

**Jury duty takes on a whole new prospective in
Dark Covenant
A Jake Steele mystery
By
Don Lewis**

Book review

Former county attorney releases *Dark Covenant*

By Jane Smith, Journalist
Staff Writer for the Meadville Tribune, Meadville, Pa.

Former Crawford County District Attorney Don Lewis has a new thriller, "Dark Covenant," published, and for those who like a murder mystery with a lot of twists, this is the book to read. Let me say, I read this book when Lewis lived here and gave me a manuscript of the draft. I loved it. I read it page by page and kept guessing, always incorrectly, who the murderer might be.

Dark Covenant is like no other mystery I have ever read as far as the plot goes. Where Lewis comes up with the ideas and the characters is interesting. He obviously has done a lot of homework to bring in the twists and turns before he reveals the killer and the motive. It has no resemblance to his first novel, except the writing is still excellent and the suspense keeps building until the end. The book is only 357 pages long and is a quick read for those who enjoy a good mystery — and a good insight into how police work evolves.

Reader Reviews:

Mr. Lewis,

I have been a reader my whole life, and while reading "Dark Covenant" I could not wait to get to the next page. This book was very interesting and drew me closer to the book with each new paragraph. Mr. Lewis is sincerely a talented writer, and I would be honored to purchase the books he has to come.

Lori Krall, Gibsonia, PA

Dear Mr. Lewis,

Hopefully you remember speaking with your fellow former Pennsylvanian this past weekend at the SC Book Festival. In any event, I promised I would drop you a note after reading your book. I am totally upset at you -- I was so tired at work today as I couldn't put your book down...it was great. A gritty, true to life portrayal of cops and PI(s) peppered with a little romance and nail biting suspense. You sir, are a great writer and I

think you just may have the makings of a movie with the *Dark Covenant*. Best wishes.
Deborah Johnson, Travelers Rest, SC

Counselor,

Just finished *Dark Covenant*. It was really, really, really good! I read enough mysteries that I am not usually suprised but, you got me! Well done.

Bege Martin, Denver, Colorado

Prologue

Pittsburgh - 1972

The word all over town was that, after three days of deliberations, the jury in the Racketeering-Murder trial of Alphonse Fabrizi, Pittsburgh's mob "Godfather", the most celebrated trial in Pittsburgh history, was close to a verdict. On each day of the six and a half weeks of trial up to four hundred citizens waited in line, hoping for a chance to fill one of the 300 seats available to the public. Those who were admitted to the one hundred year old courtroom in the Allegheny County Courthouse had not been disappointed.

A hundred witnesses, among them a number of high profile figures well known to Pittsburghers, took their turns on the witness stand, some testifying on behalf of the prosecution; others for the defendant. The trial had everything even the most scrutinizing soap-opera aficionado could hope for: sex, violence, drama, and the chance to delve into the hidden corners of the lives of famous people. Now, with heightened fervor, they awaited the unfolding of the final chapter of the drama.

At 5:00 p.m. on the afternoon of that third day, the jury was brought into the courtroom by the judge who inquired as to their status. The defendant's attorney had filed a motion to declare a hung jury and the judge had agreed to ask the jurors if they thought there was any chance they could reach a verdict. The foreman answered that they were very close to agreeing on a verdict and that they would like to continue deliberating with the expectation of reaching a decision that evening. The judge sent them back to the jury room, and ten minutes later, news of the matter was dominating the evening news coverage.

Finally, at 9:00 o'clock that evening, with a large crowd anxiously waiting outside, the jury of seven men and five women announced to the Tipstaff that they had reached their verdict. As the word went out to the public, the large courtroom began to fill beneath its high two-story ceiling. The onlookers filed into the rows of ornate cherry-wood pew-like benches while the portraits of ten or so somber faced former judges, who had presided over that courtroom in years gone by, stared down at them, all seeming to be whispering the word "Guilty".

Awaiting the judge's entry was a decoratively carved dark oak bench raised a commanding four feet above the courtroom floor. The judge's high-backed chair, covered with rich leather, was flanked by the flags of the United States on one side and Pennsylvania on the other. The Crest of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, favoring the state's rural heritage, covered the wall behind the judge's bench.

While it was a beautifully appointed room, all in all it suggested a very quiet and

somber business-like atmosphere that gave the appearance of a place designed to make those facing the Court feel uncomfortable. Often, it did just that.

The first row of the public seating area accommodated the defendant's family and close associates. Vincent Conti, a lean, well dressed man in his early fifties, and Fabrizi's second in command, sat next to the Godfather's wife, one arm around her shoulder, while they watched the jurors file solemnly into the jury box. None of them looked at the defendant; a bad sign, Conti had been told.

"All rise," the Tipstaff trumpeted, interrupting the murmur of soft conversation in the courtroom. At those words, the judge entered through his chamber door just to the right, and behind the bench. All in the courtroom rose. Once the commotion of six hundred feet hitting the floor simultaneously had subsided, the Tipstaff ceremoniously invited all who had business with the court to "...draw near and you shall be heard. God save the Commonwealth, and this Honorable Court. Please be seated."

The Judge, now commanding the attention of everyone in the courtroom, sat, glancing pensively at the defendant, Alphonse Fabrizi, who had, prior to the jury's arrival, been ushered in by two muscle-bound deputy sheriffs and led to the defendant's table just in front of the railing separating the public section from the rooms business end.

Judge Ben Strauss, a brusque and experience-toughened veteran of the criminal courts, seemed to be almost savoring the moment. Why wouldn't he? A trial like this rarely happens in a City like Pittsburgh. In New York or Los Angeles this kind of thing was old hat, but in Pittsburgh, major organized crime trials were almost unheard of. In fact, it was the first time a major mafia boss had been brought to trial there.

The Fabrizi case drew national attention, and reporters from every major news source in the country had hung on every word uttered by the witnesses, frantically scribbling notes in an effort to capture the scene for public consumption. Now, they sat anxiously awaiting the jury's word of the defendant's fate.

Finally, turning his attention to the jury, the judge, in a calm and resolute voice, asked, "Have you reached a verdict in this case on all of the charges?"

The foreman, in a manner denotative of the long and arduous days of stress the trial had brought to everyone connected with it, ponderously hitched himself out of his chair and, in a loud but labored voice, announced, "We have, Your Honor."

"Hand the verdict slip to the Tipstaff," the Judge instructed. "I will review it to see that it's in the proper form, and return it to you."

Nervous eyes watched in vain for some sign as the verdict slip was delivered to the Judge. He looked at it for a moment, glanced momentarily at Alphonse Fabrizi, and then gave it back to the Tipstaff to be returned to the jury foreman. The Judge's cold expression and meticulous actions gave no hint of the jury's decision. The Court Clerk instructed the defendant to rise and face the jury.

At last the time had arrived. The agonizing wait was over. The defendant would know in a few seconds whether he would walk out of the courtroom a free man, or face the likely death sentence a conviction would bring. His wife sat deathly still, the tension freezing her attractive middle-aged face. She was holding on to Conti's hand as if to loosen it would cause her to slip off the bench and into oblivion. Fabrizi's eleven year old daughter, Danielle, sat huddled as close to her mother as she could get, already crying from the mixed atmosphere of fear and anticipation that permeated the room.

The Judge asked the foreman to read the verdict as to each count separately.

“And now,” the foreman began, looking directly at Alphonse Fabrizi, “we the jury in the case of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania versus Alphonse Giamo Fabrizi, find the defendant, as to Count One, Murder in the First Degree ... guilty, as charged.”

There were muffled gasps and cheers from the gallery, simultaneously proclaiming the mixed feelings held by the community about the defendant.

Fabrizi’s expression changed not at all, and, if he had been expecting a different verdict, no one in the courtroom could have known. Mrs. Fabrizi collapsed, and the Judge held up the proceedings while Conti and another large man carried her out into the hall, her eleven year old daughter trailing tearfully behind.

Several of the jurors, seeing the reaction of the defendant’s family, wept softly and looked away. One buried her face in her hands, and from that moment on, would not look up from the floor. The Judge then motioned for the foreman to continue.

One after another, the verdicts were read, all with the same result: Guilty. In all, the defendant was convicted on four counts of Murder and fifteen counts of Racketeering; a clean sweep for the prosecution.

At the conclusion of the announcement, the Judge asked if the defense wished the jury to be polled individually upon their verdict. The defense attorney said that he did, and the judge asked the jurors to rise, one at a time, and announce their individual verdicts.

One by one, the jurors rose and agreed with the verdict as read. One, an obviously troubled young woman, the same one who wouldn’t look up, paused for a full fifteen seconds and briefly glanced precariously around at the other jurors who were glaring back at her. Finally, she stated that the verdict, as read by the foreman, was hers as well. She was immediately presumed to be the juror who had kept the deliberations going for three days, holding out for either not guilty or some compromise verdict. Once the poll was complete, the Court Clerk recorded the verdict. As that portion of the proceedings concluded, reporters rushed out to call their offices, each trying to beat the other in getting the news out to the street. If they hurried, they could still make the 11 o’clock news.

The jurors were sent back into the deliberation room; there was still the matter of the penalty to be decided. The prosecutors and investigators at the Commonwealth’s table shook hands with each other. Then the lead counsel for the prosecution walked over to the defense attorney and, with no display of malice or ostentation, congratulated him on having done his best for his client.

There was discussion between the judge and lawyers about the manner in which the penalty phase of the trial would be conducted. Then, court was recessed for the evening, to reconvene the next morning at 9:30. To all in the courtroom, however, the penalty hearing was presumed to be but a formality. It had been a foregone conclusion that such a verdict would bring the death penalty.

The next morning each side presented evidence of the aggravating and mitigating circumstances surrounding the murders. It took only twenty minutes of deliberation for the jury to return the expected decision. The defendant was to die in the gas chamber!

Nine Years Later

Having exhausted his appeals to the higher courts, the date for Fabrizi’s execution was set, and he was immediately moved to death row. He left behind all of the neatly

stacked papers which represented his final attempts to overturn his conviction. The next three months were spent reading whatever material was made available to him, mostly the bible. The matter of his final pleas for delays or leniency was left to his lawyers.

Three days prior to his appointment with eternity, Alphonse Fabrizi, having been put on suicide watch, a standard practice in such cases, sat in his cell quietly awaiting his fate. He had finally accepted the realization that his life was soon to be over. His wife and twenty year old daughter, Danielle, had visited with him earlier in the day. At Fabrizi's request, and because they said they could not, or would not, cope with being present at the execution, his family returned to their motel room close to the prison. They would return to Pittsburgh when the ordeal was over.

Alphonse had said his good-byes, and told his wife that he had made his peace with the Lord. He was ready to die! He assured them that even though he had brought shame on them during his life, he would not do so in death. He would die like a man; no whimpering, no tears, and no pleas for mercy. He was determined that his last few moments on earth would be filled with bravado. Neither his family nor his associates would have expected anything less.

Time grew short on the third day. Soon they would be coming for him. The knot in his stomach tightened, and a thin line of perspiration formed across his brow. He could not deny the fear inside, yet he took pride in his ability to maintain a calm countenance. A few minutes before midnight, two guards, the warden and a priest stood outside his cell. The door opened, and the priest entered. "It's time, Alphonse," he said.

The other inmates inside death row, who had been yelling encouragement to Fabrizi, suddenly fell silent; no doubt dreading their own call.

"Thank you, Father." Fabrizi said. "Could you pray with me for just a minute before I go?"

The priest looked up at the warden, who nodded his approval, holding up two fingers.

"I've forgotten the Act of Contrition," Fabrizi said. "Could you help me through it, Father?"

The two men sat, silent to those outside the cell, praying together in a whisper. When the prayer was ended, Fabrizi rose and stood firmly, facing the cell door. "I'm ready," he said in a steady voice.

Minutes later, after being cuffed and shackled, Alphonse Fabrizi walked down the range past the other inmates. Some of them turned their backs, unable to watch their "brother" pass by on his way to the next world. Only the sound of the leg irons dragging along the floor, and Father Campbell's recitation of the twenty-third psalm, could be heard over Fabrizi's pounding heart.

"God go with you, my son," the priest whispered, shaking Fabrizi's hand at the entrance to the death chamber.

"And with you, Father," a teary eyed but calm Fabrizi answered.

Once inside the death chamber, his irons were removed. At the moment when he sat in the death chair, Fabrizi felt more alone than he believed possible. His whole life had come down to this. He had hoped, as do we all, to die in his sleep, an old man; a peaceful passing. But that was not to be. He had earned his punishment several times over and he knew it.

Silent prayers passed over his lips as his arms and legs were strapped to the chair.

When everything was ready, the Warden of the Rockview State Correctional Institution placed his hand on Fabrizi's shoulder. "Do you have any final words, Mr. Fabrizi?" he asked, respectfully.

Fabrizi glanced briefly at the two rows of witnesses seated outside the death chamber, then closed his eyes and lowered his head. He had said all there was to say. He winced slightly as a hood was placed over his head, then, for only a second, re-opened his eyes for the last sight his living eyes would ever see.

At 12:04 am, a cyanide pellet fell into a container of acid under the chair in which Fabrizi was sitting. Within seconds a toxic and deadly gas engulfed him. He had been told that if he took deep breaths the end would come quickly, but Fabrizi was a man who loved life and was in no hurry to find out what came next. He held his breath for as long as he could. Only as he felt as though his lungs would burst did he reluctantly gasp for air. Then he held his breath again, desperately reaching for a few more seconds of life. But, it was too late. Immediately gas filtered through Fabrizi's hood and began to fill his lungs, forcing his body into grotesque and agonizing contortions lasting nearly a full minute. Those who were first-time viewers watched in horror as Fabrizi's fingers grasped the end of the arm-rest and his body tighten against his restraints. They were glad they could not see the tortured expression they guessed must have gathered on his face.

As suddenly as it had begun, it ended, and there was only a slumping body, its spirit gone for eternity.

In a darkened room, almost two hundred miles away, a lonely and frightened woman sat, trembling. *Her* vigil was also coming to an end.

Chapter One

Seven Years Later

Weekends in mid-winter were usually fairly quiet for the Pittsburgh Police Department, but this weekend was an exception. Several drive-by shootings had occurred over Saturday night, one resulting in multiple homicides. There had been two other unrelated homicides and over a hundred calls reporting everything from domestic disturbances to burglaries; and there wasn't even a full moon. So much had been going on that night that the cops in the street were unable to keep up with the volume of activity and everything was running behind.

There was certain to be a number of complaints in the coming days about the failure of the police to respond promptly to important calls and, as usual, those complaints would tumble down onto the heads of the people probably least responsible, the Shift Commanders. Worse than that, Pittsburgh's City Fathers, who received these complaints, and who had refused to provide sufficient money in the annual budget to adequately man three full shifts, would be on the phone to the Chief rebuking the Department and threatening a house cleaning if the commanders were unable to direct their forces in a more efficient manner.

By seven o'clock on Sunday morning the carnage had slowed to a trickle and things were getting back to normal. The sounds of the ambulance and police sirens that had pierced the night silence with their eerie symphony fell silent as suddenly as if the

criminals had gone off shift. Now, the police could breathe a little easier.

Detective Mel Tripp sat alone in the homicide squad room. All of his fellow detectives were still out interviewing mostly uncooperative witnesses. It had been a long time since Detective Tripp had really taken a good look at the room. With all the commotion of detectives and officers rushing in and out, distracting attention from the room's appearance, he hadn't noticed how cluttered it was. A dusty map, marked with colored pins showing the locations of several unsolved homicides, hung as a grim reminder of the mayhem that occurred daily on the streets below his office. Flypaper, waiting for summer, hung from the ceiling; boxes stuffed with clothing belonging to victims or suspects huddled beside several of the detectives' desks like obedient dogs. He shook his head and smiled. Something told him that the offices in the U.S. Steel Building, just down the street, didn't look anything like that.

Just after seven that morning, one final call came in to the homicide squad. Tripp picked up the receiver. "Homicide, Detective Tripp," he said, putting his cigarette out in the ashtray on his desk.

"Yes, Detective, this is Sandy Marcoli over at Penn Security," the young female voice said. "Someone was shot in one of our parking garages." Her voice was quick and shaky, and Tripp knew she was nervous.

"Okay," Tripp replied, tucking the phone between his cheek and shoulder and flipping open his notepad. "Take it easy," he urged. "Try to speak a little slower. Tell me what you know," he said in a rough "I've been up all night" tone. He received no response. Realizing, with a thin smile, that his harsh manner had probably pressed the caller into increased uneasiness, or possibly even unconsciousness, he repeated his words, this time in a softer voice.

"One of our security guards found a dead body in a car in one of our parking garages this morning," she said more calmly. "He says it looks like the man was shot in the head."

"Which lot?" Tripp asked, scribbling the girl's name on his pad.

"The one off Grant, across from the bus station."

"Okay, good, I know it. Where are you now?"

"I'm at the main security office on Liberty Avenue. The guard called me from over at the garage."

"Do you know what time your guard found the body?"

"No, sir, I don't. I assume it was just before he called me a few minutes ago."

"Do you know if he's called anyone else?" Tripp asked.

"I don't think so. He told me to call the police right away."

"Is he at the scene now?"

"Yes, he is. He called in on his radio. He's there right now."

"Alright, we'll get a patrol car over there right away, and a detective will be there as soon as possible. Instruct your guard not to touch anything, and not to let anyone else touch anything until the uniformed officers get there. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I understand," the caller said, then hung up.

Detective Tripp punched up the dispatcher's number and instructed him to send a patrol car to the parking garage. Then, using the radio in the office, he located his partner, Detective Ralph Boyd, who had been called out to assist on the multiple homicide investigation.

“You clear yet?” Tripp asked.

“Yeah, just about, why?” Boyd asked.

“We got another body. Can you shake loose and give me a hand with it?”

“Where?”

Tripp relayed what he knew about the new case and asked Boyd to meet him at the parking garage. Then he called the Coroner’s office and asked them to send a unit to the scene.

It was 7:30 before Tripp left his office. The sky was clear and blue and the sun was climbing over Pittsburgh’s eastern suburbs, glistening off the incline tracks rising up the side of Mount Washington. Frost on the windows testified to the sub-zero degree reading on a thermometer that was clinging to the ledge outside the window of the homicide squad room. The weather forecaster said it would be the coldest February 28th in Pittsburgh since they started keeping records. *So much for global warming*, Tripp thought, as he left the room and headed for the police garage behind the Public Safety Building in downtown Pittsburgh.

Arriving at his car, Tripp bent his six foot frame behind the steering wheel, slapped the pedal to the floor several times, turned the ignition key, then again, and then cursed the time it was taking for his car engine to turn over. “Come on! Come on!” he begged aloud, pumping the gas pedal again. There! Finally it started. Then, without giving it any time to warm up, Tripp slammed the car in gear, and rolled out of the Public Safety Building, heading for the crime scene ten blocks away.

Chapter Two

When Detective Tripp arrived at the fourth level of the parking garage, Boyd was already there, talking with the security guard. The sides of the garage were open and exposed to the cold air rushing in, it seemed that day, from all sides. A small group of curious onlookers had paused on their way to work, and were hesitantly pressing closer to the Blue Mustang to get a better look at what they had already guessed was a dead body.

Tripp walked over to them. “Anybody see anything?” he asked, expecting and getting no response. “We have an investigation going on here,” he continued, “and we’d appreciate it if all of you would move out of the area.”

Without a sound all but one complied. The one, a tall, thin, shabbily dressed young man, pulled his hair away from his eyes and stood fast, as if wondering whether the police had the authority to order him around like that.

Tripp, who had guessed the man’s motive, moved nose to nose with him. “Now!” he shouted in a threatening voice. The young man abandoned his challenge, turned his ashen face, and hurried away.

Tripp walked over to where Boyd and the security guard were talking. There was a lull in their conversation.

“I know you” Tripp said, smiling at the security guard, a tall and muscular black man. “You’re name is Slade, isn’t it? You used to work out of number nine.”

“That’s right, Detective... Ron Slade. Twenty five years cruisin’ the North Side. It’s nice to be remembered.”

“Good to see you again, Ronnie,” Tripp said as he shook the man’s hand. “I

didn't know you left the job."

"Yeah, I retired almost a year ago."

"Yeah? Well how come you're not down in Florida, fishin' off the Dunedin Causeway like all those other retired coppers, instead of freezin' your ass off up here?" Tripp asked, putting his hand on Slade's shoulder.

"Can't ... still got a kid in college," Slade answered, swinging his arms back and forth across his body in a futile attempt to keep warm, "Gotta stay at the wheel for another two years yet. Only got out because, between my pension and doin' this, I'm makin' more than when I was on the job."

Tripp walked over to the Mustang that was parked nose up to the outside wall, motioning Slade to follow him. Looking at the body inside, he asked, "Anything different from when you first got here?"

"No, nobody's touched nothin'," Slade answered, as Boyd joined them.

"Talk to me, Ronnie. What else can you tell me about this?"

"Not a hell of a lot," Slade said. "It's like I told Detective Boyd here. This is the way I found him. I can tell you, nobody's touched anything since I got here. I came on last night at eleven, but if the car was here then I didn't notice it. So I don't know how long it's been here. He's probably got the ticket on him, but I didn't look for it; figured that was your job."

"Were you inside the garage all night?" Tripp asked, as Boyd moved away.

"Yeah, this one or the one next door," he answered.

"Do you cover both of them by yourself?"

"Hey, my boss told them they need to break down and let us put at least one other guy out here, but you know how it is."

"I take it you didn't hear a shot or anything?"

"Nope, sorry; and I didn't see any pointers either," Slade said, referring to the lack of suspicious looking people.

"What time did you find him?"

Slade pulled back the sleeve of his coat and looked at his watch. "About a quarter to seven," he said, "and he ain't been real good company, I can tell ya."

The two men chuckled. Slade, like Tripp, had seen hundreds of dead bodies. Comments like that, while seen as insensitive to the public, were common among veteran police officers. It wasn't meant as a sign of disrespect for the dead; it's just the way it was.

Tripp checked his watch. It was almost eight o'clock. He turned and called to his partner. "Ralph, what's up with the multiple?"

"Couple 'o niggers got hit in a bar over on Chateau Street," Boyd answered, walking toward Tripp. "One in the head, one in the chest; both dead. Same old shit. Place was packed; nobody seen nothin'. Hey, what the hell, as long as they keep shootin' each other, who gives a shit?" Then, noticing Tripp's disapproving glare, he added, "You gotta problem with that?"

Tripp glanced quickly at Slade, who had grown an agitated expression but made no moves. Tripp never liked Boyd's attitude toward minorities, or just about anything else, for that matter, but he ignored his partner's offensive comments. He and Boyd were as different in appearance as in style. Tripp, ten years younger than the fifty-five year old Boyd, was the taller of the two. He was slim, fit, and popular with the other detectives; a

benevolent and easy-going man. Boyd, on the other hand, squat and balding, fifty pounds overweight, and belching his ill-tempered grunts through a thick mustache that resembled a ruffled broom, was always dissatisfied and not shy about saying so.

“Are you gonna to be working it?” Tripp asked.

“No, they don’t need me,” Boyd growled. “And I wasn’t crazy about workin’ it with them, anyway.”

“Have you done anything here yet?”

“Just got here a minute before you did. I ain’t even had a chance to check the body.” Boyd seemed particularly agitated.

“Seen anything of the patrol unit?” Tripp asked.

Boyd turned sharply toward Tripp. “Now what the fuck did I just say?” he asked in his patently gruff tone. “I just got here. I ain’t seen shit, an’ I ain’t done shit, except talk to this guy,” he miffed, jerking his thumb toward Slade.

Tripp stared hard at his partner and was about to say something when, as if on cue, a patrol car came roaring up the ramp from the level below, siren off, but bar lights flashing. Boyd waved his hand up and down, signaling them to slow down. The car pulled up to where Boyd was standing.

“Where the hell you been?” Boyd yelled. “The son of a bitch could’a got up and walked away by now,” he grouched, pointing at the Mustang.

“Hey,” one of the officers, a crusty old veteran named Joe Troyer, familiar with Boyd’s confrontational attitude, said, “hold your water. We were in Oakland on a domestic, for Chrissake,” he replied in a deep and bellicose voice. He obviously wasn’t impressed by Boyd’s gold shield.

Most of the street cops knew Boyd, and knew him to be a grouchy and combative man who thought patrol officers were lazy and always hanging out in donut shops trying to avoid work. He often referred to them as “donut soldiers”. They generally ignored Boyd, offering him the same respect he showed them.

Tripp walked over to the two uniformed officers. “Hey, Fonzy,” he called to Troyer, who got the nick-name because he reminded his fellow officers of Henry Winkler’s famous TV character. “Are you guys coming on, or going off?”

“Yeah, we’re coming on,” Troyer answered. “You want us to wrap this place?”

“Yeah, how about taking it from that pillar over there,” Tripp said, pointing to one of the support pillars about twenty feet from the car, “to the one over there on the other side. And block off the rest of the floor. I don’t want anyone else parking on this level.”

“You got it, Detective,” Troyer said. Then he walked back to his patrol car, popped the trunk, and took out a roll of yellow tape that read, in black; “POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS”.

As Officer Troyer was enclosing the designated area with his tape, Detectives Tripp and Boyd walked back over to the Mustang. The victim looked to be in his mid-forties, and was dressed in a suit and tie. From the position of the body in the car, it appeared that he had been seated behind the wheel, and was shot in the forehead at close range. Boyd opened the driver’s side door, being careful not to disturb anything inside.

The man was down on the seat with his legs on the floor in the area of the gas and brake pedals. The bullet had gone through the victim’s skull, and the inside of the car was splattered with blood, hair, and other matter coming from the victim’s head. Boyd was almost frantically searching the inside of the car and Tripp was certain his partner

was hoping to find evidence of a suicide so the matter could be closed without a major investigation. No such luck. There was no gun in the car, or in the area of the car.

“Forget it, Ralph, the gun’s not there. It’s not a suicide,” Tripp joked, mocking Boyd’s efforts.

“Bullshit!” Boyd shot back, “He probably ate the fuckin’ thing. Or maybe some ... *minority person* ... got here before the rent-a-cop there, and picked it up and took off.”

His eyes widening, Tripp moved closer to his partner, holding a restraining hand out at Troyer, a longtime friend of Slade, who had begun to move aggressively toward Boyd. Troyer backed away, wearing a grim frown and flashing a glance of impassioned indifference. Then, showing his true feelings, he growled and returned to his task.

Tripp pulled a cigarette from his pack and put his lighter to it. “What is your problem?” he asked in an angry whisper, smoke shooting out of his mouth like Indian smoke signals with every word.

“I ain’t got no problem,” Boyd responded. He was not whispering. “All I got’s another goddamn stiff.”

Tripp’s patience was growing short and as he shook his head, he said, “Homicide’s our business, remember Ralph? No stiffs, no job.”

Boyd snapped erect. “You know what, Mel?” he said angrily. “You’ve been getting’ on my case for a long time now, and it’s getting’ worse. I don’t know if you’re trying to make Lieutenant or what, but you ain’t gonna get it by walking over my badge. I don’t like you and you don’t like me, and that’s just the way it is. So stay out of my face and let me do my job, and we’ll get along fine,” Boyd finished, his face flushed with rage.

Tripp shook his head and sighed deeply. *Boyd was having another bad day.*

Boyd took a closer look at the victim, noticing a lapel pin on the left side of the man’s jacket. On it was a white “X” on a blue background. Paying it no more than passing attention he reached inside one of the pockets and found a parking ticket, and in another, the man’s wallet. He put the ticket in a plastic bag, and flipped the wallet up to Tripp.

Once the forensic unit had finished processing the car for evidence, the Coroner’s assistants were given permission to remove the body. Within minutes, the ambulance, with the victim inside, quietly rolled down the ramp and out of the parking lot on their way to the county morgue.

Tripp opened the wallet and pulled out the victim’s driver’s license. Tony Santomo was 43 when he died. “Pittsburgh, 15212. The guy lived over on the North Side; Number Nine area. You worked out of Number Nine, Ronnie,” Tripp said, turning to Slade. “You know where Ridgeland Drive is?”

“Ridgeland Drive,” Slade said, pausing for a moment, head down in thought. “Yeah,” he said, looking up, “I know where it is. It’s off Marshall Avenue, right behind Oliver High School. Nice middle-class residential area.”

Boyd, looking through the plastic bag containing the parking ticket, interrupted, “7:36. He checked in at 7:36 p.m.”

One of the uniformed officers ran the license plate on the victim’s car, which also confirmed the victim’s identity and address.

“How do you want to handle the notification?” Tripp asked Boyd, trying to get past the older detective’s earlier outburst.

“I had a rough night,” Boyd said, then glaring at Troyer and in a voice loud enough to be heard by both uniformed officers, he added, “Let one of the uniforms handle it. They got nothin’ else to do, anyway.”

Then, for a brief moment, Troyer and Boyd stared at each other in silence, very much as the hunter and the hunted look when they come face to face without previous warning. Tripp, seeing the danger of an impending confrontation, stepped between the two. “Hey, Fonz,” Tripp said, holding out a piece of paper with the victim’s address, “Can you help me out, here?”

“Sure, Detective,” Troyer said, still leering at Boyd over Tripp’s shoulder. “Gimmie the address,” he continued in a relieved tone. “I’ll take care of it. As soon as the coroner’s boys say its okay, we’ll find someone to make the ID.”

“You boys got it covered here?” Tripp asked one of the Crime Scene Technicians.

“Yeah, we’re okay,” one of them said. “We’ll send a report over to your office as soon as we can get to it.”

“Yeah, well try not to lose anything,” Boyd said to them sarcastically, suggesting that they might decide to keep items of value for themselves; an accusation often heard but never proven and one that was particularly irritating to the coroner’s staff.

Tripp pulled Boyd toward his car. “I want you to come with me. We need to talk,” he said forcefully.

“What are you tryin’ to pull now?” Boyd asked. “We got nothin’ to talk about. I gotta get the car back to the squad.”

Tripp called to Troyer, who raised his head. “Can you guys get someone to get that car back over to the Public Safety Building?” Tripp asked, pointing to Boyd’s unmarked police car.

“Yeah, Detective, yinz go ahead ... we’ll take care of it!” Troyer yelled back.

Tripp thanked Slade for his help, got into his car with Boyd, and drove out of the parking garage.

“What the hell is going on with you, Ralph?” Tripp asked.

Boyd made no response.

“You have no respect for anyone, anymore,” Tripp continued. “Like badmouthin’ Slade, calling him a rent-a-cop. Here’s a guy, put almost thirty years on the job, that’s more than either one of us, and you’re calling him a rent-a-cop. How do you think that makes him feel, or do you even care?”

Boyd glared at Tripp savagely, and then shot back. “Let’s start with you,” Boyd replied angrily. “Why are you always trying to make me look bad in front of the uniforms? And even in the squad room; you’re always trying to take over and give me some small part in an investigation. I’m your partner, for Chrissake, not some nigger errand boy!”

“Goddammit, Ralph, there you go again. That’s just the kind of thing I’m talking about,” Tripp countered angrily.

“What thing?” Boyd growled.

Tripp sighed heavily. “You know damned well what I’m talking about.”

“Fuck them, and fuck you,” Boyd yelled, jabbing his index finger in Tripp’s direction.

“See, there you go. This job is hard enough without you fronting an attitude like that. You keep throwing that word ‘nigger’ around all the time, and some day you’re

gonna say it to the wrong person, and maybe put both our backs against a wall.”

“Fuck ‘em. Guys like you piss me off, you know that? You want to be a goddamn bleeding heart that’s your prerogative. Not this cowboy; I say let ‘em do a little work for a change, then I’ll start calling them real people.”

Tripp shook his lowered head, again letting out a deep sigh. “Jesus, Ralph,” he said softly, “you’re gettin’ way beyond attitude. You need to do something about this.”

Ralph had worked himself into a rage. Steeped in passion, he turned, and foaming with hatred, said, “I am. I’m perfectin’ it. And who the hell are you to tell me I have an attitude? You go ahead and kiss their ass if you want; that makes you the one with shit on your lips.”

Boyd’s deteriorating composure was turning more aggressive; almost irrational. Tripp decided to let the matter lie for the time being so, in a more relaxed tone, Tripp said, “I’m sorry Ralph. This job is getting to both of us, especially on days like this. Let’s just drop it.”

Boyd nodded, but remained silent and sullen. Pulling off his glasses and coming out with his handkerchief at the same time, he began to wipe the sweat that had fallen from his forehead onto the lens. Then he scowled at Tripp. “No, I won’t drop it. You started this; let’s finish it.”

Tripp nodded slowly and staring hard at his partner, said, “OK; I just see the job eating you up more and more all the time.”

“Eating me up? Eating me up?” he thundered. “I’m over here trying to do my fuckin’ job and you’re over there calling me everything from an asshole to a looney. I think this is all about you wanting to push me out of the squad. I don’t know why and I don’t know what your agenda is, but I’ll be damned if they’re going to bury me down in records or somewhere.”

Mel pulled to the curb, stopped and glared at his partner. Angry at Boyd’s accusations, he sat motionless for a moment. “I don’t know how to respond to that,” he finally said. “In all the time we’ve been partners, I’ve never requested a change. You use to be a damn good cop, Ralph, but lately your attitude ... I don’t know ... I don’t know anymore. You’re drinking has affected your whole personality, as well as your work.”

Boyd shifted in his seat to face Tripp, and through a granite hard expression, asked, “I said what I had to say. Are you through with me now?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Tripp answered.

“Good! You got anything you want to say about this case, or did you just ask me over here so you could rag on my ass?”

“I’m not on you, Ralph; I just wanted to talk things over where no one else could listen in,” Tripp explained, pulling into the squad parking area.

“Yeah, well we did. Now, you got anything else?” Ralph yelled, pushing his crimson face toward Tripp.

Tripp got out of the car. “No. I’m coming back to the squad later tonight to go over this stuff,” he said. “You can come if you want to.”

“I already told you, I’ve had a rough night,” Boyd spat, getting out of the car. “I’d like to get some time off. We ain’t gotta be in ‘til tomorrow afternoon, so I say we wait ‘til then. The guy ain’t gonna to get any deader.”

“Do what you want. I’m going over the stuff tonight,” Tripp said.

Boyd walked away, growling under his breath but not answering. .
“Eight o’clock. I’ll see you at eight o’clock,” Tripp said, walking over to his personal car. “It’s been a long night.” There was no response.

Chapter Three

University of Pittsburgh Professor Robert Meinert’s “Principles of Economics” class had just ended, and as he walked down the hall towards his office, his attention was drawn to a tall, well dressed man walking in his direction through a sea of blue jeans and ball caps.

“Are you Professor Meinert?” the man asked as he approached.

“Yes, I am,” Meinert answered. “Who are you?” Meinert could see that the man, dressed in a sport jacket and tie, was obviously not a student.

Reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket, the man pulled out his identification and held it up for Professor Meinert to see. “My name is Mel Tripp,” he said. “I’m a detective with the Pittsburgh Police Department.” Noticing that his badge had aroused the curiosity of several of the students closest to Professor Meinert, Tripp asked, “Is there some place where we can talk privately?”

“Yes, of course,” Meinert answered, pointing down the hall. “Please follow me.”

Without further conversation, the professor turned and led the detective to his small office, a dozen steps away.

“I’m sorry for the mess, Detective,” Meinert said, grabbing several books and a pile of papers that had been lying on one of the two cluttered chairs in front of his old wooden desk. He laid them carelessly in one corner of the room. “I don’t get many visitors here,” He said, removing his tweed jacket and throwing it over his dusty bookcase. Squeezing through the cramped space between a book case and his desk, Professor Meinert settled into a squeaky old wooden swivel chair across from Tripp. “Please, sit down,” he said, gesturing toward the chair he had just cleared. “How may I help you?”

“Thank you,” Tripp said, as he sat down. “I’m with the Homicide Division and I need to ask you a few questions about . . .”

“Tony Santomo,” Meinert interrupted. “You’re here about Tony Santomo.”

“That’s right, Professor, I am. How did you know that?”

Meinert furled his brow and tilted his head to one side. “Let’s see,” he said sarcastically. “He was my sister’s fiancé. The crime was all over the papers. You’re a homicide detective. How do you think I knew?” Then, his jaw tightening, he added, “It couldn’t have happened to a more deserving man.”

“I heard you felt that way about him,” Tripp said, leaning forward in his chair. “What can you tell me about his death?”

Meinert leaned back, then in a bored tone, as if he expected the detective’s question, he said, “Not much.” He was eyeing Tripp sharply as he continued. “Just what I read in the newspaper and heard on TV. Why are you asking me that?”

“Well, you look like a bright man; why do you think I’m asking you?” Tripp countered in kind. “I know about your sister,” he said, carefully studying the professor’s body-language for some tell-tale sign of guilt.

Meinert sat calmly, his hands resting on the desk. "That means someone told you about the threat I made," he said dryly.

"From what I heard, it wasn't a threat; it was a promise," Tripp remarked, flipping a page of his pad and glancing briefly at it, then peering into the face of the man who had become his primary suspect.

"Maybe, but if you're thinking I did it, you're wrong," Meinert said, leaning forward and propping his elbows on the arms of his chair.

"I'd like to believe that, Professor," Tripp said, trying to avoid a premature confrontation. "Can you account for your whereabouts that night?"

"Yes, I can. Do I have to?" Meinert asked.

"Where were you that night, Professor?" the detective returned.

"I was at home."

"Can your wife substantiate that?"

"No, I'm afraid she can't," Meinert answered. "She wasn't home that night. She stayed at her mother's house that night."

"That's odd, isn't it?" Tripp asked. "That your wife would stay with her mother and leave her husband alone all night?"

"No, as a matter of fact, it isn't unusual at all," Meinert said. "Her father died about four years ago, and her mother has been ill for some time, so my wife stays at her mother's house once or twice a week. I hate to make your job more difficult detective, but," he said with raised eyebrows, "I was home alone; and, I didn't kill Tony Santomo."

Tripp sat quietly for a moment, taking measure of the man whose tone was hardening. "Was anyone else with you?" he asked.

"No. As I said, I was alone all evening."

Detective Tripp returned to his notebook, flipping another page. "Do you own a handgun, Professor?" he asked.

"I do."

"Do you mind telling me where it is?"

"I keep it at home."

"What caliber is it?" the detective asked, this time more pointedly.

"Why do you want to know that? Am I a suspect?"

Tripp didn't answer. This man was playing games with him. Tripp knew there was no way Meinert could not have figured out before then that he was a suspect.

"If I'm a suspect," Meinert continued, "then shouldn't you be advising me of my rights or something?" The volume of his voice increased.

"No, sir, you're not under arrest. I'm not trying to be difficult, Professor. I'm just doing my job. And that includes trying to eliminate suspects."

"I am a suspect, then," Meinert replied.

"Frankly, Professor, in light of your statements about wanting to kill Mr. Santomo, and your attitude in response to my questions, you have to be considered a suspect." Tripp reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "May I?" he asked.

"I prefer that you don't smoke," Meinert answered. "Those things will kill you, someday," he said, smiling wryly.

Replacing the cigarette and sliding the pack into his pocket, Tripp continued. "Now, believe me, nothing would please me more than to be able to eliminate you from

the investigation today. But, without your cooperation, that's not going to be possible." His manner wasn't quite as polite as it had been when the conversation began.

"It's a twenty-two," Meinert said.

"Pardon me?"

"My gun; it's a twenty-two."

"Is it at your home now?"

"Yes, it is. What kind of gun was used to kill Santomo?"

"A twenty-two. Could you let me have the gun so that I can run some tests on it?"

"I don't think so," Meinert said. For the first time a troubled look covered his face. "I think I'd better consult with an attorney first."

"You feel like you need an attorney do you, Professor?"

"Yes sir, I do," Meinert said, rising from his chair. "Frankly, the manner in which this conversation is going and the tone of your voice, force me to conclude that I do. I will tell you that I did not kill Tony Santomo, though I am not saddened by his death. That's all I will tell you without speaking with my attorney first. Now, Detective, unless you intend to arrest me right now, I wish you would leave."

Detective Tripp thanked Meinert for his courtesy, and advised him not to dispose of the handgun, since, Tripp said, he intended to seek a search warrant to seize it. Professor Meinert assured him that he had no intention of destroying or disposing of the weapon.

"I'll count on that," Tripp said. Then, without offering a hand-shake, he left.

The next evening, Detectives Tripp and Boyd appeared at Meinert's door with several uniformed officers and a search warrant. They searched the house and removed a twenty-two caliber revolver, along with fibers from the defendant's topcoat, and two pairs of gloves that Meinert assured the officers were the only ones he owned. While talking to Meinert, Detective Tripp was polite, but this time, cold and businesslike. When the search was completed, Tripp suggested to the professor that he should not leave town, and that they would be contacting him in a few days. Meinert took it to mean that he would probably be arrested in a day or two. He didn't have to wait that long.

On the afternoon of the following day, even before he had made an appointment with an attorney, Tripp showed up at Meinert's office with an arrest warrant, charging him with Murder.

In spite of his promises not to cause any problems, the suspect, now turned defendant, was handcuffed and paraded through the halls past dozens of gawking students to a waiting police car.

Chapter Four

"Thirteen in the corner," "Bones" Bonaroti said matter-of-factly, bending his tall and lean figure over the pool table. He took careful aim, drew back the pool cue, then smoothly and swiftly brought it forward, striking the ball low, so as to cause it to stop upon hitting the striped thirteen ball. *Thunk ... click*, then the muffled sound of the thirteen ball hitting the bottom of the leather pocket.

John Steele, or “Jake” as he was better known, was standing at the far end of the table, his pool cue propped in front of him; his large hands overlapped and wrapped around it, watching closely. Upon seeing that Bones was now in a perfect position for a gimmie on the eight ball to end the game, Jake pulled another twenty out of his pocket and slapped it on the table.

“You sure?” Bones asked.

“Up yours,” Jake said in a husky voice, throwing his hand toward Bones. He was smiling as he tapped the hooded light overhanging the table with his stick and walked away from the table toward the cue rack.

“How about another one?” Bones asked, waiving the twenty. “Give ya’ a chance to get it back.”

“Thanks anyway,” Jake countered, waiving over his shoulder as he turned toward the counter where Gene Leposki, his old friend and the owner of the establishment stood. Jake shrugged his broad shoulders. “Why do I keep playing this game with that guy?” he asked, jerking his thumb behind him.

“Because Bones is your friend,” Gene answered. “And, you love the game; you can afford to lose; and lastly, because you never did know when to give up.”

“That’s it?” He smiled crookedly when he spoke.

Gene laughed. “And, ah ... because it beats the hell out of being married and going home to watch Johnny Carson every night,” he said.

“Johnny Carson!” Jake roared. “Where the hell have you been? Carson’s been off the air for a hundred years.”

“See what I mean?” Gene countered.

Jake, who had been divorced four years earlier, grunted and nodded his head. “Cute, real cute,” he half muttered to himself.

“Rack ‘em!” somebody in the background yelled. Bones had a new victim.

Gene reached into the decaying Frigidaire behind his counter and pulled out two bottles of Iron City. Then, jerking his head in the direction of the lunch tables in the back of the large poolroom, he urged Jake to follow him.

The two friends sat across the small round table on two old wire-backed chairs Gene had salvaged from a drug store that had closed years before. Gene asked, in a low and hopeful voice, “Have you thought about my offer?”

“I did, and I like it. I’m in,” Jake returned.

Gene’s expression melted into one of relief. “That’s good. That’s great,” he said, slapping, then rubbing, his hands together. In an instant Gene’s whole world had turned around.

Several days before, Gene had asked Jake if he would be interested in buying into the pool hall with him, telling him that the rent and bills had been piling up and that he wasn’t able to keep up. He told Jake that the owner of the building had threatened to serve him with a Notice of Eviction if he didn’t pay up by the end of the month.

“OK, now what do we owe this guy, again?” Jake asked.

“Just a tad under five grand,” Gene said grimacing anxiously.

Jake pulled out his checkbook and pen and a moment later handed Gene a check in the amount of \$5,000. “Here you write in the name,” he said. “Something else,” Jake said.

“What’s that?” Gene asked, impressed by the manner in which his friend had so

casually written such a large check.

“Well, if I’m going to be a partner in this establishment, we’re going to have to fix it up a bit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, just look at this place,” Jake said, sweeping his hand around the large room. “You’re on the second floor of an already run-down building; the roof leaks, the floor creaks, there’s no banister on the stairway, and the place needs re-wired. Tell the owner if he doesn’t do something to fix the place up, we’ll sue him, and then we’ll move to another place. But, give him the check first.”

Gene shook his head, smiling with the realization that his world was safe once again.

“You alright now?” Jake asked.

“Jake, you’ll never know how much I appreciate this. I mean, you literally saved my life, babe.”

“Well, something had to be done,” Jake said, slapping his friend’s shoulder.

“You let these guys play on a tab they never pay. Same with the beer; they and you both have lost count of how much they owe you for that. You’re too damned big hearted, but I love ya anyway. You gotta toughen up a little, my friend. You’re too old to go to medical school so we have to make *this* place pay off.”

Gene nodded his understanding and flashed a tight smile.

“Plus, if you had to close up, where would Tommy stay?” Jake asked.

“I guess he would have had to find someone else to leach off of.”

Jake shook his finger at Gene. “Attsa no nice,” he scolded. “Why would you say that about Tommy?”

“Come on, Jake, I’m just kidding,” Gene answered in good humor.

“That’s not something to kid about, you know? I mean, Jesus, Gene, Tommy’s been our friend since back in the old neighborhood. I can’t even believe you said that.”

“OK, your right, it was a bad joke. So what do you want me to do, apologize?”

“Yeah, I think that would be a good idea,” Jake returned smiling.

Gene nodded his head slowly. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not kidding.”

Gene glanced over at Tommy, who was dozing in a chair on the far side of the room. “Hell, look at him, he’s sleeping,” he said with a chuckle. “He didn’t even hear me.”

Jake laughed. “Do it for yourself. Besides it might be fun to see his reaction.”

Gene nodded and shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know why you’re making me do this, but alright. It’s time for him to wake up anyway.” Gene rose and said, “I’ll be right back.”

Tommy Sullivan was snoring lightly in a chair near one of the tables at the other end of the room, hands clasped in his lap, his head resting on his chest, his spindly legs stretched out at an angle, and a bottle of cheap whiskey standing guard on the floor at his side; Tommy didn’t bother using a glass anymore. Gene walked over to him.

“Hey, Tommy!” Gene yelled. Then, getting no response, he yelled again.

“Yeah!” a startled Tommy blurted sharply, his body twitching at the sound of his name. He looked around to see who had called him, and saw Gene glaring at him.

“Sweet Mother of Mary, Stash,” Tommy garbled in his euphonic Irish brogue, “if it’s a

heart attack you're trying to give me, lad, you're doin' a hell of a job."

"I'm sorry," Gene said, abruptly.

"What?" Tommy asked.

"I said I'm sorry, goddammit. Get the crap outta your ears!"

"What for?"

"Because, it's not good to walk around with crap in your ears," Gene answered with mock ferocity.

"What is it you're sorry about, lad?"

"None of your goddamn business!" Gene said. "Just acknowledge the apology."

Tommy nodded and, squinting his eyes and scratching his head, he said, "Ok, boy-o, whatever you say." Gene turned and walked away, leaving Tommy bewildered.

"Well it's all settled now," Jake said as Gene returned to the table. "You'll continue to manage the place; Tommy will continue to live in the back room; and these guys will have to start paying for each rack *before* they play. And ... no more free beer unless one of the boys becomes a father, or dies."

Gene shook his head. "They're not going to like it."

"It's either that or med school," Jake said, his head cocked to one side.

Bones moved over to the refrigerator to grab another beer.

"Ah, ah, Bones!" Gene yelled, "My new partner says that's a no-no."

"What's a no ..." he stopped abruptly and, looking up in surprise, asked, "Did you say partner?"

Gene rose and walked toward the counter. "I did indeed," he said. "I think Jake wanted to buy in as a partner so's he could eighty-six your nasty ass. Guess you'll have to find another pool hall to steal in."

"Are you shitting me?" Bones protested loudly. "This is the new millennium, for Chrissake! There ain't no other pool halls." Then he turned toward Jake, who was still sitting at the back table, and yelled, "Hey, Jake! What the hell's going on? You really buy into this joint?"

"Yep," Jake answered, with a grin.

"You gonna kick me out?"

Jake got up and began walking toward the front of the room laughing. "After all we've been through together? Naw, I wouldn't do that to you, Bones. But the price of pool just doubled. And, you're gonna have to spend a little of that money you've been winning from me to pay up on your tab," he said.

"That's robbery, for Chrissake," Bones complained.

"What's robbery, raising the price, or making you pay up what you owe?"

"Both."

Jake left Bones mumbling, and walked over to Tommy Sullivan, a sixtyish looking forty-five year old alcoholic, who was out of work and lived alone in the back room of the pool hall.

"Tommy, can you do me a favor?"

"Sure 'n it'd be a pleasure," Tommy said, showing a wide smile. "What is it I can do for you this fine day, Johnny, me boy?"

"Pizza shop still open?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Can you run down and pick up a couple of large pizzas?"

“Absolutely! And what would ya be wantin’ on those fine pies?”

“Whatever. You pick it,” Jake said, reaching into his pocket, and coming out with a fifty. “Here,” he said, “this ought to cover it.”

“I’ll be bringin’ ya back the change, boy-o,” Tommy said, stuffing the fifty in his pocket.

“Just keep it for the next time when I might not have any money,” Jake replied.

Sending Tommy out for pizza was Jake’s way of giving him some pocket money. Tommy was unable to hold employment because of his drinking, and was too proud to apply for, or accept, welfare. The only other money Tommy ever saw was what he made sweeping the place out for five bucks every night, and racking balls for the players at a quarter a rack.

Tommy nodded his appreciation. “Did ya really buy into the place, boy-o?” he asked.

“Indeed, I did, laddie,” Jake replied, trying, unsuccessfully, to mimic Tommy’s accent.

“May I?” Tommy asked, pointing to Jake’s jacket and hat.

“Sure,” Jake said.

Tommy had a coat of his own, but it was sort of beat-up and he enjoyed wearing Jake’s, anyway. It was Jake’s college varsity football jacket and wearing it made Tommy feel important.

Jake shook Tommy’s hand, then walked back over to Gene’s counter and, grabbing another bottle of beer, went back to his chair and sat down.

“Jake!” one of the patrons yelled, picking up the ringing telephone. “It’s for you.”

Jake looked at the clock. It was 10:30 pm. He got up and walked over to the counter

“Who in the world would be calling me at this time of night?” he asked, grabbing the phone. “Hello?”

“Jake, this is Abbey.”

Abbey Lord was a paralegal for Jake’s old law partner, Mark Johns. The partnership was broken after Jake’s disbarment, seven years earlier, on charges of tampering with a witness. It was then that Jake turned to private investigation, and with his partner, Gable Hill, ran the most successful private investigation firm in the city.

“Abbey! What’s up?” Jake asked.

“Some man named Meinert called here a few minutes ago asking for you. He left a message on your office phone, but he said he needs to talk with you right away.”

“Did he say what it was about?”

“He’s in the County Jail, charged with murder.”

“Is Mark representing him?” Jake asked.

“Not that I know of,” Abbey answered. “He was looking for you. I’m not sure why he called here; probably knows you used to practice here.”

Jake looked at his watch. “When did he call?” he asked.

“At about four o’clock. I’ve been trying to get you all evening.”

“Where are you?” Jake asked.

“At the office.”

“You’ve been at the office the whole time?”

“Well, yes, but I also had to clean up some things that have to get done for tomorrow,” she replied.

“Who is this guy? Why is he calling me?”

“I don’t know, He just said his name was Bob Meinert. He said he knows you and needs to talk with you ASAP.”

“Bob Meinert,” Jake murmured to himself. He had known a Bob Meinert in high school and wondered if this was the same person. “Did you say he was in the County Jail?” he asked.

“Yes, he’s in the Allegheny County Jail.”

“Thanks, Abbey,” Jake said.

“Anytime, Jake.”

A few minutes later, Tommy came back with the pizza, and tried to give Jake some of his money back, but the private eye waved him off again. Grabbing a slice of pizza and a pool cue, Jake ambled back toward the pool table where Bones waited, smiling wickedly.

Chapter Five

The new Allegheny County Prison, situated on the edge of downtown Pittsburgh overlooking the “Muddy Monongahela” River had recently replaced the antiquated one hundred and fifty year old Allegheny County Jail

As he began his second day of being locked up in the nine by twelve cell at the prison, the gravity of his situation weighed heavily on Bob Meinert’s mind. Furnished only with a metal bed, cradling two inches of stuffed mattress, a metal toilet and wash basin, the Salvation Army accommodations must seem like the Hilton compared to this, Meinert thought. He had never been locked up in a jail before and he was learning quickly that being a prison inmate meant a total lack of control. Everything he did would be by someone else’s schedule, and every contact was intended to intimidate, not accommodate.

It had been determined through years of experience that intimidation was the most effective way of maintaining order in such an institution. Even the small five inch square window in the solid metal door to his cell was intended to leave the inmate with the feeling of being segregated from the rest of the world. The thought of taking up permanent residence in a room like this was intended to impress upon the inmate the reality of his situation. He was helpless, and, like a house-pet, totally dependent upon the will of his keepers. While he was there, Meinert’s only possessions would be a pillow, blanket, a roll of toilet paper, and a bible. The guards treated him and the other inmates as though they had a personal score to settle with them; again, part of the “rehabilitation process.” Unlike the cushy federal penitentiaries, the whole experience at the Allegheny County Jail is designed to accommodate control and punishment, not the inmate. Once you leave there, you’re not supposed to want to return.

At mid-morning a guard approached Meinert’s cell and told him that he had a visitor. Thankful for the respite, Meinert followed without even inquiring of his visitor’s identity. His brief but frightening time in prison already seemed like an eternity. He was hoping it was Jake, but any outside face would be welcomed.

He was taken to a small Attorney’s conference room where Jake Steele was waiting. Recognizing Meinert immediately, Jake’s suspicion was confirmed; it was his old high school classmate. Meinert was almost six feet tall, and blessed with an athletic, though aging body. His face was gaunt and pallid, almost ghostlike. He walked with a slight limp, the result of a childhood bicycle mishap. His hair was thinning, but still naturally blonde, and he was clean-shaven.

When Jake extended his hand Meinert, tears bursting from his eyes, fairly dove at him, embracing him as a drowning man would embrace a life preserver. Then, backing away and taking Meinert’s hand, Jake said, “Bob, it’s been a long time. Sorry to see you under these circumstances.” He invited Meinert to sit. Leaning his elbows on the table, Jake asked pointedly, “Did you do it, Bob?” He naturally expected a denial but Jake was interested in Meinert’s reaction to his confronting question.

Meinert looked up through glassy eyes. “No, Jake, I didn’t. I swear I didn’t”

“Okay,” Jake said reaching for his friend’s arm. Patting it, he continued. “Now, try to relax and tell me what’s going on here,” he said.

“Thanks for coming, Jake,” Meinert answered nervously. “This is like some kind of a bad dream.”

Jake explained to Meinert that he was no longer an attorney.

“I know, Jake, but I didn’t do this thing and I definitely need a good attorney and you’re the only one I know,” Meinert replied. There was an urgent tone to his voice.

“My old law partner is a very good attorney,” Jake replied.

“I need someone good, the police led me to believe I’m in a lot of trouble.”

Even under the circumstances, Jake couldn’t suppress a smile. Bob Meinert was still the master of the obvious. “He’s the best in town,” Jake answered. “But, he is expensive.”

“I’m not worried about the money,” Meinert replied. “If you say he’s good, that’s enough for me. You’re referring to Mr. Johns?”

“Yes; you say the word and I’ll call him this afternoon.”

Meinert nodded vigorously. “Will you be working with Mr. Johns,” he asked.

Jake replied that he often did do the investigative work for his old partner and if Meinert wished, he would tell Johns that it was his request. Again Meinert nodded.

Jake asked Meinert to tell him everything he knew about the death of Santomo. Meinert said he knew only what the rest of the public had been told through the media. Then he went silent. It was apparent to Jake that, discussing his situation with an old friend caused the desperation of his situation to fall heavily on him. He sat, staring straight ahead, his watery gray eyes as dull as the back of a single-edged blade.

Jake had seen that look on a thousand faces and understood. “You don’t have to be nervous talking to me, Bob,” Jake said. “Did you know Mr. Santomo?” Jake asked.

The question brought Meinert back to the world. “Tony Santomo; yes, I did,” he said just above a whisper. “He was engaged to my sister.”

Jake looked up from his notes, his eyes widening. “The victim was engaged to your sister?” he echoed in a question.

“Yes, but I didn’t really know him that well. He and my sister had been engaged for about a year and a half, but they almost never came over to my house. He always stayed away from family dinners and such, so I almost never saw him.” Meinert’s manner of speech was more formal than Jake had remembered it from high school, but then Meinert wasn’t a kid anymore; he was a college professor.

“Do you have any idea who might have killed him?” Jake asked.

“No, I really don’t have the slightest idea,” Meinert answered.

“Did you make any statement to the police?”

“Except that I denied any knowledge of it, no, I said nothing. I told them I wanted to see a lawyer before I made a statement.”

“Were there any interviews before you were arrested?” Jake asked.

“Yes. Detective Tripp came to my office to talk to me two days before my arrest. Then he and a Detective Boyd came to my house with a search warrant.”

“Did you say anything to Tripp about Santomo or his death?”

“Not really,” Meinert said, then paused only briefly before continuing. “He asked me about my gun and where I was at the time of Tony’s death. That was about it.”

“When they came with the warrant, did they take anything?”

“They took my gun, two pairs of gloves and a topcoat.”

“Was anything said to you about why they suspected you?” Jake asked.

“I told Detective Tripp about what happened to my sister. He already knew about it,” Meinert answered.

“Tell me what you told him,” Jake said.

Meinert's expression hardened. "My sister and Tony began to have problems a few months ago," he said. "I don't know what the trouble was. I didn't want to interfere, and I didn't want to know. Finally, he broke off the engagement. Actually, he didn't break off the engagement; he just didn't show up for the wedding. He disappeared the night before."

Jake could see pain creeping into Meinert's eyes. "How did your sister take it?" he asked.

"My sister, Janet, was devastated. She was older than most women when they get married, and she had been going with this man for quite a long time. Anyway, even after two months she wouldn't leave the house. She quit her job. She wouldn't eat. I don't think she slept very much. We were very worried about her. We tried to talk her into going to a psychiatrist, but she wouldn't listen. Then, right after Christmas, this last Christmas ..." He hesitated as a confused and hurt look grew on his face. His eyes filled with tears. He apologized unnecessarily for his emotional state, and then said, "She committed suicide." He breathed a long sigh, and dropped his hands onto the table.

"I'm sorry; I didn't know," Jake said. "Take your time," he added, sympathetically.

Meinert took a moment to collect himself, then continued. "At Janet's funeral, I lost it, and when delivering the eulogy, I said that I was going to kill Santomo."

Jake put down his pen and turned his face toward the ceiling. "Oh, man," he sighed. "Well, that sure as hell tells me why they like you for this one," he added, stretching back in his chair and jamming his hands into his pockets.

"I didn't kill the man, Jake."

Jake eyed Meinert closely, then, bringing himself back to an upright position, said with some sarcasm, "Well, you sure as hell had about as good a motive as there is."

"Yes, well, I hated him alright, and I can't say I'm sorry he's dead, but I did not kill him," Meinert voiced firmly. Then, after a short pause, he added, "I hope you can believe that."

"I assume they asked you where you were on the night of Santomo's death," Jake said.

"Yes, they did. And, I told them I was at home. That also was the truth."

"That is a wedding ring on your finger, isn't it?" Jake asked.

"Yes, it is," Meinert replied.

"What about your wife; where was she?"

Meinert repeated what he had told Tripp about his wife's absence. "She didn't come home until late Sunday morning," he added. "So I have no alibi, just my word, which the police apparently don't think is good enough."

"I take it you weren't able to document any kind of an alibi?" Jake asked.

"Not at the time they say Santomo was killed. But even that seemed to be a problem for them."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked.

"They said that the cold weather kept them from determining the exact time of death and they wanted to know if I knew anything about any of his movements that night. I told them I didn't. I can establish that I was at home at 10:30 that evening, though, and I told them that."

"How is it that?"

“I received a phone call from one of my students at that time.”

“I wish you hadn’t given them that information,” Jake moaned.

“Why?” Meinert asked.

“Forget about it.” Jake didn’t want to tell Meinert that it wouldn’t be unheard of for the police and coroner’s office to manipulate the time of death around their suspects alibi.

Jake asked for and wrote down information about the student. “Alright, I’ll look into that,” he said. “I should probably know this, but we haven’t seen each other in what, something over twenty-five years? I assume you’re still teaching.”

“I’m head of the Economics Department at Pitt, and have been for almost nine years.”

“Okay. Does your wife work?”

“Yes, she is also a professor at Pitt, in the math department.”

“Who all heard that threat you made?”

“I made the statement only one time. I really didn’t mean it as a threat. It was just something I said on the spur of the moment, but everyone who was at the funeral heard it.”

“Tell me, as exactly as you can, what you said.”

“I remember precisely what I said. I was delivering the eulogy and, as I lost my composure, I said, ‘God damn that man. God forgive me, I’m going to kill him.’”

“That doesn’t sound like something you’d say, Bob, even under the worst of circumstances,” Jake offered.

“I know. Even when I said it, I couldn’t believe it was coming out of my mouth.”

“And when was the funeral?”

Solemnly, Meinert thought for a minute. Recalling his sister’s suicide wasn’t high on the list of things he wanted to do then, or ever. Hesitantly, he recounted aloud the events. “Janet died on January fourth. January fifth was the autopsy. OK, the seventh ... no, the eighth. The funeral was on January eighth.”

“Had you seen or spoken with Santomo at any time from January sixth until his death?” Jake asked.

“No, I’ve neither talked with him nor seen him since two or three days before the wedding was to take place.”

After a few more words were spoken between them, Jake told Meinert he would talk with Attorney Johns, who would probably come to the jail to see him within the next two or three days. He cautioned Meinert to speak to no one about the case.

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