

A Story of Twists and Turns

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of
Tale
Curious
Comeuppance**

By

Tom Gnagey

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A story of twists and turns!

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Set in circa 1995 – think, computers did
some stuff, and few folks had
cellphones.

[The reader may well want to keep a score card]

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Being Upfront – Upfront

Please approach this piece of whimsy for just that,
and not as a manual for beating the legal system.

Back before September 11th of 2001

things such as those described

in this fantasy,

were, in fact possible

and happened every day in the United States.

Since then, security has become so tightened

that many of the activities presented herein

will land one in the pokey –

quickly, immediately, posthaste –

fast, even –

Guaranteed!

* * *

Rated: MBDCWNVD *

During the course of the story, there are deaths,
none natural, some by accident, some by vicious
intent,

none painful, all just mentioned in passing.

* murders by despicable characters with no violence depicted
(Clearly too tame for most 8-year olds, today !)

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CHAPTER ONE

Enter Oliver

Disheveled and bespectacled Oliver Trumble – *Oliver*, never Ollie – was a gaunt, pallid, mousey man, lacking in scruples and moral fiber. He was long of nose and narrow of eyes, and although a compulsively effective accountant, came up sorely wanting in personality and appearance. For most of the 27 years he had occupied his cubicle at *Higgins Accounting*, punching the calculator, pouring over the tapes, and balancing ledgers, he had seethed inside about the lowly station life had dealt him and the lack of deserved consideration and appreciation it had garnered him.

“Yes, Mr. Higgins.”

“Right away, Mr. Higgins.”

“Yes, I will work through the weekend, Mr. Higgins.”

“I understand the financial crunch of the current economy

and how that precludes a raise this year, Mr. Higgins.”

“If you must attach the employee’s retirement fund to stay

solvent go right ahead and do so, Mr. Higgins.”

Oliver’s chest tightened, and his stomach churned at the very thoughts, and the thoughts recurred often because he wanted to keep those memories alive. His pharmacist had suggested a pink liquid for his gastric distress and hot packs to release cramping in his upper abdomen.

The dry, thin lips, which defined his mouth, never really configured a smile – they expressed no emotion at all. Minute after minute, year after year, he concealed his all-consuming discontent by cooing up to his ever-maturing malevolent fantasies.

‘Things could happen to your brake fluid line, Mr. Higgins.’

‘The pilot light on your kitchen stove that sits close to

your water heater could go out, Mr. Higgins.’

‘The railing on your upstairs balcony could come lose,

Mr. Higgins.’

Prior to that day, his anger had only manifested itself in fantasies – anger filled, revenge filled, wonderfully satisfying, fantasies. He endured on the certainty that one day the moment would be his. He envisioned it as a ruthless three headed, fire breathing, dragon, inflicting revenge, exacting his due, and attaining personal relief.

Oliver Trumble was a careful man, brighter

than most and cleverer, he figured, than those against whom he was waging his ongoing assault. He received without comment, what he perceived was a total lack of respect and continuing exploitation.

‘Davis messed up his ledger again, Trumble. Fix it.’

‘These records *Williams Manufacturing* sent over this quarter are unintelligible, Trumble. Fix it.’

At the end of his finger-numbing eight hours on the last day of May – a Wednesday – Trumble carefully Xed out the 31st square on his small, desk calendar and tore off the page. He folded it carefully and slipped it into his wallet. A more sentimental man harboring similar feelings might have offered it a quick kiss. It was the symbol of his nearly life-long effort. The time had come. His never wavering patience was about to pay off.

He left his letter of resignation on his desk where it was sure to be found on Thursday morning. Without having needed to contrive any specifically malevolent problems for the company, his mere absence would cripple the operation for many weeks. Higgins would come to understand what a valuable asset he had just lost. Trumble had envisioned the man on his knees imploring him to return and save the company – and Higgins’ hide. He envisioned himself smiling, looking down on the nearly prostrate man while turning, shaking his head, and walking away into the fog called perfect satisfaction. The empowering feeling instilled by that part of his fantasy

had driven him for most of 25 years.

Each month during that time, he had clandestinely shifted minuscule amounts of money from three dozen firms into a hidden holding account, doing so in such a manner as to neither add nor subtract from the crucial ending company balances. He adjusted invoices and bills of lading as only an accounting genius could. By appropriating a tiny amount from each company during each of those 300 months a sizeable sum had been siphoned off. On the Higgins' ledger it went into the 'Holding Account' and appeared on clients' quarterly statements as, 'Account Insurance'. Auditors had never questioned either.

At random intervals, the accumulated funds were transferred to a personal, numbered, internet-based bank account – although that, of course, did not disrupt the books, remaining as the 'services fees' entry in the counterbalancing, Holding Account. There was more to it, but that represented its essence. Those funds in the internet account would soon be cashed out and transferred into a new, more easily accessible, less traceable account. But for that, Oliver needed to move on to the next step in his meticulously designed plan.

Arranging for the funds had been his 25-year-long, *Step One*. In *Step Two*, he resigned his position at Higgins, four months prior to the next audit, feigning the excuse of being ready to retire and needing to move further south for health reasons.

* * *

Step Three involved the carefully researched and ingeniously planned use of several Patsies.

Reverend Ryan, at Grace Methodist, a small Church down in the wharf district, spoke highly of Oliver Trumble and counted on the man to help run the church soup kitchen four nights a week.

“Oliver! Punctual as usual,” the Reverend said as Tumble descended the twelve, uncomfortably sized, cement steps into the surprisingly pleasant church basement.

He had closed the door, gently, behind him. It was a large open area with narrow, horizontal windows encircling the room near the ceiling, which, during the day, offered a surprisingly pleasant amount of light. It was dusk. The lights were on. It had a cement floor out of which seemed to grow a dozen, thick, wooden posts supporting the sanctuary above. The room was set up with rows of long tables and fold-up chairs – five to each side of a table. It was six o’clock on Monday evening.

“Reverend. Anything special this evening?”

It would have caused a start among those in the Higgins office to discover the man could indeed mount a smile when it was to his benefit, and to speak without first having been spoken to.

“No. Just the usual. Food’s been prepared – waiting in the kitchen on the steam table. Your regular to-do list, I guess – set out the plates and silverware, then apron up and be ready to ladle out the goodies – provided tonight by *Jenny’s Restaurant* on 145th Street. Thank you for making the arrangements with them, by the way. They’ve agreed to prepare one meal a month. You know, your idea about purchasing inexpensive dishes and utensils and such, has done just what you promised; it’s saved us

several hundred dollars these past four months over the throwaway variety. Who'd a thought?"

"And," Oliver said extending the thought, "at 5,000 years for each foam cup and plate to disintegrate and figuring over that four-month period we've saved at least 3,000 such items, you could argue you've saved nearly fifteen million years of landfill decomposition."

"Wow! Leave it to an accountant. If I can appropriate that, I'll mention it on Sunday morning – a good lead-in to a planet-saving project I will be proposing for our parishioners."

"Feel free. I'm happy it has worked out. Now, about these paper placemats. I figure if we go to substantial, reusable, plastic table cloths that we can wash off between sittings, we'll save another pretty penny over a year's time. I've made a list here of several wholesale houses that are likely to give you a great deal. In fact, with a little of your 'bless you for your generosity' palaver, I imagine you can get them for the price of shipping."

Although Reverend Ryan had never considered his negotiating skills, palaver, he dismissed it, returning to what was really important.

"I don't know what we'd do without you, Oliver. I really don't."

"Well, as you know, my retirement is upon me, and I'm thinking of moving further south – arthritis, chills, and such."

"I can understand that. You will certainly be missed here when that time comes. I imagine you'll find another kitchen to serve wherever you go."

Oliver offered a meaningful, if not sincere, nod.

“That’s my plan, for sure. I can take what I’ve learned here and make the new operation more efficient from day one.”

He envisioned no such plan, of course.

“Bless you, Oliver.”

He moved on and arranged the plates and such and collared two regular early arrivals to do dishes after they finished eating. Things needed to be kept washed to have enough to last throughout the evening.

One of those men was Cyrus Wisters, a gray haired, lightly-bearded, part-time wino, somewhere between thirty and seventy – how did one tell?

“Cyrus. I was hoping you’d be in this evening. Didn’t see you on Friday. I was concerned. You been okay?”

It had been Oliver doing the sincere sounding asking.

“I’m afraid I slipped a bit and got – well, under the weather – ya understand. Got hold of some bad brew – tryhin’ to save money, ya understand. Thought I was dyin’ fer sure but then, lo and behold, four days later I woke up sober and seven pounds lighter. Praise the Lord, ya know?”

“Sorry to hear you were made ill. You’ve seemed to be feeling so well these past several months. Glad you’re back tonight. Tell you what, I got an extra ten here. For your next bottle, you buy good stuff, now, you hear?”

“Yes, sir, Oliver. Thank you, sir.”

It had won Oliver the adulation he sought, if doing nothing for the old man’s sobriety.

“You know that government check I said I

thought you might be able to get?”

“Yeah. Did ya find out about it?”

“I did. I even got an application form, but I need some more information before I can submit it for you. Let’s go into the back room and fill in the blanks – that is if you’re still wanting to do it.”

“Oh, yes, sir, I still want to do it – a hundred a month may not be much to you, but it’s a world a money to me. I ain’t told nobody about it, like you said.”

That had not been entirely true, but in the honesty department, Cyrus ranked well above most who called the area of the south side wharf’s their home.

“Good, because there are only so many checks available for every zip code.”

That apparently seemed reasonable to Cyrus. They moved into the back room. The reverend saw them and said a private prayer of thanks that Oliver took such an interest in those who needed guidance the most. Of all the regulars, there was something about Cyrus that indicated he had genuine potential to rise above his present lot in life.

They sat at the small table there. Oliver provided an official looking form he had dreamed up and printed out from his computer for the occasion. There was no government check program. It was a scam, a con, a fishing trip – all one might expect from the amoral being he had hidden so well from Cyrus and Reverend Ryan.

“Okay, now we just need a few more pieces of information. Need to be sure we have your full name – the one on your birth certificate – did you bring it

with you?”

“Yes, sir.”

It had been riding in his boot. He removed it, unfolded it, and handed it over.

“Okay. Cyrus David Wisters. There’s your birthdate. Let me fill that in. Father, Jacob. Mother Wilma Jackson Wisters. Place of birth, St. Mary’s Hospital. Lancing, Oregon. You’re a long way from home. And finally, your social security number. Oh, look down here. Something I hadn’t seen before. It says you have to include a copy of your birth certificate along with the application. Do you want to wait and get another made or shall I keep this one and have a copy made at my office? That way it would be free.”

“You do it then. I seem to live my life runnin’ down ‘free’.”

“I’ll get it back to you by next Monday at the latest, okay?”

“That’s fine, Oliver. You’re a good man.”

Oliver was well on his way to securing an alternate identity, which he felt he needed to completely cut the ties with Higgins – become invisible as the old *Oliver* – just in the unlikely case his creative bookkeeping would ever be uncovered.

Of all the men he had met and carefully screened through his contacts at the soup kitchen, Oliver had selected Wisters for several reasons, some of which included their similar build, and hair and eye color. With the addition of a beard, the appearance of age was easily adjusted for men – ‘the great equalizer,’ so dubbed in one of the books Oliver had read about establishing a new identity. The bottom

line was that with the birth certificate and the other personal information he had just received, a new State Identification Card could be obtained giving Oliver all the rights and privileges of Cyrus David Wisters. A new bank account could be set up and soon filled; one that would be legitimate and easily accessible, although Wisters would remain unaware of its existence.

The old man was a loner, seemingly content with his lot and, as homeless folks go, did well enough to survive in what he considered, style. He was a longtime fixture in the homeless community there near the wharfs on the south side of the city. From abandoned two-bys, crates, wooden doors and plastic tarps, he had assembled his own tiny, but sturdy, mostly storm-secure and fully private hut atop an abandoned warehouse.

Oliver, being devoid of conscience, easily moved to do whatever was necessary to achieve his ends, and 'whatever was necessary' had been precisely planned. Oliver was a careful man.

After the meal that night, he told Reverend Ryan that he had, in fact, decided to move on. The Reverend would be sorry to have Oliver leave – he counted him as a friend. If Oliver harbored any reciprocal feelings, it was how ministers and priests could always be counted on to be chumps and it was reassuring to have had that verified one more time. A man needed some certainties in his life.

Over the next two weeks, Oliver bided his time until his face had sprouted a short, but surprisingly thick, beard – enough to allow him to pass for a man of Cyrus's age. It came in more white than gray.

Although he was surprised – and perhaps some dismayed – by that, it should have been no shock since his body hair, sparse as it was, had succumbed to white years before. He also forfeited the pleasure of haircuts. He felt grubby and disgusting, and Oliver had never allowed himself to feel grubby and disgusting. Oliver was a careful and tidy man.

The face in the mirror bore a remarkable resemblance to Cyrus – he had made a very good choice.

While he established the look, *Step Four*, Oliver remained close to the apartment in which he had lived for twenty-some years. The next audit at *Higgins* was nearly four months away and, although he believed his creative accounting would never be discovered, in the worse-case scenario, it wouldn't be found until then. According to plan, Oliver's life and whereabouts would be significantly different by then.

Step Five:

One morning, Oliver donned church-basement clothes and, presenting himself as *Richard Cramer* – a fully meaningless alias – walked a seamy, southside neighborhood within the smell of the sea and the sounds of lapping water. He was searching for a room to rent. Satisfied he had spotted an ideal, nondescript, out of the way apartment building, he approached it and knocked on the door marked '*Man:ger*'. It opened just inches, the security-chain pulled taut, remaining in place. A forehead, eyes, nose and chin above a row of buttons, appeared behind the long, narrow slot. The man they belonged

to surveyed Oliver – that is, ‘Cramer’, through the crack. He apparently passed muster, since the manager did that, ‘close the door just shy of clicking shut, unchain it, and then open it for real,’ thing; the universal routine-of-caution played out daily in most every home, in every city, in the country. How sad things had come to that. Oliver mused that a better dressed gentleman would have been dismissed out of hand – never gotten by the look-see over the taut chain. He would have been fingered as an authority of some kind, snooping, most likely, for information the manager didn’t know or wouldn’t share. It was typical for folks in such neighborhoods not to know things they knew. The man spoke.

“Ya?”

It had been a terse, amorphous, question where a more articulate, meaning-loaded question would have seemed more appropriate. Oliver responded.

“I’m lookin’ for a room in this neck a the woods. My ID’s a little less than up ta snuff.”

He had tried to dummy down his usually higher-class style of speaking. Oliver still had a *lot* to learn.

Richard/Oliver removed a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and held it out toward the man.

“This, plus whatever you require upfront.”

“Fifty a week – no partials – no lease – due by noon every Saturday. If you won’t be here Saturday, then sometime before that. Past due forfeits the room.”

So, the man *could* offer information-packed phrases.

The manager took a step back and looked him over a second time.

“ID problem, you say,” he said stroking his chin. “I don’t know.”

Clearly, he was playing him. They both understood that.

Richard removed a second twenty and held it out. The Manager slipped it out of Richards fingers.

“I got one room – rear, third floor, one bathroom per floor – right next door, though – four rooms to the floor. Fire escape at the end of the hall – would be on your end. All my renters are men. None of them talkative, seldom any visitors, if you get my drift.”

“I think I do. May I see it first?”

“If you *need* to. Follow me.”

He seemed somewhat bewildered – put out, perhaps – by the request.

They walked through the man’s living room to a door that opened into the hall. At the rear was a wooden stairway – 8 steps to a landing then 8 more back to the second floor. A like arrangement on up to number three. Room 304 was just to the left as they topped the stairs. The man unlocked it and pushed it open. He entered. Richard/Oliver followed. There was no sales pitch – what ya saw was what ya got – a take it or leave it offer.

It was what he had expected – no more, no less. There were two windows – north and east. He tried them. They both opened with some effort – seemed heavy – probably would have weighed significantly less had they not been so grimy – like ten years grimy, he figured. More likely, the ancient

weight ropes had deteriorated and broken between the studs. The once papered walls had been painted and repainted – the paper in places pulled away from the corners at the ceiling. The floor was bare wood, the ceiling was an early iteration of the ‘cottage cheese’ finish probably applied over whatever had been there originally. Once white, he figured, it was at that point, dark gray – maybe light black – home to the infamous *cob* – the maker of sticky, seemingly instantaneous and ubiquitous webs.

There was a double bed, which may well have been original equipment. One would certainly never fall out of it. The problem was more likely how to extricate oneself in the morning – sleep with a climber’s pick, perhaps. None of that really mattered. Looking it all over was mostly for show anyway. There was a four-drawer chest – one leg missing – propped up with a mostly empty baked bean can sitting on a copy of *Atlas Shrugged* – an appropriate final resting place for the novel, perhaps. He assumed the roaches were avid, libertarian readers who offered copious amounts of gas. All the drawers opened. There was one, bare bulb, ceiling fixture and a floor lamp standing next to a third generation, Salvation Army recliner – green with a random array of duct tape strips – a few of them holding in place *older* duct tape strips. Both lights worked. There was a desk and chair, surprisingly a match with the dresser – oak veneer over particleboard – probably weighed a ton each. Two, non-matching, multicolored braided rugs covered a substantial portion of the floor. The door – new, metal sheathed, solid core wood, with massive hinges – had three locks – in handle, dead bolt, and a

security chain strong enough to have towed the Titanic. He wondered what such a new door signaled in an ancient building like that – something more than the likelihood of frequent, *verbal* disagreements, he assumed. He wondered if the dark stain on the floor was blood. He didn't ask. Everything considered, the room would work.

“May I sneak a peek at the bathroom?”

They returned to the hall. The manager, clearly growing impatient, pointed but didn't accompany him inside. There was no interior lock suggesting modesty was not waived among the residents. He assumed they knew how to knock. Whether or not they acted on that knowledge was yet to be seen. It reminded him of his two, horrendous, years in the Army. Two sinks with mirrors, one stool, one extra-size, mostly tiled shower with two shower heads and double drains – for those who enjoyed being cozy, he assumed. It seemed to be a bring your own curtain and bathmat, arrangement.

“This should fit my needs well. Cash, I assume.”

The manager nodded.

They returned downstairs.

“I'll need a name.”

In tone, it really said, ‘any name at all’.

“Yes. Richard Cramer. I will be in and out a lot, so I would prefer to pay two months in advance – \$400 until the middle of August.”

“Up to you. I'm good for it if you are.”

He assumed that was meant to imply honesty on the manager's part.

Richard/Oliver counted eight fifties into his

palm. The man offered a signed and dated receipt – June 15th, 1995. The, ‘Received From’, line was not completed. It was a fill in the blank arrangement. Clearly, the manager knew just how to take care of his clientele. He spoke.

“Don’t require it, but I will take a next of kin address if you want and when you leave a forwarding address. Up to you. One more thing: two police calls in a month and you’re out a here – no refunds. A second thing: you dress too good for here. The others are gonna get suspicious and some of the worst may be inclined to take advantage of you – lookin’ at your shiny shoes and rattle snake belt is mainly what I’m thinkin’ about. I’d hate to find you barefoot and hangin’, you understand.”

Richard/Oliver DID understand. Reality suddenly became REALITY!

“Thanks a bunch for the head’s ups – so to speak. (He couldn’t believe he said that.) I’ll do my best to scruffy-up before I return. I will have a few things sent in the next several days. If you will see they get to my room, I will appreciate it.”

He offered a final twenty and left.

He returned home – Oliver’s home – and called a used furniture concern on the far north side – as far away from his new address as was possible, but still within the city. They came that same afternoon, looked over what he had and made an offer. Oliver accepted it and presently was left with only his computer and printer, a small table, a chair to fit it, a mattress on the floor, some kitchen things, some clothes – his scruffiest – and several suitcases. The next morning, he searched the yellow pages for an

unremarkable looking moving company. He found what seemed to meet his requirements: the two line, no horn-tooting, listing said, *Moving. In City Only. By load and destination.* At three o'clock it was loaded – less the computer, printer and mattress – and dispatched to his new digs on the south side – addressee, Richard Cramer.

That left only one thing to complete in *Step Five*. He bundled the rest of his Oliver-the-accountant clothes into three trash bags and, over the next three days, using cabs, he dropped one bag off at each of three Good Will stores separated from each other by miles. He used their Dump Bins behind the buildings, thus avoiding personal contact and the possibility of later identification. Garbage men might have seen a bag of clothes as a pot of gold and sold the contents. He wanted more space, more anonymity than that. He couldn't risk having his previous wardrobe recognized – as small a risk as that might have been. Oliver was a careful man who apparently dressed too well for his new life.

Step Six:

The following morning, he took a cab two-miles north, asking to be let out in the center of an upscale block. From there he began walking.

He had found two condos on the internet that seemed to meet his needs. He met the realtor on site and looked at both. Either would serve him well. Both were upscale, gated, and much to his liking. He selected the larger and brighter and, using the Cyrus Wisters name, even though he didn't yet have the

necessary identification, took the process right up through the stage of convincing the agent he was fully serious about making the purchase. He told her he needed just several more days to arrange the financing. He was granted a short term 'hold'.

Until then, he stayed at the Cramer room – scruffed beyond recognition.

CHAPTER TWO

Becoming Cyrus Wisters

Step Seven:

Using varying styles of handwriting and preparing letters to be included, he arranged four stamped envelopes addressed to Cyrus at his soon to be condo address, varying size, color, and return addresses. He printed a forged USPS cancellation code over each stamp, then sealed each envelope and let them sit three hours to dry. He opened them, not entirely carefully. He prepared an address label which he placed on a magazine to make it for all appearances a subscription. He roughed up the edges of the publication to give it the look of having struggled its way through the postal service. On the evening of June 24th, he rubbed a small section of his forehead raw – at the hair line. It was painful, but he worked at it until it drew blood and looked hideous and authentic. He managed a loose gauze bandage around his head to cover it. Early morning on June 25th, armed with his battered head, those letters, the magazine, and ‘his’ new, Cyrus, birth certificate, he

headed for the County Offices.

Step Eight:

He arrived early at the Revenue Office. He had manufactured and included several other official looking documents in the Wisters name, so he would need to sort through them to find what would be requested – a payment reminder for furniture rental, a sales receipt for a TV, things like that.

“Good morning, Ma’am. Fewer people here at this hour than I anticipated. I remember revenue offices always being jam packed.”

He noticed a picture pinned to a small bulletin board inside her space. He pointed.

“Grandson?”

“Yes. My youngest’s oldest if that makes sense.”

“Do I read David?”

“Yes. Named after his grandfather. They never got to know each other.”

“I am so sorry. Still, I imagine you have wonderful stories to tell him about the man, don’t you?”

“I do. He’s a bit young yet, but the day will come when he’ll be interested.”

“How nice to have family. I lost mine in an auto accident when I was ten.”

With that, he had initiated the *‘pity me’* factor.

“I’m sorry about that. Seems like you’ve made a good life.”

“I have. Well, I had until a few nights ago when I got mugged here in your fair city – lost everything of

importance I had on me.”

He had just upped the pity factor.

“Your head?” she asked, studying the bandage.

Oliver nodded and pointed. She hadn’t asked to see it, but he flipped up the gauze for just a second, so she could not help but take in the damage and verify its existence. He figured that with that, the pity factor had been well-established and had to deliver some likely needed, ‘skip-over-the-petty-details thing and get this poor man what he needs so he can be on his way’. It was why he had put himself through the painful ordeal.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was probably gross, wasn’t it? I’ve been living with a group of men for so long, I no longer consider the constitutions of the fairer gender. Again, I apologize.”

At that point it had become, ‘pity this very *nice* man.’

“That’s alright. I raised five boys so cuts, bruises and bleeding, are nothing new to me.”

“You’re very kind – understanding. I’m sure you know a whole lot more about me than you ever wanted to know.”

“She shrugged but did not indicate agreement.”

“Anyway, Ma’am, Sorry I blabbered on. I am here to apply for a new State Identification card – my old one suddenly gone from my life as I indicated. I have recently moved here from rural Wyoming. What sort of documents do you need from me to get set up in this state? I sure hope I brought the right ones. You know how you can never find anything after a move across country.”

The, pity the nice, clearly *flustered* man desperately in need of your help element, had landed.

“Well, we can take a recent tax return, or a birth certificate plus verification you are residing in the state.”

“Let’s see what I have here. Sorry I’m not better organized.”

He turned the big envelope over and let the contents slip out onto the counter. He began sorting through them.

“One birth certificate, here.”

He slid it forward.

“What counts as proof of residence? I have a magazine I subscribe to – newly forwarded – and several letters I have received at my new apartment since arriving here. Let’s see what else I have.”

“That should do fine – the certificate and the mail.”

He pushed the letters toward her.

“Flower and Garden,” she said, picking up the magazine. One of my favorites.”

It was why he had both selected that magazine *and* a woman’s cubical. Oliver was a careful and an adeptly devious man.

She spent several minutes attending to business at the computer.

“Use the address on the envelopes, I assume.”

“Yes. I should have indicated that.”

She continued. Presently, she pointed.

“Follow me over to the photo center. Once we snap your picture we’re about three minutes from your new plastic.”

“I certainly appreciate your patience and help.

I suppose you can tell I haven't had anyone to talk with for the last month or so."

And so, he continued. He figured it was time to stop, before *pity him* became *irked by him*.

He sat where told, he looked where told, he smiled when told, he signed where told and waited as told. A few minutes later the card was ready. She held it up, so he could see it.

"Make sure the information is correct. If it's satisfactory, I just need ten dollars and you're good to go."

The 'Cyrus' picture turned out better than the one he carried with his own name, Oliver Trumble. Somehow that didn't seem fair, but he chose not to dwell on it. He thanked her again and made his way out the door and back home to his new Cramer room.

Step Nine:

Later that day, Cyrus/Oliver visited the library. He approached the main desk.

"I'm new here. Can you direct me to the section containing the local newspapers?"

"Follow the green line on the floor in front of you. It will take you up a flight of stairs to the second floor where it will turn right. You'll be all but there, sir."

"Thanks so much."

He felt like the father of a newborn, following the trail in the hospital to see his baby for the first time. That would never be Oliver's fate. Once in a great while he let himself wonder if he regretted it. So far, he hadn't. He believed he would have been a

simply dreadful parent. Most who knew him would agree. To him, children had no socially redeeming characteristics, whatsoever – other than that one of them had grown up to be him.

He found the newspapers and searched the obituaries within the current month. He needed a copy of a death certificate – any death certificate – so long as it was in its latest, official format, so he could reconstruct the style and other elements as he took steps to forge one about himself. A next step would be preparing it for himself – Oliver Trumble. He found one for which he could construct a believable story – a man a few years his senior. He would become his recently deceased Uncle – poor fellow. He copied the information and left. From a phone booth near his room, he made a call to the County Recorder's Office.

“Several months back my uncle passed away and I find I need a copy of his death certificate in order to clear up some of the left-over business. How do I go about obtaining a copy? Do I need any documentation?”

“Death certificates are public record like Marriage certificates.”

“Women all tell me I will receive the former before the latter,” he said, hoping it would be received as humorous.

The woman on the line chuckled.

“We will need the full name, the mother's full name, and dates and place of birth and death of the deceased. There is a ten-dollar fee. You can send that information to us with a check or you can come by the office. Through the mail it will take a week –

maybe a little more. Here, perhaps, twenty minutes.”

“I will be in and out of town this coming week, so perhaps I better go the mail route. Can I give you the information over the phone?”

“It may get misplaced while we wait to receive the check. I suggest you either send everything together or drop by our office – that’s really the best if you’re here in the city. Like I said, it should only take a few minutes. If you decide to send it, the address is Department of Records, County Court House, in care of the city.”

Why all that rigamarole? Oliver had read that once a person assists you – answers a question, hands you the sugar at a diner – he moves into a mind-set of being willing to help you. Amy went on to confirm that.

“Add my name in the lower left corner of the envelope and I’ll see to it personally. I’m Amy.”

“Amy? No kidding. My mother’s name. Small world or something, I guess. You’ve convinced me. I’ll come by. I may still get there today. How late will you be there?”

“Today’s my late day. Be here until six – that’s when we close. I’ll be the one with bells on.”

She chuckled at her little joke. Oliver echoed it. It wasn’t that he didn’t know how to play the social games – he just thought they were absurd.

“Thank you for your assistance and pleasing manner, Amy. Looking forward to meeting you.”

Of course, that was not his mother’s name, but his purpose in all of it had been to ensure fastest possible processing with the least number of issues. He never would have done it through the mail or by

check, because those things would have provided an address. He hoped the initial ruse made it appear he was in no hurry. He would disguise himself with things he had been procuring during the past month – a bulky hearing aid, Elton John glasses, and a fuller mustache. He would comb his hair to the left rather than the usual, straight back. If an address were required, he would provide 3538 Woods Street, Apartment 42. It was one of several he had searched out as real and unoccupied as of just several days before. He would use the name, Jacob Jackson – the deceased, William Jackson's, nephew. He remade his magazine label with that name and address just in case and would carry it folded under his arm. He'd keep the bandage and use the mugging story again if required. That had worked perfectly before. He wanted no traceable connection between him – as Oliver or Cyrus – and the dead guy or that death certificate.

By plan, he arrived at five thirty – late enough to make her efficient and early enough to make sure he could receive the service he needed. Oliver was a careful, scheming man.

Inside the office, there were three short lines. He got in Amy's – there was a name sign at her window; also, the other two were men and unless one of them was brother of the boy named Sue, he figured he could have made the proper choice. Within five minutes they were face to face across the counter.

"Amy, as I live and breathe. Not at all like I pictured you from our phone conversation. I apologize for imagining you as short and plumb. Just look at you! Pardon my obtuseness. We talked earlier about my uncle's death certificate. Here is the

information you indicated you will need about him.”

He slid a sheet of paper toward her.

“You take cash, I hope. Lost my credit cards in a mugging earlier in the week.

He pointed to his head, that time leaving out the drama of the flip-and-see. That had been preparation for the no ID situation had she asked for it. She didn’t. She did need a name for the receipt.

“Jacob Jackson, nephew.”

It didn’t have to be verified.

The transaction was complete in ten minutes. Computers were clearly revolutionizing the world. He figured that was generally a positive thing for businesses and government, even if wrought with perils for personal privacy and for those living in the shadow of the law. Oliver was a careful and *insightful* man.

“Thank you for your kindness and helpfulness. I’ve never needed to do anything like this before. You made it painless for me and I appreciate that.”

He turned and left, feeling more than a little smug. He had a font package for his computer and he was sure he would be able to match those on the form in his forgery. Later he would discover it was the common old, Times New Roman – first used in England in 1832 he learned. Oliver was a careful, *inquisitive* man.

That county had made it easy. Instead of impressing official copies with an embossed emblem to certify them, they stamped the back and initialed and dated it. That font was Helvetica – another common one. Tiny. Eight point.

He decided to wait until the following day to do

the computer work. That evening he treated himself to a restaurant meal. He chose a restaurant on the west side – one he had not frequented. He ordered fileted porkchop, mashed potatoes, brown gravy, broccoli in cheese sauce, and corn – cherry pie for dessert. Eating out was his only form of entertainment and it had been too long since he had let his hair down like that – and recently he had a good deal more hair to let down. He smiled at the thought. He kept the disguise in place. Eating cherry pie through an overgrown mustache was more of a challenge than he had anticipated. It took numerous napkins and care not to loosen his new furry, little, friend.

By the following noon, he had his own death certificate printed and filled in – complete with the ‘Certified’ stamp on the back – identical location to ‘uncle’s’ and identically askew as it sat on the paper. He printed five copies – one to accompany each copy of his obituary that he was preparing. He would mail the two items together to local newspapers later that afternoon.

His Oliver obituary did not have to be fabricated – in fact it needed to be scrupulously accurate. He merely selected what about his life he wanted to have memorialized in print – things a few people knew about him to make it seem fully legitimate. By three o’clock, he was satisfied with that document. There would be no picture for fear at some future time it might lead to him being recognized. Anyway, he understood there was a charge for that – an unnecessary complication. His life had not been populated with many people – no real friends – a few co-workers, insurance agents, he

had no church affiliation – well a roundabout one via the soup kitchen. Ten fingers counted them all with room left to accept newcomers – unlikely since he had been deceased for almost two days according to an official looking document in his possession. His body had been cremated immediately, of course. His hope was that at least two of the papers would run the obituary so it would be an easily discoverable matter of public record. If not, he'd make new copies and re-submit them. He understood they typically came from the funeral home, so his approach was unusual. The rest of his plan required him to be officially and obviously dead.

Two days later, the obituary appeared in all five papers. He felt surprisingly good – considering he was dead. It was time to move on.

Step Ten:

The next day, he went back to the public library and obtained a library card in the name of Cyrus Wisters. He used his new Cyrus ID card, but gave the Cramer address as his 'new' one, not reflected on the card, explaining he had just moved. He was counting on the librarian not to look at anything other than what she needed while perusing his ID – like the very recent issue date of the card. She didn't. He brought along a copy of his lease – one he had fabricated – and together those proved sufficient to get a card.

His research into establishing a new identity had suggested it was always good to have 'secondary' identification if backup were ever requested. A library card was universally accepted in

that role. Apparently, readers who were too stingy to buy their own books were held above reproach. Oliver was a careful and stingy man.

Step Eleven:

He returned to the real estate office ready to firm up the purchase.

“Mr. Wisters. Good to see you again. I was worried. Time is running out on the ‘hold order’. So, I take it you are here to sign the papers.”

That had been Melinda Reece – the agent with whom he had previously dealt. He had been waiting to obtain his ID as Cyrus D. Wisters, necessary to seal the arrangement, but had felt the need to hurry the preparations along – thus the steps taken leading up to the hold. She had all the paperwork ready for his signature.

She asked to see picture identification. He handed her his new ID card. He smiled to himself when Melinda made her next request.

“Silly as it may seem, Mr. Wisters, I’m required to see some secondary piece of identification, also – a previous lease, a utility bill, library card, anything that establishes your identity.”

“How about my library card, then. I have it handy right here.”

The sale was finalized. Even at that, most of his ‘Higgins money’ was left.

With that, he felt certain he had left his own identity behind, buried so well that he could not be traced. If his clever robbery of the Higgins Company were ever discovered and traced to him – Oliver – he

would be long dead and his remains, as fertilizer, brightening some flowerbed below and, as smoke, adding to the air pollution above. Having served its purpose, he would let the rented Richard Cramer room lapse.

He purchased minimal new furnishings for his new Wisters/Oliver condo. He would get more later – a few pieces from a number of different places. Even in his new life, he didn't want to make memorable impressions. Oliver was a careful and private man.

With Oliver Trumble and Richard Cramer behind him, it was time for the next step.

Step Twelve:

He drove north out of the city to Milford, a community of ten thousand – small enough to be friendly and trusting and yet large enough not to be uncomfortably snooty. He located a locally owned bank where his new, sizeable, Cyrus Wisters account was welcomed. It came with on-line banking, a toaster oven, and a year's subscription to some financial magazine. Oliver had, years before, determined such periodicals were deceitful arms of the banking community, suggesting investments and such that only benefited the money lenders. Declining the magazine offer, he held his tongue and flashed more than his morning's allotment of smiles. The new, on-line banking arrangement was a necessity and the toaster oven might prove to be fun.

Step Thirteen:

Late one night, he visited Cyrus at his hut atop

the warehouse in the dock district.

“Oliver! Come in. Good to see you. I’ve really missed you, old friend.”

His enthusiasm and smile were both genuine.

Oliver entered offering a reciprocal, if not as sincere, smile. The ceiling was only five feet high, so taking a seat or scrunching onto his knees, became the alternatives. He sat.

“Sorry it’s been so long, Cyrus. I guess you found out I moved. I’ve felt bad that I didn’t say goodbye to you personally, so, since I had to come back here to the City on business, I figured I’d hunt you down and see how you’ve been. Sorry that extra check thing didn’t work out. We can try again in six months. I trust Reverend Ryan got your birth certificate and documents back to you. I mailed it to him.”

“Yes, he did. That’ was real nice of ya to have put in all that work for me. I got cookies and scotch just waiting to party.”

He didn’t wait for a response but turned away to retrieve them from an old tin breadbox – his pantry. Oliver reached out and, in a relatively painless, boot training fashion, hastened the old man’s passing. His plan had included a weighted body bag – hidden in the alley below – to be sunk some five miles out at sea. That plan, however, was interrupted by someone approaching the hut. Through the darkness, Oliver dragged the body away from the structure across the roof and into the deep shadows. He removed himself from the scene by climbing down the iron ladder on the opposite side of the old, three story, brick building. His quickly improvised plan ‘B’, was to come back

later that night and dispose of the corpse, so the death would go unnoticed and he, as Cyrus Wisters, could live on uninterrupted and unquestioned.

Step Fourteen:

When he returned several hours later, the body was gone. During the next several weeks, Oliver studied the obituaries and missing person listings in the papers. Nothing surfaced about Cyrus or anyone resembling his description. As the months passed, Oliver (as Cyrus) settled comfortably into his new identity in his recently acquired luxury condo on the upper west side – using the never needing to be verified name, Dave Cyrus, with those around the building who seemed to want a name. One more trail-concealing caution.

More months passed and through wise investments and inside information available only to accounts and few others, Oliver's fortune doubled and redoubled. He lived comfortably. If he saw a downside to any of it, it was that he had done such a good job manipulating the figures that his theft – replacement retirement fund, as he thought of it – from Higgins was never discovered. The full savoring of that act of revenge was therefore never completely realized. Wisely, he learned to live with it. There had been some short-lived fantasizing about an anonymous letter suggesting where and how to discover the shortfall. In the interest of his personal wellbeing, he thought it was better to bury the ego along with his former self. Oliver was a careful and sensible man – recently with a buried ego.

During that time, he had received a driver's license; with an ID card, it took little more than passing the tests. Oliver had always been a good and careful driver. He felt more secure with the license. Although he had given up his car, he could rent a vehicle anytime he needed to travel places a bus or taxi couldn't take him – primarily to Milford to take care of matters related to banking, which required signatures. Mostly, he stuck close to home, only visiting places within walking distance.

He typically ate breakfast at a diner several blocks from his apartment. One morning after he had finished eating and had returned to the street for the walk home, he caught a glimpse of somebody out of the corner of his eye, as it is often referenced. He wasn't sure why it seemed important. Well, thinking back, he had experienced the same feeling on several other occasions – when leaving the library, the grocery store, the local bank. Something about it grouped those incomplete images together – as one and the same, perhaps. It remained mostly formless.

He stopped and turned around, wanting to determine what was going on. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The scene included no one he recognized yet it overflowed with the essence of peril. He continued toward home, finding the closer he got, the longer and faster his strides. By the time he reached the door, his heart was pounding. He was sweating and breathing so deeply it hurt.

“This is ridiculous,” he said out loud.

Once inside his apartment, he went to a window from where he could see the final several blocks of his route home. People. They looked like

ants – no, more like Ladybugs, hugging the sidewalks, wearing colorful garb and apparently minding their own business. The streets were dotted with the tops of Yellow Cabs. Red seemed to be the popular private vehicle color with blue and white and black mixed in – he had not paid attention to that before. From twenty stories above, the streets resembled slowly moving strings of colorfully painted beads, stopping and starting with no apparent predetermined plan or rules. His vehicles had always been green. He hated green, but he had read that color was the last to fade away in the dusk of early evening. He figured a disgusting green vehicle that could be seen, was a far safer choice than one of his liking – silver or gray – that could not be seen. Oliver was a careful and practical man who had never so much as experienced a fender bender.

He sat and began talking to himself about the recent experiences.

“Supposing there might be somebody down there following me, who would it be? Nobody from Higgins – they aren’t even aware of the missing money. Somebody from back at the Cramer rooming house? There had certainly been seedy characters in and out of there. I had made a point of not getting to know any of them, so I can’t see how I could have offended or crossed anybody. It could be one of them followed me because they believe they know secrets about me or, better still, in an attempt to find out secrets about me. I’ve been so careful that seems unlikely. Best answer is that for some irrational reason, I’m suddenly on edge and my imagination is acting on it as if it were true. I just have to shake it

off.”

He managed to keep busy the rest of the day, over-seeing investments and the like. He found the potential of on-line transactions was both amazing and frightening. By nightfall he was worn out – physically and emotionally – so turned in early. His hope was for a more relaxed day coming up. His expectation, however, was for more of the same.

CHAPTER THREE

Suspicion Grows

Despite his expectation of the previous night that the old anxieties would return, he was somewhat surprised and disappointed when, in fact, they *did* return the next morning as he repeated the walk to the diner. He had done some terrible things in his life but had never been given to guilt or regret or remorse. Those required a conscience and Oliver had never been inconvenienced by such an unpleasant and potentially devastating, attribute.

No, his feelings fit a different category – *fear*, he suspected. Fear was one of the few emotions that could be fully disembodied from one's conscience. Fear was a useful emotion having to do with physical survival, different from guilt, which seemed to be a helpless reaction to one's moral disintegration or the breakdown of his integrity. For him it may have begun as stress from the many changes he had voluntarily inflicted on his life since leaving Higgins. Up until then, his life had been one of consistency,

predictability, stability and safety. He may have been angry, but he was always angry. He may have felt put-upon, but he always felt put-upon – stability. Perhaps he was confusing discomfort with fear. Perhaps for him, they were the same.

He had read that criminals on the run, sometimes stressed out because they had not been caught – not that they wanted to be, but they believed they should have been – one man against an army of law enforcers should not be winning. Could that be what was going on? He could see how something like that stirring inside a person could fuel one's imagination and make improbable mountains out of molehills – seeing things that weren't there, even – because they *should* have been there. That sounded too much like a guilt-driven process. He just needed to relax – see the world as it really was and let it prove to him that things were fine. Oliver was a careful man but clearly one with little practice untangling actual emotional conflicts

“Well, I hope that's that,” he said as he reached his destination. “No trace of anybody this morning.”

Interestingly, it had clearly not taken an ‘anybody’ to upset him.

He entered the diner, giving the patrons a once over. There was a dozen at most that morning – it could hold twice that number. He always received some indication of recognition from most them – a nod, a smile, a look up. None intended friendship. It was merely a matter of self-serving interest in knowing what was rippling its way through their routine. He pulled into his usual booth in the back corner. That choice had been based on his need to

keep track of who was there, rather than to be positioned for a quick getaway.

“Usual?” the cook called to him as a question from behind the counter.

“The usual, yes, that will be fine. Make it a full stack this morning, though.”

He knew the cook as, ‘Cook’. The cook knew *him* as the ‘Nine O’clock Number Seven’.

The waitress – Milly, according to her name tag – brought him the paper, orange juice, and coffee – his usual, settle-in-and-get-comfortable, routine. He was known there as a quiet man – a loner, not into conversation of any kind. The waitress honored that and went about her business elsewhere, allowing the other patrons to ogle her and playfully fend off the barrage of suggestive remarks hurled in her direction. She had mastered the art of looking beyond the reeking pack of salivating, junk yard curs that regularly showed up – eager to display their utter lack of human decency – to the good-sized tips they always left.

There was a bell over the front door. He heard it tinkle and looked up from the front page. Oddly, nobody seemed to have come in. The uncomfortable feelings began to stir. He found himself counting heads – a compulsive ritual in which he had engaged since a boy. When at the swimming pool as a youngster, he knew how many people were in the water at any given minute. Sometimes he also swam. That morning, nobody had entered. It should have been a relief – it wasn’t. The bell rang. Nobody had left. Somebody should have entered. Unnatural! Inconsistency and the unexplained were unnerving at

any moment in his life – something *that* unusual, that inexplicable, was clearly frightening.

His worrisome fantasy was broken when his breakfast arrived – a stack, bacon, sausage, grits and Texas toast. His earlier good mood, which had encouraged the third pancake, was fading. He always cleaned his plate – his mother had insisted on it. Had he not, he would have felt compelled to thump the side of his own head. Others would have killed for his metabolism that allowed 3,500 calories a day to maintain an unwavering, 160-pound, slender physique.

Finishing a bit earlier than usual, he paid at the register and left, pausing just outside to survey the surroundings. The wide, concrete, walk was filled with pedestrians on their ways to who knew where. There were, of course, a variety of vehicles – bicycles, cars, trucks, taxi's, buses, even motorcycles and scooters. An old man with a cane, was inching his way across the intersection. He had apparently learned to ignore the uncharitable horns and mouths – or, mercifully, perhaps, he was deaf. A teen boy – wearing virtually nothing – was chasing a teen girl – wearing twice as much but, still, virtually nothing. All of that was just like it had been for years and yet he still felt uneasy.

He hit a quick stride for home. Again, by the time he arrived, he had worked himself into a lather even though he had made no sightings nor substantiated any premonitions. It was no way to live. He sat on the balcony looking out over the city waiting for his heart rate to slow and his breathing to retreat to normal. His doorbell rang. He reacted with an adrenalin injected start. Other than occasional

delivery people, nobody ever rang that bell.

He went to the door and peeped through the eye-level, spy-hole – the one that universally distorted all images to the point it was essentially useless. So, why did he continue to peep? Oliver was a careful man. The upright, energetic, amorphous blob of brown suggested it was the man from UPS. The package had been shipped special handling, thus the delivery to his door. He remembered, so flipped the locks, opened up, and signed the gadget. He wondered how many billions of bacteria and viruses that device must spread from person to person throughout the city. A UPS guy's medical co-pay must be out of this world.

He had ordered binoculars sometime before. He unwrapped them, carefully, and returned to his balcony. He glanced through the single page, slick finish document, which announced he was about to embark on a life-changing experience with his new Model TG-80. He spent a few minutes learning how to use them – not difficult – look through one end and out the other. Things got bigger. He could zoom in to achieve amazing detail. He was glad he had spent the extra fifty bucks for the top of the line model. A camera attachment was also available. He'd think about that. Capturing what he saw might be valuable. Cyrus/Oliver continued getting comfortable with them over the course of an hour, after which he got back to things he needed to take care of – pay bills, banking, things like that.

Several hours later, he returned to the balcony and picked up his new toy taking time to give his world a more thorough, systematic, studied, looking

over.

He mumbled to himself.

“What’s that? The guy on the corner down there looks to be the same one who was there two hours ago. I may have even seen him before. He’s backed against a store front. Appears to be wearing a long coat.”

The man’s mere presence wasn’t the worst of it. He would periodically toss glances right up at him. He was being staked out – stalked even, perhaps. His gut up-shifted to undeniable fear but was still on the downside of panic – perhaps, inching across a playing field of out of control distress. Oliver thought about things in such terms. The binoculars were of little further help since the man stayed in the shadows preventing Oliver from getting a clear view of his face. Why hadn’t he just ordered the camera at the outset? In general, the man looked to be six feet, maybe a little less. Other than that, an average build – hard to tell under the long coat. He wore a baseball cap – too far away to get a team or even a color. Could be *‘Jack’s Tune and Lube’* for all he could tell. He was probably white although that was not a given.

Interesting to him, the longer he watched the man the more his anxiety eased. Reasonable explanations arrived out of nowhere. It was that time of year when many people donned long coats. There were many dozens of balconies and hundreds of windows the man could be attending to – above, below, left, right. Oliver had always been the undisputed center, content, and sovereign of his universe – he understood that. Sometimes it led to misunderstandings. Other people, unless he could

use them for his benefit, were of no relevance except as they threatened or inconvenienced him. Since childhood, he had assumed that anybody looking in his general direction had to be looking at him. Those things considered, he soon had himself convinced it was no different than before. People would be looking at him. That is what people did. He couldn't be frightened off by every shadow that appeared or every loiterer who cast glances toward the sky. He had to keep remembering that no threats or attempts to harm him had been launched. He eventually wrote it off to his exceptionally good powers of observation just getting a bit out of hand in the service of self-protection. Oliver was a careful man with instantaneously available powers of rationalization.

Oliver had always made sure he knew where the 'back door' was just in case. He had the route plotted from his cubical at Higgins to the alley door – 30 seconds, flat. He knew the alternative exit at the diner – 15 seconds. He was overly prepared there at the building in which he lived – elevators or no elevators – he could exit the 20-floor structure in three minutes – tops.

Back inside, he sat in his recliner to think. Considering the outside possibility there really was a malevolent threat out in the world with his name on it, perhaps it would be best to establish one more 'back door'. He opened the paper to the want ads – rooms for rent section. His purpose was not to inquire about any of them, but it provided areas of the city and relative price ranges. He needed a section of the city where the rents were low – like Cramer's place had been – providing for the sorts of clientele that drew.

He would stay out of the previous neighborhood, of course. He scanned the rents. There were several addresses located between 1880 and 2200 South Scruggs Avenue that fit the bill. He would walk the area the next day and locate, 'For Rent', signs on places that had not been advertised. Those, he had been led to believe, would be the most discrete of the discrete.

He was looking for an emergency retreat. He had no idea why he might need it, but continuing unexplained events made it seem like a good idea – a necessary *precaution*. He liked to have options. He would find another Cramer place – furnished, no ID, and strictly cash – his own little black hole, so to speak. A private entrance would be nice so his coming and going – more accurately his lack of coming and going – would not be noticed. He had no plans to spend time there during the normal course of events. He felt better just considering the possibility – his new back door.

The next morning, he arrived at the diner an hour early. They noticed, of course. Oliver offered no explanation. It was a different, so less responsive, collection of patrons at that hour – looks, no nods. Still, the time there proceeded according his well-established routine – the usual number 7; the paper, juice and coffee; payment from a ten-dollar bill at the register; and, finally, the bell jingling him out the front door. From there, he took a cab to within several blocks of Scruggs Avenue. He peeled off his shirt, revealing a tattered, knit pullover. He walked the three and a half blocks, which he had determined looked promising the night before. It was. There were, For

Rent, signs – a half dozen in the first block. That was in closer proximity to safer, middle class neighborhoods, so that was where he put his focus.

He ascertained what he could from a quick once over of the exteriors of several of the buildings. He didn't want to appear inappropriately nosy – it wasn't healthful to be an out of place snoop in such a neighborhood. Two had what appeared to be private entrances. Those might not be the rooms that were for rent, however. He approached a three-story building and knocked at the door.

Managers of rooming houses in seedy neighborhoods must attend the same, Seedy Neighborhood Building Managers' Training Program. The initial contact was a repeat of what transpired at Cramer's place – the door opened a crack, chain showing, the eyes looked him up and down. Then the same sort of question.

“Ya?”

Oliver could play that game. He offered his succinct response, packed with all the necessary information.

“I'm in need of a room. I'm in and out of the city a lot. Come and go at all hours. Really need a private entrance. ID, shaky. Got money.”

He figured the reasonable questions would have been, why do you travel so much, and why do you need a private entrance? Neither was asked.

“Got one. Just come free. Best in the building. Expensive. A hundred a week.”

All *that* had transpired before the door was unchained and opened.

“Sounds like what I may need. May I see it?”

After a second up and down, the man opened the door. Instead of inviting Oliver in, he moved outside, pulling his door closed. He locked it – a telling comment on the neighborhood, he assumed.

“Door’s around back. No inside door into the rest of the building. Has its own bathroom – stool, sink, shower.”

Oliver believed those were the typical elements of a bathroom, so wasn’t sure why they had been enumerated. He nodded and followed the man along a narrow, cement walk around the rear corner of the building – clearly it had been born as a house in the first quarter of the 20th century. The room was on the first-floor looking to be an add-on extension perhaps fifteen feet square. Rather than steps it had a ramp. That would be alright; he hoped it didn’t reflect the fact that it had been placed there for the convenience of the EMT’s, because most occupants left the room on a gurney. He figured that had been humorous.

Inside, it presented a pleasant surprise – like an oasis in a desolate section of the city. It was clean with freshly painted walls and carpeted floor. Along one inside wall was a kitchen-type counter with a sink, drawers and overhead cabinets. On it, sat a single burner, electric hot plate and a small – tiny – refrigerator – something right at a square foot capacity he figured. Again, not a problem. There was a three-quarter-width bed draped in a brown, fitted, spread – flat, reminding him of a low mesa. It seemed comfortable. There were sheets and blankets neatly folded across the foot. Two pillows in clean cases. The light was in the center of the ceiling – a bulb fitted with a plastic clip-on shade – a failed,

Tiffany's-look, knock-off. Included was what Oliver was beginning to think must be a requirement – a green recliner – no duct tape, however. He wouldn't miss that. A metal, bent legged, chrome, table and chairs, circa 1950s, sat in the middle of the room. A good-sized chest of drawers stood against the wall next to the closet door – it boasted four, sturdy legs and no signs of brown legumes, cockroaches or the rantings of Ms. Rand.

The bathroom was – what can one say – a bathroom. The shower was less dirty than most he had seen. It held the real possibility of revealing its brighter and more sanitary original state if attacked by brush, soap and disinfectant. The stall came with a partial can of Lysol sitting on a corner shelf. That seemed fiscally responsible, to him – not having tossed it if it were still functional. It momentarily raised the question of how one disinfected a can of disinfectant when there was only one can. He let it go.

“Looks like a bargain to me,” Oliver said.

“Lease is on the counter. It's week by week on both sides – me, you. Sign it and I'll need a week in advance, of course. Any cop calls and you're out. No parties. No loud music. You can have ladies overnight but only one at a time. They can't live here. No pets and that includes aquariums. My rule is, you break it you either live with it, fix it, or replace it. Tell me you have ID, I don't need to see it but need you to provide me with any 12-digit number to verify it – nobody ever checks ID numbers. I'll need a name for legal purposes – city inspectors don't like blank spaces beside 'name' on the form. Nine other men

live here – most have been here a good while. I run a class place.”

Oliver signed on the dotted line – which, he noted, were *never* dotted – and presented the man with four, one-hundred-dollar bills.

“A month in advance, okay?”

“Fine. I’m Chester. What can I call you?”

“How about, John – John Smith.”

The man broke a broad smile.

“I like an honest liar. We’ll get along fine. Like I said, I don’t fix nothing so don’t come pounding on my door. Oh, there’s TV cable behind the dresser – basic but it’s free with this room. Getting’ a TV’s up to you. Hot water heater in the bathroom – you saw. Furnace in the closet, you saw. Electric paid – all bills paid. Any questions?”

“Just one. My key?”

“You can have the one I left in the door. Advise you to make a few copies and stash them around in safe places outside. Don’t want to be awakened during the night to let you in.”

He offered his hand for a shake. Apparently, the deal was settled.

The man – Chester – turned and left. Oliver stood there, surveying what was suddenly his new home away from home. It was something better than a back door. With minimal work, he could live there comfortably if that became necessary. It had been a good find as ‘back doors’ went. The question did enter his mind about why it had just become available, but he tried to immediately wash away the related – none of them pleasant – fantasies.

Several months passed and even with the

occasional distress of unexplained – recurring – long-coated people in places he thought they had no business being, he had relaxed. Oliver's constitution was not really given to relaxation so being relaxed, tended to make him anxious. Oliver was a complex man.

He maintained his John Smith room and even spent some afternoons and nights there. He stocked it with nonperishables. Eventually, he found himself there so frequently that he added an apartment sized refrigerator and upgraded from a single burner electric hot plate to double. He added pans, a skillet, a coffee maker. For an additional twenty-five a month, he had negotiated extra electricity to power a small window air conditioner. Uncharacteristically, Chester volunteered to help him install it – that was mostly on Chester since John/Oliver was all thumbs. He and Chester got on well such as their, 'How ya doin?' 'Fine. You?', relationship went. He found a place for his Toaster Oven – on top of his new refrigerator. He considered it more a trophy than a useful fixture, although, on setting #3, it did lightly brown a mean piece of toast.

He often went to his comfortable get-away to read, his life-long passion, so added a low, narrow, bookcase behind the recliner. He thought about replacing the chair, but it was surprisingly comfortable, and he decided he could live with green, so long as it was covered with a multi-colored throw. Life had settled into a pretty good routine. He probably wasn't happy – that just wasn't in his makeup – but he couldn't say he was sad or depressed or even really angry, anymore. Dumping

those things had opened up a good deal of emotional room for him. He even found himself ogling women – admittedly most were too young and too perfect for Oliver, but it stirred things that had not been stirred since adolescence.

One morning, after he had made his way to ‘his’ diner, after he had confirmed ‘the usual’ with cook, and after his coffee, juice and paper had arrived at his rear-corner booth, he took a moment to do his usual head count – some things never changed. Eleven. All male. That was disappointing, even though six days a week that’s how it was. And at that, the occasional female presence on Sunday was wisely accompanied by a husband, son or grandchild. That didn’t matter. Oliver wasn’t looking for an up close and personal relationship – one he could appreciate from across the room suited him just fine. Truth be told, the anticipation of anything closer would have rippled his skin in prickles, spread terror up his spine and sprayed perspiration from every pore on his body.

He scanned the first page of the paper – chaos, death and destruction, politicians off to prison, all the usual. He hurried on to page three – he never dallied over the editorials. They were, to him, just the sad expressions of tawdry, egos gone awry. His chest tightened as his gaze was drawn to the headline in the upper right corner.

Cyrus Wisters Sought in the Murder of Jason Billingsly.

THAT commandeered the attention of both his adrenalin and respiration. His brow furrowed. He was most certainly puzzled. He swallowed hard as he read

on through the story.

Billingsly had apparently been a well-to-do advertising executive and lost his life during a weekend burglary at his home. It had reportedly netted the thief several hundred thousand dollars in cash and jewelry from the man's wall safe in his second-floor bedroom. The man referred to as Cyrus Wisters had been positively identified by a maid who had been hiding behind louvered doors in a walk-in closet during the incident. The article went on to say the man had been matched by comparison with a series of mug shots apparently taken back during Wisters' drunk and disorderly days. Although the physical description only faintly resembled either Cyrus or Oliver, the background information given for Cyrus did – his birthdate, hometown, deceased parent's names, and right on down the list. It contained all the facets of Cyrus's life that Oliver depended on and was claiming as his own, daily.

Talk about needing a back door! What he had almost whimsically characterized as overly cautious planning, turned out not to have been 'overly' in any sense of the word.

He finished his breakfast, not wanting to cause suspicion. Uncharacteristic as it was, he spoke to Milly, the waitress, telling her that he would be out of town for an extended period.

"Just didn't want you folks to be concerned when I didn't show up at my regular time. I will see you again when I return."

He assumed that should handle his absence. He had never offered his 'Cyrus' name there. He had never offered any name there. All he needed was for

them to file a missing person report on top of the arrest warrant, which was clearly already out there.

He returned to his condo where he packed two over-sized suitcases, carefully following his 'escape list' – oh, yes, Oliver had an escape list – *two* in fact – one for within the city and for away from the city. This would be within. Oliver was a careful man – a compulsively careful man – a neurotically, compulsively, careful man. He kept a significant amount of cash on hand. That lockbox went into one of the suitcases. He added clothes, his compact, Tandy computer and printer, software, and numerous CDs holding things of importance to him. He took several books, personal papers and other things essential to several identity options depending on how things developed. In the space that remained, he added things from his refrigerator – eggs, meat, fresh fruits and the like. It only seemed fiscally responsible.

The large suitcases, expensive, with sturdy handles and ball-bearing wheels, were still heavy and awkward. He applied the disguise he had used before – not a lot, just enough. That had been an admonition in one of the 'establishing a new identity' books he had read. He called a cab and had it take him to the Claremore Hotel on West 47th Street. From there, he managed his suitcases along the sidewalks to Huffman Avenue, an intersecting street on which stood the Pantheon Hotel. Inside, he removed his disguise. At that point, he called another cab from another company and waited out front. He rode to the bus station, which was within several blocks of South Scruggs Avenue – The John Smith back door.

Placing the suitcases in storage lockers, he

walked to his Smith room where he had two smaller suitcases – one just fit inside the other for handy storage or carrying when empty. Using them, within the next ninety-minutes he transferred the contents from his large cases at the station, to his room, leaving the larger models behind, empty and locked up to be found at some later date by Bus Station help. They would make the attendant a five-hundred-dollar ‘tip’ if he decided not to play by company rules. He took a different route on each of the four trips, of course. Oliver was a careful man – some might say cozying up to paranoid, even.

Having stayed in that room on numerous occasions, he felt immediately comfortable there – about the surroundings, at least. The news story continued to baffle him. He sat back in the recliner – the green one with the colorful throw – and began trying to sort it all out. It just wouldn’t sort.

Oliver’s first order of business the following day was to procure a small TV set, something he had enjoyed *not* having there during his previous visits. It now became a necessity, eyes to follow ‘his’ case on the news. Having substantiated, through one disaster after another during his lifetime that he was devoid of so much as one iota of mechanical inclination, he produced a huge – if mostly surprised – sigh when, after connecting the set to the cable, plugging it in, and turning it on, it actually roared to life. There was a local, 24-hour, cable news channel. Over the next weeks it would become his best friend. He regularly kept it on in the background. His ears soon became trained to pick up on relevant words and phrases.

Additional facts dribbled out slowly. Whether

that was by plan from the authorities or just how things were proceeding, he had no clue. An artist's sketch of the fugitive based on the witness's description, surfaced on TV and was printed in the paper.

'I may just know that face,' Oliver said to himself. "It resembles Cyrus, but *Cyrus* is long gone. There was that other man, however. Reverend Ryan had even noted their resemblance."

A man, who may have resembled the one depicted in the picture, had hung out from time to time outside the soup kitchen, although Oliver could not remember whether he had ever eaten there. He thought he even remembered Cyrus spending time with him – perhaps on numerous occasions. He would not have been able to describe the man in detail if asked to. He certainly did not know his name.

It was only Oliver's suspicious nature about the man's standoffishness that made him take note. The lightly bearded face in the picture was rather unremarkable in every way – line up six homeless winos and it was the likeness of every one of them. The sole witness had reported that the thief/murderer walked with a limp, dragging his right leg. It sparked a memory. The person who approached the hut from across the roof and forced Oliver to retreat the night he attacked Cyrus, had dragged a leg. He remembered the sound, clearly. Thump, scrape. Thump, scrape. He had no way of knowing if it had been the right leg, of course. What could it all mean? Could that man be the connection? If not that, then, nothing about it made sense.

CHAPTER FOUR

There were things Oliver didn't know

Something, # 1, that Oliver did not know:

Earlier, on the night that Oliver visited Cyrus in his rooftop hut:

“Good eats, tonight,” Cyrus said to Kenny as they both helped clean up after the last of the other homeless men had left the basement.

“Was!”

Kenny was a man of few words – probably in his fifties – looked to be in his seventies. Such things happened when men became homeless.

“Just a couple of tables left to do, Kenny. Why don't you sit and give your leg a rest?”

“Restin' don't help a paralyzed leg. It always hurts.”

Still, Kenny sat down. He'd not bypass an offer to take time off. Initiative, energy, and pride in a job well done had not come as part of his original equipment. Uncharacteristically, he did continue to talk.

“Whatever happened to that government check you was talkin’ about a month or so back. Come through?”

“Never did. Oliver says we can keep tryin’. A hundred a month would sure help, I’ll tell ya that.”

“Sure would.”

“I noticed you got new boots, Cy. Them never come from no church basement. How’d ya pay for ‘em?”

“Wish I’d never mentioned that check thing to you. Anyway, that’s really none of your business, but I worked three days straight. That’s how.”

“Who for?”

“That’s really none of your business, either. You just want to nose around and take opportunities for more work away from me.”

“You know what I think. I think you *did* get that check comin’ to ya and that’s how come you could afford them. Them is hundred-dollar boots if I ever seen any.”

“You’re wrong. Anyway, what’s it to you?”

“I figure if you can get a check so can I.”

“Oliver says only so many is given out in each zip code or something like that. Anyway, I didn’t get it.”

“Whatever.”

“I guess, *whatever!* You just drop it, now.”

“I just dropped it. You deaf? I said, ‘whatever’.”

“Now you got your secret language gonin’ on, Kenny? I try to help you by settin’ you down and doin’ your work and this is how you treat me – callin’ me a liar. I don’t think I want to be your friend anymore.”

“Never was my friend – get *that* straight. Life’s just thrown us together for a time.”

Cyrus finished the clean-up. Reverend Ryan walked in.

“Looks good boys. Thanks. Oliver used to do the clean-up. You’ve made good replacements.”

Cyrus waited to see if Kenny would own up to slacking off. He didn’t. Cyrus wouldn’t put him on the spot over it.

The reverend stood back, hands on his waist.

“I’m sure it’s been said before, but you two could be brothers, you know. I’m not prying – just commenting. Anyway, I have two loaves of bread left over tonight. Day old times three. It’ll be going stale by tomorrow. They are yours if you can use them.”

They each took one.

“Thanks, Rev,” Cyrus said. “I guess I’ll be goin’ if that’s it.”

“It is. You boys have a good evening. Hope to see you next time. Oh, one thing, perhaps, Kenny. Two men in suits came around this afternoon asking about a Kenneth Liphart. Not knowing your last name, I can’t know if that referred to you. Didn’t say what they wanted. Car’s plates were from Illinois – state government plates. I had no information for them. All I know. Probably not even relevant. As I said, have a good evening.”

Reverend Ryan kept above specifics about people. Who they were, where they came from, and what path in life they had taken were unimportant to him. He did, however, feel some obligation to help them maintain an even playing field when he heard things.

Outside, Cyrus turned toward the wharf; Kenny toward Old Town. It was where Cyrus heard he lived. Maybe; maybe he didn't live anywhere special. Cyrus was sure he didn't care. He did feel bad for his affliction – some childhood disease, he had heard. Kenny never mentioned it. What he had said that evening about it always hurting was the most Cyrus had ever heard from him on the topic. Perhaps that's why he drank. Cyrus knew why *he* drank and it had nothing to do with physical pain. But, that was *his* story. They all had stories.

Cyrus was in no way dumb – bright even, perhaps. He lived better on virtually nothing than most anybody ever had. He could clean up his English on a moment's notice when that was worth a whatever. Long before, he had learned that talking like everybody else talked down there in the belly of the wharfs had more margin in it. Doing the opposite would likely get a fellow rolled.

Cyrus and his bread headed directly to his place close to the water. He had heard rumors that the old warehouse, whose roof he called home, might be torn down. That would be a sad thing because he had lived there going on 20 years. Few knew about its location – Oliver and Reverend Ryan. Down there, men who had a good thing going for them like that, kept it a secret. Cyrus was not into having visitors and most certainly not new neighbors.

The building was relatively low, the way they had all been built in the old days when architects needed to be careful, so their structures didn't sink into the soft under soil. Modern buildings had pilings down a hundred feet in some places. The point was,

the, short, three-story climb was still well within his aging legs. There had originally been an iron ladder attached to each side of the building – ground to roof. Two had come loose and had been removed years before. Cyrus always used the one on the back side – less possibility of prying eyes wondering why he was making the climb. Most of a man's activities were ignored down there but climbing the side of a building – that would come under closer scrutiny.

The old man knew he'd take out the bottle later that night. During the day he played a game with himself in which he envisioned skipping a night – perhaps a week of nights – like it had been in the old days. It never happened. He was seldom 'blotto' in the vernacular of the waterfront, but 'tipsy'? Frequently. 'Just enough to take the edge off,' was his take on the matter. He never said what the 'edge' was.

He had constructed his hut on a 2 X 4 frame, with discarded wooden doors and the sides of crates nailed in place to provide a secure base, walls and roof. Plastic tarps, in layers, covered that. He had chosen the area beside the old stairwell entry shed. It was never used and offered some protection from the northerly winds that blew cold during the winter months. A candle, a small Sterno cannister, or even a floating wick in oil or alcohol, kept the place quite pleasant except on the coldest nights. He had blankets. In the summer there was always an evening breeze off the water from the southeast that helped make the heat tolerable.

Cyrus had settled in for the night with his best friend – long-necked, glass, with a black and white

label and a cork, whose aroma he loved to whiff as he passed it back and forth beneath his nose during those few moments of waiting on the, never-in-doubt, drink-or-don't-drink decision.

* * *

What *Oliver* knew, of course, was limited to his own visit that night to the hut atop the old warehouse – how it had been exceedingly short – how one, quick snap of the head had instantaneously performed its task – how somebody had approached – and how, in order to hide it, he had dragged the body across the rooftop to a spot not far from the second, iron, ladder. Later, prompted by a news story, he recalled the intruder was lame – dragging one foot. The body disappeared.

* * *

Something, # 2, that Oliver did not know:

The news about the well-suited men's appearance at the church had not been good news for Kenny. Suddenly, he needed money – escape money – lots of escape money in a hurry. Still believing Cyrus had lied to him about the check, Kenny set out to improve his financial situation by whatever means necessary – that check being part of it. He walked the streets looking for fair game, in general, and for Cyrus in particular. He always carried a short section of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch, metal pipe inside his jacket – protection, usually. Where Cyrus called home had never been of any consequence to him. That night it became his all-consuming focus.

It was nearly eleven when Kenny noticed a familiar figure walking the street ahead of him –

Oliver. Tallish, slender, a long, awkward gait – it was most certainly Oliver. He followed cautiously, working the shadows. Oliver always seemed to have cash on him. The time had come to check that out, he figured.

Oliver was walking south through a less than friendly neighborhood – surely, he knew the risk he was taking. It made Kenny's task that much less risky – one more mugging down there would just seem routine to the cops. They'd find no connection between the two of them, for sure. He had never trusted the fancy dressing, smooth-talking Oliver, so had done what he could to avoid him. Such incidents near the waterfront were almost never solved.

Oliver turned left a block north of the wharfs and made his way through a darkened alley. How careless could a bright man be? Kenny continued to follow him all the way to the base of the iron ladder on the rear side of the old Keystone Warehouse. Several years before, Kenny had spent several sets of cold, winter nights inside.

The fully peculiar situation heightened into even *more* peculiar when Oliver began climbing the ladder. He paused several times – to rest or catch his breath, Kenny figured. He reached the top and let himself down onto the roof on the other side of the low barrier wall that encircled the roof. The man walked away across the expanse and thus out of Kenny's sight. It had all the trappings of something that was not aboveboard – straight-laced Oliver, walking the slums, climbing to the roof of a decrepit ocean front warehouse, at nearly midnight? Still, Kenny's urgent need for cash encouraged him to press on.

Kenny's climb was excruciating and exceedingly slow. His bad leg could neither bend nor support weight without hurting, so as much of the ascent was accomplished with his strong hands and arms as with his good leg. In the time it took him to reach the top, he heard several police cars and two firetrucks pass – sirens blaring. Neither caused real notice in that neighborhood. Just night sounds like the waves swelling up and around the posts that held the piers in place.

He paused at the point where he could first see over the barrier. A quarter moon above a cloudy, night sky, provided little light but enough for him to make out the hut. He had no idea what, specifically, he was looking at. Oliver was nowhere to be seen so he figured he must have entered the little structure. That would give Kenny the advantage – able to come upon the man unexpectedly and unobserved. Once on the roof, he hefted his pipe and began the approach – needing to cross thirty-five yards or so. Before he had gone *five*, he saw a strip of light brighten along the side of the hut – the door covering was opening. Kenny bent low to hide his silhouette against the sky and remained motionless. What was taking place remained a blur in the darkness, although the tall man – Oliver, he assumed – looked to be dragging something – a sack of potatoes – probably not – something resembling it at least. In the end, Oliver left whatever it was on the far side of the roof and started down the second ladder.

Kenny approached the hut and carefully opened the door. Seeing it was empty, he entered, failing to close the door behind him. A single candle

sat burning on the floor on a tin plate. The place contained items that belonged to Cyrus. What good fortune. It had to be his place. Kenny took time to paw through what was there. Aside from several things he might be able to sell or hock, the only cash was \$3.27 in a coffee can. He took it, disappointed. There was a large brown envelop that contained Cyrus's copy of the application for the government check along with the supporting documents. He folded it and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket. He knew better than to take clothes or items clearly identified with Cyrus.

He left the hut and made his way toward the second iron ladder to investigate what Oliver had been dragging. Perhaps it was worth something. There lay Cyrus – unconscious or, most likely, dead. He didn't take time to determine which, as he hurried through the man's pockets. He took what he found – wallet, change, a few timeworn business cards, a smudged card with phone numbers and cryptic labels – to identify them, he figured.

He looked down the ladder. There was no sign of Oliver or anyone else. He stowed his length of pipe back in the pocket of his windbreaker and began the arduous descent to the alley below. His strong arms made that far easier than the climb had been. Rung by rung, he hand-under-handed himself to the alley. He had things to wonder about. Had Oliver found Cyrus that way, or was he the one who had put him out of commission? If not Oliver, who and why? Was it related to the government check? He soon decided that, not only would he probably not be able to figure it all out, but it made no difference in his situation. He

had taken what he could use or sell. As he had told Cyrus, and had just verified, he was no friend of his.

He left undetected and made it back to his basement room in an abandoned hotel in an area locally referred to as, Old Town – a mile inland from the wharfs. He occupied a former storage room that he had furnished with a bed and dresser from upstairs – rugs, a couch, table, chairs and other amenities completed the setting. There was a deep, mop sink along one unfinished wall just outside his room. He had fashioned a shower in the corner. It made for a good enough life.

Kenny took time to examine the documents he had come upon at Cyrus's place. Typically, he could have sold them for a hundred dollars – twice that if the buyer was desperate. Seizing on the opportunity for himself, he began working out a plan. The following morning, he showered, donned his best clothes, and set out for the courthouse.

“Next.”

He approached the counter and the middle-aged *woman* who *manned* it. He thought that twist in concepts was humorous.

“Yes. Thank you. I lost my State ID card in an accident – car burned to a crisp. Not sure what documents you need for the replacement. I have a copy of my birth certificate, my baptismal certificate from last year – in the envelope in which I received it through the mail.”

She stopped him.

“Those should do. I just need to find your information here in the computer records.”

The baptismal certificate was from the

Reverend Ryan's church and was authentic. Cyrus always had his mail delivered to that church, so it was a legitimate physical address on the envelope. Many of the soup kitchen regulars used that address, including Kenny.

"There you are," she said looking at the screen. "You've lost weight the way it looks."

"Had a bout of pneumonia six months ago and I'm not fully recovered yet. But, I'm getting there."

Like Oliver and Cyrus, Kenny was quick on the pick-up.

"We need to update the information while we're at it," she said. "Height's the same I imagine. I'm guessing you're still a good twenty pounds from where you were when the card was first issued."

"Good eye. Eighteen, actually. I think I'd like to stay at this weight. It feels good. Also, on the back, where it lists health problems and disabilities, I chose not to list my paralyzed leg last time. I hear I can ride the bus free if I have that on my card."

"Good idea. Will 'leg paralysis' be sufficient?"

"I'm told so. Yes. Thank you."

"Sorry about that, by the way. Injury?"

"Childhood illness. I'm good with it."

"The address the same?"

She read it off the computer copy. It was the church.

"Yes. That is the same."

She finished the paperwork.

"Ten dollars and sign here."

With that handled, he moved to the picture taking station and five minutes later had his brand-new card which bore his photo – clearly his face had

been similar enough to the one of Cyrus in the computer to get by. Beards were wonderful. The new 'Cyrus' card bore *his* perfect likeness. He was ready to leave Kenny behind and start anew as Cyrus. Eventually, it might necessitate a move across town – since the suits had traced him to the city's south side from his former place of residence in Cicero, Illinois. He had left there in a hurry due to some unresolved matters related to a pesky little bank robbery. Once he had acquired the money he would need, he'd leave the city.

Such a move would require a good deal of money. That problem remained. He spent most of a week scanning the social pages to see what was happening within the monied social movers and how he might use it to his advantage. Mugging other guys on the wharf for five or ten bucks plus change wouldn't make it. Besides, that offered the possibility of personal risk. One article caught his attention. Jason Billingsly, a wealthy, local, real estate tycoon and his family, were leaving during the following week to vacation in Europe. It would likely leave his home with only minimal caretakers – some live-in staff, perhaps.

He let another week pass, waiting to give the suits time to give up on finding him and the Billingsly family time to leave the city. He'd ask around if anybody had heard anything about his good friend Cyrus. Nobody had.

At last convinced that there would be *no* news, he launched his new plan. As if he knew what he was doing, one night he arrived at the Billingsly mansion a little after eleven. The big house was not dark as he

had figured it would be. The garage was lit, and the door was up. The car was parked partly inside and partly out, trunk up – as if someone were making ready to leave. Cyrus/Kenny knew he should leave. Apparently, his trusted sidekick, Jack Daniels, didn't. He entered the garage. The door from there into the house was unlocked. He entered. Except for the hallway, lights were off throughout the downstairs. He found the stairway and climbed to the top, silently cursing his leg with every step. The hall light was also on up there. One door toward the front of the house stood ajar. The crack was lit. Kenny carefully approached and looked inside.

He figured if good fortune had ever been with him, it seemed to be with him that night. A man, alone in the room, suitcase packed but still open on the bed, was finishing a phone conversation.

“That's right. I sent the family on ahead. Unexpected business came up here. It's out of the way now, so I'll be on the 3 a.m. flight to Paris. I'm just about to leave the house. Patty, our housekeeper will be at this number if you need anything. She can reach me. Gotta go.”

He hung up. There was a second bit of good fortune – perhaps it would be the best of all. The man removed a large picture from the wall, revealing a safe. He opened it and removed a small stack of bills. Kenny/Cyrus understood he needed to act immediately before the man closed the safe, after which he would no longer have access to the rest of its contents. He moved inside, pipe at the ready and, with the man still facing the wall, he smashed the length of iron with some authority against the man's

skull. He fell to the floor. Kenny removed a sturdy, plastic bag from his pocket and emptied the safe of cash and jewelry.

He turned off the light in the bedroom, closed the door, and retraced his steps to the street below, darkening each area as he passed through. He walked for over an hour – not an easy task – until he was sure he was well beyond the Brentwood section of the upper north side of the city. From there he took cabs, changing several times until he was back in his own neighborhood. By then, he had transferred the ‘merchandise’ from the bag to his pockets. Carrying a bag of anything begged trouble in that part of the city. One was as likely to get rolled over a red and white sack of extra crispy as a dark green, chubby bank sack.

* * *

And now, back to Oliver at his John Smith hideaway.

Oliver, also, had been paying attention to the news, listening for any indication that the body of the original Cyrus from the church basement, had been found. He was working on the assumption that the man with the limp from the rooftop had disposed of the body. Why the man had climbed to the rooftop was not clear. It lent credence to the possibility that he may have been the friend of Cyrus from the soup kitchen. At any rate, seeing to that disposal had been quite a favor – apparently well done. No news was good news in that case.

The problem that remained for Oliver was that, his ‘legal’ ID at that point was Cyrus Wisters – the fully meaningless, clandestine, John Smith moniker

notwithstanding. All his bank accounts were in the Wisters name – done initially so that deposits of the money from Higgins could not be traced to Oliver Trumble. That part seemed to have worked well. This new turn might jeopardize it, however.

If the news report could be believed, Cyrus had *not* died, which could have explained why there was no body when he had returned to dispose of it. Alive, Cyrus had to know it had been Oliver who had murdered him – well, apparently tried to murder him. Would he mount an attempt to exact revenge? Cyrus was a peaceable man, except when attacked. Then, word was he fought back like a mother lion defending her cubs. If he *were* out committing burglaries, however – it was fully out of character. And to kill somebody during the commission of one, also seemed beyond the realm of likelihood. Still, Cyrus was Cyrus. Oliver had new plans to make.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Time Passes

Oliver's life as John Smith had settled into a comfortable routine. He grew to like his room and made several additions that added to that liking. He found another comfortable diner – Sally's Café, to be fully accurate. It was only five blocks away and although the trek was through less than benign territory, he moved his restaurant meal from breakfast to lunch – a safe time of day between his room and the café. He had never been threatened or accosted. Actually, it fit his new evening routine better, because he had become hooked on late night movies – the old black and whites that flickered occasionally, were littered with random white flecks, and often presented different volume settings from scene to scene. He was taken by the fact all the actors, including the kids, were, by then, dead. It didn't sadden him – he was just taken by the fact. At any rate, it necessitated that he slept in later.

His café routine remained like before – he had the daily special, read the paper and drank his coffee.

It was a smaller place than the first diner and the clientele looked to be largely ruffians. Still, it came together as a comfortable spot for his daily getaway. He felt it somehow exhilarating to be rubbing shoulders with bad boys. The Billingsly case was soon pushed from the headlines by others – some worse – some not so bad – all apparently likely to sell lots more papers than Billingsly. That didn't mean the case wasn't likely moving forward in the hands of the authorities, however.

Soon after Oliver had left the condo for the single room under the Smith name, his suspicions about being observed and followed took something of an upturn.

Late one morning, while Oliver was walking between his rooming house and the café, he got the distinct feeling he was being followed. He stopped and used the technique from old detective movies; he positioned himself at a store window, so he could use it like a mirror. Not fifty feet behind him a man had stopped. He was wearing a long, gray, overcoat and black fedora. That seemed somewhat over layered even for early October. He had no way of ascertaining if it were the same man he had seen looking up at him from the street below his condo. The hat was definitely different. Something about the essence of the image felt chillingly familiar, however. It may have been part of the crowd scenes he had scrutinized earlier. It was a feeling not a memory.

The man in the long coat was neither chubby nor thin – more average height than tall or short. The ever-present shadow from the fedora kept his face and features but a blur in Oliver's mind. He was able

to ascertain that the man was not clean shaven. He wore light gloves – light to give ready function to a hand weapon or perhaps light to leave no finger prints on surfaces or throats. He had pockets for warmth, so warmth seemed the least likely explanation. Oliver was a careful man with an imagination that engaged itself with minimal provocation.

Oliver moved on. The man moved on. Oliver stopped. The man stopped. The man kept his upturned collar high, hiding his face. Oliver proceeded to the café thinking it would be safer inside even among the dregs of society that frequented the place. They had always acknowledged his entrance with nods and muted smiles. He realized that, oddly, he felt safe there. Imagine having become one with the dregs. He ate his lunch in a booth from where he could keep an eye on the front door and window. The Coat Man stopped, looked inside – hands making like a snorkel mask against the pane. He moved on. That time it had been glare from the glass that distorted his image. It was as if the person wanted him to see its face. That suggested an odd turn.

Several days later, he showed up outside the grocery. He, also, showed up at the internet café from which Oliver often conducted his several banking and financial activities. He even appeared outside the branch library building as Oliver exited it with reading material. Those moved beyond mere feelings into the realm of vivid images – substantial memories clearly accompanied by various levels of distress.

Oliver thought about it often, trying to put things into some sort of reasonable perspective. The man was always *just* too far away to reach. Had

Oliver given chase, the man would have had ample time and space in which to disappear. Plus, giving chase reflected not one whit of an Oliver Trumble inclination or capability. If the man were a detective, he was certainly inept at least in so far as keeping out of sight was concerned. Perhaps, in fact, that was his plan – to let himself be seen thereby panicking Oliver into making some sort of misstep. Clever! Oliver would not panic, but he did on occasion outwit the man, so he was able to reverse the situation and follow him. That provided no useful information other than convincing himself that he was frightened by him – afraid of what the consequences might be if he were to confront him.

He wondered if it were as Oliver or Cyrus that he was under scrutiny. It seemed momentarily humorous. ‘Step right up – cops, villains – take your pick, Oliver or Cyrus. Two for the price of one, today. Which is your pleasure? Might even throw in a Cramer or Smith if that’s more to your liking, or how about the elusive, David Cyrus or the once important, Jacob Jackson?’ It really wasn’t humorous, but it defined well, the basis of his unnerving quandary.

‘Coat Man’ never went close to a police station. Again, reasonable if he were not affiliated with law enforcement *or* if he were but knew he was being tailed. He followed no pattern at all, seemingly content to just wander as if hoping to run onto Oliver (or Cyrus or Cramer, or Smith or David or Jacob!). It could have been a case of mistaken identity – mistaken for the great grandson of Francis X Bushman, perhaps.

It had certainly developed into something more

than just an unsettling situation. It had become exasperating – frightening and exasperating! Oliver contemplated picking up stakes and making another move, but about that time the long-coated stranger dropped out of sight. A week passed and then two. Where could he have gone? Why? Was he perhaps still watching him but from a clandestine position? That possibility was even more unnerving.

Perhaps it *had* been just a coincidence magnified by his over-active imagination – a man who frequented the same kinds of places as Oliver. That was what John/Oliver wanted it to be, so he soon convinced himself of it. Oliver was a careful man who became exceedingly anxious in the presence of loose ends.

Weeks passed. Oliver decided to sit tight for the time being, continuing to use his relatively cozy John Smith room as his home base. He continued reading the paper at the café. One noon, a new, revised sketch of the wanted, Wisters, was published. The story made it no further forward in the paper than page seven. He took that as a good sign – only one in ten readers ever made it that far into that section of the morning edition. Oliver studied the rendering closely. He had kept the first, but it was in his room. He would compare them later.

He could tell that it had changed some – the nose was longer, and the eyes set closer. The cheeks were sunken, the skin pale, and the hair combed back. It looked a lot more like Oliver than Cyrus. But how could that be? It may have reflected growing confusion in the memory of the witness or perhaps the witness was being coached. By whom?

For what purpose? It seemed reasonable that later in the investigation, the authorities had located the condo he had purchased in the name of Cyrus Wisters and obtained his description from neighbors. Perhaps it was a combination rendering from both descriptions. Perhaps! Perhaps! Still, Oliver did not panic. He had covered his trail well. He continued to believe that.

In what Oliver characterized as a stroke of genius – a comic book, lightbulb over the head, sort of revelation – a new plan began to emerge.

Since, as it had turned out, he was *not* wanted for any crime as Oliver Trumble – his actual identity – why not return to using it? He still had his former ID including his driver's license and birth certificate. He could sell his condo blind through an agent and keep the money safe in his current Cyrus bank account for a time. Then, eventually, buy a new condo and get new bank accounts in Oliver's name in a different section of the city, and get on with his life as himself, Oliver Trumble. His version of Cyrus Wisters could just evaporate. After much thinking and re-thinking, that became his well-considered plan. He rather enjoyed the adventure of his imaginary game of cat and mouse with the authorities. Truth be told, however, being the mouse, he had no useful idea what the cat was up to. Still, his confidence grew. How delightfully correct – to hide by reassuming his true identity.

First, he had to make sure his condo was free from police surveillance. For that he had to move out of his comfort zone. A young reporter regularly took lunch at the café – listening for story leads, Oliver

suspected. He had overheard conversations that had established his affiliation with the *Daily Sun*. Oliver would engage him in conversation. Young reporters knew everything that was going on in the world of local news. They were nosey, pushy, and intrepid. The young man always took a stool at the counter.

One noon, soon thereafter, Cyrus/Oliver waited outside for him to arrive and walked inside with him – making inane conversation like folks do with marginal acquaintances – nice day, ball team’s playing well, how about that new blockbuster movie. It wasn’t as if Oliver were an out of the blue stranger to the man. They had shared the same café every noon for many weeks. They had shared the occasional nod, even. They took seats beside each other.

It was running a risk of a sort, allowing a reporter to see his face that close up. The pictures were face-on. He made sure his only exposed his profile to the young man.

“I understand you’re a reporter for the Sun. You like being a reporter?”

“It’s okay. It’s a stopover on my way to becoming a novelist. That’s my dream. Crime and detective novels with scantily clad girls on every arm and in every bed.”

Oliver offered a smile and nod, truly having no idea what the appropriate response might be. Were there really novels like that?

The Sun’s been big after the Billingsly murder, hasn’t it?”

“Broke the story – the paper, not me, unfortunately.”

“Haven’t heard much about it lately. You up to

date on it?”

“A good reporter keeps up to date on all the stories. Never know when a break might come – career break I intended there, but clearly a break in a story also has merit. I seem to be babbling.”

Oliver ignored the editorial and continued.

“The maid in that story – Patty, I believe – is a friend of my niece, so I guess I’ve taken more of an interest in it than I have any personal reason to. I try to keep her informed.”

“We’ll, frankly, the latest is that there is no latest. All the leads dried up. They thought they were onto something a month or so back – something about a condo the Wisters guy supposedly owned up town, but it fell by the wayside – wrong guy or something – apparently a vagrant with no wherewithal to make such an investment. Nobody in the building could identify him from the drawing – their descriptions of owner of the condo were significantly different from the mug shot and the witness’s description. As far as I know, that turned out to be just one more dead-end.”

Later in the day, that information moved Oliver to make an initial inquiry of his real estate agent. He found a quiet phone booth from which to make the call. He wanted privacy and hoped Clark Kent was busy bursting on the scene as Superman in some other part of the city. It moved him to wonder why a man who could move that fast had any need for a phone booth in the first place? And where did he keep Kent’s clothes?

“Melinda. Cyrus Wisters, here. . . No, not the one wanted by the police.”

He chuckled for effect.

“The one who owns the condo in the Perkins Building. . . I’ve been out of the country for a number of months and just wondered if you thought you could move it for me – as a blind offer since, as you noted, my name might be confused with the bad guy and scare off potential interest. Seems like a big investment to just let sit vacant half a year at a time . . . Oh, really. Well, if you could follow up on that I’d appreciate it. You set the price – I’m sure I can count on you to do it up right. Thanks. I’ll call again next week to check in. No telling where I’ll be.”

She reported that she had a hot inquiry for a place in that area of the city. She’d get right on it. Another \$300,000 clear would bolster Oliver’s coffers substantially. Ten days later the transaction was complete, and the money was transferred into his Milford account – being the result of a condo sale, the size of the deposit would not be suspect (in those days).

Oliver resurrected his Driver’s license and other identity documents. The license had expired which was cause for another trip to the revenue office. The woman who had helped him earlier was no longer there. That made things easier – safer. A young man called Oliver’s number.

“First, a question for you. I let my driver’s license expire because I no longer drive – my vision is failing, and I don’t feel safe on the roads. I’m wondering if I can replace that with an Identification Card?”

“May I see the old license if you have it?”

Oliver removed it from his wallet – feigning old

men's, knob-like, fingers – and handed it over. The young man searched the computer.

“Okay. Ya, it's expired. Two ways to go here. First, bring the license up to date – a 50-dollar reinstatement charge. You could use that as ID, of course, or, if you have documents, just apply for an ID card – ten bucks.”

“See if any of these documents are what you'd need to just go the route of the ID card.”

“Overkill, sir. There will be no problem. That how you want to do it?”

“Yes, please.”

Fifteen minutes later he was the proud owner of a brand new, fully official, state ID card in the name, data and face of Oliver Trumble. He also had learned he had a new option. If he came to a place he needed a driver's license, he knew he could procure one in a few minutes.

The plan necessitated another move. He would be sorry to give up the John Smith room. Its minimalist environment had come to grow on him – life simplified was life improved.

First, however he needed to rent what he characterized as a transition place – two or three months tops before he went looking for a Trumble condo or at least an upscale apartment – maybe something less considering his positive experience in the Smith abode. The first thing Friday morning, and that time carrying a brief case with an *Air India* sticker on it, he traveled across town to a lower middle-class neighborhood – many steps up from the John Smith environs. He dressed in new blue slacks and a tan sports jacket – no tie, open collar, brown socks and

shoes. The place had to be very private, preferably with another outside entrance or an easily accessed room without prying eyes.

He asked his cabbie for suggestions, describing what he needed.

“*Nelson Arms*. Good enough neighborhood. Honest owner. Keeps the grounds up. Clean from what I’ve seen picking up fares there. Efficiencies and one bedrooms. There’s been a for rent sign.”

“Let’s head that way, then. Thank you.”

It felt good not to have to hide his identity from cabbies.

Oliver tipped the man well – not too well. He still wasn’t in the position of wanting to be remembered. Like the cabbie had recalled, there was a, For Rent, sign in the front window.

Oliver explained the public side of his needs to the owner – leaving out the short-term aspect for fear he’d be turned down. There was an efficiency at the rear – second floor, walk-up stairs on the outside of the building. Everything about it was like the cabbie had described. It was furnished. Oliver wondered if he would remember how to take a shower in a stall that wasn’t missing tile and laden with rust and fuzzy, green something or other. It was worth a smile. At some point, those had begun coming more regularly – more naturally. Oliver made no value judgment about it.

“Nice neighbors,” the owner said. “We run a quiet place. Most of the tenants have seen fifty. I pride myself in getting right on any problem that might occur, and in a building this age, things do occur. Prefer to work on problems myself rather than have

renters try and end up doing additional damage. Utilities are furnished – includes cable TV. I require first and last month's rent up front. You can pay the last month in three equal payments with the first three month's rent if you're short. May I ask what you do for a living?"

It was a question for which Oliver had not prepared – this living upscale had its own set of rules and expectations. Taking a line from the reporter, he offered his answer.

"I'm a writer – do a lot for corporations – manuals and such. Continue to work on a novel. Maybe someday."

The story had taken shape on the fly as he worked his way through that sentence.

Oliver offered a smile that was met in kind from the owner.

"You travel a lot?"

He pointed to the sticker on the brief case.

"Just got back into the States from a few months in India – I was collaborating on a screen play – Bollywood, you understand. Way too many people per square inch there. I'm relieved and happy to be back home."

"That's how I understand it is. I've seen documentaries. The poverty there just eats my heart out."

Oliver managed a sympathetic face. He was really getting good at such things. Sometimes they almost felt genuine.

"You haven't mentioned the rent.

"Three fifty a month. One hundred pet deposit if you have one."

“Only my brief case, I’m afraid, and I assure you, he’s house broken.”

It had been a really dumb comment, but the man chuckled out loud.

“Three fifty it will be – seven hundred up-front. I’ll need to see ID. I usually ask for a written recommendation from the former landlord, but I suppose that’s not going to be possible in your case.”

Oliver chose not to respond since that had been the purpose of his India ploy all along. Things seemed to have been going well. He took out his wallet – filled with hundreds, fifties and twenties. He opened it, so the contents were visible as he picked through it selecting the bills he needed. The strategy worked. He could see the owner relax immediately. How was it said: Money talks? He arranged to move in on Monday of the following week. It was Friday.

Twenty minutes later, the lease was signed – one year. It probably meant Oliver would have no more than one more monthly payment before he was off to his next stop.

He had a cab drop him off a block from Sally’s Café. It was eleven thirty. The special was Sally’s Pot Roast – promoted as the best in the universe. It was delicious, Oliver would give him that – him – Sally’s had apparently changed hands some time before. Bruno, with a Brooklyn accent, was currently in charge of the kitchen and register.

As had become his habit, Oliver paged through both sections of the paper first, scanning for any Billingsly or Wisters related news. Recently, it had become an exercise in futility. He returned to page five to study a puzzling story that might be in some

way related. The headline: *Body Found Near Pier 8.*

The body of a man had been pulled from the water near the wharf the night before. It was ID'ed as a homeless man named Cyrus Wisters, according to the Identification Card found on his person. The body had washed ashore off pier 8. Death had occurred within hours of the find. That complicated the situation since the real Cyrus had most likely died months before. The tentative scenario seemed to indicate the man had probably fallen off a pier and drowned while intoxicated. There was an abrasion on his forehead but nothing to substantiate foul play. His blood had been found on a pier post suggesting he had fallen against it on his way into the water.

It raised new questions and put very few to rest. Was it the Cyrus Wisters Oliver knew? Granted, that surname name was only generally known in Wisters, Montana, and 'Cyrus' had not been wished on a newborn in most of a century. Would the maid identify the body as the man who robbed and killed her employer? If the authorities assumed it *was* the killer, was the Billingsly case closed or at least put on the back burner?

Something, #3, that Oliver didn't know

While Cyrus lay on his side, helpless and barely alive after Oliver left him for dead by the ladder, he witnessed Kenny ransacking his hut, and later, taking money and documents off his body. He had neither the strength nor inclination to protest. It upped his revenge list to two – Kenny in addition to Oliver. Only a few minutes prior to Oliver's return that

evening, Cyrus had managed himself to the shed that housed the opening into the interior stairway. He had pried it open years before when he needed a safe haven down stairs from the worst of the Spring storms. He opened the door and slipped himself inside – pulling it closed behind him. Then, sitting on the steps, he slowly and cautiously slid down, one step at a time. He may have passed out one or more times. It took well over an hour to reach the first floor. Believing he was safe there, he let himself sleep and begin healing. He remained two days, surviving on his stash of food and water for those stormy nights.

Late, on the night of the second day – still feeling woozy, but considerably better – he left the warehouse and made his way to the church where he remained until Reverend Ryan arrived the following morning. He saw that Cyrus got medical help – off the record – and set Cyrus up in a small room beyond the kitchen where he recuperated during that next week. No questions had been asked and no answers had been offered.

When he felt ready to leave, the minister gave him fifty dollars and extended the invitation for him to return whenever he wanted – or needed. Reverend Ryan was a good man.

Something, #4, that Oliver didn't know

Since the night of the Billingsly robbery/murder, Kenny had been laying low and living high as he made plans to leave. As a matter of caution, he seldom returned to the lower south side and the wharfs. Sometimes he missed the scent of the sea

and risked a visit – always avoiding the church.

Cyrus continued to help at the soup kitchen occasionally, listening for information about Oliver and Kenny. He asked to be called Dave – his middle name. The others didn't question it – they understood about such things.

As an added precaution, Oliver had periodically sent short notes to the church by way of forwarding services in Alabama, making it appear he was doing well and enjoying retirement life hundreds of miles away in the warmth of the southland. The return address was that of the forwarding agent so on occasion he received a note back. The minister shared the notes with the men who had known Oliver. Cyrus's hope for revenge against Oliver seemed to be dwindling.

One evening, a man who only occasionally frequented the free meals, approached Cyrus, asking if Kenny were back. He had seen somebody from the rear earlier that afternoon that reminded him of the man.”

“He skipped out owing me ten bucks – can you believe that – ten bucks!”

Cyrus thought to himself that the man owed *him* a whole lot more than that. He knew of Kenny's penchant for the smell of the sea. When he left the church that night, he walked the wharfs on the chance he might find him. His hope was, of course, that he would.

Using the shadows to his advantage, he made a methodical check of the docks. There were only three in that immediate vicinity. He found a short length of 2 X 4, which he carried. Dock 6 was clear.

Dock 7 was clear. He became particularly vigilant as he entered dock 8 – the largest by far – stopping frequently to take stock of things. There were stacks of crates and barrels and sacks of grain and piles of lumber. Carefully, he wove his way among them.

Presently, he saw the form of a man standing out on the leading edge – farthest from land. He was looking out to sea – perhaps reliving his dream of crewing on a ship to far off places. Cyrus moved on in silence. The person was the right height and build. His fantasies had always included a face to face climax – no rap to the back of his head or neck.

He continued until he was standing no more than a dozen feet behind him. From there, he had no doubt – it was Kenny Liphart. Cyrus understood his intent was not Christian, but that was to wield no power over him that evening.

“Hello, Kenny,” he began, softly.

Kenny (at that point, Cyrus/Kenny) turned with a start.

“Cyrus? It can’t be you, Cyrus. It can’t.”

Kenny’s words were slurred and his motions awkward. He was sliding down the slope to being dead drunk. An empty bottle lay beside his feet.

“Or maybe it *can* be, Kenny.”

That had been Cyrus the original.

“It’s good to see you, old man.”

That had been the Kenny/Cyrus. He had gone with the, ‘let’s see where his feelings lie’, approach. He’d feel him out before taking any action.

“I’ve come to set things straight, Kenny.”

“Straight?”

It seemed to be a sincere question.

“For stealing me blind and leaving me for dead. Not good things.”

“Like you said, you sure looked dead. The other guy had *left* you there. He must be the real bad guy in all this.”

“He is certainly *one* of them. *You* are the other.”

Cyrus moved to within a few feet of the man, the club still at his side.

Believing it was then or never, Kenny lunged at Cyrus.

CHAPTER SIX

[This would be a good time to get out
that pencil and scorecard, folks.]

A man with Kenny's handicap had no business initiating a fight. A drunk man with Kenny's handicap most certainly had no business initiating a fight.

Cyrus ducked. Kenny staggered past him and smashed his head against the upward extension of the corner pole that supported the pier. He fell into the sea without so much as an audible gasp or gurgle.

Revenge had not been sweet. What a disappointment. Cyrus Wisters/Kenny Liphart, the imposture, was dead.

* * *

And now, Back to Oliver, as 'Oliver' once again, in his new, Nelson Arms Efficiency

The transition into the new, Nelson Arms, apartment went without a hitch. For the move, he utilized his established, three cab rides per visit routine, each a different company. It took three such trips over two days and each with several suitcases.

Interesting to Oliver, he had become attached to some of the possessions he had accumulated as John Smith. He took all his clothes – a growing wardrobe, especially with the recent addition of a half dozen sets of more upscale, back to being Oliver, duds. Life took unpredictable turns: who knew which clothes his life might require in the future.

Unfortunately – *and* he had no idea how – after some absence, the man in the long coat seemed to have arrived in the new neighborhood with him. His care and planning had evaded the authorities through a series of aliases, but not some scruffy man in a trench coat and fedora. It made no sense. Oliver had seen him on several occasions – always remaining just out of reach. It was unnerving – perhaps scary – yes, indeed scary. He came and went unpredictably never offering any clue as to what his purpose was. He – Oliver – had a dream in which he saw the Coat Man twenty yards away as part of a crowd. At that, he – Oliver – held up a large sign that read, ‘What do you want?’ In response the man had drawn his hand across his own neck. The message seemed right to the point. It articulated Oliver’s greatest fear. Clearly, the uncertainty was getting to him – Oliver.

While all that had been going on, he had neglected monitoring his investments, bank accounts and such. He would get to that after breakfast – at a new restaurant that morning seven blocks from the Arms. During the time since leaving *Higgins Accounting*, Oliver believed he had done more walking than all he had done in his life prior to that. He was continually amazed at how much he enjoyed it – how good it made him feel. The musculature in

his legs had seen remarkable growth; his lower abdomen and buttocks had firmed; and his stamina had improved fourfold.

He found a booth to his liking and settled in with his paper and coffee. The restaurant was definitely upscale – the floor was carpeted, and the tables draped in tablecloths and set with two forks. The napkins were cloth. The waiters wore uniforms. It was a pleasant, lights dimmed, atmosphere and he found himself relaxing. Still, there had been something cozy and homey he would miss about his more informal, former retreats.

Scanning the pages in the paper – Oliver was a man of habit – an article caught his attention. It was one of those, ‘summarize the case cleanup operation’ articles. It had been the headline that caught his attention. *Cyrus Wisters – Dead or Alive?*” It appeared on page *three*. It seemed the story was coming alive again.

The essence of the article was this: Two days after ‘Cyrus’ had been found floating in the water – that time with a coroner’s certification of death – he – Cyrus – had appeared at an upstate bank and cashed out an account in his name to the tune of nearly \$400,000 dollars. It appeared to be the first the authorities had been aware of the account. Upon investigation, the account closing, and the withdrawal met all legal requirements. Several days later, while certifying the week’s transactions, the bank manager had alerted the sheriff’s office, thinking he had seen that the Wisters fellow had been found dead. That all happened after the time the assistant manager had overseen the withdrawal and account closing.

Someone remembered the man had carried a brown brief case with words on the side: *Acme Computer Forms for Banks and Financial Firms* – apparently, a clever safety measure to ward off potential thieves seeing it being carried out of a bank – clearly by a salesman. Against the adamant advice of the assistant manager, it was how Cyrus received and carried away the money – in cash.

Oliver decided not to check the account online to verify it had been his that had been closed, just in case that inquiry could be traced to him. Nothing about it made sense, and he had no idea how to go about clearing it up. It was a huge amount of money to let slip through his fingers.

As things turned out, Oliver would have far bigger things to be concerned about. No sooner had he arrived back at his apartment than there was a knock on the door. His first thought was that the manager had come to make sure things were in satisfactory order. It was not the manager.

It was the police – two in plain clothes and one in uniform, hand at the ready on his holstered sidearm.

“Oliver Trumble?”

“Yes, Sir. I am Oliver Trumble.”

“You are under arrest for the murder of Jack Cooper.”

“Jack Cooper? Who is . . . was . . . Jack Cooper? That is certainly, a new name to me.”

With the inexplicable accusation and arrest arriving out of the blue, like that, he became confused, neither knowing the proper questions to ask nor to inquire about his legal rights. At the police

station, he was placed in a holding cell pending his hearing. He slept there overnight.

The next morning a public defender arrived for an initial conference. Oliver learned there had been no finger prints or DNA associated with the crime scene. That was certainly *not* in his favor. There were three somewhat shaky eye witnesses who, in the end, identified Oliver mostly by the fact that Cooper had conversed with him, in their presence, by name – Oliver Trumble – a moment before they saw Cooper shot and killed by him.

“All we probably need is a good alibi or two and we’ll have you out of here right after the hearing.”

The time of the incident had been near two p.m. the afternoon before.

“I have no alibi. I was sitting alone in a park.”

His heart sank.

“How about a couple good character references, then?”

“Sorry. I’m a loner – a recluse I suppose you could say. I really have no friends at all.”

The attorney frowned – it was not obvious whether that came because of what it did to the case, or because he felt badly for the man. He stood and picked up his brief case. He called for the guard to open up.

“I’ll see what other avenues may be open to us then,” the attorney said.

Just maybe Oliver *could* supply an alibi.

“Wait. Two o’clock yesterday afternoon you say.”

“Yes.”

The attorney turned back toward him waving

off the guard with the keys.

“At that time, I was sitting in the park across the street from the library reading and relaxing. There was another man there, not close but close enough to identify me, I’m sure. I don’t know his name, but I have seen him from a distance many times. He wears a long, gray, lightweight, coat – like a trench coat, I suppose you’d call it – and a black fedora. He stands out like a sore thumb. Nobody dresses that way.”

The attorney hoped that at least *one* person dressed that way.

“Okay. I’ll get that information to the investigators and see if they can locate him. That park have a name?”

“*Wilson Park*, I believe. I’m new here so I’m not entirely sure. It’s right across the street from a branch Library.

At the hearing, Oliver was remanded into custody. Bail was not granted in murder cases. He went through the showering and delousing routine and was soon the proud recipient of an orange jumpsuit. The next afternoon his attorney visited him again.

“The police located a man fitting the description you gave. He confirmed that he had been sitting in the park near the library at that time, but he denied having seen anybody fitting your description that day or any other.”

“But I saw him there. How could I have seen him there if I hadn’t been there? The man verifies his whereabouts. Won’t that count for something?”

“Those are the important questions. Let me

get back to the investigators.”

The attorney left.

Oliver was at a complete loss. Whoever that man was, he was lying – vindictively – why? What about him and his cause made it right for him to win and Oliver to lose?

Two months later, Oliver went on trial and was convicted based on the convincing eyewitness testimony. There was nothing circumstantial about three men swearing under oath that Jack had called him Oliver Trumble and that they had watched him kill the man. He understood he could be sentenced to death. Oliver felt himself dying a little every day, thinking there would be nothing left to execute if that day ever rolled around. If not death, it could mean spending years in a tiny cell. Not the future he had planned. Not the future he deserved. Although he realized he was not without fault in his life, he certainly had not deserved the conviction for a murder he had not committed.

Something, # 5, that Oliver didn't know

Shortly after Oliver had resigned his position at *Higgins Accounting Services*, a man about Oliver's age, named Darrel Gardner, had come to the city in his attempt to flee the authorities in Arizona, where he was wanted for a double homicide in a hit-and-run. Darrel had been driving. He had hurriedly liquidated what assets he could and figured on beginning a new life far away from his formidable problem.

Perusing the obituaries soon after he arrived, he came upon one that fit his needs in every way. It

was short and to the point with no picture – suggesting he had been a man of no particular significance; it listed no survivors – suggesting the name was unlikely to be recognized; and it indicated the birth and death had occurred there in the city – suggesting it was all nice and tidy, nothing across state lines. The cremation was an added plus. He figured in time he could learn to answer to the name Oliver Trumble – even though both names were on the high end of unusual.

The death was fresh, so if he hurried, he could obtain a copy of the birth certificate before the death notice was published. He understood some states attached a ‘Deceased’ stamp on the birth certificate upon the person’s death – when known. He arranged for his identity verification in much the same way as Oliver had accomplished it – stamped and cancelled envelopes addressed to him at his current place of residence, a small life insurance policy taken out earlier in the week in the name of Oliver Trumble (it would be cancelled once it had served its purpose), and two magazines also delivered to his temporary address. (All the ‘build a new identity’ books offered the same suggestions.) Armed with those, the birth certificate, and his newly grown, scruff of a beard, he presented himself to receive a new ID card.

Since Darrel had no way of knowing the specifics of Oliver’s description, he had to innovate. He wore brown contact lenses. It was a very clever ploy. His eyes were blue. If the records showed Oliver’s eyes were brown, he was in like Flynn – no explanation. If they were blue, he merely removed the brown lenses and offered a reasonable

explanation for wearing them. He wore lifts in his shoes to be used in a similar fashion – tall enough, he didn't mention them. To tall, he offered an explanation for their use. The fact his new lady friend liked men of whichever height and whichever eye color would tidy it all up. It left one possible problem – would he closely enough resemble any picture they might have on file. Beards were wonderful inventions for those needing to slip the law.

He received the ID and went on to establish his new life – flying below the radar as it is sometimes called. He rented and furnished an acceptable one-bedroom apartment in the 1600 block of Peppard Street – in the buffer zone between the upward mobile slums and the lower quality old middle-class section of the city.

As smoothly as that new beginning had gone, Oliver/Darrel easily slid into his new identity and lived in the shadows. Off and on, he tended to drink too much. He was an avid poker player – not really high stakes games but nothing penny ante, either. When he remained sober he made a good living from it, moving from game to game and establishment to establishment. Intoxicated, not so much. For Darrel, an excess of alcohol released violent feelings left over from childhood. It also impaired his personal judgement. Up to a point, he could disguise his degree of intoxication.

Speaking of disguises, over a period of several weeks, Darrel trimmed his beard a little at a time to not cause a major change in his appearance all at once. Soon he was back to being clean shaven. In a way he hated to lose it because it covered a nasty

scar he had received as a teenager. Still, that was the face he was used to seeing in the mirror.

Life went on that way for a very long time.

Oliver's trial had begun but had not come to Darrel's attention. He wasn't much into local news or current affairs – unless they were long-legged, blond, and his.

As he drifted from table to table and game to game, he met others doing the same thing. On several occasions he played with an acquaintance named Jack Cooper. For some time, they got on well and frequently made side bets with each other when table stakes were too small to maintain their attention. There came a time when Jack owed Darrel (as Oliver) something over twenty thousand dollars. Darrel had tried to collect on several occasions. Jack brushed him off, not taking his requests seriously, saying he'd get to it next week when such and such or so and so would refill his coffers.

One afternoon, Darrel had been thinking about the situation, which led to Darrel drinking about the situation. Darrel carried a small handgun in an ankle holster under his trousers leg. A man who traveled in those circles couldn't be too careful. He decided to confront Jack at his house – a place in which he would most likely be close to his cash. He knocked. Another man answered. There was a game going on with men Darrel did not know. Seeing him in the doorway, Jack motioned him in and offered him a seat at the table beside him. He introduced him to the other three – “My good friend, *Oliver Trumble.*”

“I'm not here as your good friend *or* to play this afternoon, Jack,” he said. “Here to collect on your

debt and I have no intention of leaving without it – *it* being \$21,112.00 – no more, no less.

He tossed four markers on the table. They were personalized forms he had printed and carried with him – half the size of a file card. Those four held Cooper’s signature. I will give you five minutes to put it in my hands.”

“Or what?”

Darrel/Oliver removed his gun and waved the others up and away from the table. They stood and backed against a wall, easing toward a door.

“Come now, Oliver, we can work this out.”

“That’s what you’ve been saying for way to long. The money. Now!”

Jack shrugged, plucked his smoldering cigar from the ash tray and crammed it into the side of his mouth. Casually, he began to stand, appearing to be ready to comply with the request. As he stood, however, he suddenly picked up his edge of the table and dumped it over in Darrel/Oliver’s direction. His clear plan had been to exit the room through a door several feet to his left. Darrel pulled the trigger four times. Jack grasped his chest and fell to the floor.

During the confusion after the shots, the others managed to escape. It had not been one of Darrel’s best laid plans. He searched the body for cash but found none. He left needing to think – well, needing to sober up first and then think. He walked a mile to a less than classy motel and booked a room.

The next morning, waking up sober and hurting, Darrel called a cab and returned to within a block of his apartment. He took his time surveying the area for unusual activity. Convinced the police

were not there, he went to his place with the intention of packing and leaving. Although they had no reason to know where he was – no phone, no utilities, no newspaper subscriptions, no internet presence – he remained uneasy. Perhaps, he'd just lay low right there and treat it as a dry run – if poorly played – for establishing a good solid identity with the hope of using better judgement next time. He had a habit of letting bad things just roll off his back without learning a solitary thing. The one thing he did do right was lay low.

Within hours of the murder, the police had picked up Oliver, the original. The three witnesses who were in the room had come forward. They had heard Jack call the man Oliver Trumble and also witnessed the murder from only a few feet away. It was clear what they had heard and seen. There were, also, the shooter's personalized markers – all payable to Oliver Trumble and signed by Jack Cooper, which, without any doubt, put Darrel at the scene.

Correction: Darrel had done *two* things right: he had *not* placed his address or phone number on his printed marker cards.

During the real Oliver's trial, his lawyer tried to use the inconsistent description of Oliver, from one witness to another – they had each seen him from different angles – as a means for establishing reasonable doubt, but clearly the jury had not bought that. He had tried to locate Coat Man to put on the stand and question. Coat Man was nowhere to be found.

Upon hearing of Jack's murder, his older brother, Bill, a bit deeper into the edges of the

underworld than Jack, immediately returned to the city from six months in Las Vegas. Although it was Bill's inclination to take family matters into his own hands, in that case, with the apprehension of the suspect by the police, he decided to see how it played out. Days, weeks and months passed.

Bill, emotionally devastated by the loss, followed the trial daily from a distance. Too well known to the local police, he would not risk allowing himself to be seen in the city, so remained a no-show at the proceedings. With the guilty verdict, Bill was ready to let it go and watch the wheels of justice play out without him.

Virtually concurrent with that decision, however, Bill was approached by Freddy the Snitch who, as the saying goes, would give up his sainted mother for a fresh bottle. Freddy related that he had heard from a friend of a cabbie that the cabbie had brought a man back to the 1600 block of Peppard the morning after Bill's brother's murder. There was more. The cabbie reported blood on the cuffs of the man's shirt and that he had picked him up less than a mile away from the murder scene. Together with two additional items, the information earned the snitch a hundred-dollar bill. Reportedly, the man's shirt bore the monogram, OT, embroidered on its pocket, and he had an ugly scar on his left cheek – much like one of the witnesses testified he had seen and to which a second had offered an iffy, maybe. The prosecutor had dismissed that as likely having been a temporary scratch that had healed by the time of the trial. After all, the man had been intoxicated and it was reasonable he might have fallen and cut himself

before arriving at the Cooper house.

With that information, which implicated somebody entirely new, Bill had to a decision to make – see that the court got that information and free an innocent man, who he neither knew nor cared about, or handle it himself and bring honor to the family. Contacting the authorities was risky – even once removed if he fed the information to them anonymously. In his experience, anonymous seldom remained anonymous.

His reason for having left the city months before, had been prompted by outstanding arms related warrants that might send him to prison for several decades if he were found and arrested. With Bill's claustrophobia and state of depression over his loss, the thought of prison time was unbearable. Jackie had been his younger brother – his only living relative. Bill had always taken care of him – cleaned up after him, kept him in money, showed him how to slip an ace from his shirt cuff, the things that all good big brothers did for their younger brothers. Jack was the only person on Earth in whom Bill had any emotional investment. Those who knew about Bill Cooper, also knew not to mess with his little brother. Clearly, Darrell hadn't gotten the message.

Back to Oliver (the first)

The day for sentencing arrived. The unfairness of his situation aside, Oliver was more nervous than angry. He and his attorney entered the courtroom and took seats at the table on the left. The prosecutor was already in place on the right. The judge was

announced, entered and took her seat.

Before she could gavel the room to order, the bailiff approached her, talking with her in quiet tones. He handed her several sheets of paper. She donned her glasses and took time to read the information carefully – she returned to several sections more than once. Presently, she asked the attorneys to approach the bench.

“There is a new development. I have just received word from the lead investigator on the case that last evening another man named Oliver Trumble was murdered in his apartment, apparently by the brother of the man *our* Oliver Trumble is accused of murdering. He fits the description of the killer given during the trial, right down to the controversial scar on his cheek. I am declaring a recess until clarification arrives.”

She turned to Oliver’s attorney.

“It appears there are motions to be filed. Prepare them.”

She turned to the prosecutor.

“Mr. Davis, I suggest you review every scrap of evidence the investigation has produced. As the prosecutor, I know you would not want to be party to sending an innocent man to prison.”

Although Mr. Davis was not as sure about that as the judge seemed to be, he nodded. The judge spoke as she collected the folders and such from her bench preparing to leave.

“At least in this newly reported case, the identity of the murderer is not in question. He was found at the scene of the crime. When the police arrived, inexplicably, he took his own life rather than

surrendering. Ballistics has a match between the man's gun and the one used in both the murder and the suicide. Even though we may only be able to guess at his motive, there *will* be more to come."

* * *

A handcuffed Oliver was descending the steps leaving the courthouse after his appearance to obtain a hearing on a motion to overturn his verdict. The hearing had been granted. His eyes for the first time met those of the man in the long, gray coat and black fedora – that time carrying a brown attaché case with writing on the side he could not make out. The man tipped his hat and offered the slightest indication of a shallow bow. At that close range, Oliver immediately recognized him. But how could it be? The man winked at him, smiled, turned, and left. Had he been followed, it would have been discovered that he was, in fact, the Cyrus Wisters from the soup kitchen in the church basement.

Something, # 6, that Oliver would never know

Cyrus walked across the street to the bank, where he arranged the transfer of nearly one million dollars from 'his' on-line bank account, which he had discovered while watching Oliver in the internet-café. He also deposited nearly \$250,000 dollars, which was, unknown to the bank, the take from the Billingsly robbery which he had found in his search of Kenny's room after the disappointing incident at the wharf. And then, there was that deposit from the recently closed upstate account all quite benevolently established and funded in his name. There would be

tax issues, but he figured he could afford a high-class accounting firm to handle that. *Higgins Accounting Services* had been highly recommended.

Soon after *Cyrus-the-Real* had recovered from Oliver's attempt to kill him, Cyrus, having reason to believe Oliver had not left the city, had set out to locate him, using the man's well-known penchant for café food as one of two starting points. During Oliver's time with the soup kitchen, he had convinced dozens of restaurants to provide food. Cyrus investigated those leads first. Oliver had always arrived at the church by cab. Interviewing cabbies, Cyrus traced Oliver to the section of the city he seemed to call home. Then, for several weeks, he devoted his days to a methodical search of the eating places in that area of the city, eventually happening onto him at the first diner. From then on, it was just a matter of sticking with him. He knew about the condos, and the Smith place – even the Arms. In his mind, merely doing him in was far too kind, so he hatched the idea of the mysterious and intimidating – unpredictably on again, off again – man in the trench coat and fedora. Like Oliver had said, nobody dresses like that – the better to be easily picked out of any crowd if your purpose was to always be seen. Early on, he had given up the ball cap because it was a ubiquitous fixture in society. He needed something uniquely outlandish. His goal was to drive the man mad and he didn't care how long it took. He got a special kick out of making the bell over the door at the diner jingle when nobody was there. At the time, he figured he had the rest of his life in which to dispatch Oliver to the loony bin. Every life needed a goal – a

purpose – a passion. He figured even Oliver would appreciate that.

After settling his financial affairs across the street at the bank that day, Cyrus had but one step left to complete.

Up in his hut, Cyrus laid out his best clothing – a suit, dress shirt, tie, shoes and leather belt – things he had been gradually acquiring over the years in anticipation of that very occasion. He had bathed at the church the night before and one of the other men there had given him a first-rate haircut and trimmed his beard close – he could have passed as a professional man. Cyrus lifted a metal lock box from where it had been hiding inside the shed that led to the stairway from the roof of the warehouse. He removed a legal-size envelope from the box and slipped it into his inside suitcoat pocket. His final act in the hut that had served him so well was to lift his long-necked, former, best friend with the black and white label and smash it into a billion pieces against the roof. It would no longer be required in his life.

As an aside – perhaps an important aside – some weeks before, Cyrus had received word that, on his death bed, a man named Billy Burns had confessed to framing a former hospital administrator for a capital crime that had taken place some thirty years before. At the time, the accused man had slipped away before being arrested. He had recently been acquitted in absentia.

At 10:00 Cyrus arrived at the revenue office. At 10:07 Cyrus began talking with the woman at the counter. At 10:19 he left the big room with a brand-new ID card bearing the name on his own, genuine,

birth certificate from sixty years before – Thomas Clark – the former hospital administrator. At least somebody from this motley collage would live happily ever after.

What a convoluted tale of curious comeuppance!