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MYSTERY WEEKLY

Magazine

*An armada of the
withered dead sailing
on a clay-orange sea*

Stories by

Trey Dowell

J.R. Lindermuth

C.E. Albanese

Jared Schwartz

Paul A. Barra

Matthew Fries

Robin Yocum

John H. Dromey

C.I. Kemp

HUNDRED-YEAR FLOOD

C. Matthew Smith

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HUNDRED-YEAR FLOOD

C. Matthew Smith

The rain fell in dense sheets for three days. On the third night, the swollen lake breached the dam, burying everything downstream beneath feet of water. The following morning, caskets floated down Main Street—an armada of the withered dead sailing on a clay-orange sea.

The first to spot this invasion were the shop owners who came on fishing boats to survey the damage to their premises. They tied their vessels to columns rising from the water and stared down at submerged ground-floor windows. They spoke to each other of lost inventory and buckling floorboards.

Until the first lacquered hull bobbed by.

“What the hell?” Davey Grant, owner of the downtown hardware store, leaned forward in his boat and pointed. “Is that a ...”

As though to assure them all that it was, three more caskets followed. One nudged sideways when it bumped against a column supporting a second-story balcony. A wave of two came after that, and then a wave of five, and so on. By the time Sheriff Everett Dorsey arrived in his flat bottom row-boat, with his newest deputy at the oars, fully two dozen coffins had passed through the commercial center and were headed west. Still more approached from the east, the next floats in a grim parade.

“It’s Judgment Day, Sheriff,” Deputy Bobby Johnson said, his eyes wide and white.

“Or just a hundred-year flood. You know, like the weather man said.” Irritation tinted the sheriff’s voice, though the deputy seemed too horrified by the scene to notice.

Sheriff Dorsey was lanky even in middle age and stood almost six-three. Seated as he was in the fore of the boat, with his boots propped on the gunnel, his knees nearly eclipsed his face. He was dressed that morning in fishing gear instead of his pressed

uniform. His badge gleamed on his chest amidst camouflage greens and browns.

“What do we do, Sheriff?” asked Debbie Jameson, her skiff listing above what would be her coffee shop.

Dorsey shook his head. “Not much we can do ’til the water’s gone.”

“Momma!” a voice shouted to his other side, and all turned to see a portly man leap into the water and dog-paddle toward a rose-colored coffin drifting down the center of the street.

“Harold, are you crazy?” Mayor Kirbo called out. He nearly stood in his Jon Boat, then thought better of it and sat back down. “It’s too deep!”

Harold Miller, proprietor of Smokin’ Butts BBQ, reached the coffin but could not grasp it in time, his hands being otherwise occupied with treading water. Soon Momma Miller had evaded her son and was continuing on her course, leaving Harold flailing in the water and calling after her.

“Deputy Johnson,” Sheriff Dorsey said, his expression flat.

“Yeah, Sheriff?”

He nodded to the empty outboard next to them. “Kindly motor out there to get Harold before he drowns.”

The sun reappeared later that day, and the water slowly receded, leaving a slick tangerine glaze everywhere. Caskets were beached among a flotsam of drywall, lawn furniture, and trash bags. Bodies liberated from their confines lay draped over low tree branches and reposed in front lawns. One stood upright like a scarecrow, the collar of his suit jacket snagged on the wrought iron fence encircling the cemetery. The July air was soupy and rancid.

A tobacco farmer, miles from downtown, found a coffin mired in a layer of Georgia clay that now topped his lowest field. It was a simple, unadorned vessel with its lid flopped open and no body inside. Dorsey knelt beside the casket and noted faint indentations in a footstep pattern just beside it. They led either to or from a copse of pine trees behind the field—though from their indistinct shape, Dorsey could not tell which.

“You ever seen anything like this, Sheriff?” the farmer said.

Dorsey scanned the field and pointed toward the stand of trees. “You looked up there for the body?”

“I’ve looked everywhere. Nothing.”

“Neighbors haven’t seen anything?”

The farmer shook his head solemnly. “We got people stealing the bodies now?”

he asked, the words catching in his throat. “What in damnation is this world coming to?”

In the aftermath of the flood, Dorsey sensed a general anxiety in the town, likely stoked by small reminders of the horror that had befallen them. Mothers found their children playing with bones deposited in front yards and called his office in a panic. Church marquees asked passersby whether they were prepared for the resurrection and referenced the plagues of Egypt. Citizens who flocked to the town’s older cemeteries found holes where once grass and marble slabs had lain, the dark voids like missing teeth.

In the midst of this disquiet, five men and women arrived to assist in identifying the displaced dead and returning them to their resting places. “Chris Eady,” said one of them, extending his hand to Dorsey and adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses. “Dee-Mort team leader.”

“Dee what?”

“Disaster Mortuary Operations Response Teams. DMORT? We’re here to help with the bodies.”

“Oh,” Dorsey said. “Right. Pardon my ignorance. This is our first ... mortuary disaster.”

“I’d worry if it wasn’t.”

The DMORT team told town leadership that forty-something bodies, while no doubt traumatizing for the citizenry, was not so bad a number, all told. Once the cemeteries had identified the empty graves and provided a list, word would be sent out to families that they should provide information on their loved ones: descriptions of any distinguishing physical characteristics; photographs of the deceased wearing the clothes in which they were buried. “Between that information and the medical and dental records we get,” Eady said, “we’ll likely solve a lot of the cases.”

“You said ‘a lot,’ ” Mayor Kirbo noted. “Not ‘all.’ ” From the redness spreading across the mayor’s nose and bulbous cheeks, Dorsey wondered if he’d taken up a bottle already that afternoon.

Eady nodded. “We have to leave room for the possibility that not all of the bodies will be so easily identified.”

“What do you do with the rest?”

“We have other methods. DNA, for example, if we can get samples from family. You have to take those case by case. But I’m hopeful.” A throat cleared behind him, and he added: “We do have one problem at the outset, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Your local motel is closed. Still dealing with the cleanup, apparently. And the hotel by the interstate is full—probably people from town who are doing the same. So, unfortunately, we’re homeless.”

“The sheriff’s got a big house with lots of room,” the mayor offered. “Don’t you, Sheriff? Old family home, up on a hill. Close to town. Free.”

Dorsey shot the mayor a sharp look, then shrugged. “I suppose I do.”

“We’d be grateful for anything,” Eady said. “We’re not fussy. Do you need to run that by a wife or kids?”

“It’s just me,” Dorsey replied. “The mayor’s right. There’s plenty of room.”

“Have you ever seen anything like this, Sheriff?” Deputy Johnson asked.

“You know you’re the second person to ask me that this week?”

In truth, Dorsey had not seen anything like this. Deep in his cavernous office, Judge Hubert Stubbs sat splayed back in his desk chair, his face unmoving and bloodied. His favorite gavel, usually laid at the far edge of his desk, had been thrust through his eye handle first. The gavel head rested over the orbit like a smooth, brown growth.

Judge Stubbs had retired several years ago, but owing to his decades of service, the courthouse reserved him an office where he still came each day to read the paper, write notes to people on courthouse stationary, and otherwise keep his mind engaged for as long as he cared to do so. Occasionally he still presided over a small trial when the current judges’ calendars got too busy. A widow of more than a decade, he often was the last person to leave the courthouse in the late nighttime hours.

This morning a housekeeping crew had arrived a little after 5:00 a.m. to find the rear door to the courthouse lying in the parking lot, the jamb splintered, and Judge Stubbs in his current state. No disarray in the office suggested a struggle. Its door was unlocked and ajar.

Dorsey and Johnson viewed the scene from the doorway while a State Bureau of Investigation crime scene unit toiled away inside. One man collected fingerprints from the gavel while another took photographs Dorsey hoped he’d never have to see. “You’re getting quite the orientation, Deputy.”

“Sure am, Sheriff,” the young man said. “But what exactly am I supposed to be learning?”

Dorsey didn’t yet know how to answer that question.

He was older than I expected. Wrinkled, grey, and stooped. Has it been that long?

But the eyes were the same as I remember: Haughty and bright, even when sentencing a man to death.

“You’ve had one hell of a week.” Eady opened the refrigerator—Dorsey’s refrigerator—and removed two beers. The Sheriff accepted a can, held it up, and inspected the label. Eady noticed and added, “Found that at the grocery store next town over. It’s local. Not bad.”

From the screened porch came the soft sounds of laughter after a long day.

“Sorry I’ve been such a poor host,” Dorsey said. “But I’m glad to see y’all have made yourselves at home.”

Eady waved away the apology. “I told you we’re not fussy. Though I’m afraid we have kind of taken over the fridge. The local restaurants are all closed, so we’re taking turns cooking. There are some leftovers, if you’re hungry.”

“I’m okay, thanks.” Dorsey cracked the beer, took a sip, and drew his face tight. “How’s it going with the bodies?”

“Making steady progress. Interesting thing about the town’s folks—they’ve been here for generations, and they remember everything.”

Dorsey saluted this observation with his beer. “You have no idea.”

“So far only one curve ball,” Eady said. “We have more caskets than we do bodies.”

“Is that really unusual?”

Eady shrugged. “I suppose not this early. Could be out there and just hasn’t been found yet. This is actually my first assignment like this in a long time. Normally we’re called in to identify remains after mass casualties. Plane crash, bombing, that kind of thing. No coffins or burial plots to match up with those. You’re just trying to figure out who’s who.”

“Hell of a profession you guys chose.”

“But right now, you’re glad we did.”

Both men drank in silence then, slumping lower and lower over the kitchen island, succumbing to the cumulative effects of too little sleep over too many days.

Eventually, Eady held up his can. “Recycling?”

Dorsey shook his head, and Eady tossed it in the trash.

Dorsey did the same and bid his guest goodnight. Before retiring, he stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned back. “I’m sure I’ll get a call soon that someone’s

found that other body. I wouldn't worry about it just yet."

"I'm sure you're right," Eady said. "Goodnight."

"We're inviting an awful lot of strangers into town recently, don't you think?"

Dorsey blew at the steam rising from his coffee cup and squinted at Mayor Kirbo through the thin haze. "Do you see we have some other choice?"

The mayor fidgeted in his seat and gripped the sides of his desk with blanched knuckles. "I don't like letting God knows who in here to examine our dirty laundry, is all."

"You called in the mortuary team, remember?"

"We had to," the mayor snapped. "No one around here has the knowledge to deal with that. You saw what it was like out there."

"It was the right call," Dorsey said, holding up two appeasing hands. "That's my point. Just like it was the right call to have the Bureau send in a crime scene unit for the courthouse. I keep asking for the budget to hire some forensics guys—hell, *a* forensics guy—but the Commissioners keep telling me no. My deputies are okay with the simpler stuff, but they'd get eaten alive by the lawyers if they processed a scene like that."

The mayor sank back in his chair. The bags under his eyes seemed larger still this morning, and his thinning hair sprayed from his head in all directions. "Who would do that to Judge Stubbs?"

Dorsey's phone rang, and he answered. He listened, pinching the bridge of his nose, and said, "I'm on my way."

He hung up and looked at the mayor.

"May as well find some room at the house for the crime scene unit while I'm at it. Looks like they may be here a while."

"Lord in heaven. What now?"

Retired District Attorney Dick Faust sat up in his plush four poster bed with the morning newspaper folded to the crossword puzzle in his lap. He was the very picture of a serene and leisurely morning, but for the ball point pen jutting at an angle from his liver-spotted neck. Blood blanketed his pajama shirt and hands and spilled onto the lustrous white sheets.

A home health nurse had arrived this morning and found the front door busted off its hinges and clay footprints in the foyer. She sat now quaking on the front porch, clutching her employer's yipping Pekingese to her chest as a deputy asked her

questions.

“Did you know this man, Sheriff?” Deputy Johnson asked.

“I did,” Dorsey replied. “He was the DA when my father was sheriff and I was a young deputy.”

“Retired judge and retired DA both killed. You think they’re related?” Dorsey turned to look at the deputy, and the young man added quickly: “I mean, clearly related, of course. But how? Who’d want them both dead?”

“That, Deputy, could be a long list. Judge Stubbs was on the bench for probably thirty years. Dick must have been DA for at least twenty. Who knows how many cases he prosecuted in Judge Stubbs’s courtroom?”

Johnson’s face turned grave. “So how do we narrow it down?”

I remember the pen. Clicking, clicking to some evolving rhythm in his head. Faster when waiting his turn to examine a witness or argue to the jury. Slower when he sat back down, pleased with the show he was putting on. Only when the verdict was read did he lay that pen down, and then only to shake the hands of those around him.

“So here’s a riddle for you,” Eady said.

“What’s that?”

“You remember the empty casket from that farmer’s field?”

“Went out there myself to see it.”

“Well, I’m not sure there was ever a body in it.”

Dorsey adjusted himself in the porch swing. “Come again?”

“There are no signs that anything dead was ever in it. No decayed tissue, no compounds consistent with decomposition.”

The air had cooled after a blistering day, and cicadas buzzed intently in the trees just beyond the screened porch.

“Could it have been cleaned out by the flood waters?”

Eady shook his head. “Doubtful. Plus, it doesn’t look like the water ever got inside the casket. No water stains, no clay deposits.” He allowed a short silence before adding: “It’s got me stumped. The inside of the casket was pristine.”

Dorsey remembered the patterned depressions in the clay near the casket. “When I was out there, I saw something that looked maybe like footprints. I didn’t know what to make of it, but I’ve been wondering if maybe someone took off with the body.”

“Maybe,” Eady said. “But I can’t find evidence of a dead body ever being there in

the first place. I'm starting to wonder if it isn't some sort of prank."

The wind picked up, blowing cool and wet through the screen. Soon it would rain again. "We probably need to see if there are fingerprints on the casket," Dorsey said at length. "If someone took off with the body, they should have left prints."

"Yes. If," Eady said. He stood and excused himself to bed.

By the time the third body was found, news crews had taken root all around the courthouse, reporting all the lurid details and rumors they could pry from the locals. A part-time employee spotted Davey Grant in the back hallway of his hardware store, his legs shorn from his body and the back door torn from its frame. It appeared from the shotgun lying on the floor that Davey had heard the sound of the door being pulled off. One shell had shredded the drywall next to the doorway. Another had punctured the ceiling.

"What the hell is going on here, Sheriff?" Mayor Kirbo shouted, and Dorsey pulled the phone from his ear.

The Sheriff stood in the parking lot behind the store, swatting mosquitoes from his neck and arms while the soft morning light grew sharper by the minute. The forensics team was at work inside, and already news vans were pulling up just outside the established perimeter. Amid that procession of vehicles came a grey and dented SUV whose belts he could hear squeaking from where he stood.

"Aw, hell," Dorsey said. "I'll have to call you later. Davey's wife just pulled up."

The way he stood up when the judge asked, "Mr. Foreman, has the jury reached a verdict?" So eager and ramrod straight. How pleased to stand there and declare guilt. How glad to recommend that another man should die.

Dorsey stared at the computer on his desk, not believing his eyes. The security cameras at the courthouse had caught nothing.

To save costs, the system purchased for the courthouse was designed to record only when a sensor detected movement. Even then, there was a lag of a couple seconds before the recording would begin.

Still, to have caught *nothing*? Just removing the back door like that would have required significant time, and probably a vehicle of some kind. Multiple men, at least.

He clicked to play the video from behind the courthouse again. At 9:24 p.m., a large stray dog loitered for a few minutes in the background. The back door, prominently in the foreground, was closed. And then the video jumped to 10:13 p.m. The dog was

gone; the door was off its frame and lying ten yards or more away in the parking lot. It was as though someone had digitally manipulated the image of the door from one moment to the next. Intact and closed morphed to broken and gaping in an instant.

The interior cameras showed even less: darkened, vacant hallways with nothing to explain why the system had even begun recording. Dorsey pressed the heels of his hands against his aching eyes for a moment, then toggled to the video footage they had just pulled from the hardware store.

Davey Grant had only installed one camera, and its fisheye lens covered the main sales floor only. The footage showed him hunched over the sales counter at 5:09 a.m., counting out money for the register and writing in a nondescript notebook. Moments later, his body jumped, and he looked toward the back hallway. He reached below the counter, pulled out the shotgun he stored there, and shouldered it as he walked out of the frame. It was the last the video showed of him.

“Useless,” Dorsey muttered. He wrote himself a note to pull video from any cameras the other stores on the alleyway might have.

Mayor Kirbo called again mid-day. “You said you would call me back,” he growled. “I’ve got news crews everywhere and not a damn thing to tell them. Where are you on figuring out what the hell’s going on?”

“What do Judge Stubbs, Dick Faust, and Davey Grant have in common?” Dorsey asked, ignoring the complaint.

“What?”

“You’ve lived here as long as I have. Can you think of anything tying those three men together?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Could be anything. Rotary Club? Kiwanis? Do you really think they’re all connected?”

“I don’t have anything concrete,” Dorsey said. “But we haven’t had a murder in this town in how many years? And now there’s three men dead, just like that? I’m thinking they’re connected. I just don’t know how yet.”

“Is it true what they’re saying about Davey?” The mayor’s voice was a whisper now. “How would someone even do that?”

Dorsey’s computer chimed with the arrival of an email from the crime lab. An analysis of the prints found at the courthouse was attached. The accompanying message read simply: “I’m not sure what to make of this.”

He read the attached report, paused, and read it again.

“Are you still there?”

And read it again.

“Sheriff—”

“Best you don’t know the details,” Dorsey said. “I gotta go.”

He hung up and called the crime lab.

“Is this a damn joke?”

Deputy Johnson flipped through the stack of photocopies he had brought back from the courthouse archives. “Franklin Willard Bell, IV, was convicted of first-degree murder in 1999. The victim was—”

“Hilliard Forsyth, owner of the local flower shop, who was fooling around with Frank’s wife,” Dorsey said, sitting on the corner of the desk. “I remember.”

“That’s pretty good, Sheriff.”

Dorsey squinted at the light spilling into the room from the windows. “Some things you don’t forget. First kiss. Birth of your kid. First friend who gets locked up for murder.”

“You knew him?”

Dorsey nodded. “When I was school-age, I spent most of my summers with Frank, running around his family’s property next to the river. Judge Stubbs presided over the murder trial?”

“Trial and sentencing.”

“And Faust was the DA?”

“Bingo again. You want to go for three?”

“No. I’ve got no clue how Davey Grant fits in.”

Johnson held up a single sheet from the top of the pile and said, “He was the jury foreman.”

Dorsey exhaled slowly and looked up at the ceiling. “There was an eyewitness who testified at the trial, said Frank did it. A runnin’ buddy of Frank’s at the time. Hank something. Did you run across it?”

Johnson shook his head. “I didn’t go through the whole file. Just the pieces you told me to.”

“I’ll need you to hurry back down and make a list of the witnesses who testified at the trial, all the jurors, and all the attorneys. My guess is, whoever’s doing this, it isn’t over.”

“Can do,” Johnson said, and he stood up to leave. But he paused at the door and turned around. “Sheriff, since when do people like Frank Bell get out of prison?”

Dorsey looked at the deputy with concern and bafflement. “The State executed Frank ten years ago.”

Dorsey found Eady at the high school gymnasium the town had converted to his temporary work site. "I'm assuming y'all have a running list of the caskets that were found?"

"Of course."

"And do you also have a list of the empty gravesites so you can match them up?"

"I do."

"Can I see them?"

Eady turned to a fold-out table behind him and rifled through a stack of papers. He picked out several and handed them over. "What's going on?"

Dorsey counted twice and then handed the papers back. "You have one more casket than gravesites."

Eady nodded. "My guess is the extra floated away from a family plot, probably somewhere near the river. But right now we haven't heard from anyone reporting one missing."

"You won't," he said. "The last of that family died like five years ago."

Eady shifted back in his chair. "So then how do you know where the casket came from?"

"Come take a ride with me."

They walked past fencing blanketed in kudzu and into an untended yard teeming with wild grasses and flowering weeds. Each footstep in the thick ground cover launched seedlings into the air and sent grasshoppers bounding in all directions. The purling river grew louder as they walked, and eventually it came into sight down a low, gradual slope. Sunlight reflected on its surface like flecks of gold.

Dorsey found what he was looking for at the far end of the clearing. A dozen grave markers lay flat to the ground in an orderly arrangement. All prominently bore the name Bell, though on most the engravings were weathered and blackened. A thirteenth marker, set apart from the others, sat askew at the edge of a hole which, though irregularly shaped, was the length and width of a casket. No name had been etched into the marble.

"How did you know?" Eady asked.

"Just putting pieces of the puzzle together. Though I'll be damned if I can understand what the whole thing adds up to."

Eady wiped sweat from his forehead. "It's a pretty shallow grave. No wonder the casket floated away."

“The crew who dug it was in a hurry. They didn’t want it known that they helped bury a convicted murderer. I had to pay them extra just to do it.”

Eady turned to him. “*You* paid them?”

Dorsey shrugged. “His mother was on hard times. She’d had a small stroke. Her husband was dead. They’d basically bankrupted themselves with the cost of the lawyers long before that. A little before he was executed, Frank wrote a letter that his lawyer brought me. Said the date had been set and he had given up on appeals. Asked me if I’d make sure his body came back to the family plot. He knew his mother would want it that way, but she wouldn’t be able to take care of the arrangements herself in her condition.”

“So *you* did it?”

“Not for him,” Dorsey said. “For her. She was always so sweet to me growing up. The kind of good person you don’t see too much anymore. And she’d been through so much. Wasn’t her fault how her only child turned out. So I paid a funeral home to quietly pick up his body and bring it back here. I paid the crew to dig the grave. And we all agreed that it’d be best if no one ever spoke of it again.”

Eady stood scratching his head and gazing into the hole.

“We ever check for fingerprints on that casket?” Dorsey asked at length.

“Haven’t gotten around to it yet.”

“I’m thinking it’s high time we did.”

Hank Hargrett removed his oxygen cannula, set it on the arm of his La-Z-Boy, and lit a cigarette. “Well, isn’t that a bitch?”

“Do you understand what I’m telling you, Hank?”

“That someone with Frank Bell’s fingerprints is out there killing the people who put him on death row?”

“I guess he gets it,” Deputy Johnson said.

“I’ll be honest. I really can’t explain all of it,” Dorsey said. “But since you were the one who testified you saw Frank kill Hilliard, I think it’d be best if I station someone out here for a few nights while we try to figure it out.”

Hank took a long drag and savored the smoke for a moment before blowing it out the side of his mouth. “No, thanks.”

“Hank—”

“Do you know what small cell lung cancer means, Sheriff?”

Dorsey hesitated.

“I know you know what metastatic means, what with your wife.” Dorsey glared

at Hank, who looked away and added, "I read the paper."

"Yes, Hank. I know what metastatic means."

"Means I'm screwed." Hank held up his cigarette and studied the long ash. "I knew it when the doctors stopped trying to get me to quit."

"But you're here with us now, Hank. And as long as you are, it's my job—"

"Frank didn't kill Hilliard."

In the seconds that followed, Dorsey became acutely aware of the silence in the room, loud as cannon fire. The sun was setting outside, and blue pulses lit the darkening walls around him from the cruiser parked in the driveway.

"What did you just say?"

Hank tapped the ash carelessly over the tray sitting on the table beside him. "I killed him."

"But I read your testimony," Deputy Johnson said. "You testified—"

"I said what I had to at the time. But the truth is, I killed the asshole. So if there's someone out there helping Frank Bell get even, let 'em come on, get it over with."

"Why would you kill Hilliard?" Dorsey asked.

Hank smiled wryly. "Because he was messing around with my wife too."

Johnson whistled. "Sounds like Hilliard was a dog."

"Hold on," Dorsey said. "The story you told the jury—"

"All true but who pulled the trigger. We were drinking, target shooting, decided we'd go rough up Hilliard and teach him a lesson together. But I didn't want to stop at scaring him. I'd just found out about him and Nora, and I was pissed."

Dorsey stood and paced the room. "Then why say Frank did it?"

"I had my reasons," Hank said. "They were good enough at the time."

"Nah," Dorsey said, shaking his head. "You're lying."

"And why exactly would I do that, Sheriff? What do you think that gets me now?"

"Frank would've just rolled over on you."

"He was drunk, and I told him if one of us went down, we'd both go down. Used words like 'accessory' and 'accomplice.' When he got to drinking, I could convince him of just about anything. It's why he was fun to raise hell with. So I got him to agree that we'd say we found Hilliard that way. Just walking along and found the poor bastard. I wiped down the gun and hid it. But then, when the cops split us up for questioning, I'm telling them I had no idea Frank was going to do that and where to find the gun he ditched. In the other room, Frank's swearing we found him that way, like we'd agreed. You can imagine how that looked."

Hank stubbed out his cigarette and re-applied his nasal cannula.

“They were so eager for someone to punish, they never looked back.”

Dorsey glowered at him. “If what you’re saying is true, you have the blood of two men on your hands, and I’m going to have to bring you in.”

Hank waved a dismissive hand. “You want justice, get in line. One way or another, I’ll be dead soon. You want to arrest me, go ahead. Otherwise, get off my property and don’t come back without a warrant.”

Dorsey drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes, thinking. “Here’s what I’m going to do, Hank. I’m going to think real hard on what you just told me. But for now, I don’t really care if it’s true or not. We’re going to be outside your house tonight. We won’t come in unless we have to, but we’ll be here in case whoever it is that’s out there comes for you.”

Hank grunted.

“You don’t like it, feel free to call 9-1-1 and see where that gets you.”

That night, Dorsey positioned Deputy Johnson on the front porch and stood sentry on the back stoop himself. The air was still and thick. Lightning bugs poked green and orange pinholes in the darkness. No sound could be heard but the occasional distant barking of a dog.

Around midnight, his phone dinged in his pocket, and the screen lit up with a photograph sent by Eady—an up-close detail of the lip of Frank Bell’s casket where the closed lid would meet the body. Fingerprints showed dusty white, curling over the lip and extending down the side of the casket, the fingertips the furthest point away. In this arrangement, it appeared as though someone had gripped the edge of the casket from inside. Pulling himself up, perhaps. “Analysis pending,” the accompanying message said.

“What the h—”

A gust of wind brushed his body at the same moment the back door exploded outward, toppling him over the back stoop. As he clambered to his feet, he heard a sharp cry and cracking sounds inside the house. Then the front door opened, Deputy Johnson shouted, and an object thudded in the distance. Dorsey ran inside and down the hallway toward the living room, his sidearm and flashlight leading the way.

He found nothing in the house but Hank Hargrett dead in his chair. His lower jaw and right hand lay on the floor near his feet.

“My God.”

Dorsey continued onto the front porch and was relieved to see Deputy Johnson moving slowly to his feet in the yard, dazed but intact.

And then the sheriff was arcing through the air, and all went black.

He placed his hand on the Bible and swore to tell the truth. But he lied, over and over. And when the DA asked him to, he stood, and he pointed at me.

“This is a damn mess,” Mayor Kirbo declared, pacing the examination room. The lights had been dimmed, but still Dorsey could see the man’s face was flushed. “Four murders and no arrest. What am I supposed to tell people? I sure as hell can’t tell them what you just told me.”

Dorsey closed his eyes and allowed his head to sink into the pillow. “Tell them whatever you want.”

“You know the town will vote you out over this.”

“The night I’ve had, they can be my guest.”

Just then the emergency room doctor came in and shooed the mayor, explaining that his patient needed dark, quiet, and no stress.

“You hear that?” Dorsey said, smiling. “This guy gets it.”

Deputy Johnson, who had suffered more fright than actual injury, drove his boss home a couple of hours later. Neither man said a word the whole drive. But he hesitated at Dorsey’s front door before leaving.

“Sheriff, are we gonna talk about what happened tonight?”

Dorsey patted him on the shoulder. He could not remember a time when he had felt so tired. “Tomorrow,” he said. “Go get some sleep.”

When he was alone, he opened the front and back doors and turned on the outside floodlights. A soft breeze had picked up and was flowing through the first level of the house from front to back. He put on a small pot of coffee and sat in a chair at his breakfast table.

The coffee was barely brewed when a hunched figure filled the rear doorway, backlit by the flood lamps. Dorsey stood, and the figure straightened itself upright.

“Frank,” Dorsey said. He flicked off the safety but kept his pistol at his side. His pulse scudded in his temples.

“I don’t think the gun’ll do anything,” came a hoarse voice.

“I’m a better shot than Davey Grant. How about we don’t test it?”

“You didn’t have any part in it, Everett. I’m not here for that.”

Frank stepped forward slowly, his hands raised by his shoulders, until the two men stood across the table from each other. “May I?” he said, motioning to the seat next to him.

Dorsey nodded, and the two men sat opposite each other—Dorsey in his wrinkled and grass-stained uniform, Frank in his tan prison jumpsuit blackened with blood.

At length, Dorsey spoke. “I don’t mind you ringing my bell, Frank, but you didn’t need to toss my deputy like that.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he said. “I’m still learning to control it.”

Dorsey studied Frank’s face. He was pale and gaunt, but he appeared a good decade younger than he should be. A good decade younger than Dorsey was.

“How are you here, Frank? I brought your body back. I watched them bury you.”

Frank shook his head. “I can’t explain it. Last thing I knew, I was in the chair. Then suddenly I woke up in the dark, and I yelled and I pushed, and then everything was bright and wet. I was standing in the old man’s field just down the road from Mama’s house. I ran into the woods and then home and ...” His voice caught, and his chin quivered. “Everything’s different. I’m different. You’ve seen.”

“Hank told me what he did to you.”

Frank’s face hardened. “I saw Mama’s grave. She died thinking her son was a murderer.”

“And now ...”

“I know. But I’m not going back to jail. I’ve been given a second chance, and I intend to use it. I just came to tell you thanks for bringing me home like I asked. And goodbye.”

Dorsey stared at his childhood friend across the table and suddenly wished he’d opted for whiskey instead of coffee. “Are you done, Frank? This needs to be over.”

Frank nodded. “It’s over.”

“And where will you go?”

“I don’t know yet. But please, don’t try to find me.”

“Tomorrow, I’m done, too. I won’t try to find you, but someone else will.”

Frank smiled. “If they believe you.”

Dorsey snorted and nodded his head. “Yeah,” he said. “If.”

Frank looked up over Dorsey’s shoulder, and his eyes widened.

Dorsey turned then to find Eady frozen behind him, holding a water glass. “Oh, God.” He had forgotten about his guests. He turned back around just as the empty chair across from him clattered backward to the floor. The back screened door clacked against clapboard siding and swung back.

Frank was gone.

Dorsey’s body slumped in the chair, his head hung low and his hands shaking. He tasted lead on his tongue.

“Sheriff?”

He glanced back at Eady’s face, white as the moon, and pitched his thumb over his shoulder.

“Found your body.” 

YELENA TRIED TO KILL ME

Trey Dowell

The first time I saw Yelena Nevsky, she tried to kill me.

I didn't know who she was—hell, I didn't even know *she* was a she. Hidden underneath an authentic kit of Russian medieval chain mail, brandishing dual swords, Yelena was just a whirling dervish trying to go through the only thing standing between her and the Maryland Renaissance Fair's Grand Champion title.

Me. A guy wearing home-made heavy plate armor, lugging around a shield, and trying to breathe through tiny slits in a ten-pound steel helm.

Lighter, faster, and able to see better in a helmet that only partially covered her face, Yelena made me look like a drunk armadillo. She used both swords to hack away at my legs and my shield, keeping me backpedaling and focused solely on defense. And just as I thought I could anticipate her movements well enough to slip in an attack of my own, she did something I'd never seen before: she *jumped* at me. Spun around in mid-air. While wearing at least thirty pounds of armor.

For an instant, she was eight feet tall, swords spinning like helicopter rotors. I barely raised the shield in time—the clang of metal-on-metal vibrated my teeth. The voice of the crowd swelled in appreciation, then dissipated into groans as her gutsy move failed to bring home victory. Raucous cheering for the jumping-spin lunge, though, led to her first and only mistake: she tried it again.

This time, gravity and a trampled, muddy field favored me. Her foot slid as she planted for the jump and Yelena fell. She rolled, scrambled to her hands and knees, but not before my sword tapped the back of her neck for the “kill.”

Victory by pure luck.

The awards ceremony went as expected. I received my oversized turkey leg and ceremonial plastic goblet of “mead”/Miller Lite while being showered by enthusiastic boos of a crowd far more impressed with the tournament's runner-up. Until, of course,

said runner-up removed her helmet. Yelena shook out her mane of dark sweaty hair, and those boos meant for me quickly morphed into cheers for her.

She waved to her adoring fans from beside me on the victory stand. The crowd roared their approval, but they were too far away to see her the way I could. The high cheekbones, pointed chin, brilliant smile—all beneath golden-brown eyes that burned with flecks of yellow fire. Breathtaking.

“I like your armor,” she said without looking at me.

The compliment—along with a Russian accent that brought the hairs on the back of my neck to attention—broke through my daze. “Uh ... thanks. Forged and welded it myself. It’s a hobby,” I said, immediately regretting the uber-geek overshare.

She turned, looked me up and down. Her quick appraisal of the armor—and maybe me—won an appreciative nod. Then she leaned over and whispered “You know I should have killed you, yes?” Her accent turned the “killed” into *keeled*.

I nodded, unsure whether it was in agreement or submission.

Standing on a victory platform made of plywood, greasy turkey leg in hand, I realized that Yelena Nevsky was so much more than breathtaking.

She was fierce.

“How long have you been seeing her now?” Trevor asked.

I slid his complimentary macchiato across the counter, trying to suppress the dopey grin I’d worn, for, well ...

“Three weeks.”

I skipped out from behind the register and followed Trevor to the two-top nestled in the back corner. He plopped down and stared at me over the frames of his Revo sunglasses.

“Aaaaaand the sex?”

“C’mon man ...” My eye roll and disgusted sigh had been honed by years of Trevor’s douchbaggery.

“Dude, you’re dating an exotic foreigner. If there was ever a time to break free of missionary position’s tyranny, this is it. I just want to make sure you’re living life to the fullest.” He waited until my continued silence finally broke his will to be annoying. “Okayokayokay. Keep your secrets. What does your supermodel girlfriend do for a living, again?”

“She works at the Russian embassy here in DC. She’s a cultural attaché to the—”

“Spy.”

“What?”

“Dude, ‘cultural attaché’ at an embassy? Trained in combat? She’s got spy written all over her.”

Another eye roll called for. “Clearly. And she’s, what, stealing all the classified info I keep in my corner coffee shop?” I motioned toward Trevor’s cup. “Probably trying to obtain my macchiato secret formula.”

Trevor sneered enough to be mildly insulting. “Nobody’s trying to steal that, trust me.”

“Ouch.”

“Look, I’ve seen your pictures of this woman,” he said, leaning in. “And there has *got* to be another reason, because you are: A. not rich, B. not a genius, and C. unless something magical has happened in the fifteen years since the Chesapeake High gym-class shower ...” Trevor’s volume increased. “... not overly well-endowed.”

I winced and looked around. None of my employees were within earshot. “Seriously?”

He cackled, obviously happy with himself. “Hey, not that welding your own dork armor and enjoying King Arthur cosplay in a cow pasture isn’t super-impressive. I’m just saying there’s gotta be something else going on, y’know?”

I took back his macchiato.

Yelena and I cuddled in bed at my apartment that night. White-blue light from the muted television flickered over the surface of her tanned leg, draped across mine. Her fingers lightly tapped out a rhythm on my bare chest, as if playing a silent tune on an unseen instrument.

“Your friend sounds like a jerk,” she said between measures. I couldn’t tell if it was the accent or her disgust that turned “jerk” into three syllables.

“So, definitely *not* a spy then?” I asked, eyebrows arched with hope.

“This depends,” she purred, dialing the sexy up to eleven. “Do you have any state secrets?”

“*Nyet.*”

She scoffed. “Terrible accent. Influential friends?”

“I know the assistant manager at Whole Foods. He emails me when the aged Havarti is in-stock—”

“*Uglichsky* cheese is better.”

“And of course, Trevor. He’s a stockbroker.”

“And a jerk who thinks I’m lying to you. Using you. Hmpff.” Her puff of contempt tickled my chest hair. “Not a very good friend, yes?”

“Eh, Trevor’s harmless. He just enjoys giving me trouble.”

Trevor, I thought. *Usually wrong. Always crass.* Still, the thoughts he’d put in my head that afternoon were ... insidious. I’d stewed in them all day.

Which is why I blurted, “So why are you with me, anyway?”

The instant the words escaped, I wanted them back. But now they were *out* there, my naked insecurity floating in the dark between us. After a nerve-racking pause, she propped her head up and stared, one corner of her mouth curled in a half-grin. “Why do you think?”

“Because I’m the Grand Champion, of course.”

She threatened me with the back of her free hand. “*Bozhe moi!* You lost that fight.”

“The goblet on my mantle says different.”

She laughed but kept looking at me; pushing the humor aside, demanding a real answer. The TV made the flame in her eyes burn a cool blue. After considering the question for what seemed like minutes, I told her the unsettling truth.

“I don’t know.”

Yelena pursed her lips, thinking. I couldn’t tell if she was searching for the right words, or the right way to say them. Maybe both.

“Do you remember the day we met, the ceremony?” she finally said.

“Of course.”

“What you said on the platform?”

“Um, when I offered to buy you a cup of coffee at the shop?”

“*Durak.* No, before.” She sat up in bed, crossed her long legs. “You said I would have made an excellent *bogatyr.*”

I nodded. “A knight-errant.”

“But you knew the Russian word.”

“I got it wrong though.”

She cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

“I looked it up after I got home. I should have said *polian*, ah, *polianis—*”

“*Polianitsa?*” she said, eyes wide.

“Yeah, that’s it. A female knight-warrior. Closest thing in our mythology is, well, an Amazon, I guess. You would have made an excellent *polianitsa.* That’s what I should have said, anyway.”

Her smile looked as bright as it did that day at the Ren Fair. “A cute American who understands my culture, compliments me, and wants to learn.” She leaned down

and kissed me. “What more could I want? Which is why I return your favor.”

She laid down and slipped on her wireless headphones, like every night she stayed over at my place. An hour of English lessons, so that my cultural-attaché girlfriend could communicate even better with her thoughtful, cute American boyfriend.

Trevor can suck it, I thought right before falling into a very deep, satisfied sleep.

One week later—the night before our scheduled rematch on the final weekend of the Maryland Ren Fair’s season—I kissed her goodnight and said, “Don’t worry, I’ll go easy on you this time. No more scars.”

Her furrowed brow showed she didn’t understand, so I pointed to the five-inch pinkish-white line on her lower abdomen, a mark I hadn’t asked about before. She nodded. “Appen—how you say? Appendis—”

“Appendix?” I asked, touching the uneven, jagged scar. “Was your surgeon drunk?”

She clasped a cool hand over my own. “I don’t like talking about it. Please.”

I looked into her surprisingly hard gaze, waited until it softened.

“I’m sorry. It’s just ... your scar reminds me of something.”

“What?” she asked.

“Creating Ren Fair armor is like a second job for me,” I started. “Hundreds of hours, alone in the shop, practicing skills most of the world forgot 700 years ago. My friends think it’s a gigantic waste of time, but all that welding and hammering taught me some unusual, surprising stuff. For example, people always think that a weld is the weakest point in the steel—the first place to fracture if you apply enough pressure.

“Crazy thing is, it’s not true. A good weld is actually *stronger* than the parent metal. It’s like the fire does something ... magical ... to the steel. Enchants it, almost. The weld creates a bond stronger than it has a right to be.”

She removed her hand from mine, let me trace the scar’s path with my finger.

“I don’t care how you got this weld, Yelena. An appendectomy, a knife fight, a brawl with a tiger—all it’s done is made you stronger. In fact, you might just be the strongest person I’ve ever known.”

I could’ve sworn I saw a glaze of tears in her eyes, but only for a moment. She pulled me in tight, lifted my hand to her face, and kissed me. Hard. Long. Almost desperate.

The best goddamn kiss of my life.

Then Yelena rolled me underneath her and whispered, “No English lessons tonight.”

The next morning, I fitted a new chest armor piece with leather straps and tried it on for size while Yelena showered and changed. I'd made this one lighter and tighter-fitting than my old heavy plate armor. I needed more speed to stay alive against a Russian Amazon. When I pulled the locking tabs tight, one of them popped off, zipping across the bed and over Yelena's side, down to the carpet.

I wedged my body between the bed and the wall and fished around until my hand bumped something unfamiliar, definitely not the tab. I pushed the bed further from the wall so I could squirm down enough to investigate.

Just under the bed frame, I saw it. A thin wire—protruding from a hole in the floor—attached to a small plastic housing, no bigger than a quarter. A slot in the side of the housing contained a metal sliver.

A memory card?

One tug and the whole thing, wire and housing, ripped free. I retreated back to my side of the bed and pried the tiny card out, confused. That's how Yelena found me when she came out of the bathroom with her bag in hand.

"Be sure to clear space on the mantle for my—" She froze, eyes darting between the housing in my left hand and the memory card in my right.

"What is this thing?" I asked. "Did you put this under ..." I glanced back at the bed, noticed the wireless headphones laying on her rumpled pillow. Did the cold math in my head.

Listening to something every night, yes. Just not English lessons.

My eyes drifted to the card. Recording it.

Then back to her.

Spy.

Her bag was on the floor now, replaced in her hand by a gun. *A gun.* Pointed at my chest. The look on her face wasn't surprise, guilt, or even anger. No, much worse than that.

Disappointment.

"Turn around," she said quietly.

I looked at my fierce *polianitsa*, praying for it to be a joke, knowing it wasn't. Knowing I should beg, plead for my life. Instead, the only words that bubbled up were "I'm sorry."

Not sorry I'd met her. Not sorry she was a spy. Not even sorry she was about to shoot me. My single regret was that I couldn't rewind my life twenty seconds and just forget about that damn locking tab.

"Turn around," she said again. Firmer.

I did what she wanted.

One breath. Two. A third.

Maybe she changed her mi—

The gun went off, an invisible horse kicked me in the back, and I launched head-first into the end table.

Waking up in a hospital room is never good. It's worse when an FBI agent is the first person you see.

What he said made total sense and zero sense at the same time:

Fingerprints in your apartment have no match.

Russians say there's no cultural representatives attached to their embassy right now.

Apartment below you is rented by the Ukrainian embassy. High-level diplomats stay there when they need temporary housing.

He asked me a hundred questions, none of which mattered.

I asked a dozen, none of which he could answer.

All the while, the same embarrassing question, muttered in a television's flickering light, cycled through my brain on a continuous loop.

So, why are you with me?

The answer, now painfully obvious: I happened to live in the right apartment.

Just a random guy. Nobody.

Made me wish I'd never woken up at all.

Eventually, a doctor ended my FBI inquisition, sending the agent on his way. When we were alone, the doc said what I expected.

"You're very fortunate."


"Yeah, that's me," I grumbled, nodding to my IV and monitors. "Mr. Fortunate."

"The bullet should have punched straight through that light steel armor you were wearing," he said. "Instead, you've got a bruised spine, a concussion, and a helluva souvenir."

He motioned to the chest piece, laying on the chair in the corner of the room. There, centered perfectly, a deep dent in the thin metal where a slug had been removed. A dent right in the middle of the long weld where I'd joined the pieces together. A part of my armor stronger than it had a right to be.

Made me smile.

The last time I saw Yelena Nevsky, she tried to kill me.

Luckily, she didn't try very hard. 

IN PLAIN SIGHT

J.R. Lindermuth

Late yesterday as I shelved returned books shortly before closing time, I overheard a conversation meant to be private.

I'm not nosy. I generally mind my own business, and I'm not inclined to eavesdrop on others. But there's nothing wrong with my hearing and you can't fault me for overhearing something I wasn't supposed to hear.

I'm Emma Sharp. I'm not going to tell you how old I am, except to say I'm what some refer to as a senior citizen these days. I've been at the Masonville Public Library longer than anyone else and if that alone doesn't qualify me to be head librarian I'd have less cause to complain. Experience should count more than any fancy degree like that cast in my face by Miss Fancy Pants McClure. Some might say I'm jealous because the board saw fit to give her the post rather than me. In my defense, I do what I'm paid for and don't make a habit of complaining—which usually doesn't change things anyway.

Fancy Pants McClure and a man were conversing in whispers behind the Science & Physics stacks, a section which doesn't get as much traffic as it should in my opinion. I recognized her voice right away. She has a slight lisp and—despite college and her best efforts—is unable to disguise her Pennsylvania Dutch accent when excited. I knew it was her, but couldn't place the man's voice.

Now it's not my business and I don't care if she wants to have a *tete-a-tete* with a man in the stacks. It was what they were discussing caught my attention.

"... big bucks," she said. "Lucky I was the one sorting these books. Usually donated books are junk we dispose of for pennies in our sales. But this is a gem, a rare first edition."

"So how does it help us?" the man asked. "Aren't these donations recorded? If we just take it, someone is bound to notice. Like that busybody who thought she had your job in the bag." This last comment got my goat and inclined me to keep listening when I might otherwise have moved on. There was nothing distinctive about his voice, nothing to set him apart from a dozen other men who are in and out of the library on a regular basis.

She giggled. "I've got it all figured out. Later editions, which aren't worth the same money as this one, come with the same dust jacket. The publisher even retained this cover for the book club edition, which isn't worth a dime. I want you to take a photo of the book with your phone and find us one of those cheap editions. Then we'll just swap books and no one will ever know the difference."

"Where am I supposed to find this worthless substitute?"

I heard an audible hiss. Then she said, "That used book shop down the street is bound to have a copy or two. Shouldn't cost more than a buck or two."

"And we'll be rolling in bigger bucks."

"Right."

And they both giggled.

In the past I'd usually been the one to sort donated volumes. This time she'd had a look at the box before me and said she'd save me the bother and do the sorting. I didn't care since it's usually an onerous, unrewarding task. Now I wondered, what rare book had she stumbled upon? There was a list, but just seeing the title might not give me a clue. I had to see the books for myself.

People who aren't obsessed with collecting probably wouldn't be able to tell the difference between a real first printing and a tomato. Even if it reads *First Edition* on the copyright page that doesn't necessarily mean it's worth anything or even that it is, in fact, the first printing of a book. Publishers vary in their methods of signifying a first printing and some don't remove the wording in all subsequent printings. I've actually seen the misleading term in some of those book club editions. Sometimes you have to go by number codes rather than words to know you have the real article.

And even when a book is a genuine first, there are other factors determining whether it's worth any money—little things like condition and rarity.

It galled me to think Miss High-And-Mighty McClure would actually consider stealing a book and depriving the library of a chance to profit by a donation. We're a small institution and there's never enough money to do the things we'd like to do for our community.

Her attitude prompted me to want to stop her felonious undertaking and, maybe, have an opportunity to throw sand in her face. Wouldn't the board have a change of heart if I showed her up as a thief?

But how could I accomplish it? I didn't even know what book they were talking about.

Since she asked her accomplice to take a photo she either had the book with her or it was nearby. I heard footsteps as they moved up the aisle. I scurried in the

same direction, hoping to intercept them and see where they were headed, or at least identify the guy.

"Miss Sharp," a voice called.

I spun around and found Scotty Eisenhower hot on my heels. He's a bright young high school junior who spends a lot of quality time in the library. Not someone I would ordinarily ignore or hesitate to help. But did he have to need me now?

"Could you help me find a book?" he asked, his tone apologetic. "I need it for a science project. I have the Dewey number, but I looked all over and I can't seem to find it."

"Were you in the next aisle?"

"Uh-huh."

"Wasn't Miss McClure over there?"

"Uh-huh. She was at the far end helping Mr. Fields and I didn't want to interrupt them."

"Fields? The math teacher?"

Scotty nodded. "He saw me and waved before they walked off. I came around this way hoping to catch up to Miss McClure. Then I spied you."

I blew breath and set myself to helping Scotty. At least he'd identified the other culprit for me. I wondered if she and Fields were having a fling. He's a married man, isn't he? Of course marital vows don't mean as much to some people these days. Were they planning to run off with the proceeds they hoped to get from this rare book? Not that it matters to me. The important thing to me is stopping her from cheating the library out of money it deserves more than her.

After helping Scotty, my curiosity drew me to the end of the stack where McClure and Fields had been talking. My suspicion was justified. She'd left the book here in plain sight, shelved between a copy of *The Beak of the Finch* by Jonathan Weiner and Edward Wilson's *The Diversity of Life*. Smarty Pants figured if anyone noticed, they'd think it had just been a stacking error.

My hand shook as I drew it out to be sure she was correct about it being a true first edition. I'm no expert. But I know enough to agree. It was a first edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird* published in 1960 by J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia and New York. I didn't know its exact worth, though I was certain Harper Lee's little book represented a lot of money that belonged to the library and not McClure and her boyfriend.

Shivering as though I'd come down with a fever, I made a decision. Then I went outside and made a phone call to a friend.

I always attend our board meetings. As an employee I'm entitled to sit in and I like to keep abreast of what's happening with the library. Besides, it annoys McClure.

This evening, some weeks after overhearing that conversation, I had a special reason for being present. At the conclusion of the business session, Ken Hoagland, board president, nodded at me and announced, "Thanks to our own Miss Sharp, this library has reaped quite a wonderful windfall."

Unaware of what was going on, McClure glared at me.

"Last month while going through a selection of books donated to the library," Ken continued, "Emma found what she believed to be a first edition of a valuable book. She conferred with Luke Strauss—you all know him. He runs the used book store down on Chestnut Street. Anyway, Luke agreed with Emma's opinion. They contacted me and, with my permission, arranged to have the book offered at auction by a firm Luke knew about in the city."

With a big smile on his face, Ken held aloft a check. "Here's the result—\$30,000 for our library."

McClure's mouth dropped open and I thought she'd fall off her chair. I could hear her high-heeled shoe jiggling beneath the table as I accepted the applause and appreciation of the board members.

After the meeting adjourned, McClure caught up to me in the parking lot. She clutched at my sleeve and turned me to face her. "That was my book," she snapped, spittle flying from her painted mouth.

"No. It was library property you attempted to steal for your benefit."


"How did you even get your hands on it? I hid it ..."

"In plain sight," I replied with a grin. "I found it after I heard you plotting with your partner in crime. I checked with Luke. He told me you'd sent Fields to buy a cheap copy. If you'd have checked the stacks, you'd have found our collection includes several copies. One of them is a book club edition just like the one you acquired from Luke. I switched it for the one you hoped to sell."

McClure was livid. Luke heard from the collector she'd contacted how she attempted to sell him a book club edition as a first. Apparently she never examined the book after they made the exchange.

"I'll fire you," McClure cried. "You're done here, you nasty old busybody."

"I don't think you will. Ken knows the whole story. He plans on giving you a chance to resign. If you don't, I imagine you'll be the one getting fired."

I left her standing there in a state of shock as I walked on to where I'd parked my car. 

ACTUAL STOP

C.E. Albanese

The presidential motorcade barreled up the northbound lanes of the Baltimore Washington Parkway, the lush foliage lining the side of the road zipping past in a streak of green. A vast array of wildflowers stretched across the wide, grassy middle divider creating a vibrant swirl of color.

There's safety in speed.

Tommy Evans remembered learning the phrase, but couldn't recall who said it. *Probably one of the instructors at the Academy*, he thought.

He'd learned a lot at the Academy: how to handle various weapons, how to investigate financial crimes, and how to conduct protective advances. He'd even been given diagrams of the secret bunker under the White House.

He wrinkled his nose.

But he couldn't remember anyone ever telling him that the inside of the presidential spare limousine lacked any noise or smells.

Constructed to near perfection, the Cadillac behemoth, an identical twin to the President's limo—the Beast—had been engineered to provide passengers with a comfortable and luxurious experience. But the sterile atmosphere made Tommy's stomach churn.

"Got any good jokes?" asked Jon Bork, the seasoned Secret Service agent sitting behind the steering wheel.

Tommy blinked several times. *Jokes?* Any other time he would have had something silly on the tip of his tongue, but at the moment, laughing was the furthest thing from his mind. The last twenty minutes he'd barely contained the excitement bubbling under his skin. And the last time he'd felt this much nervous energy, he'd been on one knee, about to forfeit his carefree bachelor life and ask Sarah to marry him. Then, he'd been confident of the outcome; now, he had no idea what to expect.

"And to think everyone said you were the funny guy," added Bork disappointed when Tommy didn't reply right away.

Tommy shifted in his seat. The weight of the Sig Sauer P229 and dual magazine

pouch clipped to his belt still felt awkward two weeks into his new protective detail assignment. “Sorry,” he said, tight-lipped, “I’m just thinking ahead.”

Bork made a noise that sounded like a scoff. “Just remember your training and you’ll do fine.”

Training, right.

Like every other Secret Service agent, Tommy had spent four months at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia, and another five months at the Secret Service Academy in Beltsville, Maryland.

It seemed a lifetime ago.

Before raising his right hand and swearing an oath to support and defend the Constitution, Tommy worked day and night at the CPA firm owned by his father. Debits, credits, and spreadsheets were the extent of Tommy’s professional world. But then he reconnected with a childhood friend, Eric Miller.

At first, Tommy thought their reconnection happenstance. It wasn’t. Miller, the man in charge of the Secret Service Presidential Protective Detail, or PPD, was there to recruit him.

Unlike Miller, Tommy didn’t come from a family steeped in law enforcement history. He hadn’t served in the military either. In fact, he’d never shot a gun, let alone owned one. And in high school, Tommy wasn’t known for the advance placement classes he aced every year, or for being a member of the National Honor Society, but as the class clown. As a fan of old-school stand-up comedians, like Belushi, Pryor, and Dangerfield, Tommy learned at a young age it was easier to make friends with humor than with boring facts he’d read in a book.

Miller was one of the few who saw through Tommy’s charade. He saw beneath the jokes and one-liners to Tommy’s analytical mind, strong work ethic, his internal drive to help others, his unquestionable honesty, and his unwavering love of his country. Qualities that made for a successful Secret Service agent.

The deep baritone voice of Special Agent Don Davis, the shift leader sitting in the Secret Service follow-up vehicle, crackled through the earpiece secreted in Tommy’s ear. “Command Post. Command Post. This is Halfback. We are Bravo.”

Tommy’s pulse ticked up several notches.

Bravo, in Secret Service slang, meant the motorcade was less than five minutes to their destination: an office building nestled in the wooded suburbs of Prince George’s County, Maryland.

“Halfback, this is the Command Post. Copy. Bravo. Sit-rep remains the same. One greeter, five local and national press, and fifty-five contained ticketed guests

inside. The site agent has given the all-clear at the arrival-departure.”

Bork glanced over at Tommy. “Buckle up,” he said with a grin. “Shit’s about to get interesting.”

The next five minutes were a blur as a million questions flashed through Tommy’s head. *Am I ready? Do I have the skills necessary to perform my duties? What if I fail?*

And then, as if coming out of a fog, Tommy saw Brian “Zap” Zapoticzny, the Secret Service site agent. Zap, in a tight-fitting blue pinstriped suit, stood in front of the loading dock, waving the motorcade toward the arrival-departure area.

The vehicles slowed to a crawl. One by one, they passed through a checkpoint manned by a small army of Secret Service agents, officers, and a K-9 unit.

An armored black Suburban blocked the opposite end of the street. Tommy knew from the morning’s briefing that five highly trained and heavily armed members of the Counter Assault Team, or CAT, were poised inside. This elite Secret Service unit, equivalent to a military Quick Reaction Force, possessed enough firepower to confront and eliminate most threats.

And although Tommy couldn’t see them, a two-man counter-sniper team, positioned on the roof of the building with a commanding view of the surrounding area, provided overwatch.

The impressive display of force should have eased Tommy’s anxiety. It didn’t.

The secure package—the spare limo, the Beast, and follow-up—pulled inside the loading dock. The remaining vehicles parked outside in a zig-zag formation. There would be no line-of-sight issues.

Davis’s deep voice boomed over the encrypted airwaves. “Command Post. Command Post, this is Halfback. Arrive.”

Zap signaled for the roll-down doors to close.

The spare limo lurched to a stop.

Tommy threw open his door and scrambled over to the Beast’s front bumper. The rest of the shift bailed out of the follow-up, joining Tommy around the presidential limo.

Davis, watching off to the side, barked commands through the radio, ensuring the agents created a diamond of protection around their protectee.

Thirty seconds later, the loading dock door closed.

Assistant Special Agent in Charge Kelly Jones, a hulking man with a menacing demeanor actuated by the jagged scar that ran down the left side of his face, exited the right front seat of the presidential limo. He took a second to surveil the surroundings. Satisfied that things were in order, he pulled open the Beast’s thick rear passenger

door.

President Jonathan McKenzie stepped out.

Tall, handsome, and wealthy beyond measure, President McKenzie made a show of tugging his expensive cufflinks and smoothing out his Italian silk suit jacket, and then, as if surrounded by the paparazzi, flashed a flawless smile.

“Lead us inside, Zap,” Davis said over the radio.

Tommy made eye contact with Zap. And although no words were uttered, he knew exactly what the other agent was thinking: *Follow me and keep your head on a swivel.*

Zap gave a curt nod and turned. Tommy and the rest of the entourage followed.

Christopher Sendrowski, the charismatic representative for Maryland’s Third District, waited at the top of the ramp. Known for a short stint as a professional golfer, Sendrowski often wore a black-and-white Titleist ball cap. Members of the press joked that the congressman only wore the hat because he hoped the golf company would contribute to his re-election. It wasn’t far from the truth.

Walking past the congressman, Tommy and Zap paused near the double doors that led into the building.

The President grabbed Sendrowski’s outstretched hand. “Chris, it’s been too long. How the hell are you? Wait. More importantly, what’s your handicap now?”

Sendrowski’s eyes lit up at the chance to talk about his golf game. Although on a tight schedule, the two men launched into a deep-dive discussion about the mechanics of a proper golf swing before segueing into the congressman telling of sinking a sixty-foot putt on a recent golf outing.

Keeping an ear and eye on the pair, Tommy mentally went over the scheduled movements: *POTUS goes to the Hold Room. He’s there for no more than ten minutes. Then he moves to the makeshift stage set up in the lobby of the building. I take a position on the right front corner of the stage. Fifteen minutes of remarks. A left-to-right rope line. And then we return to the motorcade and depart.*

It was a straightforward sequence of events, yet, something nagged at Tommy’s subconscious. He thought back to the Protective Intelligence agent’s brief that morning mentioning there’d been an uptick in chatter on the dark web about this particular gathering. He inched closer to Zap. “How’s it look inside?”

Zap, a barrel-chested former New Jersey State Trooper who’d received national attention a couple of years ago when he ran into a house engulfed in flames to save an entire family, replied in a hushed tone as if afraid of being overheard. “The building is locked down tighter than a frog’s ass, but—”

“But what?”

Zap’s brow furrowed. He leaned in. “I’ve got a feeling everything’s gonna go to shit.”

The fear evident in Zap’s voice surprised Tommy and caused the burrito in his stomach to push up into the middle of his throat.

President McKenzie and Congressman Sendrowski started walking up the ramp.

Zap stepped away from Tommy and shoved open the doors that led from the loading dock into the building.

“There’s been a change of plans,” Jones warned over the radio. “POTUS wants to go directly to the stage. Tommy and Haggerty, I want you two to double-time it to the lobby and take your positions at the front of the stage.”

Tommy glanced over at Zap, who shook his head as if to say, *I told you shit was going to go sideways.*

Neil Haggerty, a brash no-nonsense agent from Boston who had the propensity to call everyone, regardless of age, “kid,” appeared alongside Tommy. “You heard him, kid. Let’s move with a purpose.”

Tommy didn’t need to be told twice, and he didn’t need to be told how to get to the lobby; he’d committed the entire building layout to memory.

The two men hustled down the hallway. Pushing through a second set of double doors, they passed a bank of elevators and a lone, bored-looking Secret Service post-stander who fake-yawned as they strode past.

“I guess he knows something we don’t,” said Haggerty.

“Like what?” asked Tommy.

“That we got nothing to worry about, kid.”

Nothing? Really? Then why can’t I shake this feeling? thought Tommy.

As the duo rounded a corner, the din of the waiting crowd grew in intensity. Tommy’s palms began to sweat.

Halfway down the corridor, a thick piece of dark blue fabric stretched across the hallway. A red arrow hung from the ceiling, pointing straight ahead. The word Lobby was stenciled in black letters below it.

Another agent stood guard in front of the cloth barrier. Tommy knew the agent was there to restrict access to staffers and Secret Service agents.

“Good luck, boys,” the agent said with a smirk as Tommy and Haggerty got closer. “You’ll need it.”

“Luck? Who the hell needs that when the A-shift is working? Right, kid?” Haggerty said.

“We’re the B-shift,” Tommy mumbled as he felt the burrito inch further up into the back of his throat. He pulled back the left corner of the blue sheet and squeezed through to the other side.

“A-shift, B-shift what’s the difference, kid,” Haggerty said with a shrug, and then followed his shift-mate through the slit.

The makeshift stage was on the other side of the cloth barrier. The three-foot-tall square-shaped platform faced the entrance doors. In the middle stood the Blue Goose, the presidential podium.

Tommy took in the scene. Although bright and airy, the glass-enclosed lobby seemed smaller than he’d anticipated. A set of stairs to his left, cordoned off with yellow caution tape, led to a second-floor balcony. A stone-faced agent stood on the bottom step, and another wandered the walkway above.

A pair of speakers behind the stage came to life with the President’s campaign song, “American Ride” by Toby Keith.

Tommy returned his focus to the crowd, who now swayed to the music. Although everyone seemed to be in a jubilant mood, a lesson Tommy learned on his first day at the Secret Service Academy popped into his head.

Instructor Noonan limped into the classroom. A living legend, Noonan had received The Department of Homeland Security’s highest prize—the Award for Valor—for protecting the President’s daughter during a kidnap attempt. Noonan had thwarted the attack, but not before one of the gunmen discharged his shotgun, shredding Noonan’s right leg and leaving it a mangled and bloody mess.

Noonan hobbled to the whiteboard and scribbled an incomplete sentence: *Everyone is a threat until ...* He then turned, folded his arms across his chest, and waited.

After several minutes of silence, the agent sitting next to Tommy raised his hand. “Until what, sir?”

Noonan’s right hand swooped behind his back. Retrieving a small handgun from a holster hidden inside his waistband, he pointed it at the student who had asked the question and pulled the trigger.

A single non-lethal simunition round, routinely used during training scenarios, sped from the barrel, striking the awestruck student in the chest, who yelped more in surprise than in pain.

“Ooh ... that’s gonna leave a mark,” whispered Tommy.

No one else moved or said a word.

Noonan shuffled over to the student. As he picked up the spent simunition

round, he answered the student's question. "Until it isn't."

Tommy snapped back to the moment and scanned the people at the front of the crowd. Even though they went through a checkpoint and had been subjected to a search, Tommy knew he couldn't let his guard down. First, he focused his attention on their faces, and then their hands and waistlines. He looked for bulges or anything resembling the outline of a weapon.

Wait. What was that?

Tommy zeroed in on a man in the middle of the packed crowd.

Those eyes. Hard. Determined. Like a predator stalking prey.

An uneasiness settled in the pit of Tommy's stomach.

The crowd shifted. The man ducked.

Shit. Where'd he go?

Tommy scanned the sea of faces. And that's when he saw her. Long black hair, porcelain skin, shimmering green eyes; the woman looked like she stepped off the cover of a magazine. And that red dress; it left little to the imagination. Although happily married, Tommy couldn't avert his eyes.

Haggerty tapped Tommy's shoulder. "What are you doing, kid?"

Tommy refocused. "I thought I saw something."

"What?"

What did I see? Tommy thought. *A look? A feeling? A stunning woman?* He shook his head. How could he explain any of that? "Forget it," he said. "It was nothing."

Haggerty shrugged. "C'mon then, we'd better get into position."

Tommy nodded, and as he strode to the front corner of the stage, the crowd, sensing the event was about to begin, began to pulsate with excitement.

Over the clamor, Tommy heard a voice in his ear. "POTUS is moving to the stage."

Several seconds later, the President of the United States appeared.

The lobby exploded into a chorus of shouts and cheers.

The President strode to the Blue Goose where he smiled, waved, and waited.

After a couple of minutes, the speakers grew still. The crowd did too.

A master orator, the President opened with a joke. "My fellow patriots," he said, "I'm pleased to announce that I've just signed legislation outlawing the Democrat Party. Deportations to Canada begin in five minutes."

The crowd howled. And from that moment on, they were his.

The President spoke with the passion of a man on a mission from God. And

although an abbreviated version of his stump speech, the President's delivery wasn't any less enthusiastic. He spoke about the construction of the border wall, the record-breaking heights of the Stock Market, and the reopening of Gitmo, the all-important military prison that the previous administration closed for political reasons.

The crowd hung on his every word. At times, they hooted and hollered to show their undying allegiance and support. And when the President mentioned his political rival, they booed with an intensity that sent a shiver down Tommy's spine.

Through it all, Tommy's posture never eased, and neither did his vigilance. He continued looking for unusual facial expressions, ill-fitted clothing, and the man he'd seen earlier. Twice, thought he saw him, but each time the gorgeous woman in the red dress came into view and his eyes locked on hers a little too long.

At the fourteen-minute mark, Davis spoke into his radio. "POTUS is wrapping up. Get ready for a right-to-left rope line."

Tommy swallowed hard. If something were to go wrong, this is when it would happen.

The rope line, a time-honored tradition, allowed the President to interact with his fervent supporters. He'd shake their hands, sign some autographs, and even take a few selfies. The President relished the opportunity, but it brought him within arm's reach of the public, and that made Secret Service agents nervous.

But Tommy didn't need a reminder; the burrito twirling inside of his gut made sure of that.

When the President's speech ended, the crowd roared. The President took a second to bask in the adoration. And then, he stepped off of the platform.

The speakers switched on, filling the hall with Toby Keith's music.

Tommy and the rest of B-shift met the President at the rope and stanchion used to corral the public.

The crowd rushed forward.

Tommy raised his hands and started giving commands. "Don't push, folks. Don't push. One at a time."

The crowd either didn't hear Tommy or didn't care. Shoving and jostling, they tried to get closer to the President.

"Keep 'em back, Tommy," cautioned Davis over the radio.

And that's when Tommy saw the man again. He had the same unflinching look in his eyes, only now, he was much closer.

And his hands. Was that a piece of paper? A pen? Or something else?

Tommy brought his mic to his mouth. But just as he was about to raise the alarm, the woman in the red dress appeared in front of him. They locked eyes. Reaching out, she touched Tommy's hand. Her perfect lips parted into a perfect smile.

Tommy lost all of his focus. And that's why he didn't see the man behind her pointing a gun at the President's head.

"GUN!" screamed Haggerty.

The words shook Tommy from his trance. But it was too late.

The man squeezed the trigger.

A commanding voice echoed from the second-floor balcony. "ACTUAL STOP!"

Everyone and everything froze. The music. The agents. The crowd. The woman in the red dress. And even the shooter. Nothing moved. No one spoke.

A broad-shouldered man dressed in tan khakis and a blue polo with a Secret Service star stitched into one of the sleeves appeared over the railing. "You all just failed," he shouted.

With a scowl etched across his stern-looking face, Noonan made his way down the steps and over to the shooter. Despite his damaged leg, he moved with amazing quickness.

Snatching the gun, Noonan held the crude, polymer composite weapon high for everyone to see. "This should never make it into one of our events. But for this scenario, it did. Shit happens, and sometimes checkpoints fail. But guess what?" He pointed to the agents flanking the President, his finger lingering on Tommy a little longer than everyone else. "The working shift. You guys. You never get to fail. Because failure is not an option. Luckily, this time it was only a training scenario, and these"—he made a sweeping gesture with his hand toward the crowd—"are just actors."

Noonan returned the gun to the shooter. "We'll do it again, from the end of the President's speech. And this time, folks, do it right."

No one moved.

"We don't have all day. Move your asses, people!"

The command spurred everyone to action. The crowd re-set, the agents retook their positions, and the actor playing the President hopped back onto the stage.

But before returning to his perch on the second-floor balcony, Noonan made a beeline for Tommy.


Tommy braced for the shitstorm coming his way.

Noonan put his face inches from Tommy's.

"We make the mistakes in training, so we don't make them in the real world," said Noonan. "Mess up here, and we get another chance. Mess up out there, and the

world changes, and not in a good way. Understood?”

Tommy swallowed hard. “Completely, sir.”

Noonan lingered to let his point sink in further. Then, as he turned to walk away, he paused. “And, Tommy,” he said over his shoulder, “next time, look past the pretty face in the crowd.” 

VULGAX9 ON EARTH

Jared Schwartz

As the brain-shaped spacecraft glided smoothly into and through Earth's gassy atmosphere, its lone inhabitant Vulgax9 couldn't wait to see what her studies would reveal. The nocturnal ZGGGGbop Empire had been immensely pleased with her work at Universe-University where she displayed an unusually impressive aptitude toward the study of alien life, in all of its various forms.

She was the one who proved that the BurstGasses of BopQuadrant 9704 actually had thoughts of their own, and communicated via changes in color. She was the one who discovered that on top of the highest mountains of her homeworld, there were hidden civilizations descended from the asteroid fallout of the previous century.

She was also the one that realized that pebbles had feelings and had been really annoyed at everyone this whole time.

For her work, her species showered her with many large awards, but this opportunity was perhaps the biggest one yet. A new planet had been discovered by her people, a polluted orb near a massive sun. Life, their devices had discovered, was on this world, and they decided Vulgax9 should be the representative to make first contact with these new creatures, tell them of their place in the universes if they're smart enough to handle it, and then recruit them as an ally for the Empire. (Which probably meant enslaving them, as is common for how these things go.)

Vulgax9, ever the genius, decided to land in a relatively populated area so that she could speak to the largest amount of their population possible.

She landed in the middle of what looked like some sort of Earth equivalent to a massive shopping center, which included gigantic crowds, and diverse human people everywhere! Stepping out on top of her craft so that everybody could see her, Vulgax9 proclaimed "Hello new life-forms! I am Vulgax9 of the ZGGGGbop Empire and you have been saved!"

But no one reacted to her. Not even a shrug.

“Oh no!” Vulgax9 panicked, “they’re stupid!”

She stepped down from her craft and tapped one of the humans on the shoulder, a yellow-haired being in a red sweater. “Excuse me ma’am,” Vulgax9 inquired, “where is the smartest among you? Surely you have some sort of leader?”

The woman in red refused to respond.

“Are you afraid?” scoffed Vulgax. “I know you and your species is young and new, but surely there’s somebody who can handle my scientific inquiries?”

No response.

“Fine, whatever,” Vulgax9 sighed in the language of her people, “be as you are, a creature encased with worry. I will find one among you who is brave enough to hear me.”

She stomped toward a large stocky man in a tie.

“You are large,” said Vulgax, “does your people choose leaders based on who is the largest? I see a fabric around your neck, does this denote superiority? Bravery?”

But the man cowered with each one of her stomps, he was no better than the previous person.

“I see what’s going on now,” Vulgax9 proclaimed so that everybody could hear.

“You’re all afraid of me, an alien of superior intellect who shows up at your doorstep, and you’re too terrified to approach me. I get it, I do, but please put your silly insecurities aside so that you may greet me.”

Everybody stayed where they were, paralyzed.

“LOOK AT ME!” yelled Vulgax. “I AM THE GREATEST SCIENTIST OF MY PEOPLE! I’VE WON AWARDS! I bet your planet doesn’t even have scientists, and if they do, I bet they suck! They’ve probably never even discovered anything!”

Nobody did anything, but Vulgax9 thought she saw one person shrugging.

“Is that dismissiveness I’m seeing? Well I won’t dismiss dismissiveness! I bet your people never evolved, not even in millions of years. You’re all so stupid you’re probably in a perpetual cycle of not doing anything new. How boring it must be to be human. No new inventions. No new discoveries. My people make discoveries! My people discovered you!”

The silence was so uncomfortable, it became like a wall, for Vulgax9 had clearly struck a nerve. But possibly her own, as she began to weep.


“You idiots don’t even know how good you have it. The Empire is coming. And now I must be truthful, I came here not to work for them, but to warn you! They are planning to INVADE your planet and make it part of their Empire, or enslave you! I’m

such a good being, I accepted this mission so that I could WARN you, and I planned that under the impression that you might have some weapons with which to protect yourselves, some machines with which to counter our colonization.”

She fell to her knees. “But I overestimated you. You’re all too dumb to fight. And now if you do, you’ll die anyway.”

She pushed a human to the side as she slunk back to her ship.

“It’s going to be good when the Empire invades you. I thought you people might be smart, but I was wrong. You’re primitive, and you’re too stupid to save yourselves. I would have helped you stand a chance in the coming conflict. But now, all I can say is good luck, fools.”

As Vulgax9 got into her spacecraft and rocketed back into the sky, the Wax Museum finally opened its doors, and into it rushed a crowd of humans and their children wondering why there was a hole in the roof. 

DISCIPLINING TEMPTRESS FUGIT

Paul A. Barra

Wrestling with a large horse in a small room tends to excite the senses, so I was surprised to see Charles Becknell smiling benevolently as he was being thrown about by a beast named Sampanion. I was strolling down the shedrow, sipping coffee when I heard the commotion in a nearby stall. Charles was a slender brown man, Sampanion a huge brown stallion. They were having a disagreement over the animal's plans for the day, much as a mother might have with her third grader on a cold school morning. The horse didn't want to run around The Oklahoma, the training track at Saratoga Race Course. He wanted to stay in his warm, moist barn and watch the world go past. But Charles had a job to do; the trainer and the exercise rider were waiting for Sampanion out in the early mist, whether the horse was ready for a workout or not.

Charles was a skinny man and had one of his skinny arms slung around the beast's thick neck. The snorting horse was able to raise him to the balls of his feet and haul him from side to side while I watched silently, but Charles knew that even a big human was no match in strength for a horse, so he just hung on, not resisting. He used his wiles to outmaneuver the animal. In another minute he had the bridle on and the halter off. Sampanion gave in to the inevitable then and calmed down. He clopped out of the stall behind Charles as if he'd intended to do just that all along.

"Nice job, Charles."

He smiled widely. "Thanks, reverend. You seen this rascal fussing, eh?"

"I did indeed. It looked like he wanted to kill you."

Charles laughed at that.

"He don' mean nothing. It just the way he is. Ever' day it's the same ol' thing now."

Charles clipped the bridle to a pair of shanks hanging from the wall as he talked

in his high voice. He pulled a pick from his back pocket and cleaned the horse's feet. Sampanion lifted each hoof like a child's pony.

"That fussing's a game we play ever' morning, gets me going like that coffee does you, father. Warms my blood. His too."

When Charles took the horse away I continued down the row, visiting with the grooms and hot walkers who were mucking out stalls or feeding horses. It was May in the mountains, months before the race meeting began in late July, but there were already dozens of racing thoroughbreds stabled at Saratoga, many of whom were babies. Two-year-olds, according to racetrack vernacular, are babies. The ones housed at the Spa, as Saratoga is sometimes called, were in training.

Many racehorse babies never make it to the track. Some are not fast enough, some can't be taught adequately; others strain their young muscles and become disabled. These at the track tended to be the more valuable babies that will eventually race, since it is expensive to house them here, much more than at a trainer's yard, and only owners with deep pockets and wise trainers got to train their horses at the track itself in the off-season. The excitement of a race card each day was absent from the track, so the people who cared for the stabled horses were pretty much free from the distraction of betting and racing, and most injuries. They were even becoming a little bored. That was probably one cause of the terrible crime Mary Higgins was about to uncover.

Mary was a hot walker whose current lover was the exercise rider Carlos Ramirez, and whose former lover was the decedent, Harry Milford. All three were hard-bodies in the prime of their lives, until Harry wasn't. Mary heard a baby she knew thudding his feet and blowing in a saddling enclosure inside the paddock. Horses were not supposed to be in the paddock, a fenced area where racers were readied for a race and paraded before bettors and officials, because there were no races yet to prep for. A trainer may have brought his horse into the paddock to acclimate him to the place, but no horse should ever be alone there. Being a helpful sort of person, Mary went in to take a look.

She found the bay Massive Man in a lather. His eyes showed white and he was trying to leave the stall, which was open on the front to the inside of the paddock, but he was tied to a metal ring. As she petted his face and talked soothingly to him—remarking to herself she used much the same technique to calm the men she'd known in her young life—she noticed the cause of the animal's anxiety: a bundle of rags in a corner of the stall. She unhooked the bay's lead rope and walked him out, thumbing her phone as they went.

That's where I found her, walking a huge beast around the dirt and cinder ring

of the paddock, avoiding Saddling Stall #2 and appearing agitated.

“Is something wrong, Mary?”

“Hey, padre. Something’s worrying this here guy over in number two. I’m just keeping him away from there ’til Jack Marsh gets here.”

“What is it?”

“Don’ know and don’ aim to find out.”

I went for a look. The bundle of rags was a corpse, bloodied and curled in on itself. I gulped when I saw the pulped mess of his face, but thought I recognized him. I called Sergeant Nancy Tarantino, one of my parishioners at the track chapel and the head of track security. She was a talkative, friendly sort of person but was all business when I told her, “There’s a body in the paddock, Nancy.”

“Okay, please don’t touch nothing and try to keep people away until we get there.”

There wasn’t anyone in the paddock except Mary to keep away from the dead body until three police cars arrived. That attracted a small crowd, and a lot of commotion. I stood around, talked with Mary Higgins, who was upset but in control of herself. When the trainer Jack Marsh got there to take Massive Man away, Mary said to him, “Yuh better see the cops ’fore you go, Jack. The colt’s got blood on his feet.” Jack looked as if he was going to ignore the advice, then thought better of it. I was there as a witness.

Marsh didn’t like me much, a papist priest always walking around the track environs in a black suit and a Roman collar. I suspected he held some deep-seated animosity toward religion in general, although he had contributed to a fund I was raising for Jaime Santana a year ago when he’d been kicked by a horse and incapacitated for a few months. I hoped this wasn’t going to turn out to be a deadly horse kicking affair. It didn’t. Harry Milford’s corpse had been stabbed by a knife through the ribs.

“I suspect the horse kicked out when the vic and his assailant were rassling’ around in the stall,” Sgt. Tarantino told me later. “Messed his face up some but didn’t do nothing fatal. He was stabbed to death.”

Then Nancy went into her persuasive mode and convinced me to assist with her investigation, since the backstretch workers trusted me and did not like police generally. It was not that the people who worked with race horses were not law abiding; many did have sketchy immigration backgrounds and had grown uncomfortable around figures of authority. I figured ridding the track of a murderer would be a good deed in itself. Since my goal in life was to accomplish good deeds, I listened to what the grooms and hot walkers and exercise riders had to say about Harry Milford when he was alive. It turned out he was liked by many but disliked by one other groom in

particular, my skinny friend Charles Becknell.

“I admit, rev, I wasn’t too fond of Harry, God bless ’im. He was one of them fun loving guys who went after anythin’ wearing a skirt. He drank a lot too. I grew right tired of his excesses, y’know what I mean? But the thing I didn’t really like about ’im was the way he treated horses. It was like it was just a job for ’im, caring for the horses.”

I should mention here that Charles was some sort of equine schmoozer; he talked to horses, the ones he watched over like Sampanion, the other racers in the barn, outriders’ ponies, even the occasional actual pony he’d run into at a fair or something outside of the track environs. He also listened to them. Most of the folks who worked up and down the shedrows, in addition to the jockeys, trainers and owners who were a level above these poor laboring types, genuinely liked horses. Including me, the track chaplain. It would be hard to put in the hours and the labor if one didn’t have at least a good feeling about horses. Perhaps then, the victim of the stabbing stood out that way. No one I talked to was able to enunciate any other difference between Harry and other workers at the track—except for one thing.

“Harry was not happy when I went off him and onto Carlos, I don’t think,” Mary Higgins said.

I nodded sagely, hoping she was not speaking literally about getting off and on men.

“How did he express this, er, unhappiness, Mary?”

“Yuh mean, what’d he do?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“He cuffed me around a little bit, made noise about skinning Carlos. I think he were some scared of Carlos though.”

“So, he never attacked Carlos or anything?”

“Not that I know of, and we all woulda heard if he had.”

“Did he assault you again?”

“Nossir. Just the once.”

I strolled over to the barn where Jack March boarded his string. As I looked carefully at the workers, I noticed that most of them carried a knife on his or her person, a knife that was readily available. Horses get themselves in jams a lot, so knives to cut them loose would be important. They also had to cut the strings on hay bales and straw bales and slice open feed bags. I saw a lot of potential murder weapons as I walked. Jack Marsh had one on his belt, opposite his mobile phone. He was mucking out a stall when I found him, a necessity after losing a groom, I assumed. The man was older than the grooms and other workers in his barn, but was big and fit.

“Sgt. Tarantino asked me to help unearth some facts about potential murderers of Harry Milford.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean, Mr. Marsh.”

“I mean, Mr. Priest, that you Romans must stick together.”

“I’m not Roman. In fact, I’m not even Italian.”

“You know what I mean,” he growled. “Don’t waste my time.”

Marsh stopped digging into the soiled straw to talk. I could see he was strong enough to have plunged a knife deep into a man’s body.

“You know any man with a grudge against Milford?”

“You not considering a woman? You people get caught diddling little boys and now you’re still on the side of men. Don’t you ever fucking learn?”

I couldn’t tell if he was genuinely angry or was deliberately trying to paint the whole Catholic clergy as misogynistic lavender mafia-types to get a rise out of me. It wouldn’t do any good with his kind to offer a defense, so I tried to redirect him.

“The knife that killed Harry was jammed through ribs and all the way into his heart.”

“Don’t make the mistake of underestimating these women around here, priest. They may be small, but like jockeys they’re strong as hell.”

I left without getting anything out of Jack Marsh. He did have a knife that could have killed the victim—and he certainly had some anger inside him. Maybe Carlos Ramirez would be easier to talk to.

I found him balanced on the top of a gray running around The Oklahoma, legs bent and absorbing the powerful motion of the horse’s strides. The two of them were a sight together, a symmetry in speed that belied the effort from both man and animal. When they came by my spot at the rail, I could hear the horse’s legs pounding into the track surface, hear his wide-open nostrils sucking in great volumes of the cool morning air.

“Who’s the gray colt, David?” I asked of the grizzled gray man leaning on the rail next to me. David Coleman was a track character, a professional gambler who always seemed to be wherever a horse was training. He was chewing a cold cigar and wearing a porkpie hat that went out of style a generation or two ago.

“The gray’s a filly, not a colt, father. She’s called Temptress Fugit. You got to learn to look in the right place if you gonna solve this murder case.”

He coughed out a phlegmy laugh at his witticism, and I smiled in return. I was not a horseman, but I appreciated their beauty and could tell the horse Carlos Ramirez

was exercising was fast. Her strides were long and ate up the ground.

“You betting Temptress Fugit, David?”

“I would ’cept she’s got this little problem, see. She don’t run like that ’cept when Carlos is in the irons and he’s too heavy for riding in a race. Shame.”

Carlos Ramirez didn’t look too heavy for anything. He was trim and muscular. Mary Higgins twitched her lower half at him as she led the blowing Temptress away to cool down. Carlos was smiling broadly when I came up to him.

“She somethin’, ain’t she, padre?”

“You referring to Temptress or Mary?”

He hooted at that and actually slapped his knee in delight.

“You too quick for me, padre. That’s a good one.”

I asked him about the problem with the filly, distracted for minute from my search for answers to the murder of Harry Milford, but in the way of serendipitous events, Carlos led me back to my mission, telling me that Milford had been Temptress Fugit’s groom but had spoiled her with his lack of attention to the filly’s needs.

“Horses are sensitive critters, and Harry never caught on to that. Never knew what the filly wanted. She became so touchy on the track that no jock could handle her. She’s coming ’round.”

“Now that Harry’s gone?”

“Well, I never said that.”

“But it’s true nevertheless, will you admit that?”

“I admit it. To a priest.”

“Not to the cops.”

Carlos raised his thick eyebrows at me and stayed silent. He trusted me and I didn’t want to betray that trust. It was my claim to fame.

“Your secret’s good with me, senior Carlos.”

He saluted me with two fingers and went off. As I watched him go, it occurred to me that the owner of Temptress Fugit would have a good motive for killing Harry Milford if what Carlos Ramirez said was true. If the filly was “coming ’round,” she would probably go off at good odds the next time she was entered in a race. Her trainer would also be a suspect under that scenario; he would be in the know and able to capitalize on her previous misbehavior. Most track people probably thought as David Coleman did, that Temptress Fugit was simply a bad actor and would never win a race because she had other things on her mind other than running fast. They would have no way of knowing that Harry had been the causal agent of that fractiousness.

How would I know if she was actually coming around? If the horse ran well

suddenly, that's how. I went off to find out when Temptress was scheduled to race again, if ever. Then I needed to talk to her owner.

I found both bits of information in the steward's office. The filly had been entered in The Green Oaks, a grade two stakes race being run on Saturday. Her owner was Carolyn Blanchard; she signed her entry for the race on Tuesday, the day Harry Milford was murdered. The morning line odds on Temptress Fugit winning the Green Oaks were 99-1.

Carolyn Blanchard was an impressive woman, not young but statuesque and lovely to look at. She stood at the bar in The Promenade Lounge, looking as if she owned the place. She might have, based on what I'd heard of her financial acumen. She was wealthy, and that fact undercut a motive based on betting odds, although some people who collect wealth are often addicted to the pursuit of money as much as they are concerned with things money can buy. Making a killing by wagering on a discredited horse may not improve Blanchard's D&B rating much, but it could appeal to her passion for making money.

"Can you spare me a minute of your time, Carolyn? I'm looking into the murder of Harry Milford, the groom."

If the lady resented me calling her by her first name—a technique taught to priests in training to solidify their position as a spiritual father to God's children—she gave no indication. Her gaze remained steely and down her nose at me.

"I'm aware that Harry was a groom, father. One of my filly's grooms. And a luscious little man, I might add. What can I do for you?"

I was a bit too life weary to be startled by the lady's description of the victim as luscious but I was surprised. She looked elegant and spoke with nasal upper crust superiority; I suspected she meant to keep me off balance in our interview.

"Can you tell me if the victim was good with your horses?"

"Surely my trainer could answer that better than I."

"Mr. Marsh apparently does not care much for priests. He was, shall we say, uncommunicative."

"Well, father, that may be the one characteristic he and I share. He's a grumpy shit. We never talk except about my horses' training and racing, but I will say that I'm on his side about priests: I cannot stand the thought of a man in black pants and black shoes. The very sight of someone like you turns my stomach."

Carolyn Blanchard sniffed once through her thin nose and threw back a couple of ounces of her Tequila Sunrise or whatever she was drinking.

"I hope you can control your disgust for a moment longer, Carolyn, and tell me

what you thought about Milford as a professional.”

“Well, if you insist. Harry was an accomplished person in the wrong field. I always thought he was afraid of horses, generally, and handled them poorly. I believe he made Temptress afraid of her tack by hurting her, maybe tightening straps too much or something. He hadn’t a feel for animals. I mentioned it to Jack Marsh once but preferred to let him handle the training. Except for that filly we have a successful stable.”

“Can you think of anyone who would want Harry Milford dead?”

“Other than anyone who loved horses, do you mean? I think some of the backstretch women loved him, so there is probably the possibility that one of them was spurned and vengeful. Or one of their men.”

I said as much to Sgt. Tarantino when we met for tamales and carnitas at The Mexican Connection. She paused in her feasting to quaff half her beer. Stifling a nascent belch, she said, “You eliminating the owner lady from suspicion?”

“I’m afraid so, Nancy. I can’t see her committing a violent crime. Ms. Carolyn Blanchard may have a cutting tongue but she doesn’t have the musculature to kill a person face-to-face, I don’t believe.”

“Who’s that leave?”

“I’d start with Charles Becknell. He didn’t like the way Milford treated horses and he’s very sensitive about the welfare of equine beasts. He’s also an, er, upright type who didn’t like Milford’s lifestyle.

“Then there’s Mary Higgins, who was thumped by Milford when she discarded him. She’s not but a hundred-twenty pounds, but these backstretch workers are strong. She kind of sloughed it off, the beating, although that may have been a disclaiming tactic.”

“You talk funny, padre. Fortunately, I understand highbrow so we’re good so far. Who else you got?”

“We have Carlos Ramirez, Mary’s new heart throb. He would have all the motives Mary has, plus he has to try to correct the damage Harry Milford allegedly did to Temptress Fugit’s psyche. Also a strong and capable person. Jack Marsh, the filly’s trainer, had some financial incentive to get rid of Milford, one of his own grooms, but it’s a stretch to think he’d kill the man instead of merely firing him. Of course, I don’t want to overlook the possibility of a fight turned rancid. That could have happened with any of the suspects—or with many other people.”

More food and more beer before the cop said, “Anybody who knew the history of the horse and the vic could have killed ’im to bet the horse at good odds once she

was retrained. But we have to stick with the suspects we have first, them with motive. If it ain't one of them, we got to hope for some incriminating video on CCTV or a rat giving up the perp."

"Good strategizing, Nancy. Anyone else you want me to look at?"

"Not necessary. I already know who did it."

I hadn't a clue. How could she know the identity of the killer?

"You do? Who is it?"

"Charles Becknell. He's the only one who admitted he didn't like Harry Milford. Everyone else had good reason not to like him, but didn't want to act like he, or she, had a motive to stick 'im. Becknell was trying to misdirect you, father, trick you into thinking that a guilty man wouldn't admit to hating the vic."

"If you're correct, you better get after him before he disposes of evidence."


"My men are rounding 'im up as we speak. Soon as you agree to pay for this meal, I'm off to the stationhouse to grill ol' Charlie Becknell."

"Surely the city of Saratoga Springs will pay for the investigating officer's meal with her prime informer."

The city paid, and so did Charles Becknell. The police forensics team found microscopic traces of Harry Milford's blood on Becknell's knife. Faced with that evidence, he confessed to "ridding this vale of tears of a vile human who mistreated one of God's most glorious creatures."

On the day of Milford's death, Becknell had come upon him in the paddock where he had tied Massive Man to a ring. The horse was snorting in fear as Milford whipped him with a riding crop. The crop wasn't doing real damage to the colt, according to Becknell, not breaking the skin or causing welts, but the simple beast was badly frightened. Milford had bound Massive Man in the saddling stall since the paddock was not being used and he thought his "training regimen" would be in private.

"Harry tole me he was just disciplining the colt, if yuh can imagine that," Charles told the police.

Becknell castigated Milford for his cruelty to Massive Man. The argument turned physical and Becknell resorted to his blade when Milford began to overpower him. He pled out to Homicide Two and was sentenced to five years in the maximum-security state prison in Coxsackie. When he was released nearly four years later, I went to pick him up and took him to a place where retired thoroughbreds lived out their lives in the bucolic splendor of the Adirondacks. The gentle folks who ran the farm agreed to hire him once they heard his story from me. Charles Becknell lived the rest of his life with them, about as happy a man as one could expect to know. 

DEAR MISS PROUDLOVE

Matthew Fries

Dear Miss Proudlove,

First off, I want to offer you my sincerest apologies. This is all a giant misunderstanding. I can explain everything:

What happened to me that night at the 7-11 was a misunderstanding that spun out of control. Okay, I was drunk. I'll admit that. But I wasn't blackout drunk! And it was (after all) Robbie Burns day.

I have this persistent rash, you see, and my jeans were chafing badly. So, before I went into the 7-11 to grab a late-night snack, I snuck behind the dumpster to attend to my rash. It was really stinging. As I lifted my leg to apply my zinc cream (I always carry my zinc cream with me) I heard some giggling. Some teenage punks must have spotted me from the street. They ran at me and shoved me to the ground. There was a struggle. I kicked at them, but they overpowered me. When I stood up, I saw them running away, waving my pants in the air, and laughing like a bunch of damn fools.

That's how I told it in court, and that's how it happened. I don't really care what the security camera footage says. The cameras didn't show what happened behind the dumpsters. Really, when you think about it, I am the victim here. Why didn't the cops go after those punks who assaulted me and stole my property? That is what I would like to know.

I needed a pair of pants or I was going to catch frostbite. It was plenty cold out, but I am sure you remember that. I knew the guy in the 7-11 well enough. I figured he might have some old work pants he could loan me. I tried to be casual about it. I said, "Hi," and I grabbed a bag of dill pickle chips off the shelf. Then I went to the counter and started eating them.

What was the big deal? I came in there every day. He knew I was good for the money. I want to know how a bag of chips that never even left the store becomes a

charge for theft under a thousand?

I explained to him that I was assaulted, and I asked him to lend me a pair of pants. I said I would bring them back, but he acted like he didn't even know me. He wouldn't look at me.

"How are you going to pay for those chips?" he kept saying.

All those people care about is money.

"Listen, buddy. You know me," I said. "Just give me a pair of pants."

It's all on the security footage. You've seen it, I am sure. I wasn't aggressive, or threatening. I was trying to get home.

Then, a really nice-looking lady walked in. You. Ana Proudlove, as I learned. Actually, forget, "really nice looking." An angel. A stunning beauty. You really are, you know. With milky white skin, an adorable button nose, and full red lips. I remember everything. It's as if it is all happening before me right now.

You paused when you saw me without my pants, staring right at my private parts, your jaw almost touching the floor. Then you screamed, "Oh my GOD!" and ran out.

That was not what I had intended.

I ran after you, trying to apologize, and as you peeled out of the parking lot in that little vintage Citroën (that's a really cool car, by the way), I yelled, "Happy Robbie Burns day!"

I swear to you the word "boner" never crossed my lips. I don't know how that story ever made its way into court.

It's not fair.

I wish the security cameras had sound. Then, I could prove it to you.

I am not a pervert, just a man with a rash.

The cops showed up shortly afterwards. The guy in the store must have called them.

It was all a big misunderstanding. I got a fine, and eighty hours of community service at Saint Vincent De Paul.

And so began phase two of our misunderstanding. I have so much to apologize for. I really hope you can see how everything went sideways for me. I hope you can forgive me, and we can move on from this. I do think that in time we could become very close friends. Maybe even something more.

I don't know if you have ever been to Saint Vincent De Paul's. I kind of doubt it. You don't seem like the type. Saint Vincent De Paul's is a second-hand store that smells of urine and mildew and is run by some religious old bags who also smell of

urine and mildew. My job was to sort through the donations and stock the shelves.

The old bags said they would teach me to use the price gun once they could "trust me."

I think it was a Friday when I found the real gun. I remember it was cool out, so I had my jean jacket on.

Somebody had tossed a bunch of old furniture and Penthouse magazines around the back of the store. I was cleaning the magazines up off the ground and thinking of you.

I was always thinking of you in those days. I spent every waking minute thinking of you. I dreamed of the day we would meet again. I thought about how we met, and how we would laugh about it when we got older. There would be just us, Mr. and Mrs. French. Or maybe Mr. and Mrs. Proudlove-French. Harold Proudlove-French. That's all that would matter in life: Me and you.

After I cleaned up the magazines, I moved onto the dresser. I started opening the drawers. The gun was in the bottom drawer. A little Saturday Night Special. A .25 Raven. (I googled it.) It was wrapped in a pink towel. Loaded.

I clicked the safety on and stuffed the Raven in the inside pocket of my jean jacket. I tossed the towel back into the drawer.

And you know what? Hindsight is twenty-twenty. If I knew then what I know now, I probably would have handed the gun over to the old bags, or the cops. But I didn't. Because guns are cool and I wanted to have one. Can you blame me? I was just going to show it to the boys at the legion. I never planned to fire it.

When I got home that night, I ate supper with my mom. We watched Jeopardy and she fell asleep in her chair. Then I got bored, and I sat down at the computer. I went on Facebook and looked up Citroën groups in the Grand River region. Just for the hell of it. And what do you know? There you were: A member of the South Western Ontario Citroën owner's group. Ana Proudlove. I'd recognize you anywhere. Beautiful. It was a sign. I knew it.

I then went to the white pages online and I looked you up.

How many A. Proudloves could there be in the city?

There were two, and one lived about a block from the 7-11 store.

This would be my chance to apologize to you in person. 142 Wilson Avenue. Those were the places that backed onto the park.

I was a little nervous, so I had a couple more beers and waited till it was dark out. Then I grabbed my jean jacket and I went out the rear door of the apartment. I started heading towards Wilson.

To save some time, I cut through the park. Your backyard is very nice, by the way. I like your flowers, and all the trees you have at the back of your property. You should really get a proper fence though. That little wire fence you have does not offer you much protection. You can see right in your windows.

You were in your housecoat, doing dishes. Well, at least I thought it was probably you. I wasn't entirely sure. My eyesight is not that good. Just a touch of night blindness. I wanted to get a better look. Make certain I wasn't going to bother one of your neighbours when I knocked on your door.

You know that big sliding door that you have facing the back yard? I thought that I would just peek in there to confirm it was you. Maybe it wasn't the best idea, but my intentions were good.

And you know, with all the stress of the new job, and the trial, I hadn't been eating right, living on doughnuts and beer for a few days. Anyway, my pants were really loose. And I didn't have a belt. That's not really any excuse, I know, but it's the truth. They fell down. I was so excited to finally meet you that I didn't even notice that it had happened. As God is my witness. I swear this is true.

So, that's how that happened.

Your beautiful red hair fell over the shoulders of your yellow housecoat. You were wet. You must have just gotten out of the shower. I was certain it was you at this time, but I wanted to admire you for a couple more seconds before I went to the door and asked you out to the Dairy Queen for a sundae. You were singing to yourself, *Don't Stop Believing*, I think it was. (Are you a big Journey fan? I prefer the solo Steve Perry stuff. *Oh Sherrie*, *Foolish Heart*. The love songs.)

Everything happened so fast.

You disappeared for a second. The back-porch light went on. I heard some scuffling. Paws on your linoleum floor. You had a dog. And you were letting the dog out to pee. And it wasn't a little dog either. It was huge. It looked like a bear. I turned to run. The back door opened. The dog was barking and snarling, snapping at my calves. I launched myself headfirst over your fence. I heard a bang when I landed.

I guess I had forgotten the gun, the little Saturday night special in my jean jacket pocket. It must have fallen out when I jumped the fence. Turns out the safety wasn't on after all. I thought it was.

My bad.

Your dog was barking and snarling. The gunshot had driven it insane. It looked downright mental. Rabid! Its teeth flashed as it tried to bite his way through the fence. A few lights went on. I heard some shouting.

"What the hell was that?"

"That sounded like a gunshot!"

Then it seemed like all the lights in the entire neighbourhood went on at once.

I saw your dog as it lunged at the fence again, barking, growling, snapping. I was scared, so I took off, not even realizing that I was pantless. Exposed, bare ass naked to the world, I ran for home. I didn't know what else to do. Car horns were beeping at me as I ran down the street. Cell phones lighting up everywhere as people phoned the police. I felt like I was the centre of the universe, and I was about to implode.

You know, to some people ten beers is a lot, but to me it's nothing. I know how to pace myself. I wasn't a drunken maniac out to kill anyone, or anything, that night. It's not like the newspaper reported it.

The cops eventually caught up with me. I was hot and I was sweating and frantic. I tried to explain myself, but they surrounded me with their cars. They were pointing their guns at me and shouting, "Down on the ground! Get down on the ground! Get your face on the ground!"

You know, come on. Give me a break. I wasn't about to lay face down on the ground. I didn't have any pants on! Then I got tackled from behind (the second time in a year that I have been tackled and beaten by the police). I demanded to see my lawyer. I shouted and screamed, as anyone in my position would have. I could see crowds of people with their cell phones recording the arrest. At the time I thought they were recording the police brutality, but it turns out they just wanted to post the videos on YouTube and ridicule me. I wish people were not so cruel.

So that was that. The police went back and found the gun on the ground by your fence. They never found the bullet though, so despite what the Crown Attorney said, there was never any evidence that I tried to shoot at your dog, or at you. That is utter nonsense! It happened just like I said it happened, and they could not prove otherwise.

The charges were: endangering the public, resisting arrest, illegal possession of a handgun, unlawful use of a handgun, and some other stuff. Misdemeanour stalking, which frankly seems ridiculous. I got two years for it all. My lawyer said that was "lenient."

Doesn't feel "lenient." Feels like I got screwed.

I guess I'll just have to do my time and keep my nose clean. Maybe I'll get paroled.

So, my bad luck turns critically bad, and now I am stuck here in a prison cell. There's nothing I can do about it. My mother does not even have a car to come visit me. I told her years ago that she needed to get her licence. She takes the bus once in a while, brings me cookies and smuggles in cigarettes. I am studying law in prison. It

seems like the right thing to do, and I hope to start my own law practice when I get out.

If you'd ask me now, like right now: "Can life get any worse?" I'd answer, "No," but only because there is one thing that really bothers me.

The thing that bothers me most is that I never got to apologize to you. I tried calling you from the phone in the common room. I found your number on the Internet. But I can never get through. No one ever answers, and now the line doesn't even ring. Did you change it?

It makes me sad.

I am genuinely sorry to have exposed myself to you. I never meant to offend anyone. I am sorry if I scared you with my gun. It was an accident, and if there was anything I could do to take it all back I would. I tell you this story because I hope it will help you to understand why I did what I did. It only happened because I was deeply moved by your beauty and grace. If you are able to see things from my side, you could even argue that it's kind of your own fault. In a way. If you just weren't so damn beautiful this never would have happened.

But I still love you very much, and I am hoping that when I get out of prison we could maybe meet for coffee and a doughnut so I can apologise properly.

Yours truly,

Harold French Esq.

P.S. My rash has worsened in prison. It's working its way towards my groin. Do you think you could send me some zinc cream? 🖱

SKIMMING JOEY LEMONS

Robin Yocum

“Get me a beer. Do you think you can do that without screwing it up?”
I could, of course, but he wouldn’t live long enough to find out.
Jimmy was still screaming at the television, something about Florida State sitting on the ball and not covering the spread, when I put a slug from a snub-nose .38 into the back of his skull.

That was one of the benefits of being married to a guy who worked as an enforcer for Joey Lemons; there were always plenty of loaded guns lying around the house. I was coming back from the kitchen with his beer—a longneck Rolling Rock—when I saw the .38 sitting on the book shelf next to a copy of *From Here to Eternity*, and I thought, *How friggin’ appropriate is that?*

I’d had all the slaps, backhands and degrading remarks that I was going to take. I made the decision to kill him that instant. I’m not sure I even broke stride. I made my way across the living room with the Rolling Rock in one hand and the revolver in the other. Under different circumstances, he might have found that incredibly arousing. But definitely not this time.

No, definitely not.

When I was close enough that it was impossible to miss, I extended my arm and pulled the trigger.

Simple as that.

The roar was deafening in the living room and flames shot out the barrel and singed his lacquered hair.

I took a hard swallow of the beer.

By God, that was justice.

Jimmy’s Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum had been on the shelf next to the .38.

I wanted to kill him, but I didn't want to blow off the front of his face and risk having bullet or skull fragments penetrate the sixty-inch, high-definition flat screen television he had bought earlier in the week. I think he would have appreciated my choice of weaponry and my consideration for fine electronics.

The hollow-point split apart and rattled around inside his cranium; he fell sideways, neatly staying on the couch without spilling blood on the hardwood floor that I had waxed the day before. It was the most considerate thing he had done for me in years.

I looked out the window and saw my neighbor, Giff, standing on the front porch looking up and down the street. He had doubtless heard the shot. I set the beer and the pistol on the bookshelf, grabbed the electric bill I had stamped and was ready to mail, and walked out the front door toward the mailbox. My ears were still ringing.

"Hi, Giff," I said.

"Hey, Christina." He waved. "Did you hear that?"

"That boom?"

"Yeah."

"I did. What was that?"

"I don't know; it sounded close."

"It sure did. Are they blasting over at the quarry again?"

"I don't know. Maybe. It sounded closer than that."

"If I start losing windows, they're going to pay for them."

He chuckled and went back into the house.

I went inside and locked the door behind me. First things first. I fished the money clip out of his front pocket and stripped it of the bills; he had been carrying more than twenty-eight hundred dollars, mostly in hundreds and fifties. That's another nice thing about being a mob headhunter—it's an all-cash business.

Overlooking the disaster that was my living room, I probably should have given a little more thought to shooting a made member of the mob in the back of the head. But, as the saying goes, no sense in crying over spilled brain matter.

I stood for a long moment pondering my situation. Jimmy weighed two hundred and forty-five pounds, and it was no longer the solid muscle I had married. Trying to maneuver his body into the trunk of the car would be like trying to lift a massive water balloon. I decided to think about it later. I had a two o'clock appointment to get my nails balanced at Chez Talons. They booked two weeks out; I wasn't running around with chipped nails for another two weeks. Rosita did her usual great job. I gave her one of Jimmy's fifty-dollar bills and went back home, where, of course, there

was still the problem of the dead mob enforcer on my living room couch.

Alphonso Joseph “Joey Lemons” Lemma controlled the flesh trade in the triangle between Altoona, Erie and Steubenville. He ran a string of fifty-three jiggle joints—the Lemon Drops—which were fronts for the prostitutes he referred to as his “blue-collar girls.” He also had a cadre of high-priced call girls under his control, who he employed as subcontractors under the legitimate business, the Lemony Fresh Cleaning Company. Every cop in the tri-state knew what Joey Lemons did, and he was ruthless in his control of his business investments. In spite of this, in the four decades in which he had operated, Joey Lemons had never been indicted or had any problems with the IRS.

There was a reason for that, and the reason had a name: Reggie Berta. My father was the most important man in the life of Joey Lemons. He wasn’t his consigliere; he was his accountant and financial advisor.

Dad had incorporated Joey Lemons’s various businesses and made sure he paid taxes. When legalized gambling cut the mob’s main source of income and many of the families turned to drug smuggling, my father made Joey stay away. “The cops don’t care about prostitution; it’s a victimless crime,” Dad told him. “Drugs, however, are going to draw the kind of attention that you don’t want.”

His advice was prophetic. One by one, members of the other families were indicted on drug offenses, while Joey Lemons continued to fly under the radar. Dad had Joey Lemons invest in car washes and coin laundries—cash businesses—where money could be easily laundered ... so to speak.

Joey Lemons valued my father’s counsel. The son of a Hungarian coal miner was keeping a third-generation Italian mobster out of trouble. Under my father’s guidance, Joey Lemons had legitimate tens of millions in investments and illegitimate tens of millions in the safe behind the false wall in his mansion in Squirrel Hill.

I called him. “Whatcha up to?”

“Relaxing on the patio with a cigar and a bourbon.”

“Can you come over here. I’m dealing with a bit of a situation.”

“What kind of situation?”

“The kind that requires a father’s help.”

“Can it wait until tomorrow?”

“Not really.”

“Is it Jimmy again?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“You’re talking in riddles, sweetheart.”

“It’s the best I can do right now.”

“Okay, I’ll be right over.”

“Good. Don’t bring Mom.”

When Dad walked into the living room and saw Jimmy slumped on the couch with a coating of dried blood masking his hair gel, he exhaled long and slow; he sounded like a radiator leak. He pinched his temples between a thumb and middle finger and said, “You know, sweetheart, in polite society, divorce is the preferable way of ending a marriage.”

“I know, Dad, but I’d eaten every turd sandwich he’d fed me for the last ten years, and I didn’t want to eat another one. And, since Jimmy wasn’t the kind of guy who would listen to reason ...”

I was just seventeen when I met Jimmy Fratianno. At the time, he was a low-level courier for Joey Lemons. He was twenty-four, handsome and ripped with muscle. And he was in the mob and always had wads of cash. I thought that was incredibly exciting. We got married the summer after I graduated high school. Yes, if you’re keeping score at home, instead of going to college to study architecture as I’d planned since I was ten-years old, I married an ill-tempered mobster seven years my senior.

Dad said, “I understand you had your reasons, but you just put a bullet into the back of the head of Joey Lemons’s cleaner. This kind of thing, it makes people in the mob what they call, ‘angry.’ ”

He walked to the other side of the living room and sat down in a chair that had matched the couch before it was covered with brain matter and blood. “I don’t know why you stayed with him, anyway.”

“Because he was a mob enforcer with anger management issues who didn’t handle rejection well. How’s that for a reason?”

“Probably as good as any. You know ...”

I cut him off before he could say it. “I know, Dad. I attract every man who ever slithered out from under a rock, Jimmy included, and it was a colossal mistake to marry him in the first place. You warned me. But, that’s not the problem I’m dealing with right now.” I pointed to the corpse of my now former husband. “I need help with *this*.”

My dad sat in the chair and stared at Jimmy’s corpse for a long time. “Where’s his phone?” he finally asked. It had slipped between two of the cushions. I reached between his legs one last time and into the cushions to pull it out. “Do you know how to get into it?”

I laughed. “Of course I know how to get into it. How do you think I kept track of his girlfriends?”

“How’d you manage that? I can’t remember the last time I saw him when his nose wasn’t in his phone.”

“I didn’t have to see his phone. He passed out one night, and I synched it up to the iPad. I could read his text messages in real time and he never knew it.”

Dad grinned. “Smart girl. So, any text messages sent or received on his phone show up on your iPad?”

“Yep. I made screen shots of the good ones, in case he erased them.” He frowned. “A screen shot, Dad—it’s like taking a picture of what’s on the screen.”

“And you can save those?”

“Yes. Just like a regular picture.”

“That’s interesting. Open up his phone and let me see them.”

He had scanned through Jimmy’s text messages for a half an hour before he looked up, the faintest of grins pursing his lips.

“Something amusing?” I asked.

“Not so much amusing as very interesting. I knew that the Lemon Drops in Aliquippa and Midland had been light for the past year or more, but it’s a cash business, and I hadn’t been able to figure out why. Actually, I knew why, but I hadn’t been able to prove it. But now, I know.” He put Jimmy’s phone in his pocket. “Do you know how much Jimmy was skimming from the clubs when he was making his rounds?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I’d say it was about ...”

He interrupted. “Let me rephrase the question. Do *you* know how much Jimmy was skimming from the clubs when he was making his rounds?”

I looked at him for a long moment before tentatively answering, “Jimmy never talked about business around me.”

He pointed at me with an index finger. “That’s the right answer, kiddo. Now, is his car in the garage?”

“Yeah.”

“Get something to wrap him up in and get me his car keys.”

I went out to the garage where there was a blue tarp rolled up and tucked behind fishing poles that Jimmy hadn’t used in ten years. I pulled it off the shelf and grabbed a roll of duct tape from the pegboard above the workbench. That was one odd thing about Jimmy. In the field, he was a total pro, but he had a bad habit of never disposing of the evidence. The tarp, for example, was covered in squid blood.

Santo “The Squid” Squitieri.

The Squid had been a capo for the Gagliano crime family in Cleveland and the brother-in-law of Don Luca Gagliano. After the third time Gagliano saw his sister trying to cover up bruises with makeup and long-sleeve blouses, he called Joey Lemons and said, "I need someone to paint a house for me." Joey Lemons sent Jimmy to Cleveland. He put a .22 slug behind The Squid's ear, and made the body disappear.

Joey Lemons was friends with the owner of a rendering plant and animal feed factory near East Liverpool. Once a week, one of the blue-collar girls from the Midland Lemon Drop would pay the owner a visit at his office. In exchange, when a body needed to disappear, Jimmy would make a late-night trip to the factory. The body would be put into a front-end loader, dumped into the shredder, and pumped into a slurry with the farmyard stock. Jimmy liked to joke that The Squid became fish food, but he most likely ended up in Fido's kibbles.

I found it terrifying that he shared such information with me so freely. I was worried there might come a day when he would think of me more as a liability than a wife, although that was something of a moot point at that moment.

I rolled the tarp out on the living room floor and we pushed Jimmy off the couch. When he hit, air escaped from his lungs and gurgled up through his windpipe. We rolled him up in the tarp and wrapped the duct tape around his neck, ankles, and waist.

My dad is not a big man and it took both of us to drag Jimmy into the garage and wrestle him into the trunk. He wiped down the .38 revolver and shoved it into his belt before handing me the keys. "Drive over to the lake house and wait for me. Pull the car into the garage."

The lake house was a cottage we owned at Guilford Lake in Ohio, just across the Pennsylvania line. Jimmy bought the cottage ostensibly as a fishing cabin. He wasn't kidding anyone. That's where he took his punch-of-the-month so he didn't have to keep paying for hotel rooms. I knew this because all his messages to his girlfriends were on the iPad.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm going to go pay a visit to Mr. Kozinski."

Dale Kozinski was the nephew of Dominic Luchesci, one of Joey Lemons's most loyal lieutenants. It was his sister's kid, and Joey Lemons had given him a job operating the Lemon Drops in Aliquippa and Midland as a favor to Dominic. It had been a mistake; the kid was a punk, a cheat and a thief, and not necessarily in that order. Dad also had heard he was dealing cocaine out of the clubs, which was strictly against the orders of Joey Lemons. That was the problem with guys like Dale. They

didn't know how to work within the system. And, they just didn't care.

It was a little after six p.m. when Dad parked at the dollar store just up the road from the Lemon Drop in Aliquippa. It was a windowless, cement-block building with a black, steel door and surrounded by a gravel lot. A sign in the parking lot hung from a pole that had been bent by a careless trucker. *Lemon Drop* was painted across the top. The changeable letters on one side read:

Girls Girls Girls

On the other side:

No Fat Chiks

The nose of Dale Kozinski's Tahoe extended from behind the cement block building. Dad took Jimmy's phone and texted Dale. I was watching on the iPad.

Dad as Jimmy: *We've got trouble. Christina's dad knows."*

Dale: Knows about what?

Dad as Jimmy: *Us, you idiot.*

Dale: WTF! How?

Dad as Jimmy: *He's an accountant. How do you think?*

Dale: You didn't tell him anything, did you?

Dad as Jimmy: *Yeah, I told him we were ripping off Joey Lemons. Do you think I'm a moron? He was at the house this morning. He was asking questions about the take at Quippa and Midland.*

Dale: What are we going to do?

Dad as Jimmy: *You said no one could figure it out.*

Dale: I didn't think he would.

Dad as Jimmy: *I'm not taking a fall for you.*

Dale: We're in this together. We need to get our stories straight.

Dad didn't respond to the last text.

He put Jimmy's phone in the center console and drove over to the Lemon Drop. Less than two minutes after the last text, he walked in; Dale's eyes widened. He forced a smile and asked, "Mr. Berta, what are you doing here?"

"I need your books, Dale. It's time for an audit."

There were three men in the place, all seated around a rectangular stage in the middle of the room where a blue-collar brunette was hanging on a pole with nothing that she hadn't been born with.

"An audit. Really? Why?"

"Why? That's a stupid question, isn't it? I'm the accountant for Mr. Lemma, and

that's what I do. Now, get me the books."

Dale was six-two and had slabs of muscles covering his shoulders and chest; he outweighed my father by eighty pounds. My father was the least intimidated man I knew. Of course, it was easy to be brave when Joey Lemons had your back.

"Okay," Dale said. "No problem." He looked like he was trying to swallow a dishtowel. "I'll get them for you."

He brought two three-ring binders from the back room.

"Are these for Aliquippa and Midland?" Dad asked.

"Yeah, everything's there."

"Good. I'll be in touch."

"Aren't you just going to do it here?"

Dad stared hard at Dale and said, "I'll be in touch."

By the time he got back to the car and pulled Jimmy's phone from the console, there was another text from Dale.

Dale: Christ Almighty, her old man was just here. He took the books.

Dad as Jimmy: You've got it covered, right?

Dale: I think.

Dad as Jimmy: You think? You said it was foolproof. No more texts. Give me some time to think about this.

It was a little over an hour's drive from Aliquippa to Lake Guilford. Despite the admonitions of my father, or Jimmy, as Dale believed, he was in a raging panic and continuing to send texts every ten minutes.

What are we going to do?

We need to get our story straight.

Where the hell are you?

Answer me, goddammit.

Jimmy!!!!!!

What's the plan?

Dad drove to the cottage. The car was in the garage; Jimmy was still tucked inside.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" I asked.

"In due time," he said.

"I've been watching on the iPad. Dale's losing his mind."

"As he should. Send your husband a text. He's been gone for hours and you're worried."

Christina: Jimmy?

Dad looked down at Jimmy's phone, then to me. "He didn't answer you."

Christina: Jimmy? Hello? Where are you?

Dad as Jimmy: *Don't worry about it. I'm taking care of some business.*

Christina: Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?

Dad as Jimmy: *I've had a lot on my mind.*

Christina: What?

Dad as Jimmy: *Don't worry about it. It's business.*

Christina: What does that mean?

Dad as Jimmy: *I told you, it's business. It doesn't concern you. I'll be home later.*

"Good," Dad said. "Now, help me get him out of the trunk."

We arrived back at my house just before 11 p.m. I made Dad a Manhattan, and we sat at the kitchen table.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now, we wait."

"Wait for what?"

"We wait for panic to really set in."

It didn't take long.

At 11:20 p.m. Dale Kozinski sent a text to Jimmy's phone.

Dale: Where the hell are you?

Dad as Jimmy: *I'm thinking.*

Dale: That's not what I asked you.

Dad looked up at me and asked, "Does Dale know about the cottage?"

"Of course," I said. "That's where they take their whores and have coke parties. Dale uses it all the time."

Dad as Jimmy: *I'm at the cottage at Lake Guilford. I told you I need time to think.*

Dale: We don't have time for you to think. We need to have a plan NOW.

Dad as Jimmy: *This is all your fault.*

Dale: I never twisted your arm. You were happy to put that money in your pocket. We need a plan tonight. Berta has the books.

Dad as Jimmy: *Joey Lemons will kill us both if he finds out.*

Dale: Which is why we need to talk.

Dad as Jimmy: *I can't tonight. Tomorrow. Let's talk tomorrow.*

Dale: Tomorrow is too late. TONIGHT!!

Dad didn't respond. He sipped his second Manhattan and grinned, staring into Jimmy's phone. "You're getting all this on the iPad, right?"

I held it up. "Every word."

Dale: Answer me.

Dale: JIMMY!! TONIGHT!!

I made us tuna salad sandwiches, then cleaned up the house while Dad looked over the books from the Lemon Drops at Aliquippa and Midland. He jotted down notes in the margins. I rounded up every pistol I could find—seven, in all—and put them into the trunk of Dad's car with the rolled-up squid tarp.

"Are you going to get rid of all those guns?" I asked.

"If this goes south and the cops show up, I think it would be best if there wasn't an arsenal around here."

"Good thinking. I've never killed anyone before."

He grinned. "Yeah? Well, you're killing me now."

At 1:45 a.m. the last text came in from Dale Kozinski.

Call me now!!!

At 2 a.m. I sent a message to Jimmy's phone. *I'm worried about you. Are you okay?* At 2:15: *Jimmy?* At 2:30: *Please answer.* At 3:30: *Jimmy! Please answer.*

At 4 a.m., as instructed, I called Dad's phone. He was dozing in a chair in the living room. He had started to stretch out on the couch, then thought better of it. He got up, yawned, and answered the call as he walked into the kitchen. After ninety seconds, he broke the connection.

"Wait here. If anyone would ask, you called me at home in a panic because Jimmy wasn't answering his phone and you saw his text messages with Dale on your iPad. Understand?"

"Understood."

He was back at 7 a.m. The guns had been tossed in the Ohio River near Glasgow; the tarp went into the weeds between Calcutta and West Point, on the Ohio side. He told me what he had found at the cottage. Naturally, I was devastated.

Dad drove over to Joey Lemons's place in Squirrel Hill. He was in the kitchen with his wife and still in his bathrobe; he hadn't combed his hair. "You want coffee," Joey Lemons asked.

"No."

Without being asked, his wife took her cup of coffee and went upstairs. When he heard the bedroom door shut, Dad whispered, "We've got a problem. Jimmy Fratianno's dead."

His eyes narrowed. "What? Jimmy? No, no, no. How?"

"He took one to the back of the head."

"The Cifarellis?"

Angelo Cifarelli was the head of a Youngstown crime family and Jimmy Lemons's rival in the skin trade in the tri-state.

"No. Joe, I don't like to be the guy to tell you this, but I think it was an inside job."

Joey Lemons nodded for Dad to walk out to the patio. "I've got the books for Aliquippa and Midland in the car. Jimmy and Dale Kozinski were skimming from you. As best I can tell, Jimmy determined how much would be shaved, and Dale was cooking the books. I've suspected it for a while."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm a numbers guy, Joe. I didn't want to come to you and say, 'I think this, or I think that.' I wanted to know for sure. I've thought Kozinski was skimming, but he's Dommie's nephew. It's not the kind of allegation you make without proof. Yesterday morning, I asked Jimmy about the take at both clubs. He went white when I asked him. Never in a million years did I think he was part of it."

"How do you know he was?"

I held up Christina's iPad. "This is called an iPad," I said.

"I'm old, but I'm not a complete dinosaur. I know what an iPad is."

"Okay, so it's Christina and Jimmy's. Somehow, it's hooked up to their phone. After my visit yesterday morning, Jimmy booked, and didn't tell Christina where he was going. He just left. She was in a panic because he wouldn't respond to any of her texts. So, early this morning, she finds these texts on the iPad between Jimmy and Kozinski. She called me and asked me to drive up to their cottage in Ohio. That's where I found him. He's on the floor in the living room, shot in the back of the head."

Dad handed Joey Lemons the iPad. "You can scroll back further if you want, but these are the text messages between them from yesterday."

Joey Lemons jaw muscles tightened and rippled as he scrolled down through the exchanges. "So, Kozinski drove over and killed him? Why, so he could blame the skimming on Jimmy?"

Dad shrugged. "Joe, all I can tell you is that Jimmy's dead on the floor of that cottage, and that's the text conversation he was having with Kozinski last night."

"This is very bad."

"I know."

"Does your daughter know about this?"

“She knows Jimmy’s dead. That’s all. I stopped and told her on the way back.”

“How is she?”

“Just as you might expect. She’s a hot mess right now. You know, she was crazy in love with Jimmy.”

“That’s too bad.” He handed him back the iPad. “You can erase those, right?”

“I’ll do it right away.” Dad reached into his pants pocket and retrieved Jimmy’s phone; he handed it to Joey Lemons. “This was on the floor beside the body. I can ask Christina if she knows his password, but I doubt she does. I can’t image Jimmy being that careless.”

“That won’t be necessary,” he said. “Your daughter, she knows not to say anything, right?”

“She knows. She won’t. I’ll probably take her to my house tonight. She’s in no condition to be left alone.”

At that moment, I was steam-cleaning the couch. I couldn’t get all the blood stains out, but it would do until I could get a new one.

Joey Lemons slowly nodded. “I loved that boy like a son. I can’t believe the deception.” He took a deep breath and looked out over his yard. “You tell your daughter that Joey Lemons said she doesn’t have anything to worry about financially. I’ll take good care of her.”

“She’ll appreciate that; I appreciate that.”

“But, there’s a little problem.” He rested his elbows on his knees and leaned toward me. “We can’t have the cops crawling around on this thing. That’s not good for anyone, especially me. We need to keep it in the family. You understand?” Dad nodded. “Tell your daughter not to say anything, and we’ll take care of it. Maybe in six months or so, she can file for divorce for abandonment.”

“I’ll make sure she does whatever you need, Joe.”

He reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “You’re a good man, Reggie.” He grinned. “Even for a Hungarian.”

He stood, went into the house and returned with a notepad and pencil.

“Write down the address; I’ll send Sal and Mikey over to clean up the mess. I feel bad for Dominic, but his nephew is going to have to disappear with Jimmy. I’ve got a friend over in East Liverpool who can make that happen.”

It’s been a little more than two years since I scrambled Jimmy’s brain. In reality, I did him a favor. Catching one in the back of the head would have been an infinitely better way to go compared to what Joey Lemons would have done to him when he eventually

learned that he was skimming from the clubs.

Yes, Dale disappeared.

No, I don't know how or where. And, I don't care.

Three months after Jimmy disappeared, Joey Lemons had a heart attack, but survived. He's now spending his winters in Naples, which seems to agree with him. He's up to fifty-eight Lemon Drop locations.

My dad is working his way out of the business. Joey Lemons's grandson just graduated from Pitt with a degree in accounting. Dad is training him to take over. He wants to get away from the chaos and the continual struggle of keeping the IRS at bay. He also said he didn't want to take a chance that his only daughter would again meet and fall for one of Joey Lemons's underlings. I told him to relax; I wouldn't make that mistake twice.

Considering how badly things could have gone for me, I've been doing all right. Joey Lemons was good to his word. He paid off the mortgage, and once a month a guy named Sal comes to the door and hand-delivers me a copy of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. I read it very carefully, because there's always an envelope containing several thousand dollars slipped into the paper.

I enrolled in college, and I'm working toward a degree in interior design. I also have a new boyfriend. I met him while doing an internship at an architectural design firm in downtown Pittsburgh. His name is Matt. He's handsome, funny and doesn't have handguns scattered all over his condo.

He fell hard for me. On our second date, I told him that I had divorced Jimmy for abandonment. "How could a guy let someone like you get away?" he said. "What was going through his head?"

The answer was a .38-caliber hollow point, but I've decided not to share that bit of my past with Matt or anyone else.

I like Matt. We'll see where the relationship goes. He's nothing like Jimmy. He's very good to me—kind and self-sufficient. He doesn't often ask me to get him a beer, but when he does, he always says, "please."

He has no idea how wise it is to ask nicely. **F**

THREE CHEERS FOR MOLLY SULLIVAN

John H. Dromey

“Welcome to the halls of academe, Mrs. Sullivan. A word to the wise. While you’re on campus, be careful not to let your guard down for even a split second. Above all else, don’t show *any* sign of weakness or you’ll be pedestrianized.”

“I’ll what?”

“The short-term residents in your dormitory are—by and large—both physically fit and academically gifted young women. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be here. Unfortunately, many of them are also strong-willed, highly-competitive, and accustomed to having their own way. Fair warning. Unless you project an air of authority in their presence, they’ll walk all over you. Please don’t shoot the messenger. I’m simply telling you the way it is, but that’s neither here nor there. I’ll get you a roster with names, room numbers, and photos. You’ve got the job.”

“I’m not sure I want it. Sounds to me like you need a drill sergeant more than you do a housemother.”

“You think so? We have a couple of retired military personnel on our teaching staff already. They earned their stripes and both received honorable discharges. Indeed, those two are capable of handling almost any challenge you can imagine related to physical training in general and to the disciplined activities associated with cheerleading at an elite level in particular. On the other hand, despite offers of extra pay, neither one could be persuaded to interact with our students outside of scheduled classes.”

“Why is that, do you suppose? As former enlisted men, or women, are they reluctant to pull rank on the captain of a cheerleading squad?”

“They didn’t really say, but I suspect it has something to do with a number of unsubstantiated but nonetheless disturbing allegations of hazing during our previous

workshop. Some of the attendees at this special summer session have been here before.”

Molly Sullivan sat quietly for a moment. So, too, did the man facing her from behind a massive mahogany desk. She looked him right in the eye without saying a word. He met her gaze at first, then looked down. A couple of heartbeats later, he snaked both hands slowly forward to grasp either end of an ornate plaque emblazoned with gold letters to indicate his title and surname: Dean Reynolds. There were no obstacles on the uncluttered wooden surface to interfere with the straightening process. The dean swiveled the nameplate counterclockwise approximately half an inch to align it with the leading edge of his desk. Was it a delaying tactic or perchance a power play of some sort? Either way—mission accomplished—he leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest.

Molly leaned forward and said, “What am I doing here?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same question, Mrs. Sullivan. Why did you volunteer for this assignment?”

“Ah! If you’re under the impression—perhaps I should say misapprehension—that I came here by choice, without any discernible reservations, it’s little wonder we’re having difficulty communicating. At some point, your recent request for help reached a person to whom I owe a favor. I’m here to fulfill that obligation. I have no interest whatsoever in being a mother hen to a bunch of privileged adolescents. Especially, if there’s a fox, or—to be gender specific—a vixen in the henhouse. Surely, you have a disciplinary committee to deal with incidents of hazing, real or imagined. Now would be a good time to tell me what’s really troubling you.”

“What if I choose not to?”

“I’ll have to conclude everything is hunky-dory.” She patted the bulging leather satchel beside her chair. “With my debt paid in full, just by showing up here, I can pick up my purse and go home.”

“I thought that was your suitcase.”

“A common mistake. Which will it be? Full disclosure or do I walk?”

Dean Reynolds took a deep breath. “Each year, the top finisher in our coed-only, talent-based cheerleading program is practically guaranteed a full-ride scholarship. Runners-up often receive lesser scholarships and anyone who stays the course has bragging rights and a chance to enhance her résumé. For that reason, the competition is always intense and minor mishaps are to be expected. Lately, however, we’ve had a calamitous run of bad luck. I received word from the bursar’s office we’re just one serious injury away from having our liability insurance cancelled. That would put the

quietus on our entire program. I can't figure out why things are going wrong on my own. I need the assistance of an experienced problem solver. I was hoping to attract the pro bono interest of a retired policeman or a civic-minded private detective."

"I may have some skills that overlap with certain aspects of those professions. Since I'm already here, I'm willing to give it the old college try. If I take on a dual role, though, you'll need to provide me with a valid excuse for watching the practice sessions. Maybe you can designate me an assistant coach. I'd expect you to double my salary, of course."

"Hold on! I thought you were working for free."

"I am. Since two times zero is still zero, the net result is the same, but I like to get an ego boost now and then."

"What do you know about cheerleading?"

"Not much, but what I do know, I've known for a good long while. I remember when professional cheerleaders were given screen time lasting more than a second or two during televised sporting events. Also, I brought a megaphone."

The dean tilted his head and raised his left eyebrow.

"Honestly," Molly declared. "It's in my purse. I'd show it to you, but you might mistake it for a cornucopia. It's filled to overflowing with bandages, creams, ointments, moisturizers, over-the-counter pain killers, and the like. I'm telling instead of showing because there may be some feminine hygiene products in the mix. Besides, you need to learn to trust what I say."

The dean threw up his hands. "You win. I'm convinced of your sincerity. You've got a deal."

"Good. I genuinely hope I can help you. I'd say this situation calls for a handshake agreement, but I'm not sure I can reach across the vast expanse of your work station."

"Stay where you are. I'll come to you." The dean stood up and stepped briskly around the corner of his desk.

They shook hands.

"I wondered if you'd make a widdershins approach," Molly remarked.

"I'd what?"

"Go lefthandwise. Anti-clockwise. Keep an object to your left while circling it. I'm glad you chose that path. You gave me a vocabulary lesson earlier and I wanted to return the favor by introducing a big word of my own into our conversation. The antonym of widdershins is deosil and that would not have suited my purpose at all. Even so, I think my word fell a few letters short of your first entry in our sesquipedalian competition. Maybe on the count of three we can both say *antidisestablishmentarianism* and call

it even.”

Dean Reynolds smiled.

Molly nodded her head. “Now you’re catching on. Shakespeare knew the value of comic relief. If at all possible, from time to time, no matter how serious the circumstances, we need to look on the light side.”

“You’re right. I hate to admit it, but I can be opinionated and overbearing at times. Please forgive me, Mrs. Sullivan, if I seemed a bit condescending, at first. You probably thought I was a pompous ass.”

Molly shrugged. “If the horseshoe fits.” It was her turn to smile. “All is forgiven.”

Her first full day as a housemother-cum-coach got off to a troubled start. One of the workshop participants failed to show up on time for breakfast at the Student Union building.

Molly’s queries about the absent coed drew mostly dismissive responses and a few derisive comments, plus a fair amount of bickering.

“Phoebe’s skinny as a rail. She doesn’t need food.”

“Yeah, she eats like a bird.”

“That’s a myth. Hummingbirds can consume up to twice their body weight in a day.”

“Okay. I stand corrected. Phoebe eats like a museum bird that’s already stuffed, or one that’s extinct, like a dodo.”

“I’ll buy that.”

Molly did her best to tune out the inane remarks as she ordered coffee in a large paper cup to go. With a portable jolt of caffeine in hand to kickstart her day, she went to check on the missing student. Although she had a master key, she didn’t need to use it. Phoebe’s door was unlocked.

When there was no response to a light tapping, Molly entered the room.

She was dismayed by what she saw. The motionless body of a young woman—covered by a blanket up to her waist—was stretched out on the bed. Her upper torso was clad only in an ill-fitting sports bra. Not that it mattered, but the slack fabric made it impossible to guess the cup size. A white scarf with red stains on it was wrapped around the coed’s neck. A dried scarlet rivulet extended from the edge of the cloth onto her bare skin. The most horrifying aspect of the bizarre scene was the full head of hair on display above the scarf. How was that physically possible? Was it a wig? Or—perish the thought—had Phoebe been decapitated and her cranium rotated halfway round?

Molly had to know, one way or the other. She inched forward. As she got closer, she noticed a nearly empty plastic bottle of cranberry juice beside the bed. Was that a good sign? Probably. She put it in the plus column anyway.

Crime scene, or not, Molly was compelled to check for any sign of life. She grasped a handful of hair and moved it to one side. The roots were firmly anchored to Phoebe's scalp. A bad sign? Time would tell.

Before she could continue her examination, she heard a groan. Molly let out a sigh of relief. "Wake up, sleepyhead. Did you have a rough night?"

"I don't think so," came a mumbled reply. Phoebe was lying on her stomach with her face nearly buried in the pillow. She lifted her head and spoke more clearly. "I don't remember anything bad happening if that's what you want to know. I don't remember much of anything."

"How do you feel?"

"I have a headache."

"Like you were hit on the head?"

"No, more like the usual kind that comes from the inside."

"Of the hangover variety?"

"I wouldn't know what those are like. I don't drink."

Using a clean handkerchief—so she could check for fingerprints later—Molly picked up the juice bottle and sniffed. "I wouldn't be too sure about that. Are you on any medication?"

"In addition to vitamins, I take one prescription pill every night. I can take it with food or without, and it has no contraindications concerning alcohol."

"May I see your prescription pill bottle?"

"It's at home. I brought a week's supply in one of those dispensers with a little compartment for each day of the week." She awkwardly lifted her right arm, crooked her elbow, and pointed. "It's over there on the desk."

"I'll take a look at it. You might be more comfortable if you turn over and straighten out your clothes."

Molly walked to the desk. She heard a rustling sound followed by an audible gasp. She didn't look back.

"Your dispenser is made of opaque plastic. With the lid closed, it's impossible to tell the size, shape, or color of the pills. Before taking them, do you look closely at the pills after you dump them into your hand at night?"

"No. Why would I?"

"Under normal circumstances, there would be absolutely no good reason why

you should. You're away from home, though, and it's possible someone slipped a bad pill into your dispenser in an attempt to sabotage your chances of doing well in your workouts."

"Oh! What time is it? I don't want to be late for practice. I have to get going."

"Not today, you don't. At least not this morning. You're in no condition to compete. For safety's sake, I want you to see a doctor first. She'll probably want to run some blood tests. I'd suggest you cooperate with her and tell her the truth about what happened. She *may* be able to salvage your reputation."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"I am. One more thing before you go. Who do you consider your closest competitor? Who has similar skills to yours?"

"Candice. Her friends call her Candy. She's slender like me and she isn't afraid of heights. That's why we're the ones who get tossed in the air most of the time. If I'm not there, she'll most likely take my place. Do you think Candy tried to poison me?"

"I'm reserving judgment," Molly said. "There's something else to consider. If Candy is genuinely almost as good as you are, there's a real possibility she will also be the target of a malicious prank."

"Someone should warn her she's in danger."

"I agree. I'll look for her straightaway. She should have finished her breakfast by now."

Molly caught a break. She located Candy in an otherwise unoccupied exercise room.

"Phoebe told me you two are flyers."

"You saw her? Is she okay?"

"She will be soon. In the meantime, you'll have to pick up the slack for her. With your extra workload, I have some concerns about your safety. What do you consider the most perilous part of your performance? When are you most vulnerable to injury? Is it during the takeoff or the landing?"

"The landing, for sure. Since I'm propelled by a small trampoline, I'm in control of the liftoff. It's up to me to establish the angle of ascent and altitude."

"May I see your launch pad?"

"Of course. It's over there."

"It looks rather flimsy to me."

"Maybe so, but it's sturdy enough."

"Do you think it would support my weight?" Molly asked.

"Duh! I've seen a six-foot-six basketball player jump on a trampoline just like

that one without any problem.”

“In that case, I’d like to try it.”

“I don’t recommend it. There’s nobody here to catch you.”

“You’re hardly a nobody, Candy, but don’t worry. I have no intention of jumping.”

Molly sat on the edge of the trampoline. Moving very slowly, she shifted her abundant avoirdupois toward the center. The synthetic fabric sagged at first, then gave way completely.

“Curses! I think I just converted your trampoline into a heavy-duty Hula Hoop.”

With no small amount of effort, Candy helped Molly extricate herself from the damaged apparatus.

“Are you hurt?”

“Only my pride. Let’s flip this contraption over and give it a thorough examination. Something I should have done in the first place.”

“What do you think we’ll find?”

“Nothing good. There may be signs of excess wear and tear which will reflect badly on the school for not maintaining its athletic equipment, or there may be some indication of deliberate damage.”

The device was in generally good, almost pristine condition with one exception. Along an extensive section of the trampoline, the cords binding the stretch material to the exterior rim were severely compromised.

“Somebody sliced almost all the way through these cords,” Molly said. “You can easily see the contrast between the smooth parts that were cut and the smaller jagged parts that were torn when they failed to support my weight.”

“Who would do that?”

“Someone who wants to take you out of the competition.”

“What can we do about it?”

“I’m glad you said ‘we.’ I’m going to blame you for the damage to the trampoline. It’s too bad you sprained your ankle in the process.”

“I did no such thing!” Candy protested.

“Don’t be too quick to dismiss my proposal. Once you’re placed on the injured reserve list, you should be safe from a follow-up attack. We can only hope the unidentified perpetrator will be satisfied with her achievement. Otherwise, she’s likely to continue immediately with her war of attrition against her rivals. The worst-case scenario is we’ll only recognize her as the prime suspect when she’s the last cheerleader standing. It’s your choice.”

“You’re willing to let her get away with it?”

“I’d rather not. Maybe if she has an erroneous notion of being a perfect criminal, she’ll make a careless mistake. I’ll be watching.”

“That’s all you’ll do?”

“Far from it. I intend to do some sly sleuthing, and I’d appreciate your help.”

“Okay.”

“I have some bandages in my purse. While I’m wrapping your ankle, I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Fire away.”

“Did any of the participants bring a small pocketknife? A Swiss Army knife perhaps?”

“That’s highly unlikely,” Candy said. “We were given a list of forbidden items and our luggage was checked for illegal substances when we arrived.”

“It’s a mystery then. A table knife wouldn’t do the job.”

“Scissors would. I know Jennifer brought a sewing kit. She said anyone can borrow it. All of us heard her make the offer.”

Phoebe was a no-show at the noon meal, yet her name—and her exploits—seemed to be on everyone’s lips.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s under the weather.”

“Must’ve been caught in a twister. I hear she had her bra on backwards.”

“Inside out?”

“No, back to front.”

“That’s ridiculous. She can’t be that inept, even if she is mostly skin and bones with prominent shoulder blades.”

“Maybe she got dressed in the dark,” a new speaker interjected. Her voice was in a distinctively low register.

Molly tried in vain to match the voice to a face. She darted her eyes around the room in anticipation of another comment.

Just then, Candy limped into the dining area. Bad timing perhaps, from Molly’s point of view, but she couldn’t complain. The late arrival was her idea to see how the other cheerleaders would react.

At first, they seemed indifferent.

Finally, someone said, “Looks like Candice got a boo-boo. What happened?”

Candy blushed, but said nothing.

“She fell down on the job. Crash landed!” That gruff voice again.

Whoever she was, she was in the know. Molly was on high alert, but she again failed to pinpoint the source.

The room briefly fell silent before the deep-voiced provocateur issued a parting shot. “A bouncy house is more her speed.”

Sometimes three’s a charm. Not this time. Molly still had no clue who’d spoken. Effectively, she’d struck out.

The same could be said for the speaker. Her latest negative remark did not spark a new round of jocular insults.

The meal concluded with no additional chin music, other than the murmurs of private conversations.

During the afternoon session, Molly managed to have a word with Jennifer.

“Did anyone ask for the loan of your sewing kit?”

“Just Darlene.”

“Why did she want it? Did she lose a button or tear her uniform?”

“Nope. She has a really spooky doll. She said she wanted to mend its outfit. I only got a glimpse of the creepy critter, but it looked to me like it was wearing a tuxedo.”

“So, you let Darlene have your kit?”

“Yes. She took it to her room overnight. She returned it to me this morning. Why are you asking?”

“Let’s just say I’m nosy by nature and leave it at that.”

Molly dropped by the dean’s office to give him a progress report.

She began by recounting the highlights of her investigation. What she’d observed and what she’d heard.

After listening patiently, Dean Reynolds had some questions.

“Could Phoebe have staged the episode in her room?”

“Not without an accomplice. The scarf was already in place around her neck when the cranberry juice was poured on it. Besides, the uncapped bottle—wiped clean of fingerprints—was sitting upright on the floor beyond her reach. Finally, the lab report indicated the drug-alcohol combo in her system could have proved fatal with a higher dosage.”

“That’s scary. What about Candice?”

“She’s in the clear. No one in her right mind would sabotage equipment knowing

she'd have to risk life and limb to reveal the damage."

"You've reached a dead end then?"

"Perhaps not. Remember the mealtime taunting I told you about?"

"Yes."

"I think that's the key to revealing the promulgator of the Machiavellian maneuvers."

"How so?"

"I think the responsible party is a lone wolf with a character flaw of some sort. It wasn't enough for her to sideline her competitors, she had to humiliate them, as well. To accomplish that end, she disguised her voice. If she'd simply kept quiet, she might never have been found out."

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"I do, based solely on circumstantial evidence. I have no solid proof. Maybe you can help. Are you able to access the social media accounts of the cheerleaders?"

"No comment."

"It's important. I won't tell anyone where I got the info if you don't."

"Okay. Who do you want to know about?"

"Jennifer told me Darlene has a spooky doll. Maybe there's a photo online."

Dean Reynolds took a laptop out of an upper drawer in his desk. He tapped on the keys with his index fingers. A short time later, he rotated the processor so Molly could see the screen."

"Spooky is right."

"That's not an ordinary doll," Molly said. "That's a ventriloquist's dummy. Darlene had means, motive, and opportunity, plus the ability to make anonymous comments. The question is what do we do next."

"Will this problem keep until morning?"

"I would think so. Darlene will probably be content to lie low for a while. I'll make sure she doesn't sneak out after curfew."

"How can you manage that?"

"Her room is just down the hall from mine. I'll crack my door open and watch. I have a couple of audio books to help me stay awake."


"Sounds like a plan. I'll alert campus security to keep watch outside of the dormitory. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good news, Mrs. Sullivan. Darlene is no longer our problem."

“What do you mean? I saw her entering the Student Union building a short while ago.”

“That’s right. She went in one door and out the other. She was off campus waiting for a share ride when the university security team caught up with her. Since she was out of their jurisdiction, they let her go. I doubt she’ll be back. Do you have any guess why she ran?”

Molly did her best to stifle a yawn. “It just so happens, I do. Jennifer tapped on Darlene’s door early this morning. They had a brief whispered conversation in the hall. I couldn’t read their lips, but I’m pretty sure the subject of scissors came up. At one point, anyway, Jennifer held out her extended index and middle fingers and made a snipping motion. With proof, or without, Darlene knew we were on to her scheme.”

“Thanks to your tireless efforts. For now, at least, the details of your investigation must remain confidential. Otherwise, I’d celebrate your great success by assembling the squad and having them give three cheers just for you.” 

LAST WORDS

A You-Solve-It by C.I. Kemp

“**W**hat do you think, Lieu?”
 “Whodunit”-type cases were nothing new to Lieutenant Detective Jo DeSantis. You had your victim and any number of suspects. You had your clues, you had your investigations, and at the end of it all, after hours, days, and perhaps weeks of due diligence, you had your perpetrator.

This was different.

“This isn’t so much a ‘whodunit,’ Cull,” DeSantis replied to her partner, Shea Cullen. “It’s more of a ‘who’s-gonna-get-it.’”

By that she meant that they knew the identity of the perpetrator; the question—the *big* question—was who was the victim?

It was 10:30 PM when they arrived at what used to be Judson Farrow’s workshop.

Farrow was an ex-army ordinance explosives expert as well as the town’s local curmudgeon and grudge-holder.

The call of an explosion came in at 10:10 PM. Cullen arrived minutes before his partner. When DeSantis pulled up, Farrow was lying on a gurney and the medics were pulling a sheet over him. DeSantis mentally crossed her fingers, hoping that Cullen could provide an explanation that would make some sense out of this mess.

“He was rambling when I got to him, Lieu,” Cullen reported. “From what I was able to piece together, he was out to get back at some people he hated.”

“That’s a pretty wide field. Farrow was never the type to forgive or forget a slight, real or imagined.”

“You got that right. Anyway, he said something to the effect that at least one of them was going to be dead by midnight tonight. And he was holding this.”

“This” turned out to be a sheet of note paper which read the following:

CLEAN TIMER

SLING ADDER

I STAB NOT P

INK RAFT

DeSantis took the sheet and gave it a quick once-over. "Do you have any idea what this means?"

Cullen shrugged. "Not a clue. I'm guessing it's some kind of code. Maybe if we get one of our cryptology guys in ..."

"Damn it, Cull, it's after 10 on Saturday night! All those guys are off-duty and even if we do get them here, there's no chance they'll crack it by midnight! No, we have to do this by ourselves."

Cullen shook his head. "That's crazy! We've got nothing to go on!"

"Not quite. There are four lines on this list and it's common knowledge that Farrow hated four people in this town above all. I figure that each of these phrases corresponds to one of those people. What do we know about those four?"

Cullen started rattling off what he knew on his fingers. "Number one: his former staff sergeant, Leon Groves. Groves reported Farrow AWOL from his post. Farrow received a dishonorable discharge and blamed Groves.

"Two, his ex-girlfriend Sandra DuMont. She runs a chain of florist shops in town. She ran off with Johnny Morrow which brings us to ...

... number three. Johnny Morrow, vocalist for the Johnny Morrow Trio. Farrow blamed Morrow for stealing DuMont from him. It never occurred to him that it was his own sterling character that drove her away.

"And finally, number four. Charles Drake, manager of Mercantile Savings and Loan. Drake took a chance on Farrow, hired him as a clerk, and Farrow repaid the favor by taking home samples. Did a stint in jail. No love lost there either."

"So Farrow decides to use his explosives expertise to get back at each of them" DeSantis continued. "He succeeds with one, starts preparing the others, gets careless, and blows himself up in the process. Our problem is to figure out the one he's gotten to."

"Well, there's a check mark next to I STAB NOT," Cullen mused. "But that makes no sense. It's not as if he's stabbing anyone. He's blowing them up."

DeSantis checked her watch. "We've got just over an hour to figure who I STAB NOT refers to. Let me see that list again, will you, Cull?"

Cullen handed her the list. DeSantis perused it. After a few minutes, she shouted, "Give me a pen, quick!" She then proceeded to scribble something on the list and handed it back to Cullen.

"This is our victim. Get the bomb squad to the premises right away. We may just be in time to save a life!"

Solution in next month's issue ...

SOLUTION TO JULY'S YOU-SOLVE-IT

A Bedtime Detective Story By John H. Dromey

“By doing what his namesake is famous for,” Detective Barnes said. “Let’s check every inch of the woodwork on the *outside* of the door to Mrs. Carstairs’ room for prints and I think we can prove who’s guilty.”

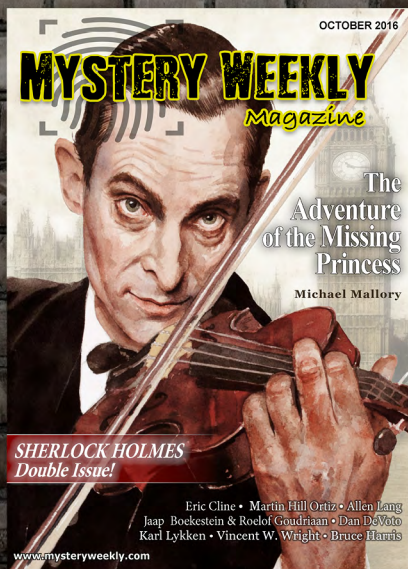
The detective was correct. A clear set of the guilty party’s prints were found where they should not have been. With that new evidence Detective Barnes and his partner Detective Lewis were able to develop a new theory of the case.

They surmised the nephew had paused, out of sight just short of the entrance, long enough to make sure his aunt was snoring. Then he quietly “huffed and puffed” on the vents of the thermostat’s heat sensor until his hot breath raised the temperature high enough to activate the noisy cooling system. To get his mouth close to the controls without stepping on the creaky floor, he’d held onto the outside door frame with one hand and leaned sideways into the room while keeping his feet firmly planted on the hallway’s plush carpet. Presumably, as soon as the air-conditioner started up, he stepped out of his loafers and glided in stocking feet to the jewelry box.

After planting the stolen costume jewelry in the maid’s room, the young man took a siesta and then briefly left the house with the ring in his pocket.

The detectives convinced a judge they had probable cause for an electronically-issued search warrant.

The stolen ring was recovered from the glove compartment of the nephew’s car.



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