

Ken Behrens – Short Stories  
Containing several mysteries, and 3 “Ghost Stories”  
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## ALEXA BROWN: ACE INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER

### I. THE BEGINNING

“Another egg roll?”

“No, I’m getting stuffed. Let’s get this mess cleaned up and get back to work.”

Mary Peters had become Alexa Brown’s first real friend in Denver, and the two women worked well together.

Mary was getting into her mid thirties, and had been a copy typist for the Denver weekly community arts paper for several years. Working late on the day before a deadline was not at all unusual for her, and it was rare if, on a Tuesday, her husband and children saw her before 7:30 or 8:00. No matter, the two boys, now aged 11 and 8, usually did their homework and got supper at the Vincent boys’ house a mile away, and her husband would have them home by 7:45 or so. It was late August, and would be dark by that time.

Alexa was a rather unique young woman in her early twenties, with great ambition and what could best be described as a weird way of looking at the world. Her father, a high school English teacher in Atlanta, Georgia, had been her primary motivation to major in journalism in college. Her mother had died as a result of complications due to the birth of their sixth child, and so her dad, and Alexa spent the next four years earning her way through state college and caring for her five younger siblings, and draining a good deal of their savings in the process. Alexa needed to get to work to send money home, but her skin color worked against her in the south, and so she ended up as the token woman-of-color in Denver’s free weekly, as a typist, rather than as the ace investigative reporter she had dreamt of becoming.

The women’s skin color was the least of the differences in appearance between them. Mary, beginning to show signs of age, reported to work with her hair up in a quick bun, casual blouse and pants, loafer shoes, and never wearing any jewelry other than her engagement and wedding bands, and the chain and cross around her neck. Alexa had allowed her once carefully beaded hair to be replaced by an easier-to-maintain professionally straightened shoulder length cut, but her taste for bracelets, neck and ankle wear, and multiple rings had continued unabated. Since her tops were usually sleeveless, the tattoo on her left upper arm reading “JJL” was clear for all to see. Mary had at first wondered if that many ear-piercings hurt, but had nothing but respect for a woman who would work in running shoes that failed completely to match the rest of her clothing, as if she were expecting an emergency at any time.

The women had shared adjacent desks in the same office for nearly two months now. Many Chinese dinners and lunch dates had taken place, and Alexa’s belief that life could be great and exciting was beginning to awaken long dormant dreams that Mary had back-burnered when she became a wife and mother in the 21-st century suburbs of Denver.

Alexa had a unique talent for seeing the world in unpredictable ways. As near as Mary could figure it, when most of us see something unusual happen, we either ignore it, or try to account for it in one or two simple ways. Alexa, on the other hand, craved the unusual, looked everywhere for it, and, when she found it, could come up with a thousand explanations, most of which made some kind of useless, but oddly entertaining, sense. Mary reasoned that maybe it was just Alexa's talent as a writer, now being wasted as a typist, but it was still somewhat astonishing, and occasionally unnerving, just how many stories Alexa could see in unusual occurrences.

Just last Friday, at lunch, as Mary was putting salt on her food, the top fell off the shaker, and spilled salt everywhere. While the restaurant replaced Mary's food, Alexa quickly ran through an unplanned repertoire of stories alternately about conspiracies to save money by designing inadequate salt-shaker lids; then spies hiding messages in salt-shakers and leaving the tops unscrewed; then radioactive salt, too heavy for the shaker lid to hold it back from falling; and a half-dozen other ridiculous ideas. Maybe two or three could have made good stories, but Mary saw no use for the "skill" other than that, and wondered if Alexa was where she was, not because of her skin color, but because of her inability to be "real".

So, as the two women typed furiously away, working against the deadline, Mary wondered why she enjoyed Alexa's company so much. The events of the evening would make the question very irrelevant, as the fact was that Mary's suburban existence had been unreal for about two months now, and the unreality was about to catch up with her in a way that would make Alexa's "talent" a genuine life-saver.

Mary was on Alexa's way home, and so, on Tuesdays, Mary rode the bus to work, and, since it was after dark, Alexa dropped her off, and waited in the car until Mary was inside the front door.

Tonight was no exception, and Mary used her key, as the locks were always kept bolted so a key was needed to lock or open them, and walked in the door at 8:04 PM, expecting to see husband and sons, busily watching TV and eating popcorn.

Instead the living room was deadly quiet.

"Honey? Mark? Peter? Anybody home?"

"Hm, maybe upstairs? Or in the garage?" Mary thought.

As she proceeded through the living room to the staircase, Mary caught something out of the corner of her eye. It was on the floor, just behind the coffee table to her left. Mary turned white....It was a hand!

No, it couldn't be. Mary had opened the locked front door herself. Everyone knows when there's a dead body in the house, the door is not only never locked; in fact, it's always ajar.

As much as we hate to admit it, there are social rules for the finding of a dead body in your living room. Mary followed protocol:

She ran to the body – it was that of her husband. "Albert, Oh, Albert!"

She felt for a neck pulse.

She stifled a scream.

She pulled out her cell phone, and called 911.

Then she called Alexa's cell.

"Alexa, are you home yet? I need help!"

As a nation, our culture tells us we think logically, in words. But the reality, that nebulous wisp of a cloud that had fled from Mary, and just recently been reawakened by the strange thought processes of Alexa, is that we think with our survival instincts, and Mary solved a problem before she knew she had it. Mary would be charged with the murder, and Alexa was her best chance of getting out of the mess. Because her husband was really dead, and the doors were really bolted locked from the inside, and Alexa could really figure it out. Sometimes, you just know these things.

Alexa and Mary sat together on the sofa, as Mary sobbed into a tissue, and Alexa held her. The last piece of protocol had informed the children that they would be allowed to sleep over with the Vincent's kids (a rare treat) and that mommy would pick them up from school tomorrow. The last fifteen minutes had seen four patrolmen inspect the house for hidden dangers, start surveying neighbors, and get into a waiting mode.

He was quiet and of small stature, methodical and observant, and he walked with an air of pride and self-assurance that commanded the instant respect of the four patrolmen. His name was Hawk James, Detective Sergeant of the Denver Police, and he had risen to that position just three years out of Police Academy not because of the color of his skin, but because he had solved several of the most baffling homicides in the city's history.

As Alexa would soon learn, they said he never gave up, never ignored a lead. He had more energy than any three people, and a natural ability to get people to tell him what he wanted to know.

The ace junior detective took one look at the body, a quick look at the upstairs bedroom, checked that the back door off the kitchen was bolted, received the report from the survey of the neighbors that a strange blue car had been parked in the driveway until about 7:45, and promptly, and predictably, at 8:37 PM arrested Mary. Social Services, not their mother, would meet the children tomorrow at school. He had more important cases to work on, and this one was so clear.

And it was too. Mary's husband had been having an affair – the bed was still in disarray upstairs. The sheets were still wet. There had been a verbal argument downstairs, as two overturned dining room chairs betrayed. The slightly open cupboard cabinet in the otherwise immaculate kitchen was further proof that a person other than the lover had spent time doing something there. The blue car was obviously that of the lover. The position of the still-warm body, the wound to the side of the head, and the blood on the corner of the coffee table spelled argument, pure and simple.

Mary's own statement of when she arrived home left her more than enough time to confront her husband about the affair in the kitchen, explaining the open cupboard door, and for the argument which brought them both into the living room, where the husband fell against the side of the coffee table, cracking his skull. Means, motive, and opportunity: Mary had them all. By lying to the police, Mary turned what could have been a claimed accident into a manslaughter charge.

Until Detective Hawk smelled the pepper spray on the dead man's face. Then it was murder.

"You wanted him to fall. You probably pushed him." Now, all the detective needed was Mary's can of pepper spray. It wasn't in her purse, of course, because she was not the guilty party, so he left orders to search the grounds until it turned up.

Mary said nothing. She was still reeling from the news that her husband was having an affair, not to mention his sudden death.

“Detective, wait a minute.” It was all happening so fast for Alexa. She already had begun writing two dozen other possible stories to explain what happened, and needed some thinking time to finish them. “What about the woman he was seeing? Why couldn’t she have done it?”

“Don’t tell me my business, lady. The kitchen and the living room are tidy. If the other woman were angry enough to kill him, she would have stormed out of the house, and there would be signs of that. Even if she had her own key, she wouldn’t have stopped to lock the door.”

Alexa would have realized that, of course, given time, but she was trying to keep Mary out of jail.

By 8:45, Alexa and two police officers were all who were still in the house, and while they searched upstairs, Alexa went into the kitchen. What she saw eliminated most of her stories.

The back door knob was shiny, and there on the dish drain was the cloth that had wiped it.

And in the open cupboard, a neat stack of bowls laid next to a neat stack of saucers; on the next shelf, a neat stack of plastic ware bowls laid next to a neat stack of teacups; and on the next, a neat stack of casserole dishes laid next to a neat stack of plates – with one errant casserole dish on top of the plates.

Alexa ran to the two police officers.

“We need to look for finger prints.”

“Look lady, if Detective Hawk says we look for pepper spray, we look for pepper spray. You’re not supposed to be here anyway.”

“He’s wrong, the real killer has the pepper spray. We need to look for fingerprints.”

“Only Detective Hawk can change the game plan.”

“How do I reach him?”

They gave her the number, and she dialed on her cell phone. In one of those Freudian slips that betray your life purpose, she entered the number into speed dial.

“Hawk,” he snapped, betraying his eagerness for the next investigative conquest that would again prove his superiority.

“Detective, this is Alexa Brown. I was with Mary Peters just now. There’s something not right. You’ve got to get a fingerprint crew into the kitchen.”

“Okay, little lady, I’ll send one over. I’d have to do it eventually anyway. But you don’t really suppose we’re going to find any prints except the husband, wife, lover, and two sons, do you?”

“Of course not. We don’t need to find prints. We need to prove there aren’t any!”

The methodical detective’s flight of pride ground to a halt, and he felt strangely uneasy. His eyeballs flipped into the top of his head as he tried to realize he may have just been outguessed by an amateur typist.

“If there are no fingerprints, how do you expect to find the killer?” Hawk tried to outsmart her.

“Church suppers, of course.” And she hung up. Now two more people were thinking without words.

The next morning at work, Alexa snuck a peak at Mary's day planner she kept in her desk. She finished work early, since it was the day after deadline. Based on the information from the day planner's address book, Alexa did a little driving around, looking at cars parked at three addresses in different parts of Denver. She got lucky; these women were housewives, and so their cars were not parked at workplaces, but home for the necessary observation. So Alexa now knew who the killer was. She needed Mary to confirm it, but had her doubts that Mary would be willing to.

Normally, Alexa would not have been allowed to see Mary in her cell, but Hawk was growing more impressed with Alexa's talents by the hour.

"I have to apologize. You were right on; there were no fingerprints on the back door knob. The entire rest of the house was full of prints – husband, wife, two sons, a repairman or two who we've identified and cleared, and, we've identified the lover as one Cherie Kilbourne. She has a record; three counts of attacking former boyfriends. But again, I have to apologize; she drives a red sports car. She's coming in voluntarily in an hour, if you want to watch while I question her. I know she didn't do it, but maybe she saw somebody who did."

Alexa was getting impressed herself. Alexa knew the lover couldn't be guilty the first night, but Hawk knew it as well, and that was surprising for a police officer, even given the obvious mismatch of the car color. She found herself wanting to watch this unusually capable detective work, so she agreed to observe from behind the one-way mirror. She needed a few confirmatory details, first.

"The autopsy. He cracked his skull, right?"

"Yes, that's confirmed, as well as the pepper spray. Trace evidence says you can buy it most anywhere in the Denver area. Do you want to see Mary?"

"You haven't let her go?"

"I can hold her 48 hours as a material witness. I need to know who else has a key."

He hadn't noticed the errant casserole dish!

Hawk solved cases by sheer willpower. He checked every angle. That was why he let her see Mary, which would normally not be allowed; Mary might tell Alexa something she would keep from him. Alexa, on the other hand, approached life by listing all the future possibilities, and then discarding them, one by one. As the investigative reporter she was fated to become, this is how she would solve cases. At this point, she was well ahead of Detective Hawk, since she knew the name of the guilty party, and was pretty sure it was self-defense.

"Mary, how are you holding up?"

"I've been way better?"

"I'd be surprised if you'd ever been worse. I checked on the kids. Social Service picked them up from school an hour ago. I told Editor Samuels you couldn't have done it, and he told me if I can solve it, I can have an exclusive article. But that's not why I'm doing this, you know?"

"Then why?"

"My dad always used to say friends are hard to find and easy to lose. Hold on to any you get. You're my one friend in Denver. You're in trouble, and I can get you out."

"What about that detective?"

“Hawk? Brilliant, but proud. That’s the trouble with northern blacks; always something to prove. My dad always used to say, ‘just be yourself, and the world will find that God doesn’t make junk.’ He told me that he’s only keeping you here to make you tell him who has a key to the house.”

“I won’t tell, you know. My lawyer says they can only keep me two days.”

“Would you like me to try to get a relative of yours to take the kids meantime?”

“Maybe Aunt Louise, or my sister Alma.”

“Not your sister Shirley?”

“How did you know about Shirley?”

“I thought you would want me to help, so I looked through your day planner at work. That’s alright, isn’t it?”

“Yes, of course. I just can’t get Shirley involved, she has her own problems.”

Alexa wished she could say more to comfort Mary, but what does a twenty year old know, just out of college? Her best friend in this new city had lost her marriage and her whole life in minutes last night, and, but for Alexa’s intervention would have been tried for murder. Mary would need years of counseling, and the children had not yet even been told. Alexa could end it all now, just by telling Hawk who the killer was, but Mary was asking her not to.

“Alexa, do you think they’ll ever find the killer without my help?”

Alexa’s right hand reached over for the tattoo on her left upper arm. That was another story, for another day. The two were interrupted by the guard, and Alexa went to watch Hawk interview the lover.

Through the one-way mirror, Alexa watched and began learning some new tricks.

“Miss Kilbourne, thank you for coming. Do you know what this is about?”

“Look, I only came because you cops are always after me. I haven’t done anything, and I don’t owe you anything.”

Cherie Kilbourne was a woman in her late thirties, dressed in tight fitting clothing, putting on weight, with bleached hair and too much makeup. She sat and fidgeted with her pocketbook in one hand, a cigarette in the other. She had obviously been through a few of these questioning sessions, and figured this cop had a few tricks that would get her back into jail.

Hawk just waited for silence from Kilbourne’s body, and spit it right out. “Albert Peters is dead.”

It was just a flicker, but long enough for Alexa, Hawk, and Kilbourne all to know it had happened. Kilbourne hoped she was wrong, that she had not betrayed that she knew the man, and regained her character quickly. “Who?”

“I know you didn’t do it. But I know you were there last night. We matched the hairs from the bed to your DNA samples from the last time you were arrested. I just need you to help me find the real killer.”

Kilbourne relaxed a bit, but she still held her guard up. Cops had lied to her before. “You really know I didn’t do it?”

“You couldn’t have. There was another car there, a blue one, and you drive a red one.”

“How do you know I didn’t rent a blue car, so I could kill him and make you think someone else did it?”

Alexa realized that was part of Hawk's technique. It was how he got her to spit out the detail on the church supper. He just made you think he was stupid. He could have mentioned the wiped off doorknob at this point, as it was the stronger evidence. Instead, he responded with the photograph of the body. "The killing was an accident, see. It was unplanned."

"I met Peter fifteen years ago, before he was married, when I worked for the escort service. His wife started leaving him alone a lot recently for her job, and we saw each other about a month ago over the lunch counter near the beauty salon where I work now. One thing led to another, and there we were. Nice guy, I'm sorry his wife found out."

"May I have your key to his house?" Hawk ignored the response that suggested Mary killed her husband. Alexa had long ago learned how to direct an interview. Control of information was what journalism is about, after all.

"Yeah, here." She opened her purse, and there was the jar of pepper spray.

"I see you have pepper spray. Did you ever use it?"

"Last week, coming from the ATM machine. This city's getting so violent."

Most detectives would have arrested Kilbourne on the spot. Hawk couldn't lose the cooperation he was getting. "Where did you park your car last night? Nobody saw it."

"Oh, come on detective. Until I retired, I was a professional. You always park a block away."

"Just a couple more questions. I'm so grateful for your cooperation. I think you were the last person to see him alive, except for the killer, of course. Was the door kept locked all the time?"

"Both doors. You needed a key to get in or out. That's why I had the key; he made it for me."

"So the plan was, you let yourself out after?"

"He walked me to the door, went upstairs and changed the bedding, then drove to somebody's house to get the kids. His wife came home at 7:45 some nights, and so we had it down to a science. I was out by 7:25."

"The most important question. Did you see anyone in or around the house?"

"We were alone in the house, I thought. There was a blue car in the driveway, though. You could tell the color, because the back porch light was on. It wasn't there when I came over, but it was there when I left. But I didn't see the owner."

"Thank you so much for coming in. And I am sorry for the loss of your friend."

Alexa and Hawk compared notes after. Alexa had learned a couple things, and she told Hawk so.

"Can I buy you dinner?" Hawk's invitation was not unexpected. Their mutual respect was growing all the time.

"Provided you don't ask me the name of the killer."

"Okay, you're on. Pick you up at eight?"

Alexa went back to the office and wrote her article for the newspaper. Then she made a quick internet check of the killer and determined, as she thought, that the woman was a model citizen. Her husband owned a dairy, and she spent most of her days doing charity work. Alexa made a phone call.

"Hi, my name is Alexa Brown and I'm doing an article on the death of Mary Peter's husband. She worked with me, you know. I wonder if you would give me a few minutes

of your time so I could get some background information. Could you? This afternoon yet? Wonderful, I'll be there in a half hour."

Alexa was pretty sure it had been self defense. After all, the killer made casseroles. But just in case she was wrong, Alexa had one more trick up her sleeve.

She took her wallet out of her purse, and opened a secret compartment. Inside was a paper marked JJJ with four first names and phone numbers. Alexa dialed the first.

"Moses, are you home? Moses...Moses. Okay, this is Alexa. Just like we thought would happen, I'm in the middle of a big one, I'm going to confront the killer. If I don't call back within an hour, call Detective Hawk at Denver Metro Police and give him this address....." Then she called the other three numbers, got three more answer phones, and left the same message. And then she checked that Hawk was still on speed dial, threw on a sweater, drove twenty minutes to the home of one certain dairy owner, and, summoning all her courage, rang the doorbell.

"Hi, Mrs. McKinley, I'm Alexa Brown. Thank you for seeing me."

"Please come in. How can I help?"

Now seated at the kitchen table, coffee in hand, Alexa went back to her real purpose.

"I'm sorry. I kind of lied to you. I am a reporter, I am Mary's co-worker, I am investigating the death of her husband, kind of, but I'm not here for background information. Can I tell you a story?"

Mrs. McKinley was flabbergasted. She knew she was the killer, of course. But this woman couldn't possibly know that. What other answer could she give? "Yes."

"Once upon a time there were five black college students majoring in journalism. Two of them were great-grandchildren of slaves, and one of those slaves barely survived a shipwreck being sent here from Africa in shackles. One other had a father who was in prison for murders that he so-called committed when the police started randomly shooting up their neighborhood in a gang war, and he shot back to save his child. The fourth had an older brother in prison for being a so-called drug lord, after he had tried to find a regular job for over two years. The fifth was a young woman, whose family was barely holding its own after the death of the mother, and years of difficulty with the white "system" in Atlanta. The five of them used to meet for long talks. They made up their minds that as long as they were alive, they were going to change things. They would sit for hours discussing how as journalists, they would make a difference. They took special courses in college; forensics, criminalistics, criminal law and procedure. All with that one specific goal. One night, they all joined their hands and swore that as long as they could do anything to change it, no innocent person would ever go to prison. Then they all had their arms tattooed with the name they chose for themselves – The Journalist Justice League." And Alexa took a deep breath, lowered one hand down to Hawk's speed dial button on her cell phone, and with the other lowered her sweater revealing her upper arm.

"I just need to know one thing. Was it self-defense? Who threw the first punch?"

And Shirley McKinley, Mary's sister, pulled back her own sleeve, revealing a welt in the shape of a man's hand. Her eyes lowered, and she started to cry.

"I just came to return that casserole dish Mary loaned me for the church supper. I forgot Mary worked late on Tuesdays, and the porch light was on and the house was dark, so I came in the back door using my key. I heard voices, so I turned and I probably didn't get the casserole dish in the right place. He had a lover. My baby sister's husband was



having sex with some floozie in their bed. Just as he let her out, I stood in the dining room and confronted him. He came in and hit me; told me he'd kill me if I ever told anyone. And then he came at me again. I guess we knocked over a couple chairs. I ran into the living room, and reached for my pepper spray. He was coming at me with his arm raised to hit me again. I sprayed his face, and he fell down. Suddenly he was dead. I guess he hit his head on the coffee table going down. I suppose I panicked. I remember wiping off the casserole dish and the back doorknob, so the police wouldn't know I was there, and carefully locking the door for the same reason. Then I just drove home."

Alexa held Shirley's hand across the table.

"Mary won't tell the police you have a key to the house. They'll keep her in jail to try to make her. You need to tell the police what happened. The mark on your arm is proof of self-defense. I'm sure they won't charge you. Detective Hawk's a good man"

"Tell your Detective Hawk I'll see him first thing tomorrow. My husband will be here soon."

Mary went home, made four quick calls canceling four emergency messages.

Hawk arrived at eight, as promised. Over dinner they discussed another promise, as well as some personal hopes and dreams.

"Oh, Hawk, about the killer..."

"I thought you didn't want me to ask you."

"She's coming to see you tomorrow morning."

"You mean Mary's sister, Shirley."

"How did you..."

"I got this strange call from a man named Moses. He said he used to be a friend of yours in college. Do you have any idea how dangerous it was to do what you did? Moses was really worried. I just traced the address and verified the color of car she drives. But I wouldn't have gotten there in time if she had actually tried to kill you. I've already talked to her, and as soon as she gives her statement tomorrow morning, we'll close the case, and send Mary home."

"So we did good, right?"

"Don't go alone, next time. Call me. We'll do it together"

Alexa noted the word 'together'. It almost sounded personal.

## II. A...B...C

Summer had begun to fade into fall in Denver. It was late September, and the first snow had come and melted. Alexa and Mary no longer worked together, of course, but often saw each other for lunch. Shirley had not been charged, the children had returned to school, and Mary threw herself into her work to get over what had happened to her family life. Fortunately, Albert had left enough savings, so she could keep the house payments up, and a victim's relief fund provided the much needed counseling for the family. And to Alexa's delight, Mary actually felt a new freedom. She seemed almost eager to try Alexa's lifestyle. Alexa made a note.

Alexa's article had come out nearly four weeks ago, and Mr. Samuels, the editor of the Denver arts weekly had promoted her to reporter instantly. Mary's husband sold furniture for a living, but had been somewhat of a local celebrity due to the lavish commercials he starred in on local television. The news of his death, and the scandal that followed was written up in all the papers, and on the night that Alexa got Shirley to

confess, they had all reported that Mary was certainly guilty. That made Alexa a prominent heroine in the Denver area, and her article as to how she did it almost tripled circulation that week. To a free paper, of course, that does not mean subscriptions, but it does mean increased advertising. Thus, Alexa had advanced her career nicely with a high-profile, well researched investigative article.

Being a reporter for an arts weekly does not provide much opportunity for investigative journalism, but Alexa spent most of September getting to meet some very nice people, and learning some record keeping skills that would help her greatly in the future. Of course, she and Hawk continued to see a lot of each other, and often discussed cases, and investigations, but the month had been uneventful in terms of challenging unsolved crimes. As Hawk studied the strange way Alexa's imagination worked, but could never quite get the hang of it, she studied his thoroughness, and his ability to form questions that made suspects give information without knowing they had done so.

For example, when Catherine Carrera, the fashion designer from Chicago came to Denver for a fall fashion show the second week in September, Alexa not only interviewed her, but compiled extensive biographical data, both on the designer, and her manager, Sam Shriver, who accompanied her. Likewise, when the rock band Night Curse arrived for their concert the afternoon before last, she did the same for all five of the men in the band, the manager, the producer, and most of the local theater personnel who would be handling the production details.

On top of all this detailed factual information, she wrote a character sketch of each. She noted, for example, the frustration that Sam Shriver seemed to feel each time Ms. Carrera asked for anything out of the ordinary, and his strange comment that she had just become "the most valuable fashion designer in the world." And she had extensive comments on the supposed "insanity" of Vince Segriff, the drummer for Night Curse. Many other interviewers had remarked on this before, but she was the first to note that it was this appearance of insanity that inspired creative responses in the other members of the band. The article she wrote on the band would never reach publication, of course, but, had it done so, it might have provoked a good deal of controversy, as ALL other interviewers had simply recorded that the man is insane, and expressed doubt that he could ever be anything but a rock drummer.

And she did the same for each person she interviewed. There was no particular reason, she was just practicing, trying to learn from Hawk's methodology. The articles were her own property, not meant to be published. She soon had a hard drive full of mostly useless records and character sketches to match her mostly useless fictional story writing ability. Only mostly useless, because it had saved a life already.

The phone call came to her arts reporter's desk early that morning. It is totally shocking for an editor of one paper to attempt to solicit the services of a reporter of another. But there, on the other end of the line, was editor Nathan Lavinsky of the Denver Post, asking her if she would investigate one of the biggest stories to hit Denver this year.

It seems that last night, after the Night Curse concert, Vince Segriff, the band's drummer, had been arrested by the Denver police, acting on a federal warrant, for a murder less than four blocks from where Alexa sat typing her interviews of the band members yesterday afternoon. Editor Lavinsky had become convinced by her first article, that she was the only person who could unravel the mysterious chain of events,

especially since, in the last nine hours since the arrest, his best investigative reporters could not so much as get a whisper from Metro Police, get into the scene of the crime, or get into see anyone associated with the case.

Editor Samuels told her “absolutely not”. No reporter of his could work for another paper. Alexa thought quickly, and offered, “how about I do it for you?” That brought a quick ‘yes’, and Alexa reached for her cell phone speed dial button.

“Hawk”, snapped the detective, as always.

“Hi, Hawk, it’s me.”

“I can’t tell you about the murder. The FBI has it all sealed.”

“Not even a name?”

“Didn’t you see the morning paper? Daniel Dunsworthy, a stockbroker, stabbed with a dagger from the backstage storeroom where Night Curse was playing. Vince Segriff was arrested for it. That’s the official statement, and that’s all I can say.”

“Really, even to me?”

“Sorry, this one’s not my call. If I say anymore than that, I’m history.”

“Can you tell me why they won’t say anything?”

“You already know. Just remember it’s the FBI that’s involved.”

“Well, they wouldn’t get involved unless it’s an interstate crime – there’s other murders, and everyone’s afraid because of his reputation that he’s insane.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I know. Thanks. Are we still on for tonight?”

“Of course, as long as you don’t ask me anything about the case.”

“I promise I won’t ask anything about it.” In her mind, the word “ask” was emphasized. She knew she would have plenty to “tell.”

Alexa walked down the hall to Mary’s and the new typist’s office.

“Mary, shh, come with me. I need your help.”

In the privacy of the ladies’ room, Alexa said, simply, “How would you like a little excitement?”

“Is it dangerous?”

“No. It’s real simple. Right after work, at exactly 4:30 PM, I want you to go to doorway of a crime scene, show your newspaper ID, and ask to be let in. There will be police, or maybe FBI agents there. Make a scene. Say you have the right. Mention the Constitution. Say freedom of the press. Anything. Just keep shouting until they threaten to arrest you. Then leave. Don’t go into the room, or even try to look in. If you don’t go into the room, they can’t arrest you.”

“Alexa, are you sure you’re sane?”

“Misdirection, that’s the trick. I solved your case by looking at the back doorknob while everybody else was searching for pepper spray. It’s the same thing here. You’re my diversion. Call my cell just before you go in.”

“Where are you going to be?”

“Oh, I’ll be bouncing around somewhere.”

Alexa’s first concern was for information to trade. If the FBI was involved, even Hawk couldn’t help her much. Asking even get a crime scene photo would be a lot. Since Editor Lavinsky had said no one could get into the murder scene, there was something the FBI wanted to hide there, and it was on the twelfth floor of a fifteen story high-rise in downtown Denver. She was hoping the window would not be draped over.

Then, she was hoping she could see something that the FBI had missed. If she had that, Hawk would be willing to break the rules and tell her what he knew.

Denver is great when you wish to shop for sporting equipment related to mountains. At 4:25 PM, Alexa was on the roof of the building where the murder had been committed, busily tying down a Bungee cord she had purchased. The sales person assured her that the cord had a beginner's 50 foot range, no more, and thus she knew it would get her down to the picture window three stories below and back up again. Even trained FBI agents, she reasoned, would not believe their eyes the first time they saw a black woman in fatigues bouncing up and down outside a picture window, and would thus ignore her. With Mary as diversion at the front door, Alexa could get a good, long look at the crime scene.

Mary was true to her word, and at 4:28, Alexa's cell rang. Mary rang the bell, and thirty seconds later, Alexa bounced harmlessly onto the twelfth floor veranda, and saw, that, sure enough, all three FBI agents protecting the room were attempting to scare off a woman at the front door who didn't want to come in anyway.

The curtain had been drawn, as Alexa had feared, but they had opened the door in front of it, and all she needed to do was stick her head into the room through the part in-between the two curtains. She had barely ten seconds to study the crime scene, before the excitement created by Mary was over. Then she quickly withdrew to the veranda without being seen, and jumped over the railing. The Bungee cord let her down two more floors, and up she went. Now out of FBI sight, she climbed the Bungee cord back up to the roof and took out a notepad.

They never knew she was there. The first obstacle had been overcome.

The chalk marking the outline of the body was barely three feet from the wall. Blood spatter began on the wall hip high, and traced a descending arc right to left. A small pool of blood had collected by the neck of the chalk outline, in between the wall and the outline. Everywhere, furniture was in disarray; the victim had put up a real fight. And the door had been broken in by force.

Alexa went downstairs, thinking about the drawing, her Bungee cord safely tucked into a shoulder bag, to make sure Mary was alright.

"I haven't had that much fun in years. I'm still shaking."

"I told you there's no danger. It's all in knowing the laws thoroughly. Most policemen, even FBI agents, are by-the-book creatures. Lunch tomorrow?"

"See you". But that lunch would be days away; and by then Alexa once again would be a new person.

Alexa was not much at geometry, so the drawing kept puzzling her. The furniture told her that Mr. Dunsworthy did not know his attacker, and that the attack came at close range. The blood spelled knife attack, as claimed. Since the victim did not know the attacker, he would not have turned his back. Since the blood went down right to left, the stabbing was done in the left side of the body. Since the body fell so close to the wall, the victim was trying to get his back to the wall to defend himself when he was stabbed. But that meant the attacker was right handed. A left handed attack in that position would not have made the body rotate that way as it fell, since it would have lacked the power.

She visualized it over and over. How many people had been proved guilty by the old "left handed attack" business. That wouldn't work here. The attacker was right-handed.

Alexa tapped her computer to get to some of her notes on Vince Segriff. And she looked like the cat that swallowed the canary.

“I know I promised you I wouldn’t ask anything about Dunsworthy’s murder...”

“And you won’t!” retorted Hawk across the dinner table.

“I won’t ask anything. I’ll just tell you flat out he didn’t do it.”

“Oh, Alexa, please. Knowing you, you’re probably right. But it’s my job at stake here!”

“What exactly can’t you give me?”

“Any details about Dunsworthy’s murder. I don’t have them myself, even if I wanted to give them to you.”

“Then how about the names of the other victims?”

“Just go look them up.” He was so used to her knowing things that no one had told her, he didn’t even bat an eyelash at the question.

“What?”

“The warrant’s not sealed. You only need to know it was issued by Federal Court of Atlanta.”

“Atlanta? My Atlanta?” Alexa speed dialed yet another significant person.

“Hey, Dad, how have you been? I’m doing great. Got a promotion already, and I have a chance to make it really big nationally. Could you help? Naw, it’s easy. Downtown, in the Federal Courthouse, a warrant has been issued against a Vince Segriff for several murders. I need the names of the people it alleges he killed. Oh, would you? Thanks, I’ll call you tonight. Yes, I’m out with a man. No, Dad, we’re in a restaurant. No, Dad, I never do anything dangerous, immoral or illegal. You’re right, Dad, I skipped ‘fattening’ on purpose. Yeah. Thanks.”

“Are your parents that bad?”, she asked Hawk.

“Worse. They still think I’m in police academy. I haven’t had the heart to tell them. Do you really think you can solve this thing?”

“One thing at a time. I just know someone’s got to try.”

Alexa had to wait until evening of the next day for her dad’s e-mail to arrive. He was a teacher after all, and had to wait until after the end of the school day.

“They wanted to know why I wanted to know. I said term paper material. They believed me, LOL. In order: ‘Alice Ambrose of Atlanta, drank arsenic in the Atrium last August; Beverly Bean of Boston, beaten with a baseball bat two weeks later; Catherine Carrera of Chicago, choked with a curtain cord a week ago, and now Donald Dunsmore of Denver, dispatched with a dagger’. And no, I’m not making this up. This is the exact ‘weird wording from the wanted warrant’. What are you into?”

She replied ‘I wish I knew’, finally got over laughing, and then recognized the name of the fashion designer she had recently interviewed. It was all very real, and not insane. It was very well planned, and an excellent frame.

Alexa spent the next hour on Internet. She was pleasantly surprised to discover that only the details of the Denver murder had been sealed. All the newspaper material from Atlanta, Boston, and Chicago was freely available, and very thorough.

“Atlanta, Aug. 30. Alice Ambrose, dead at age 64, from suicide by poison. Formerly of Atlanta Housing Unit 7, moved to the Atrium hotel 4 years ago. Predeceased by 4 children and husband.....”

Housing Unit 7? Suddenly living in a posh hotel? Alexa got an e-mail off to Moses. This could be the clue his dad had been waiting for.

“Boston, Sept. 5. Beverly Bean found beaten with a baseball bat behind the auditorium where Night Curse had played last night. No motive known.

“Boston, yesterday. The FBI has arrested a suspect, Vince Segriff, drummer for the band Night Curse, in the brutal murder of Beverly Bean. The arrest in Denver yesterday, comes as the result of what is suspected to be a series of murders committed by the partially insane Mr. Segriff. Segriff is known to have attended high school with Ms. Bean, then Miss Beverly Shawn.”

Well, at least now she had the FBI’s theory of the case.

“Chicago, Sept. 16. Catherine Carrera dead of strangulation in her Lake Shore Drive penthouse apartment. Miss Carrera had just returned with her business manager, Sam Shriver, from Naples, Italy. Investigation is continuing, but police anticipate an early arrest due to large amounts of forensic evidence found at the scene.

“Chicago, yesterday. An arrest was finally made in the strangulation death of fashion designer, Catherine Carrera. Vince Segriff, drummer for the band, Night Curse, was arrested in Denver for another murder, and linked to Chicago by comparison of forensic evidence. Mr. Segriff’s fingerprints on a wineglass and epithelial cells inside gloves which handled the murder weapon, which were not available to authorities before the Denver arrest, demonstrate his presence in Ms. Carrera’s apartment.”

“No they don’t, silly”. But who was framing him?

Carrerafashions.com states that Catherine Carrera is one of the most famous fashion designers in the world, and lists her traveling for the past three years. Alexa studied the list and wondered, first, why a wealthy 40’s something woman, brought up with a silver spoon in her mouth, would want a tryst with a rock drummer while still suffering jetlag from a trip from Naples? Then she wondered why Sam Shriver would tell her that Ms. Carrera was the most valuable designer in the world when her travels had gone DOWN steadily over the last three years? Finally, she wondered who had access to wine glasses and gloves belonging to Vince Segriff?

“Chicago, Sept. 15. Chicago Hilton. The band Night Curse celebrates the release of their new album.” Alexa saved the j-peg picture clearly showing Vince, and everyone else, holding a wine glass.

“Los Angeles, yesterday. From the real-estate news. Carl Fellows, the stage manager for Night Curse. Purchase of Beverly Hills home, paid in full \$4.6 million.”

NightCurseRock.com lists the bands dates. And, not surprisingly, they played Atlanta, Boston, and Chicago on the nights claimed.

Alexa downloaded Agatha Christie’s “The ABC Murders” and started refreshing her memory.

The novel is a mystery classic. A salesman has apparently gone insane and is killing innocent people unrelated to each other in successive towns that he visits, first a town that starts with A, then with B, etc. Each victim’s name begins with the same letter as that of the town. He is also writing letters to the Agatha Christie’s great fictional sleuth, Hercule Poirot, daring him to stop the killings. Since investigative procedure always begins by looking either for relationships, and/or for motive, with both of these lacking, the cases cannot be solved until the pattern is deduced after 4 or 5 murders. Poirot deduces, correctly, that the salesman has been set up by a third party wishing to kill Mr. C. The

intent was to deceive the police into thinking that no motive other than insanity was involved, so the true killer would not be linked to Mr. C, and thus found. Poirot has some difficulties, due to a couple coincidences. For example, victim B is killed coincidentally by an unrelated third party before the true killer intended, thereby giving the killer an alibi for that one incident. Also, the person set up dreams he is killing Mr. C. Such complications make the story longer, as Poirot must wait 5 victims before he can prove his case. When Agatha Christie wrote the story, the ABC idea was new, now it is part of detective fiction literature history.

To Alexa, it was now obvious that at least two people have been reading it. Proving it was the next step.

Just as Alexa was ready to go offline, an e-mail popped in.

“Sorry if I caused you any trouble with Det. Hawk. I could never thank you enough for making the connection to Bldg. 7. I saw the article, too, and I just didn’t think. The Atlanta Police stormed several apartments looking for gang members. My dad, thinking the gang members were pushing through the door, shot back and killed a policeman named Frank Visco. His sentence would have been reduced for self-defense, but an old woman named Alice Ambrose gave false testimony that we were all gang members. Looks like she was paid off, and now killed for blackmailing someone. This may be a major scandal for the City of Atlanta. I’ll let you know. Moses...”

Alexa had not yet slept, and there was so much more computer work to do.

Her notes on Sam Shriver said that he was born in Connecticut, outside New York City in 1968. He attended private schools, Fordham University, and took fashion marketing courses at NYU, which gave him connections to the industry in Milan, where he met Catherine Carrera. She needed a manager, he was hired, and from 1990 on, they jetted all over the world together.

The notes on the stage manager, Carl Fellows, put him as a child of the Bronx, born in 1967, attending local Catholic Schools, then taking a two year degree at NYU. He worked in various stage manager jobs for nightclubs in Manhattan, and occasionally off-Broadway, before being drafted by the recording company sponsoring Night Curse in 2002.

There it was: means, motive, opportunity. But that didn’t explain the four murders. If the goal was to collect on insurance and set up Vince Segriff to take the fall, why kill the two earlier ones, and resort to this elaborate ABC business?

It was after 2AM. Alexa put her head down on the desk for just a minute.

The sun woke her what seemed like seconds later. She had barely dismissed the cobwebs from her head when her doorbell rang.

“Alexa Brown?”

“Yes?” She was half-asleep, or she would have had the sense to say she was watching the apartment while Alexa was in Atlanta and Boston.

“FBI. You’re under arrest for interfering with a federal investigation.”

She woke up fast at the news, but, common sense having returned, she pretended to still be sleepy. “Can I go to the bathroom? I just woke up?”

Question? Was Mary okay? Was her dad okay? She wasn’t going to run; she needed to talk to the FBI guy who swore out that warrant. But how deep was this conspiracy anyway? She really needed to go to the bathroom; the cell phone call to Nathan Lavinsky’s voice-mail was an afterthought. “Lavinsky. It’s Alexa. I’m being arrested

for working on the Segriff thing. If I don't call you back in three hours, run this tonight: 'Vince is being framed. It's a conspiracy involving at least two people, probably more'. If I get stuck in jail, the trail starts with the warrant in Atlanta. None of the other cities are censored."

She was taken to the Federal Building for 'questioning'.

"How much do you know?"

"How did you guys find out I was working on the case?"

"You don't understand. We ask the questions."

"No, you don't understand. You have to charge me or let me go. And I have rights as a journalist not to tell you anything. And I know that someone in this office is deliberately concealing evidence."

She studied her adversaries for a response. The grey suit almost started talking; the brown suit stopped him.

"How'd you like to spend the rest of your life in Leavenworth?"

It's called good cop/bad cop. They'd actually made the mistake of judging her by her age and pretended sleepiness.

"You can't scare me!" She looked the brown suit bad cop squarely in the eye, crossed her arms and legs, and started her body trembling on purpose, hoping they would read the body language cues as they were taught to do.

Bad brownie took the bait and grabbed her arm. Victory! She'd gotten them to go to scene two. She pulled away, ran to the corner and pretended to cry.

Good grey pulled Brownie off, sent him out of the room. Alexa had won.

"There, there, miss, we just need to know what you've found out."

"I'll talk to YOU. Keep him out of here."

"Okay, here, come back and sit down. Now, can I get you anything?"

"Just tell me how you found me. Is my dad alright?"

She was fishing. She knew they would know that her dad had asked for the warrant record, so there was no harm in sharing that. The question was did they know about Mary and the diversion? Did they do anything to Mary to get to her?

"Your dad's fine. We just realized you were related. We had to stop you before you messed up our surveillance."

"Surveillance?"

"Vince didn't do it. We know that. He's left handed. And there was no motive. We held onto him because of the DNA match to Chicago. We've sealed the apartment, and we have a man watching it from outside, hoping the thief will come back."

"You've been watching the apartment from the outside?"

"For two whole days."

He was lying. They would have arrested her for the Bungee stunt twelve hours ago. But Alexa was in control now; she may as well use it.

"What's your theory of the case?"

"Revenge. Dunsworthy had been stealing clients blind. We're questioning them now."

"Then who recognized the ABC pattern?"

"Oh, that was profiler Lindsay Visco, from our Atlanta office."

Lindsay Visco? Four years was long enough for it to have happened. She looked up at the mirror.



Agent Brown Suit, whoever else is out there, come on in. You've got a major internal problem, and I want to help. Grey suit didn't even realize yet that she had turned his own game to her advantage.

As Brown Suit opened the door, Alexa pushed him out of the way and ran. They were on her in a second.

"Okay, guys, okay. I'm not trying to escape. I had to make sure she wasn't out here."

"Okay, lady, now you're in trouble. Start talking."

"I want a paper and pencil." She wrote three lines. "Okay, sign it."

For the first time, the two agents and the Denver supervisor realized they had completely underestimated her. They read, "I do hereby promise that all journalistic rights for the story of the ABC murders are given exclusively to Alexa Brown."

"We're not signing anything."

"O, yes you are. Charge me with anything you like. My editor will post bail, and I reveal the truth of the murders as soon as I'm out, and the FBI goes down with the other murderers. I'm the only one with all the details, and I can cause a national scandal for the Bureau. And at least one of the other murderers will probably be in the Cayman's within hours."

They had no choice, and they knew it. They signed, she pocketed, and they turned on the tape recorder. I need one more piece of information before I can solve the four murders and the attempted murder of Vince Segriff. Where was profiler Lindsay Visco born, and is she as I suspect, wife of slain Atlanta Police officer Frank Visco?

"Det. Hawk was right about you. Okay, you win. Lindsay Visco was born Lindsay McDonough in 1969 in the Bronx, where she went to Catholic school for a while. Her parents moved to Atlanta. She married Frank and after he was killed, she joined the Bureau. A few of us have been wondering about her loyalties for a while now."

Alexa reached over and turned on their tape recorder.

"A month or so ago, Sam Shriver, the manager for fashion designer Catherine Carrera, decided she would be of more use to him dead than alive. He took out insurance on her for at least \$10 million dollars, and looked for a way to kill her. While in college, he had met a man named Carl Fellows, who he realized was now the stage manager for the rock band Night Curse. Since the band was coming to Chicago to release a new CD soon, the two men formed a plot to kill Ms. Carrera and implicate Vince Segriff, since he acted so insane on stage. Mr. Fellows stole a pair of the drummers gloves, and a wine glass used at the CD release party, and gave them to Mr. Shriver to plant at the scene. Since Ms. Carrera would have been suffering from jetlag at the time of the murder, the killer had to be someone close to her. That's how I know Shriver did it personally. Mr. Fellows took his share of the money and bought a home in Beverly Hills yesterday, so I doubt he's going anywhere. Before I go on, you might wish to stop Mr. Shriver at the airport."

The supervisor nodded, and grey suit left the room.

"Now, Mr. Fellows got together with your Lindsay Visco somehow. My guess is they probably ran into each other in Atlanta before the band played there. He must have started talking about the plan, and Ms. Visco realized she had a solution to her ongoing problem. Four years before, someone had paid off a poor old woman named Alice Ambrose in a housing project to lie about a neighbor. Ms. Ambrose left the projects and started living the high life. She probably started blackmailing Ms. Visco because of her position with the FBI. Ms. Visco agreed to remain silent about Shriver and Fellows' plan

if they worked Ambrose into the equation. Because of Vince Segriff's pretense of insanity, and because of the coincidence of the letters for the cases of A and C, Visco worked out the details of the plan, using her experience and training. My guess is that she personally served the arsenic to Alice Ambrose – the other three murders were all violent. The real reason you were ordered to seal the Dunsworthy murder site is the obvious blood spatter evidence proving the killer was not left handed. I seriously doubt the motive was robbery. You see, when Segriff wasn't arrested by the Chicago Police, the plan went awry. It meant that Shriver was being watched, so he couldn't run away with the money from the insurance. They all realized too late that the planted DNA and fingerprint evidence didn't lead the police to Vince Segriff, because he wasn't in the databases. They had to strike again in the first D town they came to, in order to make Segriff look like the suspect. Visco fingered him for you, and you all did as you were told from then on. Once you tied him to Chicago, you could also convict him for Atlanta, and the three real conspirators were all in the clear."

"How did you get all this?"

"Internet mostly. I happen to know the son of the man who was sentenced by Ambrose's perjured testimony, but that's just coincidence. I used my own personal interview notes of Segriff and Shriver to trace the school connections"

"But how do you know about the blood spatter?"

"Oh, in my other identity I'm Spiderwoman. I climbed the wall and peeked in the room. May I go now? I'll call you tonight to make sure I have all the details right."

Alexa went home, made some tea, wrote the story, and called Nathan Lavinsky to see if he wanted to offer her a job.

The details checked. Shriver was caught getting on the airplane to Brazil (okay, no one is ALWAYS right), and he confessed. Fellows was arrested on Shriver's testimony, and Visco was relieved of her position based on what Fellows said. When it was all sorted out, Shriver killed Carrera, Fellows killed Bean and Dunsworthy, and Visco killed Ambrose, all as Alexa had guessed. Tons more evidence surfaced, also. The insurance had been for \$20 million, and Visco, Fellows, and Shriver each took a third. The arsenic had actually been taken by Visco from a student lab at the FBI academy at Quantico, and the bloody clothes Fellows wore to kill both his victims turned up in his closets. Moses' father has a hearing coming up in a month, where the sentence may be reduced. And of course, Vince Segriff is free to act as insane as he wants to, as long as it sells CD's.

Alexa now works for the Denver Post, and has syndication ties to Atlanta, Boston, and Chicago, as well as a few other places. Editor Lavinsky got the story of who killed who, and Editor Samuels got the human interest story of how his ace reporter and his up-and-coming typist outsmarted the FBI to get it. Alexa and Mary still meet for lunch regularly, and Mary helps Alexa with an "errand" occasionally.

Late one afternoon, near the end of October, as Alexa and Hawk discussed a case over dinner, 700 miles away, just outside the small town of Melano, Iowa, a young black woman recently transplanted from Atlanta lost control of her car and crashed into a grain silo. Her husband rushed from his job as chief editor of the town's weekly paper to be at his wife's side in the local Emergency Room. You couldn't see it under the shirt he wore, but on the top of his left upper arm were tattooed the initials JLL.

### III MYSTERY OR NOT?

When Alexa's plane set down in Des Moines, two investigative reporters from the Register were there to welcome her. Skills like hers are rare, and she was developing a following of fans in the profession.

"I'm not here to investigate anything. A dear friend of mine from college called to ask for my help after a car crash involving his wife. I'm here to keep him and his wife company for a few days until she gets out of the hospital."

She wasn't lying, of course, since no one knew for sure if there was a mystery or not, but she wasn't telling the whole truth, either.

Alexa drove her rented car into Melano just as the setting sun glistened off the red and yellow autumn leaves that still remained on the mostly bare trees. She pulled up in front of the offices of the Melano Guardian, and jumped out.

Simon Black came running out to meet her, and wrapped a bear hug around her small frame. He was almost six feet four, and built like a fullback whose hobby was sumo wrestling. The Afro hairstyle she expected had been replaced by a middle-class cut, and Simon had on a sucky middle-class powder blue dress shirt and tie. Alexa thought about how much they had wanted her to compromise, and how far both Denver and Des Moines were from Atlanta.

"Simon, Simon, everybody's not built like a wrestler. Put me down!"

"I'm sorry, Alexa. I forgot again."

"I hope you don't do that to Cayley." Alexa had not seen Cayley since the wedding last year, and only that one time. Their careers had separated them and phone calls and e-mails were all that had held the JJJ together for many months.

"I haven't broken her yet."

"What's all this about a mystery?"

"Shh... Come inside."

Once inside, Simon got serious, and started pulling out pictures.

"Cayley's still in the hospital. She's going to be laid up for months. Look at these pictures." And Alexa looked at the pictures of seven young men and women in their thirties, and three children.

"You know I took this paper over last year after old man Phillips retired. I work for him as the editor. Cayley and I moved here for the job. There's people here accept us, and people who don't. Cayley got a job working in the lunchroom of the school, and we're doing alright. Or we were until this accident happened. I just don't think Cayley could have lost control of her car that way. I checked, and the car wasn't tampered with, but it just FEELS like something's wrong. We normally get about two accidents a month in this little town. That's what the newspaper records say. But since school started, we've had 17 accidents in two months; four involving older people, just like every other year, two that might happen once in a while, Cayley, and these ten."

"So, you think that someone caused these ten and Cayley?"

"I don't know. There's no motive I can see, no evidence of tampering with the cars. They weren't all cars, either. This man here," he said as he selected a picture, "for instance, lost an arm to a board-cutting machine at the lumber yard, on a machine that had never had anyone hurt by it in the 40 years it's been on the market. This woman, misjudged a step of the stairway to the church basement, and is still in the hospital

because of brain damage in the fall. It just seems so unnatural for this many young people to have this many accidents in such little time.”

“I agree with you there, Simon. What do they have in common? Their age, right?”

“Well, yes, all the adults are in their thirties, and all are parents. All except Cayley. She’s just 24, and we don’t have children.”

“What about the children? And are you sure that you can eliminate the four older people?”

“Each child was injured in a car crash with the parents. The four accidents I omitted from the pile are 70 to 80 year olds, and they all crashed their cars in the rain, or at night. We get that every year. These are all young people, and all the accidents, including Cayley, occurred in broad daylight, in good weather. All the people are from town here. They go to different churches, have different occupations, and have nothing obvious in common.”

“Were any killed?”

“None yet. This one is still in intensive care after two weeks. She may not make it.”

Alexa read the article with the picture. “Librarian. Jennifer Marx. Age 32. Two children 8 and 11.” She took a couple others at random. “Jake Lockerman. Age 35. Works at the lumber yard. Children age 15 and 11. This is the one who lost the arm on the machine. Mary Benedict, age 34, housewife. Her husband is an attorney. Children ages 11, 9, and 6. Does her husband think anything is strange?”

“I asked him; he can’t deal with it.”

“Do you have any pictures of her husband?”

Simon pulled a book down from the shelf and looked for a September back issue. “Here he is after a trial.”

“He looks like a nerd. Look at those horned-rimmed glasses. Wait a minute; I just had a thought. How many more pictures of their families do you have?”

“I never thought of that. You mean maybe the real intended victim is the spouse in some cases?”

“No, actually, I have another idea, but it’s weird. Give me a paper and pencil, would you, while you look for the pictures?”

And for the next five minutes, Alexa compiled the following table: Children of age 1-5: 4; of age 6: 2; of age 7: 1; of age 8: 2; of age 9:1; of age 10: 0; of age 11:7; of age 12:3; of age 13:0; of age 14:2; of age 15 and older: 1. Twenty-three children in seven families. The numbers jumped out at her. “That could be part of the motive”, Alexa thought, but the story she was starting to write in her head was many hours away from completion.

“I found two more families”, Simon interrupted her thoughts. Alexa studied the photos very carefully. She didn’t know what to look for yet, maybe nothing. But the coincidence on those ages was too big.

“Does the Guardian run regular school news?”

“Here’s the last two months, nine issues since school opened.”

Alexa looked through nine issues of school news, but found nothing of interest. “I guess it might not have made the paper.” She wrote down the names of all the new teachers, just in case. “You’re right, this is a puzzle.” Alexa looked at her watch. “Quitting time for today. Can we go see Cayley?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Alexa followed Simon to the hospital in her rented car, and they walked into Cayley's room with a bucket of chicken and a bouquet of flowers.

Cayley had her left leg up in traction, and her right bandaged. Her left hand was bandaged as was the left side of her head, and part of her chest. But it had been four days since the crash, the broken bones had been reset, the pain was subsiding, and Cayley welcomed the visitors sitting up in bed, with a cheery smile.

"Hey, Dear, guess who followed me home."

"Alexa. You came. How wonderful." The women squeezed each others' hands. They each grabbed a piece of chicken, and started to share the past two years of their lives.

Eventually, the conversation got around to the accident, and Alexa heard the story from Cayley's own mouth. It was a clear dry day, and Cayley was driving home from school. She was listening to music on the radio as she went, and all of a sudden she just seemed to feel woozy. She spaced out, and crashed into the side of the grain silo.

"Simon, did everybody feel woozy?"

"The five victims I talked to, did. Oh, we ran blood tests. I have a friend in Des Moines who helps me with investigative lab work. No chemical in the blood."

Simon was trained in criminology, as the other members of JLL; surely, he would have caught that, Alexa reasoned. That was as far as the investigation could go, for now.

"So now, tell me," Cayley went on, "did you bring any samples of your work?"

"Well," Alexa was not a braggart, but since she was asked...

"Simon, hand me my glasses." Cayley said to her husband as she reached for Alexa's article.

"Cayley, I didn't know you wore glasses. You didn't have them at the wedding."

"Of course not, silly, I have contacts."

Minutes passed as Cayley read the stories of the ABC murders and the murder of Mary's husband.

"Alexa, I wish I could write like this. Or think like this."

But Alexa didn't hear. She was inventing and discarding stories. They both looked at her. You could feel the silence in the room poised to spring into action as they counted her apparent heartbeats.

"O, my gosh. Simon, the pictures. Did you bring them?"

"In my car." And he handed her the keys.

"Cayley, I'm sorry, I'll be right back."

Alexa ran to the car, and verified what she thought was true. She speed dialed Hawk. "Hawk, are you busy?"

He was, but this was more important. "I need you to pull up seven drivers licenses from Iowa for me."

Hawk argued for a minute, then figured it would take less time to help her than to get rid of her. The statement was on each license, just as she had expected it would be. Alexa had the solution. And the perpetrator. All she needed was a motive. She dialed information, and requested a local number, then called a family across town.

"Good evening. My name is Alexa Brown and I work for your next state senator, Mr. Joseph Abernathy. As you may have read in the paper, Mr. Abernathy is running on a platform of local school improvement, and I wonder if you would be so kind as to answer a survey to help him out. Would you? Oh, thank you. First, may I ask how many

children you have? Three. And their ages? 18, 16, and 11. What do you think of the schools there in...Menelo, is it, yes, Menelo? They WHAT? When? That's horrible. What was the teacher's name? Say, would you let us interview you for a television ad? This is just the kind of thing Mr. Abernathy wants to expose. Thank you so much. I'm calling by number, so I need to ask your name and address. Yes, yes, thank you. Our people will be in touch."

When you know what to ask, and have learned your interviewing lessons well, it's easy.

Back in Cayley's room Alexa stated simply. "You're right, Simon, it's deliberate, and it's being done for revenge. Cayley, tell me about what happened in the lunchroom the second day of school.

Cayley never had time to answer. Emergency sirens went off in the hospital, and a code blue was sounded. Everyone started running in the halls, but they were too late. Jennifer Marx, the librarian, had just died from her injuries. It was now murder. The question would have to wait.

"Simon, we need to go right now. There's no telling what the killers will do when they hear about Jennifer Marx dying. We need to get proof, so the police can act. Will your friend in Des Moines do a chemical analysis for us tonight?"

Simon and Cayley looked at each other, and Cayley said, "Go, honey, it could have been me or one of our kids this person killed."

Simon went up to his wife's dressing table, and took a small bottle. He called his Des Moines friend, and made certain he would stay up. He started driving. It was two hours each way, and Simon would not see bed that night until well after midnight. At least they knew what kind of chemical to look for, and exactly where it had to be.

Alexa took her car and parked across the street from the family she had called. She had no idea how quickly the news of the death of Jennifer Marx would reach the family, but she wanted to be ready. She could not call the Iowa State Police until the chemical analysis proved that the doctor had access to the chemical she thought it would show. The truth was, that she had discarded every other story and this was the only one that remained. Even the story of what had happened at school and the family's reaction to it that the wife had told her on the phone was not proof of deliberate endangerment and murder. She debated with herself for a half hour, and then called the Des Moines Register.

"Hello, this is Alexa Brown, from Denver. Two of your reporters interviewed me early this afternoon. Are they still around, or have they gone home? Excellent, may I speak to her? Hi, I kind of didn't tell you everything at the airport today. I have what could be a major story here in Menelo, revenge, murder, you know. But I can't get the police involved for several more hours. Would you like to come and help? I can't promise, there's a slight chance I could be mistaken. On your way? Great."

By 10:00, there were two cars, and three reporters watching the house.

10:30 came, and the lights in the house went off. Alexa and the two reporters started dozing intermittently. Just after 11, Alexa looked up from the front seat of her car to see a bedroom light go on in the house. Then a hall light, then a living room light. Alexa got out of her car, and snuck up to the house, hiding in the shadows as she went. The two reporters from Des Moines woke up, and got cameras ready.

Alexa was crouched under the picture window of the living room, using shrubbery as cover from the roadway. She heard an argument inside.

“Why did you do it?”, a woman screamed. “A woman is dead. It’s murder.”

“You said you wanted them punished,” a man retorted.

“But not like this. What about your practice?”

“What about my practice? What about when I tell them what hospital nurse gave me the neural blocker? I don’t have access to those kinds of medicines.”

“You wouldn’t even have known she died if Nora didn’t call me just now.”

“Well, what are we going to do about it?”

The voices got quieter. Alexa couldn’t hear. She had her proof now, but it was obtained illegally, so the police couldn’t act.

Alexa moved away from the house, and pulled out her cell phone.

“Simon, how’s it coming?”

“He needs another half hour, but it looks good.”

“The doctor knows Jennifer Marx is dead. His wife is a nurse at the hospital; that’s how he got the neural blocker, from her. They’re in it together. Listen, call the state police as soon as the chemical is confirmed, have them meet me here. I’ve got two reporters from the Register here. If there’s any danger someone might get hurt, I’m going in.”

Suddenly, the picture window Alexa had been standing under was shattered by a lamp coming through it. Alexa ran in the open now, to the two reporters’ car.

“One of you come with me. We’re going in. The other get ready just in case.”

“We can’t go in there. We might get hurt.”

Alexa was astonished; she had no idea her level of courage was so much higher than her colleagues. “Then get ready to call 911, just in case. There’s three kids in that house, and a husband and wife who just figured out they’re murderers.”

And Alexa went up to the front door, and rang the bell.

“Is everybody alright, I heard a....” Alexa was looking at the business end of a hunting rifle.

“You’re not a neighbor. Who are you?”

“Someone who wants to try to keep you and your children alive until morning.” Alexa reached into her pocket as secretly as possible.

“How much do you know?”

“I know about the brawl in the lunchroom, and how that new teacher’s kids ganged up on your fifth-grade daughter. I know the school didn’t do anything about it, and so you’ve been punishing every fifth-grade parent you could for the last two months. I know about the neural blocker from the hospital, and how you put it in the contact lens fluid of every parent who came to you as their eye doctor. I know about seven accidents, nine people in the hospital, and now one dead. And in a few hours, I’ll know exactly how the neural blocker operated to attack the eyes directly without going in the bloodstream, making people feel woozy and causing them to misjudge driving and machinery. And I know there’s no place you can run. Simon Black, the Guardian’s editor is in Des Moines now, having the contact lens fluid analyzed, and the State Police will be here as soon as they hear what’s happening. Just give it up. Jennifer Marx wasn’t intentional murder. If you use that gun, it will be.” And Alexa pulled her hand out of her pocket, with her cell-phone in it. The cell phone had been on the whole time.

The doctor raised the shotgun. "You won't take us alive."

"Honey, no, it doesn't have to be this way," his wife begged.

The doctor looked away from Alexa for just a second. She tossed her cell phone in front of his face, and as he turned to follow its path through the air, she leaped for the gun. She just kept thinking of two adults and three children who didn't need to die.

It was a fight Alexa could not win. She managed to pull the gun away and toss it through the window. The doctor grabbed her around the neck, and he was a man and sixty pounds heavier than she was. By now the kids had been awakened and came into the room.

Two newspaper reporters appeared at the broken picture window, and got a picture of the action. The flash gave Alexa a chance to escape. She stamped down hard on his right instep, jabbed her left elbow backward into his stomach, and reached upward with her right hand, catching the middle finger of the hand clamped around her neck. She pulled the finger backward hard. The doctor shouted in pain, and Alexa escaped his grasp and ran for the door. The doctor came after her again, but sirens were heard approaching. Alexa had no idea who she speed dialed, or if the reporters had called the police when they saw the rifle come flying through the window, or if it had been Simon. But she knew it was over.

The doctor and wife were taken into custody. Several major lawsuits would be instituted by accident victims. A certain new fifth-grade teacher would be fired. And Menelo, Iowa, was now without an eye doctor. The Des Moines reporters were asking Alexa for an interview.

"I'll trade you for that picture." It was something Alexa's father didn't need to see.

"No way, we'll figure it out ourselves."

And that's how it was. Alexa's picture, and the story of the arrest ran in the Des Moines Register. But it was the Denver Post that covered the brilliant deduction that brought Alexa to the eye doctor's home, first on the phone as a survey taker, and then as the preventer of a death-suicide situation.

The list of ages is what gave it away. Every single victim, except Cayley, of course, had a child of age 11. That suggested the school connection. When Cayley mentioned the contact lenses, it hit Alexa that none of the accident victims wore glasses in their pictures, but some of their spouses, and children, did. When she called Hawk, she asked him to check on their drivers' licenses if any of them wore glasses, and, sure enough, on each driver's license, the state of Iowa had said "not permitted to drive unless wearing corrective lenses." That made the eye doctor the only person overlooked with common access to all victims. The phone call confirmed the couple's grudge against the fifth grade.

Alexa's bravery was now national news. As far as she knows, to this day, her father never saw the picture, or knows about the violence she was involved in when the arrest was made.

Alexa spent a few more days with Simon and Cayley and returned to Denver. She was rapidly becoming so famous that Editor Lavinsky allowed her to work on pretty much what she wanted.

Her next big case would make her rich.



#### IV. THE FRICK AND FRACK FLYING CIRCUS MURDER

November came and went in Denver. Early December saw the streets filled with nearly fifteen inches of snow. Alexa and Hawk had been getting closer since she returned from Des Moines last month, and they had spent the best part of their free time discussing an odd case. The case was not Hawk's to solve, as it was robbery, not homicide, and the FBI had become involved due to the interstate nature of the matter. But it was fascinating for Hawk and Alexa to apply their joint prowess to trying to outsmart an apparently master criminal and the FBI.

The details of the case seemed normal enough. Security apartments in security high-rise buildings in several states were being systematically cleaned of money, jewels, paintings, and rare coin and stamp collections. Never a fingerprint, or a so much as a hair for the forensic people to look at. The stolen goods had never yet surfaced, although this was not surprising, due to the recent nature of the crimes.

It was clear a that master thief was operating. In July, exactly four apartments in each of six buildings in Seattle were hit. In August, exactly four apartments in each of six buildings in Portland. In September, the same statistics in Boise. In October, the same pattern in Billings. In November, Salt Lake City. This December, it was Denver's turn; two buildings had been hit so far. This man, or woman, was following the cool weather south. The sudden blizzard had called a halt to the plan; by this time of the month, in each of the other cities, four buildings had been hit. It was now Dec. 18, the snow had melted, the temperature gotten into the sixties, and Hawk and Alexa were making bets on when the thief would strike next.

The case seemed beyond even Alexa. The method was so curious, that it should have meant something, but so far the pair had done little except scratch their heads like the FBI agents who had trailed this mastermind through six states, 32 buildings, 128 security apartments, and about \$2 billion dollars in missing wealth.

"Let's go over it again, Hawk. I know we're missing something."

"The odd element is the timing. All four apartments in each building are on different floors, and each faces a different direction from the outside. The first robbery is always just after 1 AM. The thief enters the apartment by picking the locks, somehow disconnects the alarm system using the five to seven digit security code, opens a safe if he needs to, picks up whatever he wants, and then RESETS the security code, so that when he leaves, he leaves the door open, the alarm goes off and wakes up the victim. The victim calls the police, and AFTER they arrive and start investigating, about 30 minutes later, the thief strikes again in another apartment in the same building. This happens four times in all. By 3 or 3:30, the police are stretched so thin, they can hardly tell which end is up."

"No one's seen anything?"

"Everyone's asleep. In two cases, a short man in fatigues and a hood has been seen entering a staircase at the end of the hall where the apartment was robbed. That's all."

"And stakeouts are useless?"

"There are too many apartments. Any police who have tried the stakeout invariably wound up chasing the last report of a robbery just as the next is reported. Even outdoor stakeouts have failed. Without knowing the day he'll hit, or the building, it just takes too much manpower."

“The real question is how does he get out of the building?”

“In and out. Each building has only one functioning entrance, kept locked day and night, and there is a human guard at the entrance. No non-resident can get in or out, without a resident requesting him. Most buildings had security cameras in the lobby as well. He’s not climbing down or even up on ropes either, unless he’s some kind of magician. Searchlights on the building, even from helicopters have failed to see anything.”

“Have the buildings been locked down and searched? Could he be staying in the building?”

“Every apartment rented in each of the last seven have been. No perpetrator, no loot.”

It was surely a most baffling case. Hawk was glad it wasn’t his.

Alexa thought she had an idea once. She thought that the robberies could be staged from a vacant apartment, which would thus be not subjected to search, since it was empty. Hawk checked, and each building robbed did have a vacancy at the time of the robbery, but, given the number of apartments in each building, that was not unusual. Hawk had fed her suggestion to Lieutenant Mendez, the detective in charge, and so the second building robbed in Denver had the vacant apartment checked, and all they found were animal hairs on the floor from the last tenant. Mendez collected the hairs, but saw no purpose in chasing the last tenants dogs. The vacant apartments in the other buildings had all been rented since the robberies.

So, in the end, Hawk and Alexa each went home for the evening, and no progress was made.

At 3:10 AM, Hawk was awakened by a phone call from Metro Denver Police Headquarters. At 3:11, Alexa was awakened by a phone call from Hawk.

“The impossible robbery case...start thinking. A victim has been killed. Now we have to solve it.”

Alexa met Hawk at the scene. The medical examiner was looking at the body of a 20-something male laying in a now dried pool of blood in the center of his living room, fully clothed, with a bullet in his chest. Near the body, partially covered by some papers that had fallen from a desk, was a hair dryer that the robbery detectives thought the man had been using when he was shot.

As Alexa and Hawk stretched plastic gloves over their hands, Lieutenant Mendez filled them in. “David Brynne was his name, sergeant. He worked in computer software. We came in at 1:30 for a robbery call on the third floor. His was the fourth alarm of the night.”

Alexa and Hawk quickly surveyed the room. The only window was locked from inside, and there was a rather impressive computer setup on the desk. An open safe betrayed that the room had been robbed by the serial burglar.

Hawk bent down to move the papers and look at the hair dryer, as Alexa checked the window, and noted dust on the window sill, except for a few inches of clean space in the center. She thought maybe an object had been there and been knocked off, but there was no object nearby to be found. She noted dust on top of the wood above the bottom pane where one might close the window, except for a space about three inches across, as though the window had recently been closed by someone with a narrow hand.

Hawk moved next to the computer. Alexa bent down to look at the hair dryer, and noted the handprint, or rather glove print, in blood on it. It was plugged into the wall

about 3 feet away, and the cord stretched to bring the dryer near the body. As she knelt down, she noted a line of blood along the lower part of the leg of the computer desk about 4 feet beyond the head of the victim. The line was straight, about 3 inches above floor level, and was parallel to the floor. She also felt the bloodstain around the victim and determined that it had dried onto the carpet. She noted the outline of what must have been the murder weapon in the dried blood beyond the victim, as though the murderer had dropped it there, and picked it up later. It was the shape of a gun with a silencer attached.

“Alexa, do you know how to run these things?” Hawk interrupted her from the computer desk.

“I had a computer forensics seminar in college. Let me try.”

Alexa gave the return key a tap, and got a `c` prompt. She typed the `dir` command and received the information that she was looking at a 160 GB hard drive that was empty.

“Sorry, Hawk, it’s been erased. Your forensic people might be able to recover something.”

“Well, Hawk”, Lieutenant Mendez said, “I guess we’re working together now. Looks like our robber finally got caught in the act.”

Alexa and Hawk looked at each other in disbelief. “What do they teach these people?”

Hawk asked the medical examiner to confirm the time of death, but he already knew from the dried blood. The medical examiner said around midnight. But both Hawk and Alexa could see that it was closer to 10 PM.

“Your robber didn’t do this. I want all this man’s computers. And get a search warrant for his office, too. Every last piece of equipment. Every floppy, every CD, every DVD, every, what-do-you-call it? ”

“Zip disk,” Alexa volunteered. “But, Hawk, we still need to solve the robberies. The real murderer will have an alibi, and if he destroys his bloody clothes, we’ll never prove he did it.”

“Yes, I know, Alexa, that’s why I called you first. We’re done, lieutenant. We have a lot of work to do.” The robbery detectives were speechless. Hawk had done it again; managed to outthink the experts.

The murder itself was trivial to solve. Hawk would simply check the guard’s sign-in sheet for who came in at the real time of the murder. Alexa would simply look it up on the Internet. But both knew Hawk was right. The hairdryer meant that the murderer was planning an alibi for himself. The computer hard drive, even if the erased data could be recovered, would prove only motive.

Alexa and Hawk had both predicted this outcome in a matter of seconds at 3:45 AM, and realized what needed to be done.

Alexa walked the hallway to the stairs, and by the door, found what she had hoped for: a 3 inch half-square pattern of dried blood flakes on the floor just in front of the door. Now she knew that the murderer may have failed in his objective. That might mean negotiating room later.

Hawk, the thorough detective he had always been, pulled out his only possible clue to the robberies; he ran Mendez’ “dog” hairs through the lab. But Alexa would have the answer before he did.

Alexa went home to bed. She needed to dream another story.

The next morning, before it was light, Alexa got Mary out of bed, and used her police consultant ID to get herself and Mary into the vacant apartment in the building that had just been robbed. There was more hair on the carpet.

“Alexa, I don’t understand how I can help you.”

“I can’t wait for the crime lab. I need a quick way to identify these hairs.”

“I don’t know anything about...achoo!”

“Thank you. That’s what I thought.” And Alexa opened the nearest outside window, and noted two indentations, each about an inch wide, about 15 inches apart, on the inside and outside edges of the window sill. Then Mary and Alexa stopped at the guard desk, and Alexa used her police consultant ID to get a look at the list of visitors to David Brynne’s apartment just before 10 PM. She had the name of the murderer.”

She asked Mary, “Can I go check your archives?”

Editor Samuels was not on the best of terms with Alexa, after she had left his arts paper for the Denver Post. That’s why she had started so early this morning. Alexa knew Mary well enough from their frequent lunches, and Mary was not allergic to dogs, or even cats. But Mary had told her about an article she had volunteered to write for the paper the beginning of this month, and how she had sneezed so violently.

Alexa had the robber’s name, or rather names, and motel room address, before the sun cleared the downtown buildings. She called Hawk, but he was dead to the world after last night’s excitement, so she left the information on his voice mail and decided to go it alone. There was no point to Hawk even trying to arrest the murderer until they had the murder weapon anyway. And he wasn’t going to run and leave behind the prize he had killed for. There was no way to know if the robbers knew about the dead body yet. She needed to make sure they didn’t move on to rob buildings in Las Vegas or wherever their January target was. After all, their wonderful scheme had just gotten caught up in a homicide, and that would make remaining in Denver dangerous for them.

Alexa stopped at the office for her laptop, a couple floppy diskettes, and ran into a grocery store for a toy squirt gun and a bunch of bananas. Then she drove to the motel address provided by Mary’s interview research.

The two trucks were there, parked at the motel. “Frick and Frack’s Flying Circus”, the trucks said. Alexa was glad she arrived in time. She sat in her car, running the heat periodically to ward off the late December morning chill.

She kept trying to write the rest of the story in her head, but it just didn’t want to fit. Okay, she knew how they got the goods out of the apartments, and how they avoided being caught. And now she knew why no victim was ever involved in a fight with the robbers. Even in a high-rise, a window left open by the boss could get them in, and the mastermind simply turned off the security alarms, opened the safes, and marked what was to be stolen somehow, earlier in the evening, when he was in the apartment to open the window. But where did the vacant apartment thing fit in? He didn’t need it; his helpers could climb walls. And most importantly, how did he get the security codes to the alarms?

Alexa finally had the time to go on the Internet. She hooked her laptop to her cell phone, and verified that the murderer had killed for jealousy and competition. The missing item, whose bloody outline she had seen twice last night could be worth well over ten million dollars, if it was what she thought it might be. And she didn’t even know for sure if anyone knew it existed.

Fandfflyingcircus.com is the website for a circus act of two brothers from Manitoba, Canada. Tom and Frank McDonough completed doctorates in primate research at the university of Manitoba late in the 1980's, is what the website said. Since their father was a circus manager, when he died, they took their inheritance money, and carefully bred the world's most intelligent primates. The chimps, now third generation, could communicate fluently in sign language, and do incredible stunts. They took the chimps on the road beginning this past spring, and played exactly one month in each city. May in Saskatchewan, June in Victoria, July in Seattle, August in Portland, September in Boise, October in Billings, November in Salt Lake City, December in Denver. January was to be Las Vegas (she had guessed right), February Phoenix, March Los Angeles, April San Francisco, and then back up through Canada.

The Canadian papers confirmed the same pattern of robberies in their cities in the same months.

That still left the security questions unanswered, though. Anyone willing to put in the time can learn to crack simple wall safes and pick locks. And there are special tools to help. But those keypad security codes? You have to be a CIA agent to bypass one of those. And where were they hiding the loot?

Alexa decided there could be secret panels in the trucks, got out of the car, and started going over to have a look, when she heard the noises in the trees behind the motel.

She looked up and saw two chimpanzees seemingly flying from limb to limb of the bare trees. Her knowledge of deaf sign language was less than perfect, but she caught one of them signing "look what I can do", as he or she looked at the motel roof.

Two more chimps, in dark coveralls, wearing gloves and hoods were videotaping the performance! Alexa watched in amazement, as one signed "my turn", and effortlessly stuck his video camera to the outside wall of the motel. He took off the cardboard glasses he wore, dropped them to the ground, where Alexa retrieved them, and noted the blue cellophane in them for lenses. That was the last piece she needed; now she had it all.

She waved to the chimp on he roof, and signed, what she hoped meant "I have bananas."

She must have gotten it right. The junior cat burglar came down, and signed "gimme".

Alexa signed, "I friend. Name Alexa." She risked spelling it, to see what would happen."

"I friend. Name Haynie." Came back. "Haynie want banana." And he followed to her car.

Alexa opened her grocery store bag. She showed Haynie the bananas, the squirt gun, and the floppy diskette. "Bananas Haynie and friends. Alexa want gun and diskette, red."

Haynie climbed the trees, and within minutes, Alexa had the murder weapon, and the floppy diskette that had left the trail of blood on the desk leg and the stairway door. And Haynie, Matilda, Gertrude, and Frankie Junior had a midmorning snack. Alexa looked at the gun, copied the contents of the floppy into her laptop, ran an encoding program, sent an e-mail, and put the evidence carefully into plastic bags.

Frick and Frack, or more precisely Tom and Frank, came out to see who was feeding their chimps. They had absolutely no idea about the murder that the chimps encountered on their last night's rounds.

"These chimps are SO CUTE", Alexa gushed. "Are they yours."

“Indeed they are. You’re not hurting them, are you?”

“Of course not. I pulled in off the road for a rest, and I saw them in the trees. I got out of my car to watch them, and realized I had a bunch of bananas, and thought it would be fun to feed them.

“Would you like to see them perform?”

“They perform? Oh, how absolutely lovely.”

And for the next fifteen minutes, Alexa got a private show from the two proud brothers and the four chimps. Alexa saw Hawk’s car drive up. He parked about 200 feet away, and cracked a huge grin.

“I’d bet these chimps would make great cat burglars.”

The brothers were completely shocked. “Well, uh, we never thought of that...”

“Have you guys read the papers this morning? A man was killed in the last apartment you robbed.”

“You mean you know?”

“Wait a minute, I know you. You’re that lady who’s been solving all those mysteries. Alexa something. Tommy, let’s get out of here. Haynie, Matilda, Gertrude, Frankie, let’s go!”

They started to run for the trucks. Hawk drove up and blocked their exit.

“Do you have the gun?” Hawk got right to the bottom line.

“In my car. I didn’t have much time to look at it, but I noticed some skin caught in the threads where the silencer screws on. I think we have him with his DNA.”

“Alright, you guys. We got you.”

“Please take care of the chimps.”

“I’m not arresting you. I’m a homicide detective. We just needed to find you to get the murder weapon your playmates picked up last night. Now, here’s the deal. In ten minutes, I’m going to make a phone call to robbery division, and give them this address. I’m going to tell them that I acted on an anonymous tip and found the loot in this motel parking lot, with our murder weapon. As long as the loot is here when the robbery division gets here, that’s all I’ll ever say.”

“And I’m going to write an article. No names, I’ll just tell how I interviewed the chimps. But if there’s ever another robbery, the names of my ‘sources’ get shared with the FBI. You guys got it?”

“Yes, ma’am”.

“Okay, your ten minutes starts now.”

Alexa and Hawk drove to police headquarters, and filled out the paperwork.

“I always wanted to do that.”

“What’s that, Hawk?”

“Let a master thief who never hurt anybody escape on the condition that he returned the loot.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“How did you ever figure this out?”

“I had a dream right after I went home. I dreamed it was chimpanzees. You’d have gotten it to after the lab work came back on those hairs.”

“Of course, by then, those guys would be on the run, and our murder weapon would be at the bottom of the Grand Canyon or someplace. So the chimps stole the stuff after Tom and Frank marked it?”

“Let’s take it piece by piece. The whole process takes about 5 days to set up, which is why they do six buildings a month. First, one of the brothers assumes an alternate identity, and pretends to be looking for a place to live.”

“The vacant apartment, right?”

“Yes. Brother 1 unlocked a window in the empty apartment. Later that night, a chimp climbed to the window, and let down a metal ladder that clamped onto the sill. The marks are still there; I saw them. The chimps go around and put video cameras outside as many windows as are left uncovered, so they can look in and watch the alarm keypads as the owners press them. The monitoring is probably done from those trucks. I saw the video cameras they have, and they really stick to walls, and the chimps are quite skillful with them. Now, one brother finds an apartment whose tenants are out working in the daytime, picks his lock, uses the videotaped security code to get in and pretends to be him. The other brother pretends to be a visitor for the man out working. His brother lets him in, and the two of them start picking locks and searching apartments. If someone’s home, they make a ruse. They pretend to be polltakers or whatever and get in that way. After three days of this, they have the whole building cased, and no one even knows they’re operating. They know where every jewelry box and coin collection is, and every safe. Because of the video cameras, they know everyone’s moves.

“In a high security apartment building, most tenants live alone, have good jobs, and have quite a bit of wealth on hand. They trust the security of the building to keep them safe from robbery. And anybody above the third floor probably leaves his window uncovered, since he’s too high up for anyone to see in. The brothers had a good thirty apartments to choose from in each building, they simply picked the four that were easiest for their plan to work. On the night the robbery is to happen, in the EVENING, they wait until everyone is home for the night. They pick the locks on the four apartments they have chosen, disarm the alarms, open the safes if necessary, leave the window open, and mark everything to be stolen with infrared dye.”

“Dye?”

“To guide the chimps. I’m sure you’ll find the dye on the outsides of the windows too. I picked this up when one of the chimps threw it on the ground. It’s a pair of cardboard glasses. The blue cellophane filters out blue, and so it shifts the visible wavelength to the red. Infrared dye, which is usually invisible to the naked eye, becomes visible to the chimps, and they know what to steal. It’s like the exploding ultraviolet dye packs the police use to mark ransom money, only at the other end of the light spectrum. That’s why the chimps picked up the gun and this diskette, which we’ll get to in a minute. They were marked with “red” blood, and the chimps thought they was to steal. They would have taken the hair dryer, too, except, when they opened the window to come into the apartment, the wind blew papers off the desk on top of it, so they didn’t see the bloody handprint.”

“Lucky for us. His trying to cover the time of death is what gave us the killer.”

“The chimps were trained to steal what was marked. Well, anyway, the brothers reset the alarms, and left. They went somewhere to get an alibi going. The fun starts with the chimps in the vacant apartment. The brothers probably use an alarm clock, or maybe one of the chimps has actually learned to tell time. The chimps are totally dressed in dark clothing, their form does not look human when they are climbing around the outside of the building, and they are skillful enough to outrun searchlights, which is why they were

never caught. The chimps go to each apartment on cue. They pull up the unlocked window, which sets off the 45 second countdown built into the electronic alarm. Gathering up what is marked takes about 30 seconds. They're out the door with 15 seconds to spare, which is why nobody ever sees them. The clothing keeps them from leaving fingerprints (yes, chimps have them), and hair. The chimps come back to the vacant apartment, and stack up the loot. Since they put the clothing on in the apartment, that explains all the hair. After the police have left, about 5 in the morning, the brothers come back, climb the metal ladder to the vacant apartment, and take the loot and chimps with them. One chimp goes back up and brings the ladder down. The chimps get the videocameras in the meantime. Finally, one more trip from the man who pretended to be interested in the apartment seals the window left open, and it's a perfect crime."

"Except for dust moved on the window sills, the marks on the window sill left by the ladder, and the hair."

"Right. It's too bad vacuum cleaners are so large, they can't be smuggled past a guard. If there was some way to clean that hair, it would have been a perfect crime. Over and over again. Once you identify the hair as primate, it's a simple matter to trace the few chimps who would be intelligent enough to pull all this off. Now, I solved the impossible robberies, you solve the murder."

"Okay. David Brynne was killed by a colleague either over jealousy or over competition. The colleague visited him before ten o'clock and shot him, and erased his computer. He then tried to use a hair dryer to heat the body to try to make it look like the time of death was closer to midnight. That gave him an alibi. Let me make a quick call here...."

Alexa waited while Hawk verified the forensics.

"You were right. Ballistics confirms it as the murder weapon, there are epithelial cells caught from the killer's hand as he screwed on the silencer, and there are even fingerprints on the bullets in the chamber. The guy wore gloves in Brynne's apartment, but not while he was loading the gun. They're bringing him in now. With the evidence on the gun, it's a slam dunk conviction. The guy must have learned his criminalistics from a video game."

"Tony Masters has no record. He probably only took the gun there to scare Brynne."

"How'd you know his name already? I just got it myself an hour ago."

"I have that police consultant ID you got me. While I was in the building verifying the monkey hairs, I asked to look at the sign-in book. By the way, the motive was competition. The prize is on that floppy."

"I never saw a floppy."

"You were asleep when I called, or I'd have told you everything. Apparently, Brynne had just copied a key program he'd been working on to back it up on the floppy when Masters came to the door. After Brynne was shot, he knew Masters would search his body as he was bleeding out, so while Masters erased the computer, Brynne tossed the disk under the desk. I saw a bloody line on the desk leg where it had landed. I noticed dried blood flakes by the stairwell door where our chimp friend had dropped it. I got it back from the chimps when I got the gun."

"What is it? Do you know?"

"Put it in your computer and see. It's a defense program Brynne and Masters had been working on. The Pentagon's got ten million dollars in it according to Internet. I



wouldn't be surprised if a military intelligence agent shows up to look for it by this afternoon."

"Well, I'm holding it as evidence. They can copy the contents and erase it if they want to."

"You don't have to, I e-mailed it to them this morning. I put a security code on it, so it wouldn't fall into the wrong hands. Just give this to the military intelligence guy when he comes." She wrote a series of numbers on a piece of paper. "If there's a reward for this, it's mine. My dad needs the money."

Alexa went to the Denver Post offices, and wrote two articles: "Defense Contractor Murder Solved" and "My Interview with the Monkey Burglars". Tony Masters got 20 years, all the loot was recovered in the motel parking lot, there was never another monkey burglary, and Frick and Frack and Company got hired by Cirque du Europa and are now on television. The Pentagon gave a 5% finders fee, which after taxes let Alexa keep \$50,000 for expenses in her future cases. The family had a wonderful Christmas when she walked into her home in Atlanta with the \$200,000 check.

Hawk and Alexa spent a quiet New Years' eve together, and he made her promise that she wouldn't confront any more suspects without him. But, we all know what New Years' resolutions are for...

## 5. FIRST WINTER

They say Denver is the "Weather Capital of the World", because the wide variability of the weather in almost any season brings people to settle in its invigorating and challenging climate. But this winter had been a particular challenge to both Hawk and Alexa. It just kept snowing, and snowing, and snowing and snowing.

"It's even keeping the bad guys in", Alexa and Hawk had been commiserating for 6 weeks now. The pair was grateful for free time together, but they had not had a real challenge since the Frick and Frack caper last December. For Atlanta-bred Alexa, her first winter in the north was getting to feel like her brain was turning to mush; there had not been a real article to write in almost two months.

Hawk had taken to inviting Alexa on even his easier cases, giving her relatively small scoops.

For example, just two weeks ago, at the Cooking Challenge Show filming in Denver, when the murders happened.

Cooking Challenge is one of those cable reality shows with four contestants vying for fame and prize money by accepting challenges to cook meals and present them to a panel of judges. Normally produced in Los Angeles, the show took its filming on the road for three months, and had the good fortune to schedule its Denver episode in-between two snowstorms.

It was a simple case, really. Two of the four judges had been poisoned by hemlock powder on a duck entrée served by one of the contestants, a Felix deJung. The two judges sat next to each other, and it was assumed that Mr. deJung had targeted one, and poisoned the second by accident at the same time. Hemlock is a very potent poison, and a few flakes are enough to kill fairly quickly. Since Hawk was off duty that day, two other detectives responded, and when they found that the second judge, one Gourmand Arthur Salvo, had been having a clandestine affair with Mr. deJung's older brother's wife, they arrested him, and gathered only a small amount of evidence.

It was Alexa who called Hawk. The newsroom at her paper had received word of the arrest, and it fell to Alexa to get background details. An envelope with traces of the poison and no fingerprints had been found in a wastebasket accessible to everyone, and the motive clearly made Mr. deJung the best suspect, but Alexa could feel there was something wrong. After all, if only two of the four judges died, the poison was not cooked into the food, and from the time it came out of the oven until it was served, it was probably under video surveillance, she reasoned. Only a very stupid person would attempt to murder the sister-in-law's lover on national TV.

Alexa and Hawk filled a pleasant afternoon watching the station's videotapes. They saw the food come out of the oven, be separated into four portions on four plates, and then carried to each judge. They watched the judges eat, and noted a cut in the film after the victims had eaten about three bites.

"What is that cut for?" Alexa asked the producer's assistant who was showing them the tapes.

"Oh, he dropped his fork on the floor. The judge next to him, Carl Carlson, handed him another from the side." Mr. Carlson had had a long and splendid career as a food critic; he had been the accidental victim under the current theory.

Alexa and Hawk spoke to each other at the same time. "We're done here." Hawk reached for his cell phone and got crime scene access. "I bet anything no one thought to save that fork for evidence."

The autopsy would have confirmed it in a few days anyway. Mr. deJung got very little poison, and that came from the fork handle. A little more research would show that Mr. Carlson had inoperable cancer, and an insurance policy that would not pay if he took his own life. He had chosen a dramatic suicide, and thought he could pass it off as the work of a contestant. It's a good thing some self-murderers are stupid.

Mr. deJung was freed immediately, Alexa got a nice scoop, and her and Hawk had some quality time.

But that was it, and it was now mid-February.

There was that small gnawing matter from last November. Mary had called Alexa three days ago about the sudden marriage of Sarah Berne to dot-com millionaire Henry McGuire, which she noticed as she was typing wedding announcements. Even Mary was suspicious that the woman who became suddenly widowed by her husband's suicide in November was marrying again this soon. Mary had looked back at the arts papers and noted that Sarah Berne had placed the house up for sale almost immediately, and sold off all the couple's collections almost as soon as her husband died.

The Bernes had been written about in the arts paper many times. They collected everything from bottle caps to old bottles to books to postcards to Pez candy dispensers. They bought, sold and traded at every flea market in a two-hundred mile radius and took out advertising often, so Mary recognized the name.

Alexa had asked Hawk about the case when Sarah's husband died. It was a simple closed room suicide, and the case was closed quickly, even though many of the investigating detectives had the same gut reaction that Mary was now having. Sarah's story was that she was watching TV in the living room when she heard the gunshot from the den. She opened the door to the den, saw her husband dead, and called the police immediately. She seemed genuinely distraught when the police questioned her, the neighborhood canvass produced no witnesses who saw or heard anything except the gunshot, there was only about two minutes between the gunshot and the call to 911. The gun was right where it should be, the blood spatter and gun-shot residue were both perfectly where they belonged, and there was even a typed, but signed, suicide note. Nothing was wrong with the picture except the way the widow rebounded so quickly. Faced with the perfect alignment of witness testimony, forensic evidence, and autopsy results, the coroner returned a verdict of death by suicide, and Mrs. Berne collected the small insurance policy settlement, sold the collections and moved on.

All Alexa could do was let the matter lie. And that is what she told Mary.

Until Hawk showed up at her apartment with the present. Wrapped in special "cabin fever" paper and tied with a lovely red bow, Alexa discovered the closed case file.

"Oh, Hawk, you shouldn't have!" Alexa had not held a complete closed case file since forensics class at college, and sounded really enthused at the prospect.

"Everyone in the department knows she's guilty, but it's got to be the perfect crime. And we're both so bored."

Alexa opened the file, and carefully read the full report, detail by detail. With the locked door, the canvass of the neighborhood, and the forensic evidence, there were only two possibilities. Either the man shot himself, or Sarah Berne committed the perfect murder.

"The suicide note could be faked, right? I mean, she could have had him sign it first, and then typed over it?"

“It’s been done.”

“It’s these damned forensics. Your lab dotted every “i” and crossed every “t”. If she did it, she did it in less than two minutes with no defensive attempt on his part. The body was normal 98.6 temperature yet, when the coroner got there a half hour after the 911 call. The room was normal temperature, so the time of death has got to be accurate”.

“She didn’t drug him, either; this is one of the most thorough tox screen analyses I’ve ever seen. Nothing could have passed through his system this thoroughly in two minutes. They checked for skin absorbed drugs, also”.

Then hawk saw Alexa do something that took him by surprise. She returned from a bureau drawer with a magnifying glass, and started examining the crime scene photos, as he himself would have done next. But Alexa became so focused, that Hawk did not understand what was happening. He called her name repeatedly, and got no answer; she had gone into some kind of trance.

The technical term is inductive versus deductive. Most police investigation proceeds inductively. Detectives use the clues to hypothesize a most likely scenario, and go on to look for more evidence to support it. Indeed, that is part of our justice system; the two party adversary proceeding. It is the responsibility of the defendant’s attorney to prove if the police are wrong. It is not the responsibility of the police to eliminate all other possible defendants.

But Alexa doesn’t work this way; her method is inductive. She memorizes all the clues, writes a hundred stories to explain the first two, and then adds each subsequent clue to the stack of stories, eliminating the theories that the new clue contradicts. After a long enough time of doing this, she is left with only one story, and that must be the right one. It’s that JLL thing: Hawk is trained to get convictions; Alexa is self-taught to free the innocent by finding the guilty.

A big case like this was exactly what the doctor would have ordered for her six weeks’ involuntary incarceration from mental activity. The sheer number of collections of things that the Berne couple owned created dozens of crime scene photos of collections, each with several hundred items, that, if combined correctly, might be a way to make someone kill himself. Alexa would have to memorize not a dozen photographs, but ten thousand more or less unrelated items, decide which two to start with, and slowly whittle away a million stories into just one or two. It was like asking an old pre-DOS computer to download and make a music CD with broadband. Alexa gave it her all, but that left nothing to acknowledge Hawk’s presence with.

It was a good half hour later that Alexa looked up. “Have you considered hypnosis?”

“She hypnotized him to kill himself?” Hawk knew it could explain the evidence, but he also knew it was impossible. “I just went to a detective convention last summer that had

a conference in the topic. Hypnosis can't make a person do something they have ethical standards against. It just isn't possible."

"Says who?"

"Dr. Emil von something or other, the famous hypnosis researcher from Vienna."

Alexa didn't need the detail; they had taught her the same in her forensic psychology class. And so back into the magnified photographs she went.

Another two hours passed. Hawk got a pizza, watched a football game, and returned some phone calls.

"Got it."

"Huh?" Hawk suddenly remembered why he was killing time at Alexa's apartment.

"She did it. I know how. I just don't know how to prove it."

"Tell me, I'll help you."

"You're no fun! Let me think..."

And Hawk went back to the movie he had been stirred from.

A half hour later he was stirred again. Alexa was talking on the cell-phone.

"Mrs. Berne-McGuire. Congratulations on your upcoming wedding. My name is Alexa Brown of the Denver Post."

The name opens doors in Denver.

"We're planning a special article on beginning a new life after tragedy. Would you allow me to interview you for the paper? You would, how lovely. Tomorrow at 7? Great. Is there any chance Mr. McGuire would be there too? Excellent, so I can speak to you first, and to him when he gets home for a few minutes, great. Yes, of course, assuming it doesn't snow again in the meantime."

"Alexa, no, she's a murderer. Is she a murderer?" Hawk had made the decision months ago not to let her confront any more murderers.

"Almost certainly. Evidence and story to follow on tomorrow night's news. Don't worry, Hawk. You've just become a photographer for the Denver Post, and been assigned to my story tomorrow night. See if you can rustle up a video camera, and a backup audio recorder. I'll doctor you up some credentials. Can we leave at 6:30?"

“How did she....?”

“You’d never believe me. With any kind of luck we can get the proof on tape.”

Hawk got his evening with Alexa with no further distraction. He didn’t know it, but he’d need the memories to get him through tomorrow night.

Promptly at 7, Alexa Brown, and her videographer, James Hawk, rang the doorbell at the mansion of wealthy dot-com millionaire Henry McGuire. Sarah Berne-McGuire greeted them personally.

“Do come in. Alexa, may I call you Alexa?”

“Of course. This is my videographer, James Hawk.”

“Please come into the south reception room. I have some refreshments set.”

Hawk and Alexa noted that this was a woman who seemed to prefer to do things herself, rather than hire domestic help.

“You’ll excuse my absence of help. It’s the maid’s night off.” Hawk was satisfied. But Alexa had talked to the woman on the phone and detected some incompatibility with her tone of voice then, and the lack of a maid tonight. She bumped up against Hawk and felt that his service pistol was strapped on.

“So, my dear, what can I answer for one of the country’s finest reporters?”

Flattery will often blind people to hidden agendas. But not Alexa. “How does one rebound so quickly? I mean, Mr. Berne died not three months ago. You’ve come from a collector of what some would call trash to this wonderful mansion.”

“Trash, you say? I had heard great things about you, and your ability to size up people. Are we off the record?” Hawk switched off the vidocamera, but the hidden tape recorder kept running.

“Of course, Mrs. Berne. As you wish.”

“Call me Sarah, please. Yes, I don’t mind telling you, I got tired of Mr. Berne years ago. I was so sick of living for his ‘collectibles’ and flea markets. The big secret? Me and Henry actually met a year ago.”

“Are you serious, Sarah? Are you really willing to give me a story that the way to succeed in rebuilding your life is to cheat on a now dead husband?”

“And why not? It worked for me. I’m just happy I didn’t have to kill him myself.”

Alexa barely glanced at Hawk. How many real non-moral sociopaths are there in the world? This, if true, would mean that Alexa would have to change her interview tactics, and she needed some time to think.

“You mean he obliged you?”

“Well, yes, of course. Husbands are like that, you know. Speaking of which, here he is now.” And Henry walked through the door and joined them in the room.

“Good evening, dear. Please meet the famous Alexa Brown of the Denver Post, and her videographer, James Hawk.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. Please call me Henry. May I call you Alexa and James?”

“Of course.” Alexa and Hawk both noticed that he did indeed oblige her. The four were seated and Alexa was still thinking how to proceed. She got her idea.

“Henry, could you tell us how you and Sarah met?”

Henry looked at Sarah, uncertain if she wanted the truth of the affair to come out. “It’s okay dear. Please tell her.” So he did.

“Sarah, could we get more tea?” Alexa asked.

“Henry, dear. Please get us some tea.” And with that, he left the room.

“You have a great man there, Sarah. Any woman would be pleased to have him.” Alexa needed to check the verbiage Sarah was using, so she had to have a couple more samples. That’s why she was encouraging this nonsense.

Henry returned with a tray. Alexa asked, “Henry, would you please hand me a napkin.” Henry looked at Sarah.

“It’s okay dear. Please hand her a napkin.”

“Thank you, Henry.” Alexa said. “Just one more thing, could I have that spoon?” Henry looked at Sarah. Before Sarah could answer, Alexa added. “My dear, please hand me the spoon.” He did so at once.

The question is, did Sarah notice Alexa had broken the code?

Alexa stood to her feet.

“Hawk, get ready. Sarah Berne, I arrest you for the murder of your former husband.”

“Henry, dear, please defend us. These are burglars.”

Henry started towards the pair menacingly.

“Sergeant Hawk James, Metro Denver Homicide Division. I need you to step back.”

“Not necessary, Hawk. Henry, dear, please make your own decision.” Alexa knew the code, too.

“Henry, dear, dear please return armed. We are being attacked by wild animals.” Henry left the room. Alexa knew there was another code, but she had no way of knowing it. Hawk had his gun drawn, but didn’t know what was actually happening.

“Give me your cuffs and keep her covered, Hawk. We have to gag her, too. She’s got him hypnotized. The code word is the combination ‘dear, please’”

“You can’t make someone do something against their will,” Hawk retorted.

“She’s not doing that. She’s changing what he sees.”

It suddenly dawned on Hawk what was happening. He gave Alexa the cuffs, and suddenly the door swung open and a shotgun blast rang out. All Henry could see was the two lions who had somehow entered their home. Alexa and Hawk jumped behind a sofa. Sarah ran to Henry’s side.

“Henry, dear, please try to kill those animals. I’ll call for help.” And she left the room.

“Hawk James, Denver Metro Police, put the gun down.” A second blast barely missed them and was mostly absorbed by the sofa. Henry started to reload.

“That won’t work, Hawk. Henry, dear, dear, please, we are other hunters and have killed the animals. Come help us with the bodies.” Henry put the gun down. Hawk ran and handcuffed the man.

“Hurry, Hawk, she’s getting away.” They ran out to the street, as Sarah whizzed by in her new Mercedes. “Get out an APB.”

“Okay, just don’t say ‘dear, please’ to me”.

“You got it.”

Sarah was caught just four miles from the house and arrested. With knowledge of the plot, it was easy to get Henry to turn state’s evidence. As Alexa remembered from her class, hypnosis can’t make a person kill, but it CAN make a person identify an object as something other than what it is. Alexa guessed, and Sarah’s confession later confirmed, that Sarah got her husband to sign the suicide note by making him think it was a letter to a friend, and got him to shoot himself by making him think the gun was a Pez candy



dispenser. Both work the same way – you put it near your mouth and pull the trigger. They differ only in whether a piece of candy or a bullet comes out.

“You know, Hawk, I had no idea at all how she did it, until I noticed that she owned four books on advanced hypnosis. I saw them in the crime scene photograph of the book collection, when I looked with the magnifying glass.”

“So she was a black widow sociopath who married for money, and killed her men?”

“No, actually, I think she started out normal. At a certain age something snapped. She hated her life from then on, and when they first got the hypnosis books, she read them for fun, and tried them on her first husband. The idea to kill him probably developed after she met Henry. She probably tested her skills on Henry and figured out she could get his money the same way. I wonder, if we hadn’t stopped her, if she would have just killed Henry also, say, by telling him that a stone wall wasn’t there when he was driving his car, and gone on to a few more husbands the same way.”

“It was a good thing I kept the recorder running. We’d have no evidence otherwise, and it would be Henry’s word against hers.”

“Yes, well, we got her. You know what, look out the window. The snow’s starting to melt.”

## 6. THE TIME TRAVELLER

It was March, and Alexa was doing what Alexa usually did on alternate Tuesday afternoons. She was standing in line at the Second National Bank of Denver to deposit her paycheck.

“ZZHHHSSSHHAAAA”.

“What kind of a noise was that?” Alexa said to herself. She turned to her right, and saw a huge burned circle on the bank wall.

“Nobody move.” The voice came from her left, and she, and twenty some other patrons in lines waiting to see tellers turned to see a man enter, or rather appear, in an odd kind of suit, made of some kind of sparkling material, and holding what looked like a futuristic ray gun. “This is a holdup. Everyone down on the floor, face down.”

Alexa switched on her pocket interview recorder, and glanced up just enough to see the man walk, or maybe almost float, to the teller window, and point the ray gun at the teller. “One hundred dollar bills only.” Naturally, the teller complied.

“Good day to you - hey wait a minute, who touched me?” the robber screamed. Alexa thought it odd, because it was unlikely anyone would be near him. But it was what the robber thought had happened that mattered, and he shot again, making a new circle on the

wall behind where the customers had been standing. The burglar alarm went off. “Okay, everybody stay where you are. I have to think.”

Alexa knew the police would be there in three minutes or less, but had no idea what was going on, except she felt a scoop coming. Everyone waited. Three minutes later police were seen outside the bank window. Four minutes later a phone call came through for the robber. “Tell them to call me on my cell phone, 201-555-9872”. “How odd can you get”, Alexa thought, “A ray gun armed man who wants U.S. money, and has a cell phone?” But the call came through. The robber pulled a cell phone from his pocket.

“Hi, Matt. You’re the FBI negotiator, right?... Pleased to meet you... Now, Matt, don’t lie to me. I know that you’re here to talk me into surrendering without killing anyone. And you know that I know that anything else you say to me is just a lie so I’ll do just that. So, how about this, just like I told your friend Peter two weeks ago: You can’t stop me... Now, Matt, be reasonable, I told Peter and I’ll tell you. I’m a time traveler. I can just disappear. Look, Matt, I’m sorry, I’ve got to go. Oh, by the way, you can come into the bank in twenty seconds; I’ll be gone.” He hung up. “Okay, everyone, you can look up now.” And the man put away the cell phone, and pulled a device out of his pocket that looked like a pocket calculator. He punched some buttons, glowed various colors, and vanished.

The FBI interviewed Alexa with the rest of the hostages, but let everyone leave. They took samples of the burned circles, and were careful to note that the burglar had escaped, apparently to the future, with \$6200 in what to him, must have been antique money fit only for some futuristic coin collector. The money was marked with ultraviolet dye, but no one would be looking for it, then.

Alexa called Hawk.

“I’ve got it on tape; I had my recorder running. I don’t believe it for a minute. No, I can’t explain it, not yet. I need the forensics on the burn marks; and the FBI call trace. Is the FBI handling it, or is Denver Metro? I don’t want to deal with brown suit again, even if they do owe me a favor. Okay, tonight.”

And Hawk came through. They met that night, and Alexa got her copies of everything.

“It’s the second time, you know. It was almost word for word what you saw today, and at a different bank.”

“I knew. The robber mentioned it. An FBI named Peter negotiated the first time.”

“There’s no way we could stop a time traveler anyway. What would he want with twenty-first century money? The burn marks are some kind of ignited chemical. The phone number is untraceable, sold recently at a mall in Denver, but somehow the call went through. The FBI knows it’s a modern person pretending to be a time traveler, but they’re at a total loss for how he did it.”

“You’re confused, Hawk. That’s all smoke and mirrors.”

“Huh?”

“He’s misdirecting you. Don’t ask how he does it, ask why.

“Why he’s robbing a bank? That’s easy, money.”

“No, no. Ask why he takes hostages, if he can escape to a future reality where we can’t follow him just by pushing a button. We need to solve this quickly. His true motive might be way more serious than bank robbery.”

“You’re right.” And hawk pulled out his cell phone.

“Captain, Hawk here. Listen, is the FBI willing to let me and Alexa work that bank case? Okay, this is just a thought, but tell them I’d like to have the names of all the negotiators serving the Denver area.” He turned to Alexa. “Satisfied?”

“I’ll be satisfied when we catch him. That other holdup was two weeks ago? And a different bank each time? I just hope we can stay ahead of this guy.”

The captain had hoped the FBI would cooperate, but they said their negotiators were above suspicion, and refused to tell Hawk and Alexa and more than that there were two – Peter and Matt. Without last names, that was as far as they could go. But Hawk and Alexa said they would be on call for the next holdup. Who could have guessed it would be the next day.

2:20 PM Denver Peoples’ Credit Union. Hawk and Alexa waited outside as the script played out. They were allowed to listen to Matt’s side of the negotiation.

“Hello, again. This is Matt. Yes, I know, you told me that yesterday. Yes, I know escape into the future. No, we don’t believe you, that you’re from the future. No I don’t even believe you’re real. We think you’re a hologram.”

Alexa thought of that, too, and abandoned it at first. After all, someone picked up the money, and something put two burn marks in the wall. And worse yet, you can’t talk to a hologram on the phone. That’s how Alexa eliminated the other stories until she was left with only this one.

As she stood next to Matt, she carefully picked his pocket, and handed the wallet off to Hawk. Hawk made a phone call, and two detectives were on their way to the first of the two real culprits. Alexa and Hawk would catch the second as he came out of the bank.

Matt continued on the phone: “You’ll let me what? Come in and actually watch you leave? And you’ll even let me bring my gun if I keep it in my holster? Okay, give me

half a minute.” Alexa had expected this, which confirms that Hawk had sent the two detectives to the right place.

“Matt, don’t go in. You’re the target.” Alexa would at least try to get these FBI people to listen.

“Stay out of this, lady. This is exactly what we wanted. I’ve got my flack vest, and we’re finally going to get to see how he does it. See, I’ve got this little lapel camera.”

“Please, Denver Metro’s on its way to arrest the boss of this little gang right now. They’re not robbers, they’re murderers, and they’re after you personally.”

“Somebody get her out of here.” And they did. Matt never had a chance to notice his wallet had been stolen.

Matt’s video feed caught it all. Matt entered the bank, showing his hands were empty.

“Okay, everybody, you can look up now.” The robber pushed the buttons on his calculator-like gadget, glowed several colors, and vanished.

“ZZHHHSSSHHAAAA”.

The video feed stopped. Matt was dead, and on fire. In a minute nothing would be left except ash. The fire was so hot, no one could get close enough to help, although one young man, a photographer named William tried, and would shortly be released by the FBI with their thanks, as a hero.

Alexa had it pretty well figured that it would happen this way, and so she just went over to Denver Metro where Matt’s wife was being questioned by Hawk.

“We’ve got your bank records already, we can see the payments to the unnumbered account. We know you hired your husband killed.”

She said nothing.

“We know it’s a hologram and a partner. Identify him or you’re going to spend the rest of your life in jail.”

She said nothing. Hawk knew he had nothing. Without the FBI’s help there could be no tracing the actual hit man. They could hold her 48 hours that was all.

“Let her out! Now! Let her grieve.”

It was grey suit and brown suit, from the ABC Capers, insisting Metro Police let her go. Alexa had hoped they would have longer to get the warrant to search her phone records, etc. Hawk stood firm. It was a good thing that the FBI would never know that Matt’s

wallet had not been vaporized in the ray gun blast, but instead was hidden at Hawk's apartment. They would have probably brought charges.

Alexa wrote nothing, and got scooped by every paper in town. "Accidental ray gun blast kills FBI negotiator". WRONG, all of it. But Alexa and Hawk were stymied. The truth would have to wait for another idea.

Alexa tossed and turned for quite a while that evening. By early tomorrow morning, the FBI would have a Federal judge get Matt's wife out of jail, and by 12 she'd be in a new life with her insurance money and/or new mate. By now, the geek who the wife hired to figure out this stunt would be out of Denver, and back in his own real identity. Alexa might still be able to search the wife's house for a link to the lover or the geek, but the FBI probably was watching her, so that wouldn't work. Maybe, if she could get to the bank security tape, she could identify the geek with his different identities and go from there; but the FBI had those, and no idea that there even WAS a geek to look for. Alexa needed sleep.

It was 2 AM before sleep came. By 6AM, Alexa had a dream, and by 6:30 she was on the Internet.

Would you believe rentageek.com? It was the fifth such site Alexa tried, and the first to bring up any names at all for the weird combination of skills Alexa entered into the search bar: computerized programmable holography, incendiary chemicals, and remote activation of components. Alexa had 5 names. Her dream had helped her remember who was in the bank with her a couple days ago, carrying any kind of bag that could hide projection equipment and other paraphernalia. She had seen him in the bank through a window a second time yesterday. He had multiple identities, of course, but he had to be carrying a satchel with a secret compartment, so satchels was what she tried to remember.

35, 5 foot 9, male. She tried to focus on the things disguises can't hide, like ear lobes and hairlines. Comparing that to the names and pictures on rentageek gave her two numbers, and she called both. One's life-partner said he was still at work on the night shift. The second scolded her for waking him after a long airplane trip. This may be the man.

"Hawk, I have a way to break this thing. Jason Peeves of Worthingham, Massachusetts. Was he in Denver yesterday?"

Alexa does this kind of thing all the time, so Hawk dragged himself out of bed to check airline departures.

"Okay, go down there and try his name on Matt's wife. I'm pretty sure he's the killer."

As predicted, at 8:01, the FBI interrupted the questioning with a habeas corpus writ. At 8:02, Matt's wife was formally arrested. She had cracked at 8:00 exactly. Apparently, the mention of Jason's name was enough to convince her that what she thought was the perfect crime had been discovered for the conspiracy it was.

With the arrest, the local charge of conspiracy was enough to hold Matt's wife. The rest was details. Once warrants were obtained, and her house searched, bank, computer and phone records proved the connection before Jason could cover himself by computer hacking. Jason was arrested and brought to Denver.

And Alexa scooped every paper in town.

“Elaborate conspiracy targets FBI negotiator.”

Matt's wife had indeed been having an affair and wanted out of the marriage. Killing an FBI negotiator is very difficult, as they are so well protected. The wife hired Jason, and the plan was set up. Create a time traveling bank robber by means of a holographic projection. Computerize the picture so it can be controlled to respond real time to an incoming phone message. Have chemicals sprayed on two walls and radio controlled receivers to ignite them on command, to make it look like the holographic ray gun is actually shooting. Always take hostages, so Matt has to come into the bank. Control the show from a small satchel while laying on the floor pretending to be a hostage. Pick up the stack of hundred dollar bills after everyone stands up, while the crowd is distracted by the disappearance, and hide them in a secret compartment in the satchel. Create a lot of identities to give yourself lots of banks to be in, so you can do it to a different bank each time until Matt shows up as the hostage negotiator. The second time Matt shows up, fake him out so he will come into the bank. Then shoot him with a stun gun, and use your chemicals on him while everyone is distracted. Burn up all your equipment with Matt in the fire, and walk away. Expensive, tricky, but not impossible.

And without Alexa, Jason could have destroyed all the records he created being in Denver, and it would have worked.

Brown suit and grey suit were understandably mad, and told Alexa so. Alexa just said, “okay guys, next time I'll tell them all about YOUR contribution to the murder. That headline could have read ‘Denver Police stonewalled by FBI cover-up; bank robbers escape while Federal officials seal evidence.’”

## THE 10:15 MURDER CAPER

Spring had come to Denver, but the long winter had taken its toll on the business of solving impossible crimes and writing about it. Alexa was not surprised when, the second week in April, her boss assigned her to a non-crime related research story: write about what it's like to be homeless. Alexa responded as her boss would have liked, and went undercover, taking up residence under an interstate overpass on the outskirts of downtown. For the next three weeks, she would alternate between nights spent in a cardboard box, and her middle class apartment, hoping to gather experience firsthand, and interviews with the homeless population of Denver, for an article.

Of course, Alexa had some experience with the homeless already. Her upbringing was middle class, as her father was a teacher in the Atlanta school system. But many of her fellow students at the community college had been homeless at one time or another. Moses grew up in a project. So Alexa had more than nodding acquaintance with the problems.

But it *was* a boring job, compared to solving inexplicable crimes. So, on the weekends, Alexa and Hawk met, as usual, and discussed the as-yet-to-be-solved problems of Denver Metro Homicide division. The first weekend, Alexa was out of luck. While she and Hawk had quality time together, there was little of the mental gymnastics that both their brains thrived on.

The second weekend was better:

“Okay, here’s the problem,” Hawk began. “Last Tuesday a college student became unconscious right in his seat at class. After a few minutes, they noticed he was not asleep, but sick. They called 911, and he was DOA at the hospital at 10:35. The autopsy revealed a poison was the culprit. Solve it.”

Alexa couldn’t believe it. That’s not enough for anything.

“What kind of poison?”

“Takes about 2 hours after ingestion to become effective.”

“How ingested?”

“Unknown. Forensic search turned up nothing on his person, in his house, or at school to account for it.”

“Where was he at the time of ingestion?”

Hawk opened his notebook. “Breakfast at home 7:15. Left at 7:30. Took the bus to school arriving at 8:10. Bought a soda from the machine, went to class at 8:15, class started 8:30, ended 9:50. Second class started 10:00; that’s where he collapsed. We checked the breakfast food, the soda, nothing.”

“Then someone sneaked it to him in class or on the bus.”

“That’s what I thought too. I’ve had three days on this, Alexa. If this kid has any enemies, I couldn’t find them. I checked all his calls, computer activity, talked to all his friends, parents, boss at his part time job.”

“Random killing?”

“Not likely, there’d be another one by now if it was some kind of terrorism. Besides, I checked every student at that part of the college that time of day. I talked to more than 60 people. No one even acted suspicious. We had plain clothes officers talk to everyone on the bus Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, same story.”

“Maybe, or maybe it’s a new terrorist killer practicing.”

“It’s like any serial killer, if it is. We can’t do anything until we have enough victims to get a pattern.”

They thought and talked for another hour, but it was useless. In the end, Alexa went back to her homeless people project, and Hawk left the case open, although he had no plan what to do next.

Alexa woke from her cardboard box Friday to see Hawk standing over her.

“You’re under arrest for vagrancy.”

Alexa groaned, and rolled over. It always takes her a few minutes to get her brain working in the morning. Then she sat bolt upright. “You mean there’s been another killing.”

“Two, Monday and yesterday. A court reporter collapsed during a trial Monday at 10:18, and a doctor’s receptionist in the suburbs fell over Thursday at 10:03. Same poison both times.”

Alexa picked up her bedroll, and joined Hawk in his car. “Lay it on me.”

“The court reporter investigation is done. Again, no motive, no enemies. Movements on the day in question were: Breakfast 7AM with his wife, arrived at work at 9AM.”

“What happened in-between?”

“I can’t prove it. He drives to work, usually about 8:45. But his wife leaves the house at 7:30 for her job, and he starts the housework at home. But I have no proof that’s what happened Monday morning. Once she left, she couldn’t be sure. And his car was in the garage when I got there Monday afternoon. So basically I don’t know.”

“Same as the student? Everything ruled out.”

“Yes, but now with 2, it looks like terrorism.”

“Commonalities between the two?”

“Only one. They both live on the east side of town, and spend their weekdays in the downtown area. But that’s not it; it can’t be.”



“Why not?”

“The receptionist for the doctor lives in a downtown apartment, and works in the western suburbs. Her story looks like it will be the same. No enemies, no motive, no way it could have been slipped to her. And she eats breakfast at 8AM, doesn’t leave for work until 8:30.”

Alexa went with Hawk, interviewing the receptionist’s relationships, checking phone records, etc. There was nothing to grab onto. These were three non-descript people, living very private, humdrum lives, living in different parts of the city. Once again, by Monday morning, Alexa was back interviewing homeless people, and Hawk was adding to a list of unsolved murder cases. The only commonality was the time of the poisoning, and the type of the poison.

Monday evening Hawk pulled Alexa into police custody again.

“Another one?”

“Not exactly. Financial executive secretary in an office on the fourteenth floor of a building northwest of downtown. But it happened at 2:30 PM.”

“Movements 11:30 to 12:30?”

“Sat in the office at the computer until 12, lunch at the cafeteria on the twelfth floor until 12:30, and back to work. Forensics took everything from her desk, but that’s not it. And I know she’ll turn out having no enemies, no motive, and no leads.”

“Of course, you checked the cafeteria patrons?”

“Not yet. There’s over 800 regulars. We’ll need lots of manpower. And we’ll never be able to find the visitors, if there were any.”

“No, we have a lead. We just can’t see it. I know we must be looking straight at it. I need to dream; I need to think.”

Alexa looked straight out the car window, half in a daze. Her eyes fell on the bus stop at the corner, and the ads pasted on the plexiglass windscreens around the waiting bench: “Vacation in New Mexico this spring”, “vote for LaBella for council”, and “Life Savers”.

“I’ve got it, Hawk, that’s it!”

“What’s it?”

“How much publicity has there been on these murders? I haven’t been able to keep up with the news where I’ve been.”

“A little article in the back of the paper each time. We’re trying to keep the potential serial killer and terrorist angles quiet.”

“Now, pull out the map, and show me the five victims home and work again.”

And it was as Hawk had said. The first two victims lived two block north and two blocks south of the main street through East Denver, about a mile apart, and worked downtown. The third lived downtown, and commuted to the northwest suburbs. The fourth lived in South Denver and worked in a skyscraper on the northwest edge of the downtown area.

“Okay, good, then the M.O. won’t change on us, and we have until Thursday before the next victim. We know how it’s done, we just have to find out who. Hawk, tomorrow you and I are going back to the upper floors of that skyscraper, and we’re going to look for a good natured very ordinary man or woman who commutes to work, eats at that cafeteria, and has a spouse with a reason to kill them and a knowledge of chemistry. And then, we’re going trick-or-treating.”

Hawk never understood such things, of course, but he knew Alexa was probably right, so he spent the evening checking the records of the cafeteria for who eats there. Next morning, he and Alexa would have their work cut out for them. There were over 800 people from 30 firms and offices on the top eight floors of that sixteen storey high-rise. And most of those 800 people were very ordinary.

It was a simple procedure, but extremely time consuming. Hawk couldn’t ask other officers to help, since Alexa had only the germ of a theory going, and she’d have to be there, to play her hunch on whom to question. They went to each office in turn, and asked the manager if he would corral all the employees in a meeting room. Hawk would introduce himself, and explain the situation, and Alexa would say, “okay, who has candy like Life Savers or breath mints with them everyday, and passes them out to people, lives in East Denver, and rides the bus to work sometimes?”

The first time Hawk couldn’t believe his ears. It was so obvious. The intended victim almost certainly had to work here, of course, because of the cafeteria connection. Riding the bus seemed a natural enough guess, and the locations of the homes of the victims suggested that he was transferring busses to get here. In the long run, it was the ONLY way it figured. Someone with access to the person’s purse or pockets was spiking the life-savers, hoping the target would eat the poisoned one. Instead, the intended victim kept sharing them, giving them to other people. Opportunity for access made the killer a spouse with chemistry knowledge, since the doctored life-saver had to appear identical to the others. That’s why it took 3 days between killings each time. The spouse had to wait for the newspaper to make certain that that’s what happened, and the victim had not gotten wise.

At the end of Wednesday, Hawk and Alexa had eliminated all but three people, and on Thursday would receive three packages of unopened candy, from spouses who were now on the alert for such trickery. Forensics would do the rest.

And, as Alexa said to Hawk, “let’s just hope the guy with the candy wasn’t merely visiting the cafeteria last Monday.”

The rest was simple. By Friday, Hawk served the warrant, found the unused poison, and the chemistry set. The wife of one senior accountant had him followed a few weeks earlier, thus getting proof of his affair, and signed to a prenuptial agreement, would gain nothing if she divorced him. A few days later she hatched the scheme, and tried to poison him at work, where she could never be suspected, and the method of delivery would be destroyed by the digestive system long before he succumbed to the poison.

The inadvertent serial poisoner is waiting on death row. Alexa had two great articles to write, one about homeless people, and one about life-savers. And the bus riders of Denver were safe from malicious candy.

## DANNY'S DILEMMA

By Ken Behrens

Sept. 2003

My name is Danny. I'm 13 years old. I'm scared to tell you my last name, because you could get my parents in a whole lot of trouble. But I need to write this because I need to find someone who can help me. I need to solve a problem and I don't know who I can turn to for advice.

Four years ago, my mom and dad were still married, and we all lived together. We were happy until one day when my dad met Lori. Lori had a lot of money, and my dad liked to go with her to things the rich people do. You know, like art galleries and opera and stuff. Well, my dad started hanging around with Lori a lot, and that made my mom real sad, so my mom went to court and sued my dad for divorce. My dad didn't care. He got married to Lori, and they lived off her bank account.

Well, my mom and dad never had a lot of money, and she had to pay the lawyers a lot, so it wasn't long before she wrote a bad check so we could buy groceries. Well, the store put my mom in jail for a night, and because of that, and because my dad and Lori were married, the judge said I had to live with my dad.

The judge made my mom go see a social worker. Her name was Ms. George. My mom used to tell me that Ms. George was a really good social worker. She said that's because Ms. George used to have a lot of problems herself. When you have a lot of problems, you get good at solving them, and then you can help other people better.

Ms. George helped my mom a lot. She got my mom a job working in an office, so my mom had money, and she helped my mom get her own apartment, and not feel so bad that my dad left her, and that I couldn't live with her for a while.

The next year Ms. George had some more problems of her own, though. She got in a car accident, and got hurt so bad she couldn't work anymore. She had to be in a wheel chair, and sometimes her brain didn't work right.

Well, my mom decided to be nice to Ms. George, like she was to my mom. Ms. George never had a husband, so she was all alone. Since she couldn't get out much now, my mom would drive over to Ms. George's apartment, and bring her mail in for her, and buy her groceries. Ms. George and my mom got to be friends, and my mom even had a key to Ms. George's apartment, and a key to her mailbox.

Which is how my mom met Mrs. Baker.

Mrs. Baker was an old lady, over seventy. Her husband died many years earlier, and she was in a wheelchair, too. Until Ms. George was in the accident, she used to buy Mrs. Baker's groceries for her, and bring in her mail. So when my mom started helping Ms. George, Ms. George asked if she would help Mrs. Baker too. Well, my mom did. And the two of them became friends, too.

My mom used to say it was good to have people to help. She didn't have to think about how sad she was so much. I think it was nice to have two people's apartment keys, and two mailbox keys in her wallet too. Keys make people feel important.

There were four apartments in the building where Ms. George and Mrs. Baker lived. The two ladies lived at opposite ends of the building, and two young couples lived in the middle, but they worked all day, and were never home. My mom's boss used to let her

out of work early on Thursdays, so that's when she went to the grocery store, and helped her two friends. This went on for over a year.

Then one Thursday something happened, and that's what caused my problem.

My mom bought groceries, and came by about three in the afternoon. She dropped off Ms. George's mail and groceries. She told my mom she wanted to look at some of her mementos and think about some stuff. So my mom went to see Mrs. Baker for a while before she came back. This is important: my mom very carefully locked the door when she left.

Mrs. Baker made my mom tea and some biscuits, and the two of them were sitting and talking, when there was a sound, like a car backfiring.

Mrs. Baker thought maybe it was a gunshot, but my mom didn't think so. Anyway, they got up from the table and went to the window to look out, but they didn't see anything. Mrs. Baker kept being afraid, though, so she made my mom go to Ms. George's apartment and see if she was all right.

What my mom saw was horrible. Ms. George was lying slumped forward in her wheelchair, her back to the door. The whole back of her right hand was all bloody. And there was a bullet hole in her right temple. My mom was about to pick up the phone and call the police, but then she noticed the box where Ms. George kept her mementos laying on the floor at her feet and snapshots and jewelry falling out of it. My mom said it looked to her like Ms. George had gotten her mementos out to look at, and someone killed her for them. Most people would have thought that nothing was taken, since the jewelry was still there, but my mom knew that Ms. George had mostly worthless costume jewelry, but only one good piece. It seems that about ten years ago, a cousin in Europe died and gave her a diamond necklace worth about half a million dollars. When my mom saw that wasn't there, she remembered from TV how you shouldn't touch anything in a murder scene, so she ran back to Mrs. Baker's, and dialed 911. Then she waited for the detectives out front by the mailboxes.

Here's what the detective, Sergeant Broke, and my mom, said to each other:

"Are you sure", the sergeant asked, "that the door was open when you got here?"

"Yes, I am. I had my key out ready to open it, but I noticed it was open about four inches. I was a little scared already when I came in."

"Well, there's no sign it was forced. That usually means she knew her attacker."

"Usually?" my mom asked. "You don't think so now?"

"Probably", Sergeant Brooke answered. "But I'm not sure. See, if Ms. George answered the door to let him in, why would her wheelchair be facing away from the door? And how would the attacker have gotten close enough to shoot her like this in the temple?"

"She owned a gun."

"Where is it, now?"

"She kept it the bedroom, in the bureau drawer, locked in a metal box."

"We found the box, it was opened with the key, and was empty. The killer must have taken the gun with him. We're looking all over the neighborhood for it now."

"I'm glad I'm not the detective."

"Here's the other odd thing. The pen in this box with the mementos."

"That's not odd. Look at the backs of the photos. She wrote on them all the time."

“And how did he ever get her to put her hand to her head and pull the trigger? She would have resisted, and there’s no sign of that. And no sign of any poisons or bruises first.”

“That’s easy too. Since the accident, her mind wasn’t always working right. She’d go out of normal thinking every once in a while.”

“You know, the only thing that fits is that a friend came over, and she showed the friend her gun, and her jewels, and the friend decided to steal the necklace you told me about. Then he tried to make it look like suicide, but changed his mind and ran. It sounds so odd, but that’s all I can think of. Tell me, would you be willing to stay for a while and go over her address book with me? We need to figure out who she knew well enough to let him into all those personal things, but could still turn on her?”

“Of course.”

“One more thing. Do you mind if we search you?”

“Search me? I’m not a suspect, am I?”

“Not really. It’s just routine, so we can be thorough.”

“I guess. I have nothing to hide. If you need my car, it’s the green Mercury in the parking lot. Here’s the key.”

Sergeant Brooke had a policewoman search my mom, and a couple officers search the car, and came up empty, as expected. So my mom stayed a few hours, and helped the sergeant get about five suspects from the address book.

My mom came over after work about 6 on Friday to pick me up, like she always did. My dad was out of town for a business trip, and would not be home until about eleven, so Lori had me write him a little note to him while my mom used our bathroom. My mom told me the whole story that night.

And that was that.

Days went by. Then weeks went by. My mom checked in with Sergeant Brooke every week or so, since she missed Ms. George. But every name from the address book had an alibi, and there were no unexplained fingerprints. The gun and the necklace never turned up.

Until my mom saw it after about six weeks. My mom and I were looking through the paper on Sunday morning, and there was a report of an opening of a new art gallery. I showed my mom – there was dad and Lori in the picture. And there was the necklace – around Lori’s neck!

Mom called Sergeant Brooke, and he called the insurance company for a picture of the necklace and had the crime lab magnify the photo. Sure enough, it was the same necklace.

Sergeant Brooke got a search warrant, and the gun turned up too. It was in a plastic bag in the toilet bowl at my dad’s house, some matching blood still wedged between the cylinder and the frame. And a key to Ms. George’s apartment was with it.

The police checked Lori’s bank account and found out she wasn’t as rich as everybody thought. She wasn’t poor, but a half million-dollar necklace would have helped.

Lori said that she found the necklace in her sewing room Saturday morning after my dad got back from his business trip with a note that it was an “I’m sorry I had to be out of town” present. Dad couldn’t let on about where the present came from when she thanked

him for it, and she didn't know its true value, so she wore in public the next time they went out. She still had the note, so the police were satisfied she wasn't the killer.

The police thought my dad had gotten into my mom's purse, and copied the apartment key. Then he used the business trip as an excuse. He drove back to town secretly to rob her. Ms. George was in the bedroom looking at her mementos when he came in, so she got her gun from the bureau drawer. My dad told her who he was, and then she put the gun away, since she figured he would be a friend, like my mom was. They both went into the living room, and talked. Then my dad realized he could steal the necklace, and killed her for it. Since Mrs. Baker's apartment was on the other side of the building, she wouldn't have seen my dad's car anyway. But he didn't know that the young couples in the middle apartments both worked, and weren't home. That was why he panicked and changed his plans at the last minute. And dad had Thursday afternoon off from his business meeting and went out shopping, so he had no alibi.

It wasn't true, of course. You can see that as easily as I did. But the judge believed the police. My dad is on death row now. They're going to kill him in eight more months.

Yesterday I talked to my mom.

"I love to be with you again, mom, but why did you have to do it like this?"

"Like what, honey?"

"Framing dad for Ms. George's suicide."

"What do you mean?" That was the first time mom ever got nervous around me.

"Oh, come on. You said her whole hand was bloody. If someone shot her in the head from far, there'd be no blood on her hand at all. If someone tried to make her put her hand to her head to make her shoot herself, there'd be no blood on the part of her hand that the killer's hand was covering."

"But, honey, the police searched me. And my car too."

"You wrapped up the gun, the necklace and the suicide note in one of the plastic grocery bags and hid them in Mrs. Baker's locked mailbox for over night. You had the keys, and that's where you waited for the police. All you had to do was pick the things up Friday morning, tear up the suicide note, imitate dad's handwriting like you always used to do, and deposit them with your key to her apartment in our bathroom and Lori's sewing room when you went to use it while I was writing dad my note."

"How did you know there was a suicide note?"

"The pen, mom. You forgot to pick up the pen. People don't write notes on photographs when they're old enough to be considered mementos. They only mark them when they first develop them. She just got tired of all her problems, right mom? Is that what she wrote in her note?"

"Yes, Danny, that's what she wrote. She looked at the history of her life one last time and ended it. It was so sad, but I couldn't let her death count for nothing. I wanted her to help me one last time. I wanted to get you back.."

Well, there you have it. My mom won't tell what she did. If I tell the police, my mom goes to jail. If I don't tell the police, my dad dies. What do you think I should do?

## JUST A PHONE CALL AWAY

As David and Kaitlin Borders approached the crest of Baker's Hill, they couldn't help but feel that they were headed for an appointment with destiny.

This was not unusual.

From that first chance meeting in the financial district, each of them knew that some invisible power was operating. Their first date, their first kiss, their entire courtship held the same hallmark; the everpresent feeling that it had all been brought together in an earlier life – or some previous heaven, if you will, and that fate, or an unseen God, was maneuvering time, space and occurrences to give meaning to their lives.

Their engagement had been barely two months long, their honeymoon postponed for nearly a year due to job responsibilities, and only now, this July, were they able to celebrate their first anniversary by a two week road trip to meet each others' families.

He was a stockbroker; she an advertising executive. Both were in their late twenties, intelligent, creative, and patiently aggressive in pursuing their careers. The careers had been accidents, so they both assumed; mainly the work of this unseen agent of fate to make them travel from different states, and homes almost five hundred miles apart, to get together under the same umbrella in that sudden freak winter cloudburst a year and half ago. It was their life together that had mattered, and though neither understood how such things worked, the dynamic of that understanding permeated every minute of every day of that life.

They had just left the restaurant not twenty minutes ago, discussing this very idea. Kaitlin had called her mother on her cell phone from the restaurant. They were then just about a half hour away, and now Baker's hill was the natural geographic boundary of the country area where Kaitlin had grown up. Her mother had sold the house and acreage three years ago, after Kaitlin's father died, and she felt that a senior apartment would be a better option. So, although once the pair crossed Baker's hill, Kaitlin's home would have been no more than four miles to the right, it had since been torn down for the inevitable progress of suburban sprawl. They would proceed instead another eight miles straight ahead to where they would visit Cottage B-9 in the "Country Lane New Beginnings Senior Housing Complex."

"It's nothing like I remember it, David," Kaitlin remarked as they neared the top of Baker's Hill. "There were never so many houses. The road was only two-lane in those days. This was all little farms. It's hard to think this all happened in the eight years since I came to the city."

"What the...?" Brkes squealed as David took a hard left just as the car cleared the crest of the hill. The right lane had just run out at the top, making the highway two-lane, and David made the natural adjustment. "You mean it used to be more like this, Kaity?"



“Yeah, just like this. What happened? This area hasn’t changed a bit. It’s like they ran out of money for sprawl just at the top of Baker’s Hill.”

And right she was. The traffic had thinned. The road had narrowed. And Kaitlin Borders called off from memory the houses and the families who owned them.

Another mile, seven houses. Another hill, two more houses. The right turn to her old house, which of course they rolled past. Six more houses, another hill. She knew each by name.

And then they saw it, a quarter mile ahead of them, on the downgrade.

“David, look, ahead of us. The girl on the bicycle. Boy, is she in a hurry.”

David looked. The girl was really too far away to know for sure, but David guessed she would be maybe 10 or so. Short blond hair was waving in the breeze. She was wearing a sweatshirt and a backpack and pedaling furiously enough down the hill to be going 20 miles per hour.

Then it happened. The girl must have hit a stone or something, because she lost control and ran off the road into the ditch at the side of the road.

“We gotta help her, Kaity.”

David pulled the car over where they had seen the girl go off the road, and noted the stone that probably caused the accident. They got out, and looked into what they assumed would be a ditch along the roadside. They were quite surprised to see an embankment going down maybe thirty feet, with a grove of trees at the bottom. A trail could be seen in the weeds where the bicycle had gone off the road down the embankment leading into the trees.

“We gotta get her out of there. She could be hurt.” David started down the hill.

“It’s going to take more than the two of us, David.” Kaitlyn reached for her cell phone, and tapped in 9-1-1. There was no response.

“No answer. Wonder why. It worked okay at the restaurant.”

“We’re probably between towers. You can take it down the road.”

“I’ve got a better idea. Old Mr. Fogel’s place is just down the road here. Not a half a mile. He’s got a pay phone out front.”

Eight years ago, Kaitlyn would have had a sound plan. Now, who could be sure? Old Mr. Fogel might not be there anymore. Nonetheless, David and Kaitlyn got back in the car and drove the half mile. She had been right.

“Just like I remember it from when I was a girl. We used to come here for ice cream. Look, David, there’s old Mr. Fogel going in the back door. He hasn’t changed a bit.”

Kaitlyn got out, and waved to Mr. Fogel. He did not see the gesture, and went back inside. Kaitlyn went to the pay phone near the front door, deposited 50 cents, and dialed 9-1-1. There was no response.

She dialed 0 for the operator, figuring the 9-1-1 system hadn’t yet been established there. This time, she succeeded.

“Operator, I’m at Fogel’s Diner. My husband and I just saw a little girl on a bicycle go off the road about a half mile west of here. Could you send an ambulance and rescue crew up here? We’ll meet them at the scene. We’re the grey Escort.” Kaitlyn removed the 50 cents from the phone (since operator calls are free).

David had been otherwise occupied. He had noted the curious array of cars parked at the diner. Since all were from the 19070’s, he had gone in to ask about the situation.

“Is there an antique car show or something in the area?” David had some interest in antique cars and was quite curious.

“Well, yes, up in Tessatown, 5 miles north, just take the next cutoff, two miles east.”

Satisfied that he had explained the parked cars, David walked out, and rejoined Kaitlyn.

Five minutes later, David and Kaitlyn waited by the side of the road until the ambulance came. They showed the volunteer firemen where the girl had crashed her bicycle, and waited, somewhat impatiently, while they retrieved her from the woods.

“I don’t like this place being this far from a cell-phone tower, David. I can’t seem to reach mom. We’re already a half hour late, and she’s going to worry.”

“We’ll call her from that restaurant if you want, just as soon as we’re done here.”

There was a knock at the car window, and an ambulance man approached.

“Thank you ma’am, for calling this in. We got the girl okay and the bicycle. She’s got what looks like a concussion, and she’s unconscious. We’re just about to take her in to the hospital now. You know, if you hadn’t called, we might not have found her for days. She’d have died by then. She probably owes you her life.”

“Do you know her name?”

“No ma’am. They’ll figure it out at the hospital, I suppose. Her parents will call around for her. If you don’t mind, you should sign the accident report anyway. That will help the parents find you later, if they want.”

Kaitlyn and David were just in a hurry, so she signed, and they gave her the yellow carbon for her records.

“You know, Kaitlyn, those men were right. We were the only witnesses. If it weren’t for us, they probably wouldn’t have found that girl for days.”

“I suppose you’re right, David, but I still need to reach mom. This cell-phone just isn’t working.”

They stopped again at Fogel’s, and Kaitlyn tried her mother from there, but an automated message told her the number was not in service. Kaitlyn found it odd that the phone had given her 40 cents change.

They drove another 5 miles, and the road again widened to four lanes as they cleared the top of Minner’s Hill, and Kaitlyn’s cell-phone was now working. Kaitlyn completed the call to her mother without incident and advised her they had stopped to help a little girl in a bicycle accident.

Ten minutes later they drove up to her mother’s cottage, and sat down to tea in her living room.

“Looks my little girl is good hands, David. Kaitlyn, I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m glad to know you, Mrs. Butters,” David responded.

“You know, Kaitlyn almost didn’t make it past nine years old.”

“Mom, you’re kidding. What happened?”

“Your call reminded me. When you mentioned that bicycle accident. You know, the same thing happened to you when you were nine.”

“I don’t remember it. Why not?”

David’s ears were perking up. This news made him think again how he and Kaity seemed to be destined for each other. Anything that might have interfered with their life today would definitely be of interest.

“Well, it was pretty traumatic. Your dad and I had gotten in an argument, and you overheard. You went to your room, then into the kitchen. You packed a bag with some clothes, some bread and lunchmeat, and ran out of the house on your bike. We didn’t realize you were gone for almost twenty minutes. When we started looking for you, we

didn't know which way you went, and twenty minutes is a pretty good head start on a bicycle. After an hour, we called the police of course, but no one knew where to look. Apparently, you had crashed, and someone had gotten you to the hospital. You were unconscious and couldn't talk for a couple days. It was a good day and a half before anyone at the hospital put you together with the Kaitlyn Butters who ran away."

"Gee, almost exactly like the girl we helped. How history repeats itself," David mused.

"You know, we never did find the couple the ambulance people said called them about you. We tried the phone number the woman left, and it was out of service. The address she gave in the city was a vacant lot. It was the oddest thing, too. Her first name was Kaitlyn, just like yours. We thought that was so odd, because in those days, naming girls Kaitlyn had just become the fashion, so there were few adult woman with that name."

Kaitlyn looked at David. David looked at Kaitlyn. "No way," they thought in unison.

"Mom, did you ever save that name of the couple?"

"Well, I have it somewhere. Let me see." And with that, Mrs. Butters opened a closet door, and took a shoebox from the top shelf. She rummaged a bit, and came up with an aged pink carbon of the record. "Here it is. Kaitlyn – Kaitlyn Bor..I'm not sure."

"Mom, how's old Mr. Fogel?"

"Oh, he sold that restaurant and moved to Florida three years ago. It's a condominium now."

Kaitlyn fumbled for the carbon the ambulance attendant had given her. "David, I never checked the date until now. It seems so impossible, but it would explain the narrow highway, the phone not working."

"And the old cars in Mr. Fogel's parking lot."

Kaitlyn grabbed her mother's paper away. Except that one was pink and one was yellow, the pages matched exactly. And Kaitlyn's paper was dated twenty years ago.

Nobody said a word for almost ten minutes.

So just how does fate work anyway?

## THE MURDER OF MICK

Dark Maven sat on the bed, her head against her knees, clutching the blue stuffed elephant doll that had been her ninth year birthday present. It had been a really sucky two weeks.

She kept going back over it all, looking for some clue the police had missed. Back again in her childhood room, where she had not been since she last called herself Jennifer Palenka some sixteen months ago, the whole thing looked so distant, almost like a dream.

She had run out of tears days before. The first three nights after Mick died she didn't sleep at all. Even now, she had eaten almost nothing, and slept only intermittently for nearly two weeks. As Mick's fiancée, it had fallen to her to arrange for the cremation and scattering of the ashes over the fjords of the Norwegian coast, the traditional home to the gods of Valhalla, which Mick had written about so often in his songs. She had stood up to it well, far better than she ever thought a young woman would have been able to just before her twentieth birthday.

It was her own room, that she had grown up in, and yet, she felt so strange there. Perhaps Mick had been right. She really wasn't Jennifer any more. The new name he had given her, Dark Maven, was who she really was to become. Her once dark blonde crew-cut hair was now long and flowing, and jet black with streaks of blue and orange. Even around the edges of the frilly pink pajamas that her parents had saved for her return, the edges of three tattoos were visible. The face of an innocent teenager in love with the prospect of joining a metal band had become a face chapped with dried tears and crinkled with the lines of a warrior in the eternal battle.

"Mick, I promise you. I'll find him. If it takes my whole life, the sword will fall." Ultimately, heavy metal music is supposed to be a quest for the battle that the heart fights before the victory, and Jennifer had become intimately involved in it, first through Mick, and now through her own grief. She had wanted only to join the band in a journey of excitement around the world. Now it seemed that her own journey of life had become involved with the future of the band.

But the police had given up. Even the state trooper elite murder squad had nothing to go on. Mick had no enemies. He did not handle the business for the band. He never got into fights, even over the quality of the music. Mick was just the nicest lead metal guitarist in the world, and everybody on three continents knew it.

But Dark Maven treasured secrets about her "faithful warrior" no one else ever knew. She knew his heart, his dreams, and his musical gift better even than Geo, the drummer, or Pat, the lead singer. And somewhere in the treasure she had received from him in these last sixteen months, there would be a clue. All she had to do was go over it all one more time...

So, she started again, talking to no one or to someone who might someday listen. It was the 147-th time in 13 days that her mind played the tape, but she wasn't keeping count.

"Geo and I went to high school together. When the guys formed the band, he would invite me to rehearsals. But then came the day when Metallica came to Cleveland, and the boys were invited to open for them. They had to choose the band's name too quickly. "Weeping Tiger". How silly! Maybe "Screaming Tiger", "Preying Tiger", "Cat of Vengeance". Now, those were proper names for a heavy metal band. No matter...the

German CD producer was in the audience looking for new talent and he found it. And Weeping Tiger became the metal band of the future. And now, its lead guitarist murdered on stage, the Tiger would weep forever.

“The guys knew me because of Geo, and I wanted so to travel with them. You know, be a roadie. My parents held out letting me go as long as they could. But eventually, I turned 18, finished high school, and that was that. I helped with the instruments, hung around with them, and they paid me in room and board. In less than a year we toured Los Angeles to London to Hong Kong and back again through Dresden, Leningrad, the Hague and Madrid. Eventually, Mick and I fell in love. We were going to get married at the end of this season’s tour.

“Big groups don’t usually play in little towns. I mean, Brainerd? Really! Not hardly ten thousand population. But a Saturday eight hour rock festival was expected to draw twenty thousand of our fans from a 300 mile radius, so there we were.

“We got into town with our bus about 5 on Friday night, as I recall. A group of men had just about finished setting up the big tent, and stopped to buy hot dogs from a vendor cart that was set up there. Mick wanted to sneak in some practice, so we set up an amp under the tent. About 6, my cell rang, and Pat called us for supper, so we picked up Mick’s gear and headed to the hotel. It was only about a three block walk, so we got there quickly. We finished supper, Mick and I made love for what would be the last time, and we fell asleep. The next day, we got up about 10, practiced for a bit in the hotel room and went to play the gig at 2. Mick stopped and bought a hot dog from that vendor about 1:30, and he collapsed on stage.

“That’s all, that’s it. The autopsy said there was poison in Mick’s bloodstream. Some weird Latin name that started with numbers and ended with “hydrate”. It had to be the hotdog. All the police agreed.

“The lieutenant from the State Police came to interview me twice. It’s funny how everybody tries to have an image. The guy looked like Kojak. I mean, even the bald head and the lollipop! Well, I got the feeling he felt nervous around me. A lot of people react that way. The hair and the tattoos, you know. Well, at least I can be myself; I don’t need to look like my latest movie idol.

“I remember he told me how, at first, they thought the intended victim of the murder was some guy working on the tents. This guy had bought a hotdog just about the time Mick and I got there, and he died about 5:30 in a public bathroom. The autopsy showed the same drug in his system as in Mick’s. But once Mick died, they had to assume that he was the target. Of course, the lieutenant said, they kept the options open, even thinking that perhaps the poisoned hot dog never reached the REAL victim, and both the tent worker and Mick were accidents.

“Their interviews produced some information, but none of it proved to be of value. For instance, the guy fixing the tents who ate the hotdog meant for Mick was found to have been the victim of a difficult marriage three years earlier. It seems his wife had inherited a genetic deficiency that caused mental illness when she hit her mid-thirties. In a real heartrending episode, the wife had to be institutionalized, and the poor man had to sue for divorce to protect his finances, and accept full custody of the children.

“And then, for a while they thought they had discovered that there was a different intended victim. It seems that about 5 days into the investigation, a newspaper reporter named Jean McIntyre told the local police sergeant that she remembered hearing a fight

over money among some of the musicians in the show. Unfortunately, she was too busy interviewing bands for the newspaper to recall who had been involved or what they said. Since this happened just about the time the police were beginning to wonder if the tent assembly man wasn't the real target, they dropped that line of exploration to check the story. Unfortunately, no one else seems to have heard the argument. So that line went nowhere.

"In the end, the poisoned hotdogs stopped when Mick died, he was famous, and those were the determining factors. Since Mick had no apparent enemies, they talked to me at some length, but I guess they decided what I already knew. I loved him too much to ever have even conceived such a thing. The trail turned cold, and the police marked the file "unsolved", and put it in the bottom drawer."

Tape replay number 147 having come to an end, Dark Maven noticed a small change. Maybe she was finally getting over the first wave of shock and grief. Or maybe, as she would later judge, her or Mick's karma was guiding her. Or maybe, it was just a coincidence. She was hungry. She got into an old shirt and some jeans and headed downstairs.

Just as she reached the bottom step and made the turn to the kitchen, she heard a knock at the front door. She cracked the door a bit and almost burst out laughing.

He looked more like Sam Spade than Sam Spade. The overcoat, the bulge just below his left breast, the hundred dollar suit, the hard-boiled look in his eyes, the hair slicked back by 1950's style Brylcreme. She thought, if she could feel the back of his head, she would find one bump for every episode.

"Why does everybody have to be a copy?" asked her thoughts.

"What can I do for you, detective?" Fortunately, her mouth had better sense.

"How did you..." The poor man obviously thought he was undercover.

"It's the hair streaks...they affect my brain", her thoughts responded. Fortunately, again her mouth had the sense to keep silent.

"The band posted a reward. I'm looking into the death of your boyfriend."

"Please come in, detective?"

"Mike Spade".

Her brain was going again. But, as there seemed to be little value in the sarcastic comeback it was considering, the comment will omitted for the sake of brevity.

They sat down at the kitchen table, and Dark Maven poured some juice and a bowl of cereal.

"Want some, detective?"

"No, thanks, Sweet Cheeks".

The name was insulting enough in the 1940's, but Dark Maven chose to avoid the confrontation. Little did she know that the man would write her up as "stacked like a bag of onions lifted in the center by a strong produce man, but unfortunately with a body more decorated than the Louvre". Like his namesakes, he was fond of filling his office records with 1940's similes that would never have made it into the pages of a REAL mystery novel..

"Like I said, Honey Doll, I'm looking into the death of one Mick the guitarist."

Here was a real fix. If Dark Maven talked to they guy, she'd just keep getting insulted, and have to try to hold her tongue. If she sent him away, she will be giving up a chance to find the killer.

Neither her brain nor her mouth entered into the thinking process. Tape play number 148 was cued in an instant:

"Geo and I went to high school together. When the guys formed the band..."

Mike Spade listened for ten minutes, and even took a few notes. When the tape ended, he asked:

"Mick's effects, do you have them?"

"You mean his belongings? Certainly."

"May I see them?". Now Dark Maven was glad she had said nothing. As weird as they guy dressed, he knew his stuff. The police had never thought to look.

She brought the box down to him from her room, and they rummaged together.

"Wallet, ID bracelet, guitar picks, amp cord, whoa, what's this?" He held up a spray can for her to identify.

"Guitar string lubricant. Professionals spray it on the strings to make their fingers move more easily." She recognized it easily; she had brought the can to Mick dozens of times.

"Then why does it say 'Liquid Chalk'?"

Maven read the can in disbelief. "For use by tent riggers and sailors to increase friction between hands and rope and prevent rope burn."

"But the label's nearly identical."

Her mind leaped. If exactly two people are killed, and the same label is on a spray can that can be used in their respective unique professions, is it coincidence?

"How did you get it?"

"I picked it up after Mick was done practicing that night in the tent."

"Detective, we need to find out if that poison could transfer by inhalation, as well as on food."

"And then, we get some fingerprints."

Dark Maven started into the next room.

"Where you goin', Honey Doll?"

"Inkpad. You'll need to eliminate my prints, Gumshoe". She tried to return the 'compliment', but she was more used to being serious about how she felt.

Within minutes the mystery had taken a whole new twist. Mike Spade left with the spray can on his way to the lab, and Dark Maven sat down to three bowls of cereal and a 17 hour nap.

The next day, she awoke to the first streaming sunshine she had noticed in two weeks. It was 10 in the morning, her parents, undoubtedly unwilling to wake her from much needed sleep, had left for work. The phone was ringing.

"You've reached the Palenka residence. We're sorry, but we can't take your call just now, so you know the drill...BEEP"

"Sweet cheeks... Spade here...We were right. The spray can is full of poison. It's a kind that works best if it's inhaled. That can's the murder weapon, Baby doll. I had to get my friend, Lt. Chesterton, to run the prints. He called the Brainerd cops, and they're reopening the case. That means I have to stop investigating and wait for them contact



you. Thanks for nothin', Doll face. Now I don't get the bust., or the reward posted by the band."

Dark Maven was hardly surprised that Spade had a police lieutenant friend; ALL television PI's have a police lieutenant friend. Nor was she surprised that he hated all the other cops; all television PI's hate all the other cops. It didn't matter much to her exactly how or by whom the guilty party was caught.

Happy to be on the road to vengeance, she headed toward the kitchen to make breakfast. Sausage, eggs, pancakes, and orange juice would feel really good about now.

She began stirring eggs and dropped the wire whisk with a start.

"I killed Mick!" The revelation hit her like a speeding freight train. It was she who gave him the can before the gig.

She didn't mean it, she told herself. It wasn't her fault. The murderer was to blame. There's no such things as poison spray cans unless wicked people doctor them.

"Keep stirring, girl, don't listen to that voice."

Ten minutes passed, as she tried to displace her thoughts with the routine of sausage frying, toast making, juice pouring, and self-coaching. Finally, she resolved it:

"You made me do this. PI's, police, I don't care. Mister, you made it personal. I'm going to kill you with my bare hands."

"Operator? Can you tell me the number of a detective named Mike Spade?"

She was halfway through dialing the number when it hit her....If the can she brought to Mick was the murder weapon, where was Mick's can of guitar string lubricant? Could the murderer have come back and picked up the can the two had left behind in the tent? And if he looked at the can he brought home, just how long would it take him to trace her to Cleveland? Her pictures had been in fanzine articles for a year.

She ran to the window, and looked out on her suburban Cleveland cul-de-sac. No strange cars, no sinister looking men.

"Back to breakfast, for now. Eat, rest, think, plan....Do I call the PI? The Brainerd police? The Cleveland police?"

Who would protect her from the evil man? And when would he come?

Dark Maven forced herself to eat slowly. She needed to think it through. What would the warriors of her fiancée's songs do? They would rest. They would plan. They would know their enemy. That's it...that's the first step. Get to know the man who killed her fiancée and must now come for her.

She went back to her room, folded her legs into lotus position, and started trying to meditate.

Then it occurred to her that she didn't know how to meditate. She was falling into the image trap she hated so much in others. She picked up the blue stuffed elephant, put her head against her knees, and started going over it for the 149<sup>th</sup> time. "Geo and I went to school together. When the guys started the band..."

What kind of man would doctor a spray can with poison with a long Latin name? A man with wide knowledge and limited strength. A man who wanted to kill slyly, a man who was educated, but insane.

A man who...no, not a man, a woman. The blunt object, the gun, the knife, the garrotte – those are men's weapons. Poison is a woman's weapon. And the slyness – the woman is well known in the community; she would need to protect her reputation. And the knowledge – doctor? Writer? Teacher? Writer! It had to be – the others all interact

with people every day. The writer lives in an ivory tower. Only a writer would choose a weapon that would keep him so far from the victim.

Okay, a woman writer who was insane. Like the tentman's wife. No, she was in the insane asylum. A sister...maybe the woman has a sister.

"Run it through in your mind. How did that song lyric run? "Warrior of the heart, the sword in wielded by the mind...And the ambushes lie in unconscious reaches..." Your sister is judged insane, put in a hospital, and sued for divorce. You blame the husband. You kill the husband. You pick up the wrong can. You start to worry about being caught. So....you talk to the police to see how they're doing. But they're suspecting that the tentman was the real victim. What do you do? You send them on a wild goosechase! Yes, of course you do. You tell them...you tell them...yes!!!!!"

"Operator, for Brainerd. The number of the local newspaper. The arts reporter. I can't recall the name. Jean...Jean somebody."

"Hello, Mr. Macaulay speaking."

"Can I speak to Jean?"

"Ms. McIntyre's out of town."

Panic!

"Cleveland?"

"Yes, she's going to interview the girlfriend of that guitarist who was poisoned. How did you know?"

She tried to compose herself. She must not sound nervous, but eager.

"I'm the girlfriend? I'm in Cleveland? Can I reach her here?"

"Her plane won't get in until this afternoon. After that she's staying at the downtown Holiday Inn."

Dark Maven put the phone down slowly. She had an hour, maybe two. It could be days before the police traced her. What if the reporter's fingerprints on the can had been covered? What if they weren't on file. With no proof, why should the Cleveland Police protect her from a journalist?

"Think, girl, think." The sword of truth...the battle of the heart...no, no, no, be practical....I've got it!"

Dark Maven raided her mother's cookie jar for money, ran to the garage, hot wired the family station wagon, and sped off to the office supply place.

It was two hours later she appeared at the downtown Holiday Inn with a small paper bag, and asked for the room of Jean McIntyre.

Knock, knock, knock. Dark Maven noted the lump in her throat, and rapped gently at the room door. She was shaking.

"Later. I just got in..."

"Ms. McIntyre...It's Dark Maven, Mick's girlfriend. I hear you're here to see me."

The door opened and Dark Maven was greeted by a woman aiming a small but dangerous looking pistol.

"How did you get that past airport security?" Dark Maven had expected another spray can, but not a gun.

"Reserved my room in advance and FED-Ex'ed it to myself."

Dark Maven had always wondered how the mob hit men did that.

"I guess you found the can. Is that what's in the bag?"

“Yes, look, just let me alone and you can have it.” Dark Maven reached in the bag and pulled out the can.”

“You know I can’t do that. You know, and I can’t risk you telling anybody. They might put me away like they did my sister. I have to kill you.”

“This is for Mick”. Dark Maven sprayed the can into the woman’s face. The reporter fell to the ground, and Dark Maven kicked the gun safely under the bed.

“Now we’re both dead.”

“I don’t care. I came to avenge Mick.”

Dark Maven sat on top of the woman. Her job was not quite over.

“Why did you kill that man?”

“I had to. He put my sister in the nut-house and took her kids.”

“How did you know about the poison?”

“I interviewed a famous mystery writer once; he told me. He gave me the idea for the spraycan.”

“Well, just so you know. That’s non-toxic paint in your face. I just covered a can with construction paper so it looked like your murder weapon. This bag also had a tape recorder in it.”

Dark Maven turned and walked out the door, leaving Jean totally shaken. She calmly went to the hotel lobby and called the police.

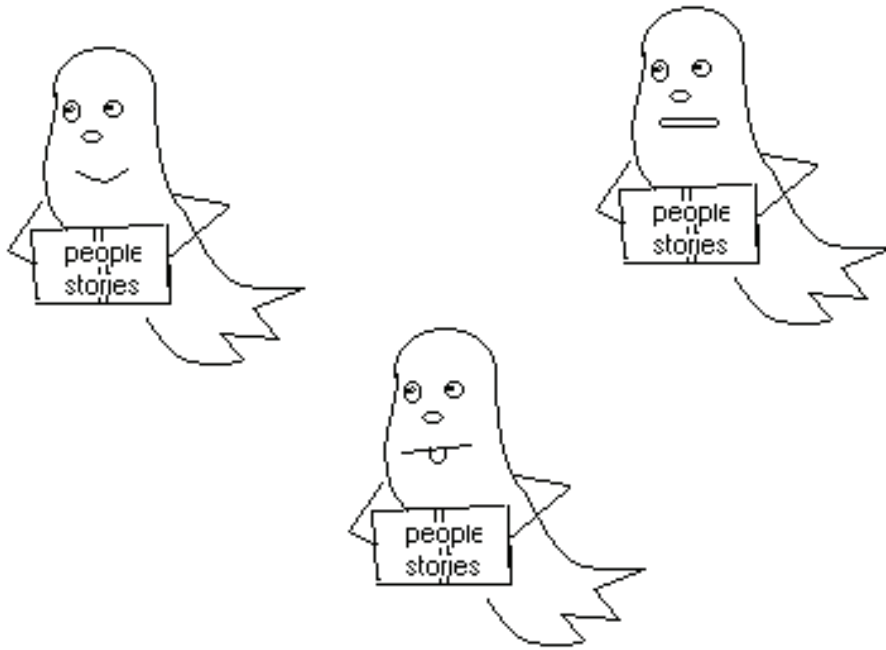
Dark Maven would never be the same. The band sung of battles, she had fought one, and won. With only her own resources. There was one more thing, though, a little unfinished business before she could take her own journey could resume.

As she stood one last time on the coast of the fjords of Norway, Dark Maven spoke to waves...

“Rest well, faithful warrior. The heart is victorious.”

# Three (3)

## Ghost (!!!)



stories

by Ken Behrens

## BLANCHARD'S GHOST

By Ken Behrens

The new fishing cabin I had bought was perfect. Just by the mountain lake where I had spent so many weekends fishing and meditating since my childhood. I was so happy to sit back and realize that, at the age of 35, I finally had the money to pay for it. And here I was, just unpacked, a fresh stock of groceries in the larder, early Saturday afternoon, with two weeks of well-earned summer vacation waiting to be filled with the sounds of nature and the delights of the calming motion of a rowboat on the lake.

The cabin was a marvelous stroke of good fortune for another reason. The entire lake had been, until now, the private property of Old Man Healy. His home, this cabin, and the three others he rented to summer fisherman like my dad, had been in his family almost since Indian times, and he was not about to sell, in spite of the many offers he'd had. It was one of the finest summer retreats on one of the state's most beautiful bodies of water.

It all came about quite suddenly, and by a surprising turn of events. It seems that about a year ago, Old Man Healy was given a prison sentence and a half-million dollar fine, and the property had to be sold to raise the money. The crime of which he was convicted was aggravated manslaughter. Apparently two autumns ago, he had let his longtime boyhood friend, Pat Blanchard, stay in the cabin. From what the real estate agent told me, Bridey Healy had gotten upset at where on the lake Blanchard had chosen to fish. The two had begun an amiable enough discussion over who owned what part of the lake; but tempers flared, and the punch that one nine-year old might give another had a drastically different effect on a retired seventy-year old. Blanchard cracked his skull on the side of the kitchen table going down, and died instantly. Of course, it might have helped Healy's case if he had not become known all around as such a cantankerous old man these last ten years. Judge and jury alike had all encountered his temper at different times when they had inadvertently passed onto his land without paying the rent while hiking, and justice ran its course.

And I was the one of the lucky five new land owners. It did not matter to me at all that the dreaded accident had happened in the cabin I bought. I was grateful to have gotten one at all. Even the cheapest, and least desirable, was to me a piece of heaven.

I mused over these things just as I finished folding all my sweaters neatly into the bureau drawer, and considered how many hours of daylight I might have remaining for fishing. It was 4:02 p.m., I noted on my wristwatch, and as I turned to pick up my tackle box, I heard a squeak behind me.

I glanced casually over my shoulder in the direction of the sound, and saw nothing amiss, so I once again reached for my equipment.

There was another squeak. Then another, and another.

I froze. They were rhythmic.

I had grown up in these woods, and had never heard an animal like that. I turned, and, to my surprise, the rocking chair was rocking.

I went to look for the open window that had let in the breeze, but there was no breeze now.

The rocker kept rocking. And, unimaginably, a man was materializing in it.

I grabbed for the support of the nearest doorframe and stepped behind it, lest the apparition see me.

The ghost was a man in his late sixties, I guessed, dressed too warmly for summer, with a plaid hunter's jacket and wool pants.

I watched in some kind of combination of fear and astonishment, as the man rose from the chair, and ambled slowly to, and then through, the cabin's front door. I followed cautiously, lest he see me, for, although I now owned the cabin, I wasn't sure that such ownership laws mattered where this guy came from, and I had no idea what he or I might do, or if he knew I was there.

I watched through the front window as he walked about 30 feet along the path that led from the front door. He stopped, opened his arms wide, and I heard him call:

"Bridey, Bridey, come on in. I've got some good whiskey."

"I don't believe this," I told myself, "I've got a ghost!" But then I was too numb to be sure that I didn't *not* believe it either.

The man, now tentatively identifiable as Blanchrd's ghost, embraced thin air, and then started talking softly to his unseen guest, walking back to the cabin's front door. I hid again, waiting, but he never reentered the cabin.

Time, 4:08 p.m. The apparition seemed to be over. I waited 'til 4:10 p.m. and cautiously walked to the stuffed chair to puzzle out what to do next.

I barely collapsed into the cushions of the chair when I heard the squeak. I looked at the rocker. Yes, it was. All over again. After a half-minute of rhythmic rocking, the ghost reappeared, got up, went through the door, welcomed Healy, came back toward, but not into, the cabin.

Time, 4:16 p.m. "No, you don't, not twice in one day. No ghost I ever read about did that."

I sat for a minute, trying to think. Time, 4:18 p.m.

And there was the squeak. And the rocking. And the apparition. And the welcome. And the disappearance. It was 4:24 p.m.

I ran for my Polaroid. Any ghost you can set a watch by had to be something worth at least trying to photograph. I had two minutes to get ready.

Four twenty-six p.m. The rocker started rocking. Four twenty-seven p.m., the ghost appeared in the chair, and I snapped the camera shutter. As expected, the flash did nothing to disturb the pre-programmed sequence of otherworldly events.

The ghost got up. I snapped.

The ghost walked. I snapped.

The ghost went through the door. I opened it and followed. I ran ahead and snapped. And snapped. And snapped.

Two minutes after I had gotten my last of eight pictures, the rocker started rocking again. It would happen six times in all that night, and I had pictures of them all. Eight out of eight. Flawless.

My mind was racing. I had read a little about ghosts when I was in college. They never photograph well, and they almost never come out on a regular schedule. I had spent my life savings to buy the cheapest of the lakefront properties, and I was about to be a rich man. I realized that I was sitting on the major tourist attraction of all time.

Oh, I waited a few days to make sure, but he always appeared, rain or shine, six times a night, beginning at 4:02 p.m. Six minutes on and two minutes off, the last show ending at 4:48 p.m. precisely. I had made some inquiries, and sure enough, the time of death had been estimated by the coroner at about 3:30 p.m. in the afternoon - which, allowing for daylight savings time, worked out perfectly. And the picture of the dead body in the newspaper? You guessed it. Plaid

jacket and wool pants. And yes, Blanchard did call him Bridey, and the two men loved to get drunk together on whiskey.

There is this syndicated cable TV program called "Bump in the Night". They do on-site studies of hauntings, UFO sightings, and such. I had already tried a video camera on the "phenomenon" and had gotten perfect footage 46 minutes a day, so there was no harm in calling them. It would be the best free publicity I could hope for, especially since the "ghost" had no problem with being watched and photographed.

A week later, just after lunch, seven of them came out. Three camera men, an announcer, a producer's administrative assistant, a "parapsychologist" who specialized in exorcisms during seances, and a scientist who was one of those professional skeptics.

That last one scared me a little bit - I hadn't thought of fraud. But on reflection, I realized that if this is some sort of elaborate technological prank on me, it would be better to find out now, before I opened the place for commercial exploitation.

Actually, I wasn't too happy about the parapsychologist either. I didn't need anyone exorcising my new moneymaker before I could take advantage of it.

The announcer, Ben, and the producer's assistant, Jennifer, watched my video tapes, looked at my now hundreds of still pictures, and talked to me for almost two hours. No, I did not know Blanchard. Yes, I knew Mr. Healy as a child, but had not seen him since I finished college twelve years ago. I knew only as much about the murder as the real estate agent, and my last week of research had told me. No, I had never seen a ghost before. I was not sure about life after death, and was too young and on too fast a track to success to care. Yes, the crew could set up wherever they wanted. No, the...

There it was. The squeak. And yes, it was 4:02 p.m.

Floodlights came on. Camera men started whirling around.

"Positions everyone!" Jennifer shouted.

Ben started talking. "Ladies and gentlemen, I don't believe this. This rocker is moving, now something...."

And so it went. All six times. Each time a little less enthusiastic to be sure, but each time a perfect taping. The ghost was completely oblivious to our presence. He just kept re-enacting the moments before his death. At 4:51 p.m. they turned off the lights.

"Now it's my turn!" the skeptic growled. "I'll find you your ghost!" And he looked, outside, inside, under the cabin in the crawl space, up over the rafters. He didn't ask permission to start pulling the floorboards up, but I didn't care. Those dollar signs kept distracting me from such minor inconveniences. Three hours later, night fell, and the scientist pronounced the phenomena "unexplainable by current scientific understanding, but still not proof of life after death."

Now the parapsychologist offered to do his part.

"Not with MY ghost you don't!" I remained firm.

We drove down the road and had a pizza, and the seven representatives of the American media went to their motel.

It was all over, so I thought. A few weeks, and I'll be rolling in money. And so I tossed in bed until around 2 a.m., just from the sheer exhilaration of the day.

I slept until 10 the next morning, but rolled out of bed to find the "Bump in the Night" traveling van, with seven occupants, on my front lawn. Could they get some more footage?

Of course they could. Nothing was too great a favor for my unpaid advertising agents.

The skeptical scientist took apart a few pieces of furniture and x-rayed a couple walls, but he was satisfied that every possible chance of fraud had been prevented. And it was barely lunchtime.

By three that afternoon, they were ready to shoot again. Today, Ben, Jennifer, and I waited by the cameras outside to get another narrative position.

Sure enough, at 4:04 p.m. precisely, Blanchard's ghost walked through the closed door, as completely oblivious to the TV filming around him as he had been of my first Polaroids. And I kept counting the money I could make when my TV program came out.

Then it began.

Oh, it was innocent enough at first. The cameraman got creative.

"Hey, Blanchard, how about a nice smile?" he called.

The ghost didn't move, but Ben knew the take was ruined anyway, so he got into the act.

"Pat, my boy, turn this way. It's your best side."

No harm done. Just innocent fun. To this day I'm sure of it. Take two would be better.

4:12 p.m. Out he came through the closed door.

"Blanchard, watch out, it's muddy there. Don't trip."

Well, I reasoned, at least this proves the ghost can stand hecklers. He ignored everything, and just kept repeating his show. That would be good to know once I went public.

4:20 p.m. Take three.

Actually, how long could I expect Jennifer not to get into the act? But the cameraman had his camera to hold him back, and Ben had his microphone. Jennifer was footloose. She ran to the apparition.

"Bridey, Bridey, come on in. I've got some good whiskey." His open embrace closed right around, and then through, Jennifer's body.

"Hey, guys, watch this," Jennifer called. She raised her right hand toward the ghost's forehead, forefinger extended, thumb raised, like a gun.

"Bang!" she commanded as her cocked thumb fell.

We all expected Blanchard to turn and walk the invisible Healy into the house, ignoring Jennifer's tactics as he had done the rest. But there he was, flat on the ground, a bullet wound in his head, bleeding. What's worse, he was starting to dematerialize. That was the last time anyone ever saw him.

Oh, they got it on tape alright. And they played the tape on TV. And yes, I am suing Jennifer and the "Bump in the Night Program" for destruction of business assets. And yes, my lawyer says they'll pay, and pay millions, once the case comes to trial in a year or two. You can find out when it will be if you like. Just look for me as the plaintiff and Jennifer Healy as the defendant on "People's Court."

Oh, by the way. Jennifer turned out to be Old Man Healy's granddaughter.



## E-MAIL FROM HELL

By Ken Behrens

This is a story about my friend, Janet, and how she died. I've been putting off writing it for many years, hoping that her husband, Albert, wouldn't read it. So, if you know Albert, please, in the interest of justice, fairness, adventure, and freedom for womankind everywhere, either stop reading now, or promise never to tell him. Because, dear reader, it is the truth, just as Janet told it to me.

Janet and I grew up together in the tenements of Rahwah, New Jersey, early in the sixties. We did what all girls do, I suppose. We dreamt of swashbuckling pirates snatching us away, rescuers who would climb mighty towers and defeat ogres on our behalf, our Prince Charmings, and how it would be to live happily ever after forever in their palaces.

Janet and Albert met in college. He was finishing his MBA, and she was a freshman majoring in psychology. The meeting was classic: they collided at the college library, and had to sit on the floor for a couple minutes collecting both their books and their self-esteem. A quiet conversation led to a couple concerts, then dinners, then a weekend at his parents' summer house on Long Island. I remember the long hours Janet and I talked about him. Janet's fear that she couldn't handle the money she was marrying into. The age difference. Her own youth and the taste for adventure that maybe she should fill first. But, in the long run, she was so much in love with him; she knew this was her once-in-a-lifetime-prince of our girlhood dreams. They were married at the end of her sophomore year, and Janet dropped out of school to become the wife of the already Vice President and soon partner-to-be of one of the biggest management consulting firms in Manhattan.

I visited them several times at the half-million dollar "starter place" upstate that Albert's career had set them up in. I can't imagine how two people could have seemed happier. It was always like a dream come true. Janet took up writing, and even published a couple short stories. Albert spent most of his weekdays at work, but always drove up the driveway at seven sharp with a smile, often flowers or theater tickets, and a day full of news to share with his wife. Janet trusted me with a lot of details, of course, as girlfriends will, and their life in the bedroom was ideal, as well.

They had chosen not to have a family for five years while Albert established his career. His father had been a self-made millionaire, and Albert was programmed from childhood to be the same. His children, when they came, would have all the best that life could provide.

It was three years into the marriage when paradise suddenly collapsed. Albert's parents died in a car crash, the victims of a drunk driver. I attended the funeral, of course, and I don't remember then having even an inkling that his love for Janet had all been an act. It took almost a year for Janet to figure it out herself. One night, in a fit of something midway between grief, anger at how he had been raised, and guilt over how he had dragged Janet into his own parentally-imposed lifescrypt, he admitted that he had married her for convenience, and actually had no feelings for her beyond friendship.

I know. It didn't make sense to me either. Apparently, Albert's father had told him from childhood that the only way to be successful as an executive was to become a family man. There was, so Albert was raised to believe, an unwritten code among the titans of American industry, that the single man is unsettled and undependable. So, Albert said, his whole relationship with

Janet had been a sham. He was simply doing what the culture expected of him. Not that he would ever have allowed Janet to suffer as a result. Albert had fully intended to play out the act until he was a multimillionaire. Janet could have her divorce and half the money then, and all would be fair. But his parents' death changed all that. Now, suddenly free to admit the truth, Albert did just that.

Janet cried for days. I thought she'd never be able to go on. All those dreams of a lifetime with her Prince! All that happiness and love was a lie! Her college days and her youth were over, Albert would never be the same to her again. Eventually she asked him for a divorce. She would start over.

But Albert was still at the beginning of his career. He would not grant her a divorce now, even though half the ten million or so dollars from his inheritance in their various joint accounts would make a tidy monetary settlement. It would just be too risky for someone who needed a career to prove his worth. If she sued for divorce, he would contest, and without grounds, she would get no money. Once the grief of losing his parents, which had enabled him to share his shocking revelation, had passed, he clammed up and withdrew into himself. Janet was expected to resign herself to being a housemate to an upward-bound executive who needed a decoration in public to succeed.

Her material life was okay. She had clothes, food, whatever she wanted. But her spirit was dying. Her writing stopped, and she spent her days at the mall or watching soap operas. Albert spent the early evening hours, that were once spent with Janet, at the bar with other executives. What was worse for Janet, is that he spent the nights with his computer on the Internet.

"A hobby he would share with me would be wonderful. Even the thought of a mistress, I could live with. But that miserable computer! He stays up all night writing e-mail and visiting chat rooms. He's right there in the house with me, but I'm so alone!"

The conversation that would ultimately lead to my dearest friend's death happened on a Wednesday. Janet and I had met for one of our intimate afternoon tea breaks in town.

"You need to get out. You know, I saw it today, and I thought of you," I tried to help.

"What?"

"The Erroll Flynn film festival. Remember how we used to watch those movies on cable when we were in high school? You loved the stuff."

"I remember. I always wanted adventure, to be snatched away by a pirate, to be rescued by a swashbuckling hero. Now look how it turned out. No adventure, not ever. No pirate, no hero, no Prince, no family, no nothing."

"Janet, I'm your best friend, you trust me, right?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Look. You can go to court, sue for divorce, and parade his and your emotions and mistakes all over the Wall Street Journal to get nothing, or you can live with it as best as you can. Now you've chosen to live with it, so at least do what Albert did and get a new life for yourself on the side. The film festival will do you good. It'll get you in touch with the carefree happy girl I remember."

It took some persuading, but that night she went. She called me astonished the next day.

"He didn't even notice I was gone. I came back at 2:30 a.m. in the morning, walked right past the computer room and said hello, and he didn't even hear me. He just kept typing and playing with that fool mouse. And you were right. I feel better. And I do remember what it was like when you and I thought we could have the world. I know it's impossible now, but it feels so

good to think about it. Someday, *I'm* going to be a pirate. And a Robin Hood. And I'm going to take from the rich and give to the poor. And I'm going to have a sword. And I'm going to cut out old dead hearts and come alive again. And I'm such an old has-been fool! Will you go with me tonight?"

I couldn't. My own husband had made plans for us. I didn't say that to Janet, of course, I just told her to follow her dreams.

I got an emergency call from Janet Friday morning just as my husband left for work. She *had* to see me for tea. It was like her life and the future of all that was sacred in the history of movies depended on it.

"I met a guy."

Can you imagine a tone of voice that blended happiness, excitement, fear, self-consciousness, and dread? That was how she'd said it, "I met a guy." Janet, who had talked of nothing for the last six months but how adultery was a direct ticket to hell. The tea from my mouth traveled three or four, thankfully empty, tables.

"You what?!!"

Well, he was one row behind me at the festival. About an hour into the Foreign Legion, we noticed that we were laughing, crying, and rooting for the good guys at exactly the same time. We were out in the all-night coffee shop 'til almost four. I haven't been to bed yet."

"You sound excited." One learns never to come between a best friend and her significant other. Right now there were two such significant others in Janet's life, and I wasn't going to take a chance on coming up backing the wrong side.

"My head is spinning. I'm in love. Really in love! He's *the one*."

"Hold it. What about Albert?"

"That's what we were talking about all night. Albert. Ernie really believes he can find a solution."

"Ernie?" I thought. Ernie - Erroll? Janet was rebounding. She was just so bored, she'd go with anybody, and the names were close enough. "Janet, dear, you've only got three options. You won't sue for divorce in open court, you don't believe in adultery, and Albert won't let you go. What are you going to do, kill him?"

"Oh, don't be silly. Ernie just says he can find a way to make Albert let me go and give me some of the money, that's all. Then everything will be alright. See?"

"No, actually I don't see. Janet, I'm worried about you. You don't know anything about this Ernie, except that he likes Erroll Flynn."

"That's where you're wrong. Ernie is a well established professional. He's a trained doctor, and he works for the County. He owns his own condominium, he's 34, been single his whole life, and he's been waiting for someone just like me - someone who loves adventure as much as he does."

"Janet, even forgetting Albert, it's too soon to get so deeply involved with someone you've just met!" I cautioned.

"Alright, mommy. I'll let you meet him. Monday morning. They've got him on night shift for the next few weeks, so we can all have breakfast together after his work," she negotiated, with a dreamy look in her eyes.

So. I met the man. I'll admit it - I was wrong, Janet was right. Ernie was everything a woman dreams of: educated, articulate, sensitive, even sexy. Stable in a well-paid profession, with unfulfilled dreams of adventure, and wanting a family. I still didn't understand how he was

going to make Albert give Janet a divorce, and he didn't, either, yet. He only felt certain that he could figure it out, especially since he was rather bright and his hobby in high school had been computer hacking. There might be a little risk to Janet, of course, and there would be a risk to himself, as well, in the plan Ernie was hatching. But, of course, both of them had enough reason to try it. Or so he said.

But, had any of us known that Janet was about to die...

Albert, meanwhile, had noticed that there was something different about the house. He could not analyze the fact that Janet had left him in her heart as he had left her, of course, since she was no longer in his field of consciousness to be missed. But, the house had started getting dirtier, and less hospitable, so Albert had begun coming home to his computer later and later, spending his first after-work hours with his colleagues at the local management consulting firm bar, across the street from the office. There he would drink, and the drink would loosen his tongue.

"I agree. Women, who needs 'em. If it wasn't for the customers. Why, Janet's such a waste. Doesn't care about business, or me, or anything. She just goes to the mall and watches soap operas. You know, she asked me for a divorce once. Told me I don't care about her. Me, imagine that. Of course, she wanted half the money. I told her off, good, too. She married me and now she's going to stick with it. I wasn't gonna let any woman drag my name through the financial papers and ruin my career."

It went on that way for over a week. Roughly the same speech every night. It should have come as no surprise, then, that about two weeks after Janet's and my "fateful conversation" that a young man took Albert aside to a booth, bought him yet another martini, and made an offer almost too perfect to be true.

"You sound like you would like to get rid of your wife."

"I can't. Divorce is the surest way to ruin a career in this business."

"Who's talking about divorce? I'm talking about becoming a widower."

"What?!"

"Keep your voice down. Look, I'm a professional. That's what I do for a living."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I kill people."

"You kill people?"

"I kill people. Wives mostly. I don't like the organized crime hit-man business; it's too risky. I travel from town to town, go to the upscale bars, and look for men like you. Then, if the price is right, I make their wives go away forever. It's clean, it's easy for them. No one ever suspects them because I make it look like an accident. All their clients come to the funeral, and then they can go on in their business and never lose face. Plus they keep all their money."

"I don't know..." said Albert's lips, but his pupils were dilating, and the saliva was forming on the roof of his mouth.

"Ten grand, five in advance." And he shoved Albert a paper.

The paper read: "Pay Less Shoes, corner of 34th, Brown oxford 8-1/2EE."

"What's this?"

"That's where you leave the money. The top box. Tomorrow night at 6 p.m. exactly. I'll be 10 minutes behind you, and I'll pick it up. Hundred dollar bills are fine. Just put them in a plain envelope. The first five grand down tomorrow night. Then I'll call you when it's done, to tell you what to say to the police. You leave the second five grand at 6 p.m. the night after I call. We'll never meet again."

The man got up and walked away. Payless Shoes had two customers the next night, and although both of them looked carefully at a certain pair of brown oxford shoes, size 8-1/2EE, neither of them bought anything. At least, not shoes.

It's a good thing I didn't know about any of this at the time, or I would have told Janet and Ernie to run like crazy. I only saw Janet once after that breakfast appointment where I met Ernie. It was about two weeks later, let's see, that would be just about two days after the shoe store money drop. They were coming out of the Bank of the Cayman Islands in Manhattan. He had his arm around her shoulder, and they were looking at each other with that dreamy-eyed far away look that signals the early stages of love. They both looked like the cat that swallowed the canary.

"Janet?"

"Oh, hi, can't stop to talk. We're almost there. Another few days and Ernie's plan is going to..."

"Shhh..." Ernie cut in.

"Sorry, hon. Can't tell you. It's a secret. I love secrets, remember. Call you when it's over."

"Janet! Be careful."

"Careful. Nothing can hurt me when I'm with Ernie. Get your passport ready. In a few weeks, you'll be visiting us in..."

"Shh..." Ernie nudged her.

"Oh, okay," Janet acquiesced. "I just wonder if she likes koala bears."

Ernie put a hand over her mouth and hauled her away. But she had given me the message. They were getting money somehow, putting it in the secret accounts in the Cayman Islands and getting ready to move to Australia under false names. And Janet was right again...it *was* kind of exciting, after all. Suddenly I felt like I was missing out on something that would be fun. Maybe I should have taken those old movies as seriously as Janet did. Now, here all I had was a loving husband, a good home, and hope for a family one day. But, that was before Janet died...

Two weeks after this meeting, or four weeks in all since the day Janet had met Ernie, Albert's phone rang. It took twelve rings for him to pull himself away from his computer, since it was eleven at night.

"Just listen, Albert. Tell the police you have no idea how she got into that part of town, but you've been having a bit of difficulty in the marriage lately, and she might have been meeting someone to cheat on you. Just identify the body. Be honest about everything else. And visit the box of shoes tomorrow at six."

The next morning the Police called. Albert went downtown, and saw Janet for the last time. Her face had been blown away by a shotgun blast during a gang drive-by shooting. They had brought her body in with several others, all known gang members. Janet had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but Albert knew from the clothes, and the phone call that it was her. Because of his status in the community, there was a short investigation. But Albert had been at the bar with a dozen friends at the time of the shooting, the fingerprints and dental records all checked out, and police do not frequent shoe stores as they do donut shops. So Janet was cremated, and Albert was free to pursue his business. But Ernie and I knew the truth. Or, at least, I thought we did.

"He did it, Ernie, he has to have," I tried to persuade him.

"But how? He was at that bar when the shooting happened. We both saw the police report," he said.



"I don't know. Maybe he paid somebody to do it for him," I suggested.

"But it was a gang shooting," He disagreed.

"Which was all over the radio within minutes. Anybody could have shot poor Janet at home and brought her body just beyond the police lines to be found later. Remember, the report said Janet was found a hundred yards away?" I was still in tears, even a week after the memorial service.

"Look, I can't tell you everything," Ernie said as he passed me a third handkerchief, "but I promise you, you'll see her again."

"Yeah, in heaven, if there is one! Ernie, you're a doctor. You know death when you see it. You read the books about grieving. Janet is dead, and denying it isn't going to bring her back. Now we need to concentrate on proving that Albert killed her!"

"Look, what makes you so sure, anyway?" Ernie asked me.

"I can understand why you couldn't come to the funeral, but you should have seen him. He was so nonchalant, so almost happy. Do you know what he talked to me about? Do you? My God, Ernie, the most wonderful girl either of us ever knew gets her face blown away in a gang shooting, and all he talks about is shortages in their joint stock market accounts." I dissolved into tears again.

"Shortages in his stock market accounts?" Ernie repeated.

His whole demeanor changed. He looked worried.

"Look, I've got to go. But trust me. Janet is not dead. You'll be hearing from her very soon. And so will Albert....especially, so will Albert," I thought I heard him mumble the part about Albert to himself as he got up and left. I shook my head in disbelief at the depth of his denial.

I have had to reconstruct the next two weeks of Albert's life from articles in the financial newspapers. Albert wouldn't talk to me much after I had accused him to his face of hiring someone to kill Janet. He was right, too, I didn't have any evidence. And to use what I know now would be so counterproductive.

It was nine days after the memorial service. Albert was home chatting on-line with his cyberspace friends when a message crossed his screen:

"Why did you do it, Albert?"

That was all. It just flashed, then vanished.

About two hours later, another one came:

"Why did you kill me, Albert?"

Albert reached for the delete key, but the message vanished before his finger got there.

The next night, the pressure on Albert's guilty psyche increased:

"Ten thousand dollars in a shoebox. I thought I was worth more than that, Albert."

But now Albert had a strategy ready. He pressed the print key. This time he would prove he wasn't going crazy. But he had gotten there too late. The message was gone.

Two hours passed. Another message wiped out the current screen and read:

"I loved you since the library, Albert, but you paid that guy from the bar."

Albert pressed the print-screen key, but it wouldn't print.

The next day, Albert looked for malfunctions in the computer for almost an hour before he logged on. There were none.

The night's first message from Janet was:

"No matter what you told the police, Albert, I wasn't in that part of town to cheat on you."

Again, it would not print.

Two hours later:

"Tell, the truth, my forever lying Prince Charming. Tell them about the shoe store."

By now, Albert was getting nervous. I would have been too, if I was in his situation. Later messages told intimate details of their life together, before it turned bad. Things Janet had never even told me.

Albert tried everything, as anyone would. Not being a great computer repair expert himself, he had his computer examined. He rebooted everything several times a night. He even bought a new computer. And tried a new Internet provider. But the messages kept coming, and would not print. Albert could not help but wonder if he was going insane.

The fateful event happened one night almost two weeks later. It had now been seven weeks since Janet and I had met in the tea room and discussed her going to the Erroll Flynn film festival; and it was just about three weeks since her murder had cut short the great adventure that she and Ernie had planned.

Albert went to the university hoping to outsmart Janet's "ghost" by using a computer at the library.

It was 9:15 p.m., when he read:

"You can't escape a ghost, Albert. I'm your guilty conscience and I'll be with you forever."

It wouldn't print. Albert went to the desk.

"Look, there's something wrong with that computer terminal. You've got to help me." He was sweating.

As expected, by the time the assistant arrived, the message was gone. The assistant walked away.

"Albert"

the screen beckoned,

"Remember how we met picking up books from the library floor? We were only twenty feet from where you are now."

Albert turned, looked, remembered, and screamed...

"No..... I killed you. Go away!"

His arm swept madly across the countertop, and four terminals went flying. Albert ran from table to table, grabbing terminals, and hurling them to the floor.

"Stop it. You're dead! You're dead! I saw you in the morgue," he yelled frantically.

Security arrived in two minutes. Albert was sent to the psychiatric facility at Bellevue for observation. No one believed his confession, of course, since he had become a jabbering idiot. All-in-all, he spent three years in the institution. He came out a broken man. Albert still reports to his case worker once a month. He is still doing community service tutoring business students at the university library, where his first, and also, his final encounter with Janet occurred. And he never looks at the stock market accounts or plays with the Internet anymore.

Oh, Ernie was right. I do see Janet every year or two. And we talk on the phone all the time. I tried to make this a mystery for your enjoyment, dear reader. If Janet had written it, it would probably have sold more copies. But of course, she doesn't dare. I'm sure you saw right through me, and know all about Ernie and Janet's great adventure, and how they proved that the Robin Hood who loves the maiden-captured-by-the-pirate can rescue her and get the money even in the 20th century. But in case you didn't, I suppose I should explain it all.

Three days after Albert was sentenced to Bellevue, or just about six week's after Janet's death, Ernie had put his condominium up for sale, and quit his job as night medical examiner for the county coroner's office at the morgue. He boarded a plane for Australia, where, with half of the eight million dollars in his new Cayman Island account, he had just bought a cattle ranch. On the plane, he sat down beside a woman who had boarded earlier in Kansas City, and was also bound for Australia. As soon as the flight attendant left them alone, they embraced and kissed passionately.

"I missed you so, Ernie." Janet's voice was full of relief.

"Janet, I missed you, too. But now, we have the rest of our lives together. With four million dollars cash and a ranch of our own," he added, holding her hand a little tighter.

"I've never worked so hard as I did for those two weeks, draining Albert's and my accounts bit-by-bit, so no one could trace where the money had gone. And I hated being alone in that hotel in Kansas City for all these weeks," Janet said, cuddling a little closer to her him.

"You know that we couldn't have risked your being seen, honey. And once I'd promised your husband in that bar that I would kill you, I had to wait for just the right body to show up at the morgue."

"We got lucky on that count, didn't we?" Janet giggled.

"I thought I was going to have to pour acid on some poor corpse's face. But when that bag lady got caught up in the gang shooting, that was our perfect break! All I had to do was put her into the clothes and jewelry you had given me, and put your fingerprints and dental records into the computer instead of hers." Ernie sounded so glad that it was over.

"Claiming she came in separate was the perfect touch, wasn't it, dear!" Janet observed.

Ernie nodded. His voice became less animated, "I felt so sorry for your best friend, though, and how thinking that you were really dead made her cry so terribly. I told her as much as I could, but...." Ernie's voice trailed off.



"Well, we can tell her everything as soon as we're settled in Australia! She'll understand." Janet said, stroking his shoulder.

"It was a good thing I talked to her, though. I never thought Albert would look at his accounts so quickly." Ernie continued.

Janet paused thoughtfully for a moment. "I've got to admit it, Ernie," she said. "After what Albert did to me, I thought I could never like a man who used a computer again, let alone, fall in love with one! But those e-mails you hacked into Albert's computer really did the trick!" Janet's eyes sparkled.

"That kept him busy just long enough, made him confess, and gave us a three-year's head start. Following him to the university library was risky, but it allowed me to write the perfect message." He added.

"I never would have done it to him, but when I saw you pull that money out of the shoebox, it really hit me that he had earned it." Janet cuddled closer to her hero.

"Tell you what, my love, I'll make you a deal. If you promise never to talk about Albert again, I'll promise to get rid of my computer."

Janet laughed, "But we've *got* to keep your computer! How else will we communicate if one of us dies before the other!"

And when they landed, the koala bears could hear them, still laughing.

A CHRISTMAS PERIL  
By Ima Dickens (a.k.a. Ken Behrens)

Ebenezer Stooze was undeniably the cheeriest, most optimistic, bright eyed, life-loving advertising account executive in the business. There were two explanations for this fact. Some co-workers and customers were of the opinion that it was due to an early upbringing that was in every way positive, and that this was just his way of responding to a genetic predisposition to happiness coupled with a tremendously nurturing environment. Others felt it had something to do with pure survival. After all, the latter group reasoned, one would have to do something to adjust to being a founding partner in an advertising agency called Stooze and Moron.

In the latter group was Stooze's personal assistant, Bob Crotchitty. Caught between denying the title of "Stooze's stooze," and frequent encounters with his boss' enthusiasm, Mr. Crotchitty hated life. Mrs. Crotchitty was a constant shrew, and his one daughter, Whiney Kim, regularly threw tantrums, destroyed portions of her room, and threatened, but unfortunately never quite got around to, running away from home. And this was at age twelve. So Mr. Crotchitty found himself spending most of his free hours at the neighborhood bar, and, due to Mr. Stooze's unbridled generosity with vacation time, he spent a lot of time there indeed.

Christmas was fast approaching, as Christmas has a habit of doing, and the media's constant attention to the number of shopping days remaining, the prevalence of Christmas muzak everywhere in the air, and the constant barrage of Christmas ads and paraphernalia in every store window almost since the fourth of July did little to help Bob's mood.

It was 3 a.m. on December 24, and Bob was just coming out of the fifth tavern of the night. He was on his way home at last, trusting that his family would finally be asleep. He had one more stop to make first, however. Mr. Stooze had handed out to each employee that evening the usual 20-pound Christmas turkey, \$100 gift certificate for the mall, one week Christmas vacation, and Christmas bonus, complete with giant multicolored Christmas card wishing peace, love, joy, and all those other good things that it seems to be everyone's responsibility to talk about at the Yule season. Bob had wanted a little less Christmas, and a little more bah, humbug, and so, he had dropped said gifts at the first tavern, his favorite, the one with no Christmas decorations at all, and now needed to retrieve them prior to going home. This soon accomplished, he returned, quietly tiptoeing past his wife, who had fallen asleep, waiting on the couch for his return, repeating the nightly ritual again another time.

The next morning would be Bob's last at the offices of Stooze and Moron until the 2nd of January. This half-day was merely to put accounts in order in preparation for the long leave for the holidays enforced by Mr. Stooze's generosity. But little did Bob know that it would change Mr. Stooze's, and therefore his own, life forever.

"Hark the herald angels flap;

"Wake the shepherds from their nap..."

Loud, boisterous, pushing their way past the front door receptionist, the drunkards came. Right into the front office, where it would fall to Bob's responsibility to stop them.

"Excuse, me, gentlemen, can I - I help you?" Bob timidly rose to occasion.

"We're here to see...to see..." the first one stammered.

"Mr. Stooze," the second volunteered.

"Yes, Mr. Stooze," the first was satisfied he had remembered the purpose.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, Mr. Stooze is occupied." Bob was debating if he could take the four. He wasn't all that over last night himself.

"He'll see US!" the third challenged.

"You just tell him we're here."

"Yeah, tell, we're...uh, where are we?"

"I'm sorry, you'll have to..."

"Nonsense, nonsense, Mr. Crotchitty." Bob turned to see Mr. Stooze emerging from the inner office.

"Ebby, Ebby, Merry Chrishmash."

"Leroy, Perkins, I haven't seen you in month of Sundays. Who's your new friends?"

"This is, well, and, oh, yeah. We spent the night celebrating Chrishmush, and we just had to tell them about...about..."

"About our favorite cousin."

"Well, come in boys, come in. Leroy, the last time I saw you..." And they disappeared into Stooze's inner office.

It was always like that. Stooze never judged, never suspected anything. He just welcomed anybody, everybody, all year. And this was what-did-he-call-it, "Chrishmush," and that made it special. Two hours later the four emerged and Stooze wished them on their way. He invited them for the evening, but the two cousins had only been passing through town for the day, on their way to Bermuda for the holidays. The work hadn't gotten done, but that didn't matter. Stooze still sent Bob Crotchitty home at the expected 12:30, and Bob went straight to the tavern until nightfall.

Stooze stayed on by himself to make up for the time his hospitality had cost him, and it was then that it happened.

"Let's see," like many bipolar individuals, Stooze talked to himself. Actually the only reason he had not been diagnosed manic-depressive is that he never got depressed. Besides, he lived alone, and had these many years, so there was no one to get his psyche committed to the proper facility.

"The Richard account's finished. That leaves just two more. Two o'clock. Yes, yes, doing nicely."

The pink paper floating down onto the desk top barely made him look up.

"A matter of the most urgent importance concerning..."

He had scarcely read the first, when a second, this time a yellow one, joined it.

"Your future reward after death. You must..."

Everyone hates these Post-It-Notes. They're just too small to finish a thought on. The third, the lime-green one, floated down presently.

"Permit yourself to be visited by three..."

This time Stooze looked up.

"Moron, my dear, departed partner Moron. You've come back as a ghost! Welcome, welcome, my beloved friend! Speak to me."

Jacob Moron, dead seven years to the day, started a tan post-it-note. Stooze sat him down by his own personal laptop, gave him a quick lesson in Windows 98, and awaited results.

"I can't speak to you. Look at my face. See this smile? In death, my own joyous, affable personality was frozen into my features. I cannot frown, or speak, or tell anyone how I feel. You are headed for the same hell unless you reform."

"What do you mean, reform? Everybody knows kindness is the best way to lead your life."

"I don't understand it either. All I know is I was permitted 10 minutes on earth this day to warn you of your impending doom."

Stooge stared at the screen, then at Moron in disbelief, as a Pacman came and ate the last two paragraphs. Just as the Energizer Bunny put in an appearance on the screen, he spoke.

"What a wonderful time of year to see you here, Moron, you must stay and enjoy this great season with me as we always used to do."

Moron gave the return key a tap, dismissing the rabbit, and continued typing.

"The chains we forge in life are those we drag through eternity. There is but one chance for you to avoid my fate. You must permit yourself this night to be haunted by three spirits. The first at midnight, the second at one a.m., the third at two a.m."

Stooge was beginning to wonder if Moron hadn't been reading too much Charles Dickens. "Oh, and what are the names of these three spirits?"

"The first the Ghost of Christmas Repast, the second the Ghost of Christmas Presents, and the third the Ghost of Christmas Stupor."

Poor Stooge. He wanted to yell at the guy to leave, but his brain couldn't put those words together, so much had he trained it to say only the opposite. No matter, the 10 minutes was up. Moron vanished, Pacman returned, and the Energizer Bunny and Ebenezer Stooge were left to their own thoughts.

Eleven p.m. Stooge had spent Christmas Eve caroling with a group of social workers, handing out sandwiches to homeless people, and visiting a couple customers who were of a similar disposition to his own, and held Christmas open house at their homes. He had forgotten about Moron and his strange communication.

He laid down to his customary peaceful, eventless sleep.

At midnight, Stooge awoke with a start. A siren had awakened him, and somewhere a church bell was chiming Christmas. It was then that he remembered a story from his childhood - a story about a hater of Christmas, three ghosts, and the chime of a Victorian grandfather's clock. And there she stood.

Five foot four, 350 pounds if she weighed an ounce, a face round as the full moon and twice as pot-marked, dressed in a long overcoat that reminded him of what Harpo Marx used in the movies to steal food at buffet social events. A big Panama hat topped her head. She was gnawing on a turkey leg with great enjoyment.

"Up and at 'em, big boy. Time to do our thing."

"Merry Christmas, my fine, healthy woman. Who are you?"

She had finished the turkey leg, and tossed it over her shoulder. She reached through her pockets, and found a cup of pudding. His suspicions about the coat had been confirmed.

"Sweetie, I'm the Ghost of Christmas Repast. Would you like some shrimp? I got some here someplace."

"Uh, no thank you. Are you Jacob Moron's friend?"

"No way, sweetie. That poor boy got his mouth sealed up in a smile. Me, I don't get along well with anybody who can't eat." The pudding was gone. She discarded the cup, and removed the hat.

"How about some coconut cream pie?" The top of the hat opened, revealing a refrigerated compartment Ebenezer assumed was battery powered.

"Jacob said you're supposed to show me something."

"Right you are sweetie! Hang on!" She stuck her fork into his pajamas, and away they flew.

Moments later, they landed in a dining room in a large suburban house. To Stooze's surprise, the pie was undamaged. "Sure you don't want some?" She asked.

Stooze looked around. He knew the old story, and she didn't have to tell him that they were invisible. Seven adults, all fat, and five unruly children were all assembled around a table full of turkey, pudding, stuffing, pies – generally, whatever was in the ghost's pockets.

"Coming for a new refill?" Stooze put together the first sarcastic comment of his life, but he didn't notice. Jacob's fix was beginning to take hold.

"No, dearie," she said, replacing the pie, and pulling out a pan of some kind of casserole, "I'm here to show you Christmas. The ritual starts now."

"Okay everyone, let's say Christmas Grace," the mother encouraged.

"Christmas grace!" a twelve-year old volunteered, with a hint of sarcasm.

"Good bread, good meat, good God, let's eat!" The uncle's version wasn't much better.

The mother picked up the Bible and began: "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus."

"Oh, no..." Heads went down on arms folded across plates.

"Honey, can't you cut it short, the turkey's getting cold?" her irate husband demanded.

"Okay, okay, but next year we're going to church in the morning. Thank you God, for sending your Son, and for this great feast." The mother's words spilled out before she could be silenced. The amens we're quicker than the laptop's Pacman.

"Okay, who wants white meat?" The father had the next part of the ritual, as we all know.

"Me, me!"

The ghost put the casserole back half-finished, and Stooze wondered why. She was just clearing her hands, getting ready to work some ghostly magic.

A finger snap later, and they were in the middle of the meal. Everyone was fighting. After all, they hadn't seen each other since last Christmas, and there was a lot of criticizing to catch up on.

Another finger snap, and the meal was over. Mother was alone in the kitchen washing a stack of dishes that almost exceeded the measure of Stooze's generosity, were such a thing thinkable. Two men were snoring on respective couches, while two more watched a football game, eating popcorn that had just come out of the microwave. One old woman sat in a rocking chair petting the cat, who, not overlooked today, had stuffed itself on turkey grease and was currently sleeping off an overdose of its new catnip mouse. The other woman who had been at the table was gone. As the ghost explained, she went home in a huff after the argument got too heated. Five children of various ages were busy breaking computerized toys on each others bodies.

"Behold!" the ghost proclaimed, "Christmas dinner."

The ghost stuck an apple in her mouth, and snapped her fingers. Stooze was back in his own bed.

Another siren wailed. It was 1 a.m.

There he was, in the brand-new, shiny suit of a supersalesman, with a credit card imprinting machine chained around his neck, his pockets bulging with new receipts from this year's shopping.

But it was the curious chains tied around him that Stooze questioned first.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Presents. My chains are all the maxed-out credit cards I collect when people try to buy one more present than they can afford. It's a nasty job, but someone's got to do it."

"Are we going on a trip?"

"Nope, I brought the store with me. Come into my parlor..."

And Stooze's bedroom opened onto the biggest general merchandise outlet he had ever seen.

"Four acres of Christmas. Toys, clothes, knick-knacks. Quality merchandise, everything. Look at this - clothes that change size and color the minute they leave the store, toys, all pre-broken, everyone needing one more battery than they sell in a package, and none with assembly instructions in English. See our gift counter. Just look at this. Every item here carefully researched for the right consumer orientation - pick one up, fondle it. Notice how it makes you think of who to buy it for. Tools - nothing useful, mind you, but every one looks like a great new idea. And, the hallmark of perfect Christmas merchandising - customer service. Our stock is totally computer indexed. No matter what someone returns, we can always find something he really wants for 10% more. And, for the children, twelve, count 'em, twelve Santas. No one has to wait. And, we make it a point that they always tell the customer to go somewhere else to shop. Yep, we learned that trick from Miracle on 34th Street. The customers love it. They always shop here. Of course, we're smart. We always put our stores three miles from town where there's no competition. That helps, too. And, all the usual, in-store bank, in-store optician, beauty parlor, barber shop, child care facility, restaurant with gourmet cappuccino. You know, all the standards. And, best of all, we start our Christmas displays in May. That really gives people time for a head start. Of course, we're realists, we make certain every checkout lane is open until midnight Christmas Eve. Oh, sorry, gotta go add up the profits this year."

Stooze had seen it all. An advertising executive meets some fast talkers, but even he didn't have time to wish the man a Merry Christmas. But then, he reasoned, there was never a man who needed such wishes less.

One thing bothered him, though, so he spoke up.

"I see the store, but where are the people?"

"Oh, you want people? Well, of course, it wouldn't be Christmas without people, would it? What's the sense of a store with no customers? I can see why you're in the advertising business. Well, if you really want to know, they all went home, so there. It's 1:15 a.m. Christmas Day, and they're all home in bed waiting for Santa Claus, hohoho, or should I say hahaha, because we all know where presents really come from, don't we? Retailers, retailers, American ingenuity, we're the real Santa Claus. Okay, you want people, you got people, but it could get dangerous. Step this way please."

And the two of them went into the manager's office where they could watch from behind a panel of glass. The ghost operated the credit card machine chained to his neck. Stooze heard the sound of coins dropping into a cash register, and the store came alive.

"Eleven p.m. Christmas Eve. Look at it. Isn't it glorious? It's been this way for weeks."

And Stooze looked. Hundreds of people everywhere. People running, pushing, cutting each other off with their shopping carts to reach the best toys.

"That's mine. I saw it first."

"In your dreams."

And with that, the last Turboman in the store went flying in two directions at once.

"Isn't it lovely?", the ghost asked, "a superhero doll who can really fly. And can bilocate - he can defeat two mad scientists at once."

"He's broken." Stooze observed, "You can't sell him if he's broken."

"I can sell whatever they'll buy. Besides, all our toys have an unconditional manufacturer's warrantee."

"They won't honor it for store breakage."



"They'll honor it for ME. I'm their best customer. All the little darlings will have to pay is the shipping and handling to get a good one. And that won't happen until after Christmas."

Stooge looked again. A lady and a man were both on the ground, shopping carts intertwined in a heap in between them. They were having trouble getting up. Within seconds, the other customers descended like vultures, and the carts were empty.

"Don't you just love enthusiasm? I adore Christmas!" The ghost exclaimed.

"Bah, humbug." Stooge thought, but the words didn't make it out.

Now he noticed the checkout lines. Three people had just had another shopping cart collision getting into the ten-item-or-less express line. The least-filled cart had fifteen items.

"I can't take this shouting anymore. Take your store out of here and let me get back to sleep," Stooge pleaded.

"What, you don't like Christmas? Seems like every time they send us ghosts out, it's to somebody who doesn't like Christmas. Very well."

The ghost worked the credit card machine. The sound of money clanking echoed in Stooge's ears, and he stood alone in his own bedroom. He went to bed, and laid there, tossing and turning.

Two a.m. Stooge had never gotten back to sleep. A vague light appeared in the hallway outside his bedroom door, and he heard what sounded like Burl Ives singing something about holly jolly.

There she sat, her dazed eyes glued to a four-foot surround sound television, the remote in her hand. She was dressed in a robe, slippers, and hair curlers. A scrapbook had fallen from the arm of her easy chair onto the floor.

"Are you the Ghost of Christmas Stupor?"

No response. She zapped the TV, and got a shot of Donna Reed sitting down to Christmas Dinner.

"Excuse me." Stooge tried to get her attention.

Zap. Now it was an angel trying to pull a drowning man out of the water.

He gave up talking and picked up the scrapbook. Another zap brought Fred MacMurray and three sons happily trimming a tree.

The scrapbook told the story. The orphanage. Two pictures of her walking down the aisle in two different bridal dresses, and no groom. An invitation she had printed up one year asking her co-workers to a Christmas Eve party, accompanied by a picture of herself and one other woman.

Zap. Now Dolly Parton was waiting for someone to come home from killing a wild turkey. Another zap. Tennessee Ernie Ford singing Silent Night. Zap. Zap. Zap. Happiness everywhere - on every channel. And a scrapbook full of disappointments and rejection.

"Ghost of Christmas Stupor. Snap out of it. 'Tis the season to be jolly!"

Zap. "Chestnuts roasting." Zap. The Grinch learning his lesson. Zap. Scrooge getting converted. "Ghost, I'll be your friend. Let's celebrate together."

It was then that she emptied the pill bottle into her mouth. Her Christmasses were over.

"No, no, there's never a reason! Live, live!" He tugged at her lifeless body. But it shriveled into his own bedpost. Stooge was too weary to stay awake. His eyes closed as he collapsed, shaken and drained, onto the pillow.

Dawn broke into Stooge's window. He opened his eyes. "Moron, you're right. I'll change. I'll change today, if it's not too late." He ran to his window. He had one chance - only one person he knew who could help him put it all together. He saw a boy on the street.

"Young man. What day is it?"

"Why, Christmas Day, sir." He hadn't missed it.

"Boy, the tavern in the next block, the one with no Christmas lights in the window. Is it open?"

"Yes sir, I think so."

"Do you know where Bob Crotchitty lives?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell him that Stooze says to meet him there. Do it quickly, and I'll give you twenty dollars." He almost said "half a crown." It's amazing how that dialog sticks with you.

Stooze dressed. The boy returned.

"I gave him the message, sir, where's my twenty dollars?"

"I lied. Here's a buck. Bah, humbug, kid."

"Joke's on you, mister. His wife wouldn't let him come."

Stooze wandered the streets for an hour thinking. Christmas is foolish. Life is foolish. Being pleasant is foolish. Reality stinks. An honest person witnesses to that. Bob Crotchitty would understand. He walked until his feet wouldn't take any more. He finally landed in the tavern anyway.

Ten minutes later, in walked Bob.

"Mr. Stooze, Merry Christmas?"

"Bah, humbug." Classical wording is best to fall back on until you can invent your own expressions.

"Mr. Stooze?" Bob was incredulous. "What are you doing here?"

"Ghosts, my boy, ghosts. What about you? I thought your wife wouldn't let you out on Christmas."

"In the hospital. Her and Whiney Kim."

"What?!"

"The turkey. I left it at a bar. It spoiled while I was out drinking. I hate Christmas, so I refused to eat it. They're unconscious after having their stomachs pumped. It's funny, what you think about. The last thing Whiney Kim said as she collapsed on her plate..."

"What was that?"

"Christmas. God deliver us, every one."