

# **Mayhem, Murder, and Music**

*Short Stories Inspired by Musical Pieces*

**Steven M. Moore**

SAMPLE

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## **Preface**

I was inspired to write these short stories by recalling some favorite musical pieces. Before each story, I give a wee bit of history, but you can often have fun ID-ing the song just from the title. Some of the songs are a bit obscure, so have a good time finding them for your playlist too.

There's a serious purpose here, though: I want to introduce you to my mystery and thriller writing. I hope you have as much fun reading them as I did writing them.

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## The Piano Man

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*Everyone knows this Billy Joel classic. Call it rock, a ballad for a struggling musician, or whatever, the melody is probably already in your head.*

“Hey buddy, are you OK?”

Through the fog of his hangover Walter Ellison stirred and then awoke as the flashlight’s beam fell on his face. “Go away. I’m trying to sleep.”

He saw the beam sweep over the contents of his van. Still hugging his keyboard with his left arm like his Angela, he pushed up with his right and saw a face in the penumbra behind the beam. Shadowy lips moved.

“You can’t sleep here, bro. The park closes at eight.”

Walter looked at his watch. “That’s five hours from now. I’ll leave by then.”

“Eight p.m., idiot, not eight a.m. Come on buddy, we don’t want to haul you in for vagrancy.”

“I’m no vagrant. I have a gig at the night club three blocks from here. It’s a regular job.”

“But you can’t park your van here,” said the closest voice.

“What do you want? Do you want me to drive around drunk so you can haul me in for DUI? Or cause an accident where I kill someone? FYI: I don’t like sleeping in jail. Let me sleep it off here in peace.”

“OK. Just this once. The park opens at eight. You’d better be gone by then. And don’t come back.”

“Thank you, officers. You’ll get your reward in heaven.”

Walter snuggled with Angela and went back to sleep.

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Four hours later as daybreak neared, the flashlights were back. The van’s door was forced open. A burly cop crawled inside and roused Walter.

“Out with you.” He dragged Walter out in his underwear and slapped handcuffs on him. Miranda rights were read.

“What’s all the commotion? Why the handcuffs? Do you fellows think I’m violent? I’m just a homeless piano man with a hangover.”

A woman stepped forward and flashed her badge. He saw a serious but good-looking woman with no perfume but maybe apple-scented shampoo. She brushed her hair aside as she stared him down.

“Nora Peterson, homicide detective. After what you did to that little boy, we’d like to do a lot more than put handcuffs on you. But you’ll have your day in court.”

“Excuse me. What are you talking about?”

“Little Billy Hunter was found mutilated in his backyard. Let’s go.”

One uniform led Walter to a squad car and forced him inside. Peterson leaned into the driver.

“Be careful with him. I want to see this SOB get the needle.”

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“Why are you still here? Haven’t they processed Walter Ellison yet?” Chief Monday had just arrived at police HQ. It was 8:10 a.m.

Sgt. Peterson raised her head from her desktop. “I’m having second thoughts, Albert. We might have the wrong guy.” She handed Monday several pages of computer printout. He grabbed a chair and began to read. She waited. When he finished, she said, “See what I mean?”

“Not really. So he was in Afghanistan and earned enough medals to put U.S. Steel back in business. He was drunk. He could have PTSD. Maybe he thought the kid was a ferocious ET about to attack him. You just never know. His wife must have left him for some reason.”

“Check the date. The divorce came through during his second tour. He was in combat, sure; homeless and living out of a van, sure; but he’s never been in trouble anywhere. The two uniforms remembered the van. They let it slide because he had pulled into the park to sleep it off instead of driving around drunk.

“Homeless vets out of work get desperate,” said Monday. “Case closed.”

“He has steady work. He has a regular gig in a night spot and makes a living moving from gig to gig. I checked. People at the bar like him. He’s a piano man: plays and sings using fake books.”

“What’s that?”

“Hundreds of songs with just lyrics, melodies, and chords. We found them in the van with a keyboard, but in the bar he uses a regular baby grand. The player creates the accompaniment using the chord indications and sings the lyrics. Standard piano bar stuff.”

Monday thought a bit. “OK. I guess I understand your second thoughts. What’s the ME say? Did the perp just start hacking on Billy? If not Ellison, who? And why? Even for Ellison that’s a valid question. It would help to have a motive. Was the kid molested?”

“We need to wait for the ME’s findings. But I don’t think this is the perp. Someone who saves his squad leader and two other guys while almost losing his leg sounds like an upstanding person, don’t you think?”

“Don’t forget the PTSD angle. You were military, right?”

“Marines, like Ellison, only Iraq. Not much combat. Mostly self-defense when our unit was attacked. I was com but had some training as an MP. Don’t look for logic in assignments from the Pentagon.”

“Maybe you’re too close to this one then. Do I need to find someone else to take the case?”

“Not for that reason. If we pass this to the DA without sufficient evidence, though, I’ll withdraw on my own. I rushed to judgment. That printout creates a whole cloud of uncertainty.”

Monday shrugged. “I’m not so sure, but OK. Get the ME’s report and take it from there. Keep me in the loop. I can’t give you much time. People will get lathered up by this crime, the media will start screaming for justice, the mayor will be upset, and it will all come down on me.”

Peterson nodded. With the DA’s and mayor’s office alone, the Chief was always receiving flak. Add residents and media and it often became the perfect storm.

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Nora Peterson was in her ninth year at Riverside PD, he fourth year as detective. Most of the time she loved her job.

She splashed water on her face, toweled off, and wondered about makeup. *To visit the morgue? Hardly worth it.* There would be the mutilated body of a little boy. No one would notice or care how badly she looked.

No, love wasn't the appropriate word. Most of the time she felt good about the job because she could bring some scumbags to justice and give victims some closure. She had a good arrest record. She didn't feel good about this arrest, though.

She decided to walk. Some of the humidity had lifted. It would be a nice day in the Pennsylvania hills. The walk would dispel the fog in her mind from lack of sleep. The labs were just around the corner, three blocks away in an old converted warehouse. The ME had a better office than she did. The conversion was a success and provided more spacious quarters than the previous ones in the station's basement.

"You could have just called. Or downloaded the report." Dr. Brendan Sullivan, a tall, heavysset man, motioned toward one of the visitors' chairs. She dusted it off and sat. "I don't recommend you see the body."

"I'm here in case I need to. I've seen plenty. COD and TOD?"

"TOD is between one and four a.m., give or take a few minutes on either end. Error bars are a bit large—small body and cool night. COD was strangulation."

"The mutilation of the body occurred after the strangulation?"

"Yes, thank goodness. To satisfy my own curiosity, what have you discovered?"

"Lab boys are still working in and around the house. There's no signs of forced entry. No one knows how the kid got out. It was a bit ritualistic, as you know. Any signs of molestation?"

"No. Here's something interesting, though. Scratched on the kid's chest was GGGEb. The blood was fresh there, so it occurred as part of the mutilation."

"Does that have any meaning? A gang symbol?"

"The only meaning I can give it is that those are the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony."

*Music? Walter Ellison was a musician.*

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Peterson returned to HQ and began to prepare mentally for Ellison's interrogation. *How do you interrogate someone who's probably crazy?* She knew that it wasn't just the battlefield that affected people's minds. Ellison's divorce might have put him over the edge. Maybe he was a closet sex offender, having remained out of the public eye all this time. She cupped her chin with her hands.

He'd appeared surprised at the arrest. It was dark, she couldn't see him well, but she'd heard surprise in his voice. She looked at the pic in the file. He was in dress uniform and at attention. *Maybe a proud mom snapped the pic? How'd the Pentagon get it?* Her boot camp pic was a frontal and profile without makeup, more like a booking pic than a graduation pic. She thumbed through the file. There it was. *So why the pic with the dress uniform?* She took a magnifying glass from a drawer and examined the details. Saw the medals. *After the injuries.* Probably taken for promo purposes when Ellison received the honors. It helped in

recruiting to show recruits, that some returned, even with wounds and medals. *I count myself lucky.*

A large man entered the detectives' area and headed for Monday's small office. *Mayor Sam Bradley, the bull in our china closet.* He was followed by some aides and four reporters and photographers. *He's huffing and puffing and ready to blow our house down!* The SOB was grandstanding as usual. She felt sorry for Monday. The mayor didn't even knock.

She recognized that the mayor had a pretty good record for getting things done. But he wasn't popular with underlings, and that included cops and firefighters. Although he was an ex-union boss and ran as a law-and-order man, he had become highly critical of Riverside PD and forced pension and health cuts down their throats. She knew that such antics were common across the land—most local property taxes were destined for schools. Tax relief in their city with so little commercial real estate had to be accompanied by cuts in city personnel and services to keep the school budgets intact.

She'd never met the mayor, but the charge through the detective area hadn't set well with her or other detectives there that she could see. She wanted to be a turtle and crawl into her shell when several people crammed into Monday's office started pointing in her direction. She swept up the file on Ellison and left for the interrogation.

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Peterson walked into the interrogation room and nodded to the public defender.

"Hello, Nora," said Bob Ortega. "You're looking well."

She took a chair across from Walter Ellison and Ortega. "I'm not in the mood for ass kissing today, counselor." She pushed a paper across to Ellison. It had GGGEb written on it. "Can you tell me what that means?"

Ellison studied it. "Is this some kind of code? I can't break codes. I always admired those guys when I was fighting in Afghanistan. I can say it doesn't make sense because G is repeated."

*Is this an act?* "Let's say they're musical notes."

Ellison hummed. "Yeah, that makes sense. It's the four opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth."

"Does it have any other meaning?"

"Hmm. If I remember my Boy Scout merit badge work correctly and take it to signify dot-dot-dot-dash, that's V. In World War Two, I think Churchill used both the notes and V to rally the Brits—V for victory." He looked at Ortega. "I thought we were going to discuss the charges against me."

"We were," said Ortega. "Where is this going, Detective?"

"Do you know the name of your victim?" Peterson said to Ellison.

"You're leading my client," said Ortega. "It's incumbent upon the police and the DA to prove my client had something to do with this crime. Use of the pronoun 'your' is tantamount to asking him to confess to a crime."

Peterson frowned. "OK. Have you heard who the victim was?"

"You told me it was Billy Hunter," said Ellison. "Did you get the name wrong?"

"No, it's Billy Hunter." *Damn, that was a slip. I must be tired.* "Did you know Billy Hunter?"

“By reputation. His father brags about his Little League prowess all the time at the VFW post.”

*Is that a connection?* “So you know the father, Nate Hunter?”

“We talked once during one of my breaks at the bar. I generally do three sessions with breaks in between.” He flexed his fingers. “More for the voice than the hands. I used to do only two, but the tip jar started overflowing.”

“You draw good crowds?”

“Even during the week, but Friday and Saturday nights are crazy. Still not enough to rent an apartment. I bailed on the last one. No one would rent to me now anyway.”

Peterson wrote a few notes. “So you’ve never met Billy Hunter?”

“Detective, the only thing I know about Billy is that his father says he’s a great shortstop but needs to learn to hit better. I told him not to worry—a lot of MLB shortstops are great at defense and bad at offense.” He smiled. “I don’t know where you’re going with this. A lot of the fathers brag about their kids. I figure that listening to them is the price I have to pay to get some free refreshments.” There was a twinkle in his eye.

*Am I starting to like this guy?* “You’re at the VFW often?”

“It’s dinner some nights. It’s hard to cook in my van, and I get tired of fast food.”

“Back to Beethoven. Do those notes signify anything else?”

“They’re powerful notes. I suppose they could signify strength and power. It was once thought that Beethoven intended them to mean fate knocking at the door, but that was probably just an exuberant publicist.”

“Fate, huh?” *Whose fate? The perp’s or the vic’s?* “Do you understand all the charges against you, Mr. Ellison?”

“Not really. I was sleeping off a hangover and your people woke me up. You have the wrong man. I’d never hurt a kid.”

“Did you and your wife have kids?”

“We tried. Considering the circumstances, it’s probably a good thing we didn’t. Please leave Angela out of this.”

“Just trying to understand you better. Were you ever diagnosed with PTSD?”

“My client doesn’t have to answer that question,” said Ortega.

“I don’t mind,” said Ellison. “While I sometimes have nightmares about my tours over there, I don’t have PTSD. Did you?”

“How did you know I served?”

“A lot of cops do, but Bob told me.”

“The answer is no, but it’s really none of your business. Let’s keep the questions to mine.”

They went on for almost an hour. She ran out of steam before Ellison did.

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“That didn’t go well,” said Monday.

“With the mayor, or watching my lame attempts to obtain a confession.”

“Both, I guess. But forget about the mayor for now. What’s your take on Ellison?”

Peterson sighed. “Either he’s innocent or he’s very good at hiding his guilt.”

“What’s your gut feeling?”



“That we have the wrong guy. There’s no concrete evidence. Saying Beethoven was a musician and Ellison’s also a musician is a pretty flimsy connection, don’t you think?”

Monday nodded. Stood and poured some coffee for himself and then raised an eyebrow to Peterson. She shook her head. He sat again. “So, did you have PTSD?”

“It affected me, yes. I was never diagnosed with it. And I’ve been over the experience for a long time. Ellison’s more recent.”

Monday shook his head. “Having PTSD isn’t a crime by any stretch of the imagination. I’m really wading in dog crap now, though, because we have no other POIs. The mayor suggested removing you from the case, by the way. He wants us to give it to someone else who can take it to the DA.” He smiled. “I told him to stick it in a nice way, that he can run the city, but not Riverside PD.” He put an index finger on the file folder that had become larger as the hours passed. “Canvassing that whole area produced squat. And Nate says no way someone came into his house to take Billy.”

“The kid might have let himself out,” she said. “Any forensics indicating that?”

“Billy’s fingerprints are all over the place. Why wouldn’t they be? He lives there. When we eliminate all family members, no prints are left. He must have gone outside.”

“The neighbors aren’t good POIs either. The one in back is an old lady who thought Billy was the cat’s meow. The two families on either side are on vacation. Ones across the street check out too. And there aren’t too many other kids in the neighborhood.”

“What about gangs? Don’t some of them congregate in that park where they picked up Ellison?”

“They meet there to drink and smoke. That’s pretty harmless and out in the open. Other things they do, not so much. Do you think this is some kind of weird initiation?”

“That would be a first for this town. The only Fifth those boys would know about comes straight from Kentucky.” He frowned. “We’re either going to have to charge Ellison or let him go, you know.”

“Let’s let him go,” she said. “We’ll tail him.”

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It was Peterson’s shift two nights later when Ellison left the club. She watched him head toward the van, fake books in hand. He opened the back, put the music inside, and closed the doors. He moved around to the front. She could see under that van and watched his feet. They disappeared into shadows.

She waited. *Did I lose him?*

A knock on the passenger window made her jump. Ellison slid into her passenger seat.

“Hello, Detective. I was waiting for you.”

*Can I get to my gun in time?* “Really? You knew we were tailing you?”

“I was in combat in Afghanistan. When every sound is a threat and every shadow can kill you, you develop a keen sense of surveillance and detection. Even smell—the Taliban don’t bathe too often.” He smiled. “I was waiting for you, though. I wanted to get to know you better.”

*In what way?* “I’m not sure the feeling is mutual.”

“I suppose not. You seem like a nice person, though. Can I invite you in to have a drink?”

“In the bar?”

"It's really a night club, but they haven't closed yet. The serious drinkers still linger on."

"I'm on duty."

"Of course. What was I thinking? How 'bout tomorrow night? Come around and catch my first set, and I'll buy you a drink on my break."

"I thought you were homeless?"

"The cost of a few drinks doesn't come near paying rent for an apartment. Joe might give us freebies too. I just received a raise, though. People are coming in from around the entire county just to hear me." Ellison made a face.

"Isn't that good?"

"Ever heard the adage about being a victim of your own success. Success is overrated. It just complicates our lives. Right now I have no encumbrances besides my van."

"But you invited me for a drink."

"I said I wanted to know you better, not marry you. I don't have a good track record in that department."

"Your fault or Angela's?"

"Does it matter?" He slid out of the car. "Think about tomorrow night. Let me just say you have a good influence on me. I've been sober since I met you." He waved his fingers.

"Playing better too. Come and see."

She followed him into the countryside where he pulled onto a side road and parked. After fifteen minutes, she left her suspect to his dreams.

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Peterson walked into the office that morning, sat at her desk, and was confronted by Monday.

"Were you tailing Ellison?" he said.

"Until he pulled off of County Road Six to sleep. Why? That's been SOP on this tail. We have other cases."

He nodded. "Susie Vickers is missing."

Peterson searched her memory. "Who's Susie Vickers?"

"The mayor's secretary's kid."

*I should have known that.* "How old is she?"

"She just turned twelve. Pat is on sedatives and Chuck has threatened to go after Ellison with a gun. We had to restrain him. We have Ellison in protective custody. He said he talked to you, so he discovered the tail."

"From night one, I think. He was very pleasant and asked me to join him for a drink at the night club tonight. What time did Susie go missing?"

"They haven't seen her since about half past ten," said Monday.

"That clears Ellison," said Peterson. "Does Chuck know that?"

"He says Ellison could have grabbed her on his break."

She thought a moment. "Don't the Vickers live on the other side of town from the bar?"

Monday nodded. "People aren't listening to me, including the mayor. They'd lynch Ellison if he weren't in custody."

"Have you questioned Ellison?"

"I was leaving that for you, but are you too involved with him to be objective?"

“Oh, please. The man asked me to drink with him. And I didn’t say yes. I was pretty surprised.”

“Then he’s all yours.”

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“Do you know the Vickers family?” said Peterson.

Ellison, who had been resting his head on his hands at the table, looked at Bob Ortega. The lawyer nodded.

“I knew Patsy a long time ago. She’s from my hometown. I didn’t even know she was living here. I thought the only person I knew from here was Mayor Bradley.”

“How did you know Sam Bradley?”

“Basic training. We were in a scuffle once. He landed in the brig for a bit.”

“What was that about?”

“I just wanted to show him how to break his gun down faster. I never quite understood what pissed him off. Those are the kind of unpleasant things that are better forgotten.”

“Excuse me a minute,” said Peterson.

She left the interrogation room to join Monday, who’d been behind the glass.

“Did the mayor ever mention that he knew Ellison?”

“Nope. Not a word. Who’d figure that?”

“While I finish with Ellison, can you have Kathy fetch the mayor’s service record?”

“Where are you going with this? Bradley’s as squeaky clean as Mickey Mouse.”

“Why? Did you see his service record?”

Monday blushed. “Of course not. No one performs a background check on a sitting mayor. We might be the police, but this isn’t a police state.”

“Aren’t you a bit curious? We already have Ellison’s service record. It didn’t mention any altercation. That tells me that the onus is on Bradley, at least according to DoD.”

“OK. But let’s keep this between Kathy, you, and me for now. We’re treading on thin ice.”

She returned to the interrogation.

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“I want that man charged!” said Mayor Bradley. He was red in the face and bellowing.

“Sit down, Sam” said Monday, indicating a chair. The mayor sat. “I’ve asked Nora Peterson to join us in this little discussion.”

When Peterson entered, she nodded toward the mayor and winked at Monday.

“Why didn’t you say you knew Walter Ellison from basic training?” said Monday.

“What? What difference does that make?” He looked at Peterson and then back at Monday. “OK, I had a tiff with the jerk. Do you think I’m trying to frame him for that?”

“I’ll let Nora answer that.”

“We asked for your military records, Mister Mayor,” she said. “I was curious because you were thrown in the brig for that altercation and Ellison was not.”

“That’s because the CO was black too,” said Bradley with a growl.

“We’ll ignore that statement,” said Monday with a smile. It wasn’t often that he had three people in his little office at the same time, so his own black skin was shiny with perspiration. Of course, Bradley’s was more red than white. “Go ahead, Nora.”

“Actually we couldn’t access the reason with DoD. So I asked an FBI friend to pressure them a bit, and DoD finally opened your records. All of them. You were in the brig for possessing child pornography, right? And you barely avoided a court martial in Korea when you were accused of raping a Korean boy. Where’s Susie Vickers, Mr. Mayor? And where were you on the night when Billy Hunter was killed? What happened? Did you see Ellison’s old van and decide to have some fun while framing him?”

“I want my lawyer. When I’m through with you two, you’ll be homeless too.”

“I wouldn’t bluster so much, Sam. It’s not good for your blood pressure. Read him his rights, Nora.”

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“I don’t get it,” said Ellison. “I didn’t even know about the porn in basic training.” He took a sip of his drink.

“Bradley didn’t know that. He’s been worried you’d expose him for years and when you showed up here in Riverside, he lost it. In the interim, he had made his pictorial fantasies come to life. We saved Susie, poor thing, but he has left a trail of little bodies, kids raped and murdered. I suppose his lawyer will make an insanity plea.”

She straightened her blond hair. She’d put on some makeup. Ellison raised his glass to her. “I want to thank you for believing in me.”

“I didn’t. You had opportunity and you were a night owl and homeless guy. I jumped to conclusions. It’s hard to maintain an even keel when you see vics like this. I suffer for them and I suffer for their families.”

“Understood. What about that Beethoven crap?”

“He wanted something to point to you.”

“He confessed to all this?”

“Even the case in Korea. He’s looking for leniency. I’m betting he’ll get it along with a long sentence in a prison for the criminally insane.” She smiled at him. “So, what’s in your future?”

“Not jail or worse, thanks to you. I’m still maintaining my sobriety streak. That guy I was talking to? He has a recording studio. He wants to make a CD with me. Go figure.”

“So you’re hanging around here?”

“For a while. That place on the other side of town offered me a gig, so Joe here had to match their offer to keep me. I guess you’re good luck, Detective.”

“Just call me Nora. Our professional relationship is now over.”

“What about a personal one?”

“It’s starting.”

## Zamba Argentina

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*The zamba in Argentina is sung, not danced like the Brazilian samba. “Zamba de mi Esperanza” is almost an ode to the song form and characteristically sparkles in melody and rhythms while maintaining a certain indigenous sadness like much of South American folk music.*

“Who’s up?” said the Sub-Commissioner.

Marco looked up from the report he was writing. It was the Sub’s idea of irony. The rest of the squad room was empty. “I’m your man, I guess. But I was writing a report.”

“Later,” said the Sub. “This one’s a German tourist. The embassy wants swift action. The Deputy Chief wants swift action.”

“And so you want swift action?”

“You guessed it, Atahualpa.”

The Sub was referring to Marco’s Native American blood. His father was a *Porteño*, but his mother was from Salta. Only his mother was still alive on that side of the family. Too many family members on both sides had died in the Dirty War when the Junta made anyone suspected of being connected to the opposition “disappear.”

The Sub had a strange sense of humor, but Marco didn’t mind—he admired the man. He’d come up the hard way from poverty and had been a shaker and mover when the new *Policia Metropolitana de Buenos Aires* was created. The capital’s Scotland Yard was modeled after the London Metropolitan Police and the NYPD. It had a zero tolerance policy, but the port city’s civilians trusted it more than the Argentine Federal Police, known for high levels of corruption like the Mexican *Federales*.

In contrast to Marco’s slender frame, the Sub was portly and out of shape. Marco, twenty years younger, had thinning hair and dark rings under his eyes, characteristics that made him seem much older than Angelina. He didn’t expect to ever be in as bad a shape as the Super. Marco sighed and shut down his laptop. Instead of going home early, he’d have a late dinner and arrive late. Angelina would probably be asleep by that time.

He gathered up his umbrella, hat, and raincoat and headed out.

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The drizzle had diminished a bit by the time he reached the docks. He saw a bulky giant pacing up and down in front of the crime scene.

“About time,” the man said in English with a German accent. “Show me your ID.”

“I’ll ask you to do the same,” said Marco, not liking the man.

“Karl Brandt, German Embassy Security.”

“Marco Montanari, Metropolitan Police.” They exchanged creds. “I understand the victim is a tourist and not from the Embassy?”

“That’s correct. I’m here to see that you do your job. I assume your forensic people are competent. The ME’s been here and left. TOD was between four and six a.m. COD is a stab

wound in the back, pending autopsy, but I'm guessing a professional job to the right renal artery. No sign of rape."

Rape wasn't common in the capital. It generally occurred as some sort of payback from pimps or johns and not from sexual perverts. *Not that that makes it any better*, Marco thought. He found the ME's tentative report on his smart phone. "From the point of entry and lack of blood, I'd agree this was professionally done. Marks on the neck indicate a grab from behind with the left arm and penetration with the knife using the right. Is there a murder weapon?"

"They haven't found one." Brandt pointed at the dirty harbor water. "Good luck finding it if it's in there. I guess you people don't worry about polluted harbors."

Marco skirted around the "you people." "We're a major port and a city with a diverse population of more than three million people. Hamburg is half that size. And if you people hadn't shipped all your old Nazis here, we'd be doing better at this point in time."

Brandt shook his head and frowned. "I won't report you for that remark. Keep me updated with your progress." He walked away.

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"A nasty old kraut," said Lisa Buendia, head of the forensics team. She approached Marco and kissed him on the cheek. "How's Angelina?"

Lisa was Angelina's sister. "Better now that the morning sickness is ancient history. A little demanding with the cravings. I had to find some *gelato* early in the morning two days ago."

"I bet you had some too."

He smiled. "A reward for being a good husband. Do you have anything for me?"

"We're bagging a few things. Some dark hair—the victim's blond. There are a few blood drops and material under the nails. She might have scratched his face going down. We might have some luck with that, whether her attacker was Argentine or German. Maybe your friend Brandt can help out with the latter—it could be another German national."

"I wouldn't count on help from him. He's a blustering bag of hot air, but not a cop. He wouldn't be here working as Embassy Security if he were really any good. This is a backwater assignment for someone who's ready to retire. He's the age of my mother at least, but he's probably in a midlife crisis and more worried about his pension."

She smiled. "I understand that you don't like him. Still..."

"Yeah, I can ask the favor if I need to, but we have Interpol contacts that will be better than that fat Bavarian."

"Have you been to Germany?"

"No, but Angelina's into the pastries now."

"Don't let her go wild with that. She can have all kinds of problems down the road. I know." Lisa had three kids. "What's your take on this?"

"I agreed with old Karl—it looks like a hit. We need to learn more about this victim." He looked at his smart phone again. "Melissa Brentwood? Hardly sounds German."

"More American or English. But Brandt was here. Maybe she lives in Germany or is married to a German?"

"I'd better check that out. You'd think the old *hijo de puta* would have told us that."

Lisa nodded, agreeing that the German was an SOB.

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Marco watched Klaus Ihlenfeldt pace up and down in front of the window of the hotel room. He was an intense and nervous young man. With his athletic build, blond hair, and blue eyes, he could have been on a recruiting poster for the Third Reich. He swung his arms and pounded his right palm with his left fist.

"I told her to be careful. She's always too adventurous. That's how we met."

"On a tour?" said Marco.

"No, hot air balloon ride near Rothenburg." He smiled, but it was a sad smile. "It lurched and she fell into my arms. She was studying German in Munich." He collapsed into the desk chair. "And now she's gone." He snapped his fingers indicating the speed of her demise. "How am I supposed to make sense out of that?"

"You weren't with her obviously. What were you doing between four and six a.m. this morning?"

The German glared at Marco. "*Ja*, I see, the husband is always the first suspect! I was preparing some Powerpoint slides for a business meeting. She decided to enjoy the evening listening to tangos in *La Boca*. I warned her about the lecherous Argentine men that inhabit the clubs. I didn't think to warn her about assassins. Who would kill my sweet Melissa?"

"That's what I intend to find out." Marco pulled out his smart phone and stylus. "Can you give me some more background about Melissa and yourself? Have either of you been in Buenos Aires before? Do you have any enemies? Even ones back in Europe could be important because they could hire someone here. Things like that. The smallest details can sometimes be important."

He was prepared for the long session. At times he saw tears come to Klaus' eyes. After the session, he'd recommend the man buy some tranquilizers—otherwise, he wouldn't be sleeping much.

After leaving the grieving husband, he checked his watch. It was nearing ten p.m., not a late hour for Argentine diners, but late for his pregnant wife. Adding a thirty-five minute bus ride, she'd probably be asleep when he arrived. He popped into a nearby restaurant, made a quick dinner out of steak, salad, bread, and red wine, and then caught the bus for home.

As he'd predicted, Angelina was asleep. She had her arms wrapped around her large teddy bear. He was often jealous of that bear. Tonight wasn't any exception as he stripped down into his boxers, grabbed his pillow, and headed for the couch.

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"I don't want to hear about the murder," Angelina said, serving him eggs and sausage the next morning.

He pointed at the *Clarín*'s front page. Buenos Aires' largest newspaper's reporter and photographer had arrived at the crime scene just as he left. He had known TV reporters would soon follow. He'd been lucky to avoid them.

"You've already seen the story," he said with a sigh. "Female victim this time, execution style. German tourist but British citizen, so there are international complications. I'm contacting a friend in Interpol today. I'm sorry I was late."

"I had Osvaldo. I should have married him."

*Osito Osvaldo* was the bear. He smiled. "He wouldn't give you any sons or daughters."

"But he keeps me warm." She sat down at the table, took a bite of toast. "I used to like that kind of breakfast."

"You will again. Thanks for making it. It's always good to start the day with a good breakfast. Other inspectors only have coffee and pastry on the way in to work."

"And some older ones also look like W. C. Fields as a consequence and are just as bad humored."

Angelina was a fan of old Hollywood comedians. She was also a fan of Gardel, the old crooner of tangos who had gone to Hollywood. Marco preferred more traditional music. His favorite group was the *Chachaleros*; his favorite song was their "Zamba de Mi Esperanza." Like a lot of South American folk music, Argentina's had many influences but often featured strong rhythms, Spanish influences, and Native American melancholy in its melodies.

"First impressions are often wrong. They might be grumpy old men, but most are just trying to be good public servants. We're much better than the federal police."

"Which group has the more dangerous jobs?"

"Probably us. Any big city has crime. Do you want to live in the *Pampas*?"

"No. I want a husband who's alive to be the father of my children."

They'd had that discussion before. It always ended in stalemate. "Let's not go there this morning. How are you feeling?"

"Before watching you gulp down eggs and sausage, I was fine. Slow down at least."

"It's habit."

"Jobs can wait."

"Not for the job, *querida*. I grew up with four brothers and three sisters. We competed for food. Survival of the fittest."

"Were you the fittest?"

"No. Katia was. She ate like a Viking princess, grabbing and eating faster than all of us."

He frowned. His older sister, a singer, now lived in Europe. With brothers, uncles, and aunts among the disappeared, she had no use for the currents of fascism still present in Argentina. She had married a Jewish man, a writer, who had protested against the mysterious death of a special prosecutor who had wanted to indict the current president. They both felt safer now in Spain.

"Let's move on. Katia's off limits as a topic this morning too. Forget my breakfast and answer my question."

She shrugged. "I'm better. Men should have to carry babies so they know what it's like."

He laughed. "If men had to carry babies and give birth, there would be a lot fewer kids. I'm glad you're better." He looked at his watch. "Got to run." He gave her a kiss, grabbed his creds and shoulder holster, and dashed out.

She finished the eggs and sausage.

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When Marco arrived, he saw the German Karl Brandt talking to the Sub. *Is he complaining about me?* He regretted his slipup. While it was true that South American countries had provided safe haven for many Nazis during and after World War Two, some Germans, like Italians and other nationalities, had just been fleeing the violence in Europe.



Because of his family's history, though, he firmly believed that the influx of people leaning toward fascism had sowed the bitter seed that led to the *Junta* and their Dirty War.

He put such thoughts out of his mind and called Interpol. His friend there promised to dig into the lives of Klaus Ihlenfeldt, Melissa Brentwood, and, for added measure, Karl Brandt. His friend said it would take at least a day.

He also had a contact in Scotland Yard. He called and asked her to check on the British side of the victim's life.

Someone turned on lights. It had started to rain again, bringing gloom to the port city and the office.

He was reviewing the case file and the new forensic information when two shadows created from the flickering fluorescents fell over the papers. He looked up.

"Inspector, I learned you've already met my old friend, Karl," said the Sub.

Brandt smiled at Marco. The Sub wasn't smiling.

"Yes, he was good enough to let me get about doing my job. What can I do for you, Brandt?"

"Just saying hi to Raul and checking in with you. Any news about the case?"

"If you have contacts with the German police, information about the victim and her husband would be helpful. Forensics and ME results show this wasn't a robbery gone bad or a random act of violence."

"I concur. Someone wanted Melissa Brentwood dead. The two are married, by the way; she didn't take his name, but that's common nowadays. Anything else I can do?"

"I might interview *Herr* Ihlenfeldt again today. He was distraught yesterday, so I'm assuming he wasn't thinking too clearly. He has problems with English and Spanish, and my German is worse than my English. I was planning on taking a translator, but if you're there, it might be better for him."

"Of course. Set it up. Give me some warning, though. Our Ambassador tends to improvise on his schedule a lot. So far he's sleeping off cocktails and canapés at *La Casa Rosada*, but that could change at a moment's notice."

"Understood. I'll give you fair warning. I'll keep you posted too. Or, do you prefer to handle that?"

The last question, aimed at the Sub, who had been staring out the window at the downpour, caught his boss by surprise.

"No, you can inform Karl of developments in the case. We need to avoid any international repercussions, of course."

"Of course," said Marco.

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Marco entered the interrogation room and recoiled a bit. A witness had come forward in response to the police request for information, no questions asked. He was a slovenly dressed bald man with a straggly beard turning to gray who seemed at ease in the old wooden chair that was probably older than Marco.

"I'm told you have information about our victim."

"What's in it for me?"

Marco thought a second. "A good meal and good karma for doing something to help the victims' relatives deal with this crime."

"The good meal sounds good. But no one cares about me, so why should I care about anyone else?"

"So why come forward?"

"The victim was a woman. No lady deserves that kind of violence."

"So, describe what you saw." His description of events matched forensics and the ME's results. "There's some evidence the victim scratched her assailant."

"Yes, I saw that. She was trying to take off the mask as she went down. I only saw the back of his head, though. Long, black hair, short neck. I think she scratched his face."

"Did you see what he did with the knife?"

"It was one of those illegal things. He wiped the blade off, clicked it shut, and put it back in his pocket. This guy was a real pro. She didn't have a chance. No one would."

"And he was definitely stalking her?"

"Oh, yeah, I was watching the whole thing from behind those shipping crates. Went there to take a pee when I heard her high heels clicking on the wharf."

"Any idea what she was looking for?"

"She seemed to be looking at the boats. They're all freighters, but she was looking at their names, I think."

Marco looked at the file. The murder scene had taken place in front of a freighter named *Brisas Pacificas*. He frowned at the irony. "Did she stop in front of the freighter and study it in detail, or was she moving along the docks when attacked?"

"She was looking at some ropes dangling from the boat and others used to tie it up."

"Was she thinking about boarding it?"

"In high heels? I doubt it. Well, maybe. She was acting strangely, that's for sure."

"You said you had to pee. Were you drunk?"

"Nope. I was scavenging. You'd be surprised how many bottles sailors throw into the trash with some good stuff still in them. They're so drunk they can't see there's something left. I can generally party the night with that."

Marco sighed. *How much can I trust this fellow's testimony?*

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Marco returned to his desk to access some databases. *Brisas Pacificas* had been commissioned in San Francisco, sold to an Argentine firm, and then sold to a German firm in Hamburg. That wasn't uncommon. Merchant vessels were traded around like cars as different shipping firms had their economic ups and downs in the world economy. Customs would have a list of crewmembers—they were usually from all over the world. They would also have a description of the cargo offloaded at the port. Both needed a phone call and probably at least a day's wait.

Marco looked at his watch, called Klaus Ihlenfeldt to set up another visit, and then called Brandt, who agreed to make the 3 p.m. appointment at Klaus' hotel.

Ihlenfeldt looked better this time.

"My business is almost finished here. When will I be able to take Melissa back to Germany?"

"Won't her family claim her?" said Marco.

Ihlenfeldt looked confused. Brandt translated.

“No, no, Melissa was raised by an aunt who died two years ago. She has no close family left. She was well integrated into our family. My parents already have a plot for us.” Marco raised his eyebrows. The German smiled. “A bit morbid, I know, but it’s a family plot. We never thought we’d use it because we’re young. And we were planning to start a family of our own. We’d need more room. Again, morbid, but burial plots won’t get any cheaper.”

“Does your company own any merchant ships?” Marco said.

“My company’s a holding company for many other companies. I’d have to check on that.”

“Could you, please? I’m trying to determine why your wife would be interested in a ship named *Brisas Pacificas*. Ever heard of it?”

Ihlenfeldt looked at Brandt. He translated, ad-libbing another form of the question.

“No, you have to understand, I don’t get down into the details about any of our holdings. I manage only a bit up and down, from CEOs or VPs in our companies up to the general corporate staff, including the CEO. Think of it as an iceberg where I work at the tip.”

“There’s a lot of iceberg under that,” said Brandt.

“And a lot of it under water and not visible to the eye,” said Marco. “Is there such a thing as being too big?”

“Not for Germans,” said Ihlenfeldt with a smile. “Do you need anything else from me?”

“Only your promise not to leave town just yet in case I do later.”

“Is *Herr* Ihlenfeldt a person of interest?” said Brandt.

“For now, only a person who has contacts I don’t. Thanks for coming, by the way.”

“You could have told me about the ship,” said Brandt.

“You didn’t look too surprised when I mentioned it.”

“Only because I assumed it was random chance that it was there at the dock. As you say, it’s a big port.” He smiled.

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Marco returned to the station. A message from the Interpol agent was waiting on his laptop, together with attachments.

Information about Ihlenfeldt and his wife was a boring confirmation of what he knew already, except for the fact that the husband had enjoyed a rapid rise in his firm.

Information about Brandt was more interesting. He had worked in West German intelligence before the wall fell. He was older than he looked. *Is he still working in intelligence at the Embassy?* Marco knew embassies and consulates had employees who were undercover intelligence agents. It was a worldwide phenomenon. *But why Buenos Aires?*

He decided that didn’t matter, not for this case. But intuition told him the ship was somehow key.

He packed up and went home early, justifying his behavior by the long day before. Angelina was happy to see him.

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The customs information he received the next day about *Brisas Pacificas*’ cargo troubled Marco. *Bales of Egyptian cotton?* The ship had come from Cairo, so that matched, but

Argentina had access to plenty of cotton, a bit of its own and from around the region. *Is there something special about Egyptian cotton?*

He decided to find out. The cargo destination was a textile factory in the western suburbs. He called and was finally connected with a knowledgeable person who spoke perfect Spanish—no Porteño or other Argentine accent.

“It is rather simple, Inspector,” said Julio Salazar, “many buyers of fine linens assume it’s only about thread count, but I guarantee that a 220-count sheet made from Egyptian cotton will be superior to a 220-count sheet made from another cotton. Egyptian yarns can be spun thinner, providing more count, but at the same time they’re stronger and have lower lint so they don’t pill so easily. Our sheets are the best in South America.”

“Even if other companies make them from Egyptian cotton?” said Marco with a smile.

“Many linens made in South America are made from local cotton. Some of the cotton in America is almost as good, but you will pay a premium for linens imported from America compared to ours, and they’re made from the best Egyptian cotton.”

“Slight change of topic: have you already used those bales of cotton coming from *Brisas Pacificas*?”

“Let me check.” Marco waited. “No, *señor*, we have yet to use them. They’ll be used shortly, though. We don’t like to store the cotton too long.”

“Mind if I drive out and take a look?”

“I suppose that could be arranged.”

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Julio Salazar could have been a jockey. About 1.2 m in height, he was a bald Yosemite Sam, only his drooping mustache was black. Thick, curly hair spewed out of his collar like some black, shaggy dog was hiding in his shirt.

“Here they are, Inspector,” he said to Marco. “At the gin, the seeds are removed and what we call the lint is banded together. For overseas shipment, we usually encase the whole thing in plastic, as you see. You can also see we haven’t opened any of these bales.

The bales looked like what Marco imagined bales of cotton would look like. They sat on a wooden floor—there must be a basement.

“How do I see what’s inside?”

“Inside? There’s only cotton inside. Pure, Egyptian cotton.”

“Can you still use the cotton if I burrow around in one?”

“I suppose. Let me do the borrowing. Like I said, we were going to use this soon anyway. Take your pick.” Marco picked one at random. “Let me go get some keys.”

When Salazar returned, he hopped onto a fork lift and moved the bale close to a conveyor belt. He pulled out shears and wire clippers from a tool box on the lift.

“You can help me load it onto the belt,” he said.

“As payment for causing you so much trouble?” said Marco.

“That, and because your time is short here. Your wife is on her way to the hospital.”

“*Mierda!* Forget about it. I’m off. I’ll be back.”

“This will take only a minute. Your sister-in-law said she thinks the contractions are a false alarm, that it’s too early.”

“It is, but I should be there.”

“Then help me. We’ll be done in a flash.”

A few minutes later they looked at the thin plastic crate that had made the journey inside the cotton bale. A surprised Salazar helped Marco open the crate. It contained sheets of newly printed Euros. Marco whistled.

"Just off the press, I'm guessing. If counterfeit, they're an A-1 job. I'm going to trust you with this, *Señor* Salazar. The police will be here in minutes."

"How could this happen?"

"Somebody's sending strong currency here in exchange for something, and I'm betting it's not linens made with Egyptian cotton."

"You're thinking drugs?"

"Not unless the something comes from farther north. Don't betray my trust."

"I won't. Make your call and then go to your wife. I'll be waiting for your buddies. This is a disaster."

"You never opened the bales?" said Marco as he searched on his speed dial.

"No. My helpers do that now. Go, go. Your woman will expect you to be there!"

Marco spoke to the closest precinct and took off.

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Lisa had been correct. The contractions were a false alarm, but the doctors wanted to attend to Angelina overnight in order to run some more tests. Marco returned to his unit. Brandt was talking to the Sub. Both approached Marco's desk.

"Good work, Inspector Montanari," said the Sub.

Brandt nodded. "You blew this case wide open. We still have some work to do on both ends of the merchant ship's voyage. Our information was sketchy, but Melissa was a smart operative."

Marco looked at the Sub and then back to Brandt. "Is Melissa Brentwood a German agent?"

Brandt nodded. "She uses her husband's many trips as a cover."

"And he knows about that?"

The German shrugged. "We'll have to tell him now, I suppose."

"That doesn't make sense. I suppose you're an agent too?"

"*Ja*, that I am. Stationed temporarily here in your fair city. I don't move around that much anymore, though." He smiled. "Melissa outranked me, by the way. We Germans aren't so macho now."

"She was tracking down counterfeiters?"

"No, artworks stolen by Nazis originating in this area. The black market's in Europe, everything from those auctions on cruise ships to calls to private collectors. We traced payments to Cairo, and now to here. Those are real Euros."

"There are groups here in the region," said the Sub. "Always have been. We suspect there are several old caches. They've been known to sell them on the black market and use the proceeds for all sorts of mischief."

"Our Dirty War?" said Marco.

"Heavens no," said Brandt. "That's ancient history, and everyone knows that the CIA was the instigator in that mess. At the time, they thought Communists were coming out of the woodwork everywhere. Your *Junta* used that to their advantage."

"So what are the old Nazis doing with the proceeds now?"

“We’ll find out soon enough because we’re questioning the workers. They will lead us to the suppliers of the stolen art, which has probably been here since right after the war.” He winked at the Sub. “They aren’t old Nazis, by the way. There are fascist movements in Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile. These are new Nazis, young thugs who think Hitler’s ideas are just what the region needs. Fascist sentiments go hand and hand with graft and corruption, though.”

“That’s a very bleak portrait, Karl,” said the Sub.

“I’m just tired. And our work is just beginning.”

“What are the next steps?” said Marco.

“You people can help, obviously. You already have. We need to find who was receiving the paintings here if the workers don’t break. Obviously, workmen at that textile plant had to be involved, but they’re not the final recipients. The consignee in this case was just a front. And tracing forwards from them might lead us to the cache.”

“Sounds like we need a task force,” said the Sub. “Should we get Interpol involved?”

“Definitely. We don’t want any Latin American nationalities to get in the way. Or Germans, for that matter.”

“Interpol’s already involved,” said Marco. He told them about his call to his contact.

“That’s a start,” said the Sub. He saw Marco closing his laptop. “You’re not declaring victory already, are you?”

“No. I’m calling it a day. I want to go hold my wife’s hand. She’s in the hospital.”

“Is she OK?” said Brandt.

“False alarm. But she needs a friendly face beyond the young doctors who will be ogling her beauty.”

“Go then,” said the Sub.

“Yes, please,” said Brandt. “Lucky you. I have to go talk to Melissa’s husband.”

“Tell him we’ll find who killed his wife. It’s only a matter of time.”

## The Tightrope Walker

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*Ravel's Piano Concerto in G has nothing to do with tightrope walking, but it's a favorite classical piece of mine. Most people think of Debussy and Ravel together as the creators of impressionist music in France, but the second movement in this concerto is about as romantic and lilting as they come. Maybe that's why it inspired this story?*

Yuri Ledovskoy was the son of immigrants. His father had been a doctor; his mother a pianist and prof in a local music school. I accepted the tea she offered. Didn't like it much, although I've heard it's an Irish staple, but some people even in the U.S. think it's the civilized thing to offer. Couldn't much turn it down. I was on duty, but tea didn't qualify as an alcoholic beverage that would impair my on-the-job performance.

I'd introduced myself to Mrs. Ledovskoy at the ME's when she came to identify her son's body. She immediately went from Sgt. Myra O'Connell, NYPD Homicide, to just plain Myra. Made me think she was a good music teacher, at least in making her students comfortable. The situation was worse for her than me.

Not exactly pleasant circumstances; her life would start and end badly. Both she and her husband had been in Nazi camps as very young children. They weren't Jews, but the SS had also put suspected commies in the camps after Stalin joined up with Churchill and later Roosevelt to defeat the Nazis. We'd agreed to meet at her house because I had some more background questions.

The ME had declared the case a homicide. It was an unusual one. The son was practicing his circus tightrope walk when he fell. He broke many things when he landed, but the ME said he was already dead. Someone had shot him from below—a gun with a silencer, no doubt, because there was a small audience even for a rehearsal—the bullet had entered the base of the neck and out the top of his head, so he was shot on the wire. Every member in the circus was under suspicion.

"If you'll pardon me saying so, didn't your son have an unusual profession for someone who has such accomplished parents?"

Evgeniya Ledovskoy eyed me over the brim of her cup. "You don't have children, I take it?"

From a detective's viewpoint, a person answering a question with another question is problematic. In this case, it was also personal. I eyed the elderly woman a moment. She was pale and wrinkled, but her blue eyes beamed intelligence and good humor.

"Not yet," I said with a smile. My mother had five by my age. I wasn't that good of a Catholic. You say Hail Mary and I first think of a last minute pass in a football game, a la Doug Flutie. "Maybe someday."

"We only had Yuri, but that's irrelevant. Parents should let their children seek their own futures. We can guide them, educate them, and offer them different opportunities, but they must make their own choices. We have the freedom to do that in this country. It's an important one. Parents shouldn't push their children into bad choices. It only can breed resentment in future years."

I nodded toward the grand piano. "Did Yuri play?"

“He grew out of it. Once we took him to see Cirque du Soleil, he was hooked. He did gymnastics in school, but dropped out of college to join the circus. As a matter of fact, he was quite good at everything acrobatic. He died doing what he loved, I suppose.”

“You probably didn’t know all his associates, but any love interests or friends who might help me?”

“He had a girlfriend named Tara.”

“Another acrobat?”

“A clown.” She reacted to my grin. “It happens. I mean, women can be clowns too. Women can be anything these days, thank God. I saw where two even became Army Rangers. That’s quite an accomplishment.”

Felt we were getting distracted. “Would this Tara know if he had enemies?”

“Probably, at least since she knew him in the circus. His best friend was Arthur Hill. They went to school together; he’s a trader on Wall Street now. I suppose Yuri had many other friends in the circus too. My Yuri was quite sociable.”

“Someone certainly didn’t like him,” I said.

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Tara Finley was less than five feet tall—a little doll with a perfect figure, she was a miniature version of Botticelli’s Venus. Couldn’t imagine her as a clown, but what do I know?

“Of course Yuri had enemies. We’re performers. Professional jealousies and squabbles often occur. I don’t know anyone who would go as far as to kill him, though.” She dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. “He had a fight with Mark once about salary. The GM’s always trying to nickel-and-dime us. It’s tough to make a living in the circus anymore. PETA’s made us get rid of all the animals. Next thing you know they’ll succeed in eliminating the carriage horses in Central Park. People love animals. A circus isn’t really a circus without them.”

The tears seemed real, but aren’t circus performers actors? Certainly clowns were.

I saw strength in that petite figure, and maybe some inner turmoil. Tara was in perfect shape. Imagined being a clown was strenuous, so she had to be physically fit. She wore her auburn hair cut short. Business casual described her outfit. She didn’t look like a clown. She looked like a woman from Madison Avenue.

I’m small too. Not as small as Tara, but I wondered if her size made it more difficult to get ahead in a man’s world. Or, did the circus respect women’s talents more than the NYPD? Female cops are more common than female firefighters, but machismo is present in both professions. It’s better now than it used to be, though.

“But you’re still performing.”

“What else can I do? Go back to school?” She laughed. “Maybe I could become a politician. There are plenty of clowns in politics, especially in DC. One of them is right here leading the charge against the carriage horses.”

She obviously didn’t like New York’s current mayor. “You’re only a bit older than I am,” I said.

“So, would you go back to school?”

“I guess. If I had to. I don’t have to. But back to the enemies and friends. Where can I find this Mark?”



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Mark Travers wasn't an ogre. The GM had a business to run. Many like him were caught between a rock and a hard place, trying to balance shareholders' desire for profits against giving their employees a decent salary. Public service was immune to that for the most part, and I was thankful for it. I put the man low on my list of suspects. Call it woman's intuition if you like—I just call it a gut feeling. All cops have them. Didn't know if there were stats on how often we're wrong.

Arthur Hill, the Wall Street trader, was more helpful.

"That's a nice piece," I said.

Hill cocked his head and listened to the music playing in the background. I thought it was pretty awesome to have a sumptuous office with its own sound system. I shared mine with many other detectives, most of them slobs.

"The second movement of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G. That's Mrs. Ledovskoy playing with the university orchestra. She's quite good. I can sit and listen to her playing Chopin nocturnes forever."

"In performances or privately?"

"Both for the Chopin. After-dinner hours were quite high class at Yuri's home, and I was often invited to stay over for dinner. Loved it. She can cook as well as she plays the piano. A regular Julia Child."

"You were obviously a good friend. Any idea who might have killed him?"

"Don't look for culprits in the circus," he said. "They're pretty much all friends, near as I can tell, except for having occasional problems with management. I'm betting on Cynthia Brock. She had a thing for Yuri and was practically stalking him. Even at thirty-five, he was still in great shape. She seemed to back off when Yuri started dating Tara, though. Surprised me—he was a confirmed bachelor until then. He was about to take the plunge maybe." He grinned. "I suppose that's a bad pun, considering how he died. I meant that he and Tara were getting real serious."

"How did he meet Cynthia? And who is she? What does she do?"

"Cynthia doesn't do much of anything. She's a spoiled daddy's girl. She went to Princeton and studied something useless, but she's never worked a day in her life. Her father works here in the bank. He works for me, as a matter of fact, although he's much older. Won't retire, but he doesn't need to work. Never did, because his family's old wealth. One of the few hundred families that finance GOP candidates—that one-tenth of one percent who think they own the country and have no love for the common man."

"That's quite a put-down coming from someone in your position."

"Oh, please. My parents were dirt poor and instilled in me a work ethic I've never lost, in spite of my success. I put myself through college and grad school on my own dime and took longer to do it as a result. I live modestly too. Someday I hope to meet a nice lady and forget all this stress and hassle. Maybe buy a farm somewhere. My family owned one when I was young."

"But you went to school with Yuri?"

"High school and the start of college, until he bailed for the circus. We were still best of friends, though."

"Where can I find this Cynthia?"

Hill pulled out his cell phone, checked, and then wrote down an address and telephone number.

"Daddy's house, naturally. I would have erased the data otherwise. She was stalking me before Yuri. I warned him about her."

"You didn't say how she met Yuri."

"Maybe I shouldn't. Oh, what the hell, you'll find out anyway. Most of us were in our second or third year of college and all skinny-dipping in Daddy's pool. Did it off and on since high school. She bounced from me to Yuri like a steel ball in an old arcade game. He was impressing everyone with his fancy diving. Her too. I warned him about her afterwards."

"What was the specific warning?"

"That she's very jealous and possessive about her men," said Hill.

"I sense there's more to it than that. Personal experience?"

"As you might expect, it's all about her needs, even in bed."

"You obviously slept with her. Did Yuri?"

"They might have that night. Can't imagine they did much, though. They were both wasted."

"Drugs?"

"Maybe on Cynthia's part. Yuri and I never went beyond the occasional stick. Who needs that heavy crap? No three-martini lunches for me either."

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I felt inadequate driving up to the Brock mansion in my little squad car I'd checked out of the precinct's pool. Upstate New York can be beautiful. The mansion was gorgeous. It reeked of old money.

The butler showed me to a living room that was a relic from the Victorian age. A large portrait of a gentleman with serious sideburns graced one wall. It had a frame that was so ornate that it distracted from the dark painting. Besides the sideburns, the old man had his hair parted in the middle and wore one of those fancy ties and a high, starched collar. He had struck a Napoleonic pose, hand thrust in vest.

"Great-grandfather Hamilton Brock," said a man entering the room with hand outstretched. "I'm Hamilton Brock the Fourth. I'm afraid the name stops with me, though. I had no sons. The genetic line ends here too. I doubt my daughter will ever have children. She'll never settle down long enough with one man."

I shook hands with Brock. Showed him my creds.

"Shall we sit, Detective?" He gestured toward a huge leather wing chair. It swallowed me, and he took a seat on a sofa across from me. "I suppose you're here about Yuri."

He seemed pleasant enough. I could see the family resemblance. He was formally dressed. Figured his tailored three-piece suit cost as much as my monthly salary.

"Did you know him well?"

"I knew of him. He and others belonged to a group in high school everyone, including Cynthia, called the nerd herd. As it turns out, I now work for one of them, one of life's ironies. I'm sure you obtained my name that way." I nodded. "Arthur's an up-and-coming trader, smart as a whip, and he was the leader of the pack, so to speak. My Cynthia wanted to be in that group, but she was never the academic type. I'm afraid that some high school boys sullied her reputation too."

“Were Arthur or Yuri in that group?”

“The despoilers? Maybe. Kids today are pretty wild, and Cynthia was no exception. The nerd herd stayed together pretty well into college, partying mostly in the summer when the kids were back from school. Arthur and Yuri partied with the rest, but both were working their butts off. I have to admire them for that. My daughter hasn’t done any real work her whole life.”

“So, was her reputation sullied or did she seduce boys?” I said with a smile.

He shrugged. “I see your point. Today it’s hard to tell. Great-grandmother had to be courted by great-grandfather, and they had to be chaperoned right up to their wedding night. That’s all changed. Even in my case, I was living with my bride-to-be before marriage. It’s a different time.”

“Would you say Cynthia is the jealous type?”

“Oh, she can be a real witch. You’re not suggesting she had something to do with Yuri’s death, are you?”

“No, I’m asking whether she was jealous of Tara. Must be hard to lose your man to a clown.”

“Detective, I didn’t even know my daughter and Yuri were close. And I have no idea who Tara is. I suppose Arthur told you Cynthia’s the jealous type?”

“Mr. Hill said Cynthia was stalking Yuri. You didn’t know that?”

“I don’t think it’s true. Her crowd wasn’t the nerd herd. I think she just liked some of the boys in that group—they were here in pool parties enough, from high school into college—but she isn’t a stalker. Isn’t it usually men who are the stalkers?”

“Often, but it can go both ways,” I said. “So, as far as you know, she wasn’t jealous of Tara?”

“If she were jealous of that girl, wouldn’t she have killed her and not Yuri?”

“That’s not the way it usually works. By killing Yuri, she also punishes Tara. Jealousy can also breed complex schemes for revenge.”

“I see. That’s a very dark view of relationships.”

“The genesis of that view lies in experience, Mr. Brock,” I said. “Where can I find Cynthia now?”

“She’s in a convent,” he said and laughed upon seeing my expression. “It’s somewhere in upstate New York. A bunch of theater people come together and put on dramas there during the summer while working and meditating with the religious folk. I can find the address for you, but she’ll be home next week. She’ll want to go to Yuri’s funeral. It’ll be Russian Orthodox I assume, but that’s pretty close to Catholic.”

I asked him to write down the information about the convent, but this early in my investigations, I wasn’t about to run off to upstate New York. I would try to build a case against Cynthia first and keep my eye peeled for other suspects.

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Cynthia had become involved in theater in college. I began snooping around in that world and discovered a nexus with Yuri through Arthur Hill. While Hill clearly didn’t have time now to spend the summer at a convent in a theater group, he had acted while in college. Before becoming engrossed in his work, he had also acted in a local theater with Cynthia.

“Hill played Romeo and Cynthia Juliet in one production,” said the director of that thespian group. “I’ll have to say they both gave it their all. Our local rag said something like ‘lust over love in the new Romeo and Juliet production,’ if I recall. It was quite the success, at least on our level.”

“Was Yuri Ledovskoy present at any of the rehearsals or functions?” I said.

“Can’t help you there. I don’t know the fellow, and I pay no attention to who’s in the audience. The theater’s dark anyway. I do recall both Cynthia and Arthur saying they practiced their lines with someone. Maybe that was Ledovskoy? No, I take it back. It was a woman. Maybe one of Cynthia’s friends. God knows, it was so long ago.”

I handed him my card. “If you happen to remember the woman’s name, call me. Did Cynthia and Arthur seem close outside the production?”

“Not really. There was just a lot of chemistry on stage. I didn’t see much off.”

“Did Cynthia ever mention a boyfriend or someone she wanted to be with?”

“My dear, I think Cynthia pursued many males. She even pursued me and was furious when she found out I’m gay.” He shrugged. “Not much I could do about that, right?”

“I guess not.” I could commiserate with Cynthia’s disappointment. The director was a good-looking hunk.

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Two days before Cynthia was due back from her summer theater sojourn, I had developed quite a background file on the case. My lieutenant was getting antsy as the pile of caseloads on my desk grew. And we seemed to have much more to do because the uniforms spent more time on the street now. “Integrating with the community,” the Commish called it. Or, was that the mayor? Having once been in uniform, I know for a fact that uniforms were a great help to detectives, offloading a lot of grunt work in solving crimes. I missed that now as a detective.

“No leads yet?” he said.

He always looked tired. I didn’t envy his job, running a bunch of detectives, fending off the media, and taking crap from his bosses, all the time doing more paper-pushing than actual criminal investigation. He was the boss, though.

I shook my head. “Wild kids, many jealousies, but nothing I can call motive for murder. Forensics came up with zilch. The gun was never found, but, from the unusual slug, the ammo used was probably bought in a Georgia gun show and brought back here.”

“We’ll have to go into cold storage then. Not good. You OK with that?”

“I have one more thing to check. There’s something missing from Tara’s background. She was adopted after spending time with some foster families, but she had a juvie record that’s sealed. I’m trying to unseal it. Judge Sawyer is waffling.”

“With good reason, I suppose. Keep working on him.”

I met with Sawyer’s assistant, not the judge.

“Juvenile records are sealed to protect the person. We need a good reason to unseal them.”

“How ‘bout suspicion of murder?”

The assistant shook his head. “Not even that, because the record might be completely unrelated and never allowed in trial anyway.” The young attorney smiled. “Why don’t you

describe the case? If I can determine some relation, it might help your cause when I present it to the judge, assuming I decide that happens.”

After getting him to promise confidentiality—his ears and maybe the judge’s only—I laid out the case.

“I’m not supposed to do your work for you, but you have three possible suspects already. Ms. Brock has a rep of being a jealous person. Mr. Hill could have been jealous of Yuri because Cynthia was stalking Yuri and not Hill. Mr. Brock could think that eliminating Yuri would make his daughter get a life. So, why are you looking at Tara? Because she has a juvenile record? That doesn’t sit well with me. It won’t with the judge either.”

I agreed with his assessment of the case except for Cynthia’s father. I hadn’t thought of that angle, but I still didn’t value it much either.

“Mr. Brock could have wanted to protect his daughter because Yuri was a lowly circus performer.”

“That too. I think Cynthia is your main POI. Jealousy’s a powerful emotion.”

“And not just for women,” I said, thinking of Hill. “But Tara could be jealous. If her record suggests problems with jealousy, doesn’t that make her a POI?”

“Maybe. Again, that record probably wouldn’t be admissible in a trial.”

“Have you read that juvenile record?”

“I will and get back to you tomorrow. Don’t get your hopes up, though.”

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Next morning, I was thumbing through the folders corresponding to my case backlog, resigned to the fact that Yuri’s murder would become yet another cold case, when Sawyer’s assistant called.

“We need to talk. Judge’s chambers, eleven o’clock.”

As Holmes often said, “The game is afoot.” But I didn’t know what to expect. I still had time to prioritize my future cases before I left. One way or the other, Yuri’s case would probably end.

I knew and respected old Judge Sawyer. He was a grandfatherly figure, a no-nonsense kind of guy, both strict and fair. He didn’t tolerate grandstanding in his court room and would throw everyone out if the crowd became rowdy. He also wasn’t known for letting jurors get away with not reaching a verdict when he thought they should come up with one. DAs and cops like that.

His assistant and I sat facing him. He sat behind a large but simple desk. His quarters were utilitarian, dark, and brooding. Dressed casually and out of his robe, with hair a bit awry and bushy eyebrows, he could be a mystery writer churning out short stories and novels in the seclusion of his study.

He handed me a bunch of papers. “Ms. Finley’s juvenile records, Sergeant O’Connell. My assistant has blacked out certain names, allowing you to focus on the main protagonists in Ms. Finley’s tale of woe.”

“Meaning I can’t know who they are and determine if they’re relevant to my case?”

“Conclude what you want, but I assure you those names aren’t relevant. They’re mostly attorneys, social workers, and a few psychologists, and they shall remain nameless to you.”

“Can I have a minute to read this?”

“Be my guest. Todd, can you have Mrs. Hicks bring us some coffee.”

The assistant nodded, and I began to read. After coffee arrived and Mrs. Hicks left, I finished and waved the papers. “This is clearly relevant. Tara killed her father and stepmother. Was she acquitted because she was bipolar?”

“Partly,” said the assistant. “The record says ‘she flew into a jealous rage.’ But the father was both a philanderer—the reason for his divorce—and was sexually abusing Tara, while the stepmother looked the other way. The father’s stepping out on even the stepmother was considered the tipping point.”

“That’s a pretty good summary, Todd,” said Sawyer. “So, Sergeant, there’s relevance to your case. But without evidence, I think you’re stymied.”

I nodded. “Unless I can prove Tara was off her meds again.”

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One week later, the cold case became hot again. Four suspects were reduced to three. Tara was found dead in her circus trailer. No gun again, but the bullets were determined to be the same by our CSU. I left the crime scene shaking my head.

“You now have a serial killer,” said my lieutenant. “Any ideas?”

“Maybe Cynthia Brock wasn’t satisfied,” I said. “But when I talked to her, she seemed distraught about Yuri’s killing. I’ll have to see her again, of course.”

“What about the other two? Still POIs?”

“Cynthia’s father and Arthur Hill don’t seem likely. It could be someone from the circus. I’ll have to look over my notes and revisit some of them too.”

“Get on it, then. The killer might strike again sooner than later. Even the Times is making this into another Son-of-Sam case.”

“There aren’t any messages taunting the police,” I said. Serial killers often do that, more with media recognition. “Let the media go wild. What do I care?”

“You’ll care if I care, and I’ll care if the Commissioner starts riding my ass. You know the pecking order.”

I nodded. And the Commissioner was hassled by the Mayor who’s hassled by the press. Big city crime fighting had too much politics.

“What about my other cases?”

“Hand the current one off to Mathers, who’s sitting on his hands right now. The others will wait.”

Great, I thought. Now I had to spend time bringing Mathers up to date, and, if he solved the case, he’d get all the credit. Sometimes I just can’t catch a break.

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“Do I need a lawyer?” Cynthia said, looking at her father.

I nodded to Mr. Brock but refocused on his daughter. “Understand where I’m coming from. Your motive is clear to anyone. You were upset that Yuri picked Tara over you, so you shot them both. Do you own a gun? Be forewarned that I can search the premises.”

“Not without a search warrant,” said Mr. Brock. “But go ahead and answer the question, Cynthia.”

“No, I don’t own a gun. I go to the gun range with Daddy sometimes—they lend me a rifle or pistol. The only guns in the house are hunting rifles.”

"I'd like to correct that. I have a Glock in my desk in a locked drawer. Cynthia didn't know that."

"With the security here, why do you need a gun?" said Cynthia.

That was going to be my question. I waited for his answer. I knew it would be irrelevant. A Glock hadn't killed Yuri or Tara, not with those slugs.

"I haven't taken it out except to clean and oil it periodically," he said. "I bought it legally when Cynthia was away at college. You're right, it's stupid with all the security, but all the same, the house was burglarized. That's on record. The burglar turned out to be one of the hired help. I fired her but wouldn't press charges. The woman was in financial straits."

I would check his story, but it sounded reasonable. "What about summer homes, cabins, and what not?"

"Not all rich people are snowbirds or have hunting lodges," Mr. Brock said. "I prefer not to be tied down to one vacation spot. I'm as likely to go fishing or hunting in Minnesota as to take a cruise to Atlantis. I like variety. And I still work for a living."

"While a search warrant might be required later on," I said, "and/or a lawyer, let's change the subject: can either of you think of anyone who had it in for Yuri and Tara? I've asked that before, but maybe you've had more time to think about it."

"Not a clue," said Cynthia. Her father nodded his agreement. "I'll have to admit I don't give a rat's ass about Tara, but I'm eager for you to find Yuri's killer. He was a gentle soul who died too young."

"I'm working on it."

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People have phobias about clowns. I'm one of them. More with the sad ones than the happy ones. The circus had a mix of both. Tara had been a sad clown. The boss, well over six feet, was a happy one. Enrique Jimenez crossed his legs. I tried to keep from staring at the huge shoes. His makeup was only partially removed, making him look more like a happy zombie.

"I thought this was over and done for me, but now Tara's gone too. Two great friends. I can't say I'm happy to see you again."

"I guess I'll start by asking if there are any second thoughts on your previous answers. You said Yuri and Tara were well liked. No jealous clowns here?"

"Tara came to us a bit battered by life in general. I don't know many details, but she thrived here. Everyone liked her. Yuri was a bit of a show-off and cocky, but he was good at what he did. Everyone looked past his ego and liked him. We were happy for the two. And Yuri seemed devoted to Tara as much as she was to him. They were the perfect circus couple."

"My knowledge of the circus is limited, coming mostly from reading *Toby Tyler* as a kid. Aren't there jealousies, professional or otherwise, and different opinions about many things?"

"We're professionals, Detective. There's friction in any group of people, especially in one so tightly knit as ours. But we get around the inevitable squabbles. We have to. The show must go on."

"You said that in the first interview. But both Yuri and Tara were killed here. Some would say that any circus performer in the troop is a possible suspect."

"I'll give you that. But here's a thought: the same gun was used. That probably means the killer still has it. Let's do a search to find it. Will that make you feel better?"

"Maybe. I suppose I need a warrant."

"Maybe. Our GM can call a meeting. Everyone might agree to the search if it means we can get beyond this and on with our lives. You need to eliminate suspects. I'll concede that we're all suspects."

"I read between the lines that we'd be wasting our time. Am I right?"

"I'm not saying it will be a waste, but do you know how many places you can hide a gun in a circus? It's not going to be in a wall-mounted rack in a trailer, you know."

I laughed. "I suppose not. But I might be back, so should I clue your GM in on your suggestion?"

"Mark Travers is a very organized man. We'll be ready for you if you come back."

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Something bothered me about Jimenez' candor. Was it all an act? Did he know more than he admitted?

I randomly sampled some other circus people, focusing on ones I hadn't questioned before. Zero results.

I found Arthur Hill in a bar close to Wall Street.

"Detective O'Connell, what a pleasant surprise. Can I buy you a drink?"

I took a stool next to him. "Fraid not. I'm on duty. Perrier with lime, please." I eyed him in the mirror behind the bar. "How much of your performance as Romeo was acting?"

He laughed. "You mean, with Cynthia? That was a while ago. She would have fucked me right there on the stage, I'm sure. But I was just acting. She's a beautiful woman and not a bad actor, as a matter of fact. It was easy to get in the zone. I'll admit that she almost made me forget my lines a couple of times. I can lust for Cynthia, but I could never love her."

"What about Tara?"

"She was Yuri's girl."

"I know that. But did you lust for her?"

"Oh, please. I liked her. Her sad clown act wasn't all clowning, you know. Yuri said she had bouts of depression. She didn't have a good childhood. We commiserated on that. Mine wasn't good either. But we mostly agreed that one should forget the past, enjoy the present, and look forward to the future."

"Together?"

"Leave it alone, Detective. We were becoming friends because Yuri was my friend. That's the extent of it. She wasn't even my type."

"Were you jealous of Yuri because Cynthia was after him?"

"You're very repetitious. I think I answered that question before, or a very similar one. The answer is no. I warned Yuri about Cynthia, and he heeded my warning. End of story. I still think she's your number one suspect, though."

"A convenient one, at least. Did Tara know about Cynthia?"

"Hmm. Good question. I suppose Yuri told her, but I'm not sure about that. Men tend to be a little secretive with new girlfriends and don't want to talk about old ones. Past failures of any kind are generally taboo for a man's ego."

"That's perceptive. But Cynthia wasn't an old girlfriend."

"But she was a bit obsessed with Yuri, ever since they were in high school. Maybe that obsession grew over the years into something really ugly."

I was getting nowhere.



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"We have a shell casing with a partial," said the CSI.

"You're kidding. Where did you find it?"

"You told us to go over the center ring again where Yuri was practicing. We were a bit more thorough this time, that's all. Or luckier. It was wedged into a seam in the ring's border with moist sawdust."

"By someone?"

"Probably not. Probably just kicked there. Everyone practices in that main ring. The only ring. It's a small circus."

I nodded. "OK, so who's the partial belong to?"

"You're not going to believe this," said the CSI with a smile.

"Try me."

"Cynthia Brock." Thought a moment; then I jumped up. "Where are you going, Detective?"

"I need to see if Cynthia was in the circus that night watching the practice," I said.

I cursed my stupidity. It had never occurred me to check that. Like many performances, the circus sold cheap tickets for rehearsals. The public loved them. The crowds don't often mind that there are repeats, false starts, and glitches. Some people think that's more fun.

We had only studied the video to determine if we could see the shooter. But the cameras pan through the crowd too because the cameramen are rehearsing too. The shooter could have been in the crowd and then gone behind scenes. Who would know? But I'd know if I saw Cynthia

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"This is most irregular," said Mr. Brock. "Shouldn't Cynthia be here?"

"It won't matter either way," I said as the CSU began its search in the Brocks' home.

"But you might want to get her a lawyer."

"That's absurd. Just because she was in the audience doesn't make her the shooter. She doesn't even have a gun."

Twenty minutes later we had the unusual gun packed up in a plastic evidence bag, together with a box of the peculiar bullets. I put out a BOLO on Cynthia Brock. Her father called his lawyer.

But I'm paid to have second thoughts. Who killed Tara? Unless Cynthia had killed both Yuri and Tara, a possibility, someone else had to kill Tara. The two shootings were a week apart, though. Why did she wait so long? Maybe she decided that losing Yuri wasn't punishment enough for Tara?

The BOLO soon had its effect. Cynthia was spotted by a uniform buying a dress on Fifth Avenue. We had her for one murder. The other would probably remain unsolved. That wasn't satisfying for me, but it happens. Tara didn't have any relatives that needed closure either.

A week later, the DA's office had taken the case and run with it. I still wasn't satisfied.

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"Detective, can I have a moment?"

Hamilton Brock had seemed to age in a week. Wrote it off to the fact that he still loved his daughter and was stressed out. Thought maybe their attorney was good enough to strike some kind of plea bargain or give the DA's office a run for their money, but that wouldn't satisfy the old man.

I nodded and motioned to my old visitor's chair.

"I'll be blunt," he said. "Don't you think this is too easy? Here you can't come up with any real suspects, and suddenly you find a shell casing in some sawdust."

I smiled. "OK, I'll give you that it seems a bit too convenient, but so what? Criminals aren't that smart, Mr. Brock. Your daughter slipped up with the casing and the gun. Cops aren't rocket scientists either, but we will solve the cases when crooks are more stupid than we are."

"I'm not trying to comment about anyone's mental prowess," said Brock. "My daughter might have been obsessed with Yuri, but she's no killer. And she's not stupid. I'm saying this is a frame. Someone's framing my daughter."

"Forgetting the fact that you're a biased observer, do you have any ideas who would do that?"

"Arthur Hill." My eyebrows arched. "He must have wanted Cynthia after all."

"That's farfetched. And why would he kill Tara then?"

"I don't know about Tara, but Cynthia was obsessed with Yuri. That's enough motive if Arthur still had a thing for Cynthia. Payback to both Yuri and Cynthia, in fact, exactly the scenario you described earlier."

"A good story, but still farfetched. Let's go with it for the sake of argument. Again, why kill Tara?"

"God knows. Maybe he wanted her too. He's kind of creepy. Smart, but creepy."

I shrugged. "If I were you, Mr. Brock, I would start getting used to the idea that Cynthia's going away for a long time. The DA has enough evidence for that."

"Did the gun have Cynthia's fingerprints?" Brock said.

"No. It was wiped clean. Two rounds had been fired, though, and the gun hadn't been cleaned after firing them."

"Where's the other shell casing?"

"Beats me. That's not important. We don't have to solve Tara's murder, you know."

"As a detective, that should be unsatisfying."

It was, but I wasn't going to admit it to the prime suspect's father.

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Unsatisfied as I was with the case, I started working on others, trying to put Yuri's murder out of my mind until the trial began. It kept bouncing around in my head, though. But I just couldn't see what stones I'd left unturned. We had the gun, so a search of the entire circus wasn't called for. All the evidence pointed to Cynthia. Hill insisted it had to be her, and he had a solid alibi for the night when Yuri was killed—he had been in the same bar where I met him the second time. I hadn't just taken the barkeep's word for that—we had Hill on a CCTV tape at the bar, and the time stamps were clear.

Two days before the trial, I caught another break. The director of the amateur thespian group called.

"I remember the woman's name who helped Cynthia Brock and Arthur Hill with their lines. It was Laura Polzin. Hill mentioned her, but I never met her."

I thanked the man and found the case file to see if I'd talked to anyone with that name. I hadn't, but she was in the file. She was also a clown. I set up an interview.

I'd missed her in my interviews because she was out with flu. She was one of the happy clowns.

"I've been informed that you helped Cynthia and Arthur with their Romeo and Juliet lines. Can you confirm?"

Polzin was a redhead closer to my size, a bit chubbier too. She had an easy smile. The name sounded Russian, but maybe there was an Irish leprechaun relative in her genealogy. In my polyglot city where hundreds of languages and dialects are spoken, I knew that was irrelevant to the case. I was just curious. For all I knew, that Irish person might be an O'Connell.

"No problem. I'm a good friend, or was, of both Yuri and Tara, and I knew Hill through Yuri. I just prompted them until they had it down. They were good at it, though. Shakespeare's not easy, you know."

"A foreign language, as far as I'm concerned. Did you know Yuri before he joined the circus?"

"I came on board after him. Tara and I are younger. We used to have a business being clowns at kids' birthdays. Like any business, you have to work your way up. She was my connection here."

"What was Tara like?"

"Because of her history, which I don't want to get into, she was paranoid. She didn't particularly trust men. Always kept a gun handy in her trailer." She was taken a bit aback by my expression. I probably looked like I was struck by lightning. "I can see you think that's important. She bought it when we had a gig in Georgia. Some redneck was obsessed with her and reminded her of her father. I advised she purchase a gun, knowing it would make her feel better. She had a license and a permit to carry, but she kept it here in her trailer. When we were doing birthday parties, she'd slip it into my glove compartment."

"Do you know who else knew she had that gun?"

Laura shrugged. "God knows. Yuri probably did. He slept in the trailer most nights. You know how it is: Separate abodes in case it doesn't work out. Oh, and Enrique knew about it, because Tara threatened him once with it, making him leave the trailer."

*Great—yet another suspect.* "Did it have a silencer?"

"I don't think so. Aren't they illegal?"

"They're legal in about 80% of the states. In New York and New Jersey, they're illegal."

"What about Georgia?"

"They're legal there."

"Then she could have had a silencer, I guess. Wouldn't that add to the expense? Guns aren't cheap to begin with, and Tara wasn't rich by any means. Yuri wanted to get married, but Tara wanted to wait until they had more of a nest egg."

"Makes sense." I handed her my card. "This is useful information, Laura. Thanks. If you can think of anything else, let me know."

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It was easy to compare Tara's gun license with the gun we had recovered from Cynthia's house. It was a match. Either Cynthia had stolen the gun from Tara, or someone else killed Yuri. Could that someone be Enrique Jimenez?

But that clown had been undergoing laser eye surgery. Figured. He couldn't wear glasses and contacts wouldn't work well with all the circus sawdust and other detritus.

I made a trip to the holding jail. Cynthia Brock didn't look too fashionable in her orange jumper suit. Not too bad, though. Some women can look good in anything. I had to struggle.

"I have nothing to say to you detective," she said to me from across the metal table in the interrogation room. Her attorney was present.

"Just one question, please," I said. "Did you know Tara Finley had a gun?"

"I advise you not to answer," said the attorney.

"Oh, shut up, Claude! I can't get into any more trouble than I'm in." She gave him the finger and turned to me. "Of course I didn't. I didn't want to be near her. She stole Yuri."

"Did she know you were obsessed with Yuri?"

"It wasn't an obsession. I loved Yuri. Arthur turned him against me, so he settled for Tara."

The attorney cringed. "Please, Cynthia. You don't have to answer these questions."

She gave him the finger again. "Dumb ass, if I don't answer them now, I'll probably have to answer them at the trial. At least here it's only between the three of us."

It was amusing that Cynthia was worried about her image. "Did Tara think Yuri still liked you, in spite of Hill's advice?"

"God knows. Arthur's the real culprit here. If he hadn't turned Yuri against me, everything would have been fine."

"Did Arthur know about Tara's gun?"

"I suppose. He and Yuri were like twin brothers. In high school, we used to think they could read others' minds, they were so close. Yin and yang."

I thought a minute. Dominoes were falling. Yin and yang? Who was yin and who was yang? The whole convoluted mess started to make sense. At least, I had a good idea how things went down. Could I prove my theory?

I concluded that the case had to be solved in court. But I needed a bit more evidence.

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"Hello, Detective," said Arthur Hill. "Who are your friends?"

"We have a search warrant."

"Please come in, then."

"It's for your car, not your house, Arthur. Is it in your garage?"

"Of course. I keep it away from the elements as much as possible. I spent good money for that car."

The car was a top-of-the-line Audi. The CSU combed through it. When they finished, they nodded to me.

"Can I ask what this is about?"

"Nothing much. Thank you for your patience."

We left the man puzzled. It hadn't taken them long to find what I needed.

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"Mr. Hill, have you seen this gun before?"

"No. I don't like guns. I think the NRA is a club for weirdoes with penis envy."

“Objection,” said the prosecutor.

“Please just answer the questions, Mr. Hill,” said the judge. “We don’t need you to editorialize.”

“Then no, I’ve never seen that gun before.”

“Did the victim tell you about Tara’s past and why she had a gun?”

“That’s two questions.”

“Granted. Answer them both, please.”

“The victim didn’t tell me; Laura Polzin told me about Tara’s past. She told me when she was coaching Cynthia and me on lines for a play.”

“And the second question. Did Ms. Polzin explain why Tara had a gun?”

“She did.”

“So both Cynthia and you knew she had a gun. Is that correct?”

“Yes. I guess she stole it.”

The defense lawyer turned to the judge. “I move to strike that last part, your honor. It’s conjecture.”

“Agreed. Don’t embellish, Mr. Hill.”

“Well, how else did she get the gun, then? We heard testimony that it was Tara’s gun.”

“Indeed,” said the attorney. “Here I’ll ask for an opinion: why do you think she needed one?”

I smiled. That was a safe opinion to ask for. Who would object? He was the defense attorney.

“To kill Yuri, of course.”

“The Brocks have plenty of guns in the house. Why steal one?”

“I don’t know. And I’m not allowed to conjecture.” Hill looked smug.

“Did you see Cynthia after Yuri died?” said the defense attorney, changing tactic. But I knew what was coming.

“I tried to console her, yes.”

“And after Tara died?”

“That’s when I visited her.”

“An interesting lapse of time. Would that be the night of—?” the attorney looked at his PDA, giving the date and time.

“It might.”

“I’m going to play a CCTV video showing a car leaving the Brock’s home. Will the court please pay attention to the time stamps?”

“Objection,” said the DA’s man. “Mr. Hill has already said he went to console Ms. Brock. We have that video. It’s a waste of time.”

“Counselor?” said the judge.

“Defense stipulates that the time stamps are key.”

The judge nodded. “Objection overruled. Please continue. But don’t waste this court’s time.”

The video showed Hill in his convertible driving away from the mansion. It was 3:37 a.m.

“Is that you, Mr. Hill?”

He shrugged. “So what? I’m not drunk, if that’s what you’re complaining about.”

“No, I expect you’re coldly sober. Max, can you bring forward the report from the CSU.”

“Is this something we haven’t seen, counselor?” said the DA’s attorney.

“I’m sure it’s in your files somewhere,” said defense, “just like the video. It’s easy to miss, I suppose. Your honor, it’s a note from a CSU search of Mr. Hill’s car. The warrant was signed by Judge Sawyer, and the request was made by Detective O’Connell, who’s already testified for state in this case.”

“She didn’t say anything about that search,” said the DA’s attorney with a growl.

“You didn’t ask her. You probably thought it was procedural and irrelevant. However, I will point out that there was GSR in the glove compartment of Mr. Hill’s Audi. Mr. Hill has testified he doesn’t like guns. How did it get there, Mr. Hill?”

Arthur Hill’s face turned white. “I didn’t kill Yuri! Tara did.”

The courtroom buzz increased in volume.

“That seems like a bold statement, considering Ms. Finley isn’t here to defend herself.”

“She told me she did it. Yuri had told her about Cynthia’s obsession, but Tara thought he still had feelings for Cynthia. She lost it and killed him while he was practicing.”

“So you took the gun from her trailer?”

“Maybe.”

“Answer the question, Mr. Hill,” said the judge.

Hill put his head in his hands. “OK, I took it from the trailer. I wanted to protect her.” Cynthia Brock jumped to her feet. “You bastard, you fucked me and then planted the gun, didn’t you? You wanted Tara!”

“Order, order!” said the judge. “Bailiff, clear the court. I’ll see the two attorneys in my chambers.”

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That pretty much did it. Cynthia was freed, and Hill would do time for his little scheme of trying to frame her. But I knew the story didn’t end there. Why would he have done such a thing? The only possible motive was that he killed Tara and used that shell casing as part of the frame. I’d suspected that Hill really wanted Tara, but she’d balked when he told her he was going to protect her by framing Cynthia. That murder was on his hands; I just couldn’t prove it.

You win a few, you lose a few. I bought that Ravel concerto, though. Some pianist who loves wolves is playing it now on my stereo. I like the first and third movements better than the second because the latter reminds me too much that love can turn into jealousy so easily.

## Sunday Mornin'

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*Kris Kristofferson had quite a few country-style hits. You'll probably remember "Me and Bobby McGee," made famous by Janis Joplin. One of my favorites inspired this story. By the way, the plight of NYC's homeless still continues, and homelessness is a national problem.*

Jimmy kicked the can down the street and enjoyed the tolling of the church bells as he made his way to the soup kitchen. He saw the lines, decided he'd rather panhandle some change for breakfast than wait for the slop they served, and headed for his favorite corner. It was shady in the morning and had plenty of street traffic as New Yorkers headed for a day of worship or a day of labors within and among the brooding skyscrapers. The day still had a lazy feel to it...God's day, a day of rest, and work for those who provided city services, often 24/7.

He decided to save some time and cut through an alleyway. "C'mon, old boy. Who knows? We might find a trash bin or two with some edible scraps. Saturday night's always a good scrap producer."

He'd named the mongrel Emyouteetee, for M-U-T-T. Colleagues were surprised when they asked about the name and he usually told them it was the name of a famous Buddhist monk. One old fellow named Benjamin had even held the dog's head and looked into his eyes, searching for divine revelation. Out of guilt, Jimmy had almost told the old man about the name because he and Jimmy often shared weed, but Benjamin had seemed so at peace gazing into the dog's eyes that Jimmy hadn't wanted to ruin the spell.

James Earl Pennington, Jr. had served in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Except for the nightmares, he thought he was sane. The medics had saved his left arm and leg in the battlefield hospital, but not his left eye. He spoke southern Pashto, Iraqi Arabic, and Colombian Spanish, but most of his night school students had spoken either Arabic or Spanish. He was facile with languages because of his mother, a Louisiana Creole, who spoke her maternal dialect, French, and Spanish, as well as English (he had no idea who Mr. Pennington, Sr. was). The Army had considered him a natural for a home-grown translator, but that had put him into squads that combed the streets of towns and villages looking for the enemy.

He had recovered from the battlefield surgeries and endured a few more, first in Germany and then Walter Reed, before teaching night school. The Big Apple had many immigrants who needed the courses, but he wasn't paid enough to stay off the streets. He had become homeless, one of the many thousands down on their luck. Good teacher's pay required a college education and certificates; he only had his Army record.

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That time of the morning, the alley was shrouded in deep shadows. But he didn't need good eyesight to hear the woman's screams from the opposite end. Emyouteetee growled, barked, and took off, Jimmy right behind.

The screams had ended by the time he found the body. The wire around her neck was the weapon. The torn skirt raised to the waist and shredded underwear said rape. The contents of a purse strewn across the alley said a mugging had escalated.

"If you see something, say something." The city's security slogan pounded in his head. He ran onto the street's sidewalk, saw a patrol car approaching halfway down the block, and stopped it. The cop in the passenger seat assumed the worst, attacked Jimmy, and put handcuffs on him after pushing him down on the hood.

"In the alley!" Jimmy screamed. "A woman's been murdered!"

The cop who had been driving put the flashers on and dashed for the alley. In five minutes, three other squad cars were at the scene.

"Why'd you do it, man?" said the first cop, who was also black.

"I didn't, I swear. I ran to help. Where's Emyouteetee?"

"Who?" said the cop.

"My dog. I don't see him."

The cop remembered the mongrel taking off down the street. "Forget the damn dog!" He pushed Jimmy into the backseat behind the meshed barrier. "You aren't going anywhere until we have this sorted out."

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The media was as unforgiving as the cops. A video of Jimmy sitting forlorn in the cop car was featured as breaking news on the four o'clock news channels. Reporters were already looking into his background.

The next morning public defender Jean Hardy saw the headline "Why did this decorated veteran rape and kill a woman?"

*I get all the bad cases, she thought. Declared guilty in the court of public opinion before the man goes to trial.*

"Good luck, counselor," said the cop who brought Jimmy to his interview with Jean.

She was sitting on one side of an old table. She recoiled. The man was a mess. She didn't know whether the stench was from his homeless life or his night in jail. Or, whether his disheveled look was his normal appearance or a consequence of cops roughing him up during the arrest and booking.

"Sit down, Mr. Pennington. I'm your attorney."

"Don't have an attorney. Don't need one. I'm innocent. Do that DNA thing. I didn't touch that woman. I've seen enough dead bodies to know she was dead, so I ran to get help."

Jean glanced again at the booking records. He'd been saying that consistently. *Could it be true?*

"We'll do that DNA thing. It takes a while even to do the quick check. Instant DNA tests only occur in Hollywood. Why don't you tell me what happened?"

He did. The story was a bit meandering, from flashbacks to his Army service to present day, but she got the gist. The man seemed more worried about his dog, though.

"Jimmy, they could put you away for life if that DNA test doesn't prove your innocence. We need more info. Did you see the person who did it?"

"Couldn't see—hey, I got only one eye and there were too many shadows. Couldn't hear much either over Emyouteetee's barks and the woman's screams. How could anyone do something like that? She must have just been walking by on her way to church or work. Where I came from at the other end of the alley, there were lots of people. Why weren't there people at the other end too?"



"It's a narrower street and not a major one. Not as many people on Sunday morning either."

"So, why were the cops there?"

"Good question. I don't know. Either you were lucky or unlucky, because there they were. Did they check you over physically?"

"Except for roughing me up, no. Guess they thought they had their man. Look at my record. I wouldn't hurt a fly. I wasn't even in combat overseas because I was a trained interpreter, a go-between for our soldiers and the natives."

"You didn't go to basic training?"

"Sure. Everyone gets that basic shit. But they had me pegged as a translator, so that's what I became. Guess they sometimes get it right. Suited me, because I don't cotton to killing."

Jean smiled at the Southern sounding expression. "You've lost your Southern drawl."

"Three tours overseas and years here in the Big Apple will do that. I pick up the local lingo fast. If I moved back to Louisiana, I'd be speaking like a native in a few weeks."

"I'm from Virginia, but I went to school here. I lost the accent too. Except for that DNA test, I can't see that I can do much of anything else for you."

"You can make the cops go after the monster who killed that woman. And find my dog."

"Emyouteetee?"

"Yeah, he's named after a Buddhist monk."

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Two days later, the preliminary DNA results were in. Jimmy's DNA didn't match the DNA in the attacker's semen. They released him with a gruff apology. The two cops who had arrested him drove him back to his old haunts.

"Sorry, Jimmy," said the black cop. "You take care of yourself, now."

"I need to find my dog," said Jimmy, looking around. "Your—what do you call it?—CSI didn't happen to see him when collecting their forensics."

"That would be CSU," said the white cop. "I didn't hear anything about a stray dog. We can keep a look out for him. Maybe animal control collared him."

"I saw him," said the black cop. "He's likely going to stay in the area. He might be looking for you too."

"I'll find him," said Jimmy. "You fellows should just focus on finding the monster who killed that woman."

"We're doing our best," said the white cop with a smile.

Jimmy wandered off down the street. He didn't have much confidence in the cops. They messed up by arresting him. *Why wouldn't they mess up now?* Right now he needed to look for Emyouteetee.

Following the cop's suggestion, he checked out animal shelters first. One manager told him the dog would be better put down than be cared for by him. Another wouldn't even let him inside.

He found Benjamin, who had a cell phone. The older man had found it in some garbage with broken front and dead battery, but he lived with the first and found a battery to replace the old one. A priest had shown him how to subscribe to a cheap cellphone service. He was already two months late on the bill, but they hadn't cut him off yet.

"I don't have many minutes left," said Benjamin. "Who do you need to call?"

"An attorney. She's nice and clean and can help me look for Emyouteetee."

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Jean Hardy figured she was going to regret meeting with Jimmy, but she knew she owed him a favor. She felt guilty, in fact. She'd thought he'd raped and killed that woman.

"I often sit here and watch the sun go down," said Jimmy, looking across the Hudson. "It's nice to see so much water and the setting sun. Iraq was dry and the sun was an enemy too."

Jean nodded. "You said you needed help."

"I need someone nice and clean to check out shelters for me. I'm still looking for my dog."

She smiled. "I understand. Maybe we should just clean you up a bit?"

"I don't have no clean clothes no more. These are pretty much it 'cept for an overcoat Benjamin stashed for me. I wear that in the winter."

Jean stood up. "Let's go then."

"Where to?"

"My apartment. You can clean up. My Dad was about your size. I still have his clothes."

"Was? He's dead?"

"The clothes are all washed, ironed, and folded, Jimmy, and they're in good condition. I was going to give them to Goodwill. I just haven't gotten around to it. C'mon. I'll give you company to the shelters if you want, but we'll clean you up so well your friend Benjamin won't even recognize you."

"That's not much of a problem, 'cept for the overcoat. I want my dog to recognize me, though."

"He will. Don't worry."

After his clean-up, it was too late to do anything, so Jean invited Jimmy to stay for dinner.

"I'm grateful you're doing all this, but wouldn't it have been easier for you to just go to the shelters on my behalf?"

Jean smiled. "I'll do that anyway, but Dad lived with me for years. It's nice to have a man around."

"Your father and you must have been quite a pair. I never knew my father." He sipped at his fruit juice. "You make good spaghetti, by the way."

"I live on pasta. It's easy, and I burn a lot of carbs. Sauce comes in a jar, so all I have to do is put that in a pot and boil water for the pasta. This came out *al dente*, but I've been known to forget I have it on. I throw it into condensed soup then."

He laughed. "Not the shortest way to a man's heart for you maybe, but you'd still make any man happy, I think. Why don't you have someone special in your life?"

"Because I don't have time to look for him," she said. "My work starts at seven a.m. and often goes 'til late at night. Our caseload is tremendous. I also inherit others' cases because there's a lot of turnover. Trial lawyers often start as public defenders, but the pay is lousy."

"So they find something where they can make better money. Figures. I don't have a problem with money. I don't need it anymore."

"But you won't live long as a homeless person," said Jean. "Bad food, little or no medical treatment, even danger—that's not the recipe for long life."

"I almost bought the dirt farm in Iraq. I figure that used up all this cat's nine lives. I'm on borrowed time. The Grim Reaper is homeless people's friend."

She pondered that. "What about your dog? He'd miss you."

He looked at the ceiling and then back at her. "There's that. I don't know how old Emyouteetee is. I haven't had him long."

"I bet if you cleaned him up, he'd look younger too. You don't look so bad, you know."

"I had a girlfriend once. Lost her when I became homeless. The romance was winding down anyways. She thought I didn't make enough money to help with expenses. She was right. I couldn't even cover my own."

They talked about Jean's father. He'd been a Jersey cop and had encouraged his daughter to study law. He'd been a bit disappointed when she became a public defender.

"He was an MP during the Korean War," she said, "so it was natural he became a cop. He moved in with me when he retired. Cheaper that way."

"Kinda put a crimp on your sex life, I imagine," said Jimmy.

She blushed. "A woman living with and taking care of an elderly parent isn't in the same class as a man living with his mother."

"Society has strange prejudices against old spinsters, though," he said with a laugh.

"Sorry. That came out wrong. Just saying this is a small place. Not much room for a guy to woo a gal, especially with a Daddy around who knows how to shoot a gun."

"This isn't the bayou, and we didn't have any guns here. Still don't. Moreover, my father, until he got sick, was a steady patron of the bars where cops and firefighters congregate. I encouraged that. He wasn't a drunk; it was his social life, about all he had left."

"So you had men in here back then. Why not now?"

"I said I'm too busy."

"OK. Let's change the topic. Let me tell you the story of how I found my dog."

After dessert and coffee, Jimmy stood. "I best be going. When can you help me look for Emyouteetee?"

"I have a trial tomorrow at ten. It probably won't last long. I convinced the woman to accept a plea bargain. The cops and DA want her supplier anyway. I should be free by twelve, when I can spare a few hours. How's that sound?"

"Great. If you buy me a subway pass, I can keep looking even afterwards. Even the places I went to wouldn't recognize me like this."

Jean looked at her watch and made a quick decision. "Sit down. You're sleeping on Dad's bed tonight. It's too late."

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They'd just left the fourth shelter when Jean decided that she had to prepare Jimmy.

"You know that your dog might be dead, right? And not all shelters are no-kill shelters. He could have been euthanized already."

"I know that. But I have to look. If he's still alive, he needs me."

*Maybe not as much as you need him.* She looked at her watch. "One more, and I've got to get back. You can go on looking, though. Come by tonight and tell me how it went." She handed him two twenties.

"They'll let you have a dog in your apartment?"

“Good question. I don’t know. I’ll have to check the lease. Ring the buzzer and call me down.”

“Even if I don’t find him?”

“Sure. Maybe I can go out some more with you tomorrow. Right now, let’s check this one out. It isn’t no-kill, so it’s an important one.”

Jimmy’s dog wasn’t in the shelter. He even described it to the attendant, who shook his head. “We haven’t put any animals to sleep since the first of the month either. Good luck, fellow. You should get him a chip.”

They left the shelter. Jean could tell by Jimmy’s foot-dragging he was dejected. She was about to say something to cheer him up when two shots rang out. The first bullet hit the brick wall behind them. The second hit Jimmy, spinning him around. He sank to his knees.

But he jumped up immediately. He looked left and right. They both saw a figure in a hoodie run into an alley.

“He must be the killer!”

Jimmy took off, Jean behind him. “Stop! He’ll shoot again,” she called out.

He ignored her. He was fast. He was already closing in on the fleeing figure when she turned the corner into the alleyway. Jimmy tackled the man. The gun went flying. A brawl began.

She ran and picked up the gun, pointing at the two men. But she didn’t have a clear shot. She didn’t need one. The fugitive was soon unconscious. She covered him while Jimmy tied the hands behind the shooter’s back.

She set the safety, placed the gun on a garbage bin lid, and dialed 9-1-1.

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“I guess I shouldn’t defend that perp,” she said, walking out of Bellevue Emergency with Jimmy, who had his arm in a sling. “It would be a conflict of interest.”

“And I guess they won’t be questioning him for a while with his jaw wired up like that.” He’d broken the man’s jaw. “We’re a good team, although I was afraid you were going to shoot.”

“I don’t like guns, but my father taught me to shoot one. I knew I didn’t have a clear shot. I’m pretty certain you were correct. This fellow thought you were a witness to his terrible crime and wanted to take you out.”

Jimmy smiled. “Too bad he’s such a terrible shot and so slow. He has the shakes now. Probably withdrawal from somethin’.”

“K-2, meth, whatever—what difference does it make? That won’t help him in his trial for rape and murder. I’m sure they’ll find a DNA match this time. I’d bet on it.”

“Back to looking for my dog, then.”

“Oops! I forgot. Sorry. While they were fixing you up, I received a call from one of the cops who arrested you. They’re holding your dog at their precinct.”

“Let’s go there now!”

She thought a moment. “Hmm. That’s a problem. He didn’t say which precinct—there are so many. I have his name, though, so the mystery’s easily solved. I think we owe your dog a shampoo. I know a place.”

“He’s clean on the inside already, but I guess that would make him feel better on the outside.”

“He’ll feel better seeing you too. Do you worm him and everything? That isn’t cheap.”

“No. He’s clean inside because he’s the reincarnation of a famous Buddhist monk.”

She smiled. “I asked for that. I figured out the name, by the way. I know your Buddhist monk story is just a joke.”

SAMPLE

## Glory Road

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*Here's one of the obscure songs. During a TV special long ago, Pete Seeger introduced a husband and wife modern folk duo, Hedge and Donna. I bought the LP (you know, those things that look like a black crepe with grooves). The title is part of the lyrics to "I've Got a Long Way to Go," a Billy Batson song they sang on that LP. This story is based partly on personal experience and is about PTSD before the acronym even existed. (The LP, probably a collector's item by now, is not for sale.)*

Paul saw the explosion just before he heard it. When he awoke, he was no longer in Vietnam. The nurses and doctors were U.S. Army people, but the hospital was in Tokyo. He figured that out without seeing much—just blurs and splashes of pastel colors. He felt very much alone.

A bit later, a soft hand took his wrist. "How are you doing, soldier?"

"Not great, if I'm here. You're from the South." He liked her soft voice, but was the tone pitying or compassionate?

"Good ears. You'll need them," the nurse said.

"Because I can't see? Is that permanent?"

"When we get you back to the States, we'll find out. Right now, count yourself lucky. Others in your patrol lost their lives. You're pretty much intact, except for the eyes and losing a few fingers. I think they dug a round out of your back. That will be sore, but the least of your worries."

"Right hand," he said, wiggling his fingers enough to feel the heavy bandage. He already knew his eyes were bandaged. "Why am I here?"

"On the way back," she said. "You're going home. Your trek down that glory road is over, at least as far as Vietnam is concerned."

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Paul relived the attack many times in many hospitals before he ended up back in Indianapolis, his home. Jersey was the lieutenant, he was the sergeant, and the others were new at combat. Ricardo Santos, called Jersey because he was from there and spoke with the accent, was OK, but some of the new recruits didn't like him. He asked a lot of everybody, but the new guys had lost the lottery and some were bitter about it. One in particular, Jimmy Coulter, a Southerner, didn't like taking orders from Jersey. Paul had tried to mend fences, but there was always tension.

*But was it bad enough to shoot Jersey and me in the back? Catching them both by surprise, he had turned enough to see Coulter and wound up facing the blast. The shot was insignificant as Jersey took the brunt of the explosion, shielding Paul. Is Jimmy dead? Paul hoped not. He wanted to find the bastard!*

"Mr. Holloway, do you understand what I'm saying? You'll pay nothing."

"Huh?" Oh yeah, the GI bill, that gift of a grateful nation, a nation where the peaceniks spit on and insulted veterans, blaming them for the war. "What am I going to live on?"

“The government provides a small stipend. Can your parents finance the rest? It isn’t very much.”

Paul nodded. Money wasn’t the problem. He was rethinking his whole dream. Wanting to go to college was stupid—he was legally blind!

“How about getting around? How will I see anything in class?”

“We can hire a person to be your aide, your eyes, if you will. It’s a great job for our work-study students.” Paul heard papers shuffling. “We have other handicapped students. Their graduation rate is above average. It says here that you want to study psychology to be able to help your fellow veterans. I’m not sure I understand that.”

“Physical ailments aren’t our worst maladies,” said Paul. “Some of us return a little nuts. I have repeating nightmares. Other suffer from bouts of anger or depression. Highs and lows. It’s a huge roller coaster we ride on. Some have committed suicide. I think I can help. But I’m blind. I’ll need someone even to read the textbooks. Most aren’t in Braille, and I’m not very good at Braille anyway.”

“We can find help for you. Don’t worry.”

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The first candidate didn’t even show up the first day. The second couldn’t dedicate enough time, and they wouldn’t give him two helpers. The third was a second-year student. Paul was first-year, but he was two years older than Marjorie was. They hit it off.

Four years later, Marjorie had graduated and was working to support them while Paul finished his degree. His nemesis was Spanish. He needed to pass a year of Spanish during that summer. They hired a tutor, not a Hispanic but a guy from California who spoke Spanish like a native. Paul passed the required course, and tutor and student went out to celebrate.

“Paul, this is a topless bar,” said the tutor.

“Yeah, so your graduation gift to me is to describe all the naked boobs you see. For obvious reasons, I can’t bring Marjorie here.”

“Why eat hamburger when you have steak at home?” said the tutor, referring to Marjorie.

“That’s clever.”

“I think Paul Newman said it about his wife,” said the tutor. “So, answer the question.”

“Maybe I want to compare,” Paul said. “Everyone says Marjorie is a real catch, but I can’t see her.”

“Forget the looks.”

“You were never a soldier, right?” Paul knew the tutor had heard the litany before, but went on. “You don’t have any idea what it’s like to be thousands of miles away from your home, slogging through the paddies and jungle, knowing that the only girl you’ll see for a long time will be a nurse in a hospital. Even then, when I woke up, I couldn’t see them! Then we come home and all the peaceniks spit on and swear at us.”

“I’m a peacenik, but I don’t do that.”

“I know. You were 1Y. I’m worse than 1Y now. I should be a fucking hero.”

“I won’t disagree with that. And you’re not responsible for this awful war. The people who sent you over to die are, along with the Viet Cong.”

But the tutor began describing the waitresses.

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"I found him!" Marjorie said.

Paul muted the stereo. His hearing was off too, so he played it loud, but he tended to lose speech with any interfering sounds.

"Found who?"

Their Indianapolis one-bedroom apartment was a bit tiny, but Marjorie and Paul weren't there much. She worked in a hospital; he worked in a veteran's addiction clinic. Most nights they were exhausted, as much from their patients' stories as from the actual workload.

"Jimmy Coulter," said Marjorie. "He's a used car salesman in Kansas City."

"Kansas or Missouri?"

"Missouri."

"I need to confront that bastard! He deserves a bullet, but I won't shoot him in the back."

"You can't shoot him. You can't see."

"I just have to aim the gun at his stench," said Paul.

"You'd spend the rest of your life in jail," she said.

"There's that. What can I do?"

"I think there's a better approach."

Marjorie was always the calm one.

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"We're looking for Mr. James Coulter," said the MP.

The secretary looked at her watch. "He's late. I assume you're not here to buy a car." Coulter had returned from Nam healthy and became a reservist. "I'll wait for him."

"He's an American hero, you know," said the woman.

"Not if he's the James Coulter I'm looking for."

Coulter appeared a half hour later driving a convertible he had taken home from the lot.

"Always good to see a soldier. Have you had a time to look around at the inventory?"

He brushed his hair back and straightened his tie. "You're big, bro. I think you need a man's car, a pickup."

"Did you know Sergeant Paul Holloway and Lieutenant Ricardo Santos in Vietnam, Mr. Coulter?"

"Sure. Paul and Jersey. Real soldiers. They bought the dirt farm like so many others. Only three of us survived from our group."

The MP took out his cuffs. "You're under arrest for the murder of Lieutenant Ricardo Santos and the attempted murder of Sergeant Paul Holloway," he said.

"You're kidding. What evidence do you have?"

"A sworn deposition by Mr. Holloway," said the MP.

"It's my word against his," said Jimmy, holding out his hands.

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The court martial took only two days. The bullet they'd pulled out of Paul was U.S. made. Jimmy's defense made the argument that anyone could have shot Santos and Holloway. He was given only six months. Santos' parents left the courtroom furious. Paul didn't blame them.



After serving his sentence and being dishonorably discharged, ex-Private First Class James Coulter decided to drive to Georgia and restart his life.

They found him dead from gun wounds at a remote rest stop in Tennessee not far from Nashville.

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“That was a nice vacation,” said Marjorie as they pulled into the parking lot at their apartment complex. “I’m glad you thought of it. It seemed to take a load off your shoulders too. I know that trial was a disappointment.”

“You described all my favorite country and western venues very well, honey.” He thought of the tutor describing the topless waitresses and felt guilty. But the tutor had come through for him.

“Funny meeting your old tutor there in Nashville. I guess you guys deserved your time in the bar. Was it topless this time?”

*Wow! She knew all along!* “I’m sorry about that, Marge. We were just married. I had a lot of issues.”

“I know. I did too. I was thinking you only loved me because I took care of you.”

“And I was thinking you only pitied me. Guys in ‘Nam warned me about falling in love with my nurse.”

“You expected to be in all those hospitals?”

“I expected to be dead. Instead, I found someone who makes me feel alive.”

She kissed him. “Me too. Did you guys go to a bar?”

“Drove around a bit listening to his damn folk stuff. I’ll admit I liked some of it. Beer and music afterward. Catching up. Guy things. You would have been bored.”

She kissed him again. “I’m never bored with you. We need to start thinking about making a family.”

“Yeah. I can think about that now. Like you said, I took a load off my shoulders with this trip.” He kissed her back. “I think we should name our first son after the tutor. He’s a real friend.”

## TKO

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*“The Boxer” was one of Simon and Garfunkel’s biggest hits. I identified with it. Dad had three pro fights and might have ended up the same way if Grandpa hadn’t made him quit. This story is more about the seamier side of the sport.*

Jake Billings finished sweeping the floor of the gym, sniffed at the foul air, and locked up. The last punk had left. *Always thinking boxing’s their future.* He had once thought that. Not hard to understand for a kid living on NYC’s mean streets. Runner for the mob, pimp for the whores on 7<sup>th</sup> avenue, drug dealer—these were the kind of occupations awaiting a poor young man looking for a future. Boxing had seemed a safer place to be.

You start out fighting because you have to defend yourself. Even to stay out of gang life, you have to fight. They call you a faggot if you don’t join. They might bugger you if you don’t join. Some die fighting them. If not them, the cops, who think every poor kid’s a future danger to society. Cops aren’t much better than the gangs sometimes. Some are OK and try to help; others will beat the crap out of you if you look at them wrong.

They’d called him Basher Billings. He’d known how to fight. He had learned fast. Liked the fact that there were rules—it’s much safer when your opponent can’t pull out a gun or knife. His first four matches ended in three knockouts and one TKO. Then Sam, a good cop who hung around the gym, advised him to quit.

“You’re taking some hard hits, Jake,” the cop had said. He’d fought a bit in the Marines. “You’re going to turn your mind to mush. Even with a helmet, I’d have ringing in my head.”

“The big money’s still there to be had,” Jake had said. “It’s my way out of these neighborhoods.”

Sam had shrugged. “Don’t ever say I didn’t tell you.”

Jake had thought about it, though. But his agent Sid quashed the idea. “We have a big one coming up. Big money for both of us if you do what I tell you.”

Jake hadn’t liked the idea. The agent had someone talk to him, someone called Biggy.

“Your nanna might have a little accident if you don’t do what you’re told, boy.”

Nanna Nina had raised Jake. He still checked on her whenever he could. The old lady had offered a poor boy unconditional love, taking him in after losing his father to gun violence and his mother to drugs, and trying to keep him on the straight and narrow in the worst circumstances imaginable. Jake recognized the bulge from Biggy’s shoulder holster. The threat of its use caused fear, but the mob enforcer’s fists were just as deadly as far as an old woman was concerned.

Jake turned out the lights and fumbled for the keys. Remembered taking that hit in the third round of his fifth fight. He’d been fumbling for his keys and other things ever since. His nimble dance in the ring had long ago been replaced with shuffling, concentrating on each step so he wouldn’t stumble.

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Jake’s roommate was handicapped too, physically not mentally. He lived his life in bed or in a wheel chair. He designed computer games. He didn’t make a lot of money, but the

company liked his work. Jake helped take care of him. It supplemented the salary he received from the gym.

"You seem out of sorts tonight," Alan said from across the dinner table. Jake had made pasta. That matched their budgets, cooking skills, and tastes. "For an old boxer with his brains addled, how can you be depressed?"

Jake considered the question. He knew the one eye that drooped a bit and the scars on his face easily interpretable as wrinkles from old age made it seem like he was always considering some question. Alan called him a retard-philosopher. Alan was quick to react to all stimuli; Jake was slow. Basher Billings was forced to think as slowly as he now moved.

"Not addled enough," said Jake. "I saw Sid today."

"That asshole. What did he want?"

"Nothing concerning me. I'm nobody now, so he ignores me. He was talking to another eighteen-year-old and ogling the kid's girlfriend." Jake knew that Sid had been married twice. Number Two had thrown him out because he was a philanderer and also addicted to porn. Jake remembered some of the disgusting pictures. "Probably going to sign him. Just another kid wanting a better life to get out of the 'hood."

"To throw yet another fight? That's crazy! Somebody should stop that jerk. I thought the Feds cleaned up the mobs."

"No one cleans up the mobs. They have takeovers and mergers like big corporations. They've gone far beyond extortion and protection. Vices pay big, though, and gambling is a moneymaking one. Getting rid of the mobs is like trying to get traction on an icy sidewalk. Besides, Sid receives money from gamblers too."

"How entrepreneurial. Maybe you should pay Sid back for what he did to you."

"Not a bad idea. Nanna's dead and buried now. I don't have anyone left but you to worry about. I wouldn't know how to do it, though. I'd like to get a gun and just blow him away, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life in jail."

"You'd rather spend it as a custodian in that stinky gym?"

"It's an honest job. Between that and what I make taking care of you, I get by."

Alan nodded. "I bet I can figure out a way to get you some revenge. It's about time I helped you for a change."

Jake smiled. "That sounds appealing. Tell me about it."

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After dinner, Sidney Johnson checked his wallet. *Not even enough for a blow job.* He didn't feel like going back out anyway. He decided it was a DIY night, so he went to his computer. *Let me think...I have it!* He hadn't looked at that one file in a while. He powered up the machine.

Sidney was five-five and developing a spare tire. He still got lucky with some women, but most told him to get lost. DIY or paid sessions were his steady diet now. The porn had always helped with the former. The mob money had always helped with the latter. He was a fighter's agent, but he worked more for the mob and their bookies.

*That kid had balked, though. Maybe because tootsie was around?* She was a good-looker. He didn't care if they were silicone or real—the kid had good tastes in breasts.

He stared at the computer screen. It said: “Hiya Sidney. You’re a real swinger. Want to see some real porn? Go to....” A URL followed. *Has someone hacked into my computer and seen my protected files?*

But he was tempted. His second wife had left him because of his extracurricular activities. He had his revenge, though. Her lawyer couldn’t find ninety per cent of his assets. Everything the mob sent his way was under the table. He was frugal too, so they couldn’t prove he spent more than he made.

He typed the URL. What appeared seemed like a snippet from a raunchy computer game. He had some on his computer. Some woman with tits like melons was on top of a fat man. She and her boobs were bouncing up and down and cooing with pleasure. *Not bad*, he thought. *Cartoonish, but good shit*. The scene shifted. He now realized who the fat man was—a caricature of himself. *Geez, I’m not that fat!*

As if to confirm it, the well-endowed woman screamed his name and some obscenity about his member and reached back. He saw the huge knife just before she buried it into his chest. The wicked arc of that blade was repeated several times for good measure.

He hit the power button. Sweat was pouring off him.

*Just a cartoon, just a cartoon!* Someone was playing a bad practical joke. But that someone must know about his tastes for good porn.

His nightmares were filled with variations on the scene. In some, the knife found other parts of his anatomy. He tossed and turn.

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“I thought over your offer, Sid,” said the potential recruit. “I don’t think I’m ready to go pro. I had a long talk with Jake.”

“Jake? Who’s Jake?” The kid pointed at the janitor. “Him? He’s a has-been, a real loser. Why would you listen to him?”

“Because he told me about how he had the same contract and how you screwed him. It was enough to come to my senses. You’re a jerk, Sidney. I’ll tell the other fellows to look out for you.”

“You can’t do that!” said Sid. “I’ll—”

“Have the mob work me over? I don’t think so. That old cop Sam’s got your number. And I got friends on the street. I told them what you did to Jake. They’ll hack you into little pieces if you try anything. If they don’t, Dolores will.”

“Who’s Dolores?”

The kid handed him a photo. He blanched. It was the fat woman. “She’s real?”

“You’re Mama Dolores’ best client, but you probably don’t know her. She runs a porn business out of a loft in the ‘hood. We know all about your little hobby.”

“I-I get lonely sometimes,” Sid said.

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In two months, Sid found he had no clients. His friends in the mob lost interest in him. The money started drying up.

One Sunday night he was feeling lonely and depressed. He turned on his computer. This time when he logged on, he went directly to the site corresponding to the URL that flashed on his

screen. Another computer-game broad, this one looking a bit like a Viking princess, fondled her boobs for him.

“Hello, Sidney, want some of this? Meet me at...” She gave the name of a hotel, room number, address, and phone number.

Sidney wasn’t completely stupid. He checked the address on Google Maps. The hotel was legit, a four-story building. *Maybe a flophouse, but still?* No, he wasn’t going to fall for it. *It must be a trap.*

He went to the bathroom on a DIY mission. The image of the woman was still fresh in his brain.

The next night the blond was replaced by a redhead. *More my size. Are these Dolores’ girls?* Computer graphics were getting so good they looked almost real, right down to the nipples. He opted for another session in the bathroom.

The third night, he couldn’t stand it anymore. He decided to take protection, though—a condom and a gun. *What the hell?* He’d just signed a new guy, a toughie from China Town, a martial arts guy not connected with the gym—some extreme-fighter type who needed representation in the illegal bouts around the area. It meant he’d mostly just hold the bets, but it was better than nothing, and he’d get his fifteen per cent of the winnings. So, he deserved to celebrate a bit.

He knew he didn’t have enough money for a prostitute. That’s why he liked porn—little cost involved. It wasn’t clear these babes modeling for the cartoons were asking for money, though. *Maybe just precocious teenagers? Why would they want me? Kinky sex, maybe? I certainly won’t tell Daddy or Mommy.* But the city was filled with frustrated women. *Maybe they’re divorcees?* As long as he didn’t have to make a commitment, he didn’t give a shit.

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The desk clerk was in a wheel chair. “Mr. Johnson, we’ve been expecting you for some time. Here’s the key to number 312. Go right up. I’m sorry the elevator is broken.”

“How do you go up?” said Sidney, not relishing the idea of climbing three flights of stairs.

“I don’t. I don’t have to. The girls go up at night, and the cleaning crew goes up in the morning.”

“Do I owe you anything?”

“I take my cut. You’ll have to negotiate with Wendy.”

“Who’s Wendy?”

“Your host tonight,” said the clerk with a leer.

*Will she negotiate before or after?* he thought as he climbed the stairs. It didn’t matter. If she charged too much, he’d keep his pants on, turn around, and leave. *But if it’s some desperate housewife or some sex-crazed teen, maybe I’ll get it for free!*

“Come in,” said a sexy voice when he knocked.

He entered. The room was dark, but he saw that the woman named Dolores was sprawled naked on the bed. He shrugged and took a step forward when the room became a lot darker.

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When he awoke, he was staring into the eyes of Jake Billings, the janitor. He tried to push his scarred face away but found his hands were tied to the cheap headboard.

"So you do remember me," said Jake with a smile.

"Where's Dolores?"

"I asked my friend Dolores to go. She doesn't need to see this. Nice gun, Sid." He waved the revolver. "A good one to carry for a man with penis envy, I suppose. You must have guessed this might be a trap. Thinking of your mob friends? They're probably not too happy with you right now."

"I came prepared. I didn't know it was an old friend."

"Old friend?" Jake's lip curled. "Why would I consider you a friend after what you did to me? I'd kill Biggy too, but he's already dead. Years ago. I've never been the same since I took that fall for you. How much did Biggy and his friends give you for that?"

"I can't remember. I had to play along, you know. That's just the way it is."

"I know, Sid, I know. You couldn't make a decent living otherwise."

He put the gun to Sid's temple and pulled the trigger. Sid jerked and Jake laughed.

"Alan and I talked about really doing it. How I could wipe my prints off, put the gun back in your hand, and fire again so there was GSR on you. It was fun to think about it. It's more fun to watch you pee your pants, though."

"Why, after all these years?"

"Because the fighter still remains." Jake slashed at the cords with a penknife and tossed the gun on the bed. "Don't think about shooting me. The gun's full of blanks. And don't ever think about representing another fighter, Sid. Next time I'll just beat the crap out of you so you're more addled than I am. And be completely incontinent."

Jake walked out the door, leaving the stench of the urine and the dirty old man behind.

Note from Steve: You have just finished the short story collection *Mayhem, Murder, and Music*. I hope you enjoyed the stories.

If you enjoyed reading this free PDF, please check out the list of other ones available—you'll find it on the "Free Stuff & Contests" webpage at my website <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

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## About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the U.S. and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the U.S., for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.