn't draw a slug behind his ear once he was incapacitated – if some hood was there to back him up, I mean.”

“About the slug that killed Val – same or different rifle?”

“Just about the first thing they checked here. The same. Again, hush-hush, remember.”

It was beginning to look like a well-organized operation. Still, where could the judge have hidden a rifle, tripod and scope so well and in such a short amount of time that the police had not been able to locate it?

“Do you know where the Judge was found relative to the position where he'd have been when firing the shot?”

“I hadn't put all that together, Josh. Good thinking. He was at the rear of the roof – completely across from where he would have had to be in order to fire the shot. Also, he was in the corner opposite from the ladder, like he didn't even intend to us it.”

“Prints on the rifle?”

“Nope. Found latex gloves on the judge – loaded with gun powder. He was dressed in a black jump suit.”

“And I'm sure the officers combed the alley at the rear of the building.”

“I'm sure they did – as well as the roof. Not really many places to hide something that large on most roofs, ya know.”

Josh nodded. Chrissy had opened the candy and slipped it back through the window, offering him a piece.

“Just don't squeeze them and put them back. Find one, take it and that'll be that.”

He offered another smile and followed her directions while posing another question.

“As I recall, the judge had no relatives. How can I find out who claims the body?”

“You're hot this morning, Josh. Another good thought. Have to find that out from the coroner's office, I suppose. Mary Lou's the front desk girl there. She likes roses. You know how to get there – in the hall turn left, sixth door on the right. Coroner and Evidence Locker both in the basement. I suppose that's ironic, huh?”

Josh nodded, even though her term only marginally fit the circumstances. No matter, he understood – some unspoken connection. They did the finger thing and he left,

making his way up the stairs to the front entrance. He would check out the 'ironic' coroner's place of business later. He really didn't know the personnel there – any humor arising from between those walls would certainly be of a dark and insider nature, most likely unsuitable for his column.

Although, there was that one story of a coroner's helper who had been napping in a coffin when the top dropped in place trapping him. The man was allergic to the cedar lining and had been rescued when a coworker heard the coffin, coffin'. There might be a place for that – someday.

Upstairs, Josh chatted up the guard.

"Do you know if they are allowing reporters up on the roof of the building from where the Vlad guy was shot?"

"I heard the Captain saying they'd be done by noon. Apparently there ain't much to investigate. Just a large, empty expanse of tar and chat."

Josh thanked the old man and moved out onto the sidewalk. He noted to himself that he had already violated rule number one he had set for himself the day before: 'My column comes first!' He smiled thinking even at that, it may have been the longest he'd ever kept a promise to himself. Josh was, as his mother had been informed by his obviously harried, first-grade teacher, 'rashly impulsive'. He just translated that into the time-honored platitude, 'He left no stone unturned', and proceeded as if it were a badge of honor. His parents apparently agreed as – fortunately – did his *new* first grade teacher as of the following Monday.

It wasn't yet 8:30 so he walked north toward *Lady's Diner*. Sally had left early for a staff meeting and he had skipped breakfast.

Uncharacteristically, he slipped onto a stool at the counter.

"The number one," he said accepting, with a smile and nod, the coffee slid in place in front of him.

"Breakfast, Mr. Josh? That ain't like you."

"The love of my life left early, leaving me to starve."

"So, you love her 'cause she feeds you?"

"Partly, I suppose. The same reason I love you, Lady."

He raised up slightly, leaning forward and planted a gentle kiss on her rouge-laden cheek. Several patrons who

knew him offered the predictable, “oOOoo” – predictable in most fourth-grade classrooms, at least. He turned and bowed. Several clapped. Everybody loved Joshy.

“Great column this morning!” one offered shaking a copy of the refolded paper in his direction.

Another offered, “You hear how Officer O’Malley over in the 44<sup>th</sup> got hit in the back by a police car? You oughta be able to make something outta that.”

Josh offered him a thumbs up and turned back to the counter.

The Number One was pancakes with scrambled eggs, and two patty sausages. He loved pancakes, but Sally didn’t, so it was never his request when asked.

As the man with the paper left, he laid it on the counter beside Josh. He worked his way down the lead story – the judge – and followed it to page three for auxiliary articles. One of those compared and contrasted it with the previous two murders. They had most elements in common: no gun at the scene – clearly a leak – and a well-known local citizen dead from a single shot. The uncommon element was that the gunman had been apprehended at the scene, that time. Still, nothing was said about the brass casings with the inscription, or that the slugs had all come from the same gun.

Josh took time to savor the Number One and downed a third coffee refill before exiting back to the sidewalk. He hailed a cab and rode to the vicinity of the first shooting. His mission was to examine the rooftop from which the marksman had operated. He hesitated when selecting the card to use in paying for the ride – business or personal? He opted for personal. That could be amended later if it became appropriate.

He rounded the building to the alley, and located one of the rusted, iron ladders, ubiquitous in the alleys of that city – a requirement of a 1934 ordinance. That one, at least, was securely attached to the back wall of the building. He climbed to the top, wondering the entire way just why he had become obsessed with a case that required him to repeatedly face his fear of heights. At the top, however, he felt a wash of pride, which *almost* tempted him to look down.

He made his way across the roof to the front, then

walked along the low wall that rose thirty inches above it. The small, orange circle of police spray paint indicated what he supposed was where the casing had been found. He examined the cement bonnet that covered the top of the wall hoping to find scratch marks or something else that might indicate where a clamp from a gun tripod had been attached. He found none. Clearly, the police had not, either, no paint.

His thinking had been that an amateur with a rifle might need help in steadying the gun. It had seemed like a reasonable idea. He moved to the rear of the roof and continued his examination, having no idea what he might be looking for. It was much like writing his column. Just examine the chatter and something useful would eventually turn up. His theory just might have paid off.

The cement cap extended three inches, front and back, beyond the thickness of the wall. It had seemed reasonable up front that, that would have provided an excellent place to attach a clip or vise to steady a gun. If that had been the case, such a device might have left scratches on the cement. There, at the north end of the rear wall, he found the exact sort of markings he had been looking for. There, they made no sense, of course. He investigated further and not only found marks on top of the ledge, but also underneath the inside lip – round like a vise or C-clamp might leave where it had been snugged up tight.

“Hmm? I find what I’m looking for, but at a place which could never have been used to steady the rifle that killed a man eight floors below across the street from the front of the building.”

At that spot, there were no signs of the orange paint, which would indicate the police had not taken note of it. Of all that, however, only the, ‘Hmm’, seemed relevant. He gave the obvious hiding places a once over – a dozen pipe vents, the locked-from-the-inside, wooden entrance shed to the stairway, and really, nothing more.

Still buoyed up, somewhat, from his earlier conquest of the ladder, he approached it with a new degree of confidence. Most of that dissipated somewhere along the way, but he took his patented deep breath and made his way down to the alley. He had to wonder how an old man – supposing it were

another old man – would manage that climb, but then it was just a ten-inch gap between rungs – nothing requiring the skill or strength of an Olympian. Still, a seventy-five-year old, climbing nearly 30 yards straight up, carrying a rifle, tripod and scope, probably in some kind of a container strapped to his back? *That* was hard to believe.

It caused him to take note of something about the metal ladder he had observed, but not appreciated. He examined the rungs within easy view from the alley floor. Many of them displayed a series of marks – scratches that had removed some of the decades old rust and revealed the metal underneath. It was cause for a second, ‘Hmm?’

“And, *that’s* interesting,” he said out loud.

He moved up a half dozen rungs to pursue his find.

“Those deep scratches alternate – right side of a rung, then left of the next, then right, then left.”

Before he was aware of it, he was back near the top of the ladder.

“This can’t be good,” he managed, again out loud.

He navigated the rungs back down to the alley. It was then he noticed a second ladder on the opposite side of that alley wall. He moved to examine it and found no similar markings. It was narrower, older and less safe from any measure one might apply. No wonder the other appeared to have been used, given the choice.

“So, markings on one and not the other – not naturally occurring indentations, but then I already figured as much. Verification is good, though, I suppose.”

He made his way back out front and hailed another cab. That one would take him to the scene of the second shooting. As he rode he thought.

‘What could make such markings – scrapings? Maybe a large ring on a man’s hand? But that would just be on one side – every-other rung as he climbed alternating hands. Unless he wore two large rings. Probably not rings. The markings virtually encircled each rung.’

The cabbie began talking to him – a big fan of ‘*Joshin’ Around*’ as it turned out. He related several experiences he had had, which he thought Josh might be able to use. In fact, he probably could. How could he have disregarded cab

drivers all those years – a treasure trove of new blood, perhaps. He made notes.

By the time he reached the scene of the shooting that his old friend, P.J., had witnessed, he was back on track and fully focused on it. He took note that P.J.'s place was on the same side of the street as the building he was about to examine, and three buildings to the north. That suggested that although he could have witnessed the victim being shot across the street, he had no view of the shooter's position there on the roof.

Again, he began in the alley and again, right where it should be, was the rusty ladder. He paused a moment to appreciate the consistencies of his world – there seemed to be so few of them – Sally and rusty ladders to be all inclusive. That one appeared to be more rickety than safe, but he figured it weighed considerably more than he did, so, if it had not come lose under its own weight, it shouldn't come lose under his. Most of his brain didn't buy that logic, but fortunately, Josh had long been able to turn off everything that tended to veto something he wanted to have happen. He had at one time figured his tombstone would probably read, "And except for that ONE time, his mental veto had always worked."

He chuckled and he approached the ladder.

"That is just fascinating," he said running his fingers across the deep scratches he found on the rungs.

They were identical, at least in essence, to those on the ladder he had just left at the first site. With less trepidation than had been the case before, he approached the ladder and climbed it to the top. He sensed his 'veto' laughing at the rest of his brain – that was, the *terrified* rest of his brain.

On top, he first searched the rear cement cap. It had been a good move, for there on the far north corner were markings similar to those on the previous roof. He turned and walked toward the circle of yellow paint clinging to the tar close to the center of the front wall. Once again, his examination divulged no markings on the cement up front.

"Consistency! That should be good, right?"

That question was the best spin he could put on his findings. If it should have brought him any closer to understanding what had gone on, it escaped him. He didn't

linger at the site.

As he entered a cab, the clock at St. Archibald was chiming twelve noon. He had expended a good deal of time during his explorations.

“The Gazette Building on Carver Avenue. Alley entrance on the south, please.”

He went right to his cubical. There were emails. Two from Sally.

*‘I’ll have a long lunch today because of the early meeting. Meet at Autumn’s Café at eleven?’*

The second had been sent at eleven fifteen.

‘See you at my place after work. I’ll bring burgers and other cholesterol-laden delicacies. Assume you are deeply involved in something. Can’t wait to hear.’

“I love you so much,” Josh said out loud, kissing his fingers and touching the emails.

“Just don’t tell my wife,” came a deep voice from the other side of the wall.

It had been Wally – the *Car Care* columnist. Josh smiled and ignored it.

He went to work on his column, using the O’Malley story (Having been hit from behind, O’Malley would be the butt of that joke for some time) and several from the cabbie for starters. He couldn’t resist anonymously mentioning the ‘Streaking Imp of Winston Heights School for Boys’. The part of the story that had not been related was that when Chuck returned to the place from which he had started, he had his clothes handed to him from behind the bushes by the usually stodgy Headmaster whose only comment had been, ‘Damndest skinny dip I’ve ever witnessed.’ The column was in Barny’s email by three-thirty.

The events of the morning had energized Josh so he decided to walk the twelve blocks to Sally’s place. Considering the length of city blocks and the growing pedestrian traffic at that time of day he figured he’d be walking in the door just before five.

Several blocks into the walk he began to sense somebody was following him. Not one to play unnecessary games, he stopped and turned around with the intention of confronting the person. There were two dozen people within

that block; they all kept doing what they had apparently been doing. Some walked, some window shopped, some stopped to wait on the crosswalk signal. A few entered buildings. He detected nothing the least bit suspicious. He turned and continued. Things were suddenly different. Who would be following him – why? Unlike the days when his mother followed him to school as a kindergartener, this did not provide a sense of wellbeing. It was discomfoting and threatening. His internal reaction discounted the fact that he had seen nothing when he turned around. It was all taking place in the periphery of his vision where objects faded from color to black and white. He shuddered and continued. He knew of no enemies. Perhaps it could have had some connection to his investigation.

At the door to Sally's apartment, he again turned to survey his surroundings. He saw nothing unusual – nothing suspicious or unexpected. He made sure to lock and chain the door behind him – not his usual style. By four-thirty-five he was into the shower – rooftops, rusty ladders and alleys were filthy places. He was just slipping into his robe when Sally arrived. He unchained the door.

"You smell wonderful, my guy," she said offering her lips.

"And you smell like burgers, my gal – also wonderful."

He lingered over the kiss for as long as she allowed it.

"Double bacon cheeseburgers, Texas fries, slaw, and hot fudge sundaes. I suggest we start with the ice cream or we'll have to drink it."

"Where were you when I made similar suggestions to my mother?"

"Probably, making similar suggestions to mine."

"Shower or food?" Josh asked.

"Food will get cold, but I won't get any grimier – worked in the archives again this afternoon."

She washed her hands and face at the kitchen sink as Josh spread the food on the table. They took their regular seats across the small round table from each other.

"So, what was occupying you this noon?"

"I made the rounds of the roof tops from which the first two shootings took place. Found interesting, if baffling, stuff."

He relayed his findings.

“It’s those markings on the ladders that really have me baffled. I’m thinking they must tie into the shootings. Maybe at just one site they could be a coincidence, but at both? I doubt it.”

“Carabiner marks?”

“What’s a carabiner mark?” Josh asked.

“Those circular-like clippy things that mountain climbers use to hook up to ropes and belts and things.”

“Fascinating! A carabiner on each end of a rope that was secured around the climber’s waist. He’d move the right clip up to the next rung above him, step up one rung, fasten the left one to next rung above that, remove the one on the right and proceed, alternating right on up the ladder. How in the world did that pop into your head – your very attractive and intelligent head, I might add?”

“Doing research on the equipment Sir Edmund Hillary used on his noted climb – for a new outdoors magazine. Wouldn’t that be overkill – using two like that. I’d think one carabiner and one hand grip alternating would be more than sufficient.”

“I see what you’re saying. In the Judge’s case, though, he was approaching eighty, though. Perhaps he decided to air on the side of caution.”

“But you haven’t actually examined the site used by the Judge, yet.”

“Extrapolating, backwards – assuming it was he who did all three shootings.”

“I suppose that makes sense at this point. You have chocolate on your chin.”

“I know. I was hoping you’d lean across the table and lick it off for me.”

“I love you for many reasons, but the opportunity to lick your chin through the stubble of your five o’clock shadow, is not one of them.”

She handed over a paper napkin as she continued to think out loud.

“How do you suppose he got the rifle up to the roof. It wouldn’t fit in a back pack, would it?”

“I’ve wondered that, also. Maybe a gunny sack or a

special case designed to hold the gun and the tripod.”

“I hadn’t considered a tripod. You’re probably right on that – an old man needing it to steady the gun. Seems complicated. Maybe he put the gun up there earlier.”

“Maybe. I doubt that. A very strenuous climb, plus doubling the possibility of being seen. I’m more puzzled about what happened to the gun. If all had gone according to plan, I imagine the obvious procedure would have been for him to have carried it back down to the alley after the shooting and left with it.”

They finished eating. Josh cleaned things up while Sally showered and got comfortable for the evening. They watched the local news hoping to discover new information.

“Well, that was disappointing – the authorities seem to know less than you do, Josh.”

“I do seem to be ahead of them. I suppose such a hero needs some sort of reward, don’t you?”

“TWS?” she asked, teasing him by playing with his hair.

“I assume that was really meant as a suggestion and not as a question.”

“You are simply impossible, Joshua Jamison.”

“And you love me that way!”

///

## CHAPTER FOUR

Josh was up and gone by seven-thirty. He wanted to get a look at the one rooftop he had opted to miss the day before – the site from which the last assassination was launched. Actually, he was more interested in the ladder than the roof. He assumed the same MO had been used during the last incident as the others – no marks on the cement up front; marks rear, north side, scratches on the ladder. A half-hour later he had confirmed those things. There was an addition, however.

He leaned in close at the site of the scratches to the concrete on the outside edge of the cement cap. He sniffed.

“Some sort of plastic. Polyethylene, maybe?”

He sniffed again. Then felt his pockets, finding an envelope. Using his pocket knife – a new one, since his boyhood edition had been confiscated at an airport check-in several months before – he scraped the remnants of flexible, white slivers into the envelope.

“I’m quite sure that’s polyethylene or nylon. I sincerely doubt if a wealthy Judge wore either of those. Hmm?”

He looked toward the front of the roof and saw the familiar small circle of orange spray paint indicating the spot where the casing had been found. Satisfied, he returned to the ladder.

“Ah! What’s this? Come to papa!”

There were similar shreds of the white, plastic-like material, that time on the outside of the cement cap centered on the ladder. There was considerably more of the substance than at the first location on the north cap.

Another, “Hmm?”

His quick search of his pockets revealed no more envelopes so he folded the shreds of material into his handkerchief and placed both ‘containers’ into his inside, jacket pocket. It would be alright – he always carried two hankies during allergy season. He felt an unusual pang of bravery overtake him and he ventured to look down. It wasn’t half bad – it wasn’t good, but it wasn’t half bad. He noticed something he had missed while he had been down in the alley. There was an area of interest some ten yards to the south of the corner of the building – in the alley behind the building to the south. It was a gash dug into the graveled, alley floor – extending perhaps four or so feet wide out into the alley from the building, a foot deep, dug in at a slant.

Once back on the ground, he walked to the spot. It was as if a bull dozer, aligned with the alley traffic, had cut – at that angle – a chunk out of the alleyway floor. It sloped down from the side nearest the street just to the south to a depth of something just less than a foot. Even stranger, the leavings seemed to still be there. They were piled up – rolled up, more clearly described it – along the top of the deep edge like a levee.

Josh squatted down for a closer examination. Along the slanted edge closest to the building, he detected maroon soil – no, a maroon coating of some sort across the top of the shiny, hard-packed soil. It was along a path no more than four inches wide and was more apparent near the top of the hole than deeper.

“There goes the spare,” he said removing the second hanky and lifting several thin slices of the colored soil into it with the large blade of his knife.”

He was back at the Gazette by eight-thirty. By eight-thirty-two he was on the third floor speaking with Wayne in Research.

“Where do we get material analyzed?”

“Material? Analyzed?”

“Yeah. Say, I had scrapings of an unknown material. Where would a reporter or you guys take it to be analyzed.”

“City College. The Forensics Lab in the Criminal Justice Department.”

Josh spread some of the white scrapings from the envelope onto the table. Wayne rolled them between his fingers and moved them to his nose offering random comments.

“Plastic. Most likely from rope – polyethylene, strong, lightweight. See how some of these strands have a natural curl. They form a three eighths circle so I’m thinking it’s probably three-eighths inch rope. That would suggest a tensile strength of between two hundred and two hundred and twenty-five pounds.”

Josh replaced it inside the envelope and laid back the edges of the second handkerchief on the table. Wayne poked around the soil with a pencil then licked a finger and used that to pick up a sample of the colored layer. He moved closer to a table lamp and took a large magnifying glass from a drawer. He studied it for some time.

“Maroon paint like often used as undercoats on metal.”

“So, I assume you don’t have to use the lab at the college often.”

Wayne grinned.

“After twenty-years up here, you pick stuff up.”

“I can see. Thanks. How sure are you in each case?”

“Ninety-nine percent. The guys at the lab could give you the paint name, number, company and local outlets if you want to go that far.”

“No. For now, I’ll go with what you found. Remember, hush, hush.”

“My lips are sealed.”

So, he knew what he had. The what-did-it-tell-him, was another matter entirely. Sally was good with puzzles. He’d engage her that evening – possibly, even about the evidence.

He spent the rest of the morning out and around trolling for goodies to use in his column. The diners provided several. The precinct a few more. He saved the cabbie for last as the old gentleman drove him back to the first and second assassination sites. He reeked of great material and was eager to tell all. They arrived at the second site, first. Josh had the driver wait. What he needed to do would take only a few minutes and he felt safer with a cab waiting, if, in fact, there were some nefarious stalker watching him.

His interest was two-fold: to see if there were traces of polyethylene at either of the two positions on the cement cap, and to search for the ugly slit in the alley floor. In both cases, it was yes to the first – but only at the ladder – and yes to the second – well, almost yes to the second.

The second alley was paved in brick – one of very few in a city that had long ignored its backstreets. There was a damaged spot of the same dimensions as the slit at the third site and sat at approximately the same location relative to the ladder on the shooter's building. Many bricks were scraped raw along the line. Others were cracked and a few dislodged. There was maroon paint that had been left behind in the scars on many of the bricks.

He revisited the first site, where it was back to the gouge in the gravel – shallower, but otherwise the same. Josh took pictures of everything. As it neared one o'clock, he had the cabbie drive through *Raisin' Canes* chicken place before dropping him back at his office building.

While he worked his way through four of the most delicious chicken fingers on the face of the planet, slaw, fries, garlic toast and a diet Pepsi, he loaded the pictures from his phone into his computer – file name, CHIFERS, from chicken fingers. Who'd suspect. He placed it in among other files on his desktop, which also bore esoteric labels. The one that most delighted him was PORN. When opened, it boasted only a list of psychologists that specialized in treating compulsive sexual disorders. It continued to produce chuckles.

The question plagued him: Why would there have been a bull dozer at each of the three assassination sites? And why would it create such an odd configuration and then leave. Perhaps, instead, it was a mark left by a city crew, indicating some action was yet to be taken – waterlines or sewer, maybe?

There in his cubical, he went to work on his day job, finding more than enough material for two good columns. Since Barney had not been by to complain and blow imaginary smoke in his direction, he assumed what he had been producing was at least acceptable. The verbal reviews from the readers were fantastic and that was what really mattered to Josh.

He finished both columns, but submitted only one. He had gotten ambitious early in his career, and produced a week's worth over one weekend. Big things happened in the city that week that could have really spruced them up. Since then, he made it a point to only deliver one per day.

At four, he left the Gazette Building through the side alley door. It expedited two things; perhaps removing him from watchful eyes, if in fact there were some sort of stalker, and gave him easy access to the alleys, which he wanted to follow toward Sally's place that afternoon. He paused on the steps and looked both ways. A figure was rounding the building from the alley onto the sidewalk and disappeared in front of the building. It had been the briefest glimpse and provided no additional information, although it certainly could have been the figure he thought he had been seeing. He moved down the alley in the opposite direction to behind the building and began his trek, generally north.

For some reason, he was reminded that he should probably stop by his own place soon to make sure he hadn't left the bathtub running, the iron burning its way through the ironing board, or left the kitchen window open so robins were building nests in his dishwasher. Josh tended to think in terms of catastrophes. Sally expected only wonderful things. She wasn't a Pollyanna, but could find the positive things in most aspects of life. She chided Josh relentlessly about his dark take on life. He probably enjoyed the attention more than he should have, so her words of wisdom fell on unresponsive ears. Josh had grown up in a home where bickering had been honed to a fine art so he took some odd sort of comfort in it. There were times, he provoked it. It was like a sugar fix to a five-year-old.

He was walking the alleys to determine if the dozer marks were commonplace around the city. They weren't – not a single, similar mark in over a mile. That deflated his only explanation, but pleased him because he really hoped they would be found to be germane to the case – or would that be cases? Perhaps *one case*, if all the shootings had been committed by the judge. If there were more than one shooter, although the evidence tended to support the single shooter theory – the single, engraved, brass, thirty-ought-thirty casing

and the slugs all traced to the same gun – then, *three cases*.

He had remained alert for the creepy shadow, but nothing indicated anyone was trailing him. Perhaps whoever it was, was just getting better at concealing himself. He hadn't mentioned any of that to Sally. It was probably all in his head and he didn't want to worry her. If more substantial proof emerged, then he would discuss it; it might concern her safety as well as his.

At Sally's, he removed his jacket, tie and shoes and slumped onto the couch clicking on the early news. He found it boring, so clicked it off. He stretched out to await the arrival of the one he affectionally called the Love Of My Life.

Shortly, he was awakened by the gentle touch of that LOML. Smile met smile. Lips met lips.

"How about eating out this evening?" she asked.

It was more a *telling* than an *asking*, but Josh always took it as a kindly gesture – indicating that he might actually have some say in it if he wished to pursue that option.

"Sure. Got lots of stuff to run by your beautiful brain this evening."

"After a day spent in the mundane editing of a glossary for a new Asian Studies book, my brain eagerly awaits one extended period of 'running by'. Let me change. *Chin's Chinese Dragon*, okay?"

Another *telling* disguised as an *asking*. Since sustenance was his only goal, the source mattered very little.

"Been wanting to go back there for weeks," he managed, fingers crossed.

"Almost as much as you've been wanting to go back to the opera, I suppose."

"You don't fight fairly, you know, LOML."

"I grew up with five older brothers," she said. "Early on, I learned how to fight to win."

"You know, *I* had a couple of really hardnosed imaginary friends, myself."

He heard her chuckling in the bedroom. He slipped back into his shoes. Sally brought him a red polo shirt to exchange for his stiff-collared white. He transferred his evidence from his hankies into new envelopes to take along.

One of the perks of being a beloved columnist was the

celebrity treatment Josh received at places like restaurants and theaters, even – shudder – the opera house. They were met by green robed, old man Chin himself.

“Welcome to humble abode, Joshy. Select table, please.”

He motioned around the room with his extended arm. Josh looked around.

“We’ll take the one that couple is occupying over there.”

Chin put on a scowl and limited bow, palms together in front of him, appearing to be fully prepared to move them.

“I ask them move so you and pretty lady sit – eat.”

“No. No. I am kidding, Chin. It is something we do here in the good old United States.”

Soft spoken Chin reached up and pulled Josh down so he could speak quietly into his ear.

“Look, you young rascal. I was born in these United States thirty years before you began trodding the face of the earth. I am an expert at kidding. You certainly didn’t think I was serious about displacing that nice young couple, now did you?”

“You con artist. You speak as good English as I do.”

“Probably better, but it is really not a competition,” the aging little gentleman said, through his tight-lipped, ever present, forced smile. UCLA, 1955.”

“I bow to your seating expertise, then. Find us a good place – secluded and quiet.”

Sally had not been privy to the exchange, thinking they were negotiating for a certain table. Once Chin left, Josh explained.

“That sly old bird,” she said. “Built this wonderful oriental ambiance based on a put-on. Good for Chin!”

They ordered the usual – the six-dish dinner for two. Josh got right down to cases, removing the three envelopes from his rear pocket.

“I visited the roof at the third murder site this morning and found several things. I had Wayne in research look it all over. These are slivers shaved off a polyethylene rope by the cement cap. I found them at two places.”

He drew a diagram on one of the envelopes showing the setup.

“What do you make of it,” Sally asked.

“I did the sleuthing. I’m counting on you to do the connecting.”

“From rope, you say.”

“I say because Wayne say.”

“You’re sounding like our oriental con man.”

“Ah so! Hope that wasn’t racist. I love the old man. Anyway, Wayne believes it’s from a lightweight rope probably capable of holding two hundred pounds or so.”

“So, you’re thinking like an escape line for the old man to use.”

“I hadn’t thought that, although that’s intriguing. Such a thing seems way to risky and skill-intensive for an old man, don’t you think?”

She nodded and continued.

“Maybe he attached the gun case to one end of a rope, carried the other end up the ladder to the top and pulled the case up after him. If he dragged it over the cement cap at the ladder, that could explain the slivers of polyethylene you found there.”

“Yes. Very good. I’ve been bothered by the old man’s ability to manage a gun or as you suggest, gun case, up eight floors on that ladder. We’ll put that in the ‘Likely List’. Any thoughts about the slivers in the rear corner of the roof. They were far less abundant there and not as long. Here, look, from this envelope. Also, they were only at the site of the first shooting.”

“He spread his sample on the red table cloth.”

“I see what you mean – thinner strands and shorter – more like Angel’s hair we used to put on Christmas Trees. It’s almost like it got there by mistake. Maybe the rope was draped over the side carelessly and some of it sheared off.”

“Could be, I suppose. Like I indicted, it was only at the one site.”

“Maybe the judge had tired by the third shooting and left the shreds by mistake.”

“Another possibility. That’s good. It means we are assuming he is the only shooter.”

A young waiter served the food, insisting on spreading the large, red napkins across their laps. Josh always hated

that. Sally always seemed to enjoy it.

Josh pulled up pictures on his phone of the three gouges he found on the alley floors. He made no comments that might color her reaction.

“Like something a bulldozer would make. I suppose that’s not reasonable – one at the site of each killing the way it looks.”

“Perhaps the beginning of a rice paddy – perhaps Chin is cultivating a *sideline* – so to speak.”

“You’re terrible, Josh. And, it really wasn’t that funny.”

“As the aging pig with the superior self-image said, ‘I ham what I ham’. I had forgotten how really good Chin’s food is. Good idea you had.”

“It came to me while I was spell-checking *Mongol Hordes*, this afternoon. I always want that second ‘o’ to be a ‘u’. Never is!”

Smiles.

“I checked some random alleys on the way home today and none of them had similar gashes in them. I thought it might be some sort of mark left by a city crew indicating where something needed to be dug up or something.”

“Not a bad wonder, but I guess not, huh?”

“What then? They were only at the three sites. It seems to beg to be included in the process of committing the murders, don’t you think?”

“Nothing the police would have put there during their investigation, would it?”

“I doubt it, but it’s a good enough idea to check out with Chrissy at the precinct. She has been a big help. I took her a small box of candy. Maybe I shouldn’t have.”

“I think that was sweet of you.”

“Pun intended, LOML?”

“No, but I’ll take credit for it when you retell the story.”

“I love you.”

“Me, too – you.”

They finished with peppermint ice cream and were back at Sally’s by seven. The conversation had not solved any part of the case, but it got all the parts into play between them. It continued into the evening. Josh lay on the couch with his head in Sally’s lap. She played with his thick, dark hair as he

spoke.

“Let’s assume the shooter did as you suggested, lifted the gun case up to the roof, at the ladder, by the plastic rope. It would certainly be strong enough for that. Before the shooting, he had all the time he needed to get in place, set things up and so on. But, once he fired the shot, things had to move rapidly – tearing down the rifle and tripod, putting it back in the case, somehow managing it to the ground – maybe the same way it came up – then climbing back down the ladder. It would take an old man some time to do all that, especially if he were using the carabiners like you suggested. I’m thinking five or more seconds per step. There are nearly one hundred steps so that would be, say, one thousand seconds or about eight minutes.

“How long without using the carabiner’s do you suppose?”

“Probably a second or so a rung – 100 seconds – about two minutes. You’re thinking he didn’t use them on the way down?” he asked.

“Think about it. You’ve been there, but it seems to me the strenuous and therefore unsteady part of the operation would be pulling his weight up eight stories. Moving down should be a whole lot easier, right?”

“It is easier going down, no doubt about that. I will estimate it took me three minutes to climb and under two to reach the ground. You may have something there. I know my legs hurt.”

“That seems reasonable. Say the old man weighs 160 pounds and his legs had to lift that one hundred times. What is that 1,600 pounds in all?”

“16,000 pounds I think – 18,000 for me, plus the return trip to the ground.”

“How did he get away once he returned to the ground, do you think – on the first two shootings?”

Josh shook his head.

“A vehicle, I’m thinking. Not a cab if he was carrying a gun case and a hundred-foot length of rope. Any cabbie would have recognized the most famous judge in this city. A cabbie could place him at the spot of the murder. No, it had to be a private vehicle.”

“Think he had an accomplice?”

“I’ve wondered about it. That would mean two people would have to get away – twice as much chance being seen, I’d think. I tend to think somebody like a judge wouldn’t want a witness of any kind and an accomplice would certainly be that.”

“I’m just saying it seems like an awful lot for one old man to do all by himself.”

“It does, I’ll admit that,” Josh said. “Will you agree the most labor intensive and time consuming part would be done before the shooting?”

“I follow your thinking on it, Josh, but I don’t know. Do you know if it’s easier to put a gun together or take it apart, or, just how long it takes to do each of those things? If the rope was used to pull the case up, it could have been kept tied to the handle to speed lowering it. I wonder what the cop’s response time was, and who called it in and how long after the shooting they made the call.”

“I see what you’re saying. Those are really crucial numbers for us. The police arrive, they ascertain the shot probably came from a roof, they access the roof by moving to the rear where the ladder is found. If we can get good estimates on both sides – cops and shooter’s times after the shooting – we can begin building sceneries for the bad guy’s escape.”

“I love your hair.”

“I’ve noticed. Does hair wear out from being handled? If so, consider the prospect of living out your elder years with a bald husband.”

“Was that a proposal, Josh?”

“I will never understand the leaps only a woman’s mind can take.”

“Here’s one more for you, then,” she said. “There are several tall buildings on each of the blocks involved in the shootings, right?”

“Right. Three in each case. Not as tall, however. All in a row – beside one other. So?”

“Was the shooter always on the building closest to the victim – like right across the street?”

“Only in one case, actually.”

“Then how did the police know which one to investigate first. Could that have given the shooter more time?”

“It could have, but he would have no way of knowing whether they would first go to another or to his. Maybe, there were officers dispatched to all three at the same time.”

“You make this complicated, hair boy.”

“That’s my purpose in life, my dear. For some reason this popped into my head. What if he had some system that did away with the gun case altogether? He climbed the ladder with the gun assembled and he didn’t take time to disassemble it afterwards.”

“The gun, scope and the tripod?” she asked. “I looked at some high-powered rifles on-line and some have a handy-dandy tripod built right into them.”

“It shows how little I know about such things. I was making what may well be a false assumption, then – the need to disassemble. Nice going.”

“AMD.”

(Absolutely My Dear.)

“I’m still bothered by the idea the shooter would just climb down the ladder with the murder weapon on his person,” she said. “All of this has been worked out too carefully to include taking a chance like that, don’t you think?”

“What you say makes all kinds of sense, but how to make the gun disappear, and, for that matter, make the gunman disappear? All three shootings took place in broad daylight. The gunman had to arrive in daylight and get away in daylight.”

“I suggest we sleep on it, ‘Bald Man’.”

“If I have a choice, I prefer, ‘Hair Boy’.”

“We’ll just see what you got tonight – *Man* or *Boy*.”

“Why do I feel like I’ve just been set up to lose, regardless?”

“You always win and you know it!”

“Yeah. I do, don’t I?”

A large, tan, throw pillow had soon engulfed his face.

## CHAPTER FIVE

With the remainder of his columns ready for the week, Josh found himself with a day of few requirements or commitments. His goal was to make the rounds of several shooting ranges in the area. For that he needed his car, so he took a cab across town to his place, where he first checked for flames or water damage and traces of straw in his kitchen. Finding none, he emptied the mailbox of unwanted ads – he received his first-class mail at work – and headed west to the first address. It sat on the outskirts amid a sea of strip malls, car dealerships, and Bargain Barns. A complex of a dozen Little League fields sat off further the east. Josh’s early years hadn’t allowed that. He regretted it.

*Jake’s Range* was his first stop. It was his first experience with such an establishment so there was some degree of eager anticipation involved. Josh had always sought out new experiences – broken left femur, dislocated right shoulder, an arrest for trespassing at age ten. This should offer no such risks.

“Hey. Aren’t you *Joshin’ Around*, Josh?”

“You got that from the old picture they run with my column?”

“Spittin’ image. Why’s a man of your *caliber* – a little firing range humor there – use it if you want to – slummin’ way out here?”

By the time the old man had worked his way to the end of that sentence, Josh had nearly missed its message.

“I know nothing whatsoever about guns and shooting. I hear friends and colleagues talk about it and always feel left

out. Thought I'd better get myself up to speed and one of them mentioned your establishment – said you are always helpful and patient.”

“Mighty kind of him. What ya got in mind?”

“I have heard about high powered rifles with built in scopes and tripods. Are there such things?”

“Oh, yes. Very popular among stationary hunters – like large game hunters. Compact. Lightweight. Accurate to a thousand yards with a good quality scope. Shorter the barrel the less accurate at great distances.”

“Say that I was just interested in target shooting at a range like this – 100 feet, 200 feet, something like that. What would you recommend?”

“I could put you into a good starter model under three feet long for under five hundred dollars. I'm more into to practice fees than sales, so my advice to you would be to search the want ads for a used one. Those weekly ad sheets have hundreds of listing every weekend. A rifle like you're talkin' about lasts forever – probably get one in the \$150 to \$200 range through ads. If you move into competitive shooting, you'll want to move up several notches in quality.”

“I hear my buddies talking about 30/30. Is that length and height?”

“Goodness no. You are uninformed ain't you? That's the caliber of the ammo it uses. 30/30 is as powerful as any amateur shooter will ever want. Blow a hole clean through a thick iron sheet with one a them boys.”

“I suppose you get all kinds of folks out here, don't you?”

“Sure do – teachers, business men, lawyers, housewives, even priests once in a while.”

“I suppose you heard about that judge who killed a Mobster. I read he used a high-powered rifle. I forget his name.”

“Judge Medford – Claude I believe I read.”

“You ever see him here, practicing?”

“Not that I know of. Don't need to tell your name here so long as your cash is good.”

“No credit cards?”

“Oh, yeah. Didn't mean that. You heard of Buzz

Anderson, ain't ya?"

"The owner of the *Reds*, the City's baseball team? I figured he was dead."

"Pretty near, I'd say."

He chuckled.

"He's been commin' by recently. Always uses a credit card. Says he and his grandson are plannin' a trip to Colorado to hunt big game – mountain goats I imagine. Personally, I could never bring myself to kill such a magnificent beast."

"Do you hunt at all?"

"No, sir. I just shoot mark, and let me tell you, *Mark* don't like it none at all – some more shootin' range humor. You can use it if you want to."

Josh offered an appreciative smile. The world was rife with fourth grade humor that week.

"Back to the rifles. How much would an all in one short barrel weigh?"

"Well, all three together, I'd say on average maybe fifteen pounds on cheaper models. The more expensive lightweight sets maybe as little as eight or ten. What weight there has to be is in the barrel, you understand."

"Like everybody says, you really know your stuff. I can't thank you enough. If there is a fee, I'm happy to pay."

"Goodness no. Never a charge for ol' Joshy. In fact, use one a my jokes and you can shoot here, on me, any time."

"On *you* and not *Mark*?"

The old man chuckled and shook his head.

"You're as funny in person as you are in the paper. Hope you come back."

"One more thing. You don't seem to have much competition way out here. That true?"

"Closest is *Mountain Man Range* over on Buffalo Avenue. Always thought that was great – a shooting range on Buffalo Avenue."

"I can see how you'd think that was humorous."

Perhaps he and Chirssy should start an '*Ain't That Ironic*' club.

"It about the size of yours – the Mountain Man place?"

"Pretty much. They got a nicer reception house – all

brown brick with carpeted floors and a snack bar. Just more ways to take a guy's money. I 'spose they may get a higher-class clientele because of it. I know they charge more."

"Well, thanks again. I'll be sure you get a mention somewhere down the line, Mark – I mean Jake."

It received the intended reaction.

They shook and Josh left, heading toward Buffalo Avenue. That one had not been on his list so it may, indeed, have been classier. He had targeted the small and out of the way ranges, thinking if you didn't want to advertise yourself as a wannabe shooter, you'd steer clear of the upper-end places. Of course, being seen in one would certainly not become evidence against a person.

After a few minutes, a ham salad sandwich with chips, and a diet cola at the snack bar counter, Josh was convinced that place was not what he needed. The young man behind the counter did enjoy dropping names of celebrities who frequented the place – the mayor, the Bishop, ball players. Josh made mental notes just in case they came up later. Sally often wondered how he could remember complicated lists and minute details of articles he read and yet, year after year, forget her birthday. In recent years, she had taken the matter into her own hands, merely reminding him a week ahead of time, and no hard feelings ever had to surface. Truly a rational, win/win solution. Josh loved that lady!

The ball park was less than a mile on west so he drove to it – an unplanned *field* trip, so to speak. There was no game – the team was out of town that week – but the museum and merchandise store were open. Again, the young man on hand was chatty and recognized Josh, immediately.

"I got a million funny stories about the guys if you ever want to hear them. I won't force them on you. I imagine you get sick of that."

"I find myself in a catch-22 in that respect . . . *Deon* – he leaned in to read the lad's name tag. "I cherish my privacy and yet I have to depend on things people offer me. I appreciate your courtesy, on the matter. I'm sure I'll find reason to give you an ear at some time."

"You're welcome, I guess. Mom will be pleased about what you said. She's always been a 'good manners' nut."

“I believe most mothers are.”

Deon rolled his eyes.

Josh moved on to his real reason for being there.

“I heard a rumor that Mr. Anderson, the owner, and his grandson will soon be heading to Colorado on a hunting trip. I thought if there was any truth in it, I might pass it on to one of my fellow reporters so he could catch an exclusive story.”

“Sorry, sir, but Buzz doesn’t have a grandson. He never married. His bachelor years when he was a player in Cincinnati were legend, the way the guys tell the story. Anyway, he’s pushing ninety. He gets around unbelievably well – even still shows up for conditioning practice some days – but can’t see him tracking goats up mountain sides.”

“My mistake. I’m afraid I’m not a ball fan. Hope you won’t let that be known. My readers would abandon me like a disgraced politician.”

“Secret’s safe with me. It’s just a summer job that my grandfather got me. Pays well, allows me lots of reading time on off weeks like this, and I get a lot of ogling from girls on game day. I’m told I’m not bad looking.”

Josh chose not to pursue a discussion of the relative good looks of a seventeen-year-old male.

He did his thank you, solicited one genuinely funny story, and was back on the road toward the city by two. He wasn’t sure what he had, but it seemed he had something. Buzz’s reason for target practice didn’t hold water. That certainly did not define him as a potential assassin, but it felt important. Why would an old man take up the use of a weapon? If he were fearful for his safety, wouldn’t he more likely go for a hand gun? Things that didn’t make immediate sense, often, of course, *did*, with the addition of just one piece of missing information. The Judge in his eighties and Buzz pushing ninety. Neither had a whole lot to lose if they were caught bumping off a bad guy. It was another, ‘*Hmm moment*’.

That was the first information – if way out there – that might move support away from the single-shooter theory. Maybe Buzz saw some value in what the judge had done and was planning a copy-cat exercise.

Occasionally, throughout the day, Josh offered furtive,

irrational glances into his rearview mirror to see if he were being followed. He detected nothing suspicious. That was most likely a figment of his overly active brain, anyway. He turned on the car radio looking for music and was met with more unsettling news.

*'Senator, Malcomb Winslow, has just been killed as he left the up-scale, Bastion's Restaurant on the south side of the City. At least on the surface, it looks like the work of the Rooftop Killer. I suppose now, we have to assume that is Killers with an 's'. More as the story develops.'*

His cell phone rang. It was Sally.

"You hear about the Senator, Josh?"

"Yeah. Just this second on the car radio. That muddied things up in a hurry. I'll have some interesting bits and pieces to share this evening. How you doing?"

"I'm fine. Seems like the city is suddenly less fine than it was a half hour ago. Can you pick up supper? I'm running behind. Be closer to six than five."

"Sure. See you later."

Josh had broken another promise to himself – never talk on the phone while driving. It seldom happened.

Josh drove to the down-town precinct building where he made his way to the coroner's department. He had come down Flossmoor – kids sold flowers at intersections and he had purchased two roses. He figured if there were truly anything ironic about the coroner's office, it was that it was underground. It was hardly worth a shrug. He approached the woman at the front desk – Mary Lou, he assumed from Chrissy's information.

"Chrissy, over in Holding or whatever it's called said you were the person I needed to speak with over here. She made it sound like you were the brains of the *operation* – no pun intended, believe me."

He handed her the flower.

"You must be Josh. She alerted – well, *told* me about you. What can I do for you?"

"I assume it is public information who claimed Judge Medford's body."

"The body is still here, but yes, and I can tell you that Dr. Gerald Patterson is the one who has submitted the claim

papers. Looks like tomorrow it will be released.”

“Dr. Gerald Patterson, the Headmaster of the Winston Heights School for Boys?”

“That would be the one. He’s ancient.”

“He was ancient when I attended high school there. Thanks so much.”

“I love your column. Afraid I have no humorous anecdotes for you – things are just generally depressing down here.”

“Except for your rosy cheeks and lovely smile.”

She put the flower up to her cheek so he could make an actual comparison.

He offered a thumb’s up as he turned to leave.

Josh made his way toward his car, dialing Sally as he walked.

“Hey. See what you can find out about Dr. Gerald Patterson, the Headmaster of the Winston Heights School for Boys.”

“Your high school?”

“The same – Junior and Senior years. Just found out he’s the one claiming the body of the judge from the coroner. See if you can find any connection between the two of them. Oh, and here’s a long shot. See if you can find a connection between either of them and Buzz Anderson, the Reds owner.”

“On it. Suddenly have great gobs of stuff on the Judge I have pulled for others, regarding his arrest. So, I’ll begin searching that for a connection to your Doc. Patterson. By the way, I read where the judge gave up his driver’s license when he turned 65 – something about failing eyesight – for what it’s worth. I hope that after delivering those two pieces of *non-damning* information that I’m still your girl.”

“AMD. (absolutely my dear) How about Mexican, tonight? I got a craving.”

“You always have a craving,” she said emphasizing *craving*.

“For food, I mean, as if you didn’t understand that.”

“Fine. Pick up whatever sounds good.”

“La Cucaracha and all that,” he said. “If that was racist I take it back.”

“Lot of that going around recently. And no, I don’t think

so. Just good clean humor.”

“Anything special *you* want?”

“Lots of chips and cheese sauce. Anything else will be fine. Love you.”

Josh was distracted and nodded instead of replying. He hung up.

Thinking he should put in a physical appearance at his office, he parked in his space beneath the Gazette Building and, upstairs, worked through his email. It was fifty/fifty, potentially useful to spam. He deleted the spam – it made him feel particularly powerful to do that; twenty-five emails gone at the poke of one button. He’d get to the useful messages in the morning, or perhaps at Sally’s later in the day.

He left *Mexico Viejo* – ‘Old Mexico’, for those with only modest knowledge of Spanish – toting enough food to put the Chinese place to shame. He munched on chips as he drove.

That restaurant was across town, but he knew it was Sally’s favorite south of the boarder eatery. It put him at her place a few minutes after she had arrived. His phone rang as he approached the apartment door. It was Sally. He ignored it and entered, the second, long stemmed red rose between his teeth. She removed it and kissed him.

“I was just trying to call you.”

“And you did. How talented.”

“I suppose that was one of those useless bits of information dissemination that you rail against, wasn’t it?”

“You have litigated my case. Grab a bag, please, or you’ll have to enjoy the dip off my tie.”

“Shower or eat?” he asked.

“Eat. Let’s shower just before we go to bed.”

“Like the sound of that, but you know *now* I won’t be able to concentrate the rest of the evening.”

Ignoring the comment, she relieved him of several bags and they were soon enjoying supper.

“I found no solid connection between the judge and the Headmaster. They both volunteer for burial duty with the VFW. Neither actual belongs to the organization although they were both in the army. Assignment to any given burial detail is made by pure chance – who is available at the date and time. Not sure where else to go with that. The same

dead ends for each of them and the Buzz character. You realize he's in his late eighties?"

"I did – do."

"What's Buzz's connection to all this?"

Josh explained what he had, and what he had was pure speculation that made Goldilocks look like a fact-based biography. He summed up.

"The only things they all apparently have in common is that they are elderly and quite civic minded."

"And they all have military experience, if half a century ago. Dr. Patterson fits that category, too, you know," she said.

"I know. He must be pushing eighty-five, himself."

"Somehow you're thinking all these old codgers are in cahoots on the killings?"

"I know. It makes no sense, really. They don't even seem to know one another and yet Patterson is claiming the judge's body. With your just added tidbit, I suppose that has come to seem reasonable. The more information I gather the less it makes sense. The connection between Doc and the judge may just be the burial detail – since the judge has no family, the VFW may take on the responsibility of handling all the final preparations."

He told her about the itinerary he had followed over the course of the day and shared findings and questions from points along the way. She listened then commented.

"So, a nine or ten-pound gun seems like something old guys could manage."

"Biggest problem would be managing it up the ladder – the awkwardness as much as anything. Attached to their backs or by a sling over their shoulder, it might cause them to lose balance – pull them back away from the ladder."

"So, that's a reason to believe they pulled it up by a rope," Sally said.

"And then there is the big puzzler from today – another shooting with the prime suspect, the judge, dead. I'll stop by Chrissy's tomorrow and see what I can find out about the latest crime scene. If the slug is from the same gun, then we at least know there has to be some connection between the judge and today's new shooter."

"And can assume that with the first two as well, I

imagine,” Sally added. “I know there’s no proof, but it seems logically necessary. Are you thinking Buzz for today’s outing?”

“The Reds are out of town – flew to Jackson yesterday afternoon for a three-game stand.”

“So, where does that leave us?”

“Without a suspect for today, for one thing,” Josh said. “Let’s say there are several shooters involved. The first two, who were not caught, would still seem to be available, so it might have been a repeat by one of them, today. If Buzz is a part of some scheme, then he could have been one of the earlier killers, but not today’s. Of course, if there are more to follow, one of *them* could be earmarked for him.”

“I guess it takes us back to one of the two theories we discussed before,” Sally said, exploring anything that might help make sense of it: “revenge or cleansing the city of bad guys.”

“Does the second seem more reasonable if there are actually several people involved?” Josh asked. “The first would mean somebody, or more likely some group of somebody’s, had wronged all the members of our suddenly postulated ‘Old Men’s Shooting Group’.”

“Unless, he wronged one of them and all his friends have chipped in to help him get his retribution.”

“But so far, at least, none of them seem to have any relationship to any of the others.”

“Hmm?”

“Seems to be one of those, one step forward and two back, scenarios,” she said.

“Two back at a minimum. I wish we knew what the cops know.”

“Chrissy?” Sally asked, grasping at straws.

“Her information never runs very deep beyond what she has in her possession. I can try, but I doubt if it will be useful.”

They caught the six o’clock news. Although the Senator’s death commandeered most of the newscast, it had nothing new to reveal. The authorities were clearly becoming even more closed mouthed regarding what they knew.

“I can see I need to look further into connections among the victims to see if they can be tied to some single event in the past,” Sally said.

“Do that. We have to keep all options open, I suppose.”  
“Speaking of options,” Sally said, “Tub or shower.”

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## CHAPTER SIX

The following morning, Josh found an interesting email in among those he had left unopened the afternoon before. It was from Jake at the shooting range and read:

*Joshy: I have to admit I have no idea what your real reason was for coming to see me today, but something came to mind that may be helpful to you. You seemed interested in Buzz – your eyes dilated when I mentioned his name. He uses a short barrel 30/30 rifle with built-in tripod and a special, light weight scope – a make of scope that is not common. Made in Switzerland some years ago, by a very small company called LEBEDEV. That is the guy's name that made them. He's Russian. I've saw only a few of his scopes in all the years in the business. The interesting part is that another patron also used a set up exactly like Buzz – the long-time mayor of the city, K.T. Majors. He must be in his eighties by now. He came a few times a couple of months ago. Turned out to be a pretty good marksman – said he shot competitively when in his twenties. Just FYI, you understand. – Jake*

Josh spoke out loud: "Who'd have thought Jake was a student of eye-dilation."

"Well, I sure wouldn't have," came the deep voice from over the top of the cubical.

"Do you ever do any work over there, Wally, or do you just wait for me to talk to myself?"

It was Wally's turn to ignore the exchange. Josh was not privy to the immense grin that blossomed just a few feet away.

Josh immediately took the information to another level

– what if both the mayor and the owner of the ball team shared the same gun and scope? He emailed Sally to see if she had come across anything connecting those two.

The response was immediate: ‘GMSMT’.

(Give me some more time.)

Sometimes it seemed much of their relationship could be reduced to acronyms. He uttered an uncontrolled chuckle as he responded: ‘AMD’ (Absolutely My Dear) ‘OK, LOML’ – clearly funnier from context to him than it would be to Sally.

He left the building to make the rounds that were within easy walking distance. He needed a haircut so stopped at his barber’s first – Cal somebody. In eight years, he’d never asked. There was only one person ahead of him – already in the chair. That man recognized him and offered a humorous incident about a neighbor boy, about seven, seeing his three-year-old laptop and responding, “Wow, what an antique!” By playing with the reference – the laptop or the old man – Josh would mold a good entry from that.

Cal had his own story. A boy in for his first haircut watched the process on the person ahead of him, then asked: “If you cut off too much can you put some back?” That one would take more work, but in a pinch, he’d somehow make it work.

At last settled into the chair, Josh spoke.

“Do I remember you telling me that Buzz Anderson gets his hair cut here?”

“No. He’s never been here. If the Reds don’t start winning, he won’t be able to afford a haircut *anywhere*.”

Now THAT, Josh could use! The barber continued – like barbers will do.

“I *have* had some celebrities as regulars here – other than you, I mean.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. One a recent newsmaker, even – that Davis guy who got shot, the one who worked for the governor. His real name’s not Davis, you know.”

“No. I didn’t know.”

“Davinski. A second-generation Russian immigrant. Came with his parents when he was just a tad, the way he tells it . . . er, told it. Sure couldn’t tell from his accent – I

mean, he didn't have a trace of an accent. Terrible things, these murders. You got a take on them, Josh?"

"Wish I did. Hard to know. Quite a puzzle."

He hoped that meshing of three trite phrases would be sufficient to satisfy him. It seemed to be. One of the secrets of being able to maintain an endless, ongoing conversation in a barbershop, like in a poolhall or gym, was to find ways of saying nothing that always received nods of agreement from everybody. Josh was the past master of *triteisms* – as Sally called them. Just don't let him try one on her!

Josh stepped down from the chair and reached for his billfold.

"No, no. You know it's always on the house, here."

"Makes me uncomfortable – like I only come here because I know it'll be free."

"My grandson's class is collecting for one of their families whose house burned down a few days ago. You make a contribution in the bowl over there and we'll call it even, OK?"

"Fine. What a shame."

He dropped in a fifty.

"You're a good man, Joshy."

"Can I quote you on that to my girlfriend when she might have reason to think otherwise."

Cal chuckled.

"You oughta put that one in your column. Remember, I'm Aron with only one 'A'. I'll bet you keep her in stitches, don't you?"

"No, I count on her surgeon to do that."

Josh knew it was tired and stale, but it typically got a chuckle. It did. He nodded, smiled and left.

'Aron?' Josh thought. He'd called the man Cal for seven years. Perhaps his reason for having spelled his name just then. The man really didn't give great haircuts, but his shop was handy and Josh could have cared less how his hair looked.

He walked south toward the precinct building to bend Chrissy's ear. There was a new guard at the front door who efficiently patted him down before he walked through the electronic doorframe.

“Very thorough. I hope Sam’s alright. I think in the eight years I’ve been coming here daily, he’s the only guard I’ve seen.”

It had been meant to send several messages: that it was, in fact, too thorough; that he had been a regular there for years; and that he was like ‘family’ to Sam.

“His granddaughter’s getting married, I hear. He’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I had forgotten, I guess – yes, granddaughter.”

The young officer motioned him on into the entry hall.

“I was waitin’ for you this morning, Joshy,” came Chrissy’s greeting as soon as he appeared around the corner.”

“How nice. My remarkable personality, my fantastic build or my handsome, angelic face?”

“Well, all a them, I suppose, but I knew you’d want to hear about the slug in the latest body from the Rooftop Killer.”

“And . . . ?”

She leaned in toward him in her usual, confidential manner.

“Same gun again. Talk upstairs is like it’s about the biggest mystery ever to come down the pike.”

“You come up with anything yet, my dear?”

“Wish I did. Hard to know. Quite a puzzle.”

It seemed to Josh he had heard those phrases rather recently. Oh, yes . . .

“I take it the gun was missing along with the shooter like before.”

“Sure was.”

“You know anything about response times – like from the time a shooting is reported until the officers arrive on the scene?”

“Sure do. All in the Sargent’s Prep Manual. The goal is five minutes. Usual time is actually more like eight or nine. I’m sure it depends on how far from the closest available squad car and the time of day – traffic and all.”

“Seems to me those are really pretty fast responses in a city this size,” Josh said clearly surprised.

“Response time, and gettin’ down to work time, is probably different. Like for these shootings. Say it takes five

minutes to get there, then two or three to determine what happened and call for the EMT's or the coroner, then crowd control and call for back up and a detective and by the time the actual search really gets underway for the shooter I suppose it could be fifteen or twenty minutes – likely more than that.”

“An interesting professional perspective. Thanks for that.”

After their fingers to fingers ritual, Josh was up the stairs and out the door – that time with far less attention from the guard.

It was going on nine. He stopped at Lady's for coffee and a donut – front booth. Josh always had glazed donuts, not because they were his favorite, but because he was fascinated by watching the slivers of glaze float on the coffee and dissolve before his eyes. He had his black – the coffee – and took short sips to see if there came a point when he could detect the added sweetness. He never could.

He received a half dozen high fives for his column that morning, and listened to several stories. Apparently, a woman rear-ended a man's car at the stoplight out in front of the café. When he pulled around the corner at the policeman's request, he took the woman's front bumper with him – it was lodged in his. The woman shook her fist and called after him, “That's my bumper. You take it, you pay for it.”

A retired teacher who often had bits to share, related the time she took a group of third graders on a tour of the city library. At the front door, as they were gathered to leave, several firetrucks, lights blazing and sirens screaming, passed on the street. That over, being the dedicated teacher she was, she turned to the youngsters and asked, “So, what were some of the things we saw at the library today?” As one, the ten boys called out, “Three firetrucks.”

Josh would make them both work.

He started south to the pool hall – *The Table n' Ale*. There it was again – the feeling that he was being followed. On several occasions, he just went for it, stopping and turning around to scope out the scene behind him. The first time he might have seen somebody duck into a doorway fifty feet behind him. It was a tall somebody – just a blur. It wouldn't

have been a fan. Fans didn't stalk him – they rushed up and waved copies of his columns they wanted signed.

Josh wasn't one to rely on feelings – things happened or they didn't, they were palpable, had immediate legitimacy, and were at least more or less clearly discernable. He hated references to feelings that were not tied down with those characteristics, and yet, there he was confronting just such a condition.

The presence of that fleeting form, tended to move it into the realm of the actual, unless, of course, he was jumping at a chance happening. Even as a potential threat, he'd rather experience it out in the world than as some sort of free-spirited, ethereal feeling of uncertain – undefinable – presence. The larger questions were: for what purpose would he be followed, and by whom? He figured if he answered one he would probably answer both.

For the first time, he acknowledged to himself that he felt threatened. It was a new experience. Josh the joshier had never had an enemy who would have harbored an intent to hurt him. People liked being around him. Being in the midst of others had typically presented a self-assuring, ego-building encounter. What had changed?

“My interest in the assassinations, that's what changed,” he offered out loud, half-way expecting to hear Wally's voice from across the wall.

Who knew about that? Sally, Chrissy, and P. J. Jake and Wayne probably suspected, but had both established themselves in supportive roles. It almost certainly had to be somebody outside his usual range of associates. Perhaps somebody involved with the shootings had seen him poking around and decided to keep tabs on his activities for his – their – information. Maybe a hired snoop like a private detective.

Did any of that suggest he was in danger? He had no idea. Perhaps he needed to start being subtler and more elusive in his exploration. Perhaps he had unknowingly run across something crucial to the solution of the crimes. Perhaps he was becoming bat crap paranoid – he tended to go with that.

He wondered if it were time to begin sharing his findings and hunches with the police. No part of him attempted

to provide an answer so he believed it must not be.

Something about his ruminating had prompted a thought on which he assumed the authorities were probably well ahead of him. Thinking about where the shootings had occurred, he discovered they were all in or close to the area of the city that had evolved as the buffer between the thriving downtown region and the more nearly run down section, rife with empty buildings, street people, and crime. It was where P.J. lived. The pool hall sat just to the north by less than half a block. Plotting the positions of the shootings Josh estimated the area would encompass less than ten percent of the city – more likely, less than five percent.

That presented an interesting question that might provide an interesting clue. Why there? If that section offered any elements that might beckon such an activity, it was likely the scant sidewalk traffic and the fact those who were present were a tight-lipped group given more to excluding themselves from authorities than rubbing shoulders with them. There were tall buildings all over the city so that didn't seem a relevant feature. The roofs used, had all been on occupied buildings, so isolation didn't seem important to the perpetrators.

Each of the victims had to have received some compelling come-on to get them into that particular position in the city at the time appointed for them to die. None of them appeared to have any business being there. Perhaps the shooters had some major dirt on each one. What might that irresistible arrangement have been: come meet me and I'll turn over some sort of personally damning evidence to you? For what in return? Payment by money or favor, perhaps? Josh had to wonder if the victims had been found to be carrying large amounts of cash. Chrissy might be able to find out about that.

Josh assumed if it had been money, it had *not* been taken off the bodies by the perpetrators. There was neither time, opportunity, nor inclination, so that was not their objective. Death to the person seemed to be the sole aim of the undertakings. It put him back to either revenge or cleansing as the motive. It did leave out the possibility each was a dying man and was merely being put out of his misery.

Perhaps the coroner's office could clear that up. He would head to the precinct after a brief stop at the pool hall. One more thing came to mind. If the victims had been carrying large amounts of money, that eliminated the random shooter theory, which had pretty well already died a natural death.

Presently, he arrived at the pool hall. In all the years he had been dropping in there, he had never allowed himself to be enticed into a game. It left the important question unanswered: was Joshy a pool player or not? For some reason that day he gave in to the usual taunts. Nobody took them seriously – not Josh or the taunters, so they were dumbfounded when Josh removed his coat and tie, rolled up his sleeves, and challenged Archie – the king of those tables as he understood it.

Archie bowed to Josh who broke – one into each side pocket. Eight shots later he had run the table. The room had fallen silent as Josh advanced from ball to ball. It remained silent as he racked the cue and donned his jacket. He turned to the men and held out his open arms as if to say, "Well, this would be a good time for applause."

He received it along with thumps to his back and offers of drinks. Josh didn't imbibe, so just reveled for a moment in the attention and then left. He had to wonder if that had in some way been his single, unconscious, objective there that day – to prove something to a group of men who meant nothing to him. A pathetic motive. Maybe to prove to himself he could be the *Table 'n Ale's* best. Regardless, it had been out of character. He disliked not being in charge of himself. The whole incident was unnerving, still, he *had* won. The skills garnered during those countless afternoons he was AWOL from school were still with him. Amazing, he thought, allowing the slip of a smile as he headed back north.

It had raised an interesting thing to think about, however. If his early training at the tables had remained with him, perhaps each of the shooters also had a skill left over from their earlier days. Jake said the Judge had been a competitive marksman when younger, and apparently had been in the military – weapon training. Patterson had also been in the military. He couldn't remember if he had heard about Buzz.

At the precinct building, he talked with Chrissy, first.

"I understand each of the victims of the Rooftop Killer, had a huge amount of money on him. Are you allowed to verify that for me?"

"That's supposed to be the best kept secret of the century," she came back in a whisper. "I had to sign away my first born in case I told."

Josh smiled at her joke and shrugged. It seemed to be his lucky day.

"I'm not without sources, my dear. Any way you can indicate how much we're talking about here?"

"No, but if you were to guess with the right words I suppose I might be able to find some sort of response."

Josh had no idea what she meant and she soon understood that. She offered a prompt.

"Was it less than . . .?"

"Ah! I see."

They played the game for most of a minute. He started at a million and came down. At \$200,000 he received his first, 'No, it was *not* less than \$200,000.

"You are an angel. Thanks. I have to run."

"You always have to run."

"I suppose I do. Maybe next time."

Maybe *what* next time neither knew, although it seemed to be somehow satisfying for Chrissy.

He moved around the corner and down the hall to the coroner's office.

"Mary Lou. A lovely top you're wearing."

"And not a bad line for a old guy. What's on your mind?"

Later, he would contemplate the ramifications of being called an old guy. Maybe it was time to think seriously about tying the knot.

"There's a rumor that each of the Rooftop Killer's victims was in the final stages of an incurable disease. Can you verify that?"

"First I've heard of it and I believe I'd have heard about something like that."

"I may have to switch sources then."

He did his best to put on a puzzled look.

“Thanks, love. Wear that top often. It really sets off your beautiful eyes.”

Mary Lou knew it was all part of his line, but she'd overlook that. There was just something about Josh.

Josh worked his usual sources until three and then checked back at his cubical. On his way out of the building for the day, he stopped up on third with a new request for Henry.

“Would it be much trouble to look into the source of that maroon paint? Something about that keeps bugging me.”

“No problem at all.”

Josh handed over the envelope while Henry continued.

“I'll hand deliver the sample on my way home this evening – I have other results to pick up.”

“Have you had any contact with the investigative reporter pool about the rooftop cases?”

“About the Rooftop Killer, you mean – they created that name you know – our guys in their first headline.”

“I guess I didn't. Good for them, I suppose.”

“If you mean have they brought me anything to research for them, no.”

“And if I didn't mean that . . .?”

“One of them asked if I knew if you were snooping into the killings. I played dumb and he didn't elaborate.”

“Can you indicate who that was?”

“We have six investigative reporters. The tallest. Sorry but it don't feel I should reveal the name of that reporter.”

He offered an exaggerated wink. Josh went on as if the exchange had not occurred.

“Okay, then. Thanks. How will I get the results on the paint?”

“I can have them email you directly if you want.”

“No. Not that. I need to keep my nose and business email account clean on this. I'll check back with you. What – a couple of days?”

“Probably. Depends how busy the lab is.”

Josh thanked him and left. He was at Sally's by five. During the walk, he had let himself forego his concerns about the tail, although he did stick to the main streets.

Sally greeted him with a hug and kiss.

“I got a couple of things,” she said.

“And they are *magnificent*, but I’ve told you that, I believe.”

“Ad nauseam, I believe is the less-refined response.”

“So, what you have?”

“Bar-B-que sandwiches, corn on the cob, and baked sweet potatoes for starters.”

“Sound’s great. Some new place?”

“A food truck that often parks across from the Library. Did it on whim. Hope it’s good. Maggie says it’s the best in the city.”

“Well, Maggie, we shall put your endorsement to the test.”

Sally had the table set and waiting. She spoke as they passed the food.

“I can find no social or business connections whatsoever among the victims. I did find that Harlow Davis changed his name from the Russian, Davinski. Also, his mother’s maiden name was Antonov – the same as the mob guy, but I have found no solid tie between those two specific families.

“The grand jury investigation about Justice – the real estate guy – grew out of the accusation of laundering funds for a foreign agent. He was accused of using those funds to purchase buildings for the agent, mortgaging them to the hilt and resell them a year or so later, thereby turning the dirty money into respectable money. I found no connection to the obvious player, Antonov, but one of the names on the subpoena list was a Russian National living in Miami named Davinski.”

“My, you have been busy. So, quashing the grand jury by the governor’s office could have been the work of Davis on behalf of the Florida Davinski guy – possibly a relative. That could establish Davis, Antonov, and Justice as bad guys that all escaped the long arm of the law.”

“Long arm of the law? Really?”

“My language sometimes reverts to my comic book days.”

“And the good news continues,” she said. “You mentioned want ads for rifles. Those being simple to pull up by numerous key words, I searched the on-line papers back

for a month before the first killing. The name of the rare scope really narrowed the field.”

“Good! How many did you come up with?”

“One.”

“I’d agree that’s fairly narrow.”

“It was a small-time gun dealer from Pineville just east of the city. Got his contact information. I checked him out. He’s licensed. He has an excellent rating from his clientele.”

“You get anything done for the library today.”

“It was a slow day and anyway, Martha came back from maternity leave so we had lots of hands. Also, I don’t remember if I got back to about Buzz and the military. He served in the army – that seems like it may be a common thread among them.”

“Interesting. And presents an answer to a question I’ve had – how could such old guys be such good shots?”

Josh raised his eyebrows, momentarily distracted from the case.

“This really *is* great bar-b-que. I’m thinking I know just the proper reward for you later.”

“You always know the proper reward for later.”

“Then, I only hope you appreciate how lucky you are, LOML?”

“AMD, my man. AMD!”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Before entering the Gazette Building the next morning, Josh paused in the privacy of the alley and placed a call to the gun dealer Sally had located.

“A few months back I saw you had a rifle set-up I was interested in, then I was called out of state and couldn’t get back to you. Since your ad disappeared almost immediately, I assume somebody bought it. It was the 30/30 with built-in tripod and the Lebedev scope. My father had one many years ago. He loved it but it was stolen. I’m trying to find one to give him on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. So, I’m wondering if you can point me toward the person who purchased it, if that was the case.”

“Could, not sure I should,” came his quick response.”

“It would sure make a great old man happy.”

“Tell you what. I’ll contact the purchaser and see if it’s alright with him if I give out his name. Best offer I can make.”

“If that’s the best, then I’ll take it. Contact me at this number – will you do that either way? I’ll gladly pay you for your time and attention.”

“That won’t be necessary. I lost my pa when I was eleven. I can feel how special it must be between the two of you. It may be tomorrow before I can get back.”

“I appreciate your help and your principled sense about it.”

They hung up. Josh went upstairs. It was a scenario he hadn’t anticipated, but he understood and truly did appreciate the man’s position. It did not fit with his preconceived notion of how a dealer in weapons would

respond. About that he felt bad and would try to convert it into a lesson of some kind. Clearly, he was not as open minded as he thought he was.

After a few minutes at his desk he left by way of the hall outside Barney's always open door. He paused for just a moment to offer the big man a smile and a nod.

"Good columns last week, Kid. Expect the same this week."

Josh managed an awkward wave and moved on, not wanting to get into a discussion about whether 'good' meant merely acceptable or top-notch. He'd believe the latter until there was actual evidence to the contrary.

The site of the most recent shooting was seven blocks south. He made several short stops along the way, but they were inconsequential in comparison with his goal. He could have taken a cab – that would have made more sense, timewise, but he wanted to give his tail, if there were one, the chance to show himself – itself. There would be many fewer sidewalk walkers the further south he went, thus the less chance of someone blending in with them. By stopping now and then and entering buildings, he gave himself more opportunities to survey what was going on behind him. Upon leaving an establishment, he felt the need to stop, pull his trench coat up tightly around his chin, light a cigarette, and pull his hat low, thereby buying time for a good look around. It was how Bogart always did it in the back and whites of the 30s and 40s. Since there was no trench coat and he gagged at the smell of tobacco smoke and he found hats of any sort uncomfortable, he had ditched the plan early on. Still . . .

As he emerged from his third stop, he saw a person with all the telltale characteristics. Again, it was a fleeting glance, but he was sure it was the same tall figure he had seen days before. Whoever it was, had moved just inside an alley across the street and turned around as if ready to continue his surveillance. Josh could see the toes of his shoes sticking out onto the sidewalk – then the brim of a hat, quickly withdrawn.

Josh moved on. When he reached his destination, he found no yellow tape, which he took as a sign the police were done processing the scene. He turned into the side walkway –

a required ten-foot-wide barren strip between the buildings. He made his way to the alley at the rear.

His first inclination was to look left and determine if there were the same broken surface on the alleyway that he had found at the other sites. There it was – gravel moved, earth revealed in a V shaped groove or furrow. None of the four crime scenes had differed in any major way – well, there had been the one on the brick-paved surface where that was understandably far less pronounced. He walked the eight paces toward the area and squatted to look for maroon paint. He found none. It wasn't a disappointment because only two of the other sites had displayed it. He did realize that indentation into the ground must not be a requirement for accomplishing the shooting since although the marks were there, the ditch was not.

“Hmm?”

He stood and returned to another of the elements that had been common to all the sites – the rusted metal ladder making its way up along the south, rear corner. He moved in close to look for the scratch marks – Sally's suggested carabiner marks, he was still assuming. They were there. He sighed deeply and began the climb, pleased that it was accompanied by less terror than had that first one. From time to time he looked down, his way of 'laughing at danger and throwing caution to the wind' – also, straight out of those old black and whites, or, was that from the comic books? Not a question on which to expend his energy.

Interestingly, he thought, the higher he climbed the more his mental picture of himself changed from Bogy to Errol Flynn – detective to sea captain. It was fascinating how situations just demanded images from his boyhood. How nice, he thought. Now, if he could just muster the Sam Spade knack for solving crimes – and the captivating way Captain Blood had with women!

Up-top, he wondered if cops had a term like 'ditto', for crime scenes that copied one another in most all aspects – a tossup between copy-cat and MO, perhaps. There they were – all the usual parts: the orange circle of paint in the center of the low front wall, the scratches on the cement cap at the rear north edge and a few shreds of plastic clinging to the cap near

the ladder.

Although he did not understand it all, one thing seemed certain; whatever the sequence of events was, it worked well enough to be repeated – exactly – at every shooting scene. Perhaps he had been going about it backwards. Rather than trying to figure out the functions indicated by the marks, perhaps he needed to discover what sorts of devices might leave such marks. Where to look for such an item?

“An outdoorsman’s store, maybe.”

That time a response from Wally would have been welcomed. Josh knew he was a *big* outdoorsman – hunting, camping, hiking, *and* he tipped the scales at 275. Not wanting to share his information from the sites, he decided to visit one of those stores, first.

Out front, he hailed a cab and requested that he be taken to one of the best in or around the city. It was a twenty-minute ride – *Big Al’s Everything Outdoor*. The name promised quite a lot. Once inside, Josh believed it could probably deliver. The building was huge with rustic, high arched, beamed ceilings and mezzanines along both sides and the front. He faced thirty-foot high windows along the back wall. It smelled of pine and cheap aftershave. The latter trailed after a young man who hardly seemed old enough to shave. *Tony*, his tag read.

“Tony. I’m a writer and I’m not at all sure what I’m looking for.”

“We’re a good match then, because I’m new here and very likely will be unable to find whatever it is you want.”

He either had a quick sense of humor or unabashed honesty. It turned out to be some of each. Josh may well have been one of his first customers since his trainer had let off his leash.

“My story requires a device that could screw onto the lip of a cement cap – like might sit atop a barrier along the outside of a bridge or on top of a wall.”

Tony started walking, slowly. Josh followed and continued his description.

“It would probably screw in place from underneath.”

Tony turned right.

“It would need to be sturdy yet light weight, and quickly

attached and unattached.”

Tony turned left and stopped a few feet down the aisle.

“We can start here and move one way or another depending on your further description.”

It sounded like an astute plan from an astute young man – a series of successive approximations. Josh thought of the saying – like the blind leading the blind – and then wondered if that would now be considered insensitive. He figured it would, so decided to purge it from his trove of illustrative sayings – were those metaphors or similes? Maybe neither. Maybe both, since he seemed to remember that all similes were metaphors, but not all metaphors were similes. Most importantly of all, why in the name of Lucifer did he obsess over such fully irrelevant trivia?

They looked together for some time: Josh would ask questions or give further specifications and the young man would answer by moving one direction or the other pointing at one thing or another. If Josh could have only answered Tony’s most reasonable question – “What is it used for?” – progress would have progressed far faster. Josh did notice that many of the gadgets used a very similar if not identical, screw-up-tight, vise-grip-type base. Some were for holding tent lines or hammocks to trees, others for wall or mountain climbing, and some to provide extremely heavy, sturdy, setups for zip lines.

The one leaving the imprint from underneath that was most similar to the marks Josh had observed on the cement caps, was the one the lad explained was used to set up portable clotheslines out in the wild and to hoist signal flags on yachts. One devise was attached to each of two separated surfaces with a loop of rope running between them around a pulley. Add a piece of laundry at one end, move it away a few feet, add another piece, move it on, and so on until it was full – on one side. Outdoorsmen apparently represented the epitome of lazy. It reminded Josh of pictures he had seen of old-time tenements where such wash lines were strung across alleys well above the traffic, and were, alternately or cooperatively, used by the tenants on both sides. Something about that seemed right – the setup, not the high-flying undies. What that something was, totally escaped him. He purchased

a set of two and a coil of plastic rope.

The boy seemed more pleased that he had found what Josh needed than he did with the commission he would earn. Josh had to ask.

“There must be a gazillion items in this store. How in the world can you possibly remember where everything is?”

“I have absolutely no idea, sir. It is all like being thrust into the canopy of a vast tropical forest in which I am expected to know exactly where every insect lives.”

It deserved a smile, a nod and a slap on the back, even though the young man had clearly been serious.

THAT would most certainly make his column. Josh thanked him and stuffed a twenty into the pocket of his bright blue vest.

“Thank *you*, sir. It will go right into the fund for my girl’s diamond ring.”

Since when were eleven-year old’s getting engaged?

Josh resisted the urge to play with his new toys and spent the afternoon back at his cubicle readying a column. He noted that many of his best items were coming as outgrowths of his investigation into the shootings. Perhaps at some point, that could become a talking point with Barny to get his blessing for doing some legitimate, investigative reporting.

He left early by an hour, feeling no guilt since his evenings were being spent for the paper’s advantage – well, mostly. At Sally’s, he changed into jeans and a hoodie and took his new playthings up to the roof. It had posts and vents and chimneys in abundance, remnants of a run of remodels during the previous fifty years.

First, he hooked them up as intended – like a looped clothesline. He stood back and looked at the arrangement from several angles thinking about additional configurations and uses. He released and removed one of them so he could examine any ‘print’ it might have left behind. Although it was of some satisfaction that it had, and that it was virtually identical in size, shape and depth to those at the sites he had examined, the usefulness of those facts continued to elude him.

So, it is intended for clothes. A rifle might be substituted. That could have been one way the weapon might

have been either raised to, or lowered from, the roof – or both. Somehow, the device itself had to be both taken up to the roof and then removed from it. That only seemed to confuse and complicate the issue.

The spot where it was attached on the roof seemed clear. Where would the other end be located. Down at alley level, probably. Not necessarily, however. It might have been located on a roof of one of the surrounding buildings. Slide the rifle onto another building for safe keeping and then go back later and pick it up. Still, what about removing the vise-gadget? Maybe just lower it with a rope, descend the ladder, pick up the gadget and be gone. After all, the most significant part of all that *would* be to hide the rifle. That left one gadget as well as the rifle on the other roof. Who knew what happened to the rope! He checked the vise for an identification number. It was long and hyphenated, so he assumed it related to that particular piece rather than just generically to the type of device. He searched his pockets for the sales ticket. The number from each item was repeated there. The run of numbers after the hyphen was different, though close. Each specific device could be traced to the person who purchased it – or at least to the credit card that had been used to purchase it. That would be of no use without the shooter's devices, however.

"I don't know. Chance leaving the weapon unprotected on a roof that would likely be searched by the police?"

He shook his head. The more he pursued that line of thinking the less reasonable it sounded.

"I suppose using Occam's Razor – finding the simplest answer – would be that the rifle and the gadget were both lowered to the ground by a rope, but then why have the gadget in the first place?"

And none of that dealt the gouge in the earth into the game. It was obvious that the old man couldn't have moved all that soil and gravel to create the gash in the alley floor. Could it just be a coincidence? Once maybe, but all four times – absolutely not. Could such a mark be left by some sort of getaway vehicle? He'd think about that, but his initial reaction was probably not short of a Sherman Tank popping a wheelie. Maybe a pre-dug site in which to bury the evidence – and

leave it open as an obvious invitation to be investigated – no.

“I need to reconfigure my thinking. What had to take place for the shooting to occur and for the shooter to get away?

- 1- The shooter had to get up onto the roof. A ladder provided easy access in all cases.
- 2- The shooter had to set up and position the rifle with scope and tripod. That only entailed walking to the front center of the roof, probably crouching down behind the wall and setting the gun unit on the cement cap. With a steady tripod, it wouldn't need to be secured in place and allowed for repositioning as needed to keep the subject in the crosshairs.
- 3- The gun had to be aimed and fired. That's self-explanatory although the whole 'how-did-they-get-the-victims-to-the-exact-spot' aspect was yet to be determined – established above and beyond his speculation.
- 4- The gun had to be removed from the roof – either in one piece as the three-part unit, or separated and into a sack, backpack or gun case – the latter seeming more and more unlikely due to the amount of time that would have been available.
- 5- At some point, the gadget and rope had to be utilized – how and for what purpose was still a matter of speculation.
- 6- The gun had to be removed from the scene.
- 7- The gadget had to be removed from the scene.
- 8- All rope had to be removed from the scene.
- 9- The carabiners had to be removed from the scene. Pockets, perhaps.
- 10-The shooter had to make his getaway and three of the four had.
- 11-Whatever purpose the ditch served had to be fit into the essential sequence.

12-If the shooter were careful, he would have worn, in the least, latex gloves and most carefully, some sort of full-body plastic shroud to catch any gun powder. Perhaps some kind of face mask and shoe covering to eliminate traces of elements that could have put him in the alley. Those things needed to be disposed of. The weather-proofed jump suit the judge had been wearing may have served that purpose – wear it during the crime and then dispose of it. But he wouldn't have wanted to be seen wearing it afterwards – an old man walking the streets in a jumpsuit? Where would he have disposed of it?"

Thinking just about the judge, he had been able to accomplish all but one of those steps – getting away – during a heart attack, or perhaps all that activity brought on the attack, but *after* he had tended to all those necessary tasks. That suggests an interesting aspect to it all. Those tasks had to have all been carried out from up on the roof – getting rid of the gun, the gadget, and the rope, since the judge remained on the roof when he was found. This was clearly not undertaken by an unintelligent individual – or *group* of individuals as it had come to appear. Perhaps somebody with an engineering background. Perhaps somebody who was just amazingly creative. Perhaps the reincarnation of Houdini!

"I need more information about the life and interests of Judge Medford."

"Well, I'm probably just the one who can provide them."

It was Sally's voice from behind him.

"You are carrying the note I left for you? Did you have reservations about your ability to find the roof?"

"I suppose it does look silly, considering your message was so detailed – 'ROOF'. And your printing looks nothing like your writing."

During the next few minutes Josh explained what he had, the questions it had all raised for him and the detailed steps necessary to complete the crimes.

"When I was a little girl, my grandmother had a

clothesline like that, down on 21<sup>st</sup> street. I loved it when the smell of the freshly laundered clothes wafted in through the open window.”

“*Wafted*, is it? Going highfalutin’ on me, are you?”

“I’ll begin carrying a dictionary for your benefit if you want.”

Josh collected his gadgets and the rope and they returned to the apartment.

They made a supper of scrambled eggs, ham and fried potato slices. Add toast with jam, orange juice, and left over birthday cake from a party at Sally’s work and they managed a very acceptable meal.

“What was that remark up on the roof, about you having more information on Judge Medford?”

“Turns out there was a biography written about him by a local historian a few years back. If it’s anything about him, it seems to be in that book. I brought it home. After spending four years in the army infantry and seven getting his law degree, he spent many years as a prosecuting attorney before he began his thirty-some years as a municipal judge. He had opportunities to move up, but declined saying his work there was nowhere near finished. Once, the mob tried to blackmail him about some dark connections his older brother supposedly had with foreign agents. He made it public immediately, an independent commission considered the allegation and his brother was cleared.”

“A man of strong convictions, it seems.”

“That could have been the title of the book.”

“What is it, by the way – the title.”

“Social Justice in a Small City.”

“Any other interesting tidbits?”

“As a lawyer, he wrote scads of position papers against the gun lobby, political greed, and for-profit prisons. He singlehandedly stopped the establishment of one in this county. He was on the board of City Hospital and past president of the Boys and Girls Clubs, which, under his guidance, spread throughout the poorer sections of the city.”

“And he ends up dying after murdering a bad guy that had escaped justice for years. I think I recall my psychology professor calling that *compartmentalization* – the ability of a

person to hold two opposing viewpoints simultaneously. His mind insulates one from the other.”

“I suppose that supports the ‘cleansing the city’ theory – somebody who had seen justice thwarted time and time again, finally taking things into his own hands. Your description of him from the book seems to be the perfect blueprint to produce such a person.”

“Ironic that he’d use a gun when he apparently hated them so,” Josh said before stuffing the final bite of cake into his mouth.”

“Here’s a thought,” Sally said. “His motive merged the cleansing thing with the revenge thing.”

“Interesting. Probably never be able to unravel that even if it is true. You’re thinking the false accusation against his brother might have been made by the man he killed. It does open an interesting theory to follow. *We know* there are – were – at least two Rooftop Killers. If they both held that same dual motive it might begin separating the chaff from the grain.”

“And would the killers be the chaff or the grain?” Sally asked.

“You seldom ask easy questions, LOML. *Important*, but difficult. Another hunch. The judge was a respected force for good in our community. If it is a collusion among several people, perhaps those are the ranks from which they come – the most respected.”

Sally wanted to make sure she understood.

“Respected men who have come to believe the system too often doesn’t work, so somebody with high ethical and moral standards must step in, make a difficult decision, and act on it?”

“As a question, my fairest of the fair, that was really more like an attorney’s summation to the jury – and thought provoking, I must say. Let’s pursue that – tomorrow – definitely tomorrow. I feel more like playing for a while.”

“Like hop scotch?”

“That’s a girl’s game. More like sheet scotch?”

“Do I know how to play?”

“You’ve pretty much taught me the rules, young lady. Your background with TWS undoubtedly accounts for your

adroitness.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The following morning, Josh had one of those feelings he didn't believe in, and it led him directly to the third floor to find Henry.

"Got my email, I see," the man said breaking a smile.

"No."

"Oh. Well, it just asked you to stop up. I got information on the paint. Humorously, the lab guy also said the dirt was high in contaminants – lead, mercury, sulfur, other elements commonly found in a city's dust. But, here's what they have to say about the paint."

He handed Josh a copy of the email and went on to offer the information anyway.

"Paint is manufactured by a company in Delaware and is formulated specifically as an undercoat or final coat for metal objects that are to be exposed to the elements. The company item code is PM462. They go on to say it is regularly purchased by the *McGillicuddy Foundry* here in the city. With such an Irish name, you'd think they'd paint their products green."

He chuckled.

"Do you know off hand what they manufacture?" Josh asked.

"No, but you can go to their web site."

"Okay, then. Thanks so much."

"You want the sample back?" Henry asked.

"Containing all those life-threatening contaminants? Absolutely not?"

They shared chuckles.

Thinking better than to use his at-work email, he texted Sally about exploring the website if she had time.

Josh searched his 'could be used' file for stories he had liked, but had not yet found their ways into his columns. By ten-thirty had assembled a good offering for the following day. He delayed filing it with the editorial room, so it wouldn't appear he had time on his hands that day. Having time on his hands that day, however, he slipped out the side entrance and headed for Lady's. He sensed a void in his stomach that was a perfect match to one of her great Salisbury Steak lunches – perhaps even a wedge-shaped area just calling out to be fitted with a piece of peach pie – refrigerator cold and gentled into place with a cap of vanilla ice cream. His mouth moistened just thinking about it.

As he entered, the man occupying the front booth got up and moved to the counter.

"I know that's your booth, Joshy. Just keepin' it warm for you."

"Come on back and join me. I need to learn the saga behind your world class beard."

He offered his hand for a shake. They talked for some time. It seemed that twenty years before, the man had lost a bet to his older brother and was to let his beard grow until that brother got married. In twenty years, he apparently hadn't, thus the navel-length whiskers.

"And he keeps track of you about it to keep you honest?"

"Oh, no. He died fifteen years ago. I've just grown to like it."

*That* would make his column.

During pie, he received a text from Sally.

'You might want to visit the foundry – silos, dumpsters, fencing, gates, pipe.'

It was at the west edge of the city. He took a cab to his car and made the thirty-minute drive. It was a huge operation covering several acres, set aside from the world by a twelve-foot tall, woven wire fence. He used his Gazette ID at the front gate to gain admittance and stopped at the main office. He approached the counter and the very pretty, middle-aged lady standing behind it. Her nametag read, Alice.

“How may I help you, sir.”

“The *McGillicuddy Foundry*. I assume that means you are in the business of *finding* McGillicuddies. First, just what is a McGillicuddy?”

“You’re Joshin’ Around, aren’t you – I mean Josh, the columnist. I recognize you from your picture in the paper.”

“Guilty. Here to nose around a bit and see what humorous bits I might come upon.”

“Nothing very funny ever happens here, I’m afraid – other than listening to newcomers try and pronounce or spell our name.”

The question at the front of his mind was whether they built blades or scoops for bulldozers. His inquiry was met with a disheartening, ‘no’, but he was escorted to a room where there were dozens of framed, full-color, photographs of their products, along with listings of the important specifications of each. She stayed with him. He had questions.

“Who are your clients? Companies, municipalities, individuals?”

“Mostly companies. We sell all over a four-state area. There are some direct sales to towns and cities.”

“Like what sort of items?”

“Lots of fencing. Water towers. Manhole covers. Pipe for sewer and water lines. Dumpsters. Mostly, though, parts for other manufacturing companies. Our guys can design and produce most anything that can be made from metal.”

“You said individuals. That intrigues me. What do you have that could possibly be of interest to an individual?”

“Lots of made-to-specification silos to farmers in the rural areas. Sometimes odd, special orders. Like collars that reduce or expand flow through off-size pipes. Believe it or not, we even did a made-to-order dumpster a few months back.”

Josh spent a few more minutes looking at pictures hoping something would jump out at him. Nothing did. He was back on the road by two o’clock. His phone rang. He pulled over and took the call.

“Josh here.”

“This is the gun guy. We spoke about the rifle with the old Lebedev sight and laser spotter.”

“I had forgotten about that last feature, but go ahead.”

“The man who made the purchase says he obtained it for somebody else – a third party. Some funny stuff about it if you ask me.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah! He said his instructions were to address it to “C” and employ the services of a delivery company known as CDS. I’ve never heard of it. He had been given an email for contacting the company. He did. It was picked up by a CDS credentialed driver in a late model Lincoln – a kid, very young, no more than 17. The driver handed him an envelope containing the agreed upon amount of cash and that was that. He gave me the company’s email address. Apparently, the buyer hadn’t suggested there was anything secretive about any of it.”

“Will you text me that email?”

“Sure. Coming at you right now.”

“Thanks. Are you sure I can’t pay you something for all your work.”

“If anything interesting comes of it, let me know. It all suddenly intrigues me.”

“I will do that. Thanks again. Oh, one thing more, if I may. Did you receive many calls about it?”

“Only the one and then yours. That scope is so old and so rare I’m thinking that guys surfing the want ads for a set up wouldn’t have known about it, so moved on to find one with a more familiar scope – a Burris, Leopold, Vortex – something like that.”

“Would that also tell you the one who purchased it might not know much about guns?”

“I suppose it does. Hadn’t put it in that context.”

“Okay, then. Thanks again.”

Josh turned the car around and headed back to McGillicuddy’s.

“Alice. Seems like I’ve known you for, oh, say seventy-five minutes. I forgot one question. Do you regularly use a delivery service known as CDS?”

“An interesting question. I had *never* heard of it until a few months back. I think I mentioned we had a special order for a dumpster. CDS handled that delivery.”

“In a late model Lincoln?”

“What? Goodness no. One of these roll-off dumpster trucks. I remember it had a very young driver, which surprised me. He handled it like a pro, however.”

“Can you tell me how the dumpster was addressed – I don’t mean something like, “Hello there, Mr. Dumpster,” I mean its destination.”

“You really are a funny man. I suppose there’s no reason I can’t tell you that. Let me look it up.”

She pressed keys on the computer.

“Yes. I remember, now. It was odd. The address was just a capital “C”. The driver seemed to have no problem about that.”

“Alice, you are an angel. Thank you, again.”

“For what, I’m not sure. None of that seemed very humorous to me.”

“Humor, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder.”

He was sure his comment had not cleared up anything for her, but it allowed him to exit the building.

Outside, he approached a workman who, himself, was approaching the office.

“I’m here to check on the progress of my special-order dumpster. Can you direct me to the building? I seem to be turned around in here today.”

“Building ‘J’. Right over there.”

He pointed.

“With the red door, right?”

“Right.”

“I should have remembered that.”

They exchanged smiles and Josh moved toward ‘Building J’ where he entered. The operation inside suggested each unit was made in place – no assembly line to it. He approached the man who seemed to be in charge. Supervisors in places like that always looked uncomfortable in their white shirts and loosened ties.

“You built a special-order dumpster for my company a few months back. We do business under the odd name, ‘C’. I’m purely a front office amateur at this stuff. There’s a doomaflatchy on it that came loose and we lost it somewhere along the route. I’ve been sent to see about getting a replacement part. You may have already received an email

about it.”

The man smiled and patted Josh on his back – apparently not recognizing him, which had been a concern. He had prepared a ‘lookalike-get-that-all-the-time’ story if it had gone differently.

“Sounds like we will need to look at the specs to find your doomaflatchy. I remember that one. Would you know the part if you saw it?”

“Oh, yes. That much I can certainly do.”

They walked to a cubical in one corner of the big building. It was much like the one Josh occupied at the Gazette building – a bit larger, higher walls. After a few moments, the man pulled up a diagram on the computer screen and motioned Josh in close.

“I have six main angles I can show you. Do you see the part here?”

Josh studied the diagram for longer than necessary but stopped before he thought it might become suspicious.

“It’s on the inside, actually.”

The man brought up a top-down view of the interior.

Again, Josh studied it with care, learning as much about it as he could in an amount of time he hoped seemed reasonable.

“Thar she blows,” he said pointing to a ‘U’ shaped element, six or so inches long up near the top edge at the front right corner.”

“The lift-bar. There are four of them.”

He pointed.

“One near each corner. They are where hooks and chains from a crane can be attached to lift it – like up to a higher floor at a construction site. It’s a standard item you can take with you. Just need your John Henry on an invoice. Be printed out in a second.”

It took *ten* seconds, but Josh didn’t complain. He signed it – Billy Jones. The man made a call and a workman brought it immediately.

“That is great. What do I owe you?”

“Six-month guarantee. No charge. I assume you’ll be able to weld it in place. Our initial weld must have been flawed. I’ll get on the boys about it.”

Josh hadn't come with the intention of getting anybody in trouble, but it didn't sound like it would amount to much.

"One more thing, because you seem so willing to be helpful – that will teach you."

The man chuckled as Josh continued.

"Any chance I can have a copy of that diagram so I can study it and appear smarter than I really am about such things. The drivers enjoy ribbing me about my ignorance."

"Of course. Just the one?"

"Well?"

"Let's make it all six for the price of one," he went on, sending the whole file to the printer."

Josh had taken things further than he had intended, but sensed he was at a relatively safe point of no return.

"By the way," the man said, "is it working the way you need it to work?"

"Not sure what you mean."

"Well, your company had us design it with the double bottom, hinged across the front so it can be raised up in back by this pully arrangement."

He pointed to the diagram.

"As far as I know it's working fine. That really isn't my area. The only complaint I've heard is this oversized staple coming lose."

"Good. That's what we like to hear. Our goal is always to produce dependable products."

Josh thanked the man and left, the proud possessor of six printed sheets in a manila file folder and one, five pound, maroon, doomafatchy, or whatever the man had called it – lift-bar.

He texted Sally before leaving the grounds, telling her he had lots of work for them to do that night. He'd bring supper and decided on Chinese since it warmed up well in case he got home well ahead of her, which was how it appeared things would work out.

On a whim, he sent a simple e-mail to the company called 'C' – "Send Catalog" – with a fake address. It was returned as undeliverable. Why it took 49 lines of information to deliver that seemingly simple message – 'Undeliverable' – he had never been able to understand. That was, however,

what Josh expected. Once it has served its one-time purpose, it had been closed.

By the time he entered the apartment, he had in hand, supper, a lift bar, and a set of specifications for the roll-off dumpster. Of course, he had no use for the bar and, in fact, had nothing to substantiate that specific dumpster played any part in the murders. He searched his phone for notes he had made at the murder sites. There it was, the width of the gouges in the alley floors – six feet and maybe a few inches – hard to tell the way the earth fell in on itself near the ends. He went to the spec sheets – six feet wide. He wondered if that were standard and figured it must be if it were to be delivered by a standard roll-off truck. Or, perhaps a roll-off truck could handle loads of varying widths. He would find out.

That brought up several more immediately important questions. If you owned your own dumpster, but not a delivery truck, could you rent one? He went to the phone book, always amazed there still were such things. He assumed their prime purpose was to keep advertising agencies solvent.

“I have come by a roll-off dumpster at my new residence, but I have no way of transporting it, rolling it off and picking it up. Do you provide that service?”

“Sorry. We only handle our rental units. I think *Rick’s Rentals* on South Lavern may rent a roll-off truck. What’s the size of the dumpster?”

“Eight feet long and six wide.”

“Yeah. Narrow width. I’m pretty sure they have one that will work. If not, remember we can supply the whole shebang.”

Josh thanked him, grinned, and hung up.

‘A roll-off, TWS,’ he thought. ‘What a fascinating, if cumbersome, idea.’

He wished he could work that into a column – he couldn’t of course. He would share it with Sally and surely get at least a smile. Perhaps even a trial demonstration, later on.

He called *Rick’s Rentals*, asking for general information. If it panned out, he’d stop by the next day to finagle more answers. They did have such a truck, but only rented it to people familiar with the roll-off operation.

Inexperienced drivers were required to receive an hour of training at fifty dollars a pop.

Josh understood that in his heart he was a conman. He generally thought his version was that of a benevolent conman – using his skills to get people to give up secrets he could use to entertain the masses. It had also been useful back in high school and college – teachers, classmates, girls – especially girls. His skills were highly honed as he had exhibited with Alice and the foreman at the foundry and just then on the phone with Mr. Dumpster.

He studied the diagrams and spec sheets. Why a hinged bottom in a six-foot-high container? According to the figures on the drawing, the bottom section was only one foot deep. Maybe to capture water or a liquid chemical from some sort of wet contents it handled. In that case, he figured there should be holes in the ‘lid’ for it to seep through. Sally always had ideas. He’d wait for her. He had noticed there was a definite front and back – the front having another of those U-shaped, lift-bars centered up half way so a winch could lower it down the ramp slowly and then pull it back onto the truck. He had seen one operate once. The truck functioned like a dump truck, tipping the dumpster and sliding it down to the ground, then, when the truck pulled forward, the big box settled onto the ground to be filled. The pick-up of the unit worked in reverse. He had noticed that when it slid off, the rear bottom edge had dug into the ground a few inches because of the angle of tilt. He wished he could remember exactly what that gouge looked like.

The pictures Alice had pointed out to him, showed the MCgillicuddy dumpsters were all painted maroon. Although he couldn’t be certain, he figured a brand-new unit just might leave some of its recent paint job behind in the ground.

\* \* \*

“It’s been a long, hard, virtually fruitless, day, Josh,” Sally said. “Can we just eat without working – give ourselves a half hour of unadulterated time out from the world?”

“Of course. I’ll even move my great findings off the table and over to the desk.”

If she could resist that temptation, he knew for sure she needed some time away. She resisted. He arranged for the

time away.

“The sweet and sour sauce is different. Not Chin’s?”

“No. A place called Ho’s. It was on my way in from the foundry and I guess I, too, was looking for easy and handy this evening. Is it okay?”

“It’s great, actually. Red. That’s different.”

“As a kid, I was allergic to red food coloring,” Josh said. “If I’d have even tasted that at twelve, I’d have had a bright red, prickly, rash all over my body.”

“Did you have somebody to rub Calamine on you?”

“I did, but my mom wouldn’t let her into my bedroom.”

“You were a scamp at an early age!”

“No, just believed it was my sacred duty to follow my new hormones wherever they led me.”

“Anyway, it sounds horrible. I’m glad that’s behind you.”

“Oh, it was behind me, in front of me, around the sides of me – even in my scalp.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Thank you for noticing. I do my best.”

They spent the remainder of supper time trading happy stories from their childhoods. It allowed memories neither had thought of for a dozen or more years. What a nice time, they thought.

With the dishes cleared away, Josh moved his chair beside hers and spread the diagrams out on the table.

“What’s that overgrown, purple horseshoe?”

“In the first place, it is maroon # PM462, and it has no bearing on anything we’re interested in. I’ll explain later.”

“I bet the P in the PM stands for Purple,” she said, not easily giving up.

“And the M for maroon,” Josh added. “So, we both win. May we move on?”

Without more words, she shifted her attention to the sheets of paper he was positioning in front of them.

“I realize we make a good deal of trash with all the take outs we get,” she said, “but you think we really need our own dumpster?”

“I will assume that was your attempt at humor. Let me enlighten you, and at the outset, I must alert you to the fact

that what I have here may not have any bearing on the shootings.”

“That sort of takes the exciting edge off it all, you know. Bummer!”

“Am I going to have to put your mouth in a lip-lock to keep you quiet?”

“Sounds like fun. Hold that thought for later.”

He went on to explain about the false bottom, the only really interesting aspect of the drawings.

“A hiding place?” she said. “You’re thinking the shooter puts the gun into the false bottom?”

“The gun, scope, tripod, rope, vise-grip-thingys, maybe even the carabiners and latex gloves.”

“You have previously pointed out the problem with that explanation, you know,” she said.

“The fact that the judge clearly hadn’t left the roof to accomplish any of that. I know. We need to reset things so we can make sense of it. If this dumpster is a part of it – and the delivery information, marks in the ground and the paint match sure make it seem like it is – then, two things: a brilliant plan, nothing but an apparently empty dumpster in an alley, behind a different building for the cops to see, *and*, the essential question, how did the material get placed into it?”

“And three, ‘by whom?’” she added.

“Yes, okay, placed there by whom? Are you posing the possibility of an assistant or accomplice?”

“No idea,” she said. “It seems like the intention was to make it simple, like ideal for a one-man operation.”

“Say more about that?”

“The self-contained, compact, rifle-scope-tripod arrangement for one.”

“The answer has to lie in the use of the wash-line thingys.”

“I thought they were gizmos.”

“No, the lift-bars are the gizmos. Don’t you listen? But, you’re right. The so-called, clothesline vises must hold the clue to how the equipment was made to disappear fast and permanently.”

“So,” Sally began, standing and beginning to pace, “we know all the elements that we have to use, we just need to get

creative about *how* they are used. Let's say one of the vises is hooked onto the cement cap – something you seem to be pretty sure about – and the other is attached somewhere on the dumpster – since the dumpster seems to part of all this. There is a continuous loop of rope strung between them – the two vises. Immediately after the murder, the shooter hooks the rifle set-up onto the line, and by pulling the rope, directs it down into the dumpster. Make sense?"

"As far as it goes," Josh said. "But how does it get into the hidden compartment? It makes sense that if the dumpster is the hiding place – and a false bottom seems to support that – how does the second vise get down to it from the roof?"

"What about this?" Sally continued: "After the gun is sent down, the shooter unscrews the vise from the cap and drops it to the ground. Then he goes down the ladder, picks it up and throws it into the dumpster along with the plastic rope."

"A possibility," Josh said. "Why not just lower the gun and the vise to the ground by rope and then put all of it in the secret compartment?"

"Because *then* there is no reason for the vise?" Sally said, really asking. "Maybe we need to sleep on it," she went on. "I'm out of ideas and like I said it wasn't an easy day at the library."

"I think we've made some progress, Sally. We know we must find a way to make some sort of use of the vises and rope loop so, as a method, it is more effective than just lowering it all to the ground by a rope. One other obstacle I've thought about; that dumpster's walls are six feet high and it sits on eight-inch iron wheels. That's way too high for an old man to navigate – put the material into it, get in, transfer it all into the secret compartment, close the false bottom, climb out and make his getaway."

"Like I said, we need to sleep on it."

"I agree. So, do I now have permission to pursue the application of that lip-lock?"

"If you can catch them?"

"What?"

"I've been told I have the fastest lips in the west."

"Ridiculous! Prepare to be roped, tied, and romanced, pardner!"

## CHAPTER NINE

It was Saturday, the prelude to 48 hours of book-less, column-less, freedom. They often left the city on weekends – a hotel in the hills, a cabin in the woods, a float trip on a lazy river. They agreed to stay in town and pursue the murders. The sooner they figured it out the more likely the score for the bad guys would remain at four – well, five counting the demise of the judge.

Sally slept in. Josh put on the coffee and began work on a miniature replica of the crime scene, which included the still to be determined role of the dumpster. Cardboard and glue – he had spent hundreds of hours between ages eight and twelve constructing wonderful things in that way. Some won prizes in the county fair. The pinnacle of his inroad into the arts was a 1/20<sup>th</sup> replica of a stage coach, complete with most everything. After thirteen arrived, his focus on *inroading* shifted to the female of the species.

By the time Sally stretched her way into the kitchen, Josh had the back sides of two side-by-side buildings in place on the top of a large pizza box – the building used by the shooter and the one to the south where the dumpster might have set. The ladder to the roof, made of chopsticks and matches, was drying beside the sink. He sliced a piece of Styrofoam packing material for the cement cap, topping the rear wall on the shooter's building.

"Looks like *Pablo* has been busy this morning," she offered pouring coffee for herself and refilling Josh's.

"If I were to paint it, I believe the proper simile would be 'like *Vincent*' but I won't quibble."

“Vincent, you say. How *earie!*”

“Clearly the prolonged lip-lock last night didn’t solve your problem, young lady.”

“Do I need to stay after school for tutoring?”

“For a mere student, you do have fascinating ideas, sometimes.”

“Seriously, what’s going on?”

Josh explained even though she really had surmised all the basics.

“I’m beginning to work on the dumpster.”

“You discovered the secret to how it works?”

“No, but I figured with both of us fooling around with possibilities, we just might come up with something plausible.”

“We *are* a world class team when it comes to fooling around.”

It was worth a long moment’s pursuit of the perfect lip-lock.

“What I have so far is an oversized box – to scale it would be less than an inch square. I substituted blocks for wheels. Notice it has an open top, the way most roll-off models do. I have inserted the false bottom with a fabric hinge in this iteration. As I went back through the photos I took of each scene, it popped out at me that in each instance, the dumpster sat at an almost identical distance from the north wall – the far wall – of the shooter building. It may also have to do with why all the buildings are eight stories tall – all of them virtually the same height.”

“You’re thinking those two measurements – the height of the building and the distance from the north edge of the building to the dumpster – are important.”

“Yes. Remember figuring the length of the hypotenuse of right triangles in Geometry and Trig?”

“Only vaguely. It seldom comes up in my line of work.”

“Or mine, but Henry up on third gave me a refresher course. If all those hypotenuses are approximately the same length – allowing for a variable sag factor – the rope used between the vice grips could all be the same length.”

“And the angle would be the same if that’s important,” Sally added.

Josh nodded.

“Question,” Sally said. “Say the assembled gun is clipped to one side of the rope loop by a carabiner – up top. Would its weight be enough to lower it down the rope or would the rope need to be pulled by the shooter? That could be time consuming?”

“Interesting. Get paper, pencil and a ruler. We’ll draw it out so we have a better picture of the angle we’re dealing with.”

They worked in silence for several minutes.

“Okay. The building is eight units high – about 80 feet – and four units wide – about forty feet. The mark from the dumpster is in about ten feet from north edge of the south building plus the ten-foot width of the pass-through between buildings which is . . .”

“. . . sixty feet by measurement,” Sally added.

“Say the lower end of the rope is attached five more feet further into the compartment at the bottom of the dumpster. That length would then be sixty-five feet. That makes a relatively severe angle, I’d say.”

Sally measured carefully and drew on the paper.

“Let me check it with a compass. . . thirty-five degrees,” she said.

“I’m certain the weight of the gun assembly would quickly drop it to the ground along that angle. The assembly weighs about ten pounds. Look on the box that the vise-grips for the clothesline device came in and find the weight, if it’s there.”

“Let’s see. Easy one-hand operation. Eight pounds, three ounces. So combined – the gun and the vise – would weigh close to twenty pounds – over eighteen. Why include the vice?”

“Hear me out, Sally. This may be way out, but then you’re used to me being way out.”

He pointed as he spoke.

“Assume that when the shooter first arrives on the scene, the dumpster is there and all the material needed is already in the false bottom. He somehow opens the lid on the false bottom – a short length of rope from it attached up at the rear lip of the dumpster or some such thing. The shooter pulls the lid open and in some way fastens it open – maybe there is

a folding leg that snaps into place to hold it open like on some car hoods. “I’m doing a lot of spit-balling as I go here. But listen for the essence – ways can always be found to make the little things work.

“The vise-grip that will be fastened to the north lip of the wall around the roof is pulled out – probably by that same rope used to open the lid. The loop of rope is already threaded through the second one that is attached under the lid and onto the false bottom. He attaches the free vice-grip to his belt or some such thing. As he walks to the ladder the rope follows behind him. Using the carabiners to provide a safe climb, he makes it to the roof. He walks to the rear north edge and clamps the vice-grip in place.

“Down in the dumpster, the assembled gun outfit is already fastened to that end of the rope loop so it will be carried up the rope when it is pulled by the shooter on the roof. When it arrives, the shooter removes it and goes to the front to await the target. It is probably timed so he is there at about that same moment. The shooter sets the rifle in place on the front cement cap – assume it is pre-loaded – gets the target in focus in the cross hairs, shoots the victim and returns to the rear corner. He reattaches the gun unit to the rope with a carabiner so it will slide under its own weight into the hidden area under the lid. Remember, that lid is open like the beak of a newly hatched Robin.

“The shooter then detaches the vice-grip with one hand – the box touts easy one hand operation – and, holding the rope tightly in the other, allows the vice-grip to also slide down the rope into the dumpster. As it arrives in the dumpster, it hits some sort of trip mechanism that activates a spring-loaded axil that rolls the rope onto it. Once the last item is inside the hiding area the lid closes. The shooter makes his way down the ladder and leaves by way of a predetermined get-away route where he has access to a vehicle.

“What do you think?”

“Suburb, Sherlock!”

“May I *‘far out’* a bit further?”

Josh nodded, eager for anything that might provide a more complete scenario.”

“Let’s say there is a ladder hung, horizontally and

loosely to the outside of the dumpster – say six or seven feet long and hung on ‘L’ shaped brackets. It isn’t used until the very end, when, after the rifle, rope and vice-grip are all inside the bottom compartment – according to your description – the shooter sets the ladder in place at the rear, climbs it, gets inside drops it back into the ‘L’ brackets over the side, which held it originally, works himself inside the hidden compartment on his back – probably padded – closes the lid and waits for the dumpster to be picked up and taken away. That minimizes the chance the shooter would be seen in the area.”

“One of your better ‘far outs’, I’d say. I like it – a lot,” Josh said, adding:

“Assume they all wear a jumpsuit like the Judge to collect residue from firing the gun. Rather than having to get out of it, like they would if they just walked away – not daring to be caught in it – they would save considerable time. I think we have the entire escape, from the moment the trigger is pulled until he is all cozy in the dumpster, down to something well under the five minutes it takes the cops to arrive on the scene. A brilliant plan, I’d say.”

“And it was put to shame by *my* brilliant man.”

“I’m not sure regarding a few details about the mechanisms, but that they can be devised is certainly clear.”

Sally began laughing.

“What?”

“Wouldn’t it be funny – if after all of this – we find out the shooter simply inflated a large helium balloon, floated into the sky and landed in the surrounding hills.”

“You are evil, LOML, Josh said, pulling her onto his lap. How about we go catch Bruch at *Ballantine’s Buffet?*”

“That sounds good to me. We both need showers.”

“THAT sounds good to me!”

\* \* \*

They lingered *over the food*, in what was a very nice atmosphere for a buffet. On the way home, they stopped by a park and played on the swings. It had been a haven for Josh when his family first moved to town during his third-grade year. It was just down the back hill from the Winston Heights School for Boys which he attended – reluctantly – as an older teenager. On his side of the hill was a lower middle class

neighborhood. On the other, a wealthier section.

He pointed up the hill to the top of a steeple – the only part of the Administration Building that could be seen from down there.

“That was once graced by fluorescent-orange paint. The culprit was never identified – for sure. The headmaster, Dr. Patterson suspected *me*, of all people. I remember the morning it was discovered, he called an assembly, which he began by calling me up to his lectern. He had me hold out my hands where he discovered fluorescent Orange paint under my fingernails. He had me hold them up so the others could see as he went on to accuse me of the deed. One by one each of the other boys stood and held up his hands, nails in the Headmaster’s direction. They were all orange as well. One might think there had been a malevolent collusion of like-minded, Headmaster despising, teenage boys. He walked out on us, huffing and puffing.

“I was glad that was near the end of my senior year because life was not easy for me after that. He and I had hated each other from the moment we first met. I informed him that wearing a striped jacket with a checkered vest was in poor taste and suggested that clearly, he had no intention of being a good model for his students. He informed me that boys with big mouths quickly acquired warmed buttocks at his school.”

“You had that exchange with the Headmaster – the first time you met him?”

“I didn’t want to be there and hoped that might get me kicked out before the two-year ordeal began.”

“I’m not sure I understand. You were an outstanding student.”

“I treasured the freedom that public school had allowed me. Unfortunately, what I considered freedom, the school personnel considered truancy and bad manners. Being forced to attend The Heights always represented punishment rather than an opportunity as far as I was concerned. Dr. Patterson would have loved to have me leave, I’m sure, but he was too stubborn to have it on him – it had to be on me and I was just too careful and smart to let that happen once it became established as a competition between us. It was undoubtedly

the most miserable two years of both our lives. Stubborn asses, the two of us.”

“It’s hard to believe you were that sort of teen; you are so kind and gentle and understanding as a man.”

“Oh, I was kind and understanding back then, too - kind of obnoxious, and understanding just what I had to do to make the Headmaster’s life miserable. He held himself and his students to very high standards – I can’t fault him for that – but he was one of those, any-means-justified-his-ends, sort of person.”

“Not sure I understand.”

“He was fully certain that he knew what was right – the ultimate truth – and what was wrong – no room for argument in his mind. Like most people who suffer under that delusion, he believed, therefore, that nothing he did to achieve his ends could be considered out of line. If he had to cheat a little to instill or act on his beliefs, he defined that cheating as allowable – no guilt or second thoughts. If he had to hurt somebody, physically or socially to achieve his ends, he was immediately able to define such an action as permissible – laudable, even. In my estimation, he represents one of the most dangerous sorts of human beings that trod the earth.”

“I can see that you and he would be at loggerheads. You stuck it out, though, right?”

“Valedictorian, which had to be the biggest disappointment of Patterson’s life. It gave me a free ride through six years of college so I suppose I should be appreciative for the motivation the old man provided.”

“It would be nice if that could happen – you become appreciative.”

“Don’t hold your breath for it. You’d not look your best laid out in your casket wearing a blue complexion.”

“Sometimes your head goes to just awful places Joshua Jeramiah Jamison.”

“Sorry my dear, but my head is part of the package.”

“I really do love most of your head, you know.”

“I will start frisking you for a scalpel before we go to sleep at night.”

“You already frisk me – might as well be for a scalpel, I suppose.”

They shared a peck to the lips and walked across the green expanse to the car.

“So, adding in our early morning’s work, where does it leave us on the case?” Sally asked, setting the stage for a summary.

“If we are correct about the dumpster, and I’m more convinced than ever after this morning, we need to find how and by whom it is transported.”

“And *when*, relative to the shootings,” she added.

Josh nodded and continued.

“We still have no idea who the shooters are. It might be just the judge and one other who were taking turns. It might involve at least four – one for each murder. I’d like to think that address – ‘C’ – is some sort of a clue. I think the Gun Man from the want ads may be right – that the person who bought the gun did so as much out of ignorance as anything, other than his need for a gun of a specialized sort – length, weight, and scope for example.”

“That all makes sense. You believe both delivery boys are the same person?”

“As close to the chest as these people are holding their cards, I’m inclined to think that – the fewer people involved the better.”

“It makes sense they would have employed an outsider to pick up the supplies. They wouldn’t want to have themselves associated in anyway with it all.”

Josh nodded.

“Where would old men – and I’m thinking that because of the judge – find a boy who they could trust to both do the job and keep his mouth shut?” Sally added, asking an important question.

“Picking up the gun took no expertise other than being able to drive and read. The dumpster, on the other hand took well-practiced skills. That may be one of our best lines to pursue.”

“Alice spoke of him as a teen-ager so I’d guess somewhere between seventeen and nineteen.”

“A grandson, maybe?” Sally said.

“That would assure loyalty, for sure. Would they want to get a relative involved in such a nefarious activity, though?”

“Good point. Not sure where to go from here, then.”

\* \* \*

Back at Sally's, she sat at one end of the couch and he stretched out with his head in her lap. It was suddenly mid-afternoon.

“I don't suppose the date of a next assassination is predictable, if there's to be another,” she said grasping at straws.

“How interesting,” Josh said. “We haven't thought along those lines. Let's think about it. The first was on March 15<sup>th</sup> – the Ides of March – when Cesar was killed.”

“There's a 'C' – Cesar,” Sally pointed out.

“Remember that. The next one was on April 30<sup>st</sup>. What's that? 46 days later, I think. The third was on May 23<sup>rd</sup>. That would have been a span of only 23 days. And the last one was on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, which was eleven days later.”

“You see the pattern, don't you,” Sally said. Each one occurred a number of days later that is half the period elapsed for the one before – 46, 23, 11, and that means the next one, if there is to be another, should happen 4 or 5 days after that on June 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup>.”

“The 7<sup>th</sup> was yesterday. The 8<sup>th</sup> is today, Sally. Turn on the TV. We haven't heard the news all day.”

What they witnessed there provided a mixed message. There had been a fifth Rooftop Murder – it happened no more than an hour and a half before. It was terrible that it happened, but they most certainly *had* figured out the sequence. They assumed the authorities had also.

“It took place within the same tight, geographic ring there within the buffer zone,” Josh said.

He had been sitting up since the first blazing headline had flashed on the screen.

“If our figuring is correct, that means the next will be in 2 or 3 days – half of a five or six-day span.”

The story was the same as the others – the shooter took one shot and left before he could be apprehended. That time the victim was Dimitri Urganov, a Russian diplomat. Jot down that address, Sally. I'm going dumpster hunting.”

“Not without me you aren't.”

“I assumed as much. It will be five by the time we can

get there. Maybe already too late, but let's dress in our dark sweat outfits so we'll blend into the coming darkness and long, deep, shadows in the alley."

They changed clothes and were on the road within a few minutes.

"We will park several blocks away – let's make it one south and one west. I doubt if the police will be looking that far away," Josh suggested.

They came upon the area from the south west. They could see flashing lights as far as three blocks in all directions so parked a bit further away than planned. Every twenty yards they stopped to reconnoiter – changing direction depending on the presence or absence of the black and whites.

"Look there," Josh said pointing. "The building across the alley from where we expect the dumpster to be setting is vacant. The first-floor windows are boarded up. Let's see if we can find a way inside and move to the alley windows on the second floor. It should provide a good view right behind the scene."

They moved on carefully.

"The door is locked," Josh said. "Help me find a short length of narrow gauge wire."

"Like this wrapped around that nail on the door frame?"

"Exactly."

He worked with the wire until he had two straight ends. Inserting them into the lock and twisting them one way and another, he soon had the door opened and them inside.

"It would seem you've done this before."

"Would it now?"

He took her hand and they moved along halls toward the east and the alley.

"That door," he said pointing. "That room should get us to where we want to be."

It did. The windows were covered with grime.

"Just clean tiny spots to look through so they won't be noticed by anybody below," Josh said, continuing to sound like he had been in the thick of such a thing before.

It had been two and a half hours since the shooting. Police were everywhere. Josh counted ten before running out of fingers. Why fingers he had no idea, but he stopped before

removing his shoes. At any rate, it was quite a few cops.

"There's no dumpster," Sally said.

"I noticed. Not even the telltale gouge in the alley floor. That's disheartening."

The buildings in that section were all a minimum of five stories tall so the alley had already darkened considerably. Josh noticed several other features. The pass-through between the shooter's building and the one to its south was twenty, perhaps twenty-five feet wide. That was more than twice the usual ten feet required by code.

"So, what do we do now," Sally asked.

"My plan was to find the dumpster right where I knew it would be, break onto the scene, lead the authorities to it, expose the shooter and his equipment, and accompany you as we accepted the *Citizen's Law Enforcement Plaque* at the awards ceremony in September."

"How about a Plan B, then?"

"See if you can find any more up to date news on your phone. I want to watch from here for just a little longer. I must say the officers are scouring the area."

"Nothing new, on the news feed. Also, interestingly, nothing about the time line for the shooting that we predicted. If the police have it figured out they aren't letting it out to the public. Apparently, none of the reporters have figured it out or you know it would be all over the news, frightening the bejeebes out of the citizens."

Josh's eyes wandered up and down the alley.

"See that kid at the far south end of the block? I was that kid once. I'll guarantee that he knows more than any of the rest of us. I'm going down and try and talk with him. A woman will spook him, so, you'll need to stay back out of sight. You okay with that?"

"Sure. It's for times like this that I carry that Derringer in my sock."

"Really?"

"Of course, not. Not yet, anyway. If you are going to regularly play detective I may need to search the want ads myself."

They turned to leave. The floor squeaked out in the hall. The tall dark figure hurried by the open door and out of

sight.

## CHAPTER TEN

They crouched in the shadows and waited. The squeaking ceased.

“We’ll walk sideways along the central hallway to the stairs in the center of the building, take them to the first, and then circle back out the east door – the way we entered – away from the action in the alley.”

It had been Josh, whispering.

They moved out. Josh grasped Sally’s hand and took the lead. Although they had not noticed it before, it seemed every time they moved, the floor announced their whereabouts.

At last on the street in front of the building, they stopped and began breathing naturally again.

“Let’s head for the south corner of the block. We’ll find you a place to hole up until I meet with the kid.”

Sally nodded agreeing although, after that experience, not necessarily liking it.

There was a deep doorway perfect for what they needed.

“You have gum?” he asked.

“You know I always have gum. Why?”

“Give me a pack. Nothing like the offer of gum between street guys to signal everything is copacetic.”

“Copacetic?”

“It means . . .”

“I know what it means, but you’d use that word with a kid?”

“No. I used it with you, the educated love of my life.”

Josh kissed her and rounded the corner. As a friendly gesture, he pulled his hoodie down around his neck and shoulders as he drew close to the boy – thirteen or fourteen, he figured, and dressed much like Josh only the kid's shoes were more expensive.

He saw Josh coming and took a step backward. Josh smiled and hitched head up the alley. He spoke.

"Hey. Lot's a cops. What's going on?"

Josh ambled in closer. The boy stood his ground. Josh held out the open pack of gum, one stick extended. The boy accepted it with a nod – street talk for 'Thanks, Dude'. The boy spoke pointing up the alley.

"Another Rooftop Murder. The Jackson Building. A couple of hours ago – maybe three."

"You hear who got killed?"

"Some big wig."

"I assumed that. Seems to be the type this killer is going after."

"I think he's a Russian – Demi Urges or something like that. Probably good to get rid a the commies. No big loss."

"Yeah, commies," Josh came back trying to remain noncommittal and not antagonistic.

*Commie* was an odd word for a present-day kid to use. Maybe he lived with grandparents or spent time around the elderly.

"You been here watching long?"

"Pretty much the whole time. My grampa lives down on Elm. I was on my way there when I crossed this alley and saw all the cops, so I stopped to see what's what."

"Your grampa be worried if you don't show up?"

The boy held up his phone.

"I have been giving him a blow by blow. He likes old fashioned words like that. He was a pretty good middle weight back in his day – at least that's his story."

The boy offered the first grin. Josh returned it with a knowing nod.

"You're the expert on this, then – been here the whole time. See anything unusual?"

He gave Josh a look.

"I'd say an alley full of cops is unusual."

"I walked into that one. That was a great comeback. I'm a writer so I listen for things like that. Can I use that in a story sometime?"

"You write stories, too?"

"Too? I don't understand."

"You're that Joshin' Around guy. You think I would have stayed around and let a white guy in expensive sweats come toward me if I didn't know you were harmless?"

"I suppose not. I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry it has to be that way for you. Still, I wouldn't have taken you for a column reader."

He grinned again.

"I have to admit it isn't by choice. Grampa likes your stuff and his eyes are failing so I read it to him. Three days behind right now – partly why I was heading in his direction."

"Partly?"

"Aunt Maudy takes him one of her fresh backed pies every Saturday. He tells me he needs me to help him eat them so she won't think he doesn't like them. I know it's just one of his ways of getting me to come see him. I should do better by him."

What a great kid, Josh thought.

"You asked about anything unusual and I gave you a smartass answer. Sorry about that. You're okay. Not this afternoon, but maybe something this morning."

"What was that?"

"Early this morning I was walking this alley on my way to see Letty – she's my girl. Up just beyond where the cops are there behind the Jackson Building, there was one of those slide-off dumpster trucks leaving off a little dumpster. I tried to start up a conversation with the kid driving it, but he wasn't very talkative. Seemed like I was making him nervous so I moved on. I wasn't looking to make him nervous."

"Behind *which* building was the drop-off?"

"You seem more than a little interested in all this."

"It's the writer – the reporter – in me I suppose."

The boy nodded and continued clearly enjoying being the center of attention.

"The J. M. Bower Building – all offices. Other side of the one the cops are interested in. Lots of good looking

secretaries there early mornings. Anyway, that's the one. Beside the back door right in the center of the building. Hard to understand."

"Why is that."

"Late, every afternoon during the week the janitor – old Mike, he likes to be called a Building Engineer."

The boy smiled and shook his head.

"Anyway, old Mike pushes their little dumpster out the double doors on the far end and leaves it in the ally for a garbage truck that comes by during the night to empty it. Then he takes it back in the next morning. It's what I was going to ask that driver kid about, but that conversation went nowhere fast. Like I said, I just moved on. No margin in aggravating people – that's what grampa says."

"Did you notice anything special about the truck or driver?"

"That worth another stick of gum?"

He grinned. Josh handed him the pack.

"I was mostly kidding, but thanks. Anyway, like what sort of things?"

"Company name or address or phone or email – website maybe."

"Rick's Rentals on South Lavern."

"That's great. Anything about the driver – you referred to him as a kid."

"White. Tall. Skinny. Probably sixteen. Way young to be driving that sort of a rig, I'd say. Wore a ball cap with the bill toward the front – not from around here, I'll tell you for sure. Blond. I always wanted to touch blond hair, but never have. He knew his way around that truck, I'll give him that. From the time he stopped, 'til he left wasn't any more than three minutes. Maybe it was because he was in a hurry that he didn't want to talk."

"Toward which end of the alley was the truck headed?"

"Other way. North."

Josh nodded.

"Oh. There was one other really odd thing. Before he slid it off, he came around on this side and used a wind up measuring thing from the north side of the Jackson building and then made a mark in the gravel with his boot at some

special distance, I guess. That's where he slid it off – where the back end hit the alley. Made no sense. Grampa says white folks have a way of thinking all their own. I didn't mean any offence by that, Josh."

"None taken young man. I am sure your Grandpa is correct. I would point out that *different* doesn't automatically mean bad or worse."

"Grampa pointed that out, too."

"You don't have to do this next thing if it's uncomfortable."

The boy backed up a step and furrowed his forehead. Josh hurried on to relieve the young man's apparent apprehension.

"I was going to ask if there is some way I can contact you – phone, email- and I sure understand if you don't feel comfortable with that."

"Let me ask grampa."

"He dialed a number."

"You won't believe who I'm standing here talking to."

Pause.

"I am being careful. It's Josh from your newspaper column."

"I am too, serious."

Pause.

"Okay, I'll see if he'll let me. Can I take your picture and send it to grampa?"

"Of course. Shall I pose?"

Josh struck the classic Napoleon stance, chin up with his hand inside the front of his hoodie. (Well, Napoleon probably wasn't wearing a hoodie!)

"Just a minute. It takes grampa a while to make his phone work."

It took less than the requested minute. The boy listened for some time.

"He says sure and invited you to his place for pie. I told you. He says I can give you whatever means for contact is most convenient for you. It seems to me email would work best considering how busy both our lives are – you with your column and me with school and my girl."

"Don't take me wrong, but I have to admit I am

impressed with your language pattern. It may just prove my ignorance about how that is in this neighborhood.

The boy smiled, clearly pleased Josh had noticed.

“Not your ignorance. I read a lot. Grampa says that will be my ticket out of here – learning to speak what he calls, ‘The Kings’ English’ – like how you talk and write.”

“You and your grampa are wise men. I admire you both.”

The boy’s grin all but burst his cheeks.

“I will have to take a raincheck on that pie – Saturdays, you say.”

“Yes, sir. I can put in a special order if you have a favorite.”

“Let’s play it by ear. Here’s my phone. Enter your email for me if you will please. You young people are way ahead of me on doing such things.”

That was partially truthful. Josh understood from his own boyhood how important it was to be made to feel capable and he seldom overlooked a chance to do that with kids.

“There you are. This has been great, sir. I really hope grampa gets to see you sometime.

“I can guarantee that he will.”

“And I believe you.”

Josh had prepared a folded twenty in his hoodie pocket in case the encounter produced anything valuable. He handed it toward the boy.

“Oh, thanks, but no. Grampa would skin me alive if he ever found out I took money from his Joshy. One thing would be nice, though.”

“Name it.”

“Maybe a paper with your column autographed.”

“You can count on it. I’ll even deliver it in person.”

“This is so great. I guess I should be getting myself to grampa’s place – if we’re finished.”

“We are. Go. Run. Fly if you can.”

The young man’s quickly furrowed brow just as quickly smoothed as the boy understood it had been a joke. Josh figured there hadn’t been a lot of jokes – joshin’ around – in his life. He’d see what he could do about it.

With the boy gone, Josh returned to Sally. He gave the

brief explanation with the promise of more as they hurried back to the alley and headed toward the thinning assembly of officers. They had set up generator operated lights.

"The one in the white coat is the precinct captain, Mark Duncan. He is who we want."

"Captain Duncan. I'm Josh Jamison from the Gazette."

"Of course, you are."

"This is my special lady, Sally Brown. We believe we have information that may help you with all this."

"By 'all this' you mean . . .?"

"Sorry. The Rooftop Murderer."

"I'll take anything at this point."

Josh began. Duncan motioned two officers to move in closer and listen.

"A short way up that alley – 65 feet or so from the north edge of this building – you will find a maroon dumpster, 6 X 8 X 6 feet high."

One of the officers spoke.

"Yes. We already searched it."

Josh continued.

"It contains a false bottom that you didn't find. It is well concealed. Here is what you will find inside it: a little over 200 feet of 3/8 inch, white plastic rope, two hiker's clothesline vise-grips with pulley assemblies, one of them attached inside the dumpster and the other not – the rifle used to commit the shooting – short barrel rifle with a built in tripod and a laser spotter, an old Levetev scope, uses 30-30 ammo – a small number of carabiners – probably two, maybe three – and the shooter, probably wearing a black jump suit to absorb any gun powder. I assume it will be a man in his very senior years and at this point relatively harmless. Most likely, he is or was at one time a prominent citizen. There will be a ladder hanging on the outside that you will want to use to make entry from the rear."

"If this is a preview of Monday morning's parody in your *Joshin Around* column, Josh, you just may be in over your head," Captain Duncan said as the five of them began moving in the direction of the dumpster.

Josh stopped talking, as did the others. The two officers drew their side arms and approached first, as the

Captain held out his arms to slow Josh and Sally. The ladder was right where Josh – well, originally, Sally – had predicted it would be. They set it in place and one officer lit his flashlight and climbed it.

“I’ll have to get in to determine about the bottom.”

He slipped over the side. As he stood there, his head was sticking well above the top.

“It appears that either you have grown a good foot in the past few moments or you are standing on a false bottom,” the Captain said to him.

The officer disappeared as he bent down. The second officer climbed the ladder so he could help light the area and keep track of what was going on. He kept his weapon at the ready.

Josh leaned in toward the Captain and spoke in a low tone.

“In the service of preventing a second heart attack victim, I suggest you announce what’s happening in a clear, loud, voice.”

He immediately responded.

“You, hiding in the bottom of the dumpster, this is Captain Duncan of the police department. We are coming in to get you. Please stay calm.”

Josh thought he did pretty well, considering he doubted that was a canned speech presented to be memorized in the Captain’s Manual.

“Found the latch, Captain,” came word from inside. I am lifting it.”

“Well I’ll be, Sir. You will *not* believe this. At first glance, there’s everything in here Mr. Jamison predicted or described or whatever he did.”

“Yes, what *did* you do, Jamison?”

Sally stepped in.

“He used one of the most creative minds you’ll ever meet and figured out exactly how it had to be – the one and only way it had to be.”

“You’re not going to put the police department in a bad light in your column, are you.”

“Me. Why would I do that? Seems you and your two officers just cracked the case.”

“I didn’t mean you had to do that.”

“I have no idea what you’re jabbering about. One thing you could do. Sometime in the near future, just mention my contribution to Barny – the editor at the Gazette. He has conniptions and throws hissy fits when I go off script like this. There is also a young teenage boy here in your precinct that helped put the finishing touch on the solution. It would be nice if he could be credited, somehow.”

“Who’s that?”

“I forgot to ask his name. Can you believe that?”

Sally spoke, holding up Josh’s phone.”

“Name: Winston Blackburn. Address: 2436 Elm Street. Apparently, his grandfather, also Winston Blackburn, is the boy’s guardian but he lives with an aunt. The boy didn’t share that but entered it all here in Josh’s phone.”

“I know the boy, fairly well in fact. Nice kid. He did a school report on the Precinct earlier in the year. He’s one of the few kids in this area determined to make a better life for himself than his family has had. His grandfather was a middleweight contender fifty years ago. Even had his shot at Marvin Hagler.”

At long last and with some difficulty, the man was removed from the dumpster. He was wearing a black jumpsuit.

As he showed himself above the top, Josh spoke in disbelief.

“Jim? James Adams, the political editor for the Gazette?”

The man turned to Sally, noticing she was holding a phone.

“Young lady. Please record a video of the following.”

She had already begun. Adams continued.

“You’ll never understand, Josh. Your integrity is still solid, well beyond your sense of abhorrence about perennial injustice in our city. See what happens after fifty years of watching the Despicables of our city get off Scott free. I offer no apology or explanation. I just shot and killed Dimitri Uganov, a Russian diplomat and cold blooded killer. I did so with considered malice of forethought and no regrets. That is all I will ever say on the matter.”

Josh took the Captain aside.

“What about keeping this Adams capture quiet. We still need to capture any other co-conspirators.”

“Just what I was thinking. I’ll handle it with these officers and issue a blackout other than to confirm the name of the deceased.”

“We do have one piece of evidence that we can’t fit into the pattern, Captain. At each of the crime scenes we’ve found plastic slivers on the outer edge of the cement cap that rings the top of the building. They appear at the ladder – more or less centered between the metal uprights.”

The Captain broke a smile. The forensics team uses white, plastic rope to lift and lower their equipment. I’m quite sure that explains it.”

“Probably so. It’s been one of two things about all this we haven’t been able to figure out.”

“And the other one?” Captain Duncan asked.

“Who the other players are.”

\* \* \*

It had been another bitter/sweet experience for the two of them and back home they sat on the couch in silence for a long time. Lip-locks and TWS seemed unimportant. A very good man had just behaved well outside the law and yet there were things about the result that were hard to fault. It wasn’t that the Russian was dead that was distressing; it was that it had to have played out beyond the limits of the social contract to which all people who live together in a successful social group, agree – to abide by the rules and laws in the service of establishing and maintaining the finest, working society possible.

They sat in silence for some time. Eventually, Sally spoke.

“We still haven’t solved the crimes, you know.”

“I know – the shooters that got away – what was the nature of their cooperation or organization, will there be more now that the dumpster is in police custody.”

“When should the next one be if they stick to the apparent time schedule – each subsequent killing coming after a period half the time between the previous two?” Sally asked.

“In two days, June tenth, this coming Monday.”

“And then, one day after that, Tuesday could be the

final killing,” Sally said. “That would make seven in all.”

“Let’s hope it stops before number seven,” Josh said.

“You suppose it is a hitlist the group established as a whole?” Sally asked.

“Hard to know, but there was certainly some coordination.”

“We have just two names out of the five shooters – Judge Medford and now James Adams,” Josh said. That leaves three unknowns, plus whoever might still be waiting in the wings. Put on your librarian hat, Sally. Any way to establish a mutual social group between them that might yield additional candidates based on age, values, expressed moral outrage. I’m grasping at straws, here.”

“Might be. I can try cross referencing business associates, meetings and social affairs that have been reported in the media, which include the two names we know.”

“So, begin by trying to find out if Medford and Adams were in some way connected? Can you do that from here?”

“You just watch me.”

She went to the table where her laptop sat waiting. Josh followed. She sat and he watched over her shoulder. Accessing the library research database, she configured a program of inclusion with their two guys as the epicenter. The program churned away. The page remained blank for some time, finally presenting the name of one organization.

Josh leaned in close to read the name.

“The Girl Scout Cookie Sales Campaign? Heck, that would make you and me potential accomplices. Does that mean they have no social, civic or business association of any kind?”

“That’s what it tells me – at least none we can easily find.”

“So, we draw a blank,” Josh said, shaking his arms at his sides as if trying to shake off the setback. “Time to expand our creative range somehow.”

“Time for bed, if you ask me,” Sally said.

“I agree. A new day a fresh start. It does present the kernel of an ingenious idea, though – form a group of assassins from a group of men who share a calling but who have never met. If they somehow managed to keep it that

way – everybody remaining anonymous – no one of them could give up any other one of them if caught.”

“Only one person would know the other’s identities – the evil genius behind the plan.”

“That should lead us to pleasant dreams,” Josh said, grinning for the first time that evening.

The best Sally could manage was to shake her head.

They left for the bedroom.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

They had both slept fitfully and awakened not really rested.

After breakfast, they got back to the case. Josh placed a call to Rick's Rentals.

*'Rick here. Rentals by the hour, the day, week, year or month. How can I help you?'*

"This is Sam from a company we call 'C' – the *letter* not a body of water. Occasionally, we rent a roll-off truck from you. We picked it up yesterday and I'm just wondering if the boy has returned it to you yet. I can't get him on his cell phone."

*'Tommy, yeah, he picked it up at . . . let's see here . . . six yesterday morning but hasn't returned it yet. You think something's wrong?'*

"Never know with teenage boys. It's Sunday and I'm not at the office with access to the records. Did he happen to leave his home address with you? I think I'd feel better if I took a run to his place just to make sure."

*'Yes, sir. We're very thorough here. Scan addresses right off the driver's licenses. You'd never believe what con artists try to get away with these days. The address he gave is 1467 North McAllister – out near the ritzy district.'*

"I sure thank you. Is our next reservation all set? Like I say, I'm at home."

*"Yes, sir. Late, this Monday afternoon – six thirty."*

"It could be Tommy just decided to keep the truck 'til then and not have to go through the rigmarole of your paper work again now that we're needing the service more often."

*"That could be. He's a really sharp kid. I trained him*

*on the truck. He caught on to every detail the first time I showed him. I'll assume everything is okay unless I hear different from you."*

"Oh, just one more thing. I suppose it's possible that I could have the wrong number for Tommy's cell and that's why he doesn't answer. Let me check this one with what you have on file."

Josh reeled off Sally's number.

*"Oh, no, Sir. Good catch on your part. It's about as wrong as wrong can be. This is what he gave us."*

Josh jotted it down and thanked him, really wanting to encourage him to keep one step ahead of those con-men he spoke about, but he settled for a smile and hung up.

"Now that you have all that, how are you planning on using it?" Sally asked.

"Hey, I got the information. It's your job to figure out the rest."

It had been worth their first kiss of the morning. Things were slowly getting back to normal.

"Can you check the secondary schools for student rosters and see if you can find a Tommy or Tom or Thomas with this home address?"

"I can try. Give me a few minutes. I'm wondering why you didn't ask the rental guy for his last name."

"I figured that he would think it odd I didn't know that. Didn't want to raise any red flags."

She nodded. It made sense. She found something almost immediately.

Actually, this was not hard at all. I'm surprised and a bit bothered the school rolls aren't more closely guarded than this. There are ten high schools with a total enrollment of nearly sixty-thousand students. Looks like I'll need to do each school separately. Fortunately, each seems to be set up with a 'search' feature."

"Start with one closest to where he lives."

She worked for several minutes.

"Bingo, my dear. Thomas Thomason – not very creative parents, I'm thinking. A Junior at Washington High School. Oops! No. He left at the end of the first semester. I'll have to look further. It may take some time."

A half hour passed.

“Nil, zip, nada, nothing I’m afraid.”

“So, he either dropped out or moved away and since we know he’s here he didn’t move away.”

“And since he lives in that affluent part of the city, we have good reason to suspect he probably didn’t just drop out. There is one other option, Josh. He could have entered a private school here in the city.”

“Of course. I hated my experience in one so much I seem to have repressed the very possibility. Most of them offer tough academics. Not sure if a truck driver type would be admitted. Did that sound snobbish?”

“Most certainly. You should be ashamed. Only a half dozen full service private high schools – scads of home school assist schools. That seems like an oxymoron – a school for kids to attend who are being homeschooled.”

“Can we delay philosophic and logical discussions for later. Most of them are church related, I’m betting. Start with the non-church first.”

“I will, but why?”

“Most church schools capture their prey as preschoolers and keep them in tow until they graduate or rot, whichever comes first.”

“Do I sense a negative attitude about them?”

“Again, time for that later.”

“Just three ‘academy’ type private high schools. That includes yours. Another minute.”

Josh popped two Pepsi’s and placed one on the table beside Sally. She smiled and nodded.

“Look at this. Thomas Thomason, second semester junior at your alma mater.”

“Poor kid. Can we check juvenile legal records?”

“They are sealed aren’t they so probably not. Why do you even bring that up?”

“There is one juvenile judge in this town who has a penchant for giving bright kids that age who come before him a choice between a year at the juvenile detention center or enrollment in my alma mater.”

“And you know this how?”

“Let’s just say Judge Beale and I were very close

during my two years at the Heights.”

“Do I get to learn more?”

“Later. Been meaning to tell you since our first date.”

“You’ve been meaning to tell me for *seven* years?”

Josh shrugged.

“It does seem to suddenly explain many of your ‘out of the ordinary’ skills – hot wiring cars, lock picking, dodging bad guys in darkened, abandoned buildings.”

He flashed a smile.

“All useful. Later, okay?”

“So, where does that leave us?”

“I think a road trip is in order.”

“To Tommy’s place?”

Josh nodded.

“To do what?”

“Haven’t the faintest idea, but I’m sure I will by the time we get there.”

They parked a block away and walked, hand in hand, in the direction of Tommy’s house, as if just out for a leisurely walk. As dwellings in that neighborhood went, his was on the low dollar end. As dwellings in the city in general went, it was on the high end.

A girl, five or six, was playing on the sidewalk and approached them.

“Never seen you two before.”

“Never been here before,” Sally said.

“Then why you here today?”

“We were told there were pretty houses that we could look at.”

The girl nodded understanding that was true because she lived in one.

“I imagine you know everybody around here,” Josh said.

She nodded and began providing last names as she pointed at each house. She came to Thomason.

“Thomason. Would that be Tommy Thomason’s house?”

“How did you know?”

“I’m a reporter and I gave a talk at his school. He introduced himself to me.”

She nodded and moved in closer, becoming confidential in tone.

“He’s a bad boy, you know.”

“No. I guess we didn’t know that.”

She nodded vigorously.

“He stoled stuff and the cops came one night and they dragged him off to the cop dungeon. That’s what my big brother says. He was gone for days. Came back looking real scrawny – so my big brother says. They probably beat on him day and night. That’s what my big brother says.”

“How old is your big brother,” Josh asked.

“Goin’ on nine.”

“You know what he stole?” Sally asked.

“Like rings and necklaces and stuff like that.”

“You said he was gone. Is he back now?”

“Yes. Came home Christmas eve. He was crying when his mom came out to the curb to meet him. I sure never knew big boys cried. I’m pretty sure my big brother don’t.”

“Do things seem to be better at his house now?” Sally asked.

“No more cops coming, if that’s what you mean. They’re gone today – at least his mom and dad. Saw their car leave early. It’s got black windows so I couldn’t see inside. Tommy’s car may be in the garage.”

“It’s been nice talking with you,” Sally said. “Thank you for treating us strangers so nicely.”

“You are welcome.”

She curtsied. Sally wondered how long it had been since she’d seen a perfectly executed Shirley Temple curtsy.

They walked on the quarter block to the Thomason house. Josh pointed.

“Trash cans by the bushes. You be lookout while I dumpster dive.”

“Dumpster?”

“Well, mini-mini-dumpster.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“Nope. Once in the trash, things become public domain.”

Sally moved just off the sidewalk so a large bush blocked her from the little girl’s view while Josh ‘dove’.

Several minutes later he surfaced with pieces of paper.

“Got what we need. More than we could have hoped for. Let’s move to the other side of the street on our way back to avoid Little Miss Inquisitive.”

As they sat in the car, Josh spoke about his treasure.

“Several envelopes. Look at this one – addressed to Thomas Thomason, Jr. Apparently, the boy comes from at least *two* generation of unimaginative parents.”

“So. We already knew he lived here. Why is that important?”

“Look at the return address – ‘C’, 1212 Isabella Drive, City. Look up that address. I’m betting big-time that, like the email address, it doesn’t even exist.”

“You seem to have won your bet. Isabella Drive is in a subdivision – only ten blocks long. Last number is 1072.”

“So, Tommy received a letter from the mysterious ‘C’, *that* or *who* seems to play a central role in all this,” Josh said. It probably wasn’t a letter. Look inside.”

“A folded 8 ½ X 11 sheet of paper – thick, like parchment. Blank. Did you make sense of it?” she asked turning it as if to make certain it was blank.

“If you were going to send cash through the mail . . .”

“I see, fold the sheet around it so nobody would suspect bills inside. You’re thinking he received a payment.”

Josh pointed to one corner of the envelope.

“He tore the postmark date off when he opened it, but it probably came this past week, if they remove household trash according to most people’s schedule.”

“You are so clever. Now what?”

“I need to make a call I once vowed never to make again – to Judge Beale.”

“Let me look it up. You have a first name?”

“No need. Having been required to call it three times a week for two years it’s still on speed dial inside my head.”

“Not questioning the call, but why?”

Before he could answer, Josh was talking on the phone. It was on speaker.

*‘Hello. This is Judge Beale.’*

“Yes, Judge. A ghost from your past.”

*‘What a pleasant surprise, Joshua – or just Josh these*

*days I see in the paper. Social or business?’*

“How about civic duty if you can believe that.”

*‘I can. No problem.’*

“Not wanting you to reveal confidential matters, understand, here at the outset, but I have reason to believe you are coming to know a sixteen-year-old boy by the name of Thomas Thomason.”

*‘Go ahead.’*

“He has been duped into playing a supportive role in the Rooftop Killings. I am quite certain he has no knowledge about what he is mixed up in. He drives a truck – it might be considered a getaway vehicle, but he doesn’t know a person is even involved. If my calculations are correct, his last set of two runs will be either tomorrow or the following day. Captain Mark Duncan at the downtown precinct can give you details and verify my involvement. The boy will be in no danger, but we need him to go ahead and make the next run. It will be the last in the series of murders – this one being only an attempt if I have anything to do with it – but I think it would be well to have Tommy tailed for his protection. I hope after you talk with Captain Duncan you and he will see to that.”

*‘May I ask how you, of all people, got involved in this? You ARE on the right side of the law this time, right?’*

“Oh, yes, sir. And you *may* ask about my involvement, but I will need to provide the explanation later. Duncan has many of the details. Do you need his number?”

*‘Mark and I are poker playing buddies. He’s on speed dial. You be careful and thank you for the heads up.’*

“Okay then, thank you, Sir. Later.”

*‘Yes, later. By the way you can never know how proud I am of you, Joshua.’*

“I will arrange ample time later during which you may heap accolades upon me.”

The judge chuckled. Josh hung up.

“Now what?”

“I would sure like to find that truck. Surely, he is too smart to just be driving around in it. I’m sure it’s too large for the garage at his house and anyway that presents problems with parents. With the continued police presence, he probably won’t try to do the pick-up . . . Wait! That’s it!”

As his mind suddenly switched gears, he placed another call.

“This is Josh Jamison. I need the captain immediately. Relates to the Rooftop Murders.”

Click . . . click, click . . . CLICK

“Captain Duncan, Josh Jamison, here. I believe I have located the boy who drives the roll off truck and I think I know how to prevent the next killing and maybe even capture the ringleader of it all.”

They spoke for some time. The gist of Josh’s suggestions was to remove the police from the present, active site, attach an electronic, GPS, bug to the dumpster so they can keep track of its movements, and let the boy pick it up. The rest they would have to play by ear.

The Captain provided a number for Josh to contact – the surveillance department. Once the dumpster was on the move he could be kept up to date in real time.

“You seem sure Tommy is somewhere close to that alley waiting for the cops to leave,” Sally said.

“I am. He’d have to be a bright kid for the Judge to believe he could make it at the Heights. I’m counting on the boy to do everything right. Want to hear how I think it will play out.”

“Of course, but first why is he doing it? He’s from an affluent family. Surely, he doesn’t need the money. The Judge would know if he were on drugs or something like that, wouldn’t he?”

“Oh, yes, he’d know from his famous, or infamous, pee in the cup three times a week routine. I’m, also, wondering why. My checkered past tells me that either he is being blackmailed and/or there are threats of some kind involved. I have nothing more specific in mind.”

“Okay. Lead me through your take on it,” Sally said as Josh pulled he car out onto the street and headed them toward home.

“Tommy picks up the truck at Rick’s, late afternoon or evening on the day before the shooting or early morning the day of the shooting. He drives the truck to some designated place – probably sheltered from prying eyes like a barn, perhaps – where he picks up the dumpster. Then, he delivers

the dumpster to the specific spot in the alley to which he has been directed – maybe written on a piece of paper taped to the dumpster. Who knows? He has to be precise in the placement so the clothesline will be the exact length from inside the hidden compartment to the cement cap on top of the building. Like Wilton witnessed, he measures and marks the spot. This last time it had to be reversed – north of the building instead of south – due to the extra-wide walk-through on the south. It's why it wasn't where I thought it would be, based on the earlier placements. Once the drop-off is completed, he drives the truck to some designated place, again out of sight. I'm thinking the same place he made the pick up so he would have his own car to return home. He attends school if it is a school day. The shooting takes place in afternoon. The shooter's escape is made to the dumpster.

"The following early morning – say two a.m. – Tommy goes back to the alley and picks up the dumpster. If there are police he has been instructed to say something like once they have released it he needs to pick it up and get it back to the owner. Since it appears to be empty, and him being a kid, he gets away with it. He loads it and takes it back to the safe place. He unloads the dumpster and takes the truck back to the rental store. That makes me believe the holding spot is always the same and that it is within easy walking distance of Rick's so Tommy can go back and pick up his car. He lives clear across the city.

"Then he waits for his next instruction – probably by phone. I doubt if he would have received them all at once up front in case anything might go wrong or if he would for some reason come under suspicion, the timetable might be located. He may have been told how many times he'd have to perform the task so there would be an end in sight for him. After each run, he receives an envelope with cash."

"You think he gets a payment even though he is being blackmailed or threatened?" Sally asked.

"Like a bonus to play down the threat every time he does as instructed. Something tangible and positive in it for him, just like some calamity would befall him if he didn't come through."

"The big boss must be somebody who knows boys his

age pretty well, I'd say," Sally said.

The color suddenly faded from Josh's face.

"I hope I didn't just make a terrible mistake, Sally!"

"What's that?"

"What if Judge Beale is in on it and I just tipped him off to the authorities' plan."

"You think he's that kind of person?"

"No, but would you have thought the Judge or Jim Adams was capable of such a heinous thing? Beale hates injustice with a purple passion – his words to me once."

"I see."

Josh pulled over and stopped.

"I need to call Captain Duncan and make sure the Judge called him."

There was clear relief in Josh's voice at the end of that conversation.

"That part of the plan – a tail on Tommy – is already underway."

"You hungry," she asked. "Cunningham's Café is close by. They have a good-sized menu and good enough ambiance."

"Ambiance is it now for which we are searching? Sure. What I need is coffee. We were still so bummed out about things this morning that we didn't make coffee."

After ordering, Josh called the surveillance number. The dumpster was being picked up from the alley as they spoke. When they had a drop-off location, they would call him.

"You do know this is only surveillance, right," Josh went on. "We need to keep tracking it as it moves out, probably about one a.m. some morning soon."

He was reassured that they were on the same page – everything was under control.

He hung up and got Sally up to speed. It provided a good time away from everything and they even began to relax. Sally was good about things like that and Josh understood.

Then, the wait set in.

When the dessert menu arrived, it reminded Josh.

"I want to stop by the Gazette Building when we leave here and pick up some back copies to take to Wilton and his

grandfather. You up for those side trips?"

"Sure am. I'm eager to meet your new young friend."

"I should warn you. If he stares at your head, it's because he has always wanted to touch blond hair."

"For such a short conversation, it seems you two got right down to basics."

Josh grinned.

"It's a guy thing."

Josh signed six columns. The old gentleman was overjoyed, clearly not wanting to let go of Josh's hand when they were ready to leave. Sally graciously encouraged young Wilton to run his fingers through her hair.

"Softest anything I ever felt. Thank you."

"Oh, we aren't done yet," she said.

The three men looked puzzled.

"I've never felt great hair like yours either, and I'm not leaving here until I have."

"Milton grinned and removed his hat, lowering his head in her direction, watching his grandfather out of the corner of his eye."

"It'll probably feel like a Brillo Pad after a lifetime of feeling your own, ma'am."

She took much longer than necessary, just to put on a tease.

"I think that is a simply magnificent head of hair, young man. Isn't it nice that we each have our special kind of locks? What a dreary world this would be if we were all the same. Can you imagine that?"

"No, ma'am, I guess I can't. Thank you, you know."

"You're welcome, you know."

Josh and Sally returned to her apartment. It was going on three.

"I suggest we take a nice nap," Sally said.

"I like the possibilities of the 'nice' part of that."

"The kind of nap during which we *really* sleep. I have the idea your phone will be ringing all night long."

"Sadly, I see your point. Good idea."

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

Josh had requested hourly updates from the surveillance office at the precinct. By midnight he had moved out to the couch so Sally wouldn't be disturbed.

The truck appeared in the alley a few minutes after eleven p.m. Tommy took no more than five minutes to load the dumpster. At the north end of the alley the truck turned left – west – and continued for six blocks. An unmarked car followed at some distance. It then turned south, entering an alley in the middle of the 1500 block of South Agnes Street. There, it entered a warehouse through a double-wide, double-high garage door. It remained open until the boy left in his car a few minutes later. The door closed after him. It appeared he possessed a remote door opening device.

The dumpster remained stationary in the warehouse, which was established to be six blocks southwest of the rental store. Two officers had eyes on the building – front and rear – and offered periodic updates. At two a.m., they reported the next activity.

“The young man entered the warehouse in his car through the rear, overhead door. It remains open. . . . The truck left and the door closed – no more than two minutes elapsed between entry and exit.”

The tracking bug on the dumpster indicated its route. North four blocks, east three, where it entered an alley between Baxter and Everett. The tails on the boy eased off, not wanting to spook him. They watched as the dumpster was rolled off to the specifically measured position – just to the south of the old Appellate Court Building. An unmarked police

car waited back from the north end of the alley ready to follow the truck to its destination. They would wait to take Tommy into custody until he got out of his car back at his house, in case time was needed for him to send some communication confirming that the drop-off had been completed.

The dumpster remained stationery. The next long wait set in until daybreak, when electronic, onsite surveillance would be ready. At seven-thirty, Josh woke Sally to tell her he was leaving to be closer to the action. He set his phone to vibrate and requested that if she called him she hang up after one ring. He would call her back as soon as he could. It was a precaution against who knew what! But he figured a long-ringing phone would not be a good thing regardless. He donned his dark sweat suit and left the apartment.

He parked four blocks away from the Appellate Building. As he recalled, some not-for-profit had taken over the lower floor. He figured the workers would be arriving soon. They should be in no danger. The previous buildings used by the shooters had been occupied as well.

The Captain had reluctantly agreed to the next phase of Josh's plan. With the help of an officer from a waiting squad car, Josh slipped into a black, bullet proof vest, and a black helmet that cradled his head down past his ears. As he entered the alley, a plain clothes officer approached him, flashing a badge on his belt.

"Josh, I assume," the man said.

"Accurate assumption. And you are . . .?"

"Undercover officer Malone, here to accompany you at the Captain's direction. He gave me these ground rules. When, in my opinion, you are unreasonably putting yourself in imminent, danger, I am to pull the plug on your part in the operation."

"I understand. Just hope we don't disagree on the definition of imminent danger."

He flashed a smile at the officer, which did nothing to clarify what he meant. They began moving in the direction of the building.

"I assume all the officers are plain clothes like you are."

"Yes, sir. Directed to blend in like chameleons on a pile of leaves. Do you have a projected time-line, Sir?"

“Please make it, Josh, or I’ll probably ignore you, thinking you’re addressing my father.”

“Yes, sir, Josh.”

“In answer to your question, sort of.”

“Not helpful.”

Josh went on.

“The other murders occurred between one p.m. and four-thirty p.m. I wanted to give us a good cushion in case the bad guy came by early to check things out. I believe this will be the final attempt so I wonder if maybe the rules will change. It may be the head man, himself. It’s a nebulous feeling in my gut. I hate unattached feelings, let alone in my gut. Reminds me, I didn’t have breakfast.”

The officer offered him a candy bar from the briefcase he was carrying.

“Thank you. I just imagine you were a boy scout.”

“I was. How could you have known?”

“The ‘Be Prepared’ thing.

It garnered the first modest smile from the generally stodgy officer. He spoke.

“We are to expect no accomplices – strictly a solo operation, right?”

“Right. You have a spot picked out from which we can observe things up close?”

“Rear entrance, ground floor of the building just to the south – I’m told there will be a maroon dumpster close to the door.”

Inside, there were monitors from five cameras. Two directed onto the roof. Also, views of the alley – north and south. The fifth showed a wide-angle view of the sidewalk directly across the street.”

“I am really impressed. You guys put this together in four, five hours?”

“The Captain knows his business and we have the best tech crew in the business.”

“I believe you.”

Once inside, Malone introduced him to Jerry, the tech guy. He got right to work explaining the set up. Josh immediately had a question.

“The roofs of the buildings to the south and north are

only six stories. How do you have cameras focused on this roof that's at eight stories?"

"Telescopic from a block away in each direction."

Josh nodded, which didn't come close to suggesting how impressed he was, but his head was on to other matters.

"What's the backup plan if mine doesn't work?"

"Batman swings in from the north and Superman swoops down from the south, feet on the roof, hands on his waist."

Josh chuckled.

"You're a family man, Malone?"

"Two boys – eight and ten. We eat and sleep super heroes at our house."

It was nine o'clock – clearly way early.

Malone's radio vibrated.

"Malone."

Surprisingly, Josh thought, the voice on the other end came through clear and crackle-free, unlike what TV cop shows led one to believe.

"Sergeant Duncan, Malone. You on schedule?"

"Yes, sir. Josh and I are onsite in the surveillance room. All's quiet."

"Have Josh fill you in about how things will develop according to his theory, and I must say his theory has been flawless up to this point. Remember we need the bad guy alive."

"Yes, sir."

The connection went dead. Malone turned to Josh.

"If I failed to say, 'Out', when I ended a conversation, he'd have me cleaning his badge with a toothbrush for a week. But, him? No! He can just hang up."

"Your words of outrage don't match your tone. You really respect him, don't you?"

"Absolutely."

As Josh outlined the exact sequence of events as he expected them to unfold, Malone put him on the phone so the others involved, would all have the same information.

They waited until eleven.

They waited until noon.

They waited until one.

“A figure, entering the alley from the north,” came a voice over Malone’s radio.

He soon came into camera view behind the Appellate Building. He was dressed in a dark jump suit and black, stocking hat. Josh figured it was a ski mask, folded up out of way.

“Looks promising,” Malone said.

“More like a *Bingo*, as Detective Masters would say from his mystery series. He is going directly to the dumpster – to the ladder on the dumpster. Let your guys know things are on.”

Word was put out.

Everything proceeded exactly the way Josh had outlined, right down to the use of the rope with carabiners as he climbed the ladder with the vise-grip device hanging from his belt and the double lengths of white rope trailing behind as it unwound from the spring-loaded axil inside the dumpster.

Suddenly, a person entered the alley from the south.

“Can we zoom in on him?” Josh asked.

“The tech guy was way ahead of him and it happened immediately.”

“That’s Wilton. He’s just a kid. He lives only a few blocks from here. He seems to thrive in alleys.”

“Let me call an officer to go get him,” Duncan said.

“I have another idea.”

“Josh plunked a few numbers into his phone. On camera, it was clear the lad reached for his phone.”

“Wilton, this is Josh. Listen carefully. You won’t understand, but you must do exactly as I say. Danger! Turn around nonchalantly and immediately walk back out of the alley and around the corner. A plainclothes policeman will meet you and explain. Do it. Now!”

“Playing it like a pro, the boy stopped, stretched, looked at his watch, turned around, and ambled back to where he had entered the alley.”

“Look at monitor one,” Malone said. It appears that the bad guy noticed the boy. He watched him from just before he turned around. He’s still hesitating.”

“Be ready to move in in case he decides to scrub the mission. I doubt he will.”

He didn't, and was soon involved in pulling the gun assembly up the line to the roof.

"Captain says wait until he moves forward toward the front – out of sight – before we go scale the ladder," Malone said, using a tone that suggested he believed his caution was going to fall on deaf ears.

Josh understood that the man on the roof needed to be beyond the point of being distracted by anything taking place down in the alley. The roof was sixty feet back to front.

The two of them were out the door and around the corner to the ladder in seconds. Josh arrived first and began climbing – that was in reverse order from the Captain's instructions. Josh slowed as he neared the top. Malone had drawn his weapon, helpless to correct the fact he was supposed to mount the roof, first.

Josh peeked up over the side and waited to make his move, longer than would have appeared appropriate to the casual onlooker.

The rifle fired it's one shot. The casing was ejected and fell to the roof. Josh crossed the low wall with Malone at his heels.

"Jig's up," Josh said. "I think that's the term I've read in those cheap detective paperbacks."

The man whirled around. Clearly there was not a second shell in the gun, as he made no attempt to aim it at them.

The man looked puzzled. Josh looked puzzled.

"Joshua Jamison?" the man said emphasizing the puzzlement in his tone.

"Dr. Patterson?" Josh said stepping toward him as Officer Malone relieved the man of the weapon. Another officer topped the ladder.

Josh and the doctor spoke in the same moment.

"You? / You?"

"Why? / Why?"

Josh continued.

"I have recently developed an intense need to root out evil."

"As have I," Dr. Patterson said. "I don't expect you to understand, but I have come to believe that when evil does

find ways of remaining beyond the law, all laws become null and void and the citizenry must rise up and take matters into its own hands.”

“I remember, when you were my Headmaster, Sir, you called what you have done, the *Vigilante Mentality*, and ranted against it as a telltale sign society had begun to disintegrate.”

“Times change, son. Circumstances change. Institutions change. Greed and graft now define the accepted modus operandi of important sectors of our society. Their purveyors must be rooted out before we reach the point of no return. When government grovels at the feet of the oligarchs, the average citizen’s needs and rights evaporate before they understand what is happening – sometimes, even, with their consent. At that point, when those in power fail to abide by the rules, the citizens have no obligation to abide by them either. My colleagues and I have taken it upon ourselves to rid our city of the worst of the worst and we are willing to pay whatever personal price we must pay to save our small corner of mankind.”

Josh didn’t know if the man’s superior mind had slipped into a state of madness or if, perhaps, he was the only voice speaking the sane truth. It was more than a little unsettling. He had to agree with the observations, but either could not or would not bring himself to accept the man’s solution. If not that, however, what?

One officer handcuffed Patterson. Recognizing the absurdity at the same instant, Patterson and Josh shared an unexpected chuckle – how did he intend to get the shooter down the ladder, clapped in irons? Patterson addressed Malone.

“Officer, there is a card in my right, chest pocket. Please hand it to Mr. Allison.”

He turned to Josh.

“A website that presents the Council’s purpose and philosophy in detail.”

“*The Council* as in, ‘C’?” Josh asked.

“The website will explain. I truly regret that the two of us could never forge a relationship that rose above the level of detesting each other.”

Josh nodded. It was merely meant to acknowledge Dr.

Paterson's feeling, rather than accepting the basic premise. They both understood. At that point, Paterson, humorously, handed the handcuffs to the officer, leaning toward him and saying:

"A trick I learned from a onetime, imaginative, delinquent who was the bane of my existence during two long years while we were serving hard time together."

He managed the slip of a smile in Josh's direction. Josh managed one in return. The exchange represented the only hint of civility that had ever passed between them. Several officers arrived to secure Patterson and escort him down to the alley.

Josh walked to the front and looked across at the far sidewalk.

"I assume the officer who became the stand-in target is alright," he asked.

"She's fine. Was wearing bullet proof everything including her face."

"She? The original target was a *she*?"

"Blythe Beaumont."

"The high-end Madam to the rich and famous?"

"The very same. Her real name is Annie Jones."

"I can only imagine how grateful she much be to have escaped a 30/30 slug."

"Oh, she was. I just heard over the radio that she was trying to hand 'freebee hour' business cards to the officers who stayed with her."

"Couldn't those be used as evidence against her?"

"She brushes it off as a big joke. She appears to embrace the claims and innuendo against her, which moves her even further from the appearance of guilt."

"What will happen to her?"

"Free to leave and go about her 'business' – so to speak. We have nothing to hold her on. Being suspected or accused of wrong-doing by a gang of sophisticated, unprincipled, killers, is not proof in our legal system."

Josh could have debated the 'unprincipled' accusation but thought better of it.

\* \* \*

It was five o'clock by the time Josh walked through the

door at Sally's apartment. He had stopped at Wilton's place to complete the explanation of his strange phone request. The officer who had intercepted him as he left the alley had provided the basic details. Just how that officer had come to allow him to enter the alley was not clear. Something about still getting into place. Duncan would get to the bottom of it.

Back home, Josh was greeted with a hug and kiss. He slumped onto the couch and kicked off his shoes.

"How has the news media handled it?" he asked.

"They say the authorities are being very closed mouthed. Latest news flash said they would not confirm or deny that they have taken a suspect into custody. They promised a press conference at nine in the morning at the Downtown Precinct Building."

"We closed down the operation, I'm sure," Josh began. "That's the good news. Bad news is we only got three of the six shooters. I have a website today's shooter promised will explain everything. I hope it explains how six, long-time morally upstanding, citizens of our city became compelled to shed their mantles of decency and morph into the very villains they had come to detest."

Sally had taken a place on the couch next to him. She massaged the back of his neck and shoulders.

"I know you will say you aren't hungry, but when you called saying you were on your way home I ordered a pizza."

"Sausage and mushroom, hand-tossed, original crust?"

"Is there any other kind?"

He turned his head and provided a quick peck to her lips.

"You are the very best in the world. You're right, I'm not hungry. You're also right, once it arrives I will attack it like a ravenous, savage beast just released from a dungeon. Did I mention you are the very best?"

"You ready to talk about it?"

Josh stared straight ahead and nodded, slowly.

"We got the head guy – the ring leader. Even though I always thought he was an evil person, never in a hundred years would I have pegged him for something like this."

"You know him? Surely, not Judge Beale, I hope!"

"No. Dr. Patterson, the Headmaster from the Winston

Heights School for Boys.”

“Your old nemesis?”

“And, *our recent* nemesis as it turned out. The wear and tear of decades of monitoring the injustice going on around them, worked to twist their minds – to build logic-tight compartments. Every last one of them does, I am sure, still hate the baddest of the bad guys and yet believes the atrocious things they have just done were virtuous.”

“I’m sorry. I detect a sadness in you for him – Patterson.”

“Believe me, I’m as surprised as anybody about that. I can see now that he always believed in my potential, even though he never once allowed a glimmer of it show between us.”

“Are you ready to go to the website you mentioned?”

“Might as well get past as much of it today as we can.”

He handed the card to Sally. She got up to get the laptop. The pizza arrived. They moved to the table, lap top between them, pizza and pop just within reach.

“Okay, [www.theCouncil.org](http://www.theCouncil.org),\* she said entering it. Let’s see what we have.”

It was a plain-Jane site with no graphics, just paragraph after paragraph of black on white, well-organized, information, presented in college-level vocabulary. Silently, they read through dozens of paragraphs to the end. Josh picked up the remaining pizza – box and all – and moved back to the couch. Sally followed with fresh drinks.

“So, let me try to recap what we just read,” Josh said.

“In the beginning, Patterson contacted the other five men, anonymously. All the business was transacted in ways that protected everyone’s identity – none of the rest of them knew about any of the others. They held a few initial meetings in a warehouse – probably the one used to hide the dumpster. They each entered through a separate door, donned a black, floor-length robe and hood with eye slits. They proceeded to a room they called the *Chamber of Justice* where they sat at a U-shaped table, each with a special laptop. They only communicated by typing messages into a linked word processor. At the meetings, they were each allowed to nominate an evil person they believed deserved to be killed to

protect the citizens of the city. They referred to them as 'marks'. They voted. Only marks that received unanimous 'eliminate' votes were selected. After several meetings, six marks made the final list. The names were put on slips of paper and passed among them in a hat. Each member drew a name. Killing that person would then become his responsibility. The dates for the murders were established and again they were drawn.

"There was instruction, via the laptops, on the use of the weapon that had been procured – the one each was required to use. Those who were less familiar with guns and who needed to practice were given the opportunity to check out the gun for a day at a time. The rifle was kept in a locked closet at the warehouse. Each member had two keys; one that fit 'his' entrance door and one to the closet. Extensive practice with the other equipment and the dumpster was provided in private sessions with a laptop as the instructor. They practiced until they were comfortable. There was a three-story, metal ladder with a platform at the top – a mock roof – on which they practiced inside the warehouse. Once the schedule got underway, the practice sessions stopped. Patterson loaded the gun and packed the dumpster before each date. After each shooting, the shooter exited the dumpster back at the warehouse after Tommy was long gone. A garage was supplied a block away to hold their vehicles during their 'turn'.

"Patterson forced Tommy into helping. We'll soon have the information about that from Tommy. He is in police custody. I'll tell you, I have been impressed with the police department – well, once you and I got them on track."

His phone rang. He spoke to Sally in an aside.

"Speak of the Devil."

Then:

"Hello, Captain."

"I have just finished my conversation with Tommy, Josh. He is one shook up young man. He was sure something bad was going on, and even sensed the connection to the Rooftop Murders, but Patterson had his hands expertly tied. Apparently, he arranged a tryst for the boy with a lady of the evening and secretly made a video of the rendezvous. He

either did as he was told – an electronically altered voice on the phone was his contact – or copies of the video would be given to his parents, Judge Beale, and circulated among the student body. He’s just sixteen, the poor kid. Confused. Torn. Of course, he cooperated.

“He cooperated with us as well. Turns out he’s a very sharp kid. He began recording all the phone calls and in some way, only understood by Steve Jobs and this younger generation, ran down the blocked phone numbers from which the calls originated – each one from a different phone. Turns out, three of the numbers have been traced to offices out at the School for Boys.

“He didn’t stop there, he took it upon himself to spy on the warehouse and was able to give us the identities of all six of the perpetrators. You want to guess the others?”

“I’m thinking Buzz Anderson, for one. It was announced he was out of town with the team the day Malcomb Winslow was killed, but Sally determined he hadn’t gone. Although this is an unsubstantiated hunch, another would be K.T. Majors the long-retired mayor. He went missing the day after Harlow Davis was killed. Sally followed his financial trail and found him holed up in Miami Beach.”

“Again, you hit both nails on the head, Josh. The sixth as Bentley Grissom, the former owner of channel 5 TV.”

“So, what’s the boy’s status?” Josh asked.

“That will be up to Judge Beale. Turns out the boy wants to be a writer. When I got off the phone with the judge just now, he was mumbling something about a year’s probation – supervised by somebody he called Joshua. That ring a bell?”

“Good old JB – for Judge Beale. That’s as familiar as the Judge ever allowed me to get with him. Of course, I’m in. I’ll wait for his call. Hard to believe I could be in the driver’s seat with JB on this – if I chose to be. Thanks for the information. Have you sent him home – Tommy, not JB?”

“Yes. His parents were here through the entire conversation. The boy was so relieved it was all over that he cried uncontrollably for ten minutes not letting go of me until his parents walked in. He’s in good hands at home.”

“Do you know what his prior thieving problem was all

about – the one that first brought him to the Judge’s attention?”

“What else – expensive presents demanded by a girl.”

“Well, thanks again,” Josh said.

“The thanks all comes from this end. I suppose if I told you the Mayor is going to present you with a commendation, you’d tell me where he could put it.”

“How *asstoot* of you, sir – and it would be STUFF IT not ‘put it!’”

“By the way, if your ears burn this evening it’s because Judge Beale, Editor Barny, and I are together smoking cigars, playing poker, and trying to outdo one another with outlandish stories about the *Josh Somebody* each of us has come to know.”

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\*Not a working web address at the time this manuscript was prepared.

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## EPILOGUE

Several days passed. Still, only minimal details had been shared with the public. Josh did his best to get back to writing clever columns. Sally got back into the groove at the library.

Barney stopped at Josh's cubicle and actually set foot inside.

"Captain Duncan had a pointed conversation with me earlier. He says you cracked the Rooftop Murders pretty much single handedly. I should demote you to janitor, you know. The moment you have finished the story get it to me. We'll do a special edition and scoop every outlet in the city. Ask me about a raise later."

"Really?"

"Of course, not. I still have you under contract for two more years. I'm of a mind to fine you for insubordination, so shape up."

He offered Josh the hint of a smile and a cigar – firsts, on both counts. Josh offered him a flash drive.

"The story. I have it broken down in five segments. They can be run together or as a series to maintain readership from day to day."

"You think like a newspaper man."

"I thought I was, one."

"Understand, kid, it may take this old gray head some time to become comfortable with that realization."

"Would this be a good time to submit my expense sheet?"

"You actually kept one?"

“Of course, knowing your benevolent side and all.”

“I’ll show you my benevolent side.”

He turned, swinging his backside in Josh’s direction and left.

Josh took good feelings away from the encounter and figured he’d hand the sheet to his secretary later. If it accomplished nothing more than irritating the man it would be worth it. The mere thought prompted a smile.

Captain Duncan had called earlier and asked him to drop over to his office. Having been moved to hyperactive elation by the exchange with Barney, he felt the need to get away. He decided to walk the five blocks to the precinct building.

No more than half a block into the trek, he once again sensed he was being followed.

“I thought that balderdash would be over,” he said aloud, but plainly to himself.”

Using the slanted window glass in a recessed doorway, he checked out the scene behind him. He spotted the figure – the same one – the tall man in the long, dark coat and hat – distorted in the old window glass. That time, the figure made no attempt to hide, but continued walking toward him. A hit man Patterson had set in motion before his capture, perhaps. Josh froze.

The figure moved in beside him. Josh tried to remember all those Karate moves he had mastered in that one lesson he’d had in fourth grade. He drew a blank. The man stopped and spoke.”

“Joshua. You have had a most remarkable adventure the last several weeks, haven’t you? I have monitored your inspired deductions and intrepid movements with great curiosity and approbation.”

Josh turned to face him.

“P.J.? You are the one who’s been following me? I thought the bad guys had a hit out on me.”

“Oh, my! It was most certainly not my intention to cause you any sort of apprehension. Apparently, my attempt at remaining elusive was inept.”

He opened his coat a few inches revealing a snub-nosed shotgun.

“My sole objective was to remain close enough to assist you and help protect you should perilous circumstances arise and threaten you.”

“And for that I thank you. You are a very good friend. I’m on my way to the Precinct Building. Want to walk with me?”

“No thank you. I have an appointment with my long-time romantic interest. I intend to ask for her hand.”

“You old roué, you. Congratulations. Best wishes. May I ask how old you are?”

“Of course, you may.”

The old gentleman tipped his hat and turned into an alley. Josh had no way of imagining what sort of woman would be taken by the eccentric gentleman of many idiosyncrasies. Perhaps that should have been, ‘the still elusive, eccentric gentleman of many idiosyncrasies’.

He smiled one final time trying to work the encounter into something for his column – some sort of twist on a shotgun wedding.

Josh continued to the Precinct. Inside, he made his way to the Captain’s office through an unexpected army of high fives.

“Thanks for dropping by. I have some good news.”

“You mean that plaque actually fit in the appropriate depository?”

It received a smile, but no other response. After all, the mayor was, in essence, the Captain’s boss.

“It has to do with the boy – Winston. We all like him around here. He’s been in and out of here almost on a daily basis since he was a preschooler, early on pestering us to let him blow sirens and turn on the signal lights, and more recently for help with school work. Did you know he’s in two advanced placement classes this semester?”

“Didn’t, but I’m not at all surprised. He’s certainly a kid who needs more of a chance in life than seems his lot. I’ve been thinking of starting a savings account for his education. If I put just a little into it every week, it should add up. Then, with scholarships, who knows.”

“It seems we have been thinking along the same lines. Nearly 300 officers in this precinct have agreed that a fund be

established for Milton. If each one contributes just fifty cents a week they can raise over seventy-five thousand dollars by the time he graduates from college. We know the cost of education is skyrocketing, so if, at some point, it needs to be raised to seventy-five cents a week to make it, they are all willing. About the cost of a cup of coffee a week for each person.”

“I told Sally how impressed I was with the people you have working here, Captain. This certainly cinches it.”

“The union’s attorneys will draw it all up. I figured you should be in on the moment we inform the boy and his grandfather.”

“Thanks for that. It must also include his aunt who makes the most fantastic double crust, peach pie in the universe.”

The Captain nodded.

“We’ll set a time before the end of the semester.”

Josh’s day kept getting better. There was just one final thing that would surely make it the best day of his life.

That evening after supper they were sitting together on the couch, listening to soft music and sharing good things about the day. Josh drew his leg up onto the seat and turned, so he was facing Sally directly.

“There is something I’d really like you to *do* for me.”

She looked puzzled.

“You have my attention. You know I will if it’s within my power.”

“Good. It’s settled then.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I want you to marry me and I believe you just said you would – that being within your power and all.”

Sally nodded. Smiling through her suddenly damp cheeks, she reached out and touched Josh’s face.

History may have recorded more romantic proposals, but who would want to be reading musty old books at a time like that?

“Thank you so much for your love, Joshua Jeramiah Jamison.”

“*Tibi grata sunt*, LOML. *Tibi grata sunt*. TWS?”

“AMD!”

(We will now close the drapes and leave them to write the next chapters.)