

LAVENDER GARDENIA

A HIDE AND SEEK MYSTERY

And six other short stories of
mystery, intrigue and suspense

BY
TOM GNAGEY



LAVENDER GARDENIA

And Six More Short Mysteries

Stories of mystery, intrigue and suspense

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(in order of appearance)

Smiling Eyes
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Story One

Smiling Eyes

A short story of intrigue, suspense, and transformation

by Tom Gnagey

Martin Baxter's forty-fifth birthday was to be his last. The report from his doctor at the free clinic had been blunt and to the point.

"Three, maybe five, months to live. It will be painful at the end – very painful. Get your life in order."

What life? Martin was single. He walked with a limp and had seizures. Those who met him soon understood he was mentally challenged. He worked as a janitor in a warehouse – cold in the winter and hot in the summer. He had a room upstairs at the rear of the building – cold in the winter and hot in the summer. It was small and dirty, more due to his chronic depression than that it could not have been kept tidy and pleasant. There was a small, grime dimmed, window, a cot, a table with two chairs – one always empty – and a small kitchen counter with sink and cold water. He used the restroom downstairs. The cat had died years before and had not been replaced; the loss had been too devastating to chance it again. Martin had never kissed a woman, having to be content with his baseless fantasies. He had no friends. He seemed invisible to the drivers who came and went each day. His boss, though not in any way mean, treated him with no particular respect. During most hours of most days his depression served the function of keeping him numb. The concept of feelings became irrelevant. Good, bad, happy, sad – none had contained life moving experiences for many years. All things considered, the life of Martin Baxter was a fully unpleasant condition that life was requiring him to endure day, after day, after day.

So it was that in most ways the doctor's news about his illness seemed more good than bad to Martin. Within a few months his misery would be over. His reaction seemed in no way odd to him. What did seem odd was that within a few days of receiving the news his life-long depression began to lift. He began waking up on his own before the alarm went off. He washed his face and hands. He often made the effort to put on coffee.

Clearly, Martin was not the hero. Long before, he had learned to live with pain, but he would not linger suffering to the degree the doctor had suggested. There were two things he needed to accomplish. One involved the ending of his own life – soon. The second involved ending his brother's. If anything had moved him, nudged him, toward constructive thoughts those many years before it had been that – taking from his brother that which Butchy had sought to take from him, his life.

Martin remembered very few things about his brother, Marvin, just ten

months his senior. He insisted on being called Butchy and when Martin forgot he'd feel his brother's wrath. Butchy was always stronger and faster and could hit harder and inflict more pain while they wrestled. He often told Martin how he hated him. He remembered Butchy's eyes and the way they seemed to smile while he was hitting or choking him. To that day Martin had nightmares about those smiling eyes.

Martin's most vivid memory was that day at the creek almost forty years before. Butchy had just turned six. They had run off together to swim and play in the water. Martin was surprised but pleased that Butchy had included him. Usually the creek was just for him and his friends. That day it was to be just the two of them.

No sooner had they shed their clothes and entered the water than Butchy placed his hands on Martin's throat and pressed his head beneath the water. The record of just how it all went down depended on the recollections and suppositions of Butchy's friends who happened along soon after. The essence seemed pretty straight forward – Butchy had tried to kill his younger brother.

His next memory was waking up, not all at once, but little by little, fading back and forth between sense and nonsense, between stable images and those warped as if by rising heat somewhere along the poorly defined edge of his dream world. It seemed an impossible task to open his eyes, like his brain had forgotten how to do it, so he just lay there trying to make sense of the sound and smell of the place. It was like the hospital the time he visited his grandfather. He heard voices.

"He's been in a coma for ten days, Ms. Baxter. He may never wake up. You have to prepare yourself for that possibility."

It was a man's deep voice. Kind but firm. Martin didn't know much about men's voices. There had never been a man in his home. His teachers had all been women. The voice continued.

"And if he does, he may well be severely brain damaged; he may not be able to speak or walk. He may be mentally retarded."

Martin heard his mother sobbing. He mustered all of his powers and forced his lids apart. He fought their flickering and held them steady. The scene was a blur but he could make out his mother and that it was, like he suspected, a hospital room. He didn't immediately remember about the creek or the hands to his throat or the water rushing into his lungs as he gasped for that final breath.

He groaned in lieu of trying to form words that suddenly presented too much of a challenge.

"Doctor! His eyes are open. My little boy is awake!"

Her wonderful face appeared before him for a mere instant. Before he could reach up and touch it the doctor pulled her away and began his examination.

He had awakened. His eyes had opened. He could speak, though words came slowly and were slurred. He could walk, but with a pain-filled limp. He could learn, but with great difficulty, filled with a disagreeable frustration as he compared the process with how it had been before.

Several of Butchy's friends had come upon the scene at the creek only

minutes after the despicable deed. They saw Martin floating in the water face down and Butchy sitting on the bank chomping on an apple. The boys pulled Martin from the water and carried him to the road where they flagged down a truck, which rushed him to the emergency room.

Butchy was remanded to juvenile authorities. Within a year he had run away and the Baxter's never heard of him again.

Life had been difficult for Martin. He dropped out of school. He drifted from low paying job to low paying job. One side of his face was drawn and girls were disinclined to look at him let alone talk to him. The best his mother had to offer was to say that when things looked bad he just needed to count his blessings. Sometimes that memory provided him with a brief smile. Even dummy Martin could count to zero.

No matter how bleak things got, Martin had been able to keep going in the knowledge that one essential mission still remained in his life. He was determined to someday inflict a most heinous sort of revenge on his brother. The all-encompassing lassitude resulting from his life-long bout with depression had kept him from acting on it, but finally, with that lifting, and a timeline that had to be met, both motivation and determination burgeoned.

He removed the floorboard in his room where he kept his money, his life's savings in five quart jars stuffed with currency. He emptied them onto his cot and began separating the bills by denomination, most of them hundreds because they were easy to count. It took him half the night but in the end he had determined a total—twenty one thousand three hundred and sixteen dollars. He tied like bills into thousand dollar bundles and replaced them into his safe place. Before he went to sleep he washed out sox and underwear, a pair of jeans and a button up the front shirt and hung them here and there to dry.

He had weekends off. When he awoke on Saturday morning he bathed, shaved, and combed his hair. Those had become infrequent activities in his life. He put on his clean clothes and set out for Flaxton, the unofficial name given to a closed mouthed section of the city known to harbor cutthroats and a place where unsavory types could merge into the background and evade their pursuers.

He made several naive inquiries about finding a hit man. Subtlety had been one of the casualties of his brain damage. Before noon he was approached by a sleazy looking little man in a yellow shirt and a wide brimmed, black hat, who said he might know somebody who could arrange such a thing.

"I'll need the mark's description and address. We don't use names. If my man thinks he can pull it off, I'll get back to you and we'll talk money. How can I reach you?"

Martin understood two things. Since he, Martin, was to be the 'mark', as the man put it, he couldn't give the same address twice. So, an alternative was needed.

"I'll come back next Saturday and you can tell me what your man says."

"Satisfactory! Here! Noon! If he takes the hit I'll need the money Saturday afternoon. When you want it done, by the way?"

"Anytime between August first and tenth."

"That's three months away."

“Yes. *Only* three months away.”

The man left, clearly thinking it was an odd timeline.

Martin then took the bus to his old neighborhood way out at the end of 61st street. It was no longer the open, green, border between the city and the country. It had grown and changed. The creek had been given cement bottom and sides. He searched for the houses in which Butchy’s friends had lived. They were gone and apartment buildings had been built in their place. He hadn’t been back since his mother died ten years before. Even that little house was now gone.

“Good riddance, I guess,” he said out loud. “No good memories there.”

Eventually he found the aunt of one of the boys. She remembered that her nephew had mentioned something about Butchy not long before. She wrote her nephew’s address on a slip of paper and provided oral directions to help him get to the general vicinity. It was across town. He thanked her.

“Long way over there on such a hot day,” Martin said turning to leave.

He thought best out loud and made no distinction between doing it in private or in public.

“Have you had lunch? I just fixed sandwiches and lemonade. Won’t you stay and keep me company?”

Martin did not turn down offers of food. He made no initial excuses about not being hungry or needing to be on his way like a more sophisticated or cunning man might have done before accepting the offer. He was hungry and thirsty. She had offered. He accepted.

Refreshed and full, he started on his way shortly after one. At the sidewalk he turned and took several steps back toward the porch on which they had been sitting. He removed his baseball hat and placed it over his heart.

“Thank you, ma’am, for lunch. I’m sorry I forgot to say thank you.”

He caught a bus and by two thirty, with helpful directions from the driver, was standing on the sidewalk just up the street from the address on the slip of paper.

Benny was leaning back against his car in the street in front of a small, sad looking, house. The yard contained several other vehicles in various states of usefulness. Martin approached him. The man recognized him, mostly from his awkward limp.

“Marty? Marty Baxter? Never expected to see you again. How you doin’, man?”

“Good enough. Not sure I ever really thanked you for helping me at the creek that day.”

“No problem. Can’t figure Butchy, you know. I mean I knew he was creepy sometimes but I never thought he’d do something like that. I’m glad you’re doing okay. Why you here?”

“I’m looking for Butchy. Family business. Lost track of him. Thought you might know where I can find him?”

“Last I heard he was living with a woman on the south edge of Flaxton in one of the old high rises somewhere between twenty first and twenty second I think. I saw him about three months ago. Dressed great. Looked terrible.

Sorry I can't be of any more help."

Martin thanked him and walked back to the bus stop. Flaxton – even the far edge of Flaxton – was not a place for an outsider after dark so he caught the bus back toward his place. He would start again Sunday morning. At his stop he stepped down onto the walk and looked around, unexpectedly considering options other than retreating directly to his room.

It seemed like forever since he had felt that good. He noticed that he was holding himself erect, shoulders back, looking taller. He felt unpracticed smiles breaking on his cheeks as he passed people on the sidewalk. He took time to notice his clean clothes and combed hair reflected in store windows. Rather than going directly home from the bus stop he treated himself to a very rare café supper at *Ginger's*, a block away from the warehouse. Few of his neighbors recognized him until he got up to walk. Ginger asked to see his money before serving him. It was a part of his life and he obliged her with no comment or malice.

As he lay in his bed later that evening, thoughts kept rushing at him. He wasn't used to that. He never had things to think about at night. He would lie down, close his eyes, and be immediately asleep. That wasn't happening. He wondered if he had enough money to hire the hit man. He wondered if he would have a choice about how it would be done. He decided he wanted to know when it was about to happen figuring that would be a moment of great joy. He decided to make that a requirement – that the hit man take time to tell him face to face that he was about to kill him.

With that settled to his satisfaction, he fell asleep. There were no smiling eyes that night.

On Sunday morning he fixed eggs in his electric skillet – his stove for all intents and purposes. He had a glass of juice kept cool in his tiny, cubic foot refrigerator. He didn't take time to make coffee. He had money. He would buy a cup somewhere along the way.

All things considered the day turned out to be a disappointment. Either no one knew Butchy there in the neighborhood that Benny had told him about or nobody was willing to say they did. He received strange looks from some – not the usual down the nose looks he was used to getting from the well-dressed folks, but looks of recognition suddenly withdrawn as they came close. He left word in several places – bars, cafes, newsstands – that he needed to see Butchy regarding family business, and that he'd be back the following Sunday hoping the message would reach him.

During the week he found himself initiating conversations and in the least saying hi to the delivery and pick up drivers who came to the warehouse. They all returned his overtures and some paused long enough to pass the time of day with him – weather, baseball, things like that. Martin wasn't sure how that had changed, that they were suddenly speaking to him, but he liked it. As wonderful as he thought he felt the Saturday before, those feelings had blossomed into even greater – in some way more all-encompassing – feelings of happiness by the following Saturday.

He had spent those first few minutes in bed each night thinking about what

kind of revenge he was going to visit upon his brother. Killing him seemed a bit too harsh although he didn't rule it out. Somehow rendering him lame or disfiguring his pretty face seemed like reasonable options. His plan was set up in two stages. First, decide what the exact nature of the revenge would be, and Second, decide how to accomplish it.

By nine, Saturday morning, he was sitting in an open air café in Flaxton having a cup of coffee. Presently, the man in the big hat took a seat beside him.

"I got a guy. Ten grand. Five up front and five after."

"Good! I got a thing about it, though."

He went on to explain about requiring the hit man to tell the victim he was about to die and allow him one minute minimum to think about it before doing it.

"That adds some risk, you know. Face to face stuff. I'm sure he'll want another two grand to do it that way. Make it seven up front and then five after."

"That sounds fair. I'll have it back here for you by noon."

It was an exciting two hours that followed, knowing that the arrangements were finally being tacked down. Back in his room he counted out seven bundles of ten, one hundred dollar bills and put them in a brown envelope he had earlier retrieved from a trash barrel downstairs. The delivery was made and Martin returned home. He spent some time cleaning and straightening his room. He couldn't carry a tune, but found himself humming hymns surprisingly returning full-blown from childhood. He washed the window and was amazed at how much light it let in. The dreariness of his surroundings immediately lifted.

By the time he was lying in bed that night Martin felt quite comfortable about the arrangement. He would only have to endure his misery for eleven more weeks. He was thankful that the promised, additional, pain had not yet begun. Perhaps that was one of those blessings his mother used to speak about. Now he could step up his search for Butchy. At the outset he hadn't figured it would be as difficult as it was proving to be.

Again, the week at work went well. Some of the drivers remembered his name. One brought him coffee. Another showed him wallet pictures of his two children. His life was suddenly changing. There were people in his life. Not really friends, but people who cared enough to say hi and tell him about things going on in their lives. Each night he found himself lying awake rehashing the good things that had gone on that day. He began eating supper at the café – not every day, but several times a week. When Ginger took his money she would always wink. It sent feelings coursing through his being that he never dreamed he would ever experience – legitimately. He recognized that nothing of a romantic nature would ever form between them, but sitting there, close, receiving her occasional care and smile seemed good enough – certainly more than he had ever expected from life.

The free clinic opened at eight on Saturday morning. From experience, Martin knew that to get out before noon you had to be at the door by six thirty. And so he was. The doctor had told him to come back in four weeks and he would begin providing him with pain medicine. Martin decided to let them give it to him even though he had not begun having any discomfort; all of that was in case later on he needed more than doc would be willing to give him. He had

heard talk from other clinic patients about that happening.

Oddly, he thought, the doctor came outside, picked him out of the line and motioned to him. He took him into an examination room where he opened two folders that had been spread out on his desk.

“Martin Baxter, correct?” he asked. “*Martin?*”

He held up the folder with his clinic picture on the front.

“Yes, Sir. I’m Martin. What’s happening?”

“I have some very good news for you, Martin, and the clinic’s deepest apology. It seems your test results got mixed up with a *Marvin* Baxter who was born in the same year as you. You are, in fact, fine – in good health. He is the one who is dying.”

“Marvin *Thomas* Baxter, ten months older than me?”

The doctor adjusted his glasses and glanced back and forth between the two folders.

“Yes. Marvin Thomas Baxter. Do you know him? He didn’t return to receive the results of the tests and the address he gave us is apparently an empty lot.”

“I knew him once. The only Marvin I’ve ever known. Guess that’s why it stuck out in my mind like that.”

The doctor didn’t buy Martin’s story, but having worked the free clinic for ten years he understood that once the word became mum, that was that.

“Well, if you find anybody that does know him, please have them get the word out that he needs to get back here. I just imagine he is experiencing significant pain by now.”

For the second time in a month, Martin’s world had been turned upside down. From down, to up, to just *what* he wasn’t sure at that moment. Things had to be reconsidered. It was suddenly apparent to him that the life of Martin Baxter had become a good thing. He looked forward to going to work and passing the time of day with his new friends. He looked forward to those winks even though he knew nothing more would really ever come of them. He enjoyed keeping himself and his clothes clean and tidying up his room. He even looked forward to lying in bed at night, allowing happy things to enter his head and keep him awake. He wanted those things to continue.

At that moment it hit him; he had been so focused on the positive turns in his life that he had failed to consider he had to call off the hit man! He was not entirely sure how to go about that.

On Saturday, he took the bus back to Flaxton and asked around for the man in the hat—he had been given no name. He could keep the money, but just call off the hit. No one had seen him in several weeks. Martin continued to ask at all the places that had become familiar to him as he had worked the area every weekend searching for leads to his brother.

Finally a cabbie had word.

“Sounds like Tony Turner – short, greasy, outrageous shirts, wide brimmed black hat. Undercover cops picked him up. Word is it was for solicitation to murder. He’ll be gone for a long time.”

Martin didn’t understand ‘solicitation’, but he did understand the man was

gone and he no longer had a direct way of contacting the hit man. Perhaps he could offer the man money when he came to do the deed. Pay him off to *not* make the hit. He felt a helpless sense of panic.

On the ride home, Martin had another realization. Butchy was dying, so there was no way to exact his revenge; or was there? Butchy didn't know he was dying. He'd just wake up dead some morning, never having had to worry about it. That could be his revenge. Find Butchy and tell him the bad news. If he didn't believe him he would lure him back to the clinic with the promise of pain pills. He could ask the doctor himself. He would make him as terrified as Butchy had made him during those final moments of consciousness in the creek. It would multiply those moments a million fold. Yes! It seemed like a brilliant plan.

That side of the problem remained as it had, however; he still had to locate Butchy and none of his leads had turned out to be useful.

It seemed odd. There he was with the threat of assassination hanging over his head and yet he didn't get down about it. He didn't crawl into bed at five o'clock and retreat into sleep until morning. He didn't wish for death to come during the night. He remained alert and determined. He thought up plan after plan. None was good enough, but that didn't stop him. He kept working to solve the problem. He felt more alive than he had since back before that day at the creek when he could walk and run and use his mental faculties efficiently.

Several weeks passed. His plan had gradually taken shape. He would continue to try and find the hit man. There were several leads that had come his way about Tony's guy. Life was coming together well there at the warehouse. He even found he enjoyed the work and didn't want to leave, but that was his bottom line plan. If he hadn't been able to call off the hit by July twenty-fifth, he would move. It was circled on his calendar. That way, when the guy came for him he wouldn't be there. After six or so months away from the warehouse, Martin might consider returning. That would have to work itself out later. He spent some time getting leads on similar jobs way across town. He was pleasantly surprised that the owner of the warehouse had been willing to write him a good recommendation. He had no way of suspecting the man had noticed the uptick in the quality of his work.

One night while enjoying his sleeplessness, Martin had a revelation. All the good thinking he had been able to do, all the good plans he had been making, all the thinking ahead he had been doing, could *not* have been done by a dummy. He sat up in bed. He stood. He paced his little room, too keyed up to sit or even stand. He was overcome with excitement, elation, like he had never known before.

Maybe his brain had fixed itself. Maybe he hadn't ever been as dumb as people thought he was. Maybe he had heard it and believed it and let that initiate the tailspin that landed him cozied into his depression all those years. Maybe not, but maybe. If not all of that, perhaps at least part of that – maybe a substantial part of that.

So he limped, that didn't make him dumb. So, he slurred his words, that didn't make him dumb. So, he had seizures – none for three years – still, that didn't make him dumb. Learning didn't come easily, but it did come. He wanted

to share his realization with somebody, but there was no one to tell. He'd have to find a way to change that. Surely there were others out there who needed a friend as much as he did. He'd find one and make a friend.

He pinched his arm according to lore that says if it is a dream that will awaken you.

"This is not a dream, but when I do have dreams, they haven't included those terrible smiling eyes for a month or more."

* * *

On several occasions during the final weeks before August, Martin thought he had come close to finding both the hit man and his brother. Neither panned out. He continued to leave word here and there that Butchy needed to check back with the clinic, hoping that might somehow get through to him. His plan was to stake out the clinic and lay in wait. Time was becoming preciously short.

As the search for the hit man necessarily moved front and center in his life, the importance of searching for Butchy waned. His initial, all-consuming, need for revenge had moved well down on his priority list, diminishing, perhaps, over time. He became aware of the occasional, unfamiliar, twinge of compassion. He wondered if the man would even care that he was dying. If he were still anything like his younger version he certainly wouldn't admit it. Not knowing was best for a person like Marvin. Just let it sneak in and overtake him without the necessity of having to face the terrifying realization that death was at hand. Having to admit to such terror would be like ripping his heart from his chest. It was discomfiting to allow kindly considerations like that about the person he had always hated so.

The night before he was to move, Martin ate a late supper at Ginger's. He would miss that wink and the occasional pat to his hand. He paid her and looked around the café, feeling like he was about to leave an old friend. He walked the narrow alley, his habitual short cut, which would take him to the open, wooden, steps that led up to his room. Thirty yards into the deep shadows, Martin stopped. The figure of a man had appeared a short distance ahead. His features were unrecognizable in the darkness. Two things were clear. He wore a ball cap and held a gun in his hand.

"I am supposed to tell you that you are about to be killed, wait a minute for you to think about it, and then pull the trigger. The shot is to be to your heart."

"I have money that I can give you not to do this. You weren't supposed to be here for at least another week."

"How did you now that?"

"I am the one who hired you. I thought I was dying a horrible death but I'm not. I don't want to die now. Keep the money. Like I said, I can get you lots more. Please listen to me."

There was no response.

The figure walked closer; his hard heels clicked against the wet brick pavement. His steps were rhythmic and deliberate, there in the quiet blackness of the alley. He moved out of the shadows. A narrow band of light washed across the upper half of his face.

"The smiling eyes!" Martin said. "Butchy?"

“Martin? Is that you, Martin?”

They moved closer, tentatively, stopping within arm’s length to survey each other in the dim light of the alley.

“I’m dying, Martin.”

“I know, Butchy.”

The gun dropped to the ground. Martin opened his arms and pulled his brother close.

“Come home with me, brother. I’ll take care of you.”

Story Two
The Perfect Crime?

By Tom Gnagey

Bespectacled in thick lenses and thin wire rims, the small boned, pale skinned, Robert Bascum, PhD, was many things – bright, educated, creative, honest, hardworking, loyal. He was not a mean spirited person. He was not vengeful and had never in his fifty-two years ever intentionally hurt anyone. But right was right and wrong was wrong and Robert Bascum believed he had been wronged in the worst way.

He had worked as a lead research chemist for BHP Pharmaceuticals most of his adult life and had made a number of significant contributions. Several years earlier he had tendered his resignation. In an attempt to convince him to remain with BHP he was offered an unusual contract – one, which included a royalty clause. He was to receive one percent of all profits the company made from any of his subsequent discoveries that proved themselves successful in the market place. Because of that, he was persuaded to remain in the company's employ.

The following year Bascum's work led to a cure for a long elusive, serious, condition in the elderly and the product was soon profiting the company by many millions of dollars every quarter. It was a totally new approach to the problem from those methods his lab had previously been pursuing. Even so, because it was part of an ongoing project that predated his new contract, the company contended it didn't qualify for the royalty. Bascum took the company to court. His suit was thrown out as frivolous by a judge who was widely suspected of being in the company's pocket. Since it had not actually been heard, the judge deemed the suit not eligible for referral to a higher court.

Bascum was outraged and thoughtfully set about designing a plan to get him his due – no more and no less. Several months passed before it could be initiated – *that* required a specific, all quite random event with no actual connection to Bascum. At long last, there it was, a headline on page three of the local paper. John Jenkins, BHP employee, had been killed in an unexplained hunting accident. The wheels could begin turning.

At precisely nine o'clock a.m. he arrived at the office of Warren Wilson, the company CEO. The appointment had been made at Bascum's insistence – most certainly nothing Wilson had wanted. It had been the phrase, "I may know something important about the death of John Jenkins," that got him the scheduled five minute face to face meeting. A company attorney was present.

"So, let's get this over with," Wilson began, dispensing with formalities. "You know Mr. Bottoms from Legal."

Bascum offered his hand. It was accepted with clear reluctance. They took seats – Wilson behind his fortress-like, dark, walnut, desk and the other two in cavernous chairs facing it. Bascum got to the point.

"I am here for the purpose of receiving the royalty money I, and most

logically inclined honest people who know about the situation, believe BHP owes me.”

He put a finger to his lips, stifling Wilson’s impulse to reply. He continued.

“Each month on a day and time I specify you will pay me in cash an amount to be disclosed later. Unless you comply you may expect one employee to be killed each day the payment is delayed.”

The attorney interrupted, sensing an early victory.

“Your threat – extortion if not terrorism – has been duly recorded as is everything that goes on across this desk. You have just sealed your own doom, doctor.”

“Well, no. That will not be the case. Let me continue and you will understand. I have prearranged for several killings to take place unless, daily, I take the required step or steps to stop them. If I am not free, I cannot, of course do that and innocent folks will die. Even killing me, you see, will not stop the first dozen or so executions because they are already set in motion – set in motion waiting for me to call each one off, at a specifically appointed time every day.”

“Are you saying you killed Jenkins?” the attorney asked.

“I don’t believe I said that.”

“But in your earlier phone call you implied . . .”

“I implied I had information about the death and I do – I can relate to you everything I read about it in the newspaper. Of course, I may well know more – perhaps even *all* the particulars. Or I may not. Let’s just leave it that your employee died and I have promised that others will also die if you don’t meet my requirements, which are outlined here in this document.”

He removed an envelope from his jacket pocket and slid it across the desk to Wilson who opened it, read it, and handed it to the attorney.

“We should bring in the police immediately,” Wilson said.

The attorney shook his head and turned to Bascum.

“We will take your offer under consideration.”

“I disagree,” Wilson said. “Let’s just suppose we don’t pay and suppose somebody does get killed. We will have Bascum red-handed – we have his admission of guilt in advance. Otherwise he will take the company for millions.”

Bascum interrupted.

“And what if it is *you*, Sir, whose death I have already set in place as incident number one? Are you willing to give up *your* life in order to save the company that money and, perhaps, send me to death row?”

Wilson sat back in his chair. He glared at Bascum eventually averting his gaze toward the attorney.

“And, very likely,” Bascum continued, “the lead attorney that bilked me out of my due in the first place would also be in the first group – the group for which the deadly wheels have already been set in motion. And your crooked judge, too, I imagine . . . if I were guessing, you understand.”

“I’ll go into hiding,” Wilson said, “where you can’t possibly find me. I have such places that you could not know about and could never locate.”

“And remain there forever?” Bascum asked. “I doubt that.”

Bascum leaned forward in his seat effectively garnering the rapt attention

of his little audience.

“What if I have already slipped you a significant dose of poison – an exotic variety that is impossible to detect – and you remain alive only because I am also seeing to it that you get just enough antidote each day to counteract it for the ensuing twenty-four hour period? Go into hiding and I would no longer be able to save your life each day. I assume you have been consuming your regular mid-morning Danish; or, of course, it may be in something different every day.”

Wilson’s ample jowls shook; his face turned red; he stood and began pacing.

“Say something useful, Bottoms. I pay you an exorbitant salary to handle things for us. Say something!”

“I’d rather not speak in front of Dr. Bascum.”

“He’ll just demand that we *do* speak in front of him so spit it out.”

“The doctor seems to have us over the proverbial barrel, Sir. At this juncture I can see no way out. If we ignore his threat one or both of us may die. We apparently have no way of knowing about the poison he has suggested. We should have tests run immediately in case it can be detected.”

Again Bascum interrupted.

“Oh, did I fail to mention that it may well have been a combination of three or more exotic poisons so if somehow one or even two are discovered the threat is really not reduced? Such poisons, you will recall, were the subject of my dissertation.”

“You are a clever man, I’ll give you that, Bascum,” Bottoms said. He began spinning possibilities aloud.

“We could pay you in numbered bills that you wouldn’t be able to spend, but then you’d just kill one of us off to make your point, wouldn’t you?”

Bascum made no response.

“We could threaten harm or death to somebody close or important to you, but my earlier vetting of you revealed you to be a loner with nobody special in your life.”

Still no response.

“We could abduct you and administer a truth inducing drug, but while we had you someone might be killed if it happened to take place during that time you needed to do whatever you do to call things off.”

Still nothing.

Wilson put his hands on the desk and leaned forward toward Bascum.

“I don’t believe a person like you is capable of doing such things. It’s all a bluff, that’s what I say.”

Bottoms shrugged, realizing it would be foolhardy to act on such an assumption regardless of how likely it might seem.

Bascum spoke as, with some flair, he brought his pocket watch into position for easy viewing.

“Call security at the judge’s courthouse. Just about now a rifle bullet will be breaking through the windshield of his parked car – breaking through on a trajectory that would kill anybody sitting in the driver’s seat.”

Bottoms made the call. He made the inquiry. His face flushed as he

turned toward Wilson.

“It is as he said. Had the judge been sitting there . . .”

“As the judge does every afternoon at precisely 5:06,” Bascum interrupted.

“ . . . he would have been killed.” Not unlike most attorneys, Bottoms had been moved to finish his statement.

Wilson sat down and gestured to Bottoms who returned the conversation to the point at hand.

“I see you have set tomorrow morning at this time for your first monthly payment of fifty thousand dollars to be transferred to you at the desk of the vice-president of First Federal Savings and Loan.”

“Correct. At some point, when my legitimate past earnings have been fulfilled, I will notify you to lower that amount to exactly what I am due on a quarterly bases from ongoing sales. I will require regular audit figures from an agency of my choosing.”

Corporate eyebrows were raised – partly in disbelief over the man’s apparent honesty and integrity, and partly in relief over the terms just revealed – terms, which suddenly seemed all quite fair and just.

The three men exchanged nods – an adequate substitute, Bascum surmised, for the traditional end-of-the-deal handshake. The little man had one more point to make.

“I have just one last suggestion – mandate, if you will. Do not let any of this go beyond the three of us because I am sure there are other clever individual’s out there who, upon hearing of the plan, would also be fully capable of making it work to their benefit – and whose scruples, unlike mine, would not prevent them from making unprecedented and unreasonable demands.

“Oh, and perhaps one more piece of evidence you should ponder,” he said getting to his feet. “Please, Mr. Wilson, stand aside from your desk – over here.”

Bascum pointed.

With undisguised irritation, Wilson moved; Bascum again consulted his watch, cutting the air with his open hand as if counting down to liftoff.

“Two... One... Zero!”

A slug broke through the window behind the CEO’s desk, penetrating the back of his chair and lodging in the wood on the desk front.

“It has been a good meeting, I think,” Bascum said smiling and nodding at the others.

He turned and left the room.

Had he formulated the perfect crime?

Story Three

LAVENDER GARDENIA

A short novel in five chapters

By Tom Gnagey

CHAPTER ONE

Dr. William Thomas was forty seven, single, and well liked – respected, even – by his Criminal Justice Students at Coolidge Community College. He was a careful man yet clearly loved to experience life. Dr. Thomas had never so much as had a parking ticket. He still helped little old ladies across streets and purchased cookies from the giggling young, green clad, scouts when they knocked on his apartment door. So, it was understandable that Mike and Kirstin, two of his students, were astonished when the BOLO came over the police scanner: “. . . Dr. William Thomas, 47, average build, graying black hair, glasses, is wanted in connection with the brutal, bludgeoning, homicide of 23 year old Emilio Rico, son of reputed crime boss Angelo Rico; therefore expect collateral pursuit.”

As was his custom upon the completion of the Wednesday night class in Forensics, the professor had gone for a long walk in the park across the street from the campus – one of the few, large, open, green areas in that older part of the city. Understanding it had to be a mistake, Mike and Kirstin hurried into the park to find him and relay the news.

They caught up with him some fifteen minutes into their search. He usually kept to the more or less well-lit paths. On occasion Mike had walked with him. Mike gave the explanation for their presence. Dr. Thomas responded.

“Well, we’ve studied cases of mistaken identity. Innocent men have died in the gas chamber because of it. I guess I have to decide whether to turn myself in and trust the system to work, or keep to myself for a while until I can determine the exact nature of the crime and the evidence that must seem so damning against me. Thank you, of course, for this heads up. You better be on your ways now. Cavorting with a suspect will not look good on your record when you begin applying for jobs in a few months.”

“Here’s what *we* thought,” Mike began. “We think you should lay low for a time. We can gather the information you spoke of and relay it to you.”

“I appreciate your offer but . . .”

“No *but*, Doc,” Kirsten said interrupting. “That innocent until proved guilty thing, you may remember. And who better to prove you innocent than you, former decorated detective, etc, etc, etc. Hear Mike out.”

Dr. Thomas nodded and turned back toward Mike.

“We made some notes for you just now while we were searching the park.”

Kirstin took a small pad from her fanny pack and tore off a sheet, handing it to him. Mike continued.

“We will need a way to communicate with you, but face to face meetings and using our cell phones are out – yours is certainly being monitored by now. I’m sure the cops are already at your office and apartment. Here is the URL of a blog that has no relation to bad guys or law enforcement. No more than a dozen or so of us college kids use it. It’s mostly a way to vent about all the crap that goes on in our lives. Kirstin and I are the only locals. We don’t even care where the others live – Canada, Wales, South Africa, other places. Anonymity makes it work – say anything about anything or anyone – no real names – and get feedback. You and we can contact each other there and write in disguised phrases. Give us twenty-four hours to get all the details about the crime and we’ll get them to you. Think you can decode college crap talk?”

“Having been on both sides of college crap – student then professor – I think I’ll be able to manage. But I can’t let you put your careers and maybe your lives in jeopardy this way.”

“No offense, Doc, but you have no say in this – no grades, no pass/fail. This time it is on us. Think of it like a practicum putting everything we have supposedly learned into real life action.”

“Interesting. If the students fail, the teacher fails. Probably exactly how it really should be throughout the educational system.”

“It’s settled then,” Mike said. “We will write to you on the blog. I suppose it is up to you if you go there to read it.”

“We need aliases – everybody uses aliases on the site,” Kirstin said. “I suggest we become . . . *Lavender* and you become *Gardenia*. Lots of fragrances, colors, and flowers are used there so it will seem like you are one of us, you see.”

Dr. Thomas noted, but didn’t respond to the specifics of the proposition.

“You do understand that I can’t jump your grades a notch for all this.”

“It’s difficult to jump our A’s to anything higher, isn’t it, Doc?”

It brought the first smiles to the somber meeting. Standing between them, Dr. Thomas nodded and placed a hand on each of their shoulders.

“Well, then, thank you.”

“Later you may need to get a throw-away cell phone that can’t be traced to you, Doc. Remember if your current phone is on they may be able to monitor the GPS.”

“Noted.”

He took out his phone and removed the battery.

“Some of these phones are sneaky and keep that GPS thing on even when it’s off. Be sure to put that in your notes.”

The youngsters smiled and raised eyebrows in each other’s direction.

“Go, now! Scat, you two! Stick to the basics or sure as not you’ll make

somebody suspicious – that includes members of the press, remember – every CSI’s nemesis.”

“Where will you go?” Kirstin asked.

“He shouldn’t tell us that so we can honestly say we don’t know where he is,” Mike said, responding for Dr. Thomas. “One more thing before we go, Doc. You’ll need money. My home may not have been big on love, or praise, or good parenting, but it is drowning in money. You won’t dare access any of yours. Here’s all I have on me. We need to establish a drop – a place I can leave more for you. Needs to be someplace you never frequent.”

“The church?” Kirstin asked then felt embarrassed about the implication.

“A superior idea, Kirstin,” Dr. Thomas said immediately, hoping to temper the discomfort he sensed she was feeling. “Say, St. Mark’s, taped under the seat of the third pew from the back on the north side. I will even the account once we have all this cleared up.”

Dr. Thomas took the money from Mike without really examining it. He stuffed it into his front right pants pocket.

“Good-bye then and you know how much I thank you for all of this. Oh, I am reminded that I have a tutorial with Kenny tomorrow at four-thirty. Could you handle that for me?”

“Glad to, although by then all this will have hit the fan, so to speak, and I doubt if anybody, especially Kenny, will be interested in a tutorial.”

“Play dumb, but not suspiciously dumb, kids. That may well be a challenge for you both – the dumb part not the *suspiciously* dumb part.”

Dr. Thomas turned and walked south along the path that led to the duck pond. The youngsters watched him disappear into the darkness.

* * *

‘What great kids,’ I thought to myself.

I left the path almost immediately and circled back northwest. At that point the park abutted a seamy part of the city – flop houses, fifty-buck-a-week hotels, and eateries that only house flies with the lowest self-esteem would frequent. It housed a subculture of closed lips, do-anything-for-a-price, down on their luck (or ambition), vagrants. It was a step up from the homeless areas although did little to contribute to the tax revenue of the city. It is amazing how a grocery can stay in business while showing only fifty dollars a week in receipts.

What should my first move be? I needed to blend in. That meant ditching the coat and tie and eventually the hundred and fifty dollar shoes. I stopped by a fountain and rubbed dirt on the shoes to dull the shin and make them less attractive to those who might accost me for them. I removed the jacket but thought better than to leave it behind to be discovered. I turned the sleeves inside out and slung it over my shoulder. I turned my expensive belt inside out. Luckily my silk boxers would not be on public display.

I needed to change my look. How to easily accomplish that? A shaved head and a full beard. The head I could manage immediately. The beard would

take a week to become substantial. I headed for the EZ-Mart across the street on the south end of the park where I purchased a razor, a sewing kit, shaving foam, and a pack of two yellow pads. After fifteen minutes in the restroom I could have passed for Jean Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise – well not so tan and not so striking, and not so slim and trim. Otherwise an exact clone. I managed a chuckle. I ran my hand across my head. An interesting feel. I had to keep from doing that or it would be a giveaway that it was a new do – or would that be un-do? Another chuckle – clearly driven more from nervousness than actual, chuckle-deserving, humor.

I had avoided the security cameras on the way in and did so again on the way out though doubted that in that part of the city they actually worked. I headed north to find a hotel for the night. The *May West* struck my fancy – its disregard for spelling notwithstanding. Perhaps, it was named after some other dignitary although the nude fan dancer in the pink neon sign made me doubt that. I paid cash for three nights, fully intending to leave after one, allowing the extra time for built-in wiggle room just in case. Just in case of what, I had no idea. I needed time to evaluate my situation. I needed to find a place I could gain access to a computer and the internet. I needed a whole lot of things. A running list was in order.

Once in my room – 404 – I counted my money, what I had in my wallet plus what Mike had slipped me. I had brought \$66.00. My pants pocket revealed \$891.00 more. Drowning in money, I'd say! A college kid with nine hundred dollars in walk around money!

The room was fourteen or fifteen feet square, center front of the building on the fourth floor – there must have been eight – floors, not square feet. Against the hall wall was a double bed of sorts – a major dip in the middle clearly designed to keep the occupant from falling out. At that thought I broke a quick, if faint, smile. On a low stand at the foot of the bed waited a bath towel and bar of soap, two sheets, two pillowcases, and a blanket folded ready for use. I wondered how often the room's occupants actually used the bed linen and for how long it had all been sitting there gathering dust. There was a nightstand boasting a gaudy table lamp – heavy, ceramic, purple and yellow, its cockeyed, cardboard, shade torn in several places casting interesting effects on the wall and ceiling. In a front corner opposite the bed there was a mostly brown recliner, a Salvation Army reject no doubt. A small table and chair sat in front of the one shadeless, curtainless, window. As if a gift from antiquity a single bare bulb hung from a twisted, two strand, black wire in the center of the ceiling. The floor was bare boards – bare except for the months of dust that had been shuffled from here to there and back again by former tenants. I wished I would have been far sighted enough to have purchased a can or ten of Lysol® at the EZ-Mart.

The continuing adrenalin rush convinced me I wasn't tired. I made up the bed and pillows, and set them back against the headboard, thinking that had a better chance of being comfortable than the recliner with an exposed seat spring just daring occupancy. It was hot even for July so I stripped to my silk boxers, opened the window – no screen – and sat back on the bed with pad and pencil.

I knew the Rico boy – he had failed my introductory class first semester of

the previous year. He dropped out after that. It appeared to me that he intentionally isolated himself from the other students only ever really conversing with a fellow Italian looking kid, with the unlikely name of Kyle Winston, a few years older and an excellent student. I believe I recall being told they were cousins. The Rico boy's father was a certified bad guy. Perhaps because of that it may have been the other students who were isolating themselves from him.

I wondered what motive for the murder I had been assigned by the authorities. None was necessary, of course, if there were witnesses. Clearly it was a recent act – the timing of the BOLO and all. If it had taken place while I was teaching I had a dozen alibis. If after class was dismissed then nothing – park pigeons and a stray dog are generally considered unreliable witnesses – plus they all look alike so how would I ever identify them? I wondered where it took place and how the murder was accomplished.

I looked at my watch – 11:48. Class was out at nine. I had been walking for a good hour before the kids found me. They had perhaps been searching fifteen minutes. That would have provided a forty-five minute window – less, actually – for the murder, its discovery, identifying me as the suspect and getting out the BOLO. Things had moved rapidly making me think the evidence must have seemed incontestable. Since I couldn't have been seen – though a look-alike is always possible – there was most likely some other means for identifying me. What could that be? I drew a blank. My car was parked in the faculty lot, which was unattended after six in the evening. Perhaps some connection with my license plate number. It was a remote possibility.

Conjecture was a foolish waste of time at that point. I would know whatever the kids knew by morning. My first concern had to be finding an Internet café. Those in the neighborhood were frequented by college students so I didn't dare use one of them. As an automatic response I reached for my phone thinking to use the yellow pages. It had not been a fully wasted motion. It gave me an idea that might help buy me some time. I re-dressed and left through the alley exit, which had been pointed out to me by the desk clerk as a selling point, which would have clearly been seen as positive by the hotel's typical clientele.

There was a truck terminal several blocks east where long haul semis off-loaded onto local delivery vans. I kept to the alleys, probably being less cautious than I should have been. Such things happen when one momentarily over focuses on a singularly important goal. A small produce truck was pulling out. The driver of the semi next to it was closing the back door to his trailer. He moved around the opposite side. I squatted and followed his legs as they made their way toward the front.

I approached in the shadows and ducked beneath it searching for a spot into which I could wedge my phone. The 'Phone Wedging Gods' were clearly with me. A minute later I had reinstalled the battery, turned it on and had it secured between an I-beam and the bed. The truck bore plates of a state half way across the country. I felt smug about my first diversionary ploy. I waited by the fence to make sure the truck moved out. It did. Ten minutes later I had resumed my position on the bed.

The idea, of course, was to send that GPS device along some interstate

heading west hoping it would put hundreds of miles between it and me before being located. That it had probably been planted here in the city would be no secret once the trucker's itinerary had been disclosed, but I'd be long gone by then. In the morning I would take a city bus twenty or so blocks south and search out a computer for hire. I would need to use different locations so I didn't become known to any of the spots.

I slept surprisingly well. Being an early riser that five hours had not left me refreshed, but it had left me free from handcuffs and with what should prove to be an interesting day ahead. I ventured into the communal shower room with some trepidation but found at that hour I had it all to myself unless you counted the fungus, which I was pretty sure thrived there on the cement floor. I loved the unique feel of my baldness.

I was hungry, but not famished, so thought better than to eat locally. I took the bus south on 37th as had been my plan the night before. When I reached McArthur Avenue I exited and looked around to get my bearings. I was unfamiliar with the area – shops, tenements, overflowing dumpsters. I asked a young boy – ten perhaps – about computer access and he smiled up at me holding out his palm, which clearly needed greasing even at that early hour. I laid on a five. He continued to smile. His palm continued to remain open. I laid on a twenty. It snapped closed.

“Two blocks south, one west. Arnie's Place. Food, computers, printers, internet. Need a email address? I'll rent you one. Ten bucks a day. Unlimited use.”

“I'm fine. Thanks.”

I kept the conversation to a minimum hoping he'd forget me. Arnie's was exactly where it had been promised. It offered a short menu of things mostly wrapped in tortillas and dripping in grease. I took two of the number three's, coffee, and a handful of napkins. I paid for an hour of computer time and found an available unit in an out of the way corner. Upon rethinking, I probably should have used one right out in the open – that would have seemed less suspicious if anyone were looking to find suspicious.

Paranoid, I first visited several innocuous sites to cover my use history if such things were kept: weather channel, online newspaper headlines, a 'Google' look up of 'Bing' – I had to chuckle. Then I found the site the kids had provided. It was as advertised an innocent looking rant site. No terrorist threats. No white supremacist entries. No term papers for sale. I scrolled through the entries. Several brought back nightmarish memories of my own undergraduate days. I moved on.

There it was an entry signed Lavender.

“R met his maker between 9 and 10. It was no brick of cheese. Remains at rest in an elephant's snout whose dish had T's number. Two sets of vigil eyes engaged the heavy. No clear mien. Unremarkable identical suited form. Did catch that dish quite clearly. Rusty liquid on trunk iron running. T's fading taken as incriminating. Interesting sidelight. KW also evaporated. Come to find out that package was actually discrete moniker of Santa Lucia from offensive relative

group. T inferred in both. This stream of consciousness thing is just as great as you said it would be. Directives? Later. Lavender.”

Okay. Let’s see what we have. R stands for Rico, the deceased, was killed just after class let out between nine and ten. Apparently bludgeoned with a brick. Remains would mean body. Elephant’s snout would be trunk. Dish probably means plate – license plate. The body was found in the trunk of my car. Vigil eyes could be security cameras that photographed the heavy – the suspect. There was not a clear picture of the face, but it was a man of average build – so could be me – wearing a suit – which could be me. Camera got clear picture of license plate – mine apparently. Trunk iron could be tire iron and the liquid – blood, I’m thinking – which is being analyzed – DNA probably, but that’s my editorial addition. The fact that I can’t be found looks incriminating. Who is KW – Kyle Winston my student, perhaps, who it seems is in reality somebody else. Let’s see: Santa Lucia. Santa Lucia. Santa. Jolly. Elf. St. Nick. Aha! Maybe. Nick . . . Nick DeLucia. I happen to know his father is an under boss of his crime family and that’s the offensive relative group – crime family. T inferred in both means I, Thomas, am suspected in both the Rico death and the DeLucia disappearance.

Those kids are good. They must have had an outstanding teacher. And they covered their tails well, diverting any suspicion about the entry with that last ‘stream’ comment. Good going, guys! They ask for directions from me. Let’s see. What shall I write?

“Get David Nathan Alcott’s test scores.”

They will decode that as DNA results.

“Keep up with KW/ND scene.”

The reference is to the Kyle Winston/Nick DeLucia situation.

“Modify Mark to distant Agnes this evening. Lock boxer.”

Change St. Marks to St. Agnes, which is further from campus and therefore *safer* for me.

“Obtain tailless ringers. Will do likewise. Exchange designations this place ala Caesar.”

We should both get prepaid cell phones and use roman numerals here to exchange phone numbers. I signed it.

“Gardenia”

I visited one other site at random, Patsajac.com, and left. It certainly would have been more picturesque to have visited Vannawhite.com, but I’m still not thinking clearly.

I need a new place to live and this neighborhood seems ideal. Perhaps the kid with the open palm could point me in the right direction. I found him near the spot of our previous encounter.

“What kind of information on a quiet, out of the way, room or apartment can you give me for ten bucks?”

“Since it’s a add on I can do that. Let’s see the ten.”

I smiled to myself and forked it over. Trust was not a part of his young life.

He hitched his head and I followed.

We crossed the street and entered an alley. Half way in he stopped at a door and knocked – three shorts and a long. My guess would have been that it was an abandoned building. An ancient looking, stooped, gaunt woman with long unkempt gray hair answered – the witch in every six year olds nightmares. Although she may have actually needed the heavy cane it was my impression that it was first of all a formidable weapon.

“This here’s my friend, Henry, and he needs a nice place for a month or so. It’s a no questions asked arrangement.”

I watched the youngster work.

“Got nine,” she said.

“That’s Sam’s,” he pointed out.

“Got his throat slashed last night.”

“Lucky for Henry, I guess. Like I said he’s a friend. We need a really good rate.”

She opened the door a bit wider and looked me over – top to bottom and back again. Hundred a week. Utilities paid. What don’t work you fix if you want to use it. May have to clean up after last night. A week in advance.”

She held out her hand. The boy turned to me.

“It’s the best deal I can get you. Lot’s a Lammers. Like a mini-crime war on the streets around here – Ricos and the DeLucias. She might do a little better for a month in advance, but she’s known to forget long term arrangements and tries to collect twice. Her son’s is both 250 and six, six and they enjoy breakin’ bones. I’d just do one week.”

He had spoken as if she were not present.

Earlier, I had separated two, one hundred dollar bills from the wad Mike had handed me and put them in my left pants pocket. I reached in and removed one. She sniffed it. No idea why, but it passed her olfactory test. She closed the door.”

“She’ll be back with the key,” the boy said.

“Henry?” I asked with a smile.

“You looks like a Henry. What can I say? I don’t wanna know names.”

“What should I call you?” I asked.

“Why you have ta call me anythin?”

“I guess I don’t. How about *kid*?”

“Up to you. Hear about Emilio?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know an Emilio.”

“Emilio Rico. You must be from away. Somebody done him in. Nobody deserved it more. Bad stuff.”

“You more a DeLucia fan?”

“No, sir. I ain’t nobody’s fan. Can’t stay alive on these streets being agin nobody, and being fer one means you’re agin the other. Smile and yes sir to all a them. That’s how to get on in here.”

The door opened and the woman handed the key to the boy. She showed me a calendar with Henry written on the square containing the next due date. I nodded. She hesitated a moment to provide a reminder:

“Nobody pays late.”

The kid nodded emphatically. She turned to him.

“You get him to nine?”

“I’ll do that. Don’t forget to take your pills and keep warm.”

He leaned in and kissed her on her forehead. I didn’t ask, but assumed friendship at least and more likely kinship.

Kid pointed across the dark, narrow, brick paved, alley to a maze of crisscrossing, rusted, metal, fire escape steps that climbed the back wall of the old building that stood opposite us. We soon arrived at a gray metal, third floor door. There was nothing to suggest it was, in fact, number nine.

“Nine, I assume,” I said and held out my hand for the key.

He slipped it into the lock and pushed the door open. He felt the wall for the light switch and flipped it on.

“The leavins a blood there. Watch out.”

He pointed to a dark, moist, area on the floor.

“Let it get good and dry. It’ll get flakey, then you can just sweep it up out the door. Hardly know it was ever there on that dark floor.”

I then got the guided tour – quite a bit for just ten bucks I thought.

This here’s the livin’ room. Over here’s the bed room. New mattress last year. If I was you I’d buy new sheets. The bathroom’s back there off the bedroom. Then out here is the hall that goes to the back window. Can get a good cross breeze goin’ if you leave the front window open, too. I wouldn’t suggest that less you sit there with a oozie.”

He smiled. Apparently it had been a joke. I wouldn’t have known without the smile. I took a quick glance out the rear window. It looked out onto a sizable open area enclosed on all sides by buildings.

The kitchen ain’t much, but the refrigerator runs good and the gas plate cooks good. You probably want to run drinkin’ water and let it set overnight so the rust can settle out. Nobody never got sick from I, but rust can’t be good for you or somebody’d be packagin’ it and sellin’ it. Any questions?”

“At how much per question?”

He broke another smile.

“Questions is free. It’s the answers that sometimes costs.”

The kid was street savvy by necessity, but bright by some fortunate genetic coincidence. I wondered if he had any idea how smart he was.

Three questions: Where and how do I get groceries and that sort of related stuff? Where do I get new sheets? What will it cost to have you forget you ever met me?”

“Another twenty will cover it all. Corner Market, South, cross street LaGuardia. Sheets at RT’s, North, cross street Salem. You can count on my

bad memory for free. Got my rep to protect.”

He handed me the key, turned, and left. No good-bye. Our deal was over and that seemed to be that. My rooms offered standard fair – actually a step or so above what I expected in furnishings and light years ahead of the room at the *May West*. It would be possible to keep it fairly clean. The air was musty but not really unpleasant. I examined the window on the rear wall at the end of the hall. It was large, wooden, opened easily, and did provide instant air flow. It had no lock but then it opened into thin air up three stories above nothing. Still it was covered with metal bars on the outside. I hated those things. A death trap for whoever was inside should a fire break out. I chose to leave it open and did find myself wishing for that oozie – or a small pistol, heck at that point I’d settle for a sling shot or a kid’s bat.

The large area rug in the living room had been spared Sam’s blood. I figured I would give the kid’s ‘let it dry’ solution a try. At the tender age of ten he seemed to be far more experienced in such matters than I was at nearly five times that – and as a cop I had seen some horrific stuff. I failed to ask about cell phones, but figured that neighborhood ran on the prepaid, throw away, variety. Most stores probably carried them.

A half hour later there was a knock at the door. I discovered there was no peep hole and the chain hung in two sections, having recently been cut as evidenced by the shiny metal ends. I hesitated.

“It’s me, Kid,” came the young man’s voice. Apparently he had assumed the name I had suggested.

I opened it a crack keeping my foot in place to hold the door closed if necessary.

“Got stuff.”

“Come in. What stuff? I don’t remember requesting stuff.”

“That shaved head ain’t gonna cut it. Your face and arms is tan and the top of your head is white as vanilla ice cream.”

I waited. He had a small brown sack in tow and went immediately into the kitchen.

“Have a seat at the table. I got iodine and olive oil. I’ll have you tanned up in fifteen minutes.”

“You’ll have me smelling like an Italian salad is what you’ll have.”

“Answer me this. Who’s the expert here? You come from who knows fancy where, but you don’t know squat about takin’ care a yourself in here. Now, let me at that head.”

He made sense, of course. I had to ask, however.

“Why are you taking such an interest in my welfare? I thought we said our forever good-by thirty minutes ago.”

“You’re a nice guy. Got class oozin’ out a ya. I never really knew a guy like you so figured I’d hang around and maybe some a it will ooze out on me – help me get ahead in life, you know?”

Another smile – quick and to the point.

“You have a great smile, Kid, but why am I supposed to trust you?”

“Cause guys like you always trust way too easy. I sort a admire it, you know, but ya can’t be that way in here or ya’ll end up like Sam.”

“You knew Sam well, did you?”

“No. I named him just like I named you. That’s it. Didn’t like him from the start. Did like you from the start.”

“What is this Italian salad disguise treatment going to cost me?”

“On the house. Maybe you’ll teach me some high class words so I can impress the guys. Here’s the receipt for the supplies. I’ll let you reimburse me for ‘em. Five-twenty-six.”

I forked over six dollars. He made no move to make change. The boy had a way of endearing himself, or was that forcefully intruding into a life that really wanted to have no part of him? I knew he was right about the obviousness of my newly shaved head. I had wondered about using makeup, but makeup had never been a part of my bachelorhood. Well, there had been the occasional cosmetic left in my bathroom, but those were other stories.

What could another half hour matter? Then I’d show him the door.

“Alright, then, but I’d like to hear about the process before I give you the okay.”

“The process works. Done it dozens a times. Okay for the explanation?”

“I suppose.”

“Take your shirt off unless you wanna risk gettin’ iodine drips on it.”

While I did that he laid out his supplies. Iodine. Cotton balls. Olive oil. Vanilla extract. I watched with interest, but didn’t pose any of the questions that played within my mind.

“Sit here.”

I sat.

“May sting depending on how long ago you did the shave.”

He looked over my scalp and felt it.

“I’d say less than a day – about 12 or 15 hours maybe. It’ll sting for sure. You okay with pain?”

“I’ve taken a half dozen bullets in my time and I assure you I never cried once.”

He seemed impressed. I wasn’t. It was why I’d left the force. I just kept finding myself wading in where I knew better than to wade. Bang! Ouch! EMTs. College posed far fewer risks of the bodily harm variety, at least. I liked teaching. Of course, I had liked copping as well. I believed I had found the best of both of those worlds in the Criminal Justice Department at Coolidge. Now, who knew how things would turn out?

Twenty minutes later Kid had worked his magic. The answers to many of the questions about which I’d held my tongue emerged through his constant chatter.

“One part iodine, three parts oil, and then vanilla as needed to match the

color of your tanned skin. I'm quite good. Use it on scars that show, mostly. Lasts a month or so. Sun'll tan right through it. You'll need to get your head into some rays every day. I got a spot on the roof you can use. Should start tomorrow. I can work on those bullet scars on your chest and back if you want. Depends how often you go without a shirt, I suppose."

"Do you run everybody's life you come in contact with?"

"Mostly."

Another grin. There was no further explanation.

"I think I'll pass on the scars for the time being."

He packed up the supplies and clearly intended to take them with him – the ones I had just paid for. I let it go.

"I deliver food. None of the restaurants or pizza places deliver in here. Too dangerous. I got a five buck flat rate. You need anything now? I can check back at five if you want me to."

"Yes. Do that. Even better just bring me a sausage pizza and a liter of some diet cola about six."

"Need a twenty up front. I don't front cost a goods."

I handed over another twenty. At this rate I'd need to double my request to Mike.

"Ain't you gonna look at your new head?"

"Yes. I suppose I should."

I was intrigued by the fact that the kid was so convincing I had just believed him.

Kid led the way to the bathroom and flicked on the light pointing to the mirror as if he suspected I wasn't capable of finding it.

"I must say you are talented. Excellent. It deserves a tip."

"No tip. A friend thing. Don't do many friend things so don't never expect it again."

"Thanks for the heads up on that and thanks again for this heads up."

I pointed to my scalp. He chuckled. It was nice. It seemed so foreign to his make-up. I hoped he enjoyed the process.

He picked up his sack and went to the door where he paused.

"I could get myself a key if that would make it easier. I'd always call out when I entered in case you was in the middle of somethin' private."

"I think I'd prefer a no key arrangement."

"I can respect that."

He smiled again and pulled the door closed behind him.

Why did I suspect there would be a key in his future regardless of my preference?

It had been an odd series of events since entering the neighborhood. Really odd! Why did I suspect there would be more?

CHAPTER TWO

Kid was at my door at six, pizza and soda in tow.

“I got enough for both of us. The twenty covered it. I knew you’d invite me to stay.”

He walked directly to the kitchen, never letting up on the chatter.

“I can get you a TV for twenty five bucks. It’s a no questions asked variety. Just over the air channels – no cable in here. Get about fifteen channels. What do you say?”

Having a TV to monitor news reports was probably a good idea. I coughed up another thirty – seemed there was a five dollar service fee. We sat and ate and I mostly listened getting a more complete flavor of the neighborhood. Then I had a question.

“I need a list of where other internet cafés are located within walking distance. Are there many?”

“Depends on what’s your walkin’ distance.”

“Say ten blocks northeast and west from here.”

“At least a dozen. Got paper?”

I furnished a yellow pad and between munches and sips he managed a list.

I took out some bills prepared to pay up. He smiled and waved it off.

“A friend thing, but don’t expect it to continue. You finish high school did you?”

Clearly he had personal, educational objectives in mind.

“Yes I did. Glad I did.”

He nodded.

“I prefer pepperoni.”

“Then I’m amazed you didn’t get it half and half.”

Again he smiled.

“Is that an invitation for next time?”

“I wasn’t aware you actually asked permission before doing things.”

“Not often. You’re right about that. I’ve found the best way to get a ‘no’ from a grown up is to ask permission. I don’t like ‘nos’ so I mostly quit askin’.”

“I assume you have a family.”

“Assume what you want. Best we don’t know about each other – except what we got between us.”

“I see. Okay. I can deal with that.”

During the next half hour I learned several useful things – above and beyond the fact that he could linger over a single slice of pizza longer than anybody I’d ever known. The area was known as Trager Town. I remembered as soon as I heard it although I had never worked it while a cop. The Rico family territory was to the west; the DeLucia to the east. Trager Town was a buffer zone – a no man’s land – where the younger male members of the families

regularly postured and from time to time even did each other in.

“What’s the latest word on the street about family stuff?” I asked.

“The killin’ a Emilio Rico and the disappearin’ a Nick DeLucia.”

Oh? Tell me about it – them – whatever.”

Kid shot me an odd look while he worked on a mouthful of what, as it turned out, was excellent pizza. Apparently nothing but the best for kid – at least when he was buying with other people’s money.

“Emilio got his head bashed in over on 36th by the college. In a alley. He knew better than to be in a alley up there. Don’t make sense. Word on the DeLucia kid is that he went to a class Wednesday night and was never seen after he left. He liked to walk places – sort of a health nut like me.”

I had to smile as he took time to shove another grease dripping, cholesterol laden piece of pizza into his young mouth – health nut indeed!

“Walkin at night’s not a good idea up there and he should a knowed better. Cops say he was walkin’ home – about fifteen blocks away I’d say when it come down.”

“36th? The college is on 36th, right?”

Another look. He nodded again clearing his mouth before speaking.

“Runs north and south between the campus and the park. It was in the alley between Hamilton and Adams the way I hear it.”

That was no more than a ten minute walk from my classroom. It didn’t help my position. In fact, it suggested a damning time line: 15 minutes to follow DeLucia, lure him into the alley and kill him. 10 minutes back to the park. 30 minutes later Mike and Kirstin heard the BOLO and in 15 more they located me in the park. Kid had more – it was clearly propelled by his rather normal ten year old male’s obsession with gore.

“A kid with binoculars across the street – 4th floor apartment I hear – saw it all come down. A man in a suit, one with a full head of hair,” – he paused to direct another look in my direction – “pulled up in a late model Ford heading south toward the college – stopped at the curb just north of the alley and sat there. When the driver – the murderer the cops say – saw Rico walking south he got out and met up with him on the sidewalk. Then they went into the alley. The guy from the car was wearin’ a suit – two different security cameras caught that. Then they went to the back of the alley – no cameras back there. Next thing the camera got was the guy in the suit getting’ in the car and backin’ it into the alley. A few minutes later the car pulled out headin’ south toward the college. Cameras must a got the license number.

“The kid with the binoculars saw it all and told his ma and she called the cops. I guess they looked at the security videos right away and that’s how they got the plate number. They found the car right away. It was parked on the street two blocks south toward campus. Emilio’s body was in the trunk. Lots a blood, I’ll bet. Like I said, his head was bashed in and his brains was gushin’ out – well, I just imagine they was gushin’ out.

“The car belonged to a teacher at the college – the same one that taught

the class the DeLucia kid had been at that night. The teacher took off and ain't been located. Some buzz is that he lit out on the interstate headin' west. Can't confirm that. Makes no sense he'd leave his car and then head out. What would he drive? Wouldn't think a college teacher would know squat about hot wirin' a car, you know?"

"You are quite the detective, young man."

"Everybody says I got a good nose for stuff."

I assumed he and I had meant the same thing.

"You have me interested and a bit confused. You say it was DeLucia who started walking north on 36th after class, but it was Emilio who ended up dead in the alley?"

"Yup. Doubt if Nick suddenly turned into Emilio. Hard to figure. Nick could a decided to take a short cut through the park – that's pretty safe territory – cops patrol it. Then someway Rico showed up at the alley. Could be the teacher thought it was Nick and bashed the brains out a the wrong kid. It's dark in that alley. Takes night vision cameras in most a the alleys around here."

His theory had some merit. Although why Nick was still missing remained a mystery and why Emilio would have been walking that street seemed unclear. I'd give it a try.

"Why do you suppose Emilio would have been walking alone at that spot at that time of night?"

"Probably meetin' up with a girl. It's what all the older guys seem to be doing all the time. They'll give up a meal for time with a girl. I don't personally get it. Lots a willin'girls for the likes a Emilio, though."

Again, it was well within reason. I was amused with the element of disgust obvious in the boy's delivery as he mentioned and then editorialized on the 'girl' thing.

"Did you know, Emilio?"

"Everybody knew Emilio. Best dressed dude on the streets. They say he wore thousand dollar suits and two hundred dollar shoes. Can you imagine that?"

"Wow! His family must be loaded."

"It's the Rico's, Henry! Of course they're loaded."

He was clearly disappointed in my reaction.

It took no Einstein to understand that the kid suspected that I was the teacher on the lam. I decided to leave it alone – at least for the time being – but wondered, if I couldn't even fool a ten year old how I would fool the others. If he would be true to the lip-zipped philosophy he had laid out earlier, I would be safe. Odd. My immediate fate clearly lay in the hands of a gore loving, girl hating, money grubbing, street savvy, ten year old. I suppose that so long as I remained his chief source of financial support, I was relatively safe.

Since my situation was clearly no secret between us, I went further out on my limb.

"I need clothes. Can you take care of that for me?"

“Of course I can or my name ain’t – he smiled into my face – ain’t *Kid*. Give me your measurements.”

I wrote them on half a sheet paper and tore it off for him.

“Jeans and hoodie will be best. I’ll get ya a button down the front shirt for dress up in case you want to play with the ladies. Want some khakis to go with that?”

“Sure. I’ll let you be my new fashion coordinator.”

“Definition?”

“Fashion, style of clothing. Coordinator, manager. Okay?”

“Okay.” He nodded thoughtfully. “It’s a good thing.”

I furrowed my brow indicating I didn’t understand.

“Me helpin’ you so you can get on in here and you helpin’ me so I can get on out there.”

I nodded. I understood. The lad was into bettering himself so he could make his way in the Promised Land outside of Trager Town. I had to give him credit. I had to wonder where that drive came from.

“Need undies? I prefer not to wear any in the summer, myself.”

“A couple of pair of boxers would be in order – and sox.”

“Okay. Jeans, khakis, hoodie, shirt, undies, sox, towels, sheets and pillow cases – a hundred and fifty should handle it. I’ll bring you change.”

It interested me that he felt the need to announce I’d get change. I appreciated that he had remembered about the sheets and amused that he had taken the initiative to add the towels. I had to wonder if he had done the same for Sam. My guess was not. He viewed me as different from the others. I hoped I could soon find a cure for that. What I didn’t need in my life was a ragamuffin tag-along.

I shelled out the money. Kid took wide-eyed notice of the roll of bills, but said nothing. I needed to begin using my wallet. I’d make that transfer once the boy left.

“Give me thirty minutes,’ he said.

“For what?” I asked.

“For your duds shoppin’.”

“Oh. I was expecting you wouldn’t do that until tomorrow.”

“Ya want me to wait?”

“No. Actually, tonight will be better. Thanks.”

“We ain’t much on please and thank you around here. Make you stick out like a outsider, ya know?”

“Thanks for the heads up. Woops, there I said it. What should I have said?”

“Just say, ‘cool’. That handles stuff like, ‘thanks’ and ‘we’re good’, and ‘congratulations’.”

“Cool.”

He smiled. I suddenly felt quite smug. Kid left, pausing to touch and take

note of the broken security chain before closing the door behind him. His action sent a chill up my spine. I hadn't known that was anything but a figure of speech. All quite suddenly I learned differently. It was the first time I had really let myself allow feelings of fright – terror. I got a kitchen chair and forced it under the door knob. During the process I noted that Sam's remains had dried. In the morning I'd sweep him to his reward in the alley below.

Sam. Henry. Kid. Old Lady With Cane. What kind of a phase was my life entering?

I stripped the bed. I transferred the money into my wallet. I cleaned up the kitchen table and re-capped and stashed what was left of the soda in the refrigerator. Figuring Kid would finish off the two remaining pieces of pizza I left them out. I sat at the table and made a new list, roughly in the order things needed to be accomplished.

Get money from the church

Get cell phone

Contact M and K – The Lavender twins.

See what else they have learned

Provide them with my cell number

Get groceries

Talking with them would make communication far easier, if, perhaps, not so much fun. With both of us on prepaids we should be safe from prying.

At 7:40 Kid returned. He noticed the chair that I had set off to the side of the door after letting him inside and seemed to understand. He gave me a nod, which I interpreted as his 'well done' – 'cool' even, perhaps. He put the several sacks on the couch and began laying out the purchases. In addition to the items on the list were a bar of soap, tooth brush and paste, a single roll of toilet paper, deodorant, and cans of air freshener and Lysol. He sprayed the room.

"Lysol's for the shower, mostly. I'd do the floors anywhere you expect to walk bare footed. Got you solid blue undies – you seem like a blue kind of guy to me. Couldn't find blue in a shirt your size so got tan – will go okay with both pants. The hoodie's tan, too. Tan and blue ain't no gang's colors. In here ya gotta stay away from red and black and green and yellor."

He sniffed the air and leaned in close to me.

"You stink. Go take a shower and I'll be back with that TV and stuff in half a hour."

Unlike him, he paused as if to wait for me to agree with what had to all appearances been edict-like.

"Fine. Tha. . . . It's *cool* that your remembered the extras – the soap and deodorant especially. I appreciate that."

He grinned.

"That's okay. When men sweat they soon stink so I figured you'd want the Mitchum. I figure you need all the help you can get."

It wasn't truly positive, but it did indicate that I had acquired a loyal and clearly truthful – if not subtle – ally. That was . . . cool. I had been ten once myself though certainly would have failed the 'street savvy' test this lad would easily ace.

"Pizza left on the table," I said. "I put the soda in the refrigerator."

"Fridge, not refrigerator in here, Henry. Seems like I got more to teach you than you do to teach me, so far."

"Touché."

"To what?"

"Touché. T-o-u-c-h-e. It means your point was well taken. French."

He nodded, grabbed a slice of pizza, and left again, pointing to the chair with a nod on his way out. I repositioned it under the knob.

It appeared we had somehow forged a relationship. I would have to think on that. I wouldn't want to be putting the lad in danger and there was no doubt but that I was in danger. The police were looking for me and since I was the only suspect in the death of the Rico boy and the disappearance of the DeLucia boy both of those families had – in their own ways – joined the search. As a young policeman I had worked undercover for nine months. That had been years before and I hoped I could call on what I had learned. As I recalled, however, being tutored by a ten year old had not been part of the arrangement back then. Perhaps the force should consider such a move.

I showered and felt much better. I chuckled out loud as I applied the Mitchum. The new clothes fit and felt fine. I chose the jeans and hoodie. The mirror revealed that a two day growth of beard came off looking scudsy – probably just the right look. My bald head – ala Kid – actually looked quite good. As promised, the tint had not washed off. It would need to be kept shaved. I had a safety razor and foam and would wait until morning to work on that. I allowed myself a moment to feel proud that I had not cut myself while attempting the transformation – mostly Braille style – in a stall in the EZ-Mart's restroom.

I still needed to visit the church and find an internet site that night – surely there were some all-night varieties on Kid's list. I needed to accomplish those things without Kid's involvement – or knowledge. Good luck on the latter, I thought. I had never conceived of a Guardian Angel in the person of a scrawny, no hips, ragamuffin, but then I'd really never before actually conceived of a Guardian Angel.

Before he left for the final time that evening, not only did I have a working eighteen inch TV – I had to help him bring it up from the alley – but also a security bar across the inside of the door. It consisted of two heavy, metal brackets, one screwed into the wall studs just beyond the door frame on each side and a two by four that fit across the door and seated into them. I felt secure and would pay whatever the price.

"How much?" I asked as he slid the bar into place for the first time.

"No charge. I took it out of a vacant apartment up on six. Gram don't care."

His face flushed. Clearly it had not been his intention to reveal that the old

lady who apparently owned the building was his grandmother. I let it go although that really didn't change the situation. He knew I had caught it. That was that as far as I was concerned. Perhaps at that point we each knew *one* of the other's secrets. Kid left for the night, soda in tow.

I turned off the living room lights and waited fifteen minutes before leaving. I followed the alley – now *my* alley – west. I was heading toward Rico territory, but was uncertain if St Agnes was inside it or not. It didn't matter. I had to retrieve the money.

I entered the century old, grey stone, church and walked the shadows of the outside aisle to the designated pew wondering at which end they would have taped the package. It had been well played and was within my grasp first try right at the aisle. The sanctuary was empty. Even so I kept my hood drawn up around my face. Not being Catholic I didn't even play-act at making the appropriate hand signs across my chest. It would have been a more blatant tip off than just omitting the gesture. I left. The jacket had an inside pocket where I stashed the package. It was bulky. I assumed Mike had supplied me with bills in denominations of twenty and lower. Those would leave a less suspicious and less affluent trail in my wake in case I would come under anyone's scrutiny.

For a moment I thought somebody was following me. Paranoia I imagined. Let's see what are the odds that in a city of two million, somebody other than I might be out and going my way on the street at night?

There was an internet café seven blocks straight north on 40th. The first one I had visited sold the kind of cell phones I needed. As it turned out, so did this one. Fifty bucks got me the phone and 300 minutes. I had no idea if that were a good deal or not. It met my immediate needs and that was all that concerned me.

I paid for an hour of web time. That place had cubicles and was somewhat more expensive. In less time than I had anticipated, I had the phone up and running. I was soon at the computer and had accessed the private website. It was 10:25. I found Lavender's new message.

"No Donna Nora Anderson yet. Three BT's on iron – ND, ER, and Doc. The kilenick still at large. Donna's stuff should be available tomorrow noon. Cheese = BT nic. TI part prince all three. TI dried cloth spotless on E's upperware. Not succeed. ? Elephant part left open on St. showing morte. DLXXXVII – MMMMMMMMMDCLXXI. Your old region. – Lavender"

So, no DNA results available until tomorrow noon. But three Blood Types on the tire iron. Nick's, Emilio's, and mine. Although the iron had been wiped on Emilio's shirt, traces of the blood remained along with partial prints of all three of us. The one known as Kyle, actually Nick DeLucia, had still not been located. What was Nick's blood doing on the tire iron unless he and Emilio fought over it and he ended up killing Emilio? That could explain his flight. He may well be hiding out in plain sight at home, and the family is yelling about his whereabouts as a cover. And the brick only had Nick's blood type – so the tire iron had to be the murder weapon, not the brick. Kid will be so disappointed! There must have been a two-way brawl going on for at least a short time. It makes me think the

brick was used against Nick before the tire iron killed Emilio. Hmm? But then, the car trunk with the body in it was apparently left opened there on a busy street so it would be easily found. Strange!

Let me try it another way. Emilio had to have the tire iron to begin with so that would seem to make him the driver – Kid’s dude in the thousand dollar suit, probably my body type. For some as yet unknown reason, he attacked Nick with the iron but Nick somehow took it away. Emilio picked up the brick and hit Nick – cutting him, leaving only his blood on it. Nick then hit Emilio with the tire iron and killed him. My bet is that Nick, aware of the security cameras, stripped Emilio of his suit coat and put it on. The car was probably left running in preparation for Emilio’s quick getaway. Nick exited the alley looking like Emilio (or me) in the coat, backed the car in and removed Emilio’s body. Why would he do that? Why remove the body in my car unless he was trying to implicate me in the crime? Nick had no reason to know it was my car, however. Maybe just to implicate *anybody* else. That makes more sense. Emilio, however, could well have selected my car for that reason. He blamed me for causing him to flunk out of college. I assumed his family understood the real reasons or else I would have heard from them.

I need to put several items up on the website.

“Got green.”

I got the money.

“Prince of the guidance system?”

Whose prints were on the steering wheel?

“Morte garb?”

What was Emilio wearing when they found his body?

“Will sticky paper via ides guy.”

I’ll contact you by way of cell phone number you left me. (ides guy = Cesar = roman numerals.)

Hoping I hadn’t been too cryptic, I signed – “Gardenia”

I found a site that converted Roman numerals into my kind of numbers. 587-9671 with the area code (region) same as mine. I would wait and call from my room. They were college kids. As I recall, there’s an unwritten law stating they can’t go to bed until after one a.m.

I took a final look at our blog site. Lavender had been Johnny on the spot and there was already a response.

“No prince on circular rim. Morte: legal case trousers, royal acme, coalish hits and \$\$\$\$ soul holders. Await Athens communiqué.”

The steering wheel had been wiped clean of prints. That was probably the first item in my favor. It was my car. Why would I wipe away the prints? The body wore . . . ah! . . . suit (legal case) pants, a purple shirt (top), black socks (hits), and expensive shoes. I was going to miss this on-the-fly code thing. They were very clever. Apparently my attempts had not been too esoteric.

I responded: “Find the legal case thing. (suit coat) Lack of my liquid (blood) and presents (presence) of Old St. Nick’s should help # one (me). (None

of my blood on the coat but some of Nick's) Cool. Later. – Gardenia”

The ‘cool’ gave me a laugh although I understood it would hold no special meaning for them. As I stood to leave – revealing myself from within the cubicle – a fat man in a colorful Hawaiian print shirt hurried on out ahead of me. Red, green, yellow – he was most certainly an outsider. Thank you Kid. It made me wonder. I wrote it off to paranoia.

Still, I went back and forth in my mind as to whether or not I should inquire about him from the young man behind the counter. In the end, I did.

“Never seen him before,” was the answer. “Hope he comes back, though.”

“Oh. Why is that?”

“He bought five burritos and three soda refills. That’ll make my register look good when the boss does the books in the mornin’.”

What was it with the dropped final ‘g’ there in Trager Town? I hoped my questions hadn’t made me stand out in the young man’s memory. They probably hadn’t unless he was to be specifically questioned about it, which he just might. I did my best to look unmemorable and took my leave.

As I walked back south toward my place – my newly TVed and two by four secured place – I rethought the last communication from Lavender. My hunch about somebody removing Emilio’s suit coat had been correct. He was known for his obnoxious shirt colors. I wondered if his coat had been found. Undoubtedly it would bear blood. Perhaps both his and Nick’s but not mine. Ah! Another item leaning in my favor. I’d have to wait on that. I imagined that whoever the Lavender Kids’ sources of information were, they would be tucked in at that late hour.

It was going on midnight when I finally re-set the wooden bar across the door. I had taken Kid at his word about staying out of alleys after dark and stuck to the main streets – it had been 36th virtually the whole way back. I had never been out of sight of at least a half dozen vehicles so I felt relatively safe. Of course I had no way of knowing which cars might have carried a gun toting, Rico or DeLucia. If Nick had made his way home, then I imagined the DeLucia’s were not looking for me. Not knowing that for sure, I couldn’t count on it. It seemed strange and a bit disconcerting to be hiding out by remaining in plain sight.

I didn’t know a lot about the DeLucias. I did know about the Ricos – vicious and heartless might best describe them. The Kyle Winston side of the DeLucia clan seemed really nice. He offered to help me with special projects and when asked, went out of his way to be helpful to the other students. I liked him. I guess we were both basically loaners. That was another reason I came to dislike being a cop. I really was never a team player. It’s why I assume I’d make a terrible husband – several ladies in my life had made the same observation quite clear to me. It certainly contributed to my unease about having Kid in my life, if only for a week or so. I would have to scrupulously avoid giving him even the slightest hint there could be any ongoing future in our relationship. It seemed he was used to that so would understand.

I wondered if the DeLucia family knew Nick was using an alias at school.

Surely the school officials had to know – social security number and all. Why was he striving to separate himself from the family? It raised interesting possibilities.

I slipped out of my shoes and stretched out on the couch. That reminded me I needed to get different shoes. It might be a giveaway if I went to a store wearing mine and downgraded to el cheapos. I imagined that Kid could find a pair of suitable 10½ triple Es in black. I wondered how I would contact him. On the street, I assumed. In front of the meat market was where I located him both times before. That must be his block. I had lots of wonders about him. I wondered if he had any about me. Perhaps he had learned not to pursue such topics. It seemed people moved in and out of his life with few leave behinds as far as he was concerned. I glanced down at the Sam leave behind and turned away.

I took out my new cell phone and plunked in the number I'd been given. I hoped that number-conversion site knew what it was doing. It rang. Would I be surprised if I got Julius Cesar!!

“Lavender, here.”

I smiled.

“Gardenia, here. I'm at 432-2751 by the way.”

“He's at 432-2751,” he repeated to somebody, Kirstin of course. “Good to hear your voice, Doc. That web thing was fun although I suppose fun is not at the forefront of your thoughts right now. You okay?”

“Yes. As okay as the circumstances allow. I have aa couple of rooms not too far away. Private. Secure. Anonymous. Any new word on DeLucia?”

“None. Some family members arrived on campus and began asking around this afternoon. Nobody seems to know anything. They were apparently surprised about the name he was using. He didn't have any friends at school as far as I know. You?”

“My take is like yours. Good student. Cooperative. Distant. Thanks for the help with the money. I'm keeping track.”

“Not worried on this end. Anything else we need to be doing?”

“Two things come to mind. A cop patrols the park at night. I wonder if he saw me there. That could help my cause. The sooner asked, the better likelihood he'll be able to place it into an accurate time frame. Second. Wednesday about noon I was at Battlefield Mall. When I returned to my car I found that the one parked next to me had a flat. Its driver was an older woman – early seventies I'd say with all the usual features attributed to the gender and age – unremarkable. I changed it for her. In the process I cut my hand on the inside of her trunk lid. It doesn't look like much now, but it really bled – fleshy part below the thumb. I was putting the flat back in her car. I had used my tire iron and jack since she didn't have them. I know I got blood on my tire iron and I'm sure on the flat tire and the jagged edge on the inside of her trunk lid. It would help if we could locate her. Row A-4 is where we were parked. Right about noon. She drove a small KIA. I don't know any more than that – well it was white. Two door. Had a, *Save The Whales* rear bumper sticker – blue and

white.”

“We’ll see what we can do. Anything else?”

“Not right now. You have anything new?”

“DNA results should be out tomorrow. Kirstin’s aunt works as a secretary in the crime lab. She’s been our pipeline.”

“What are they using as base line for the DNA?”

“Hair from your comb in your bathroom at your apartment. The Rico’s and DeLucias apparently both cooperated by providing something – most likely hair, also. Blood types for all three of you are on file at the college. Good to know you are a universal donor. Next time I’m bleeding profusely I’ll try to be in close proximity to you. So, you got a theory, Doc?”

I relayed my hypothesis about what transpired in the alley.

“Any ideas about where Nick might have stashed the suit coat?” I asked.

“We are thinking trash containers in the park. We wondered why he hadn’t just left it in the car and been done with it.”

“Good question. He may have been hurt more severely than I have assumed and needed to cover up a wound or bloody shirt so he wore it to where ever he went.”

“Good possibility. We’ll still search the trashcans at daybreak. Walt, the park custodian, says there are forty one cans. Trash pickup is on Monday so we have some time. Problem is the vagrants frequent them for useable stuff and aluminum cans to sell at the recycle place down on 36th and Elm.”

“Check down there to see if any of the sellers looked out of place in a suit coat.”

“You do think like a cop. Will do. As you have already probably surmised, I have you on speaker so Kirstin can take notes.”

“Hi Doc. We’ll get this all worked out, you know,” came her ever cheery, if typical, Pollyanna, greeting.

“With you guys in my corner it’s bound to turn out fine. I just don’t understand what’s taking you so long?”

I heard them giggle.

“If I ever sound evasive when you call it may be because I have a young shadow who is showing me the ropes here on the street. I don’t want him to know what’s up.”

“Gottcha. If it seems like that’s happening we can ask and you can let us know. You can call us back when the moon comes out.”

“When the moon comes out?”

“Think website. When you lose your shadow. How tough could that be, Doc?”

“Good night Lavenders.”

“Night Doc.”

“That’s Gardenia. How tough could that be?”

CHAPTER THREE

Eventually it came to me that there was a persistent knocking at my door. I roused enough to look at my watch. Six a.m. I knew who it was. I slipped into my jeans and made my way into the living room. I thought better than to turn on the light.

“Who’s there?”

“Kid.”

“What’s the password?”

I was kidding as I struggled just a bit releasing the tightly fitting brace.

“Touché,” came the response.

I opened the door. He was in and had the door closed in five seconds flat. I re-placed the bar.

“Quick thinking, that touché come back,” I said.

He ignored it.

“We may have big problems.”

I furrowed my brow.

“The Rico’s is askin’ around ‘bout a guy your age they want for killin’ Emilio. Just thought you should know. You could probably be mistook for him even without the hair.”

“I see. A guy who looks like me?”

“Not *looks* like. A guy *like* you. Average build, classy, middle aged, *like* you. Somebody new to Trager Town. Somebody wantin’ a out-a-the way place to stay. Somebody that pays whatever it takes to get what he needs. *Like you, Henry.*”

“I appreciate the heads up. I imagine you should leave now and stay away for your own safety.”

I got another one of his looks.

“I got groceries outside the door. Open up and I’ll bring ‘em inside. I’m famished. Pizza don’t last me like it did back when I was a little kid.”

He waited for me to lift the bar. I did. He was soon struggling a king sized brown grocery bag inside. He turned and paused to make sure the bar was replaced and then weaved his way toward the kitchen.

“Got milk and eggs and bread and tuna and hot dogs and lunch meat and those little weenies in cans – and a can opener – got frozen stuff: burgers, fries, veggies, orange juice. Figure we can make out for a while on that. Oh. And two

little pizzas and a half gallon of butter brickle – hope you like butter brickle; it's my favorite. Got catsup and mustard.”

“Great! Cool, I suppose. I will pay you for it.”

“Twenty seven thirty six. Twenty five and we'll call it even. I been eatin' stuff.”

I didn't protest. I did begin to wonder if he really had a home. Maybe he lived with his grandmother. Maybe, maybe, maybe. I'd be better off following his philosophy of, 'I don't want to know and neither should you'.

We spent a few minutes putting things away. I tried to make conversation.

“So, the Ricos are looking for somebody. I hear they aren't very nice folks.”

“I'd say burnin' a guy's face a dozen times with cigarettes and pokin' out eyes qualifies them as not very nice folks.”

“Oh, my!”

The emotion slipped out before I realized it was on its way. It arose partly from the horrendous acts he had described and partly from the matter of fact way Kid treated it. No kid (or Kid) should have to grow up an environment where such horrific things are common place.

“Since I am so much like this guy, do you have any suggestions for me?”

“Stay outta sight. It's why I got the food as soon as Mr. Jacks got to his store. He lets me come in early through the back door.”

“So, you often do things like this for folks?”

I got a look. I realized immediately that I had overstepped the private lives boundary he had established. I backed off.

“You cook?” he asked.

Not waiting for an answer, he proceeded to get out a skillet – and wash it. He then cracked a half dozen eggs into a plastic bowl and soon had a scrambled breakfast sizzling over the fire.

“No toaster here, but I can flame toast some soon as the eggs is done. Forgot butter, but toast is toast I say. Milk? Didn't know if you was a coffee guy so didn't risk wastin' your money on it.”

“I am,” I said. “Maybe later.”

Kid went on.

“We need to put a list together. Butter, coffee, sugar, jelly, soda. We'll need more ice cream. Half a gallon don't last no time at all between two guys, right?”

Was that a second time he had asked for my opinion? My how the relationship was flourishing! I nodded, quieting my smile. He continued.

“I'll have to get the rest in bits and pieces. All at once it could raise suspicion about how I was usin' it all. Mr. Jacks knows my habits. He's a alright guy, but he can be bought or intimidated like most everybody else in here.”

“Intimidated. Nice word.”

“No it ain't. It means threatened in all the worst ways.”

“I know what it means. I was just impressed that you used it so easily and appropriately.”

“Grow up in here and it’s the third word you learn.”

I didn’t ask about the first two, but I was betting they weren’t mama and dada.

Kid had his world divided into two parts: *In* here, meaning Trager Town, and *out* there, meaning the rest of the world, something Kid seemed to understand he really wasn’t yet prepared to meet successfully. He certainly was convinced that it was a better place, however. He clearly saw me as part of his ticket out. Not that he thought I would be taking him with me when I moved on, but that I was somebody he could learn things from that would help him out there or make him more acceptable out there. My heart ached, but that was a distraction I didn’t dare allow at the moment.

“Are the Ricos into door to door searching,” I asked.

My voice cracked, much like a twelve year old’s.

“They don’t need to. If anybody really knows somethin’ they’ll end up tellin’. You been stayin’ out a sight, right?”

“Pretty much, I suppose. I’ve been to a couple of the internet cafes. Only spoke to four people; the café clerks, you and your, I mean the older lady who rented me this place.”

“It’s okay. I know you know she’s my gram. I slipped up. Not a good thing in here. It happens when you feel safe around somebody. Not a good thing, feelin’ safe.”

I had no helpful response so let it go.

“You’ll be okay then. Those clerks see a hundred people a day. Most in jeans and hoodies. You’re not all that of a stand out in the first place.”

I think it had been offered as reassurance. Certainly not intended as a put down. I was well advised to listen to his take, however. I would lay low. I really disliked putting the boy between me and danger, but I was also sure I really had no control over that. Kid did what Kid did. Period. Perhaps, exclamation mark, even!

The eggs were finished. He pulled two small, paper, containers of salt from his pants pocket. The tiny variety from fast food places. That was followed by pepper from the opposite pocket. I was offered one of each. He poured milk – I hadn’t been asked if I wanted any.

“We can just share from the skillet. Saves on washin’ dishes.”

He sat the hot skillet on a large dish and moved it to the center of the little round table. He handed me a fork as he took a seat, his legs folded under him. He ate eggs every bit as slowly as pizza. It was, perhaps, fortunate they remained in the cast iron skillet. That helped keep them warm. I tried to slow myself down and match him fork for fork. Not sure why. That just seemed right. That way we eventually finished at the same time. My how I hate cold eggs!

“I cooked so you can wash the skillet and glasses.” He paused and looked up at me. “Okay?”

“Sounds like I got the best end of that deal. You scramble a great egg, by the way. Sometime I’d like to sample that toast you spoke of.”

He nodded. It was as if his all-purpose term, *cool*, didn’t suitably cover what he was feeling. Nodding seemed to.

“I see you got a cell phone. Buy it at one a the cafes?”

“I did. How did you know that?”

“Saw the bulge in your pocket. Wasn’t there yesterday. I notice stuff.”

“I’ll say you do. Again, good detective work.”

He grinned. It was a great grin, but clearly unpracticed. More than that, it was obviously uncomfortable. He retreated from it almost immediately.

“Gotta put dish washin’ soap on the list,” he said as he watched me begin the task of cleaning the skillet. I assumed he would have suggestions about proper technique, but received none. He possessed a penchant for cleanliness fully out of character for a boy his age. Again, I had to wonder. Gram, perhaps?

When I finished he nodded his approval. I was interested that it seemed important to me that he approve. How strange. How absolutely strange!

We finished the list. I added a two liter, plastic, juice container – make that two, a roll of paper towels, four kitchen towels – cloth variety – and large rubber bands. He gave me a strange look. Not the ‘none of your business’ look that I was getting used to. It was more an, ‘I’d really like to ask why, but I won’t’, look. I would explain things to him later.

Over the course of the next several hours he came and went bringing in the items one and two at a time. From the sacks I could tell he used a number of different sources. Since I suddenly had no plans to be outside during the day I put off getting new shoes. By ten he was gone. I wondered if he’d show up for lunch. I hoped his skinny body only reflected being ten and not hungry. I figured a starving boy would scarf it down as opposed to his leisurely approach. It made me feel better, but left me unsatisfied.

At eleven forty my phone rang.

“Gardenia.”

“Lavender. No luck in the trash containers. If it was there it’s been removed. Not good news on the DNA, either. All three of you showed up on the tire iron. Your scenario would suggest that’s how it should be, of course. The cops see it another way – that it places you at the murder scene. We need to somehow set them straight.”

“I’ve been thinking along those lines myself. Here what we will do. If you will, write a letter, from the two of you, stating the facts you know and my hypothesis. It must not seem to be coming from me and it must seem to be from facts you know or suppositions you two have made. For example, say that I mentioned to you about helping the elderly woman change her tire and getting cut. Add whatever else seems reasonable. Then deliver it in person to Randy Radcliff, Chief of Detectives at the 23rd precinct. He was my supervisor back when I was on the force. We seldom saw eye to eye on anything. He probably threw a party the day I resigned. But, he’s the best cop I’ve ever known.

Thorough, honest, fair, untiring. You can say that you heard me mention him in favorable terms, which you just did. We need him on our side even though this all came down in the 27th. I know he'll do what he can."

"You got it, G."

"G? Oh! For Gardenia. Yes. We must conserve syllables where ever syllables can be conserved."

Again, I heard chuckles across the airwaves.

"One more thing. I have it on good authority that at least the Rico Family is searching for me. See what you can find out about the DeLucias. Even if we luck out and convince the police of my possible innocence, we will still have the families to contend with. They tend to snuff first and listen later. The situation with them may be far more difficult. And one more, *'one more thing'*; see if you can determine if there was any bad blood – so to speak – between Nick and Emilio above and beyond the usual family stuff. We need to establish motive. Seem to have opportunity and weapon. I guess that's it. Oh. Somebody will need to cover my class next Wednesday if we don't have this thing settled by then. Gardenia out."

"Gardenia out?" I said to myself, my voice rising into a question. That sounded like dialog straight out of some 1940s Bogart movie.

I turned on the TV hoping to catch some mid-day newscast. Channel 44 obliged. I was the lead story complete with picture. I smiled when I heard myself referred to as 'the mild mannered criminal justice professor'. That was countered by information from my days as a cop painting me as a hot head – if decorated multiple times. There were already clips from interviews with students and former lady friends. I was pleased when all those turned out to be favorable and supportive. None believed I was capable of the crime or crimes as the case might be.

The one disconcerting new entry was a student who said he saw me leaving the parking lot in my car at 6:05 the night of the murder. I needed to get my Lavender guys on that and find out what he really saw. Have them determine if it was a legitimate misidentification or if there could be some ulterior motive. The student was not identified.

My original phone, which had been following my 'Westward Ho!' admonition, had already been located by the state police. The driver figured it had been placed on his rig at the first stop he made some hundred miles west of the city since he was sure I hadn't been present anywhere around his truck at the produce dock. That was certainly a good thing. It expanded the range of the BOLO considerably. A one hundred mile plus long search lane was certainly better for me than a mere twenty-five block area in the city.

It grated at me every time they inserted the phrase, 'the only suspect in'. My Lavender guys needed to get that letter delivered ASAP. It would disperse the focus and hopefully dilute the all-out intensity of the local search for me.

I considered that I might actually be safer in the custody of the police than out here where the two families had potential access to me. Actually, of course, they would have even more direct access to me inside the jail, so I'd stay put for

the time being.

I turned off the TV and settled onto the couch with a yellow pad. I needed to make lists.

Find Rico's suit coat.

Inquire at the recycling place

Find flat tire lady

Have her ID me

Have her verify I was cut and bled on tire and tire iron

Have the blood in her trunk verified as mine

Get some lead on DeLucia's whereabouts.

How????

Did the park cop see me?

Get to the student who IDed me in my car Wed night. Get his story.

Figure out why Nick had opened the trunk to expose the body.

I felt helpless. Except for that last one, I could do none of those things myself. I wasn't used to needing to be taken care of. I had always fought my own battles. Like I said, I had a poor history as a team player. It is why I had turned down the offer of department head at the college several years earlier.

The best scenario would be to prove my innocence beyond a shadow of a doubt. The next best thing would be to flood the case with pieces of reasonable doubt – just in case.

It was Kid's familiar knock – three shorts and two longs. I let him in.

"More bad news."

He took a carefully folded piece of paper from his rear pocket and handed it to me.

"A wanted picture being handed out by the cops. I'd say it looks a lot like you. Put a ball cap on both and it *is* you."

"Okay. It is me. What are you going to do?"

"Take care a you, of course. What you think I *been* doin', Henry?"

"I see. Yes. I'm not sure why, however."

"Word is nobody who knows you thinks you done it. From what I've saw of you I'd agree with them. Anyway, Trager Town's a better place now that Emilio's dead and gone. You're like a hero to lots a us. How you gonna prove the cops is wrong about you?"

"I have a team of my students working on that. It is not for you to get into. You testified to the fact that there are some really bad guys out there looking for me and I don't want you to get hurt."

"I been walkin' beside those bad guys all my life. If anybody ain't gonna be suspected it's me. I heard you used to be a cop. I figure that's how you come by those slug scars."

"That's right. That change things between us?"

"Why would it? I know cops. Talk to 'em every day. A Detective, I hear."

“You hear right. It was a long time ago.”

“You see the news, yet?”

“Yes. At noon.”

“So did everybody else. You gotta stay inside. Most a the young guys in here would like nothin’ better than ta be the one who turns you over the Rico’s. Money. Rep. Lots riding it on it for the second rate wannabes.”

“I appreciate your help. I hope you know that.”

“It’s cool. You just tell me what to do and it’ll be done.”

It almost sounded like he was letting me be in charge. Wow!

“You know the recycling center some way north of here?”

“Yeah. Shorties. What about it?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I ain’t dumb. Spit it out.”

I felt bad at his interpretation of my phrase, which had really just been intended to buy me some thinking time.

“There is a missing suit coat – Emilio’s I believe. I have reason to believe one of the guys who collects cans from the park trash might have found it and might be wearing it or trying to sell it.”

“And you want me to ask around and find out if any of Shortie’s regulars has showed up with it.”

“Yes. That. But subtly – that means without letting on what you’re really doing.”

“Ask anybody. They’ll tell you I’m great at that. Nobody hardly ever has a clue about what I’m up to. What if I find out?”

“Don’t follow up on it yourself. Just find out where that person can be found and come and tell me, immediately.”

“Sounds really important.”

“It is.”

“Emilio has all his suits special made, you know. Shouldn’t be hard to tell if a coat belongs to him.”

“Oh?”

“Pinkerton.”

It was delivered as if that was the full and essential answer.

“I don’t understand.”

“Pinkerton is the tailor the Ricos been usin’ for years. If it’s his it’ll have that label in it.”

“Good information. Just don’t try to get that coat yourself. I need to have the police find it on the man so they can get his story about how he came to possess it.”

“Gottcha. That’s good detective work. Wouldn’t a thought that out, myself.”

I expected the sky to fall. Kid had just rendered a genuine compliment and in the process admitted a personal weakness.

“I’ll get on it after we eat lunch.”

I wanted to ask him where he had eaten before I came along, but didn’t, of course. It was a make your own sandwich meal, with milk, topped off with ice cream. He was back out the door at a little before one. I hoped I hadn’t done the wrong thing – allowing him to be involved in the investigative part of my problem.

I distracted myself from that concern by re-shaving my head. Again, without so much as a scratch. I hadn’t begun the sun tanning phase. I would depend on Kid to get me safely to his spot in the rays up on the roof. I opened the new can of coffee, pausing to enjoy the aroma, and put some on to brew. I paced. I did pushups. I ate ice cream and drank coffee – I loved that combination. I was going out of my mind. I should let Lavender know what Kid was up to.

“Gardenia here. Just a heads up that one of my other operatives with special knowledge of the recycling center is nosing around there right now. You can concentrate on the other things. Ask Kyle/Nick’s other teachers if they have any information that might be helpful – friends, interests, anything, I suppose. Anything connected to Emilio or the Ricos. Just don’t get the DeLucia clan after you. Be discrete and ask the teachers to do the same.”

“Okay. We’re in Kirstin’s car heading for the mall right now. Her aunt got us in with the head of mall security and he says he may have security camera footage that supports your story.”

“Great. I may be able to get better intelligence on any bad blood between Emilio and Nick from where I am – don’t even contemplate where that might be. You guys pursue other things.”

“Okay. We’ll call when we know what we have at the mall. Lavender Lad and Lady over and out.”

That’s what we need. Names appropriate to put up on the marquee once this gets made into a movie. What an unnerving thought!

Nearly the first thing Kid had done after we entered the apartment for the first time was to close the mini-blinds across the front window. They had stayed that way – cracked a bit to let the breeze flow through from the back hall. From time to time I would raise a slat at one end and peer out, mostly down to the alley floor to check on foot traffic. Seldom any.

I was doing that again. I wasn’t sure how I would know what should and shouldn’t be down there. *That*, however, I was sure *should* be there. It was Kid emerging from Gram’s door. He headed my way. I looked at my watch. It was going on three. *I* was going on stir crazy. I lost sight of him as he crossed to my side of the alley. Presently, he appeared bobbing up the steps. I removed the wooden bar, but waited for his knock

It came. He entered.

“I got news,” he said, heading directly for the kitchen and the refrigerator – fridge. He removed a soda offering me one before he closed the door. I waved it off.

“So, whatcha got?” I said sounding more and more like Kid.

We moved into the living room where we sat on the couch. He sat cross-

legged at one end, facing me.

“Crazy Karl has Emilio’s coat. He hasn’t offered it for sale. Can’t understand him wantin’ to wear it in this heat, but maybe that’s why they call him Crazy Karl. He’s homeless. Lives around the freeway underpass six blocks west. He’s well known. Cops won’t have no trouble findin’ him.”

“I need to let my associates – my *other* associates – know that.”

He nodded and put on an all-out guzzle. He was clearly thirsty. I must introduce the lad to water. I placed the call.

“G. here. Just listen. Coat in possession of homeless man known as Crazy Karl. Stays under or near the freeway underpass at . . .”

I needed more information. I turned to kid.

“What can I use as a location?”

“Forty first.”

“At forty first. Get word to ‘you-know-who’. How did that meeting go?”

“He returned the compliment – about being the best cop he’d ever worked with. Said you constantly drove him nuts and he often contemplated how to go about putting *you* out of *his* misery – a funny line we thought – but he is eager to help. Believe it or not he had already made some inquires over at the 27th. He cautioned us, like you keep doing, to stay out of the Families ways.”

“That sounds good. Anything else I should know?”

“We got you on tape fixing the lady’s flat, but there is no clear shot of your face or the plate on your car. Can ID it for make and model, though. Same for lady’s car and a couple of good full-face views of her. Security is making stills and will circulate to store owners to try and get an ID. Did you see anything in her car that might provide a lead as to where she shopped?”

“None. I’ve given you all I have. My powers of observation have not been kept honed this past decade. Good work though. Keep me posted. That bumper sticker looked relatively new – still brilliant blue and shiny. One more thing perhaps; it was on the bumper perfectly true making me wonder if some younger person might have applied it. Even at my age I doubt if I’d have done such a perfect horizontal alignment job.”

“See. That cop is still alive somewhere inside you, Doc. Anything else?”

“There may be a shadow in my life, but the moon is not out here currently so can’t delineate further.”

“You think you’re being followed, but someone is with you and you can’t go into detail. We’ll just wait to hear on that. Purple Professor Protectors out.”

I chuckled. Kid didn’t ask. He did have something else and it was eerie – and as if on cue. Surely he hadn’t decoded my clever message.

“There’s a fat guy that’s been hangin’. Not a local. I’m thinkin’ he may be watchin’ you.”

“On foot or in a vehicle?”

“On foot. Wears gosh awful shirts – small tents is more like it. Short and must weigh three hundred. Sweats like a pig. Stinks like he ain’t showered in days. I s’pose if he’s on stake out that might be how it gets.”

“You got close enough to smell him?”

“Had to in order to lift his wallet to find out who he is.”

“You did what?”

“Cool it. Worked out great. I copied down the info then chased him down and returned it – like he’d dropped it. He gave me a twenty for bein’ such a honest kid. Some people! You guys from the outside is just way to trustin’.”

He handed me a piece of paper torn from a brown sack.

“Julio Constonza, a private detective. Age 44.”

“Can’t figure why a PI would be watchin’ you. The Ricos and DeLucias don’t use ‘em and I’m sure the cops don’t. Don’t make sense.”

“I agree. What makes you think he’s watching me?”

“He hangs close to the alley. Only just you and Sam been new to this alley in months. Sam don’t need no watchin’ no more so I figure it’s gotta be you.”

“I see. I suppose that makes sense. I came across a large man the other night who clearly didn’t want me seeing him at that last internet place I was. He was wearing what could be described as a flower adorned tent I suppose.”

Kid nodded, repositioned himself, and spoke.

“So there is three words: honed, delineate, adorned.”

I had to smile. We would work on subject/verb agreement another time. I was impressed he had remembered them. It reflected his determination and confirmed my original take about his intelligence.

“Honed means sharpened. Delineate means to describe or explain in detail. Adorned means decorated with.”

He took a few moments to think it all over – practice them, perhaps. When he nodded, I returned to the fat man.

“Have you seen Julio today?”

“I got the wallet stuff about a hour ago. Across the street in front of the clinic right there across from the openin’ to the alley.”

“He just hang or does he look this way?”

“Don’t just *look* this way. Looks right up here at number nine. I made sure he was outta sight before I come up. Don’t want him connectin’ me and you.”

“That’s wise. He may have followed me from the café the other night. If he did, he’s good. I was watching for a tail. Since he has made no move to contact me I assume he is just watching. I do have to wonder who hired him. Clearly he hasn’t told either Family or the police or I would no longer be here. Hmmm?”

I had a suspicion, but wouldn’t act on it for the time being at least. I returned my attention to Kid.

“About that sunning spot on the roof. When do I get to try it out?”

He went to the window and peeked through the blinds.

“Now’s good, unless you don’t want Julio to know about it. He’s back watchin’.”

"I have a plan about him.

"I get to know it?"

"Yes. I am going to ignore him. It's obvious he knows where I am so it's too late to try and hide. Since he knows I'm here he knows you know me. Let's head for the roof."

"Hot up there. Get dehydrated fast. Need to take soda along."

"Or water. Let me show you what I rigged at the sink."

It was ingenious, I thought. I had folded a kitchen towel into fourths and affixed it with rubber bands to the open top of one of the new juice containers, leaving the lip – spout – whatever it might be called – unobstructed. I ran the water, slowly, through the towel into the container. It filtered out the rust. I emptied that container into the other juice container and had cool, clear, water waiting in my fridge.

Kid examined it and nodded his approval.

"I could sell them around here. You mind?"

"Not as long as you don't remove these from my kitchen."

I filled an empty, plastic soda bottle with cold water and capped it ready for the trip to the roof. Kid took another soda and closed the fridge door. I smiled.

Outside, it was up several more flights of the old metal stairs to the roof. Somebody, Kid it appeared, had set up a pretty nice area. A few large, potted, green, plants, two colorful, canvas, folding, recliner lawn chairs, sheets of corrugated metal roofing on eight foot legs, moved as needed for shade. It all sat looking north on a twelve by twelve carpet of green funeral grass.

"It's like a spa, I think," he said. "Never really seen a spa, but I think they are like this. I guess they have a pool. Don't have no pool. Probably could, but don't. Where you got water on a roof you got birds and where you got birds you got white bird poop. So, I ain't got no pool."

"I imagine you and your friends enjoy it up here."

I got that look! For the first time it was accompanied by a brief explanation.

"No friends up here. Trager Town kids don't respect things like this. They'd throw the plants over the side just to see if they could hit somebody on the street. It'd be stripped clean in ten minutes."

"I understand. I think it's really cool that you let me come up."

"You got class. Kids in here got no class. I'm investigatin' it."

"It?"

"*Class*. I told you that."

I nodded. He had things on his mind.

"You don't smoke."

It hadn't been a question. He wouldn't have asked such an invasive question; it was an observation allowing me to respond or not as I chose.

"You're right, I don't. Never did."

"I never seen you drink – beer and the like."

That was as close to a personal question as I believed he had ever come.

“I only drink occasionally – New Year’s Eve and such. Really don’t like it.”

“Then you shouldn’t be drinkin’. A bad habit. Seen lots a guys end up in the gutter. I’m never gonna take the first drink. Don’t wanna find out I’m a drunk and can’t stop.”

It was an important personal matter; that was clear. My suspicion was that it wasn’t so much guys with an s as it had been some guy, singular, in his life – an important guy. He didn’t pursue it so neither did I.

I was instructed in the proper method of getting a tan on the top of my head. Among other things it involved no sunscreen for the first fifteen minutes and then a dose of a heavy-duty brand for the next thirty. My arms and face were covered to give the head a chance to catch up.

I couldn’t believe he was only ten. I couldn’t believe a kid who was only ten needed to be like he was. It was so sad. He would have no childhood in the textbook sense. If he stayed in Trager Town he would eventually have to join a gang – there was no alternative, no option, for teens in that area of the city. Once in a gang, real life as most people knew it ceased to exist. One’s life became committed to furthering the brotherhood and wreaking havoc on all rivals. It was an existence of constant fear. I’d never spoken with a young gang member who expected to live beyond his twenties. Far too many of them were right.

“You really did a good job finding that suit coat. No cop I ever worked with could have done better.”

“And you don’t even want nothing,” he said

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

“Seldom anybody says that kind a stuff unless they want something from you – butterin’ you up it’s called.”

“That’s not how I operate.”

“I know. Felt good, I guess.”

“I’m glad. There’s lots more where that came from.”

“But only if it’s really deserved, right?”

“That’s right.”

After the requisite forty-five minutes in the sun we made our way back down to our – scratch that – *my* apartment.

At the door he hitched his head to make sure I saw Fat Julio. He didn’t follow me inside, pausing at the door.

“We eatin’ what we got or orderin’ in tonight?”

“Got a suggestion?”

“You like Chinese?”

“Yes. How much?”

He actually broke a smile.

“Chinese is cheap. Ten’ll cover it. No service charge.”

“About six, then?” I said/asked/suggested.

He nodded and left – with the ten spot. I guessed his days of not being associated with me in terms of Julio were over. I secured the door and made a call.

“Lavender, I got a name on the tail. A PI named Julio Constonza. Age 44. Uptown address. PI license number ends in 4327-JC. Five feet six or seven, three hundred pounds, wild shirts – odd for a tail I’d think. See if you can find out anything about him and even better who hired him.”

“Will do. I won’t even ask how you got all that info. Oh! A funny thing. Back on our rant site. Two bloggers asked if anybody knew where lavender and gardenia went. Apparently we made a big hit.”

“I hope an unmemorable hit. You are ignoring it, I assume.”

“Oh, yes. Not to worry, Doc.”

I hung up and stretched out on the couch. It had become a comfortable and useful thinking spot. I returned my thoughts to the ‘why’ surrounding the open trunk in my abandoned vehicle. Several possibilities came to mind although none felt right. Families had been known to put bodies on public display as a warning to those who would cross them. Nick didn’t seem that much of a family person. He was using an alias. Maybe for safety sake, but maybe to disassociate himself from the DeLucia clan. It could have been that the trunk had not been tightly closed and something about stopping or parking jarred it open on its own. I doubt if he would have been so careless about not making sure it was secure. If he actually knew it was my car – and I really doubt he did – then it could have been a means for implicating me in the murder. Surely he knew it wasn’t expensive enough to have been Emilio’s car. As I said, none of those ideas felt right.

Something else came to mind. It had been sitting there in some out of the way spot in my gray matter ever since my visit to the church. The more I replayed my trek from St. Agnes to the first internet café, the more I believed I had indeed been followed. It was just an occasional shadow, but it did seem to move with me. In my mind it was tall and thin - slim. That wouldn’t have described Julio even before the five burritos. It might be that there were two tails – one who clearly was not concerned about remaining out of sight, and if there were a second, *he* was indeed interested in staying out of sight.

I called Mike.

“I’m thinking there may be a second tail – *that* one very careful not to be seen. Taller and thinner, I’d say than the one I described to you. He may have picked me up at the church. It’s perhaps more of a hunch than a solid observation. Sounds bizarre as I hear myself talking about it. Maybe Julio has a silent partner. One out in the open and the other playing it behind the scenes. No idea why. See if you can come up with anything.”

“Yes, Sir. We will certainly look into that as well. L out.”

My! What was that? Yes, *Sir*? Followed by a complete sentence with no contractions. He must be ill, or . . .

Zzz CHAPTER FOUR

Where was Kid with supper? Things were moving much too slowly for me. The phone rang.

“Lavender, here.”

It was Mike, of course.

“Got some odds and ends. The tire iron was established as the murder weapon. It had one of Emilio’s hairs on it. The lethal blow had been to the back of his head. Not sure how a hair survived the thorough wiping that the iron seemed to have been given.”

I tried to make sense of it.

“Tire irons are often pretty beat up – having been used for lots of things they weren’t intended to be used for – like prying. I know mine was. They get rough surfaces. Part of a hair could certainly have lodged in such a groove.”

Mike continued.

“Police got Crazy Karl and the coat. Lots of dried blood on it. Apparently no attempt had been made to clean it. It is being analyzed. Probably will be Emilio’s and Nick’s, but none of yours. That should help. It is definitely Emilio’s coat – has the Pinkerton label and Pinkerton labels always include the name of the client, in this case Emilio Rico. Karl said he found it in the park, behind a tree, near 67th Street close to where your car was located. Evidently Nick just discarded it there. Looks like he might have taken off into the park. That probably would have put the two of you in there at the same time.

“That could be. Another way for him to go would have been southeast, back through campus. If he had an open gash and was bleeding he wouldn’t have risked such a public route. The Park is bordered by five lane boulevards on the south and west. He would have been coming from the north so chances are he wouldn’t head back that way toward what he knew would be a bevy of cops. Across 36th, through the abandoned faculty parking lot and beyond looks good. That’s a slightly less than middle class neighborhood with apartments and businesses. DeLucia territory bumps up against that to the north. I imagine that would be very friendly territory for him.”

“About Julio,” Mike said. “He has ties to the De Lucia family – married a DeLucia cousin or some such thing.”

“Good to know that,” I said and then offered a word of caution. “It doesn’t necessarily imply he is in their employ, however.”

“If you are now in either family’s territory, it probably *does* mean that. He’d be free to work right out in the open – even if you were say in a place like Trager Town.”

“I suppose.”

I tried not to give any support to the possibility – the guess. I didn’t want the two of them to risk getting involved with such ruthless groups.

“We talked to the cop who was on Park Patrol Wednesday night. He recalls seeing a man answering your description walking a dog at 9:07. He was

going to warn him about not having the animal on a leash, but he disappeared into the darkness while he was checking in at the rounds station.”

“They still use those? Cop inserts his key as he passes the devices to prove where he was at what times, right?”

“Right. That’s how he came up with 9:07. I guess he gets a card with a print out when he keys the gizmo.”

“I did encounter a stray dog running loose early in my walk. I suppose it could have looked like it was my dog. He stayed with me for several minutes before letting his nose lead him down some other path. That probably won’t be much help.”

“He did note it odd that a park walker would be wearing a suit coat while walking a dog. That coat thing may be a point toward reasonable doubt that it wasn’t you.”

“I believe I untwisted that phrase. You may be right and it’s looking more and more like I may be depending on reasonable doubt. Good work. I remembered one more thing about the tire I changed. Two things actually. It was a snow tire still on in the middle of summer. And, it had been punctured by a bolt – a large, smooth headed, hex bolt. I tried to remove it to see if the hole would close enough so she could have it repaired. It was set in place too well for me to get it out with no more time than I cared to spend working at it.”

“We found out that Nick was only taking night classes this summer – yours and two others – a heavy summer session load we think. He didn’t have a parking pass so either walked or parked off campus. We calculated that it is right at twenty blocks to where he lives. These are the short, old city blocks. About a thirty minute walk. The alley where the murder took place is only six blocks north of campus – less than a ten minute walk. Not sure what that means, but you always say if it’s there, collect it. Never know what might end up being the case-turner.”

“Do I always say that?”

Chuckling at the other end.

“What about the student who says he saw me leave the parking lot?”

“Turned out to go nowhere. He recognized your car, not you. Score one more for our side.”

I was looking out the window as I talked.

“My supper is arriving so I’ll let you go. Thanks again. You two may well end up being *my* case-turner.”

Kid went directly to the kitchen. His first act was to fill the tea kettle and put it on the burner.

“For tea. I got bags. Gotta have tea with Chinese.”

“Very thoughtful. I agree.”

“Got stuff,” he said turning back to the table.

“I see. Three sacks.”

“I mean stuff about our case.”

So it had become a case – and *our* case, no less. He proceeded to

spread the food out on the table. Enough to feed a family of five for ten bucks. I liked that.

“Get this. Emilio’s old girlfriend – Francie – threw him over for Nick.”

“When did that happen?”

“Two weeks ago. Word is that Emilio’s been fumin’ about it ever since – making noise like he was gonna do somethin’ about it and in here when a guy says he’s gonna, he better, or his rep is down the crapper. I figure since you didn’t kill Emilio it was probably Nick in a fight gone south – one that Emilio instigated.”

I noted the big word, but would get back to it later.

“Is that the thinking on the street?”

“No. On the street it’s still you who done it. There’s sweet and sour pork there like you said you liked.”

I didn’t remember stating that, but it was true. Perhaps I had encountered a young psychic. Since Kid portioned half of it onto his plate first I figured I was not the only one who had the sweet and sour pork preference.

“Nick was taking night classes,” I began. “I understand he often walked to and from the campus. You know anything about the route he took?”

“Of course I do. Used to be he’d head east on Ash – that runs along the north edge of the parkin’ lot for teachers – and then north on 30th. His family has a compound off a 30th, eight blocks east of Trager Town. Inside a big wall. Guards at gates.”

“You said, ‘used to’.”

“Since he started hookin’ up with Francie – you know hookin’ up?”

“I do.”

“Since then, he’s been comin’ right up 37th, then west on Adams. Her place is a couple a blocks over on Adams.”

“And the alley in which the murder took place is just south of Adams so it is a point Nick would have passed on his way to see her – when he was coming from campus.”

“I think that’s what I just said.”

“I just wanted to make sure I had it right.”

“You had it right. For a smart guy you spend a lot a time not bein’ sure a stuff.”

It was, again, just an observation, which, I was sure, intended no put down. It was actually a point well taken. Not much that came within his purview missed his astute dissection. He’d make a great cop.

“You know algebra?” he asked out of the blue – well, out of my blue, I guess though clearly not out of his.

“Some. Took it in school. Haven’t used it much so I’ve probably forgotten some.”

“Found a algebra book at school – last day – and I been working through it this summer. On chapter six. Maybe you could check my work and see how I’m

doin'."

"I'd be happy to look at it. It would be like a refresher course for me, I suppose. But aren't you young for algebra. What are you – going into fifth or sixth grade next year?"

"Sixth. Almost eleven. Small for my age. Everybody says so. My whole family is – was."

As much as I wanted to, I didn't pursue the change to past tense. Things were coming out. I figured he'd get around to that – if I had to stick around for much longer.

"I figure if I can do it I'm not too young for it. People been tellin' me I shouldn't try stuff all my life. I'll bring it by tomorrow. That be okay?"

Again, asking permission – something he had earlier, blatantly, disavowed ever doing.

"That will be fine. Have to see how the day goes. Maybe during head tanning time."

The kettle whistled. He poured. We dipped. He sugared. I didn't. We 'ahhed'. It felt like we were a couple of old men in a retirement home.

Later, with the leftovers in the fridge and the trash in the trash can, Kid was ready to go.

"Got stuff to do for Gram. You be okay?"

"I'll be fine; remember, I have Julio looking out for me, too."

"I'll get more on him later. I wouldn't let him in if he comes knockin'. I ought to have a cell for times like this. Hate to spend the money on minutes when I can run to any place I'd be callin' in seven minutes – I timed it. Maybe six now that I'm so close to bein' eleven. Let me write down Gram's number. She hates to answer phones so if you call, it better be a emergency. I asked her if I could give it to you."

I noted that his comment didn't include his Gram's answer about giving it to me. He removed the bar from the door and handed it to me, a clear directive to replace it. He left. I barred or re-barrred, or whatever. I went to the window and peeked through a slat watching him cross the alley and disappear into his Gram's doorway. Where did he call home? Where did he sleep? Where did he eat and clean up – he kept exceptionally clean for a boy his age, making me think there must be a woman, regularly, in his life. Gram, perhaps, but it was my impression that Kid was the one who did the taking care of in that relationship.

I turned in early, more out of boredom than a need for rest. As a result, the next morning I was up with the roosters, showered, and ready for another boring day well before the sounds of the morning traffic overpowered the soft, rhythmic, cooing of the pigeons and the gentle clatter of the homeless searching the dumpsters in the alley below.

I waited for Kid, thinking he'd put in an appearance by six – my usual breakfast hour. Six came and went. No Kid. I spent lots of time looking out the window. I even opened the door so I could get a wider view of the area, if, from inside the room. Seven came and went – eight. Still no kid. I had no plan for

such a thing. I had no intention of allowing the lad to become so important to me. After all, he was just one more street kid. He wasn't, of course.

Perhaps he was on the roof. I slipped into my shoes and a shirt and climbed my way to his spa. He was not there. It remained as we had left it although the soil holding the plants had been drenched. It made me wonder where he got the water. It was fleeting and irrelevant to the growing anxiety of the moment. I made my way back down the rusted, metal, fire escape toward my apartment not wanting him to find it empty and become concerned should he arrive.

As I neared number nine I noticed Gram standing at her door, looking my way. I waved – intended merely as a friendly gesture. She motioned for me to come to her. With my eyes, I searched the alley and what I could see of the street. Nothing seemed different from usual. Against my better judgment, but pushed on by my growing apprehension – only fed by Gram's obviously anxious presence – I hurried down the steps and crossed the alley. She turned and went inside, which I took as an invitation to follow.

I closed the door behind us. It was a cluttered – no, homey – room with a couch and loveseat and end tables and floor lamps with a thread bare Persian rug and desk and bookcase. She went to the desk and returned with an envelope. She handed it to me where I stood just inside the door. I assumed that gave me permission to open it and remove the single sheet inside. It was a hand scrawled note – printed in all caps.

“A TRADE. EVEN UP. THE KID FOR DR THOMAS. MIDNIGHT. YOUR DOOR. TONIGHT.”

I once had a philosophy professor who contended life was merely layer upon layer of conundrums – mysteries – with which one was forced to deal. It was in that dealing that life was given meaning and vitality and encouraged personal growth. I had just been assigned another layer – perhaps the biggest conundrum of my life. ‘I should *really* grow from this one,’ I thought to myself only partly in jest.

“Any ideas about who or why? Well, I guess the why is obvious.”

Gram shook her head and directed me to sit on the couch. She took a seat across from me on the loveseat. Her eyes were red – telltale signs that she had been crying for some time.

“When did the envelope arrive? How?”

“Taped to my door this mornin’. Found it when I looked out to see if I could see Tommy. He always checks in with me early. He never misses.”

“Tommy,” I said. It was an automatic reaction to the new piece of information.

“My late daughter's only child. She died in a drive by when he was five.”

I had so many questions, but held them feeling the need to allow Gram as much privacy about it as she needed. She needed less than I had suspected.

“Tommy's a smart boy. His dad was a college student. Gloria – my daughter – was smart too. Honor roll all through school. Stayed away from the gangs. Had a job from the time she was ten. Made a few bad decisions – letting

her boyfriend get her pregnant just one of them. The boy was from a well to do family and they set her up in a little apartment above the butcher shop. Ain't much, but he still pays the rent. It's where Tommy likes to stay. Not what I want, but he says it's the only place he feels close to his parents. He don't know his daddy or who he is, even. Got my last name. Men ain't been good in his life. My husband drank himself into a early grave."

She stood with great effort and crossed to sit beside me, taking a place close to the front of the couch. She took my hand between hers.

"What we gonna do?"

I felt another layer settle onto my shoulders – heavy, dark, tortuous. Suddenly my world consisted of little more than Tommy, Gram and me. Was that Henry-me or Dr. Thomas-me? An interesting mix of both it would seem.

"Let me make some inquiries," I said, standing. "I will get back with you soon to keep you apprised of the situation – let you know what's going on."

I let myself out and hurried up the steps to number 9, momentarily pleased that the sprint had not caused so much as a single gasp of heavy breathing.

I called the kids.

"A new development. The kid who has been my mentor here on the streets was somehow made by one of the families as my associate. He has been abducted. Will be traded for me at mid-night tonight. Has to be either Rico's or DeLucia's. You have any information that may shed some light on this?"

"Not really. We're betting it's the Rico's. Rumor has it that Nick DeLucia is safe and sound in hiding, expecting to be charged with Emilio's murder. Nobody seems sure why he thinks that. His girlfriend may know something more. You're not going to give yourself over to them are you? They'll kill you – after torturing you for a week or so."

"It is a dilemma. The boy is innocent in all this."

"And you aren't?"

"You understand what I'm saying. See what else you can dig up, but keep safe. I got all the layers I can handle right now."

"Layers, Doc?"

"I'll explain later."

I hung up, then dug my wrinkled, dirty clothes out of the box I was using as a hamper. I did my best to grungy-up. To cap or not to cap, that was the question? I decided to go bare-headed thinking hairless would make me more difficult to recognize. I also stashed my glasses in my pocket. I chose my hoodie, but would leave my head uncovered. I was betting on the bald thing and my fledgling beard to get me by.

I left a note on the couch and the door unlocked in case Kid – Tommy – showed up. Julio was on watch – a box of Daylight Donuts in tow. I made my way directly toward him. He turned away as I approached as if that would conceal 300 pounds of misplaced Hawaiian tourist. I didn't beat around the bush.

“Julio. Dr. Thomas, here. The kid’s missing. If you know anything, tell me. As a former Marine, my bare hands can see to it that you’re dead before you hit the pavement.”

“No, sir, doctor. I didn’t know. Suspects?”

“Ricos or DeLucias.”

“Ricos would get my vote.”

“I don’t know who has been employing you, Julio, but for the time being consider it me. Watch over Gram. She may be in danger. You know Gram?”

He nodded and pointed toward her door.

“Is there an alley entrance to the Kid’s apartment?”

“Tommy’s, you mean?”

I just stared at him conveying my disbelief that he hadn’t got that from context.

“Yes. Fire escape to second floor, center window. It’s how he always comes and goes so I imagine unless he’s in there it will be unlocked.”

I didn’t offer him my thanks. That was unlike me. And, ‘cool’, certainly didn’t apply. I went immediately to the alley and was soon at the window. It was open – about that Julio seemed to have good information. It was a studio set-up. Sofa bed, desk and recliner in a rear corner near the windows, kitchenette at the front with table and two chairs. There was a TV of huge proportions across from the couch and a well-stocked bookcase. I didn’t take time to peruse them for titles or topics. Posters adorned the walls – mostly appropriate to the interests of ten year old boys – bikes, snakes, cars. One foretold of burgeoning interests – Miss August frolicking at a beach. There was no, Kid!

The door to the bathroom had been broken – as if kicked in to gain access. It was a fresh break as witnessed by the bright splintered wood around the lock. The high, small window above the stool was open. I looked out to see where it led. It was a twelve-foot drop to the roof of the overhang in front of the meat market on the street below. It was possible that Kid had exited that way before somebody broke in the door in their quest to get him. It was also possible he had *not* made it. All that only clouded the issue, although the note – unless a ruse – clearly indicated he had been taken.

I left a note on the table urging him to contact his Gram immediately, then left the way I had entered. I reminded myself of the necessity to be careful and not let the emotions of the moment cause me to become careless. It would be easy to become consumed by the guilt of allowing the boy to get involved in what should have been all quite singularly, my problem.

My phone rang. I was in the alley below his place. I stepped into an alcove and answered.

“Got stuff,” Mike said. “Cops found the old woman from the mall. She confirmed the story, but couldn’t identify a picture of you. Samples of the blood in her trunk are being analyzed as we speak. Your cop friend suggested the head of the bolt in the tire be dusted for a print. He’s good. There it was, plain as day – a big beautiful index finger print belonging to you.

“The cop in the park says the man with the dog could have been you but he can’t ID a photograph either. He added something odd. He came upon us standing together later when we caught up to you. But, he said there were four of us. He recognized me so it had to be us at our meeting. The fourth, he said, as he began thinking about it, might have been hidden from us by a tree – as if that person could have been eavesdropping or something. We got no ideas about it. The cop did say he thought the man in the suit could have been the same one he had seen with the dog earlier.”

“I’m guessing the pictures both the cop and the old lady looked at had me in glasses. I’ve always been told that I look significantly different without them. On neither occasion was I wearing them. Try it again without the specs, will you?”

“Okay. Good idea. None of us considered that. And you’re right. With them you’re definitely a professor. Without them a regular guy – an ex-marine even.”

“By the way, I made direct contact with Julio and have him watching over the kid’s grandmother. I still can’t figure him and didn’t take time to ask. He has great taste in donuts, by the way.”

“What?”

“Never mind. A little absurdity to help me keep my sanity. Let me give you the boy’s grandmother’s phone number – a landline. Don’t call it unless absolutely necessary.”

I read the number off the scrap of paper from my pocket and hung up. As I moved south in the alley toward the street, three older teens approached and surrounded me.

“Looky here. If it ain’t the good doctor who done in Emilio. What da ya suppose his daddy Angelo will give us fur him?”

“He’ll make it worth our effort,” one of them said as he approached to take control of me.

It was such a mismatch it hardly seemed fair. A minute later I exited the alley, the boys laid out in various stages of semi-consciousness. While I was engaged with the would-be gangsters, I had caught a glimpse of the man I’d come to call Slim – the second tail. Although I couldn’t be certain, it seemed to me he had raised a handgun in our direction as if prepared to fire – over our heads, perhaps. I suppose when he realized I was handling things he left. It made me think he was more my friend than my foe. He certainly had a clear shot at me if that had been his intention. It reinforced an earlier explanation that had crossed my mind.

Julio was still on station – talking on his cell phone, which was quickly pocketed when he realized I was approaching him.

“It’s time for me to know who you’re working for, Julio.”

“Can’t say. Professional privilege, you understand.”

I understood it was a stall; that made little sense in light of our previous conversation about an early and eminent trip to meet his maker. It suddenly appeared that something was in the works for me – immediately in the works for

me. I was right.

A black van pulled up beside us. Two armed thugs were soon on the ground urging me in a most convincing fashion to enter the vehicle. Once inside, my mouth and eyes were sealed with tape. No one spoke. We moved out at what was clearly a leisurely pace. It had been headed toward DeLucia territory and continued straight without veering left or right. It stopped and started fourteen times – block intersections I assumed. That would put us in the center of DeLucia Land. Apparently my associates and Julio had been mistaken about the Rico's part in it all.

On the other hand, why abduct me in broad daylight on a busy street when arrangements had been made for the safer, clandestine midnight meeting? This way they kept the boy for future bargaining, perhaps. Something didn't seem right. I had been handled with care. The grips on my upper arms that ushered me into the van had not been excessive. There had been no angry or loud tones. As I recalled there may have even been a cursory please and thank you. Very odd. Surely this wasn't an undercover police operation – was it?

We stopped. A wave of heat came my way as if a window had been rolled down. Someone, the driver I assumed, asked, "Where?"

"Guest house", came the answer from a deep, raspy, male voice.

We moved on slowly. I could tell the van was following a circuitous path. We soon stopped. The engine was turned off. The side door opened and I was asked to exit. The assistance provided me was again, though not gentle, certainly without malice.

"Step up."

I did as suggested. We walked a dozen steps.

"Step up – three steps."

Again I followed the suggestion.

The rush of cool air against my body suggested that a door had been opened. I was moved inside. A familiar voice greeted me.

"Guys. Is that any way to treat the professor? Sorry about the tape job, Doc. Close your eyes tight so I don't pull your eyelids off when I remove it."

I heard the others leave.

The voice was that of Kyle Winston – or Nick DeLucia as designated on his birth certificate. I raised my hands palms up in the universal gesture meaning, 'what in the hell is going on'?

"Sorry about the method. For your own safety I couldn't risk your refusal of my hospitality. You are suddenly in great danger from the Rico's who are convinced you killed Emilio. We both know you didn't and since your involvement seems to be at least partly my doing I felt like I needed to protect you – for the time being at least. I suppose that by now you know I'm a DeLucia – by birth not by choice, hence the alias at school."

"What do you know about the boy – Tommy . . . Somebody?"

"I heard he was missing. Sure it's Rico, but don't have that verified."

"Thanks, by the way," I said holding out my hand for a shake."

It was eagerly accepted and brought a broad grin, his uncertainty about how I would react apparently relieved.

"It's a two sided thing, I must admit," he said.

I gave him a silent, puzzled look knowing he would explain.

"I killed Emilio."

"I know."

"You know?"

I related the scenario as I had put the pieces together.

"Exactly on the mark. I need to know how you think I should proceed. As you may imagine I get no realistic help on such things from my family."

"You know Mike and Kirstin from classes."

He nodded.

"Nice kids."

"They have become my eyes, ears, and legs in my situation. We communicate via prepaids."

I briefly showed him mine to make sure he understood.

"We're honing in on getting me off the hook. I think with just a little more evidence we can make the necessary argument for self-defense in your case. The evidence trail so far fits the actual happenings quite well. The time will come when you'll need to present yourself to the authorities. That going to be a problem?"

"I will keep that my problem. It is not for you to be concerned about."

"There is one thing I'm having trouble understanding about the sequence of events," I said.

"Why I took Emilio out of the alley and parked the car on the street with the open trunk?"

"Yes. Those are the questions that remain for me."

"After I knocked him out with the tire iron he was still alive. I figured that doing what I did – making him visible there on a busy street – might make it possible for him to get immediate medical help. It was never my intention to kill him, you know."

"I have been sure of that all along, Nick. You've cleared things up to my satisfaction."

"I knew the second I opened the trunk I was giving it the crime family look – make an example out of the guy who crossed our family. I couldn't see any alternative other than to just let him die. I couldn't do that; he was my cousin, you know. We were close as little kids – back before our fathers and uncles had their big disagreement and we split. At ten we'd have never been able to predict it would be a girl who would come between us like this. I'd never give up puberty, understand, but it does some terrible things to people."

"Speaking of puberty takes me back to the kid – Tommy."

"Tommy Kozinski. I have guys looking into it. The boy's safety is their first priority. We'll know the minute they know."

“Julio?” I asked.

Nick broke a smile.

“My uncle, not removed enough times, I can tell you that. When it became clear on TV that you were being blamed for what I did, I hired him to find you and keep an eye on you – protect you is how I actually put it. He’s really pretty good at his job. He discovered that another PI had been hired to follow and also protect you. His sources? I have no idea how he came upon that information. Anyway, Julio began following that PI, which led him to find you at some church and followed you to an internet café. From there he located where you were staying and that’s pretty much it.”

“The other PI?”

“Preston. Alex Preston, a high class investigator from the financial district. The best there is, I’m told.”

“So, I imagine my hypothesis about him was correct.”

“Hypothesis?”

“When I realized he had picked up my trail at the church, and that only three people in the universe knew I would show up there, and that one of them was disgustingly rich and for some reason overly caught up in my continued well-being, I fingered it had to have been Mike on the hiring end of things. His change in manner when I brought it up pretty well confirmed it in my mind. I’m not sure Kirstin even knows.”

“There is a saying, Doc. Good things happen to good people. Perhaps that helps substantiate it.”

“You’re kind. But right now we have the welfare of an innocent ten year old to handle.”

“You should also probably let Mike and Kirstin know you are safe, Doc.”

“Oh. Yes! Thank you. Right away.”

I placed the call. Nick stood to leave me to my privacy. I waved it off gesturing for him to remain.

“I’m safe. It was the elf to my rescue. Compound for safety. Anything on the boy?”

“Not a trace. Your cop friend is working it on the assumption he may have been taken into the 23rd for safe keeping. Nobody in the department is questioning his rationale. By the way. The speck-less pics got you IDed by both the cop and the old lady. Still no make on the mysterious fourth person at our gathering.”

“I believe I have that handled. Don’t waste further effort on it. Finding the boy is our only real priority now. Later.”

I turned to Nick.

“It appears to me that you knew about my involvement in the murder well before you could have heard about it on TV.”

“Is that so?”

He offered a faint, inquisitive, smile.

“You were in the park when the kids caught up to me and delivered the

news, right?"

"Okay. I knew you always walked the park after class so when I ditched the car I took off looking for you hoping you could help me. I was about to approach you when the others jogged up. I stayed behind the tree – out of sight, but not earshot. When I realized it was you the cops were looking for I backed off. I hated the idea of returning here where I knew family help would be forced upon me, but I couldn't see any alternative at the moment. I called and engaged Julio as I was making my way back here. By the way, he says you have a most convincing method of getting your way. It might be interesting for you to know that twenty years and a hundred pounds ago he was a Marine DI. It would have been an interesting encounter had you followed through on your threat."

"I guess I owe the man an apology."

"He wouldn't accept it. You did what you needed to do at the time. He admires you for that."

"At least I owe him a dozen donuts."

"Now THAT he would accept; I can guarantee it!"

CHAPTER FIVE

In the search for information about the whereabouts of Tommy all my sources came up dry – Mike and Kirstin, Detective Radcliff, and even the DeLucia clan and Julio. My most reliable source, the Kid, was unavailable for duty. Everyone suspected he was being held at the Rico compound.

I had promised Gram that I would keep her in the loop so I called. It rang and rang. There was no answer. Tommy said she hated to answer, but under the circumstances I figured she would have.

“Nick. Can you have Julio go check on Tommy’s grandmother? She isn’t answering her phone and being old and apparently sick, I am concerned.”

“I’m on it.”

He placed a call. Five minutes later his phone rang. I was amused to hear that his ring tone was the college fight song. He talked – well mostly listened and then hung up.

“The news is not good. Julio found her on the floor in the living room. The EMTs are on their way. He suspects a stroke from the drawn look of the left side of her face. He will keep us updated.”

“Make sure he leaves a note in her place about it for the boy in case he returns.”

“Will do.”

I wondered how many layers one man could be expected to carry, then immediately realized how selfish that thought had been – how selfish my life had been in many ways. It was Gram who was fighting for her life. It was Tommy who would be most directly affected by her incapacitation. And, of course, it was Tommy who was missing – terrified, alone, and helpless.

I was quite sure he was safe and probably even being well cared for, but none of that really changed things from his perspective. Knowing the boy, however, I understood that he would be concerned about my safety and about not having been able to check on Gram, about her situation. I hoped he didn’t try to escape and risk getting hurt. It was not something I would have bet real American dollars on, however.

It was going on noon. Twelve hours until ‘trade time’.

“I will go in your place tonight, of course,” Nick said.

“I don’t think so,” I replied.

“I can see that you are held here,” he said.

“But you won’t. *Let me stay, yes. Hold me against my will, no.*”

“Doesn’t sound like you really understand the DeLucias.”

“Oh, I understand the DeLucias. I also understand you. It is hard to fathom that you are a family member.”

Nick shrugged and spoke.

“Okay, then. You have a better plan?”

“I hope so,” I said. “I need to call the cops.”

“That’s an uncomfortable thought,” he said pulling at his collar.

“No biggie. I just need to get my Detective friend all the way into the loop on this.”

Nick nodded and again stood to give me privacy as I reached for my phone.

“This is largely about your future, Nick. Stay and listen. Make suggestions if you have them.”

He nodded but chose to pace rather than take a seat.

I related the entire alley scenario to Radcliff beginning with the stealing of my car and why Emilio probably did that in order to set up a revenge implication against me.

“What you describe also fits the sum of the evidence.” Radcliff said. “The problem in court for Nick will be to overcome a jury’s prejudice against crime families.”

“How about a bench trial, then?”

“In a murder case? Not the accepted approach. Let me get with the DA.”

“I’m thinking the DA has the power to refrain from filing charges in the first place,” I added.

Nick spoke.

“No. I want my name to be publicly cleared in the matter. It is my only ticket away from my family.”

“Nix that. Nick wants the full process. Now, as to the midnight exchange. I have an idea. You up to listening?”

He was and I laid out the details. Chances were that Tommy would not be present as implied in the note, but that once I was in their hands he *would* be released. So, it could not be a simple, ‘wait in hiding and capture the bad guys when they showed up’ sort of operation. Radcliff agreed to my plan – of course, he realized that I had developed things so I would go through with it whether he cooperated or not.

By one o’clock we got word from the hospital. Gram was in stable condition. It had been, as Julio suspected, a stroke. The initial prognosis was that she would need to live out her life in a nursing home since it was doubtful that at her age she would ever regain her ability to walk or to speak in more than short, phrases. The medicine Tommy kept reminding her to take was for her heart, also a deteriorating condition.

“Have Julio or somebody look into the grandmother’s finances. I think she owns the building in which she lives and the one where I am – was – staying.”

“Consider it done. My banker can take care of that for us. Don’t be concerned about her care. There will be funds for that, one way or another.”

How did that young man keep his high moral sense growing up in such amoral surroundings? Again, I imagined there had been a strong woman in his life.

My mind took momentary flight: ‘Testosterone: Without it there would be no human species. With it, the human species would surely destroy itself were it

not for the ameliorating factor of the gentler gender.' I really needed to find a long-term, gentler gender, companion. I began realizing how empty my life was.

By four we had her financial picture well in hand. Her husband had left her three buildings in Trager Town. Even with declining values they could bring well over a million dollars. She had a substantial savings account and had set up a trust fund for Tommy that had grown to a sizable level. I doubted if Tommy knew about any of that – well, from a financial standpoint at least. None of that, of course, would he value the way he valued her.

At nine, Nick provided a car, driver, and 'body guard' to take me to the police station where I met Detective Radcliff. I was amazed when he greeted me with a full-out bear hug. I was also amazed that I both accepted it graciously and returned it, honestly.

"We need to get you wired if you are still determined to go through with this," he said.

He handed me a capsule – looked like a gel cap of some kind.

"Cyanide in case they begin torturing me," I joked, really asking for more information.

"Newest thing in short range GPS devices. Swallow it. Emits signals for about 60 hours. There is also a miniaturized audio receiver and transmitter. Receiver goes up inside your nose – don't sneeze – and the receiver seats deep into one ear. All plastic. Undetectable using metal sweep devices."

My phone rang. It was Nick.

"News – rumor at least. Not sure if it's good or bad. It seems Tommy escaped from the Rico compound about an hour ago. Whereabouts unknown. May still be in there hiding somewhere. They have launched an all-out search."

I relayed the information to Radcliff.

"So, do we go through with the plan?" he asked.

"We still need to catch the Ricos in the act of taking me. Surely the DA can finagle some sort of kidnapping charge against them for that. With Tommy's testimony we should have a double whammy against them."

Radcliff's phone rang. He mostly listened.

"One of my undercover guys has found two teens who say they saw Tommy being abducted early this morning. They took a phone photo of the car. Got a clear shot of the license plate. The car is registered to Angelo Rico – Big Daddy Angelo Rico, no less. Looks like the case against them has become a lock."

My phone rang. It was Lavender – Mike.

"Kirstin and I are here with Francie, the girl who came between Nick and Emilio. She says Emilio came by her place the night of the murder and taunted her about his plan to hurt Nick. She was unable to get word to him."

"Stay there. We'll get a detective to you asap. Thanks for the protective tail, by the way and shame on you for coming to Trager Town. More later."

I relayed the information to Radcliff who put in a call to a detective working the Trager Town area.

“In the words of that wise old detective of novel fame, Raymond Masters, I think we have a *Bingo, Bill*,” he said. “The evidence removes you as a suspect, provides intent on the Rico kid’s part to accost DeLucia, which sets up a cut and dried self-defense plea, and it all supports the sequence of events as suggested by young DeLucia, himself.”

“Let’s not celebrate yet. We still have to find Tommy – safe and sound. He may try to return to my place. Get me back there, *now!*”

By eleven thirty I was again alone inside number 9 – well, I and Sam’s remains. I had never gotten around to properly disposing of him. I had the lights on and the blinds open – hopeful beacons into the dark of the night. Five minutes later, the familiar rap on the door brought immediate and fully unexpected tears to my eyes. I wiped at them and opened the door.

There he stood, a suitcase hanging from his left hand and what appeared to be his algebra book under his right arm. For the first time I saw him as a lost, helpless, little boy. He had bravely held back his own tears until that moment. He looked up and spoke, his chin quivering, tears careening down his cheeks.

“I ain’t got nobody, Henry.”

“Well, you know what? It just so happens that I ain’t got nobody either. I’ve been thinking we should team up – build a family together – then we’ll both have somebody forever.”

He dropped his suitcase. The book fell to the floor. I squatted down and opened my arms. For a first hug it was certainly the best I had ever experienced. Heck, for *any* hug, it was the best I had ever experienced!

Story Four

Deathbed Confession

by Tom Gnagey

“I know you did it, Cole.”

“That’s what you’ve been telling me every day for seven months, Mac.”

It was the daily opening volley between the two old friends as Mac would enter Cole’s bar after his shift at the 42nd precinct where he had been a detective for two dozen years. To be precise it was Cole (short for Colby) Williams and Turlee MacConahey – he preferred to be called Mac. Local wags referred to them as Mac and Cheese. After that regular, genuinely contentious, initial exchange, the conversation moved on to other things more typical and comfortable between devoted friends.

The two couples – Mac and his wife Lucy, and Cole and his wife Martha – had been close since their high school years, despite Mac and Martha’s obvious, longstanding, dislike for each other. They played cards on Friday nights, enjoyed a breakfast buffet on Sunday mornings, and occasionally took in a play or movie together. Cole and Mac talked daily at the bar. The women had coffee at one kitchen or the other most every morning. Well, all that up until it came to an abrupt halt seven months prior to the writing of this account.

At that point, Cole’s wife, Martha, disappeared without a trace. Just days before, Lucy reported that Martha had confided she was frightened for her life. She said that Cole had suddenly become easily irritated and the slightest problem between them infuriated him. She feared he would become physically violent with her. He was large and strong. She was small and frail.

Lucy had passed on the information to Mac. With Cole’s history of a bad temper when younger, coupled with Mac’s perception that a person like Martha had to be making Cole’s life a living Hell, Mac became concerned. She was gone, however, before he had been able to look into it.

Mac’s precinct investigated but came up empty handed. No clues. No witnesses. No weapon. No body. A suspicious appearing new flowerbed in the Cole’s back yard was excavated but nothing was found – other than, oddly and unexplainably, the soil had been turned to a depth of nearly six feet. Cole contended – all quite implausibly – that he had never seen the flowerbed before. It had just appeared overnight – the night Martha disappeared. Since it led nowhere the matter was dropped as was the investigation surrounding the third hand accusation against Cole by Mac via his wife, reportedly from Martha. Mac stated his suspicion that her ashes may have been mixed into the soil but at a ratio of one part ash to 1000 parts soil that also led to a dead-end.

Mac had always disliked Martha. She had been the know-it-all, tattletale, horn-rimmed wearing, vindictive, outspoken little girl all young boys despise. Martha had always made it clear that she disliked Mac, the handsome, hardheaded, never-give-her-a-second-look best friend of her second choice

boyfriend. Mac had never been able to figure what Cole saw in Martha let alone why he had married her. The two men had been closest friends since childhood. As an adult Mac had been a policeman first, a husband second, and a friend third. Lucy and Cole had learned to accept that. Each, privately thought it odd Mac persisted in accusing his friend in Martha's disappearance in the face of no viable evidence, but as Martha had observed early on, Mac was hardheaded. It had helped make him an excellent cop.

Cole seemed to have learned to live with that single source of strain between the two of them. Mac? Well, something was plainly still going on there. Perhaps he was overcompensating so his department would not think he was letting the friendship interfere with his objectivity. Perhaps he was, in a backhanded manner, commending Cole for having had the guts to do in the shrew that he knew had to be making his best friend's life miserable – although Cole had never openly indicated that. Mac looked at the record. Cole kept his life so full with the bar that he was only home to sleep. When he was there at other times he made sure friends were with them. Mac was certain Cole really hated his *life*, which translated, he believed, into really hating his *wife*. Even though she may have deserved her fate, Mac was a cop first.

Each afternoon as Mac would leave the bar he'd deliver his well-practiced parting shot.

"I'll get that confession on your death bed, you know. A good man always confesses on his death bed."

Cole would raise his eyebrows and wave him out the door, shaking his head. The regular patrons – who always paused for the exchange – would chuckle and get back to whatever fully unimportant things they had been doing or chatting about.

Cole had always contended that there had been an important piece of information offered to him by an elderly neighbor woman – Darcy Levine – who lived across the street. At the outset he reported that Darcy had come to him the day after the disappearance and disclosed that in the wee hours of that morning she had seen a man moving in and out from the back yard to the alley. She couldn't see behind the house from her bedroom window so didn't actually witness what the figure was doing there. He – it – carried white plastic sacks from the side alley into the back yard. After several hours he dragged two gunnysacks from the lawn to the alley. She continued to watch for another hour but saw no more movement. At three a.m. she went back to bed. If her observations had been accurate, the sacks had to have been removed from the alley at some point before dawn when Cole reported the disappearance.

Cole contended that Darcy had witnessed the building of the new flowerbed – the bags bringing in the plants, the gunnysacks removing tools, drop cloths, and so forth, even perhaps his wife's body. Mac had interviewed Darcy but nothing further came of it. He reported that with her cataracts she had such poor night vision she had been unable to see anything clearly enough to swear to its accuracy. The white sacks might have been shirttails. The gunnysacks, shadows. Several days later she had what the coroner termed an alcohol induced heart attack and died so that ended her role in the investigation.

Well, perhaps not. She had provided Cole with information he had not shared with the police. It was a clear and verifiable accusation. Darcy knew the villain. The question remained, had she accused Cole of the crime (perhaps resulting in her alcohol induced death) or somebody else?

At the bar, Mac and Cole mostly talked sports and politics. Occasionally they'd talk shop – Mac something about a case he was working and Cole, well, all Cole really knew about was mixing drinks. Mac had occasionally enlisted Cole's assistance on cases when he suspected poisoned or spiked drinks might have contributed in some way. Cole took on each one as a personal challenge. He did any required research and several times provided case-breaking information – if not proof, at least helpful theories or possibilities. When the bar had been broken into and robbed, Mac had come to Cole's assistance and soon had the culprits behind bars. Aside from that one, super touchy, element of their relationship they continued to be as close as when they had been skinny dipping ten year olds.

Cole had recently received bad news from his physician. It was his heart – a genetic condition inherited from his father who had gone to an early grave. It was unlikely he would live out the year. He kept it to himself. Although Cole had long been prepared for that news, and recent symptoms confirmed to him that his days were numbered, it weighed heavily on him and irritated him to the point of tremendous frustration. He found himself becoming short with those around him. The time had come for him to clear up the matter of his wife's disappearance. He was a good man and would not let the facts in the matter – as he knew them – go with him to his grave.

During the past several months, he had rehearsed it many times in his head. He was prepared to play it out to its necessary conclusion. As Mac had said, 'Good men always make the deathbed confession.'

On Friday afternoon when Mac stopped in for his beer, things began with the usual banter, smiles, and chuckles. Mac slid onto his usual stool at the end of the counter. Cole drew the usual draft. Mac was a sipper and began the long road toward emptying the glass. Cole, in an unusual move, drew a glass for himself and matched his old friend sip for sip. Did he need to loosen his lips in order to move forward with his plan? Did he need the support of 'liquid courage' as he had been known to call it? Or, was it for him, perhaps, merely a symbolic final drink together? Mac took note, but didn't comment. It was a hot, August, afternoon and the weekend was upon them. Cole seemed to have trouble with weekends since his wife – how to put it – left the scene. That could have explained it – just getting an early start on a lightly toasted weekend.

About three quarters of the way through the beer, Cole leaned on the bar and moved his head in close to Mac. Before he could begin speaking, Mac clutched at his chest and fell to the floor. Cole and several others were soon at his side. Another bartender called 9-1-1.

"Is it your heart?" Cole asked.

"Must be. . . Terrible pain. . . Sweating. . . Hard to breath. . . Can't focus my eyes. . . My strength is draining away. . . I'm dying, old friend. . . I'm sure of it. . . Something I must tell you. . . I have to go out with a clear conscious. . . I'm

the one who killed your wife. . . She's buried in a flower garden behind my house. . . I figured you'd just mess it up so I did it for you. . . I did it to free you. . . Unfortunately, I also had to kill the old lady – one of your famous drink-based heart stoppers – when she threatened to finger me. . . The flower bed at your place was just a distraction to occupy the investigators while any real leads grew cold.”

He lapsed into unconsciousness and most certainly looked to be only moments from death. Cole smiled, took a mini-recorder from his vest pocket and clicked it off. He pulled Mac into a sitting position against the bar, opened a small flask, and forced the liquid down his throat. Within minutes Mac was awake. The pain was gone. His senses were clear. He looked up into Cole's face, puzzled, as Cole spoke.

“You were wrong, Mac. I loved Martha with all my heart. You were the one who hated her. Remember that ‘good man deathbed thing’ you've always preached? You're a good man, Mac, and you just proved your point.”

Story Six
A Cozy Little Mystery
by Tom Gnagey

SECTION ONE
Old Friends?

Even though they had grown up in the same, small, New England town, the four of them really weren't friends. They hadn't seen each other since high school where they had been little more than an odd assortment of acquaintances that just happened to play on the same, boy's, tennis team. None would have attended the twentieth reunion of their State Championship had it not been that Coach had planned the event and seemed so excited at the prospect of seeing them all again. During forty years of coaching, they had produced his finest hour. Perhaps their sole common bond was their love for the old man – well, that and the delight three of them took in unmercifully teasing the fourth. But that will become evident.

The *Smoky Dale Inn* had begun as a cozy bed & breakfast a decade before any of them had been born. Down through the years it had grown, somewhat awkwardly, to accommodate several dozen patrons and provided a range of hotel services including dining and conference rooms, a pool, and other amenities associated with a comfortable though less than five star facility. It offered relaxation and privacy for individuals and couples, and played host to numerous intimate gatherings every month. Set in the high rolling hills of Vermont, it took its name from the thick, misty, smoke-like, fog that blanketed the valley from dusk until mid-morning 300 or so days a year.

Adam arrived first – just after noon on Friday. His room, like those of the others, was on the second floor. They opened onto a narrow, plank floor, mezzanine overlooking the two story great room with its rough hewn timbers, massive brown stone fireplace, and bulky furnishings arguably more fitting for the robust atmosphere of a Colorado, ski lodge than that of a subdued, northeastern, get-a-way. Adam – Adam Anderson – had done well, forming and growing a sizeable home security business in a small city to the south. It had become the most important thing in his life as evidenced by his divorce six years before.

Ben Barker became a fireman and diligently worked himself up to assistant chief, supervising a large district in a medium size city in New Hampshire. He married and his two boys play high school tennis themselves. Ben was a good father, husband and devoted family man.

Carl Clark, always sporting fewer scruples than the others, became an auctioneer at an upscale auction house in New York City. He never married, but had seldom been without feminine companionship. Earning a generous commission on each piece he sells, Carl had done very well for himself. He was

well known on the nightclub circuit and in posh social circles. He could look down his nose at the rest of humanity with the best of the upper class snobs.

Ben and Carl arrived early evening on Friday, coming upon each other at the front desk and recognizing each other after only a moment's hesitation.

"Could you be Ben Barker from Sycamore – the Ben Barker who formerly sported the coolest head of hair at Hawthorne High?"

"I could be. Luckily the hair fell away so I can fit more easily into my fireman's hat. You have to be Carl and I must say I'd have known you anywhere. Why haven't you aged?"

"Good drink. Good women. Good times. My three pronged secret for the good life."

"And here I thought I had all that myself with a wife and two great sons."

Ben smiled. Carl seemed unimpressed.

They managed an awkward, meaningless, embrace, more from social custom than from any inclination to suggest a genuine, on-going, fondness for each other.

Carl turned to the clerk.

"Have Adam Anderson, Gar Brown and Coach Mason Miller checked in yet?"

"Mr. Anderson is here – in room 204. Mr. Miller is scheduled to arrive this evening – 210. Mr. Brown will not be here until early in the morning – 208."

The men signed the register, obtained their keys, and skimmed through a shared brochure, which highlighted the various services and venues available at the inn.

"Let's meet in the bar in ten minutes," Carl said pointing to the floor plan. "I'll give Adam a ring and let him know. It will be great to catch up." [Translation: I can hardly wait to show up your pathetic lives by spotlighting my own enormous success and fabulous life style.]

They climbed the open, wooden, staircase to the second floor and each entered his room. Fifteen minutes later the three of them were gathered in a corner booth in the bar. Not unexpected by the others, Carl determined the direction of the conversation. After ten minutes of sharing the obligatory '*where do we live and what do we do*' discourse, Carl got down to what was really on his apparently still adolescent mind.

"I wonder what old Gar Brown is up to? Suppose he ever became that super sleuth he dreamed of being. I declare there wasn't a missing pencil at school that he didn't take on as a big, hairy, mystery."

"And he usually solved what he set out to investigate, you'll remember," Ben added as if he felt the need to defend the still absent member of the 'team'.

Gar – well, Garland, so named because of the lei placed around his neck moments after he was born during a taxi ride to the hospital in Hawaii where his parents had been vacationing – had been even more of an outsider than the others. He was a loner who, all quite unabashedly, *did* fancy himself a capable detective and simply could never resist looking into any mysterious going on in their little town. The other boys teased him about it and nicknamed him *Sherlock Homely* – the former referring to the Arthur Conan Doyle character, of course,

and the latter their way of minimizing his handsome face and striking physique that drew the girls in his direction. He believed the name Garland had been an unfortunate choice for a boy so early on had shortened it to the less melodic, but more rugged sounding, *Gar*, and was just thankful his last name had not been Fish, Field, or Badge.

"I believe I heard he was dentist in the DC area – Arlington, maybe," Adam said. "I imagine his biggest cases involve tracking down cavities, abscesses, and root canals."

It drew a round of half-hearted chuckles.

"I have a great prank we can play on him," Carl said.

"Aren't we a bit too old for pranks?" Ben asked.

"Never too old for *good* pranks," Carl came back.

He proceeded as if the others had shown great interest.

"I propose that we liven up this just-has-to-be-dreary-get-together by concocting a mystery for him to solve. You know he won't be able to ignore it. Then, at the end, we confront him with the actual circumstances we made up. Imagine how embarrassed he'll feel."

"I don't know," Ben said. "Sounds like you're still carrying a grudge because he beat you out as number one on the squad senior year."

"Rubbish. Think of it as pay back for the way he insisted on this particular weekend and this particular dreary spot for the reunion. Anyway, we all know that Gar just always takes things too seriously and we will be doing him a favor by bringing a little reality into his life. What do you say?"

"Well, I guess it can't hurt and it was always fun to watch how seriously he took every little thing. I'm in," Adam said.

"What the hell," Ben said. "What do you have in mind?"

Carl bent in close and spoke in low tones clearly relishing every one of his well-rehearsed syllables.

"We each borrow something from a guest and make it appear like there is a thief here at the Inn."

"Borrow?" Don't you mean steal?" Ben said, clearly becoming uncomfortable all over again."

"No. We'll see that each item is returned before we leave Monday morning. We won't take important things that anybody actually needs."

"How do we pick our marks – isn't that what such folks are called?" Adam asked.

"Let's pick the guests that seem most out of place here. That way nobody else will really get upset. They will just want to get their things back and be on their way. No desire to press charges, you see."

"I'm not sure that's how it will play out," Adam said suddenly appearing a bit uneasy, also.

"Take my word for it. I'm from the City. I know how such things work."

After several drinks, the plan not only sounded reasonable to them but it appeared to be their sacred duty.

"So, how do we find these out of place people?" Ben asked.

“Look around the bar. Each one needs to be a loner so the thefts seem random. Take that older man for example.”

He hitched his head rather than pointing. Looks English. Carries a cane that he clearly doesn't need. And that hard featured woman in the tailored suit. Out of place except in Slavonia, maybe. She wears that large, gaudy, purple broach. I see jewelry come across my auction block every day and I can tell you that is a piece of junk. Let's see. Who else. The walking anemic, there – pale, skinny, with the narrow mustache spread across his equally narrow upper lip. That bowler he carries – a hat right out of the early 20th century.”

“I thought that was a Derby,” Adam said.

“Bowler. Derby. All the same. He's wearing a lapel pin of the Australian flag. That says Bowler to me.”

“I'll bow to your expertise in all things worldly.”

Carl continued, clearly agreeing with the reasonableness of Adams observation.

“They each seem to be alone. They each seem to be out of place. I imagine they are each visiting from elsewhere in the world and are eager to get their business done and return home.”

“And,” Ben added, “They each seem uncomfortable – see how they look around, almost suspiciously. Fish out of water.”

“Old Gar would be proud of your powers of observation,” Carl said mustering a smile that almost bordered on sincerity.

“How do we divide them up?” Ben asked.

“Take your pick. Whoever you choose you'll need to get a room number. Then we will need to find ways of entering their rooms while they are separated from the items of our interest.”

“I'll take the Bowler,” Adam said.

“And I the cane,” came Ben's choice.

“Then the woman and her broach will be mine,” Carl said.

“I can get us into their rooms with no problem,” Adam said. “These ancient keys they are still using here are like no keys at all. I can breach locks like that in ten seconds. It's part of my routine to show home owners how unsafe their key protected places are and why they need one of my electronic security systems.”

“Things are falling into place nicely,” Carl said. “When they leave the bar we will each follow our mark – as they have been called – and find out which room they're in.”

“I suggest we enter their rooms between two and three in the morning,” Ben said. “As a fireman I know *that* to be the time folks are hardest to awaken.”

“Let's get on it, then,” Carl said assuming the role of leader. “Meet back here at eleven – bar's open 'til midnight. Adam, you will need to have the three doors unlocked by two.”

“I'd suggest as close to two o'clock as possible. Earlier they may still be coming and going,” Ben added.

Adam had one final piece of information.

“Each door has a peep hole and although we can't see what's going on inside from the outside we can determine from it whether or not the lights are off.”

“Good information,” Carl said. Anything else?”

Heads shook. The plan was set.

They each followed their mark as he left the bar. By eleven o'clock the rooms had been identified and the men had gathered again in the bar. Adam had code operated, mini-flashlights, for each – advertising gimmicks for his company. The code: IC4U.

Carl spoke first.

“Gar is to arrive early in the morning. I imagine by then the thefts will have been discovered and reported. Our job will be to make sure he gets wind of it.”

“Probably best we don't refer to his former inclination to solve mysteries,” Ben said. “Don't want to tip him off about our involvement.”

“Good point,” Carl said. “Oh, by the way, I met coach earlier as he was checking in. He was tired so I helped him get settled into his room. It's been arranged for us to all have breakfast together at nine in the dining room – north east corner. He is unbelievably excited about this get-together. We can at least make it a good time for him.”

Only Carl seemed to be unaware of how out of character such a compassionate admonition appeared coming from him.

The others nodded and each went his own way prepared to carry out his part of the plan to embarrass Gar.

* * *

Lacking the liquid motivation from the night before, none but Carl would have really been inclined to carry through with the prank. By the time they awoke to nausea and throbbing heads the following morning, it was too late. The deeds had been done.

At 7:30 a.m., Gar hit the narrow pass that opened into the valley floor which rose as a major incline toward the Inn. It was nestled into the hill at the northernmost end and he could just make it out through the fog, bathed as it was in the morning sun breaking over the hill to the east. He had started earlier than planned since the weather report suggested a late Fall snowstorm was moving in. He wanted to avoid driving through wintery conditions on the narrow road that wound its way upland to the high valley – *Smoky Dale*, as it was known locally. Fifteen minutes later he had parked, climbed the massive stone steps to the inn, and was approaching the front desk.

The intercom broke the early morning solitude of the lobby.

“Chief of Detectives, Gar Brown, please call your precinct immediately. Chief of Detectives, Gar Brown, please call your precinct immediately.”

Ben was making his way down the stairs. He heard the announcement at the same moment he spotted his old teammate at the desk. It was not good news. The plan had not anticipated that Gar had actually become a detective – and *Chief of Detectives* no less. He turned and retraced his steps up the stairs to Carl's door. He knocked. Carl greeted him with a puzzled smile.

“A bit early for breakfast,” he said.

“Not about breakfast. A message just came over the intercom for Gar Brown – *Chief of Detectives, Gar Brown*. And I saw him checking in. He didn't see me. This can't be good, you know.”

“Well, it’s too late to back off now. You get your item?”

“Yes.”

“You have it well hidden?”

“I think so. No maid or casual viewer will ever see it. You?”

“Ditto. We’ll just proceed as if all is well. Go tell Adam and make sure his item is appropriately secured. I’ll go down and meet Gar and get the scoop on his position and such.”

“I think we should go to the hotel manager and explain what we did and why, and get it all behind us,” Ben said clearly nervous as he viewed their situation through the clarity of his morning sobriety.

“Nonsense. Remember the ‘three heads are better’ saying. Well, we have three exceptional heads to Gar’s one. This turn of events just adds a bit of excitement and intrigue. It will be fine. Better even. It will keep us sharp. Just think how great it’ll be when we pull it off against a man of his position. That little embarrassment I was hoping for moves up the scale to complete humiliation. This just may be the best weekend of our lives.”

Ben was not convinced, but sensed the futility of trying to convince Carl to alter the plan. He moved on to Adam’s room as Carl eagerly made his way down the stairs toward Gar.

“Gar Brown as I live and breathe,” he said, hand out as he approached the desk.

“Carl Clark. Lookin’ good, man.”

“That’s what they all say. Can I help you with your bag?”

“Not so old and decrepit that I can’t still manage that. I suppose the others have arrived ahead of me.”

“All here and spent the night. Breakfast is the first official thing on the agenda – nine o’clock in the dining room.”

“That will give me time to shower and shave. Drove all night. How’s coach? I got to thinking and he must be nearing his 80s by now.”

“Coach is fine. I spoke briefly with him last evening. This is a really big deal for him so don’t let him know how much you hated the idea.”

“Hated? No, not at all. I’m looking forward to the time we will have together.”

The clerk handed Gar his key and a copy of the message that had just been announced for him. He held it at arm’s length and sighed.

“Some days I just can’t get away from the office. I’ll take care of that from my room.”

“I hear you became a real life detective, Gar.”

“Is that what you hear?”

Gar offered a broad smile and nothing more. Carl continued.

“You enjoy what you do, I assume – based on your high school passion.”

“Oh, yes. Like a life’s dream come true.”

Carl hurried to add:

“Let’s save the glorious details for breakfast so you’ll be spared unnecessary repetition.” [Translation: I could care less about your life and certainly don’t want to endure hearing about it more than the obligatory once.]

Gar understood!]

“Sounds great,” Gar agreed. “At nine then.”

“North east corner of the dining room, I’m told. Probably a plastic racket or trophy made in China as the center piece.”

“I just imagine with a little luck I’ll be able to track it down,” a mild, though clear put-down aimed at his old rival.

Carl didn’t respond openly. He headed toward the bar. Gar climbed the stairs, having already confirmed that some folks don’t change – in the fundamentals, at least. He was eager to see coach and hoped Carl could muster enough decency to refrain from ruining the weekend for the old gentleman.

It was 8:30 by the time he was showered, shaved, and into comfortable duds more appropriate for the Inn than the black suit in which he had arrived. He went down stairs to get the lay of the land – a habit that followed him from his grade school sleuthing days. In the lobby, he was approached by a young man modestly uniformed in brown and gold.

“Sir. I’m Jack – a bell boy, here. I am to inform all our guests that a major winter storm is moving in and there is a good chance we will be snowed in until the first of the week. It appears there is a two hour window in which to get back through the pass to the highway if you choose to leave. You won’t be held to your reservation.”

“Thanks, Jack. I think I’m here for the duration. What better place to be marooned than in an Inn where young folks like you eagerly attend to my every need!”

“If you say so, Sir.”

Gar placed a five in his palm. It lit up the lad’s face and prompted a question.

“Thank you, Sir. And your name would be . . .”

“Gar. 208. And yes, I tip well for exceptional service.”

“I will certainly remember that, Sir.”

“I’m on vacation. I’d like to leave the Sir behind for the week end. If I can call you Jack then please call me Gar.”

“Yes Sirgar. It may take some doing but I’ll try. Here’s my card in case I can be of further service. Punch in 902 on any house phone. By the way did you hear about the robberies last night?”

“Robberies? No.”

“Three of our guests had stuff stolen from their rooms while they slept. Makes those of us with pass keys all look suspicious. I hope it gets cleared up in a hurry.”

“Yes. I can understand that. Do you have many thefts here?”

“No. I’ve been here almost two years and this is the first one – well, first three –I’ve known about.”

“Keep me informed as things transpire. I assume the local authorities have been called.”

“I suppose so. That’s not in my job description.”

He smiled. Gar returned it and nodded.

“Thanks for the heads up – storm *and* thefts. I’ll take precautions.”

Gar walked the common areas – the large, open, great room behind the lobby with the roaring fireplace fire, a half dozen sofas, and several small round tables with chairs and lamps; the sauna room just off the swimming pool; the exercise room with a few well selected machines, mats, and free weights; and the billiard room, complete with four massive tables laid in tightly drawn green felt. There were several small rooms off the lobby that appeared to double for banquets and conferences. The facility was all it had been advertised to be. As luck would have it, the place would fit their needs nicely.

While in the Great Room he paused to watch as two older women chatted while working half-heartedly at a communal jigsaw puzzle – a colorful windmill set in a sea of tulips. The frame had been completed except for one corner piece. That had been one of Carl's ploys back in junior high – pocketing one corner thereby allowing him to always find the last piece. For him that seemed to represent winning. Who but he would consider turning the assembling of a puzzle into a competition?

Gar raised his eyebrows.

'What else might the old scoundrel be up to?' he wondered to himself.

SECTION TWO

The Game's Afoot!

Coach arrived last. He circled the table pulling each of his boys to his feet in turn for a long, hands-on-shoulders, looking over and an extended, misty-eyed, embrace. Each of them accepted it with no reservation, patiently awaiting the old man's release.

Remembering his aversion to alcohol they had ordered soft drinks. The waiter arrived to take his order.

"Ice tea – Long Island ice tea, tall and cool and if these young saints haven't already seen to it, a generous supply of rum for their Cokes."

Silence.

"What's the matter?" he said, looking from face to face. "None of us is a teen ager in training anymore or a role model for the same. Act your age, gentlemen."

It provoked chuckles and shrugs all around.

"Now, you each have three minutes to get me up to speed on your life between graduation and now. No more. No less. We have more important things to discuss – the old days. That's why we're here."

Humorously, he plucked his stop watch from beneath his shirt; it was on what seemed to be the same black shoe lace from which it had always hung. The chuckles boiled over into full out laughter.

One by one each produced a thoughtfully truncated summary of his life. Carl chose to be last – the best position from which to show up the rest. Coach seemed unimpressed. It had clearly been a conscious non-response to Carl on his part. The others snickered to themselves.

"My turn," he said at last. "Some good teams. Some poor teams. Lost my

wife four years ago. My son made Major in the Army. Been through three bull dogs since our days together. All names Winston – easier to remember that way. School turned me out to pasture when I turned 67. Seems ages ago. Still coach Little League. Never had another group like you – a few as good in technique, but not as skilled at intimidating the hell out of their opponents. And *none* that got disqualified as a team for mooning an inept official.”

The good times began to drift back. From that point forward it was one story after another. They laughed ‘til tears rolled. The meal was probably good. None paid much attention. Steak and eggs is steak and eggs– or was it pancakes and sausage?

As happens, the time together eventually drew toward an obvious close. Gar brought them back to the present.

“Did you hear there were robberies at the inn last night? Were any of you affected?”

The men shook their heads without response. Coach had not heard and seemed interested in the details.

“It seems at least three of the guests had things stolen out of their rooms while they slept. Nothing of apparent great value. Quite strange taking a hat for example and leaving behind a wallet and expensive watch sitting on a dresser right next to it. Seems to have been some motive other than typical for a second story man.”

“Maybe it was an antique hat or had some special historical significance,” Carl suggested.

“If so, its owner refrained from mentioning it. Well, I’m glad at least that none of you had things taken. I’d suggest wallets and jewelry under your pillows tonight.”

Ben and Adam nodded. Coach shrugged. Carl cracked his knuckles, but had nothing to say.

“Swimming pool at one o’clock,” Coach announced. “I wouldn’t let you swim while you were playing tennis – would have built antagonistic muscles that would have ruined you for the game. Now, I’m going to treat you to the forbidden fruit. Swim suits are available in the locker room. We’ll catch a bite after that. No eating just before swimming, remember.”

Each one refrained from informing him that contention had long ago been disproved. The old man’s eyes twinkled. He also knew that and accepted their consideration. Perhaps it had been a test. If so they may have passed, unless it was a test of unadulterated, straight forwarded, honesty.

It was eleven. That gave them time to go their separate ways for a while if they chose to. Ben and Adam arranged to do combat over a billiard table. Carl attended to his cell phone messages. Gar had questions to ask and hypotheses to check out.

They played in the pool like ten year olds – laughing, dunking each other, racing, and engaged in the requisite cannonball contest. They agreed that coach won even though his frail old body barely kicked up a ripple.

It was arranged to meet at the snack bar at two and save their appetites for dinner. Gar and coach sat for a time in the great room to chat. The others made

excuses and took their leaves. They headed back to the bar, each clearly agitated as they slid into a booth.

“My ‘item’ has been found and removed from where I hid it,” Adam related, hushed in tone.

“Mine, too,” Ben said.

“The one I took is also missing,” Carl said. “I assume if the staff or authorities located them they would have confronted us over it.”

“I overheard two bell boys saying the authorities had been snowed out,” Adam said. “They won’t be here until late Sunday night if then. The snow storm is worse than predicted. We may not be permitted to leave until Tuesday or Wednesday.”

“I must admit I don’t understand unless the marks somehow discovered who took their things,” Carl said. “The positive side is that the stolen goods will not be found in our hands. We can still concoct a story to set Gar on his ear. Has he indicated any interest in the case to either of you?”

They shook their heads.

“Then I need to get him involved. Give me a few minutes while I make that suggestion to the owner. Why have a big city detective around and not use him?”

The others nodded. It meant that they understood – not that they agreed or approved.

Carl made the contact. The owner chatted with Gar and appeared relieved afterwards.

The two o’clock snack time seemed strained – all the more so, since the three conspirators worked so hard to make things seem relaxed and normal. It caught Gar’s attention and he was privately amused. Coach seemed oblivious, his full attention absorbed by his excitement about the reunion.

Dinner was to be at seven. Coach was determined to have some private time with each of his ‘boys’. He commandeered Ben for a game of double solitaire in the Great room. Adam and Carl attended to their business endeavors via cell phones.

Upon returning to their rooms to dress for dinner, Carl, Adam, and Ben each found the item they had taken laying on the pillow on their bed. A flurry of calls was exchanged confirming the situation.

A plan emerged to re-hide the objects for the moment and then, that night, to move them to some other locality, which Carl was to find. Although they remained baffled by the turn of events, they were able to relax enough to enjoy dinner together. It was amazing how the time came to overflow with stories, never presenting a repeat. It was also interesting to four of them how Carl’s anecdotes usually involved the degrading of Gar in some way. Who was it that said, ‘Revenge is a relentless, thoughtless, always destructive task master’? [Oh. I guess that was this writer in another piece.]

At one point Jack arrived with a whispered message for Gar, who excused himself – returning after just a few minutes.

SECTION THREE Who'd a thought?

They enjoyed a short nightcap together in the bar and returned to their rooms for the night. The conspirators each checked on the safety of the item he had pilfered. Each found it was again missing. In its place was a handwritten note:

Shame on you. Is this anyway for old tennis-playing colleagues to act?

It was signed, *Sherlock Homely*.

Again, the cell phones lit up. Carl was furious. Ben and Adam were relieved and enjoyed the humor, more than willing to take some of the heat in order for Carl to get his come-uppin's.

They all showed up at breakfast. Initially, nothing was mentioned about the incident. Mostly Coach just talked in a more serious vein than before. He had experiences to relate that had been helpful to him and bits and pieces of philosophy he clearly felt the need to share. He got around to talking about the callings – as he put it – that each of them had undertaken in life. At that point, Gar needed to clarify something.

He handed a business card to each of them.

***Garland Brown, DDS
Pediatric Oral Surgeon
Member, Physicians Without Walls***

Carl stammered a bit, clearly puzzled.

"But you're a detective. We heard you called over the intercom."

"Sorry about that. I placed the call and left the message myself a few minutes before entering the front door. Just a little prank I figured you'd all appreciate. I had no idea you would take it upon yourselves to provide fodder for something even better."

"But the notes you left for us?"

"Oh, I still have that passion for sleuthing. I engaged the Bellboy's interruption to allow me time to set the notes in place during the dinner last night. Never could pass up a good mystery, you know. Think about it. An Inn that had never had a theft. Three old associates arrive who for years made me the butt of their pranks – often manufacturing false leads into a non-mystery. Carl, it was actually that missing corner piece of the jig saw puzzle in the Great Room that first lit the old flame of suspicion."

Adam and Ben laughed and clapped. Carl excused himself in a rage. Coach didn't understand but let it pass, clearly more interested in Gar's card and hearing about how he traveled the globe to third world countries, providing free care for disfigured children.

Although Carl kept to himself, the others enjoyed the rest of their hours together. When the time came to leave, there were emotional good-byes and promises to keep in touch. They wouldn't, of course, but at the moment the intentions were sincere.

Gar, again in his suit, strapped himself into the driver's seat of his black SUV. He placed a call as he waited for the engine to warm up.

"This is the CIA. How may I direct your call?"

"This is special agent Garland Brown. Extension 2234, please."

Click. Click.

Gar punched in his code.

"Gar. How did things go?"

"Just as we suspected; the three foreign agents were here on schedule intending to pass on their third of the stolen password, which, when assembled, would have provided unlimited access to our Strategic Missile Defense System. The local contact is the night clerk – Lo Chung. I removed the code sections from the Englishman's hollow cane, the Aussies hat band, and the back of the Slavic agent's broach. I will deliver them in person at noon today. Who'd have thought that a high school reunion would be every bit as good a cover as globe-trotting as a surgeon?"

Story Seven

Final Assignment

By Tom Gnagey

It had been a contest.

It had been my livelihood.

I had been very good at the contest.

It had been a very good livelihood.

There were unmistakably evil people in the world whose openly demonstrated actions unequivocally defined them as such. It was the mission of my wealthy, unknown, benefactor to rid them from our midst.

There were two of us assassins. We each knew that much but didn't know each other. The rules were simple. We would each receive a package at the outset of a new assignment – about one every two months. It would contain a photograph of someone and a single clue to the person's identity – a work place, a hangout, a street often traveled. It was never anything more specific than that. There was also a camera, which automatically time and date stamped each photo as it was taken. The assignment was always the same: Kill the target pictured. The contest was always the same: the one of us who completed the mission won and would receive a \$100,000 wire transfer into our offshore account. (The loser received a copy of the picture the winner had taken of the dead target, which signaled the end of that assignment and thus their loss.) I didn't win every contest but did command a twenty-four to twelve lead. Thirty-six of the city's vilest people were dead, buried and – it was assumed by a grateful public – committed to hell. It had all begun six years ago that morning.

A new package arrived in the mail. In *appearance* it was identical to all that had come before – a box, five inches by six inches by three inches tall wrapped in brown paper, tied with brown twine, with stamps applied by hand. Long ago, I had established that the return address was nonexistent. In *contents*, however, it was different. This time the single clue, always written on the back of the photo, began with the words, "Final Assignment – see later." Rather than one, there were four photographs. The top one was of a distinguished looking old man in a judicial robe. Printed on its back – below the words revealed above – was the word 'Director', the term always used to sign our assignments. Odd. The second was of a man about my age – average in looks, fit, well dressed. On the back it was labeled 'Agent ONE'. Very odd. The third photo was not of a person but of an office building. It was labeled, 'Agent THREE'. A new player. A faceless player. I didn't like any of that. I dealt down to the final picture that lay face down in the mix – Agent TWO was the label that looked up at me from its white backside. I turned it over. The blood drained from my head and I became faint. I sat. It was *my* picture. At the bottom of the stack there was a slip of paper cut the size of the photographs. It contained a hand printed message – clearly that of an aged person and clearly the promised, 'see

later', addendum. I mumbled through it reading the words but not really stating them.

It read:

"Upon reflection I have come to realize that even the best of intentions can be evil at their roots. By doing what we have been doing we have defined ourselves as no better than the evil-doers we have removed. In this final assignment there are four possible targets. My initial intention was to have the three of us who have been so long involved as comrades in this mission be removed for our own evil deeds. But, you have both been loyal and efficient and have engaged each contest well. I have, therefore, arranged this final game. Which agent will be left? I have loaded the contest in favor of the new agent, believing the other three of us must die for what we have done. However, I have always prided myself on being fair, therefore, I have included a clue as to Agent THREE's identity. In all fairness I have given him or her a sizeable advantage since I do want the three of us to go out together. I assume there will be no problem with the perpetration of my own death. Prompt and painless, please. Submit the claim photographs to the address below for payment as before. Make whatever arrangements you may need to make regarding your estates."

I studied the face of agent ONE. I may have seen it, though could not immediately place it. The building was also familiar. Downtown perhaps. It should be an easy find. How to locate number THREE within it would pose the larger problem. I assume Number ONE will go after THREE first, as would I. Self-protection would become our first priority. If THREE had been given an advantage it might be best if ONE and I teamed up. What a strange turn of events. We could split the kills for payment – one of us turn in THREE and the other the Director. But then what? Go our separate ways and resume the hunt or go our separate ways and end the contest. How could we trust each other in that? We couldn't. The contest would continue. The full \$300,000 would be a nice cushion for my retirement – it being the final contest. I wondered what ONE was thinking at that moment.

Being a target, myself, was unnerving but I supposed that went without saying. The marks I've taken out had an advantage in that way; they didn't know, so had no anxiety about, the fate that was about to be theirs.

I heard the morning paper thump against the door – it was early. I found myself immediately more cautious than before and used care and cunning in retrieving it. Back inside, I sat at the kitchen table with coffee as I scanned the headlines. I was met with the totally unexpected – one hundred thousand dollars' worth of the unexpended. The headline above the picture told the story – more to me than to most who read it I imagined.

"Judge Blackburn Found Dead By His Own Hand."

It was clearly a picture of the Director – the same one I had just received so there could be no question. The old bird had killed himself. I guessed because he was feeling guilty about forcing me or Number ONE to do him in.

That would be consistent with the new found guilt he revealed in his note. That changed the playing field as well as the stakes. I wondered, of course, if ONE had been responsible – staging it to appear to be a suicide. I'd done such things many times myself. I would have to wait and see if I received a copy of a proof-of-kill photograph. It would arrive tomorrow if it were to arrive.

Which person should I identify first – Number ONE or Number THREE? I wanted both of them. I knew ONE's skill and that if he decided to find THREE he would find THREE. I'd locate ONE first and see if we could make a deal. The Director clearly believed that THREE had the skill to take us both out. It might take both of us to get him. I believed that I knew ONE well enough to understand *that* would also be his take on it. Where had I seen that face? A bar? A café? On the sidewalk? Mass transit? That was it. The subway. He was often climbing the up-stairs as I was getting coffee from Sally at her cart up at street level. The gray temples and streak through his hair, the dark rimmed glasses, the dress shirt with the open collar under a sport coat. It was Number ONE.

If I figured him so quickly, it was a pretty sure bet he had figured or would soon figure me as well. I finished dressing and left my apartment through the rear door, something I never did. I turned west in the alley moving away from the subway entrance. I circled around the block behind my building – south, east, north, and then east along Maple to 6th Avenue. The entrance I sought was a block straight ahead. I usually had Sally refill my coffee cup at about seven forty. It was seven thirty-five. Despite the disruptions of the morning I was still on schedule.

ONE was a cagy, cool, dude; I'd give him that. There he was sipping coffee and making small talk with Sally. I reached under my coat and loosened my gun in its holster just in case. I approached the garish red and yellow cart at an easy stride. I offered my cup toward Sally. She poured. I handed over two, dollar bills. She knew to keep the change.

How does one begin a conversation with the man who is soon to kill you if he can? As it turned out, I didn't have to.

"Johnny Davis," he said casually as if greeting an old friend. It hadn't been a question.

"You have me at a disadvantage. I only know you as ONE."

"He smiled straight ahead avoiding eye contact."

"How about, Bill Smith?"

"Bill it is. We have an interesting situation."

"We do. See the morning paper?"

"I removed it from under my arm and exposed the lead story."

It had been my way of saying, 'yes' – proving it, perhaps.

He nodded and asked.

"Can we walk?"

"North?"

We turned and walked.

"Truce until THREE is dealt with?" he asked – suggested.

"I suppose our words of honor will suffice," I said.

It had been more of a feeler than a question. He nodded. I nodded in

return. The deal had been struck.

"No more ideas than I have, I assume," I said trying to move rapidly into the planning stage.

"Our being here together pretty well guarantees that, I suppose."

I nodded again, hoping his side vision picked it up. He nodded in return.

We came upon a harried mother with a baby in one arm and the hand of an uncooperative three year old lad in the other. She had dropped her purse. Bill bent down and retrieved it for her, extracting a lollypop from his pants pocket and offering it to the fully displeased little boy. He looked at the mother for permission. She nodded. Bill unwrapped the goody while the lad held the stick tightly in his clutches. The mother expressed her appreciation. Bill made no comment. We moved on. I liked the man. I hated the idea of having to kill a person I liked.

"So?" he said – more properly, asked.

"I have one idea," I offered. "Assuming THREE can identify us, what if we occupy opposite sides of the lobby or entry area at his building, each keeping watch for anybody who takes an interest in the other of us. We can in that way get a line on him and figure strategy from there. He's not likely to try anything upon first sight there in a busy lobby."

"I know the building; it has a large lobby with open stairs to a 360 degree mezzanine. One of us up and one of us down should get us started."

"Verifying the intentions of such a stalker may be difficult," I cautioned.

"I have a plan. One of us forces himself on him – let him know that we know what he's up to and offer to double team the third man with him. If he agrees we know we have our man."

"And if he doesn't?"

"We know nothing and one of us has shown our hand. It is the essential risk we have to take I think."

"I agree. When?"

"Nine thirty today?"

"Nine thirty today it is. We can watch for each other outside on the sidewalk, then enter separately."

"I'll take the upper," he said. "You work the lobby."

It had been carried out as if we had been partners for years. We knew each other's minds. It was a strange bond – a bond clearly defined just for the short run. I must do my best to keep my feelings toward him neutral. This was an in-the-moment, cooperative, endeavor of necessity and dared become nothing more.

9:30

I approached 1000 Claiborne Avenue. Bill was reading the brass plaque beside the revolving doors. We connected across the twenty yards and he entered. I followed without breaking my pace. It was as described an open area with meeting rooms, elevator doors, and hallway entrances, peeking out from beneath the narrow, overhanging, mezzanine. Bill climbed the stairs immediately to the right of the entrance and remained near the top. I moved across the floor and took a seat in a reception area opposite him. I unfolded my paper and

pretended to busy myself with it, able to keep watch on my colleague up above over the tops of my glasses. I figured it would be a day-long activity. Setting up chance meetings without schedules were always drawn out affairs. I settled in wondering how it was that I had been set up as the obvious target. Of course THREE could, himself, be there on the floor with me perusing the second level deck. I disliked situations that were, from the outset, so ill defined. We had set no lunch break. There was a restaurant there. When the time came I would telegraph my move and go for a bite. Bill would follow I was sure.

Noon came and went. The tuna salad was okay. The lemonade was excellent. I couldn't see what Bill ordered. He had taken a corner table to my middle of the room position. I stood and left money on the table to cover the check and tip. I turned to catch a glimpse of Bill. He twirled his index fingers in front of him. We were going to switch places. I headed up the stairs. Interestingly, I felt some relief at now being the watcher rather than the primary watchee, although truly we had no idea who was being which.

At shortly after two o'clock it dawned on me that the same woman had circled Bill on three successive occasions. She had stopped to use her powder – mirror – and was monitoring him over her shoulder. I took her picture with my lapel camera – top of the line, 40 X at that distance. I stretched; it was a time honored signal between such as the two of us. I fixed my gaze on her. He understood. I descended the stairs and made my way toward and past her. It involved my backing into to her. Later I would go through the wallet I had lifted from her purse. We left the building and met up again near Sally's.

"Abby Blackburn," I said beginning the search of the wallet. "The judge's relative, do you suppose?"

Bill shrugged taking out the driver's license.

"Different address, at least," I noted. "Age thirty nine. Might be a daughter or niece. Pure speculation. Unnecessary. She's spotted me so I suggest that you be the one who contacts her."

"Fine. I've worked that ploy before."

"Tomorrow morning," Bill suggested.

I nodded. He continued.

"If she's Number THREE, I'll take her in the elevator – stiletto through the back into the heart. Dead before she hits the floor."

Bill clearly knew his job. He hadn't needed to inform me of his method. It seemed a bit reckless in fact.

We entered the lobby at eight. Bill took the same seat as he'd occupied the previous afternoon. I waited a few yards away. She arrived at 8:15 – almost too perfect. She hesitated, looked around, fixed her hair, and then made her way in his direction. I approached her.

"I believe you dropped this yesterday," I said offering her the wallet. "Blackburn, I see. Related to Judge Blackburn – the Director?"

That got her attention. She may have been an effective killing machine but it appeared she wasn't well schooled in the art of deception. Surprise was written across her lovely face.

"What do you want?" she asked.

“We team up and take out Bill – number ONE – and split the hundred grand.”

“Then what; you and me?”

“Go our separate ways.”

“The contest continues, you mean?”

“Exactly. Just as it has for these six years. You’re good, I hear, but I’ve hit two dozen marks in that time, so don’t take anything for granted.”

Bill approached us. An odd move I thought. He reached into his inside coat pocket. Surely he wasn’t going to kill her right there.

Out came a badge. A strange tactic I thought but I’d go along. Perhaps it was his way to get her into the elevator. I turned to leave. I was met by a badge in Blackburn’s hand. It was Bill who spoke.

“John Allen Davis, you are under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder.”

Through the fog that soon overtook my mind I heard him reading me my rights.

“What’s going on?” I finally managed.

Bill’s answer was concise and complete.

“We have had Judge Blackburn under surveillance for months. His other assassin gave him up when we caught him in the act of murder. The newspaper you received this morning was one of a kind, printed for your eyes only. The Judge gave you to us. We couldn’t prove any murders at your hands so had to find a way to get you to incriminate yourself. Your confession – now on tape – to Officer Blackburn of your both your past deeds and your intent to kill me should be enough to silence your killing tools for the rest of your life.”

I had no real regrets about my past deeds. Oddly, however, I felt relieved.

Story Seven

WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY . . .

By Tom Gnagey

It was a new experience for me – squirming to get comfortable as I sat with my hands cuffed behind my back. Suddenly the shrieking red truck was upon us. I remember the siren and the thud and being thrown about in the back seat of the squad car. As we passed an alley a fire truck had sped out onto the street. It hit the front right door and spun us around. Flames spewed from beneath the hood. The rear left door sprang open. The officers in the front were unconscious, their heads bleeding.

I pressed the door out with my feet, ducked through the opening, and fled, awkwardly, into the alley across the street. The jolt from every step reignited my excruciating headache. I didn't stop until well into the shadows at the center of the block. I looked back. Additional cars had piled up from both directions. It was a scene of screaming confusion and flame. I hated that, but I had to be my major concern.

The cuffs were those made from thick, plastic, strapping – designed to keep the hands securely together, but not to be indestructible.

I jogged an uncertain course on into the alley searching for some sharp surface. It jumped out at me as things will when you are fully focused – the corner of a building, recently re-laid up in cement blocks.

I backed into it and began sawing up and down against the plastic strap. Even that aggravated my head. My arms and shoulders soon ached, but I dared not rest. I needed to move on, but it wouldn't do to be seen walking the streets with my hands cuffed behind me.

At last I felt the strap snap. The throbbing stopped in my hands as the blood returned. Interestingly, I thought, I was winded from the activity. I leaned back against the building and took several long, studied, breaths, uncurling my toes and wondering if they had helped.

I was ready to continue down the alley. Flashing a quick glance in the direction from which I had come, I saw a policeman enter and stop a few yards into the shadows. His slow, systematic, targeted glances worked their way into the alley. I pulled myself back against the darkened wall to present the narrowest possible profile. He turned and left.

Once he reentered the hubbub of the street, I moved on east through the remaining thirty feet of the alley. It was a quandary; would I be safer mingling with the people on the sidewalk or continuing on down the alley across the street? As I squinted into the bright of day I allowed but a second in which to make that decision. I crossed the street and into the alley. I would do the mingle thing on the next street heading south away from my apartment from which the police had just removed me.

My wife was dead from three bullets fired in rapid succession out of the early morning darkness of the living room. I remember that. It all began a little

before five a.m. As she entered the apartment her form was silhouetted against the light from the hallway behind her. I had just awakened and was stretching and yawning myself to life as I fumbled my way into the still darkened living room. I remember rushing toward her after the shots and then feeling that splitting pain to the back of my head.

Sometime later I struggled back to consciousness. I heard the police talking among themselves as the EMT worked on me there on the couch. After a quick, fuzzy, through the lashes, glance, I re-closed my eyes to wait out the hubbub.

I heard a middle aged officer explaining the situation to the recently arrived detective.

"Looks like the husband was waiting for her to return, detective. He shot her before she could flip the light switch. He went to her – probably to pull her inside and close the door to the hall. She had enough strength left to pick up the wooden coat rack and smash him over the head with it before she collapsed and died. The gun was still in his hand. Four rounds were fired. The paraffin test shows he very recently fired a gun. The door to the balcony was open and a rope hung to the ground – undoubtedly his planned escape route. He would have probably returned through the lobby sometime later and taken the elevator up here to the fourth floor acting grief stricken upon hearing what happened."

I had heard enough. My life was rapidly being flushed. I opened my eyes.

"He's conscious," the EMT called to the policeman standing nearby."

Together they helped me sit up. The back of my head was bandaged. I had the mother of all headaches. An hour or so had passed. They were still taking pictures. I tried to get up and go to where she lay, but with little effort the officer rocked me back onto the couch and told me to 'stay' as if I were some overly eager, ill mannered, pup. He began reading me my rights. I was confused and opted to remain quiet, offering no protests or explanations, waiting for my head to clear. I felt tears begin to flow as he pushed my shoulders down toward my knees and gathered my arms behind my back. I felt him tighten the straps around my wrists.

I remember him saying something like, "Do you understand your rights?"

I don't remember if I responded. He and another officer escorted me down to the squad car. A few minutes later the car was in the accident and a few minutes later than that, there I was. Where was I? It looked to be the 1200 block of Adams Street – less than two miles from home. Well, it had been home. Obviously I could not return there now. Not until all of this got cleared up.

I would need cash. I was sure the police had ways of tracing credit and debit card transactions. I needed to move fast. The bank on the corner was a branch of the one I used.

I made my way to it and went inside. My ATM limit would be far too small to meet my needs. I presented my debit card and driver's license and asked to close my checking account down to one hundred dollars. There was a bit over two thousand in it.

That completed, I moved to a cubicle marked Credit Card Cash Advances. It was manned – womaned, more precisely – by the smiley, middle aged, Miss Prince, according to the sign sitting on her desk. Initially, she seemed eager to

assist me. I had three cards. I arranged for the cash limit on each one. Her smile dulled some and she seemed uneasy, but completed the transactions. I offered no explanation remembering that nothing at all was always better than too much where the authorities might be involved. Fifteen minutes later I was leaving the bank with nearly eleven thousand dollars.

Next, I needed to make tracks away from that part of the city. There would surely be an APB – more recently called a BOLO, I remembered – and the authorities would soon be on my electronic trail as well. I risked it all one more time by stopping at a clothing store and purchasing three new shirts, two dress slacks, one pair of jeans, a ball cap, and hiking boots. I added a sizeable backpack to the items and made a final charge to one of the cards.

I experienced several uneasy moments as the clerk explained she was having some problem running the card. I surveyed the store making sure I knew the quickest path to the door. The second try worked and she joked nervously that she had apparently reversed two digits the first time. I smiled attempting to convey my patient understanding. I was feeling neither patient nor understanding. I donned the hat hoping to cover the bandage, and carried the rest of my purchases in the two, large, red, plastic bags provided.

I reentered the alley in the middle of the block and moved still two more streets to the east. I stopped long enough to stow my purchases in the backpack and slip into one of the new, tail-tuck-in, button-up-the-front, shirts. It would give me a very different look from the sweatshirt and jeans I had put on earlier that morning. From there I entered the street and walked to a taxi stand at the south end of the block.

Where would I ask to be taken? To the airport. It was a forty minute ride on south and would give me time to think. I needed a plan – two really. First, an immediate way to avoid the authorities – that would include a place to stay. Second, a plan to discover who my wife's killer was and somehow gather proof of his or her guilt.

By the time I exited the cab a tentative plan was emerging. I walked to a different entrance; it was nearly a mile away. In a rest room, I again changed shirts. Outside, I entered a second cab and headed for the bus station. I waited there for two hours before taking a third cab to a restaurant on the south edge of the city. If memory served me right it was surrounded by a bevy of cheap motels – the Flamingo, the Stork, the Bluebird, others. What was it with cheap motels and birds? I wasn't hungry, but felt pressured to go ahead and enter the cafe since the taxi remained at the curb waiting for a fresh fair.

When he pulled away, I finished my coffee and walked to the nearest motel. I arranged a room for a week, paid in advance. It was just large enough to contain the three-legged dresser; a double bed, which sported a roll-to-the-middle mattress; a battle scared wooden desk; and a sitting chair with long frayed, ghastly green, upholstery. A small screen TV sat on one end of the desk, angled to be viewed from the chair. I wouldn't have bet it worked. The bathroom had no door and allowed room to turn around, but not much more. The shower curtain was in shreds and the faucet at the rust stained bowl ran a constant, oddly wavering, stream the diameter of a wooden match.

I had no shaving equipment. Perhaps that would be to my advantage. I could let my Beard grow. Blond as I was, it wouldn't be seen for several days, however. Perhaps I should change the color of my hair.

During the cab ride, I had passed a Discount Mart. It was less than a mile away. I needed to shop for several things – hair dye, coffee singles, paper and pen, plain glass glasses, a battery radio, a prepaid cell phone, and a few other things. Those had all become part of my still developing plan.

I figured the sooner out and back the better. I was probably pushing the time limit for an all-points bulletin. I changed my shirt again and slipped out of my jeans and into my new brown dress slacks.

I encountered two police cars on my way there and back. Neither seemed interested in me. I felt some safer on the return trip wearing the dark rimmed glasses. I had used a college age, male, checker figuring two things: First, it was a safe bet that he'd be able to help me set up the cell phone in nothing flat, and second, guys that age never remember the faces of the middle aged men who pass their way. They fade rapidly as their hormonal driven brains make room for the more curvaceous, voluptuous, lipstick and blush laden images more readily captured and stored.

From the time I left the clothing store near the bank, I began functioning strictly on a cash basis. I splurged a bit and got a small, aluminum bowl, a mug, and a single burner hot plate so I could prepare hot food in my room. I also bought a dozen packets of freeze dried soups and meals in a cup that didn't need refrigerating. A loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter rounded out my larder. My plan was to eat a good breakfast each morning at the restaurant and fend for myself the rest of the day. Perhaps I would be well advised to find several eating places to minimize the possibility of being recognized. Perhaps the whole plan would unravel as my new life unfolded in what I understood would be playing out in an unpredictable manner.

My first act after reentering my room, and locking the door behind me, was to spray the place down with Lysol™, the carpet, seats, desk top, TV remote, the bare top of the mattress, and every visible surface in the bathroom and the rusting, bare metal, shower stall. It was going on twelve. I still wasn't hungry so I turned on the TV to the noon news on channel seven. It worked! I was surprised.

All the gruesome details plus pictures of me were center stage. The scroll across the bottom of the screen proclaimed: "Middle aged writer, Thomas Jefferies, is being sought in the hand gun murder of his wife, Bea . Friends and neighbors register shock and disbelief."

I'd certainly hope so!

There was more, but that was enough. I clicked it off and lay my head back on the chair, hoping to sleep. I didn't. The horrific images kept recycling through my head.

"Who?" I heard myself asking out loud.

Bea – Bea , as I called her – was a dear, sweet, person. She simply could not have had an enemy. There was little doubt, however, that she had been the target. Her silhouette there in the doorway and mine could not have been

confused.

That raised several questions. She had been across the city at her sister's since Friday noon. Their plan was to spend a four day weekend together taking in several shows, the symphony, and eat themselves into a size 20.

I didn't have a clue as to why she showed up back at the apartment early Sunday morning

"Who? Who? Who?" I repeated over and over.

Could it have been as simple as walking in on a robbery? The balcony door was always unlocked. It was the fourth floor, after all. The shots had come from the drapes at that door. The robber could have exited quickly behind the drapes, out the door, and down the rope that was apparently waiting for that purpose. Professionals, of that second story ilk, avoid confrontation and most don't even carry a weapon. I had researched the topic for several of the mystery novels I'd written. Either it was a rank amateur that panicked or the intruder was, in fact, waiting there to commit murder.

It was then that it first really hit me. It washed over my soul like a heavy, black, shawl – *shroud* would state the emotion more suitably I suppose. Bea , my lifelong friend and wife of twenty years was dead. At that moment it didn't matter how she died – she was dead. I would never see her face, her smile, her rosy cheeks and long black hair again. I would never feel her soft skin or hear her wonderful laugh or look into her incredible, blue, eyes. My best friend and companion was gone.

It sounded like a liturgy of self-centered pity; it probably had been. I was hurting. I was filled with the worst of all kinds of sadness – the loss of a loved one. My life was suddenly torn apart with no way of mending it.

I moved to the bed and buried my face in the pillow. I cried chest heaving sobs that shook the bed and drenched the pillowcase.

I woke up shortly after three. It wasn't that I felt better. I felt relieved in the way I imagine the pitcher of the underdog team feels after having allowed no hits through the first inning. There were at least eight innings left, but I was into the game, on my way, momentarily feeling some hint of control and confidence.

I heated one of the cups of macaroni and cheese and finished it because I knew I needed to. I had been way too long without a shower. In the beginning I thought the rank odor was just the room, but the spray had handled that remarkably well. The stink was my stink. For just a moment I allowed the idea of spraying myself.

I fumbled through the bags from the store and found the bar of soap. I lingered in the cool rush of water holding out some detached, fully illogical, hope that it might fix things. Aside from making me socially tolerable, it didn't. My left shoulder and elbow were bruised – from being tossed about in the squad car, I assumed. I removed the bandage from my head.

I read the instructions on the hair dye. Wash hair. Work in coloring agent. Let stand five minutes. Add the clear gel. Wait one minute. Rinse. I could do that; in fact, I did. The result staring back at me from the mirror was interesting on several levels. It made more of a difference than I had anticipated. I dried it with paper towels thinking if any color came off, I could flush the paper. Left on a

towel it might provide some clue if If *what*, I couldn't be sure. I was being cautious or I was being paranoid. I'd choose to characterize it as cautious. What was the saying? 'It is paranoid if they are really after you.'

As I reentered the main room I experienced a fleeting expectation that Bea would be waiting for me on the bed. She wasn't.

I sighed a deep sigh; one of those that began by filling my lungs to the point of pain and then letting go in a slow, unsteady, stream of chest jarring stops and starts. It sparked memories of terror from childhood. Where were mother's safe arms and words of reassurance when I needed them?

I slipped batteries into the little radio and turned from station to station in search of a newscast. Better, perhaps, I found a talk station on which I seemed to be center stage. There was new information for me. Three slugs had entered Bea's body. A fourth had entered the ceiling near the front wall. I knew I had only heard three shots. It was an inconsistency I didn't immediately understand, but noted. As she lay on the floor she was still clutching her purse in her left hand. Only my fingerprints were on the hand gun. It was reported to have been stolen from a police evidence lock-up several months before. In general, the conversation readily assumed I had purchased it from a disreputable source that dealt in such things. My *guilt* was not in question. The good and loving relationship we had enjoyed publicly and privately, though acknowledged by some, in no way ameliorated the assumption of my guilt. I had to wonder about the quality of relationships the listeners were experiencing in their own lives; they were so quick to accept my willingness to kill my clearly beloved wife.

So, what did I have to go on? A stolen gun and a fourth shot into the ceiling clearly fired after I was unconscious. If Bea still had her purse in her hand when she was found, how could she have picked up the sizeable, wooden, coat rack and hit me with it? That was clearly a two arm operation. I hoped the police had noted that problem. Bea was 115 pounds soaking wet as they say. Lifting and propelling an awkward, twenty five pound, club with enough force to knock me out was stretching the limits.

The photograph that flashed on channel seven's five o'clock news was taken from the back cover of one of my early books. Professionally staged photos never really resemble the subject. Between that and my youth in the picture, I felt some better. With my ball cap, black hair, and eventually a dark beard I felt relatively safe. I had purchased the beard dye, but thought I'd give it a week to grow in before tinting it. My true hope was to get things cleared up before the beard job would be necessary. The one possible juggernaut was the desk guy there at the motel.

I had two takes on that. First, he was clearly at least marginally intoxicated when he checked me in; tipsy may be the word. I used an alias, Jack Smith, and he didn't ask for identification. Second, I had the definite feeling that perhaps the sole redeeming feature of the Flamingo Motel was that names and faces were dependably forgotten or misplaced. At the moment, that was more important than any of the usually expected motel accoutrements.

I turned off the TV and opened the drapes just enough to peek outside. It would be light until nine or so. The weather guy was predicting heat in the lower

nineties for the rest of the week. I hoped the dripping, little air conditioner propped precariously in the rear window would keep churning out the cool.

There was a black car parked in front of the manager's office. A man exited the building and got into it. The scene had unfolded on the other side of the vehicle so I could not really make out stature or features. Anyway, I had no reason to. The car pulled out onto the street and turned north.

The motel was a one story, very pink, 1970's, cement block, structure arranged as a horseshoe around a cracked and pitted asphalt parking area. There was only one car parked there. Even so, I assumed many of the rooms were occupied. I'd have a better idea after dark when rooms lit up.

The manager, tall, undernourished, and tentative in manner, opened his door and stood there looking toward the street. He then closed the door behind him and sauntered, hands halfway into his jean pockets, across the open area directly toward my room. I closed the drapes and went to the peep hole in the door. He was soon knocking, non-rhythmically and tentatively, like I said.

I opened it and stepped aside so he could enter.

"Not here to stay. A guy was just here. He might have been lookin' for you."

He gave my hair a once over without comment.

"And you told him . . ."

"I don't know nothin' 'bout nobody. The fact I sip at a bottle all day probably makes that seem reasonable."

He offered a smile.

"Did he believe you?"

"Probably not. Who knows?"

"Have you seen him before?"

"Nope."

"You think he was a pol . . . cop?"

"He didn't flash no badge. They usually do. But he had the fuzzy smell if you get my drift."

I nodded.

"Did he say why he was looking for me?"

"Nope."

"Did he indicate that he had reason to suspect I was here or do you think he was just fishing, searching I mean."

"I know what fishin' means. I'm a drunk not a dummy."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to imply anything. Sometimes I use words in strange ways and then catch myself, so offer an immediate explanation."

He nodded apparently accepting it, then responded to my questions.

"Fishin' for sure. I get a lot of that. Usually from the cops. Someway *The Flamingo's* got the rep for harborin' the unsavories of this city."

He smiled an almost toothless grin and held out his hand, palm up, like one of those fully unnecessary attendants in airport restrooms.

I had a twenty in my pants pocket and handed it over. He hesitated.

"Is that too little? I'm new at this sort of thing."

Again the grin.

"This'll cover one more if anything comes up."

He took one final, wrinkled brow, glance at my hair, then turned and left. I watched him cross the lot and into his office where he closed the door.

Why didn't I get the license plate? I really couldn't kick myself over it. I had no real reason to suspect it was connected in any way to me. It was a late model Ford. A buy American kind of guy perhaps. The antenna was on the rear left fender. There was a single bumper sticker on the rear – white with black lettering – a cheap, no color sort. Probably a freebee he got somewhere. I hadn't caught its message. My years of writing mysteries seemed to be kicking in to my advantage.

I had to begin suspecting everybody. I hated that. Who but the police would be looking for me? If he had been a policeman wouldn't he have flashed his shield immediately to get the manager's attention? I couldn't answer either of those questions. Two more came to mind. I called the office, surprised the phone worked.

"Jack in 17. Two more quick questions. What color was the man's hair?"

"Blondish brown."

"Did he wear glasses?"

"Yes and no."

"I don't understand."

"He didn't have any on, but he had those little impressions at the top of his nose that's made by glasses; you understand what I'm sayin'?"

"Yes. You're a good observer. Was there anything else that stood out about him?"

"Like his shoulder holster inside his jacket under his left arm?"

"Yes. Things like that. How old would you guess?"

"Pushin' sixty. No weddin' ring."

"You really are good! Anything else?"

"That's about it. He had a little pad and a pen in his upper left shirt pocket."

"Consider us even on that twenty, my friend," I said. "You've been a big help. I assume you have already forgotten this conversation."

"What conversation? Who is this, anyway?"

I hung up. His answer had been trite though fully meaningful. It took me back to my original questions; who and why?

Assuming the man in the black car was not police, then who did that leave? Somebody connected in some way with the murder. Perhaps the murderer himself, wanting to kill me as well on the chance I might have seen him. That's probably a stretch. It was generally dark in the room and it would seem that he was at my back the whole time. Had he wanted to kill me there had been plenty of time. I would have been an easy target there in the light of the hall door as I rushed toward Bea. It could be a coincidence, him looking for somebody else the day I happen to become a murder suspect and arrive at one of a dozen sleazy motels in the area. The more I thought the more it seemed less and less like a coincidence.

It hit me as I slumped into the green chair.

"*The Way of All Wives*," I said out loud.

It was one of my first mystery novels about a man who married for money, did in his wives, gathered the money and fled, hiding out until he felt it was safe to go wife hunting again, 96,000 words in 25 chapters. I had unconsciously adopted that man's MO having checked into a dump of a motel to wait things out. It added another possibility. The man in the black car could have been interested enough in finding me to research my twenty or so novels.

That chained into another and probably more useful line of thought. Who from my past or my wife's past would have some reason to come after me? Of course I was assuming it was a bad thing. Maybe he was the vanguard for the Publisher's Clearing House giveaway.

That brought me the first genuine, if fleeting, smile since I had realized it was Bea standing there at the apartment door. Perhaps it was somebody wanting to take out both of us and he thought he had killed me with the blow from the coat rack. Then, he heard the news stories about my escape. With the door to the hall open at the time the shots were fired, I would have thought the noise would have brought a prompt response from our neighbors. The murderer probably closed the door as soon he hit me. Something in the hall may have prompted his immediate exit down the rope before checking me out, or making sure I had checked out. He may have left down the hall if nobody was there. Our door was just two away from the stair well.

As I had struggled to regain consciousness that morning, I heard one of the officers call out the detective's name. What was it? Detective . . . Detective . . . Burrows? Blackwell? Browning? Downing! I think it was Downing.

I removed the phonebook from under the dresser where it was performing duty as a surrogate leg, and looked up the number of the 22nd precinct, the one in which we lived. I placed the call on my new cell phone.

"Detective Downing, please."

"May I tell him whose calling?"

"Mister Accused."

I was pleased with my quick, witty even, thinking. I had to chuckle.

"Downing. How can I help you?"

I hung up. I had just learned two important things. Downing was the name of a detective in my precinct. And, his was a voice I had heard in my living room that morning.

I searched my memory for images of faces. It was all so fuzzy. The detective would have been one of those not in uniform. There were several from the Medical Examiner's team, but only one in the room was clearly giving directions and asking questions. He was tall and distinguished looking, in his early sixties, with graying black hair, and a neatly trimmed mustache. That had not been the man in the black car. Of course that only eliminated one of several dozen precinct detectives, I imagined, but once on a case, a detective tended to remain on the case.

I would take a cue from another of my novels and feed Downing what I knew so far. There was no need to disguise my handwriting.

Next, I did hand to hand combat with the plastic wrap protecting the new three-pack of yellow pads. Eventually, I bested it, but remained more than a little

irked that I had to buy three when I only wanted one. I sat at the desk and soon had completed the note. I kept it concise.

Detective Downing:

RE: Case of Beatrice and Thomas Jefferies

Thomas is currently being followed by a man of average height, late fifties, no wedding ring, probably wears reading glasses, blondish brown hair, drives a black late model Ford with rear left fender antenna, in-state license plate (number unknown) has a single, black on white bumper sticker, is right handed and wears a shoulder holster under left arm. More as it develops. If you have information for me place a classified in the Times under personals. Make it to the attention of Mr. Accused. Sign it 'D'.

I signed my note MISTEr ACCUSED

I was counting on the Black Car Guy to be my first break in all this. I hoped I wouldn't be disappointed. He could be a private detective working for somebody. Who would that be? Maybe some of my friends got together and hired him to help prove my innocence. I couldn't count on that and I wouldn't contact any of them for fear of miring them down in the aiding and abetting thing.

The funeral! I had forgotten about the funeral. They will contact her sister. She will handle it. I'm sorry she has to. I'm sorry I will not be able to be there. They will surely be on the lookout for me. I must remain strong. It's been a super hectic day. I think I'll turn in and reset my head in the morning.

* * *

I began my day with a shower and a close inspection of my Beard, now going on two full days. It was thicker and darker than I figured it would be. It was at the grungy stage. It felt uncomfortable. I assumed bearded folks adjusted to that. It was my first attempt at cultivating one.

I dressed and left for the restaurant, trying to stick to the routine I had outlined. As I walked the two blocks I wondered if it would be wiser to move often now that the Black Car Guy had been nosing around. If he didn't believe the manager, I figured he might return or stake out the place. It was a possibility I hadn't considered before I left that morning. I suddenly became uneasy and began scrutinizing every nook and cranny. I stopped at the entrance to the cafe and surveyed the cars parked in the immediate vicinity. No black ones were occupied. I went inside.

The *Cowpoke Special* looked both tasty and huge, the exact combination I needed. With coffee it came to a little under ten dollars. Seemed expensive. For most of my adult life I hadn't needed to watch expenses, so budgeting my funds would be a new undertaking. I took my time and tried to enjoy it. That was a struggle. Rather than feeling better, as I hoped I would, I felt worse, suddenly sadder and lonely, a bit depressed; dispirited might sum it up best.

I eyed their lunch specials, especially the long list of pies. It was not in my plan – most certainly not at five bucks a slice. I finished my umpteenth coffee refill, paid the bill, and left. I stood inside the glass entryway looking out over the cars and people, searching for the Black Car Guy. He was not in sight so I opened the door and went outside.

I didn't like having to be suspicious, having to constantly be on the lookout. I glanced frequently over my shoulders and kept a watch on the vehicles, those passing and those parked along the street.

I arrived safely at the door to my room. Just as I opened it, however, I heard a shot. I saw the door frame splinter beside my head. I ducked and turned to look. It had been a dumb move. I should have gone inside and gotten out of the way. It was the black car. It had slowed – driver side toward me. The shot must have come from the driver's window. For effect I fell to the ground and lay still until his car was out of sight, hoping he would think I'd been hit. I lucked out. No more shots came my way.

The manager ran across the pavement to me. I got to my feet and brushed myself off.

"I need to get out of here fast. Have a recommendation for another motel?"

"My brother manages a hotel on the corner of tenth and St. James, south about three blocks. I'll call and arrange a place for you. His memory's worse than mine."

"I have too much to carry. I'll come back."

"Let me take the extra to my office. Safer if you come back there than over here."

"Very generous of you. Thank you."

I pointed and he gathered up the odds and ends, mostly the things from the Discount Mart. He left with it to make the call. By the time I filled and closed my backpack he had returned with a length of yellow police-scene tape. I didn't ask.

"I'll tack this across the door. If the shooter comes back it may make him think the cops are involved and keep him away. I won't report the shooting, of course."

"I don't understand why you're going to such lengths to protect me. I'm a nobody to you."

"Not quite. I knew you the minute you showed up in the office. I've probably read every book you ever writ. I know you didn't do what they're sayin'."

"Well, I'll make it up to you after all this gets cleared up."

"I'm here if you need me. Always thought it would be great fun to be a private detective."

"Just don't put yourself in danger for me. I don't want any more folks getting hurt."

"Keeping out of the way is my third best thing."

"Should I ask?"

He grinned.

"Readin' and sippin' – not necessarily in that order."

He pointed to the rear of the horseshoe.

"An alley back there. Take it three blocks south. The hotel is six stories, shiny red brick, old. Chuck will have the back door open for you. Go straight up to the desk in front. I'll have your refund waitin' when you come for the rest of your stuff."

"Keep it for your assistance. Do I get to know your name, by the way?"

"Dusty."

He offered his hand and we shook.

"Thanks again, Dusty. One more favor if I may. The slug in the wooden frame here. Could you dig it out very carefully. I'll pick it up when I come back."

He nodded. We shook hands again, unnecessary, but seemingly called for by social convention at the exact moment of parting. I made for the alley. Through it all, the black Ford had not returned.

Chuck looked immediately familiar. He noticed my double take; literally, it was a *double take*.

"We're twins. Dusty got the best hair. I got the best teeth."

He smiled and lifted his jaw as if to prove his contention.

With that he got down to business.

"I already signed you in as John Jones. I got you a front room on the second floor. Good view of the street out front. Easy exit through the fire escape outside the window. Got a stool and sink and an air conditioner. It's not great, but makes it better than outside. Showers are just down the hall. All men here so no need for modesty comin' and goin'."

I followed him up a long narrow flight of well worn, wooden, stairs and then half way down a dark hall, lit every so often by wall lamps – several of which even boasted bulbs. The air conditioning was already on; a special service, I assumed. I offered him a tip, but he refused.

"Dusty says you tipped us both up front. He said it might be better if I went over and picked up the rest of your stuff if you don't mind."

"Not at all. You two are renewing my faith in the basic goodness of the human species."

"Mama taught us to be good boys. She said we'd never be smart, but we could always be good and when we wasn't we could depend on gettin' whopped up 'long side our heads."

I mused silently about how that probably really hadn't helped the boy's much in the aforementioned smarts department.

"I like your mama without even knowing her."

"I'll tell her that, Sir. It'll make her right proud, you bein' you, like you is."

"*Sir*, makes me feel old, Chuck. I believe you said it's, *John*."

Chuck smiled. He did get the better teeth. Hard to tell about the hair. I'd reserve judgment until I saw it combed.

"Yes, Sir, John. I'll try to remember. Sooner I get your stuff the better I figure. Be right back."

He left. The move to the *Down Town Hotel*, or, *The _own _own _otel* as proclaimed on the ageing, flickering, red neon, sign out front of my room had proved one thing to me. The *Flamingo* had *not* been the absolute bottom of the motel/hotel chain as I had earlier suspected. Had they provided saddles for the roaches, small children could have stayed entertained for hours at a time playing rodeo.

I did the bounce thing on the edge of the bed. If the lumps didn't keep me awake I imagined the squeaky springs would. There was a single bare bulb hanging from the center of the ceiling. There was a nightstand on which sat a lamp – a garish, plastic, Tiffney knockoff. There were two, unmatched chairs on

either side of a small wooden table. The requisite upholstered sitting chair had been pulled close to the chirping air conditioner, which sat on the sill of one of the two windows. There were no curtains or drapes. I sprayed.

Actually, I was impressed by how none of that really mattered to me. It could have been my depression. It could have been my necessary focus at the moment. I stood by the window and surveyed the street below. Chuck was right. Second floor was ideal; it was close enough to determine people's features and yet far enough away to stay out of sight and feel safe.

Except for the two, new, button-up-the-front shirts, I opted to keep most of my things in the backpack for a quick get-away should that again become necessary. There were several metal hangers in the closet, which I adeptly bent back into usable shape.

Chuck soon returned with my things; the slug was in an envelope. He reported that the black Ford had stopped across the street from the motel long enough to look the situation over. Apparently dissuaded by the yellow tape, the driver moved on. (*Dissuaded* was my word, not Chucks!)

Chuck left and I examined the envelope. Dusty had made the license plate and the bumper sticker - 'Hug a Cop Today.'" It seemed an odd addition to the car of somebody who appeared to be taking the law into his own hands.

I went down to the lobby and got directions to a dollar store where I figured I might be able to purchase either a small mailing box or padded envelope in which to send Detective Downing the slug and the plate number. Again I would ask for return information via the classifieds.

With the envelope addressed and mailed I returned to my room. 'Give a cop a hug.' It could have been sarcasm of course, but that would get me nowhere, so I decided to continue as if it were sincere. What kind of person would flaunt that sentiment? A cop, for sure. His wife's car, perhaps. A volunteer in the Big Brother / Big Sister program or some anti-drug or delinquency prevention organization. Probation or parole officers. Somebody with a cop fetish.

There seemed to be no place to start. Maybe the slug would help. It lit a light bulb for me. I got out my paper and tried to put it down in writing. The gun used in Bea's murder was reportedly one of several stolen from a police evidence locker. That probably meant the weapons had been test fired and ballistics information was available on them. If the slug could be tied to that set of stolen weapons, then the killer and the man who shot at me might be tied together, even to that very robbery, perhaps. The idea reeked with uncertainty.

I slipped the new note into another envelope and took it to the mail box on the corner. The mail truck was just pulling up to empty it. Good timing, I thought. Downing would have the slug and my ideas the next morning.

It was time for lunch. I fixed chicken noodle soup. Not bad, really. The best part, perhaps, was watching the noodles distend and snake themselves to life once the hot water was added to the dry contents. Watching noodles and roaches: My conception of 'fascinating entertainment' had taken an interesting turn those last few days.

* * *

The next morning I was up early, and well before seven was seeking out a newsstand. I took the paper with me to the only nearby cafe open at that hour of the morning. I ordered. As I glanced at the grill and briefly inspected the table top and silverware I prayed for protection from salmonella.

My attention was soon on the classifieds. There was one for M. Accused. It read simply, 'Keep stuff coming. D'.

At the point when he had placed that ad, he had only received the information that I was being followed, the make of car, a very general description of the bumper sticker and of the man. The response ad hadn't said for me to give myself up or even to call and talk. It hadn't threatened me. It asked for more information as I received it. That is just what I had already done. Within an hour or so Downing would have the second and third installments. I was sure that would produce a second ad the following morning.

On the way back to the hotel the black Ford cruised by. I didn't believe I could have been singled out of the horde of shoulder to shoulder people on their way to work. The car was wearing a different plate number. I wrote it on my wrist and later transferred it to a sheet of paper from my shirt pocket. I stepped back into the shadows between two buildings to wait and watch for its return. I wondered if there would be a new set of stolen plates every day. I would pass them on to Downing.

Back in my room I turned to the obituaries. It was a good picture. That was really all I was interested in. I tore it out and laid it on the table. The service would be at the Methodist church on South School Street on Wednesday. I couldn't go, of course. It brought more tears and more sobbing. This time as much for her as for me. It seemed more legitimate, balanced, that way.

Mine had been pretty much a one day news item. Breaking violence in the Middle East returned to the national focus and renewed gang violence on the south side took the local spotlight. With my face off the tube I figured I could relax a bit.

He, whoever he was, seemed to be changing the plates rather than the car. It made me believe the car belonged to the man who was driving it. There had been something new about it. An image I had captured during my brief glimpse that morning. It had faded in the startle induced adrenalin rush. What was it?

Ah! It was, perhaps, a police emergency light sitting on the dashboard, the kind that plain clothes cops reach up to the top of their vehicles when they begin giving chase or need to speed on their way. I couldn't find a way to make that compute. A police detective would not have shot at me and then sped off. A wannabe, perhaps? Somebody with all the paraphernalia playing the part of a law enforcement officer?

I had no answer so wouldn't waist time contemplating it. I began the new list of things to send to Downing. The man in the Ford was still trolling for Thomas. The new plate number. The dash light.

There might be more later. I'd wait, but would get it all in the mail before the final pick up at five ten.

A new idea popped to mind. If the man was really both the killer and a

detective, and if he did have at least two weapons from the evidence lock-up robbery, might he not be from Downing's precinct and should Downing therefore not keep all of this private? I added that to the note. Not added was the disconcerting idea that Black Car Man might be Downing himself, collecting my evidence to keep it from being considered in the case. I had no choice but to continue.

It spawned another thought. A year or so before, a policeman from upstate had contacted me suggesting that my latest book was copied after a case he had worked and solved. He demanded a sum of money. I gave him my usual response to such all too frequent contentions – sue me. He actually tried. It was immediately thrown out of court. Shortly after that I received a death threat in the mail. It was computer printed and essentially untraceable. I ignored it.

Would he have killed my wife as his revenge? That made no sense. To make retribution work I would have to be told why it had been done. Otherwise there would be no connection and I would experience no punishment, no guilt, no sense of fault in her death. Then why the shot at the motel?

There were so many things whirling in my head. Something had come to mind as I was drifting off to sleep the night before. It was important so of course I knew I'd remember it. Ten hours had elapsed so of course I hadn't remembered it. What was it? Something about the gun placement. Oh, yes. I would add it to Downing's list – a list I continued to write in the third person referring to Thomas not me.

That nocturnal idea had focused around a question. Was the angle of entry into the ceiling consistent with a shot from the floor where Thomas was found lying with the gun in his hand? I guessed it had to be. My next question was for forensics. Was the amount of gun powder residue found on Thomas's hand from the paraffin test consistent with the firing of all four rounds or merely one? If one, which I knew had to be the finding, then it gave credence to the theory that someone knocked Thomas out, placed the print-cleaned gun in his hand and, in order to leave the incriminating residue, fired it at the ceiling by pressing Thomas's index finger against the trigger. It could be argued that the gun in his hand could have gone off accidentally as he was knocked to the floor. The amount of residue would sort that out. The difference between one and four shots should be significant.

I returned to the window. It had become part of my routine. Check. Be bored. Check. Be bored. Check. I had no purpose in mind other than to check – well, there was the fact I had become careful not to step on any of the roaches. One just didn't do that to your only associates even when they turned out to be terribly inattentive. The next check proved useful.

The black Ford was parallel parking across the street. I marveled at the ease with which he maneuvered into the short space. The man got out and went into the cafe a few doors away. I rushed down stairs then slowed in the interest of caution when I reached the sidewalk. If he'd gone in for carry-out coffee I only had another minute or so. If for breakfast, I had a longer window. I couldn't count on that, however.

I hurried across the street to the car. It provoked numerous one handed

gestures and interesting strings of profanity from motorists disgruntled at having to lose a second or two as they made their way to wherever. The door had been left unlocked suggesting he intended only a short stop. I had to proceed with dispatch. I easily located the vehicle identification plate on the dash and made a quick rubbing of the VIN with pencil and paper. I left. The whole, roundtrip, operation from the hotel doorway and back took no more than two minutes. I stepped into the shadow of the entry and waited, watching. He returned with coffee and a sack – donuts I assumed if he were a cop! I allowed a brief feeling of 'smug' to overtake me as I climbed the stairs and entered my room.

The rubbing was a good one. I decided I should keep a copy. There was a Copy and Mailing Shop several doors north of the cafe. I had soon completed the operation and was back in my room. As I contemplated the slow pace of things – mail, classified ad, mail, classified ad – I decided to get Downing the car's ID number immediately. I called the precinct on my new phone and left it as a message with the young lady who answered.

"I have a vehicle ID number Detective Downing has been waiting to receive. May I give it to you and ask that you pass it on to him? I'm in a time bind, here."

"Sure. And your name?"

"He knows me as M.A. That will be sufficient."

"I'm supposed to get names."

"Let's let the Detective make that decision. This is a life and death situation."

"Okay then. Give me the number."

I read it to her. She read it back and thanked me. I accepted it without comment even though the thanks clearly needed to be going in the other direction.

On the off chance the policeman from upstate was involved I added his name to the list and provided a brief explanation. I hadn't thought about Officer Sammy Simpson in some time. The fact that I so readily remembered his name impressed me. I enclosed the original tracing as hard copy evidence.

Boredom set in. I had nothing constructive to do. My companions, the roaches, had clearly opted for the cool between the walls or had wisely retreated to the basement. The day, the loneliness, the boredom, dragged on.

* * *

I repeated the previous morning's routine; I got a paper and settled into a booth for breakfast. There it was. 'M. Accused: Plate stolen. Sticker was free precinct issue. Slug is from sister gun as per theory. Lawsuit officer's name dead end. Residue too little for 4 shots. Rubbing presents dilemma. Department vehicle. Funeral delayed to Friday at my request. Be very careful!'

Not just, 'Be careful'. 'Be very careful!' with an exclamation point. He had been willing to pay an extra charge for that no doubt. It sounded like Detective Downing was genuinely concerned for my safety. Would that have been because he wanted to take me alive and see me fry or that he was mellowing away from a stance of guilt toward questionable guilt or even innocence? I would

believe the latter, but proceed as if it were the former.

Why delay the funeral? A snag with the autopsy? Additional tests? Allow more time for me to stew and perhaps risk showing up at the funeral home? It puzzled me.

Again bored, I went for a walk. I knew of a park some eight or ten blocks west. I headed for it at a leisurely pace. I had way too much time on my hands. I tried to write, but my pen wouldn't move. I could see I was settling into a depression; it was not a major sleep all day and stop eating depression, but just enough of one to dull my emotions and detach me from the reality of what was going on around me. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing. I could still function. My sadness was mostly being held at bay. I needed to be planning for life after all of this got cleared up, but plans wouldn't come.

In the park I selected a bench with a stand of tall shrubs to its rear and a gentle slope down to a children's play area in front. I shed a tear at, of all things, the fact that Bea and I had been unable to have children. We should have adopted. Now we were too old. We had been selfish, only wanting our own when so many children needed good homes. We would have provided a good home. I knew we would have.

My reverie was interrupted when a man took a seat beside me on the bench. I was immediately disturbed about how close he sat. I didn't want to be close to anybody. I scooted to my end of the bench in an attempt to silently lodge my protest. He scooted along with me. Odd. I looked at him, frowning.

At that moment I felt it against my ribs. It was a gun I was sure.

"The man in the black Ford, I assume," I said.

"That would be me. I want you to stand and walk with me into the bushes behind the bench."

"And why should I do that?"

"Because I'll fire a couple of rounds down toward the kids in the sandbox if you don't."

I didn't believe him for several obvious reasons but still, I stood immediately and walked into the bushes. They grew thick but easily navigable. They were eight feet tall and the stand was wide and oval-shaped, perhaps twenty feet by fifteen feet. There was a small open area at the center.

"On your knees, hands behind your back," he said.

I saw that he had begun screwing a silencer into the end of his gun, a magnum if my memory served me right. I took my time and tried to engage him in conversation.

"Surely you aren't going to send me to my grave without letting me know what this is all about."

He began talking, clearly his plan from the outset.

"My son, step son really, was Sammy Simpson."

"Was?"

"He was a good cop. Had a gambling problem. Owed big money to a loan shark. The amount he asked from you would have paid him clean. They threatened to kill his wife if he didn't pay up immediately. He began thinking crazy and one weekend broke into the evidence lock-up. He took drugs and

guns because they were easy, high dollar, things to move. Once he had the money, he called the man he owed and arranged a meeting. It was required that he bring his wife along in case the payment fell short. It didn't, but he shot her anyway, forcing Sammy to watch as he pumped three slugs into her body. If you'd just have paid him, all that could have been avoided, don't you see? Two months ago Sammy committed suicide. With my wife gone, he was all I had. I decided it was my place to take the revenge he was unable to. So, I shot your wife in your presence and waited to torment you through a brief period of horrendous grieving time. Now I'm going to kill you."

"Why did you try to kill me at the motel? I'd never have known the reason behind all this."

"If I'd have wanted to kill you, I would have killed you."

"I see. More terrorizing. Another question. How did you know when she would be at home? I didn't even know."

"My plan was to do it one evening late last week, but she left. I followed her. It had to happen at a time you were together so you would witness it. I had things ready. While I was following her back across the city early Sunday morning, her destination suddenly became clear. I used my police emergency light to get me to your apartment before her. You coming into the living room when you did simplified things for me. Now, bow your head. Say your prayers if you're that kind. I'll count to ten."

I felt the gun against the back of my head.

"One, two, three, four, five, six . . ."

At the very moment I was prepared to lung up, turn and take him on, there was a commotion from all directions. The bushes shook. I hoped he had been distracted. I jumped to my feet and took off to my left into the shrubs running directly into the big strong arms of a burly, uniformed, policeman. We moved back to the edge of the area in the center. The Ford man was on his stomach being cuffed.

"Tom Jefferies?" a very detective-looking man asked somewhat tentatively, glancing my way from across the scene.

"Downing?" I returned, probably less tentatively.

He walked the edge of the opening and offered me his hand.

"Nothing like having a dozen cops around to hear a man's confession. Sorry about the hassle you had to go through, Tom. I guess you heard all the details. We've been tailing him since yesterday. I'm sorry about your loss. When I saw we were close to an arrest that was well away from you, I took it upon myself to delay the funeral so you would be able to attend."

"Thank you. Thank you for everything."

"Hey, I just sat there in my air conditioning while you did all the work. By the way, if this ever makes it into one of your novels my first name is David – just in case I might be mentioned."

"Oh. You'll be mentioned. You'll be mentioned."

I returned to my apartment.

* * *

It all began a little before five a.m. Sunday morning. As she entered our apartment her form was silhouetted against the light from the hallway behind her. I had just awakened and was stretching and yawning myself to life as I fumbled my way into the still darkened living room. Surprised at her unexpected presence, I rushed toward her and administered a swirl around hug and kiss.

"You're home a day early."

"Sister or not, I missed you too much to stay away any longer. Make good use of your bachelor time, did you?"

"I finished the story summary for my new novel."

"The one where you get accused of killing me off?"

"That's the one. I can't begin to tell you how good it is to have you back among the living."