

The Hypocritical Oath

A Novel

“Primum non nocere” – “first do no harm”

Oath of Hippocrates

“Nolite pati” – “do not suffer”

Frederick N. Lukash, MD

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Dedication

*To Barbara Mendoza, my 10th grade English teacher.
“You believed I could tell a story.”*

Disclaimer

This book is a work of fiction and a product of my imagination, designed purely for reader entertainment. Some themes and events may be real. They serve only as a backdrop to the story. Names, characters, and plots are used fictitiously. No one should imply anything more than that.

Books by
Frederick N. Lukash MD

Non-Fiction

The Safe and Sane Series

*The Safe and Sane Guide to **Teenage Plastic Surgery***
BenBella Books, 2010

The Restore Point: *The Safe and Sane Guide to a Lifetime of
Lean for Kids, Teens and Families*
Archway Publishing, 2015

Operation Art: *Reconstructing Children's Self Esteem
A Safe and Sane Guide to Understanding Artistic Impressions
of Body Image in Kids*
KDP Independent, 2022

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Finally, to my father, the late **Leslie Lukash MD**, former Chief Medical Examiner of Nassa County, NY for the immeasurable influences he had in my life.

About the Author

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Dr. Lukash is a Fellow in the American College of Surgeons and the American Academy of Pediatrics. In addition to cosmetic surgery, he is dedicated to the well-being of children. He has volunteered with Surgical Aid to Children of the World and authored three books on body image and self-esteem.

In addition to spending time with his wife, three daughters and three grandchildren, Dr. Lukash enjoys playing the piano, portrait painting, and physical fitness.

This is his first novel.

To learn more about, and communicate with the author visit his website drlukash.com

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
About the Author	xi
Prologue.....	xvii
The Pledge - 1971	1
“DOC”	4
The Beginning - August 1969.....	10
Initiation - The Anatomies	14
Hurricanes and Anniversaries	17
Katrina - 2005	25
Joy and Sorrow- 2007.....	31
Funerals and Beyond.....	40
Miranda.....	42
Reunion - 2008.....	47
Dickie B.....	50
The Departed.....	53
Victims or Suspects	59
Secrets	61
Roots.....	63
Deceit.....	67
Discovery	69

The Return	72
Covington	75
Teamwork.....	78
Peeling the Onion	82
Autopsies and Exhumations	87
Field Trips.....	94
Suspects.....	118
Road Trips	126
Cleveland	136
UNSUB - Unknown Subject	150
Mexico	160
Crossroads	173
Friends or Foes.....	183
The Road Back.....	190
Jerome (Jerry) Auerbach.....	194
Borders and Boundaries.....	203
The Plan	209
The Stakeout.....	220
Limbo.....	227
Ending	233
The Chase	241
Confrontation.....	243
Denouement and Legacy	251
Epilogue: The Aftermath.....	255

Epigraph

Hypocrisy:

“The practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one’s own behavior does not conform.”

Euthanasia:

“The practice of intentionally ending a person’s life to relieve suffering.”

Prologue

He was a physician. He took the Hippocratic Oath. He swore by Apollo, the healer, “to help, but most of all do no harm”. He lived by those words. He was in fact both admired as a masterful plastic surgeon, and a talented pianist, well -known in the Los Angeles medical and music scene.

He remembered that he could stand for hours in the operating room, working miracles and changing lives. He could also “tickle those ivories” and jam with the best in the business.

It began with some weakness in his legs. He figured it was age and probably should have exercised more. Then he began to trip, and his gait changed. Undaunted he performed his surgeries sitting on a stool. Then, when it became hard to use the pedals on the piano, he became concerned.

The clinic at the UCLA hospital began the work up. Maybe Lyme’s disease? After all, he often escaped the city to his ranch near Ojai. There were lots of deer, and he’d removed plenty of ticks.

One in five thousand people are diagnosed with ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis – better known as “Lou Gehrig’s disease.” Only five percent have some pathway of inheritance. The other 95% – bad luck.

The man everyone thought was living under the bright glow of celebrity was watching the lights dim and the curtain drop.

He had exhausted all the centers of excellence looking for hope, and without it, at least a reason.

He went to school in New Orleans in the 60's and 70's and partied hard. It was a time of exploration, and he was often the lead scout. Drugs and alcohol – a lot of both. Was he now paying the price for youth and invincibility? The experts said there was no root cause.

No more great surgeries that put him in the limelight. No more piano gigs in fancy clubs with the beautiful people.

From a cane to a walker, then from a wheelchair to a bed. Weakness and paralysis had overtaken him, inch by inch. Next, breathing and swallowing became difficult.

Now he was a patient- fifty-five years old and helpless, dependent on others and almost forgotten. He has caretakers 24 hours, seven days a week. All his bodily functions have been stolen by this disease. He has a tracheostomy, so he does not aspirate and get pneumonia. He is on a ventilator controlling every breath. There is a catheter for urine and a colostomy for stool. He is turned frequently to try and avoid the inevitable bed sores.

Most of the time he sleeps. The room is dark except for the lights from the machines keeping him alive.

When awake he can look out and survey what he once enjoyed. The coral and the riding trails. He loved his horse. He loved his ranch. He loved his Porsche; but that battery had long lost its spark.

The Hypocritical Oath

All that remains is his mind, and his memories. The more he failed the less the visitors came. One by one – now he was alone.

But on this clear summer night, he was not alone. While the nurse was sleeping in her room a familiar face appeared.

“Hello compadre. Remember me? Remember the oath?”

Staring, eyes trying to focus he turned his head to the side where the framed oath of Hippocrates sits.

The barely familiar voice responded. “Not that oath. The one you pledged that third year of medical school. I am here to fulfill that pledge”.

With that the ventilator was disconnected and alarms silenced. The unannounced visitor sat on the bed and watched as life slipped away.

The Pledge – 1971

New Orleans in August is hot, humid, and rainy. It is the prelude to hurricane seasons that can range from disruptive to deadly. It is also the month that Tulane Medical School goes back into session.

On this day, the 25th, it is even more humid and hotter than usual. For the third -year students, they will leave the air conditioning of their lecture halls and labs at 1430 Tulane Avenue and cross the street to a three thousand bed world, known as Charity Hospital, where the air is circulated only by large ceiling fans. For most, this is their introduction to clinical medicine.

The class had been divided into clinical rotations: medicine, surgery, and pediatrics. And, again further subdivided into smaller clinical cohorts.

Eight men and two women have been assigned to the fifth floor and ward 509. With clothes limp from the lack of AC, but with enthusiastic spirits, they entered their new home. There were no private rooms in this hospital – only large open spaces, lined with rows of beds. There were no curtains for privacy; simply portable partitions when needed.

Astonishment overcame them. These ten students were from well-bred backgrounds. Familiar hospitals were small in comparative size, and with rooms! If a room was semi-private it was an inconvenience, and true to its name, an invasion of privacy. Illness was not to be shared.

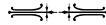
These wards were no longer segregated by color, only by sex. 509 was male, mostly black, and all indigent. The other commonality was that the majority of these patients had waited too long to seek care and were in advance stages of disease - and suffering.

The 10 apprentices were ill-prepared for what they were witnessing. Illness and disease were heretofore pages in books. Memorizations of algorithms for treatments. Now, they saw first-hand the ravages of diabetes out of control: legs without feeling; visual difficulties and kidney failure. Gangrenous toes that lacked blood supply from years of smoking. Men with shortness of breath from advanced emphysema and heart disease. Blood on rags -coughing up blood as lung cancer abbreviated their time on Earth.

These 10 were now learning! They attended to the comfort of the patients as best they could. There was not much that could be done for many. Hope was gone. Day-after-day spirits dampened as they watched suffering and the slow ebbing of life. What could they do? They drew blood, collected urine, changed dressings, wrote progress notes, and filled out death certificates. They made rounds with their interns, residents and attendings. There was little else.

Fatigue was setting in. The ideology of healer was replaced

with the woeful spirit of frustration. Reality was overtaking them.



Across the street was the Tulane Bar and Grill. It was old, and out of place with the surrounding buildings, that heralded an expansion of both the Tulane and Louisiana State (LSU) Medical Schools. Bookends of Charity Hospital. This relic remained the neutral ground for the hospital staff. Students and residents alike drank away their trials, and few tribulations of Charity life. Lab coats were shed and hung on hooks that lined the walls. Long coats for Tulane, short ones for LSU and beige for students. There was no hierarchy there. Seats were always filled in the rickety booths and along the bar. Doctors could be seen “hitting” on the nurses. Everyone bonded.

The ten often commiserated at the “TB&G”. By mid-rotation- six weeks in, personalities were emerging under the stress of the daily grind. “These patients are beyond help! This is no way to live!”

After many drinks someone blurted out: “If I am ever like that I want to be put out of my misery! We should make a pact with each other – to not suffer – to look out for each other.” Most of the group thought this was a foolish momentary over reaction. But as the night dragged on, and the liquor dulled their perspective, they began to take it more seriously- a just in case – a who wants to suffer like that! So they took an oath, long before they graduated with that of Hippocrates. “Do no harm” became “do not suffer”.

“DOC”

“Paging Dr. Brash – please report to the Chief”. There was giggling behind the microphone. He was used to it.

High school student Benjamin Brash darted out from the toxicology lab. As he passed the morgue, he heard the dieners give an enthusiastic: “See you later Doc”.

‘Doc’- A moniker that started there, while watching autopsies, and eventually stuck. He liked it. Soon everyone just called him Doc.

The private office of the Chief Medical Examiner was big and filled with diplomas, certificates, and awards. Towards the rear was an equally sized desk, where a larger-than-life man sat puffing on a cigar.

Entering, Ben thought to himself, “*Have I ever seen that man without a cigar?*”

“Come in Ben – or should I say ‘Doc?’”

Red in the face – “Ben’s fine sir. Are there any problems?”

The Chief put down his cigar. To Ben this seemed serious. “I’ve been speaking with your dad. Not to worry. Just about your future. How do you see yourself going forward? High school will be over before you know it.”

“Sir, I love every moment I get to spend here. Watching the methodology of solving the mysteries is exhilarating.”

“Ben – sons do admire their fathers. Is there more?”

“I like the puzzles. Finding the truth. The science. My father is great and inspiring, but I want more. I want to be like you! And getting away from ‘RVC’ would be nice.”

Ironically both Ben and the Chief lived in Rockville Centre (a.k.a RVC) – chosen because of its central location in Nassau County, Long Island, New York. They resided, however, in very different areas. The Chief was in the Old Canterbury section where large Tudor homes sat on spacious properties. The Brash residence was in a newer section, in a modest split ranch – essentially “zero lot” line.

Ben was well- aware of his financial limitations. His father was a civil servant in law enforcement. It was drummed into his head that he needed to excel. “You will need a scholarship- or financial aid.”

He knew what he needed to do. He always felt out of place in RVC. Jewish, not religious, but definitely Jewish. He lived in a town where there seemed to be church on every corner. Also, right in the center of town stood the Catholic Archdiocese.

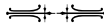
When not studying, Ben was on the tennis court. Rockville Centre had a superb recreational program, and he took full advantage. Academic excellence and athletic prowess equaled a scholarship somewhere.

The Chief continued speaking, now just chewing on the remains of what was once a fine Cuban cigar. “Your dad is an invaluable asset to me and the office. My lead investigator.

His loyalty deserves in kind help. I'm sure you know I came from very little, growing up in the Bronx in the 1920's. Poor Jewish kids had little opportunity. Tulane University in New Orleans gave me opportunity. I owe that school everything." Pointing to the wall: "Can you believe it? Me one of 'Tulane University's Fifty Most Famous Alumni'".

"I see your potential Ben. If you are up for the task and the distance, say the word and I'll use my 'notoriety' to give you the leg up you deserve."

Ben responded with a resounding "WORD!"



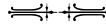
With a parental kiss and a hug Benjamin Brash said good-bye to New York. Eastern Airlines winged him to New Orleans. He landed in the aftermath of the 1965 Hurricane Betsy. He made his way from the airport to McAllister Drive and Robert Sharp Hall on the suburban campus of Tulane University. As he lugged his trunk up seven flights second thoughts creeped in. *No electricity. No air-conditioning. No people This is an ominous beginning!*

Fortunately, dorm rooms have windows. That was the only light available to see by as he unpacked. Finally, another voice. It was not Southern, but not his type of Northern. "Bryce Teller. Miami, Florida. Any interest in checking out the French Quarter? I'm sure there'll be lights and action."

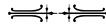
"Sorry. Ben Brash, Long Island New York. And no, it's been a long day."

The Hypocritical Oath

“See you around, ‘Serious Ben’ from New York.”



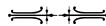
Tulane sits in the uptown Garden District of New Orleans. It has a dual reputation: serious academics and serious partying, in a very social city. Many incoming freshmen found themselves returning to their respective state schools after one semester. Ben Brash was not going to be one of them!



“Serious Ben! It’s the start of fraternity rush week. Are you ready?”

“No Bryce. I am on a full scholarship. I only have time for school and tennis.”

“Well then, my first friend, I’ll see you around the campus – and on the courts. I too am on the team!”



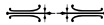
“Teller! Brash! I’m paring you as doubles partners. Let’s see what you can do.”

Emmet Paré was more than their coach. In the world of Tulane tennis, he was a force of nature. He ruled the twelve clay courts as the supreme magistrate of his fiefdom. He watched his subjects carefully and critically. “Teller! Hustle more- party less, or you are off the team. Brash is covering for you!”

Indeed, that was true. Ben was aggressive- charging and covering the net. Bryce tended to lay back. Pare knick-named him “Baseline Bryce”. But it worked. They were a winning team. Crowds gathered to watch them in action. Two co-eds had their eyes on this Ying and Yang duo – Margo Lyons Hayes and Sarah Bess Kohl.

“Ben, we should check them out. This is a perc of being an athlete.”

“Wish I could.” But over and over in his mind ran this mantra: *Eye on the prize- medical school and more scholarship.* The social life needed to be on hold. Benjamin Brash wanted a career in forensic pathology and dreamed of working back in the Nassau County Medical Examiner’s office, side by side with both his mentor, and his father.



The best made plans....

A newly minted Dr. Brash was back on the uptown campus. A student again. The medical school experience was in the heart of the urban downtown. Tilton Hall – home of Tulane Law School was nestled in the middle of the undergraduate halcyon quad. *This is the start of my ninth year in New Orleans. Was New York becoming a fading dream?*

“Is this seat taken?” Looking up was strangely familiar face. “Margo Hayes. You’re Bryce’s friend- the tennis partner and newly minted MD. I am impressed. Are you a perennial student?”

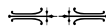
“No Miss Hayes. It is part of a plan.”

“Now I’m more than impressed – I’m intrigued. Tell me more -perhaps over coffee? And please drop the formality. Call me Margo.”

“Call me ‘Doc’. Everyone does. Since high school.”

Margo graduated from ‘impressed and intrigued’ to something more. She could not shake the sense that this man was headed for something great. Likewise, Doc believed he was ready. He was 27 years old and had deferred life long enough.

By the end of first term, they were an item. Now he was conflicted. Margo Hayes came from New Orleans ‘royalty’. She descended from the Touro family. Touro synagogue. Touro Infirmary. Touro wealth! She was embedded into this city. He needed to speak to his mentor.



The families of Kohl and Teller were pleased to announce the marriage of their children Sarah Bess and Bryce Alan. Best Man Benjamin Brash and Maid of Honor Margo Hayes made their debut as a couple.

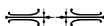
“Serious Ben. I think you found a new doubles partner. Now what?”

“I am in love with Margo. Mid-course correction. The ‘Crescent City’ will be my new home and my new life. After law school I’ll do my pathology residency at Ochsner Hospital. My goal is the same. Only my location changes. Orleans Parish has only a coroner’s office. I am going to become their first chief medical examiner!”

The Beginning – August 1969

Benjamin Brash was breathing in the hot humid air of the Gulf South in summer. He had just finished the three months between college and medical school, having worked on the ‘East End’ of Long Island. Money was critical to augment his scholarship. The Vineyards of the North Fork and the fishing boats off Montauk provided plenty of work and plenty of cash.

The top was down on his used, but ‘good -as -new’ 1967 light blue Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. As he entered Highway 90 in Biloxi for the final leg to New Orleans, he could not believe his eyes. That beautiful resort city was reduced to rubble by Hurricane Camille. He put the top up. The air was still and felt stale. *First college with Betsy. Now medical school with Camille. What other storms were ahead of me?*



Entering the lobby of Tulane Medical School at 1430 Tulane Avenue Ben blended into the other 130 first years. Some were

familiar from college, but all seemed excited for what was ahead.

It appeared to be a largely male club, with only 12 women. As they mingled and began introducing themselves, he observed the “sizing up”. Enjoying some liquid refreshment of either juice or club soda, Ben could sense many were wishing for a spike of something stronger.

The class appeared diverse. What were their motivations? Looking at the California long hair, he mused about the lack of surfing on the Mississippi River. He was also drawn to a man in a uniform. He graduated from The Citadel – the West Point of the South. Where was he headed after graduation? It was the height of the Vietnam War. About half the class were wearing wedding rings. He guessed they were seeking stability. For others like himself it seemed like an interference in educational pursuits – scholarly and otherwise – in a city like New Orleans.

Whoever they were, and wherever they came from, Ben concluded correctly that they were all were academically superior. Without a medical, law or theology program, you were eligible for the military draft. *I will need to study hard. I am used to competition.*

“The cocktail hour” ended when a very stoic -looking man in a long white coat entered and directed them to a large, tiered lecture hall. Those who knew each other sat together. Others seemed to find positions of emotional security. High, low, right, left, center.

“Welcome to the first day that will change the course of your life. Sit where you like. There is no oral interrogation. It’s

not law school. My name is Dr. C.E. Dunlop. I am the Chief of Pathology and your moderator today.”

Ben listened intently, while observing his surroundings. He already knew what Dunlop was saying. “This school was founded in 1834 to educate all ‘free white men’. As you can see, we are breaking barriers. Our endowment has been willingly forfeited to be gender and color blind”.

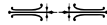
When the applause for the twelve women and three African American classmates abated Dunlop continued. “If you are expecting the usual look to your left, look to your right one of you will not make it – forget it! That is not the goal. Learning, and becoming a great doctor is our goal. You stand on the shoulders of those who preceded you. You owe it to them to give it your best.”

Ben looked at the portraits of the giants of Tulane Medicine. He could feel the intensity and anxiety in the room. Dr. Dunlop must have also sensed what he had seen many times before, for he ended with: “And never tell a patient when they will die – for they will surely live to piss on your grave.”

Once the laughter subsided and the class relaxed, he continued. “Your first two years will be the basic science part of your education. Clinical exposure is in years three and four. Class schedules and laboratory assignments are on the tables outside. Let me conclude by reiterating what you have most likely heard. The first year is the hardest. There is an ever-increasing amount of information you need to learn and process. We, the faculty, are not adversaries. We are here to help. You are our future colleagues.”

The Hypocritical Oath

This final statement was followed by silence- enough that Ben thought he was back in the morgue. Then the class of 1969-1973 exited.



The bookstore was located next to the cafeteria and the student lounge. It suddenly became crowded and noisy. Conversation was abuzz about cadavers and microscopes. There was a collective combination of excitement, enthusiasm, and fear! While standing in line to purchase his long beige lab coat with the institution logo, Ben heard a familiar voice. “Serious Ben! Doubles partners?”

Benjamin Brash and “Baseline” Bryce Teller were together again.

Initiation – The Anatomies

Gross anatomy was the opening foray. For most it was their first exposure to someone not living. For a few, it was more than they could handle, and an early exit to another career. For others, like Benjamin Brash – future medical examiner- it was familiar territory.

There were six large rooms each of which housed six shiny silver ‘casket appearing’ bins. Each contained a body. The smell of formaldehyde permeated the rooms; and soon became embedded into everything they wore. It was said: “You could smell first- year students before you saw them.”

There were four students per cadaver. For the next few months, it was theirs to dissect and learn. They were told in no uncertain terms: Respect this “gift” for the advancement of their craft. Any deviations would be met in the harshest of terms, including expulsion. Fear set in. One infraction and it could be from med school to the “Mekong Delta”. It was the Vietnam war- and there was a draft.

Ben was at the ready. Bryce was his lab partner, but where was he? Entering the bathroom, a less -than- pleasant sound was emanating from one of the stalls. “Bryce? What’s the deal?”

“Ben. I’m not sure I’m cut out for this! The body. The smell.”

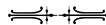
Bryce was green. “This is more than looking at books or watching movies!”

“Listen up ‘frat boy’. We are in it. You will have to step up from the baseline and come to the net. We are partners. I’ll get you through this”.

Over the next four months Ben led his group. He knew the anatomy and had seen the dissections, from having watched the dieners in the morgue back home. He frequently pondered out loud. “Aren’t you curious? What was this once upon a time person’s life? How did she live? How did she die?” Ben saw beyond the anatomical. Once again, the group began referring to him as the ‘Doc’.

Ben lived up to his moniker. Under his tutelage Bryce slowly found his comfort zone and began to master the assignments. Their relationship grew. They were now double’s partners, on and off the court.

“Ben. You are the ‘Doc!’. Without you I would not have made it. We need some celebration. I’m not taking no for an answer. We are going to the clubs in the French Quarter for different kinds of anatomical study.”



Initiation ended with the ‘Cadaver Ball’. This was a well-known rite of passage for Tulane first years. If you were there, it meant you made it through gross anatomy, micro anatomy, and the intensive three-week immersion into neuro anatomy.

Drinks in hand, Bryce hugged the Doc. “We made it”.

Smiling, Ben whispered in his now best friend’s ear. “Bryce. You will make it through medical school. You will be a doctor.”

“I think so. But I don’t want to see another dead body again. Your fascination with the dead- it’s not for me. I’m going to work in the happiest part of the hospital.”

And so it came to pass that Benjamin Brash would continue his pursuits surrounding the mystery of death and the puzzles that needed solving, while Bryce Teller would bring babies into this world.

Hurricanes and Anniversaries

Benjamin Brash, MD, JD. Chief Medical Examiner of Orleans Parish walked out of the antebellum home he had shared with his wife, Margo, and their daughter, Collette. Now he was alone. His wife was deceased, and his daughter, ironically, was living in New York.

He slipped into his Morgan Plus Four Roadster, waived to the man in the guardhouse and exited the gates of Audubon Place. Making a sharp left turn onto St Charles Avenue, he passed the historic mansions and the streetcars that rambled downtown. He liked the simplicity of his car. It has never changed its classic style. From the time he was in college he eyeballed that car. British racing green, tan interior, and a belt across the hood.

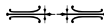
Driving mostly in second gear, stopping block- by- block, he made his way to Earhart Avenue, to the location of his home away from home: the Office of the Medical Examiner.

As he stopped, started, and shifted, he had time to think. *How did it all happen? Was I the right man at the right time? Had the plan really come to fruition?*

He was also deep in thought about his late wife. *She never liked my Morgan. Impossible to put the top on when it rained.*

And in New Orleans it rained often. And why am I still living in that big house? It was never 'me'!

His brain was complex, but his roots simple. It was Margo, and her social stature that put them there. The big house in the most famous community in the city. Twenty-eight homes built in a gated park like setting dating back to 1908. Neighbors included the owner of the city's football and basketball teams, as well as the former home of the Banana King of New Orleans - Samuel Zemurray - now the residence of the President of Tulane University. For her, a descendant of Judah Touro- Touro Synagogue, Touro Infirmary Touro, Touro Cemetery, Touro wealth. he made himself fit. Without her he was a square peg in a round hole. Especially with Collette so far away.



As a freshman undergraduate Ben Brash arrived in the wake of Hurricane Betsy in 1965. All he really perceived was the absence of utility power in a new city and unaware of the chaos and loss of life outside the university surroundings. New Orleans exists in a bowl, surrounded, and protected by levees. When they were breached or broken, the city and its environs became flooded. There was little to be done, outside of evacuating or riding it out. The more affluent citizens made for higher ground away from the city. The less fortunate stayed and prayed.

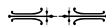
He would feel the effects of Hurricanes Camille, Agnes, and Carmen. First as a student, with its educational

interruptions; and then as a young pathologist, working in the Office of the Coroner.

When he started his career, that office was small and under-staffed. There were only a few pathologists, and no facilities to deal with local crime much less mass casualty events. In fact, when hurricanes hit, the office often relocated out of the city. Bodies were kept in refrigerated containers, waiting indefinitely for identification and burial.

Dr. Brash saw his destiny through a plan hatched with his mentor – The Chief Medical Examiner of Nassau County, New York. He would challenge the convention of the non-medical administrative coroner and become the first forensic pathologist to hold that office.

Fresh out of residency, but with a background in law and forensics, the office of the coroner was happy to have him. The pay was small, but he married into wealth. That gave him the freedom to plan. Once realized, he used all his connections – medically, socially, and politically to model the office in the image of his New York mentor. It was now a large space with sections for toxicology, ballistics, and even refrigerators for the “floaters” from the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. There were viewing rooms where families could make identifications with dignity. All in all, it was state-of-the-art. This was how a modern city should look out for its deceased of unknown etiology or reason.



He pulled into his spot labelled ‘Reserved for the Chief’

and made his way to his office. On his desk were two table weights with inscriptions: 'Non et Facile and Non-Carborundum Secundum – Nothing is Easy, and Don't Let the Bastards Get You Down!' He always stared at these and reminded himself: *True and necessary for the job.*

Waiting for him was Bryce Teller. It was another anniversary of Margo's passing. Collette was flying in from 'the Big Apple'. Bryce's wife, Sarah, was already at the airport waiting. Together they would go to the cemetery, grieve, and then reminisce over dinner at Antione's in the French Quarter. This had become a ritual they conducted yearly.

They found their way to Bryce's Rolls Royce convertible. He had made money, lots of money, as a pioneer in the specialty of infertility and in vitro services. The hospital was glad for his publicity and the revenue.

"Nice ride, Bryce!"

He responded with a smile. "You only live once, and we both know how brief that life can be."

"I need to get out of my house. Too many memories. And with Collette gone...."

"Say no more. Sarah is in real estate. She'll help you. But today it's about Margo."

They drove out, onto Canal Street, and headed towards City Park Avenue and the Dispersed of Judah Cemetery.

This was the second -oldest Jewish burial site in the city. The land was donated by the wealthy financier, Judah Touro himself, in 1846. Since Margo was a descendant from that prominent family, she was buried in their mausoleum. This always served as irony for the Chief Medical Examiner of

Orleans Parish: *Buried above ground. Where I come from Jews are returned to the earth.* Here, he learned, when you live below sea level, one major storm and- well, let's leave it at that.

Sarah and Collette were already there. There would be no other attendees. Margo's family were similarly interred, and Collette was an only child.

Gathering at the doors the group was somber. Sarah broke the silence.

"Here we are again, to mourn you and celebrate your life, and the joy you gave us. I knew you the longest. From the day we were born we were registered at the Newcomb Nursery at Tulane University. Then on to the Isadore Newman High School and then roommates at Newcomb College. I met and married Bryce, and you met your Ben while in law school. We were inseparable -until illness took you from us."

Looking at Collette, Sarah smiled and said: "Margo! -She has grown into a beautiful woman. We have kept watch over her for you; and we continue our quest to pull your husband out of the morgue and back to a life outside of work."

Ben stood alone as the others made way to their cars. Emotionally bereft he looked at the rows of mausoleums and reflected. *Silent edifices housing silenced lives. It truly was what they say. It is the city of the dead!*

Sarah and Collette were in one car and 'the Doc' and Bryce in the other. As they crawled down a heavily trafficked Canal Street, Doc was lost in thought.

Bryce nudged him. "Speak"

"Bryce. I am so lost without Margo. Especially with Collette at NYU. My whole life is solving the mystery of disease and

death. Yet, I could not help her! Twelve years of treatment for multiple myeloma. Three stem cell transfers at the Arkansas Cancer Center in Little Rock. Weekly infusions of the latest drugs at our Ochsner Clinic.”

Bryce responded. “I remember the weakening immune system and those treatments: nausea, hair loss, bone fragility and fracture. No one was more on top of her care than you. If any avenue was open, you made it happen.”

Doc was somewhere between laughing and crying. “Remember that saying: ‘Internists know a lot; but do nothing. Surgeons do a lot; but know nothing. Pathologists know a lot; and do a lot – but it’s too late!’”

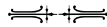
After a long pause it was all beginning to come out. “I know Collette grew up basically alone. Adjustments in my schedule to accommodate Margo’s needs left little time for a needy teenager without a mother. Surely as missed events mounted, so did a growing resentment. Thank goodness for Sarah! She was like a surrogate mom.”

“Serious Ben”. We are always double’s partners. Things happen and things change. Sarah and I never wanted kids. Ironic right? I help people have children. We liked our freedom. But Margo was Sarah’s bestie. When she became ill – like I said- ‘doubles partners.’ And metaphors aside, you need to come back and play at the club. Enough solo jogging. Time to join the world.”

Staring at the crowds on Canal Street, Benjamin Brash, (a.k.a. the Doc) sighed: “Margo became my doubles partner. We were a team. I am not sure I can ever get back into that game”

As the Rolls neared 713 Rue de Saint Louis, Ben lamented: “What about those frozen embryos? You were so optimistic that she would survive, and we could increase our family tree.”

“Ben. That’s for another day.”



There are certain perks to being the chief medical examiner – like the parking pass that gives you unlimited access. Doc placed it on the dash of Bryce’s car, and they parked outside Antoine’s, in a strictly ‘No Parking’ area.

O’Neil was ready. He had been their waiter for decades – during courtship, marriage, illness, and death. Margo was from an historic family and Antoine’s was certainly an historic restaurant.

They settled into the Proteus Dining Room, a private area for a private event. Both Doc and Bryce were known in the community, and this was no time for celebrity.

Once again Sarah took the lead. “Collette. You are your mother! When are you coming home for good”?

Collette smiled. “Aunt Sarah, I need to breathe outside of the memories here. College in New York is exciting and different. It’s big. You can get lost there. New Orleans is too small and stifling. When you are a Touro everybody knows everything. And without Mom – I needed space. And I met a guy and want to see where it goes.”

Doc was prepared to encourage Collette to return to New Orleans with a monologue she had heard many times before.

But with the news of a boyfriend, he kept his thoughts to himself.

Remember, my one and only offspring. You come from a famous lineage in this city. Your mother's family have been Jewish royalty here since the 1800's. They have been tied to this city longer than this restaurant has been here. There are synagogues, hospitals, and university scholarships in their names. In fact, my education was funded by one of their grants – even before your mother and I met.

Colette sensed her father's thoughts. "Poppa. Someday, but not yet."

That statement brightened the afternoon. It blunted the lingering sadness over the loss of his wife.

Raising his glass of a Kir Royale – Dom Perignon champagne and crème de cassis, Doc proposed a toast: "Then I live for the day you will return and give me grandchildren. And to Margo, my beloved, and to you all – my family."

Katrina – 2005

Every news outlet repeated the need for the residents of New Orleans to evacuate. “Katrina is about to make land-fall, barreling down with a bullseye for the city itself; a CAT 5 with winds above 250 mph.”

Interstate 10 was converted to all lanes outbound.

The office of the medical examiner was sheltering in place. There was always tragedy in a hurricane’s aftermath.

A voice was broadcast from WDSU TV. “The hurricane has been downgraded to a CAT3.” Brash thought: *If the levees hold, the city will flood but dodge a disaster.*

Bracing for the worst and hoping for the best, the office -like rest of the populace – was glued to the National Hurricane Center. The news was not good. “Katrina was picking up speed. The eyewall has doubled in size!”

Brash placed a call to Paul Trotter, the meteorologist in charge of the National Weather Service in Slidell, located just outside the city. “Doc, this storm rivals Camille of 1969. New Orleans is on the wrong side of the storm. West is best; we are east. There could be tornados and massive flooding. Your office should evacuate.”

Between August 25th and the 29th, there was a roller

coaster of emotions as the storm changed intensities and directions. No less worried was Doc's daughter. "Collect call from Collette Brash. Will you accept?"

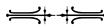
Far away from harm, in the 'Big Apple', Collette felt anxiety regarding both her home in the Crescent City, and her father. "Poppa! I know Aunt Sarah and Bryce went to Houston with the Tulane faculty and students. You should leave too."

"Collette. You know me. I won't abandon my post. I'll be fine. Audubon Place is on high ground. We have a generator, and Blackwater Security will be there if things get rough."

On Monday, August 29th the storm made landfall in Buras, Louisiana. Doc thought to himself: *Maybe not as bad as Camille. The main hit missed the city.* Then, came more bad news. Margaret Orr- Chief Meteorologist for WDSU News, revealed the biggest fear: a levee breach. "We now have winds of 125 mph and storm surges of 15-19 feet. The 17th Street Canal Levee has failed. Parts of the city are underwater."

Doc knew what he was now in store for. Destruction and deaths. Accidental deaths from the storm and criminal deaths from the anarchy that will surely follow.

One -hundred-thousand people did not evacuate. Many sought refuge in the Superdome Stadium. For some, this was their only choice - but a bad one. Food, water, and sanitation were insufficient. The city was spinning out of control. There was no law and order. Bodies were piling up.



By early September the city was still under water and largely

deserted. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was attempting to bring emergency aid to those who stayed and martial law had been declared. The United States Department of Health and Human Services assured the public that 2500 hospitalized patients would be evacuated. Doc shook his head: *Where were they going to? How long would that take?*

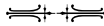
The morgue was overrun with casualties, now numbering over 1,800 and rising. Doc and his staff were pushed to their limit. Corpses were housed in mobile refrigerator cars. Identification was one thing. What to do with them was another.

Then, tragedy upon catastrophe! “Dr. Brash. We have a big problem. This is the Office of Emergency Rescue. We have reached Memorial Hospital. There are 45 dead bodies laid out on the floor!”

The forensic team arrived on scene and began their investigation. For five days, patients, doctors, and ancillary staff, as well as people and pets who sought safety during the storm, were trapped. They were alone, with dwindling supplies, no power, and no means of communication. Water levels rose to 10 feet, knocking out the generators. Temperatures exceeded 100 degrees. Ironically after 9/11, a 100-page bioterrorism plan, was created – but no contingencies were considered for a water evacuation.

Fuel was added to a volatile situation by activists within the Black community. An African- American doctor, who was present at Memorial, claimed to have heard conversations about how to deal with those unlikely to be rescued – mostly Blacks. There was talk of euthanasia.

Dr. Benjamin Brash was now flashing back to his cohort from Ward 509. *The pledge! Could it really have happened? If a group of naïve medical students thought about it, what about desperately ill individuals and their caregivers- rapidly losing hope?*



Governor Kathleen Blanco and Attorney General Charles Foti were under the microscope for the Katrina Superdome debacle, which was relived on a 24-hour news cycle. It was an election year. The political climate was as bad as the environmental. They did not need Memorial to seal their fate. Someone else was going to take the fall. To make sure of that, FBI Special Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery was dispatched from Baton Rouge to oversee-and hopefully insure-potential criminal proceedings.

Autopsies were ordered on the Memorial deceased. Foti was zeroing in on Dr. Anna Pou, as well as nurses Cheri Landry and Lori Budo, believing that “discussions of euthanasia were more than talk.” Agent Miranda was ordered to represent government oversight.

Brash and his team were “under the gun”. Politics over science ran constantly through his mind. *Why was there FBI interference? Who was this female agent? Where did her authority, to be in his morgue, come from?* Despite this, he would seek truth, and overcome the ABC’s of: ‘assess, blame, and criticize’!

Toxicology: significant doses of morphine and sedatives,

like Versed. Were they too high to be considered as 'comfort care'? Pressure was mounting on Brash and the Office of the Medical Examiner to proclaim euthanasia and homicide. Charles Foti was going to indict Pou, Landry and Budo for second -degree murder.

In the end Benjamin Brash came to a decision and testified: "The bodies were too decomposed for concrete accusations. The Health Emergency Powers Act of 2003 stated there must be exact proof of gross negligence. In my opinion, with insufficient evidence, the grand jury cannot indict."

Exiting the grand jury, the FBI agent reached out to the worn-out chief medical examiner. "Doctor Brash. That was powerful testimony. I was very impressed with your logic and your sincerity. Is that what you truly believe?"

"Miss FBI Agent Montgomery. I saw you in the rear here, and you did not go unnoticed in my morgue. I took an ethical stand. There were impossible decisions made by individuals, in a flawed system, and under unimaginable pressures. I cannot participate in condemning the medical community. If we do, then who will step forward in the future?"

"Doctor. I admire you for that. I hope you don't pay a price?"

"I've been there before. Have you? If a price is to be paid, I suppose someone must pay it. You were sent by the government. They did not get what they wanted from me. I wish you the best."

Anna Pou, Cheri Landry, and Lori Budo were exonerated after a prolonged legal battle. Charles Foti was not pleased

with the Office of the Medical Examiner, but there was little he could do. On the other hand, there was the FBI agent. It seemed now that the only head to roll was going to be that of Miranda Montgomery.

Joy and Sorrow- 2007

Doc parked his British racing green Morgan Plus Four Roadster outside 500 Chartres Street and entered the Napoleon House Restaurant and Bar. There, already seated and drinking, was his oldest and best friend, Bryce Teller.

Bryce basically leapt from his chair. "Serious Ben!"

Laughing, Doc responded: "Baseline Bryce. I am glad you are back, and already deep into your muffuletta sandwich."

"Cannot pass up the cured meats, tangy olive salad and sesame-studded bread. All kidding aside, this city took a hit. I'm glad to see it coming back to life. I was by the University. Students are happily back. And from the crowds, it looks like tourism is booming. Bourbon Street is wall -to -wall party goers- even at this early hour!"

"Yup, Bryce. *Laissez les bons temps rouler*- let the good times roll." This was a bit tongue -in- cheek sarcasm. Doc knew the dark side. "Unless you live in the Lower Ninth Ward or the City Park area. Revitalization seems to have passed over them."

"That area should go back to swamp and be a buffer to prevent 'the bowl' from flooding.

"Easily said, Bryce. Cannot be done. That part of the city is heavily Black and very poor. Where are they to go?"

Most of them were born, raised, will live out their lives, and die there.

And all of this was made worse by our illustrious Mayor – the one who fled, and his ‘Chocolate City’ Speech, pontificating about having New Orleans remain predominantly Black.”

Bryce put down his sandwich. “And poor. Nowhere to live and no work to be had. Which brings me to you, my friend. How was it here?”

“We survived the 1,800 Katrina -related deaths. Now it’s back to mundane murders. With the National Guard gone, homelessness and crime are back. Working with the police.” Doc smiled. “And searching for justice.”

Bryce smiled back. “I read about your headlines in the *Times Picayune* and the *States Item*. You and that FBI woman. ‘Katrina Killer of Prostitutes’, ‘Bayou Murders’, ‘Addie Hall Dismemberment’. Did you find some female companionship along the way?”

“Knock it off, Bryce. I was stuck with her because of Memorial. Now she is thankfully out of my hair. The FBI must have been under some serious heat because Montgomery was put on suspension.”

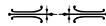
Bryce took on a more serious tone. “Was there justice for the Memorial incident?”

Doc was now solemn in what followed. “I believe I made the right decision. It was not an investigation I wanted. The Governor and Attorney General were all over me with that FBI agent looking over my shoulder. But the worst part was

thinking about that pledge from school. I could not shake the possibility -and the reality.”

“Ben. We were kids. Frightened and certainly immature. Bar talk. When Margo was nearing the end and suffering, did you ever think about it? Euthanasia?”

“Bryce. I had the thought of stopping the suffering. I could never do that. But for others: many a truth is said in jest. Let’s change gears. You and Sarah are back. Mardi Gras is around the corner, and Collette is coming home with her ‘beau in tow’. Finish your sandwich.”



Collette Brash waived to the security guard as her Yellow Cab entered Audubon Place. With her was fiancé Jonathan Heller. Pulling into the driveway he spotted a few men in suits with ‘bulging jackets. Collette laughed. “Probably security for my father. He made some enemies during Katrina. Welcome to ‘The Big Easy.’”

Jonathan stared at the large antebellum home – complete with movie set pillars. “Where’s Scarlet? Is this not Tara?”

“Lighten up Jonathan. That would be Atlanta. This home is generational. Been in the Touro family for a hundred years. Updated of course. We even have AC—for your Chicago bones.”

Entering the high -ceiling foyer and before the large, curved staircase stood what Collette considered to be her entire family. “Jonathan. Before you stand ‘The Grill Team.’ My father Dr. Benjamin Brash. Chief Medical Examiner of Orleans Parish. Next, we have Dr.Bryce Teller, head of Obstetrics

and Gynecology and Director of Infertility at Tulane Medical Center. The Rolls out front is his. Finally, my mother's best friend and my surrogate Mom - Sarah Teller." Pointing to Bryce. "He's with her."

As usual Sarah spoke first after giving Collette a smothering hug. "Welcome home! You are a glow."

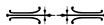
Over the next few minutes Doc got more than he expected. And not something that could be forensically dissected. Collette expounded on her last four years at New York University. A degree in Art History and a serious relationship. Jonathan Heller was also from prominent lineage - Chicago mercantile. Commodities and real estate.

Bryce shook his hand and smiled at Collette. "Southern Art History and future museum curator meets hedge funder and venture capitalist."

Collette knew Bryce's sarcasm and had a retort. "Maybe even politics. Oh, did I mention I'm pregnant- and it's a girl! Sorry, Poppa. No name legacy for you—yet.!"

Sarah was over the moon. "We'll have to enroll her in Newcomb Nursery right away. You know how competitive admission is?"

Doc finally spoke. "Perhaps a wedding soon. Pregnant- and not married—may play in the liberal north - but not so well here." Thinking to himself: *Maybe then I can have a family again.*



Collette and Jonathan settled into the room where she grew

up. “What am I in store for, with Mardi Gras? All I know is what I’ve seen on TV.

“This is going to be much different. We are going to the Rex Ball.” She smiled. “I will be in costume, and masked. Very French, and very royal.”

“What about me? What’s my costume?”

“Jonathan. You need a history lesson. Mardi Gras dates to the 1700’s in New Orleans. There were secret societies called Krewes—all with mythological names. Each Krewe builds floats for parades. We wear masks, ride, and throw fake gold doubloons and beads. It represents a time where the rich gave to the poor. Today there are over 70 Krewes with parades stretching over two weeks. Rex is our Krewe. It is one of the originals. My family has been involved since its founding in 1872.”

“Collette. I know enough that Mardi Gras stands for Fat Tuesday, and the following day is Ash Wednesday. This is all very Catholic – and you are not!”

“True my love. But in the beginning Rex had many Jewish patrons. My family was one of those.”

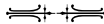
“Where do I come in while you are parading?”

“Forget the parades. I won’t be doing that. But then there’s the ball. This is great pageantry, and the highlight of Mardi Gras. The two major Krewes – Rex and Comus will come together and end the fete at midnight. There, as a member, I will be in my costume. You, my fiancé, will be my escort. You will be in black tie and observing from a balcony.” A wry smile crossed Collette’s face. “Once we are married, you get a costume.”

Jonathan Heller was not quite sure what to make of this. But he understood that this was the first Mardi Gras post-Katrina. The city was craving their normalcy. He also began to understand her heritage- something she spoke little of in New York. Her excitement reminded him of the song: 'Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans.'?

"What about your dad? Why isn't he your escort - costume and all?"

"He is a New Yorker deep down; and too straitlaced. And, ever since Mom passed, he avoids the holiday. He retreats to the medical examiner's office and waits for the dark side of street craziness."



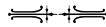
The Rex Ball was in full swing. Jonathan was taking it all in. Even from the balcony he was engaged. *Once I am married, I'll be down there.*

Excitement was mounting as the Krewe of Comus marched down Canal Street from their ball at the Marriott Hotel to the Sheraton, to greet The Rex King and Queen, and close out the holiday. The crowd now doubled in size. The pomp was replaced with singing and dancing to the sounds of the Olympia Brass Band and Deacon John and the Ivories, along with the legendary Irma Thomas.

As midnight approached, three armed men began to open fire. They had slipped in under the guise of kitchen staff. Help was hard to come by after the hurricane and vetting was less than ideal. Chaos erupted as bodies dropped. At first it was

hard to process with all the noises from the revelry. Then alarms were sounded.

Jonathan jumped off the balcony, trying to find his pregnant fiancé. By the time the police arrived there were 45 casualties, including waiters and busboys. The shooters were not among them.



Area hospitals were alerted. Televisions and radios blasted out news alerts. “Mass casualty event downtown. Shelter in place!”

The quiet of the morgue was interrupted by the telephone. Dr. Brash was alone and unaware. “Doc! I’m coming to get you. There was mele at the Sheraton Ballroom.”

Brash had panic in his voice. “Collette and her fiancé were there!”

“I know! They are on their way to University Hospital.”

Brash ran out onto the morgue’s ramp and spotted the flashing lights of Police Commissioner Pierre Des Ormeaux. As he climbed in, panic was in his voice: “What’s going on! Why are you here and not at the scene?”

“Doc. Your family are among the injured. We don’t always see eye to eye but tonight I am with you.”

With sirens blasting the black Suburban pushed onto Canal Street and then over to Tulane Avenue. The periodic tension between law and forensics disappeared as the police commissioner pulled into the ambulance bay of University Hospital.

The duo entered ‘The Pit’—as the ER was referred to. There was blood everywhere and victims sprawled out on stretchers. The staff was in full combat mode. Even the hardened PC was taken aback. “It’s a damn war zone!”

Amid that chaos was Maisy Clark. She was the head nurse, and the ‘queen of this court’. Saturday night special shootings, stabbings, auto trauma, and bar fights were all part of her fiefdom. She was briefing the new Mayor-elect. Upon spotting Doc—years of friendship allowed her that term of endearment—she excused herself and bolted across the carnage. The mayor followed.

“Maisy, where’s Collette?”

“In surgery. She was shot.”

Benjamin Brash became weak-kneed. The thought came into his mind: *Another hurricane hitting me straight on!*

The mayor tried to demonstrate her support. “University Hospital is where trauma has its best chance.”

Maisy quickly assessed that he was in no mood to hear how this hospital replaced hurricane-destroyed Charity- and the politics that led to its failure to reopen. “Doc. Follow me.”

She got him into the private elevator with direct access to the surgical pavilion. “Maisy. Collette was pregnant.”

Bryce was there to comfort him. He was already in the hospital delivering a baby. “Sarah is on her way.”

What followed was a long night filled with other families on their knees praying to whatever God or spirit consoled them. Doc was to learn that Jonathan Heller was shot in the head and died instantly. Collette did not survive her

surgery—nor did the baby. *This hurricane was a direct hit – with total devastation!*

By sunrise, the freneticism of what was to be coined as ‘The Mardi Gras Massacre’ drifted into a manageable pace for the staff of Tulane Medical Center. For some, their prayers paid off. For others, like Benjamin Brash bloodlines ended.

“Bryce. The thought of Collette going to the morgue – it’s too much! I need air!”

With that, Benjamin Brash, Chief Medical Examiner of Orleans Parish, stepped into a taxi and left all he knew in the rear-view mirror. No Margo. No Collette. The ‘Big Easy’ just became too hard!

Funerals and Beyond

Walking out of the office in Metairie Cemetery Sarah telephoned her husband. “Bryce. The fact that this cemetery used to be a racetrack does not escape me. I feel like we are running around in circles, without a clear path. Margo. Katrina. Collette. Doc. How did our tranquil lives become so broken?”

“Sarah. First things first. Where do we stand?”

“I arranged for Collette’s fiancé to be transported back to Chicago. Good thing we have some leverage here. I decided to inter Collette in our family plot. Doc is gone. There is no other family. Everyone hated those mausoleums. Doc believed in Jews returning to the earth. We are on high ground. She can be buried. Besides we were the closest thing to family. And without Doc around, I’m taking charge. She will be interred here, in the ‘suburbs of the dead.’”

They needed a minyan for the brief graveside service. Bryce brought colleagues from both the ME office and his clinic. The police commissioner paid his respects as did the mayor and Maisy Clark. Also present was a certain FBI special agent.

As the small group was readying for departure, Sarah

approached that stranger. Excuse me. Do we know you? Did you know Collette?”

“My name is Miranda Jayne Montgomery. I work – or should I say did work for the FBI. I was assigned to the Memorial Hospital Investigation. Dr. Brash left an impression.”

Sarah smiled. “He usually does – did. He’s gone. Parts unknown.”

“I am – keep losing my tenses—was a profiler for the FBI. I could find him.”

Sarah placed her hand in Mirandas’. “Thank you. I do not think he wants to be found. Why the past tense?”

“I did not come through for the government of Louisiana. There were no prosecutions. I took the fall. I’ll find a way back in.”

Miranda

She was smashing returns from a machine firing at 120 mph. Anyone in the vicinity could sense the anger emanating from court Number 1 at the New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club. Catching her breath, she saw a seemingly familiar face enter. Eye contact was made.

“Did that machine harm you in any way?”

“Nope. Just letting off some steam.”

“Looked like more than that to me.”

“I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

“Sarah Teller. Bryce Teller’s wife, and close friend to the Brash family. I saw you at the funeral for Collette.”

“I felt it was the least I could do. I was the FBI agent assigned to the Memorial Hospital case. I got to know Dr. Brash.” Sighing. “He was an inspiring man. Cost me my job though.”

“Doc had that effect on people. What happened?”

“Sarah. You read the newspapers. The governor and the attorney general were looking for a political win. I was sent from the Baton Rouge office to New Orleans to get evidence for criminal prosecution of the doctors and nurses for euthanasia. I learned a lot about that, versus ‘comfort care’. In the

end I believed Dr. Brash. My superiors were not happy with the exonerations. I am on suspension.”

“So, you attack machines?”

“Frustration. My last name—Montgomery—may be synonymous with the easy pace of the South. I am neither southern nor slow.” Wiping a sweaty hand, she reached out. “Miranda Jayne Montgomery. I like this city. Until things get sorted out with the agency, I figured I’d enjoy ‘The Big Easy’. Not much happening in Baton Rouge for a single unemployed female. Do you play tennis?”

“Not at your level. Ben—Dr. Brash and his wife - late wife—and Bryce and I played doubles here. Strictly social. After Margo passed, Doc gave it up. I come from time to time.”

Miranda did not know much about the Doc, but was curious. “Tell me more about Dr. Brash.”

Sarah was also curious. “First tell me about you!”

Miranda and Sarah settled in on the patio of the club and ordered lunch. “There is not much to tell.”

“From the way you destroyed your mechanical opponent, I would surmise a very interesting story.”

“Okay. I grew up very middle class in a suburban town on Long Island - Garden City.”

“Wow! Doc also grew up on Long Island.”

“I was a very good athlete. My father saw it as- a- means to an education. I began to train at the Port Washington Tennis Academy. Very famous—home to the greats like John McEnroe and Vitas Gerulaitis. Some said I was a prodigy. By age fourteen I was winning repeatedly. I spent my high school summers in Florida at the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Camp

playing with future stars like Monica Seles and Mary Pierce. By graduation, I was named 'High School All -American'.

"Colleges wanted me, just as my father predicted. I was five- foot ten, very strong and very competitive. Georgetown University gave me a full ride. Good for them and good for me. I was in the 'top 16' of single female amateur players in the U.S. I graduated with a degree in Criminal Justice and another title - 'Intercollegiate All -American.'"

"Miranda, you and Doc have a lot in common. Doc was also a tennis player. He and Bryce were doubles partners on the Tulane Tennis Team. Celebrity status. That's where we all first met."

Miranda continued. "I was debating law school. But my father felt I should enter the pro -circuit. Earn money. Get endorsements. Sounds glamorous? Anything but!"

Sarah's curiosity was intensifying. So many layers. "Go on."

"Professional tennis was lonely. Gone were the teams. Gone were the comraderies. It was a war for standing. Winning meant money and sponsorships. Money that was needed for travel, coaches, trainers. The competitions were stiffer and the schedule grueling. After three years, I had my fill. I realized I'd peaked, and I started to reflect on the experience. I missed my teenage years. No parties. No proms. No boyfriends. I wanted out. I began to fight with my father. Then I just walked away."

Sarah was thinking: *Just like Doc.*

Miranda sensed that. "I did not disappear. I transitioned out of athletics and back to school. Georgetown was happy to have me. I gave them glory and I had the grades."

She continued describing what seemed to Sarah like a long -running serial. “Law school was easy. I was used to competition. Practicing law was not for me. I am not a desk person. The judge I clerked for suggested I consider the FBI. Law degree and background in criminal justice.”

Sarah mused. “So, you traded your racquet for a gun!”

“Why not? I had what the agency looks for in recruits. I like being out in the field. I like challenges. And reading briefs and sitting in an office did not suit me. So, here I am.”

Sarah was hooked. This woman had edges that captivated. So much different from the other ladies who ‘lunched’ at the club. “Please tell me more.”

“Like all recruits we start at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. I was already in DC, so the geographical change was easy. So were the physical demands. They don’t get to many pro- athletes. I also had a good brain and background in law and criminal justice. Plus, I minored in Psychology in college.

After the 20 weeks of intensive training, I moved on to the Behavior Analysis Unit – the BAU—at the National Center for Analysis of Violent Crime – which is also in Quantico. The agency felt that my educational backgrounds – law, criminal justice, and psychology—plus, my years of competitive tennis- built patience and strategy. When to lay back and when to ‘charge the net’ – so to speak—would make a good fit as a supervisory special agent.”

Sarah could barely keep her emotions in check. “What’s that?”

“Sarah, in your parlance, I am a profiler. And I have experience in cold cases as well.”

“How did you end up here?”

“For the next 10 years after completion, I was stationed in DC. Again, easy transition. Familiar turf. But you are at the agency’s mercy. They needed someone in the Baton Rouge office. I got the nod. There is no debate. From there, when Katrina hit and the Memorial tragedy – well here I am. Temporarily adrift.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll find my way back. I’m on suspension – not relieved of service. I’m using my time- when not here – trying to piece together the so called ‘Mardi Gras Massacre’.

Sarah was suddenly taken aback. “Why!”

“No one else seemed interested anymore. The police commissioner resigned. The new mayor has an anti- crime agenda that does not include pursuing a case that, to them, has gone cold. And I sort of made myself a graveside promise.”

“Miranda. This was a mouthful of information. A larger lunch than expected! By -the -way, where are you living?”

“At this moment, a hotel room.”

“This is your lucky day, Miranda Jayne Montgomery. My family is in real estate- both commercial and residential. Since you are in some way helping Doc, I will help you. How about a nice condo in the Warehouse District? Some units are empty. I can arrange a good rental rate.”

“Deal. If you agree to play tennis with me from time to time.”

“Only if you go easier on me than the ball machine.”

Reunion – 2008

Sarah Teller turned to her husband as they entered the Hilton Hotel lobby. “Not a very vigorous turnout for your 25th. Fifty-five out of one hundred -thirty- two.”

“I guess time and distance allowed memories and interest to fade. The health care system is very different since Hurricane Katrina. Charity Hospital did not reopen. That place was the beating heart to our education. Tulane Medical Center moved away from that now pulseless center of our clinical teaching to a newer complex around the corner. Even the Tulane Bar and Grill, home to many of our lamentations and victories – gone. Replaced with a University Hospital, mostly under the control of our rival, LSU.”

Sarah could feel the sadness in Bryce. “Let’s make the best of the day. After all, some alums made it back. And for us, we live here. No big deal to show support to the school that gave you the push to be where you are.”

“You are right. I wonder if there will be any mention of Doc.”

The mingling was typical for most reunions. *Where do you live? What do you do? Are you still working?*

Bryce’s attention shifted to the front of the room, where

he chose a table. “Sarah, see that covered screen. I’ll bet there will be a video of those departed classmates. I hate that. Serves as a jolt about how quick and precious life was.”

“Is, my love. We are still here, and healthy. It can also be a reminder of how fortunate we are.”

The compulsory introductory remarks began. “Welcome, Class” of 1973! You were a great class. So happy to see so many of you return. Before we celebrate, let us bow our heads for those from your class who have passed away.

Names appeared on the screen: *Jeffrey Arlade. Eduardo Duponce. Joseph D’Alos. Marlon Everson.* Bryce became visibly shaken. Other names were called. He heard none of them. “I’m going to be sick!”

Sarah led her husband out of the event. “What’s wrong. You look like the devil marched through you.”

“How can that be? Four out of ten. What are the odds?”

Sarah listened as Bryce recounted his first clinical rotation and finished with: “...that Hypocritical Oath!”

“What’s the Hypocritical Oath? I’ve never seen you like this. Explain!”

“There were ten of us. We were on Ward 509. It was our first real exposure to disease, and suffering – lots of suffering. And often, slow painful deaths. We often drank away our disbeliefs. One miserable night, after near total inebriation set in, we made a pledge—to look out after each other. No suffering!”

“A joke, right? Some comic relief.”

“That’s what I thought. You know me. ‘Baseline Bryce’.

The Hypocritical Oath

Always easy. But Sarah, we are talking 40 percent. All in one year! Doesn't seem so funny now."

Sarah turned to Bryce in a very serious tone. "And Doc is missing. All around the same time. Victim—or suspect! He has gone through a lot. Maybe he lost it. Everyone has a tipping point. Perhaps there is a connection."

"Doc would never take a life. Nor do I believe he would take his own."

"Should we speak to someone. Maybe the police?"

"No way! Probably just a freaky moment at a reunion. We don't even know what those four died from. Sad coincidences."

"What If I ask Miranda to check it out. Put your mind to rest."

"Bad Idea, Sarah. She may be a tennis buddy and former FBI - but still FBI—and looking for a way back in".

"Then let's ask Dickie."

Dickie B

On the third ring -voice mail. “If you are looking for Dickie Brennan’s Steak House, you have the wrong number. Hang up and dial 504-522-2467. If you are looking to make a reservation at Mister B’s, still wrong. Try again at 504-523-2078. If you are truly looking for me leave a message.”

Richard Brennan - “Dickie B” is the lead investigator for the Office of the Medical Examiner of Orleans Parish, Louisiana. Other than having the same name, he had no relation, to the Brennan family, and their restaurant dynasty. As he was walking away from yet another mistaken dialing, he heard a familiar, yet panicked voice.

“Dickie! It’s Sarah Teller. I’m here with Bryce. We need your help!”

“Haven’t heard from you since Collette’s funeral. What’s the urgency?”

“Do you have any idea where Doc may be? We need to find him.”

“Sarah, I’m as much in the dark as you are. You know that if Doc wants to be MIA, he knows how to do that.”

“What do you mean”

“What I mean is that Doctor Brash has spent his life

dealing with crime, death, and the police. He has learned a few tactics along the way. Some of them from me. Remember, I used to be NOPD. Doc and I had some adventures.”

Bryce jumped into the conversation. “Dickie, focus. Doc could be in real trouble.”

“Guys. I am an investigator. If you need my help, I need details.”

Dickie listened as Bryce related the events surrounding the class reunion, Ward 509, and the ‘Hypocritical Oath’. “Third year of med school. We were a group of 10, including Doc and me. We made a pledge with each other not to suffer if we ever became ill. Dickie, four out of our 10 all died within a year of each other. And around the time of Doc’s disappearance.”

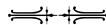
“Really, Bryce. Don’t you think your imagination is more fantasy than reality? I know Dr. Brash. He would never – and to even insinuate!”

Sarah took over the conversation. “Of course, we believe in Doc. But he has been through a lot. You’ve done enough investigating to know everyone has a tipping point.”

“How do you know the four deaths were not natural and coincidental regarding time?”

“That’s where you come in.”

“Okay. I’m in. Strictly out of loyalty to my old boss. I miss him. He was there for me when I needed help. Send me their names.”



It was after hours when the lead investigator for the Office of the Medical Examiner entered his cubicle. He thought to himself: *Off the clock and probably off base. But then, there was loyalty and the truth. Doc always said: 'The dead do tell tales'.*

Richard Brennan had undying loyalty to Benjamin Brash. In his mind Brash had rescued him. The New Orleans Police Department was mired in scandal and news press about corruption. He wanted out, but policing was all he knew. The newly minted chief medical examiner needed a reliable and trustworthy team. They had good history. Brash always said Dickie B reminded him of his Dad. The bond became unshakeable. But he remembered the Memorial incident and those cases, thought to be euthanasia. Doc always said: *'Circumstances can lead to the unpredictable and the unbelievable'.*

Dickie turned on his secure computer and logged into the National Death Index (NDI). He began to cross reference the names with the National Vital Statistics System where millions of records are compiled as to causes of death.

Four members of that cohort from Ward 509 were indeed dead. And all within one year. Unusual. But stranger things have occurred in this business. *Euthanasia. Murder. Coincidence. And what about that oath?* His head swirling. A deeper dive was needed!

The Departed

Dickie Brennan needed to be needed – and to provide answers. *This is what I do. I am an investigator. I will investigate.*

EDUARDO DUPONCE:

The first thing that stuck out was that he was Black. *Always think racial in a city like New Orleans!* As he delved further, Dickie realized that Eduardo Duponce was unique. His family had generational history in Pas Christian, Mississippi; a Gulf Coast hamlet 90 miles from ‘The Big Easy’—straight up Highway 90. They descended from the West Indies and defined themselves as ‘free men of color’, with no inks to slavery, nor poverty.

Eduardo excelled academically. *Probably family pressure to be better than the other Blacks living in the Deep South.* He was among the first to integrate both Tulane undergraduate and medical schools. He completed a family practice residency at the impressive Ochsner Clinic; and then returned to his hometown.

Reading on it seemed unlikely anyone would want to harm this gentle soul. Not only did Duponce have a thriving practice that crossed racial lines, he gave back. Dr. Duponce

had a free clinic for those less fortunate. *He was well 'integrated' in his community.*

Then came the red flag! Eduardo Duponce had a significant illness. One with lots of pain and suffering. Free man or slave – being Black carried a risk of sickle cell anemia. He had inherited the true disease – not just the symptomless trait. His life was beyond 'just passing it on'. It was one of intermittent bouts of leg pain and skin ulcers. His red blood cells were not normal – *and would never be.*

A seemingly stoic attitude allowed him to succeed despite this additional adversity. Being Black was not enough! As the years passed the disease progressed. First, visual impairments forced him to discontinue conducting even minor surgical procedures. Then came kidney failure, which required dialysis three times a week. The final blow was cardiac – ACS—acute chest syndrome. He needed care beyond his local hospital.

Eduardo Duponce was transferred in respiratory distress to Tulane University Hospital, where he died. The autopsy revealed an overdose of fentanyl. Clinical investigation showed his hand on a syringe in his IV port. It was written off as a suicide. *He was a doctor. He had access to meds. Was the suffering too great? Was he 'helped along'?*

Dickie's interest was piqued. What came next began to scare even him – and he had seen a lot.

JEFFREY ARLADE:

The file started out reasonably straight forward. Arlade had terminal ALS- amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. He was

a goner! Degenerative motor neuron disease. *Bad luck. Statistically someone in an entire class would get sick.* He noted a living will – he was a DNR- (do not resuscitate.) Also, he had an exit strategy: No added care—but nothing to be withdrawn. *This was an incapacitated man, but one who did not want to be put out of his misery.*

How does one explain the disconnected ventilator? According to the investigation, the night attendant found him dead in bed with the respirator power shut down. Even during a power failure, the battery backup would have triggered the alarm and kept working. *Freak accident. Possibly. Assisted suicide – also possible. Afterall, it was legal in California.*

The file was brief. What was there to pursue? Arlade had no life. He was terminal. He died.

Dickie was calculating. *Two suicides in one year, out of ten! What would the other files reveal?*

MARLON EVERSON:

Dickie opened the file and began by reading the obituary that appeared in the Press- Register, southwest Alabama's oldest newspaper. Marlon Everson MD. Age 55, Resident of Spanish Fort. Renown pediatric surgeon at the USA Children's Hospital in Mobile. A loving husband, and devoted father. He succumbed to complications from long standing multiple sclerosis.

Nothing out of the ordinary so far. Except no autopsy – and he died while in the hospital.

Dickie thought to himself: *Doc would never allow a death to be so rapidly signed out and the body released.*

Reading on. Dr. Everson was diagnosed shortly after medical school with relapsing and remitting multiple sclerosis. His career and his quality of life was extended with HE-DMT's (highly effective disease modifying therapies). But there were setbacks. His legs became weak and his vision impaired. Wheelchair bound, he was admitted to the Ochsner Clinic in New Orleans, for the latest pharmaceutical. *This was high risk.* Dickie knew that the side effects could even worsen the disease.

While in treatment at the hospital, Everson developed pneumonia. *Not uncommon with a weakened immune system.* He died in his sleep. The death certificate stated: "Aspiration -leading to cardiac arrest."

Everson was an observant Jew. The family wanted immediate burial – as was tradition.

Dickie closed the file and had a fleeting but perverse thought about the Ward 509 cohort. *What a shipwrecked crew! ALS, sickle cell disease, multiple sclerosis. Who needed textbooks? Read their case histories. What surprise would unfold with Joe D'Alos?*

JOSEPH D'ALOS:

Death certificate: "Sudden death from post-surgical pulmonary embolism."

Dickie could not believe it. Another tragedy for this crew of 10 He pressed on with the file.

Joe D'Alos was an athlete. When not practicing orthopedic surgery in Opelousas, Louisiana, he was cycling. He could frequently be seen following hometown routes. If he was

absent there, he was probably on a cycling tour somewhere in the U.S. or Europe.

His file showed that he was in great physical condition, but not immune to freak accidents. *Hazards of the road.* D'Alos fractured his femur and required surgery.

Opelousas General Hospital, where Joe practiced, was a trusted institution in that part of the state. He felt comfortable having his femur rodded there. He was single, with limited support services. Surgery and recovery in familiar settings suited him.

According to the hospital record the surgery was flawless. The intraoperative issues, however, were not. Heparin is routinely used in these types of procedures to prevent blood clots. Unfortunately for Joe, he had a paradoxical reaction. Instead of preventing clots, this medication caused them. Dickie could not help but smile: *Doctors have bad luck as patients.*

The anesthesiologist was sharp. He observed Joe's oxygen levels dropping despite adequate ventilation. He figured it out; stopped the heparin and started treatment with Argatroban- a different family of 'blood thinners'.

D'Alos survived his surgery. No more clotting issues. Workup revealed HIT- heparin induced thrombocytopenia. That quick -thinking anesthesiologist prevented a possible fatal intraoperative catastrophe!

D'Alos was placed on Xarelto, an oral anticoagulant suited for his needs. He was discharged to physical therapy. He was weaned off the Xarelto and placed on aspirin. He received intramuscular injections of Toradol- a non -steroidal

anti-inflammatory for pain control if needed, prior to his sessions, as well as helping to stabilize his clotting.

On post operative day five he was found on the floor, face down. He could not be revived.

The autopsy confirmed pulmonary embolism.

There was the mandatory M&M (morbidity and mortality) conference. Pulmonary embolism was a known complication after large bone fractures. The doctors were exonerated. Joseph D'Alos was mourned.

Dickie was about to close file and chalk it up to another stain on this cohort. Then something caught his eye. Something had been missed – or overlooked! The toxicology report showed traces of Lovenox. As noted, D'Alos had HIT syndrome- a genetic hypercoagulable state made worse by drugs like heparin. Lovenox was in that family! *How did that happen? Could Toradol and Lovenox be confused, and the wrong drug given? Where was the investigation?*

Richard Brennan, investigator, was now ready to go even deeper. Instinct and intuition told him something was not right! Doc's voice was reverberating in his brain. *Dead men do tell tales! Accident? Suicide? Euthanasia? Murder?*

Victims or Suspects

Richard “Dickie” Brennan found his way uptown to Robert Street, just off St Charles Avenue and Audubon Park. He rang the bell. The gates opened, revealing the antebellum home of Bryce and Sarah Teller. They awaited any information that could help allay the anxiety Bryce had been feeling, since the memorial service at his class reunion.

Dickie laid out the facts. He could see Bryce becoming more distressed. Sarah tried to be a voice of reason. “This could all be coincidence. Right?”

Bryce was not buying it. “Or something more sinister.”

“Guys. I don’t know. What we should do is find out about the others in that cohort. Are they alive? And if we are even contemplating evil intent, then we need to consider them as victims—or suspects. Especially if you are going with the ‘pledge theory.’”

There was a palpable silence in the room. The three were thinking the same thought. Sarah said it first. “Doc. Is it possible?”

Bryce now added anger to his anxiety. “No way! I know him. He could never.”

“Guys! Anything is possible. Doc has been through hell.

He could have snapped. He has the skill set. But I am not buying it, either. What I do know is we need to find him.”

Sarah agreed and asked Dickie if they should alert the police. Dickie told them it would become an FBI investigation since it crossed state lines. “And given the theory, Doc would quickly be a prime person -of -interest.”

Dickie sensed that emotion was overtaking logic. “First things first. We are surmising and letting drama rule. There is nothing concrete to alert authorities. Step by step. Locate the other members, and find Ben. If it’s coincidence, let it rest. If it’s more, then I’ll notify the FBI.”

Looking at Bryce, Dickie asked: “Any ideas where Doc could have gone? You go way back with him. Friends? Family? Familiar locations that could be comforting?”

“His parents are deceased. He has no siblings. He was close to the Chief Medical Examiner of Nassau County, New York. Not sure if he is still there. He worked in the vineyards and the fishing boats in the East End of Long Island.

Dickie saw what was coming next. “I’ll find him. You research the others.”

Secrets

Sarah Bess Kohl Teller was becoming unglued. She was not used to orbital decay. She was always the center – reliable—steady. The sun that planets revolved around. First Margo, her best friend. Then Collette and Doc. And now Bryce – and that pledge! It seemed that everything was spinning out of control.

Comfort and steadiness came from real estate and tennis. She managed the residential end of her family business, which also included one of the largest commercial portfolios in the greater New Orleans area. With that distinction came privilege. Private school education. Proper social circles – one of which was the New Orleans Tennis Club.

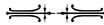
Now, Sarah was burdened with handling the Touro Mansion on Audubon Place—residence of Margo and Doc. This home had passed through generations. But Margo was dead, and Doc was gone. There were taxes and no income. *What to do? Cover the costs, with the hope that Doc would return – or put it up for sale?*

Tennis was always a release. She was very competitive. First with the Isadore Newman High School team and then with the Tulane University Varsity. She and Bryce, along

with Doc and Margo were constant doubles at the club. That was gone. Now she played with her new friend, Miranda Montgomery.

Dickie warned Sarah to keep her distance from Miranda. “She is looking for a way back into the FBI good graces. You don’t want her snooping around until we can find Ben.”

Unfortunately, Sarah did not head this advice. They played often. Miranda sensed Sarah’s anxiety. She was good at “tells”, which in tennis can be like cues for revealing a planned maneuver. She was also good at “probing” – experimenting with different shots as a strategy to uncover an opponent’s vulnerability. Sarah broke down and told her about the deaths and the pledge. “Please keep that to yourself. I should not have said anything. Friend to friend?”



Sarah realized she’d overstepped and told Dickie and Bryce what happened. Time was not on their side. “Dickie, I’m sorry. So much has happened. Find Doc.”

Dickie would not let them down. He had to move fast; before Miranda Montgomery decides to go rogue and intercede.

Roots

Richard (Dickie) Brennan was at the top of the game when it came to investigation. Formerly, a New Orleans police detective, he was now head of the MIU (Medical Investigative Unit) for the OCME (Office of the Chief Medical Examiner). He owed his career to his former boss. *First things first. Find him. After that - the facts, the truth, and maybe resurrection for a fallen Benjamin Brash.*

There would be two important items on his agenda: Finding Brash and avoiding a suspicious Miranda Montgomery. “If anyone asks about me, I’m taking a long-needed vacation. Fishing in the Bayous. No computers. No phone.” Such was the ruse as Dickie began his journey to Long Island, New York. His intuition was usually correct. *The East End was familiar territory, and a good place to disappear. Start there.*

Three days into it, Dickie crossed the Verrazano Bridge, and headed to points east on the Southern State Parkway. The automobile navigation system directed him to Sunrise Highway and then onto the two-land road—25 E—to Montauk. He kept thinking about Doc’s life before New Orleans. *Could he be hiding out in the concrete jungle of NYC? No. My gut says rural.*

Fall was transitioning to winter. The air was crisp, and the colorful leaves of the Northeast were dropping. The vineyards were bare. The grape harvests were finished. Best bet—the docks.

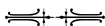
As the fishing boats came into view, Dickie planned. *Be methodical. Doc always said: 'common things occur commonly'.*

There were no hotel or motel listings for any variations of the name Benjamin Brash.

'Ben B'. 'BB'. 'B. Brash.' 'Doc B.' Next, the bars, pubs, and restaurants. Doc would need money and could be working for cash. *No luck. He was off the grid! Look beyond the obvious.*

Dickie headed for the docks and the boats. First, he checked with the managers of the marinas. *Could our Doc be working on a yacht? Not really his style - plus the rich keep records.*

Next, he moved on to the harbor masters. Fishing boats. Like in Doc's youth. Dickie was hopeful. *Could Doc fit in as rugged fisherman? Age, medicine, and civic responsibility has surely softened the Chief. But. It had been months.*



Dickie was tired. It had been days without any clues. Sitting on a stool in a dive bar, near where the fishing boats unload, he spotted a photograph. It was the crew of the Molly Kate. There in the rear, a resemblance of familiarity appeared. *More muscular, and bearded - but it was the Doc!*

Dickie could not believe his luck. His excitement caused a stir in this dark and quiet watering hole. Pointing, he quickly asked: "Where is that boat? Do you know this man?"

The bartender shrugged Dickie off. No one else was forthcoming. He soon realized that many of the dock workers were people who wanted anonymity. Maybe even moving from ship- to -ship to avoid recognition. He felt he was on the right trail. *Start with the Molly Kate!*

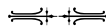
Dickie found the boat and approached whom he presumed was the person in charge. It was about to head out to sea. Crews were gathering. Tuna were not running. but there was cod, blackfish and ling. *Maybe this would be the break he needed.*

Captain James Forrester was reluctant to talk to a 'foreigner'. But as one "Cajun" Bayou fisherman relayed his concerns to the 'Maniac' from Bar Harbor, the ice began to thaw. Dickie showed a photo of the man he was desperate to find.

'Cap Jim', as he liked to be called, remained hesitant. "It is not the code of the sea to pry into other people's live or business. If they do their job and keep out of trouble, I say live and let live."

"Cap Jim. I've come too far, and the stakes too high to give up. His life could be in danger. He was - is—a good friend. Any information would be appreciated. Here is my number."

Dickie made his way back to his motel lost in thought. *Was it even possible to consider Doc a suspect? Why would a man so dedicated to solving crimes commit them? Could Doc be the next victim in the cohort of ten? Could this have any connection to the Mardi Gras Massacre? This is nonsense!*



Bad news came with the ringtone on Dickie's phone.

Answering it, he heard the scared voice of Sarah Teller. “Any luck? I’m starting to panic. That Miranda woman is snooping. She is asking about the other students in the group. I think she even suspects Bryce.”

Dickie tried to present a sense of calm. “Not yet. But I think I’m getting close. Stay calm. I will find him. I will bring him home.” But in fact, he was four days into it -tired and running low on cash. Finally on day five, the twangy Upper New England dialect of Cap Jim revealed some news. “A man, possibly fitting your guy’s description, was seen working and living on a boat berthed on Block Island.”

After checking in with Bryce and Sarah, the lead investigator for the Office of the Medical Examiner of Orleans Parish, Louisiana boarded a ferry from Montauk and headed to Block Island. *No jurisdiction and no legal authority for any professional inquiries. But Doc was his friend and whether he knew it or not, he was in trouble!*

Deceit

Peering through the bay window Sarah Teller saw a familiar, but unwanted face.

After she could no longer stand the noise from the buzzer, Sarah released the gate to her house on Robert Street and preemptively waited with front door open. “Why are you here?”

Miranda Montgomery, suspended FBI agent, was also on a mission: A way back into the Agency’s good graces. “Sarah. We must talk.”

“I have nothing more to say to you. I spoke to you as a friend leaning on a friend. Seems I got a snooping former FBI agent instead. My lips are sealed. Snoop elsewhere.”

Miranda was not retreating. Sarah relented, and listened as Miranda summarized her position and tried to make her case. “I may be on suspension, but I also took an oath. To uphold the law. I cannot not ignore the possibility of serial murders. The pledge that your husband took was compelling enough to trigger so much anxiety and distress, that you reached out to me.”

“And you think this goes beyond coincidence and is something nefarious. Who are your suspects? You are on the outs

because Doc did not play ball with the prosecution in the Memorial Hospital disaster. Is this payback? Are you going after him? Is he your ticket back into the FBI? Maybe, you think it's a ruse and Bryce is your killer!"

"Listen Sarah. I feel for Dr. Brash. He was a brilliant man. He had tragic losses that could have altered his consciousness - his right from wrong—who lives and who dies."

"Sorry. Cannot be of service. Ben may be gone, but he is not forgotten to us".

Miranda made her way to the exit. She had overstayed whatever welcome there was. Turning, she gave a final admonishment. "Sarah. I am still your friend. If this truly is evil, the police and the FBI will get involved. And they will look at the remaining cohort members as likely suspects. I would like to help you find resolution. It begins with Benjamin Brash."

Sarah placed a call to Dickie. "Work faster!"

Discovery

Dickie exited the ferry and made cursory rounds of the boats docked in the harbor. He was not sure what clues he was looking for, but felt he would *'know it when he saw it'*.

And then he did! A bearded man with a stride that Dickie had seen a million times before. *Walked with him so often*. It was him!

Having logged a lot of hours on stakeouts and surveillance, Dickie followed him undetected. What he saw was disturbing. The bearded dock worker purchased a vending machine sandwich and three bottles of liquor.

Staying at a safe distance he followed him back to an 'abode' of sorts: A rickety flat bottom houseboat that was bouncing in sync with the waves hitting the dock. He became nauseous just looking at it. This was a far cry from the calm of the 'Gulf and the River'—unless there was a hurricane. *Maybe this was an omen!*

How to approach him? What was his state of mind? Will he speak to me? Will he even listen?

It was now or never. Time to confront this man. Friend or foe? Entering the boat, Dickie was taken aback by the squalid conditions. Dirty clothes strewn about. Pots with

old remnants of what could be surmised as food. And empty booze bottles piled up in the sink. *This was a man of greatness! How far had he fallen?*

Now he was inside, waiting for the inebriated man to crawl out of the head. Startled, Dickie could sense a fight -or- flight response. But before the 'stranger' could lash out, a familiar voice halted the rage. "Doc! It's me Dickie."

Stumbling to a chair, reaching for a half-filled bottle and with slurred speech: "I'm not entertaining today. Go away."

"Doc. There is trouble back home...." But before he could even finish the thought, the reply came forth: "I'm out of the autopsy business. And for your edification this is my home!"

Time for tough love. "Doc I've come a long way. You need to at least hear me out."

Dickie convinced the once- great forensic pathologist to switch from bourbon to coffee and eat some legitimate food. Practically carrying this stuporous soul, he found a nearby pub and began to unfold the events that led him here.

Through the hangover, Doc was beginning to process Dickie's message.

"Listen, my old friend. I just want to be lost."

"Well Doc. I found you. Soon others will as well."

Doc's hands were clutching a pounding head. "Why? None of this has anything to do with me."

"Remember that pledge you took in med school. You know, about looking after each other?"

"That was naïve talk from a group of immature -third -years."

"Doc. Someone may be acting out on that pledge. Four

of your ten are dead. All within a short time. There is talk of euthanasia and murder. You are now all possible suspects—and take one guess who is prime? You!”

“Dickie. It’s probably all a big coincidence. You of all people know that people die from all sorts of reasons.”

“Remember that FBI agent? Montgomery. She’s gotten involved. She doubts coincidence and is asking about you.”

“Me? I’m off the grid. I have zero knowledge of anything New Orleans. What’s her beef with me?”

“Maybe she harbors a grudge. Your Memorial testimony cost her a career. Perhaps this is her way back in. Plus, you are clever, familiar with death—and bitter. To her, it’s a great combo for her justification.”

“Dickie, my old friend. Go home. Tell them you hit a dead end. There are just too many ghosts there for me. I’ll disappear again.”

Dickie took a long deep breath and used his final gambit. “Montgomery is also looking at Bryce! You have no choice. You need to substantiate your alibis and help us figure out what’s going on. Bryce needs you. Sarah needs you. And if there is a killer out there, your classmates will need your forensic expertise.”

The Return

“Sarah. I have him. He’s in no shape to deal with any sort of investigation. And certainly not Agent Montgomery.”

One full week passed on Block Island. Off that boat, into a motel with full showers. Restaurants with complete meals, Coffee—lots of coffee. And limited amounts of alcohol. Just to keep Doc calm enough to meet his memories in the ‘Big Easy’.

The trip back to Louisiana took three days. Ferrying from Block Island to Montauk and then driving the length of Long Island to reach the two bridges that would take them to the highways south. During that time Dickie tried to explain to a bewildered and reluctant travel companion the circumstances necessitating the return: Jeffrey Arlade; Eduardo Duponce; Joseph D’Alos; Marlon Everson. All dead. Never any investigations. Until now.

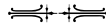
Doc needed time to process this sudden invasion. He wanted to be alone. The only companionship desired was with Don Julio, and I.W. Harper: tequila for Margo and bourbon for Collette. Those were always welcome. New Orleans, and agent Montgomery: No way! But then there was loyalty and friendship: Sarah and Bryce, and even Dickie, who tracked him down.

The closer they got to the Crescent City, the more anxious Doc became. He was not ready to face his demons.

Dickie made a decision. Doc needed time, both physically and mentally. He took a detour off the interstate and crossed into Covington, on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain. He had a vacation getaway house nestled at the fork of the Bogue Falaya and the Tchefuncte Rivers. Pulling into the driveway he woke a sleeping Doc.

“Where are we?”

“A place of peace and quiet. Only the gulls and gators to bother us. I’ve spoken to Sarah and Bryce. They’ll meet us here to figure out what’s next.”



Bryce and Sarah went shopping for provisions for an extended stay in Covington, and then started their Causeway drive from Metairie, across the Lake. Sarah hated that bridge. Twenty-four miles with no off-ramp. Having earned the *Guinness World Record’s* distinction for being the ‘Longest Bridge in the World’, it was like a scary ride, where you pray for a smooth ending. Maybe the fear was a metaphor for what was in store for Doc.

Bryce turned to Sarah. “Relax. Two lanes. Two parallel bridges. Remember when it was just a single bridge with only one lane each way?”

“Bryce. You are of little consolation. I hate this bridge, and I hate what may be in store for Doc—and us. That stupid oath – so hypocritical—The Hypocritical Oath!”

Sarah began to calm her nerves as she took in the beauty of the rural ecology, with its long leaf pines and protected cypress forests. The roads became smaller as they approached Dickie's escape from civilization. A more observant and less preoccupied driver would have noticed another car keeping pace with them.

Covington

As Sarah and Bryce entered the hidden driveway, the other car pulled in as well. FBI Agent Miranda Montgomery exited her 'chase vehicle'. "Sarah. Dr. Teller. On a retreat of sorts? I'll bet there is someone here I would love to speak with."

"You couldn't stay away! You really think that Benjamin Brash—a man you worked with and respected has become a serial killer, with a vendetta towards his medical school class of 1973? You must really need a win to get back into the FBI – at any cost!"

"I am sorry. The blame is on you. I am responsible to the law. Bryce cracked open Pandora's Box with his index of suspicion. You, Sarah opened it all the way when you spoke to me."

"I spoke to you in confidence as a friend."

"Friend or not, I am obligated to search for the truth. Your Dr. Brash, in his prime, would be the first to concur."

A bearded and slighter -than remembered man appeared on the porch overlooking the driveway, where a commotion was occurring. "Would I? Would I jump to conclusions the

way you have? Not so sure. Well, you are here. Come in. Time for alibis, so I can get the hell back to my life!”

Sarah looked at Miranda with contempt. *Betrayal, deceit, accusations, personal gain.* Those were her thoughts, as she tried to size up the former agent who was using her profiling skills to get a new impression of a man she once respected – and maybe even idolized.

“What do you think? Is this your serial killer? A man on the edge of self-destruction? He is too consumed with killing himself to dart around the country planning sophisticated murders. What’s your next move? Arrest Brash? Maybe, my husband? That would be a story. The doctor who brings life into this world also decides to take it away! You’re not even active FBI. Is this the citizen’s arrest modus operandi?”

Finally, Dickie could not take it anymore. “This is spinning out of control! Sarah is agitated over you! Doc is here, against his will, to provide an alibi. Bryce is emotional and concerned from his reunion. And you, Miss Montgomery, are searching for evil in what may be nothing more than the reality that people get old, many get sick, and some prematurely die.

“So why don’t we all take a breath. As Doc always said: ‘Dead men do tell tales.’ Evidence is fact. Facts will lead us to the truth.”

Sarah acknowledged Dickie’s logic; He always found a way to help Doc. Doc needed help now, more than ever. and she looked Miranda straight in the eye. “So, what do we know? There were ten members of the Ward 509 cohort. Four are dead. If you can see past the improbability of Doc and Bryce, there are four others that could be suspects or victims. If you

want to go on a hunt, have at it. My priority is getting my best friend's husband back to life."

"You are correct. I am intrigued. And it is true that this could help me with the FBI. But, for now I am on my own. But with you all, and especially with Dr. Brash's expertise, we could figure it out."

Doc listened to this diatribe until he lost his patience. "Alright Agent Montgomery. Once I am feeling better, I'll help you. Then you will leave us to our lives." He looked over to Sarah. "I appreciate all your efforts, but once this is over, I am leaving. I want that very clear. New Orleans is the bad memory I am trying to erase."

Sarah ended the conversation with a clear but concise offer. "Miranda if you agree to keep this to yourself, I will call you when Doc is physically and mentally ready to engage."

Miranda got back into her car. The drive made her think: *It must be nice to have such great friends. She felt more alone. Like at the end of my singles career on the tennis circuit. Absent father. A coach giving up. Maybe we could become friends.*

Teamwork

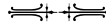
The group, minus Miranda, spent the next three weeks in Covington with Doc. Quiet walks along the river. Community meals. And discussions about what was in store, should they proceed. Once again, the topic of informing the police came up. It was dismissed by Doc. “We have enough – just dealing with Montgomery. Let’s not further stir the pot until we need to.”

Benjamin Brash MD JD, and former Chief Medical Examiner of Orleans Parish, was ready. He had emphatic conditions. “I know you, all for your own reasons, would like me to stay in New Orleans. I cannot. Dickie: I will never be your boss again. Sarah: I love you for all you have done for my family. Bryce: You will always be my best friend. But there are too many ghosts that haunt me daily. And they all live in this city. So, let’s put this ‘oath business’ to bed once and for all. Then I will take my leave.”

Each was about to protest that decision, with their own justifications. Doc shut them down. “Accept my terms or I will walk out now and disappear.”

With sorrowful nods, and the hope that over time Doc would change his mind, no longer happening, they all agreed.

“Dickie. Go deeper into the departed. There must be clues that have been overlooked. There always are. Bryce. We need to find and locate the remaining members. Are they alive? Where do they reside? Sarah. Call Montgomery. Tell her we are ready.”



By the time suspended FBI Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery found her way back to Dickie’s place, work had already commenced. Bryce had the composite of the class of ’73. “Three of the four should be easy: Pamela Prentis, Jack Buchanan, and Patty Jane Loftus. Jason James Vetter will be more of a challenge. If you recall, he was expelled. I’ll go to the alumni house and speak to Director Sandra Hayes. They try and keep tight records on the whereabouts of the classes.”

Doc was starting to feel engaged. *I remember those four. Prom Queen, Athlete, Mascot, and the Genius who came to school after only two years of college—bright but immature!* He greeted Miranda and laid out his terms. “This could be something—or an exaggeration. If this is real, it’s your ball game. I came back for Bryce and his safety.”

“Dr. Brash. I must say you are looking well. Cleanly shaved, nappy clothes. That’s the man I remember.”

“I remember you as well: Memorial Hospital Findings—did not go your way.”

“Like tennis, you win, and you lose. It’s all part of the game. I believe you can understand the inference, having been a tennis icon in your day.”

“I see you have done some research—or should I say profil-
ing. That was a lifetime ago.”

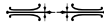
Miranda nodded, and a brief smile crossed her face. “I think
to solve the mystery we need to be doubles partners.”

Doc shrugged his shoulders. “If that is to be true then tell
me about you. And more than what I can find in a dossier.”

“What do you mean?”

“Here you are. Camping out with us. Off the books, so to
speak. Alone. Don’t you have a family, or a significant other
that may be missing you; and wondering where you are?
You’ve made no phone calls and are in no hurry to leave.”

“Doctor Brash. I believe you could be a profiler! All in
good time, partner.”



Bryce walked out onto the porch. There was an excitement
in his voice. No more sitting around, lamenting. “Are you two
about done? I have leads. I know where three of them are for
sure!”

Bryce revealed his findings to the group. “Pamela Prentiss
married Jack Buchanan. Both have a family practice outside
Portland, Oregon. Patricia Loftus is an anesthesiologist in
her hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. JJ Vetter may have gone to
Mexico to finish medical school -but then he fell off the grid.”

Miranda looked over at Benjamin Brash MD, JD. She re-
membered a framed lithograph of Sherlock Holmes on a wall
in the former medical examiner’s office. “Well Doc, is ‘the
game afoot’?”

The Hypocritical Oath

Then something happened that no one had seen for a while. A smile, brief as it was, crossed, over the face of Benjamin Brash. “Okay: Bryce, you and Sarah go deeper into the lives of our three knowns. Then try to see where JJ Vetter may have disappeared to. Miranda: You wanted in. Work with Dickie and me. Let’s review the files of the deceased.”

Peeling the Onion

Sarah looked over to Bryce as they navigated the Causeway Bridge back to the city. “I guess one positive is that we have Ben back.”

“I wouldn’t get my hopes up. He was clear on his intentions. He was drafted into this endeavor. He did not volunteer.”

“He came back for us.”

Bryce observed a sense of contentment in his wife. “You seem calm. The bridge not bothering you?”

She smiled all the way to the Garden District, in the residential area, near the uptown campus of Tulane University. They checked on their house on Robert Street, off St Charles Avenue. “The North Shore was too quiet for me. I missed the noise of the street cars, and the hustle of the students riding back and forth. Let’s go over to Doc’s on Audubon Place. It’s on the way to the alumni house. I need to make sure all is well there.”

“Sarah, Doc wants the house sold. How long can your company foot the bills?”

They nodded to the guard, parked their car in Doc’s driveway and crossed Freret Street to the Gibson Hall Campus

where the Bea Fields Alumni House was located. “I love this place. Great memories. You, me, Ben, and Margo.”

“Those halcyon days are over. We have work to do.”

Climbing the stairs of the brick Victorian that housed all things Tulane, they were greeted by Director Sandra Hayes. She knew they were coming and had done her homework. Three files were handed over. “All information was based on the alums themselves. Very little on JJ Vetter.” Curiosity was in her nature. *A prerequisite Sarah thought, if you are tracking students’ lives.* “What is this for?”

Sarah fibbed. “We are planning a reunion for Bryce’s class. They were close friends. By- the- way, do you know of any recent deaths in the medical school class of 1973?”

That last quip caught Miss Hayes off guard. “Is there something I should know. If you need help it’s what I do.”

“Thank you. We appreciate it.”

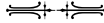
Sarah pulled on Bryce’s arm. “I don’t think she’s buying the ‘reunion bit’. No matter, we got what we came for.”

Exiting, files in hand, they decided on dinner before heading back.

Gautreau’s was their favorite restaurant. Very few tourists. No name on the front. Only an address: 1728 Soniat Street. Proprietors Rebecca and Patrick Singly knew them well and gave the couple a quiet table in a private alcove, away from other diners.

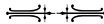
“Bryce. You need to get back to work. I’ll take the files back.”

“No problems with the bridge? Work will wait. I need to see this through.”



Sarah took a deep breath, and they ventured the 24 miles across that anxiety -producing Causeway Bridge. Waiting on the porch was a very impatient suspended FBI agent. “About time! What, do you have?”

Bypassing her former tennis partner, Sarah delivered the information to Doc. The snub did not go unnoticed.



Bryce opened the files and reported one by one.

“**Pamela Prentis** did her residency in family practice at UCLA Medical Center. **Jack Buchanan** deferred residency and joined the Public Health Service. He worked on an Indian Reservation in Arizona for two years. The two got married. They moved to Venice Beach, California while Jack also did a family medicine residency. Once training was done, they moved to Oregon and joined the Veteran Hospital Staff in Portland.”

Doc surmised: “Jack avoided the draft, and Vietnam, with the Public Health Service. I remember they were always an item. Why not? She was beautiful and smart. And he was tall handsome, and athletic. Probably made good babies. UCLA. Jeffrey Arlade also trained there. I wonder if they crossed paths. We need to investigate that. Next.”

“**Patricia Jane Loftus** returned to her Shaker Heights suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. She did a residency in Anesthesia at the Cleveland Clinic followed by a fellowship in Pain Management.”

Again, Doc pondered: “I wonder if she worked in conjunction with the Palliative Care Service? Pain; end -of -life decisions; drugs. Interesting.”

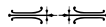
Miranda was rising from her seat. In her mind, ready suspects.

Doc stopped her enthusiasm. “Easy cowgirl, we are just beginning.” He then turned back to Bryce. “What about our missing fourth, **Jason Vetter?**”

“Basically, an empty page. He was dismissed during our third year. He did not take it well. Went back home to some steel town suburb near Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The alumni office believes he may have matriculated at some medical school in Mexico. Then, nothing.”

Doc looked over at Dickie. “Anything more on our deceased? We need to look for connections—if any.” Then to Bryce: “This could all be a coincidence – a big nothing.” And finally, looking toward Miranda: “No jumping to conclusions.”

After a moment. “We may need to make some road trips.”



As the group was retiring for the night, Miranda approached Sarah. “I know you feel I betrayed you. But, like it or not, we are now all in this together. You can clear your head from any thoughts you may have regarding your husband and Dr.

Brash. To me, they are in the clear. However, my sixth sense says something nefarious is going on. If you are willing, we could work together. I have the profiling background, but you knew these four personally.”

“Agreed. My husband cannot function effectively, thinking there is the possibility of a serial killer with eyes on his class.”

Autopsies and Exhumations

For the first time, in a long time, Dr. Benjamin Brash felt some life returning to his body, and some spirit enter his otherwise stagnant soul. He was dragged into this; now with a purpose, even if only a temporary one. He would use these cases to dull the pain of a wife lost to disease and daughter to a crime he could not solve.

Alone, in the dark, his thoughts unfolded: *Is this real, or just fantasy? These four deaths—one of coincidence, or part of a more sinister scheme? This is all too bizarre! Do they really expect me to suddenly revert to my forensic self? I have never forgiven myself for abandoning the search for justice for Collette. I walked away once. I will not let them down! I will see this through.*

Dickie found him on the porch and nudged him out of his trance. “Doc. Time to get to work. I have the autopsy reports, with photos.”

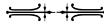
“Dickie. I was just thinking about that pledge. Could someone really have taken it so seriously, as to end lives? Was it comfort care, euthanasia, murder?”

“Could it have started out as one, and led to another? Did any of these classmates stay in touch? Would it end with the

cohort—or do we have a killer believing he, or she, is an ‘angel of mercy’?”

Dickie patted Doc on the shoulder. “Welcome back. Let’s find out. And if true, before there is another notch on the handle.”

Doc took a deep breath. “Let’s start at the beginning. What do we have?”



Dickie laid out the findings.

“Jeffrey Arlade: Age 55. Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon. Musician. Battled ALS for seven years. Ultimately, he required full time nursing care and ventilator support, with a tracheostomy. He had a living will, which he made out early in his diagnosis. He wanted to fight his disease but made it clear that if he had a cardiac arrest, he was a ‘DNR’ (do not resuscitate). Also, although no care, or treatment was to be withheld; no measures were to be added; especially as he began to deteriorate. Arlade’s problem was that as successful as he seemed to be, he was a lousy businessman. He spent money as fast as he made it.

He had no family. He was therefore solely reliant on home health care personnel. His insurance lapsed. He could not afford the premiums, and the private care. He was placed on California Medicaid (CalCare). Mediocre at best. This was substandard for a man like Arlade. Ironically, he was trapped in the system he worked in.”

As Doc absorbed the information, Dickie gave him the brain teaser. “Here is where it gets interesting: Pamela Prentiss trained in the same hospital at the same time. And she was, to put it politely, very enthusiastic about ‘end -of -life’ treatments.”

“Were there any interactions after residency?”

“We don’t know yet. On the surface they led very different lives.”

“Nice work.”

“I’m not finished. Remember your missing cohort member, JJ Vetter. He and Arlade had a relationship of sorts. They both were very interested in music. And it turns out that JJ was gay and out of the closet.”

Doc’s mental wheels were grinding. “What about Arlade? I remember they collaborated a lot. Any connections beyond music and school?”

“He was single and kept his cards close to his vest, if you get my drift. No clues yet.

“There’s one more morsel to chew on, Doc. Your buddy Bryce visited Arlade on several occasions. He told Sarah that Jeffrey did *not* want to die.”

The forensic brain was now spinning. “Jeffrey was a goner once his diagnosis was confirmed. In the beginning, everyone believes they will beat it and cheat death. Never happens. Eventually there is that ‘come to Jesus’ moment where they must accept their situation. The question is: Did Jeffrey Arlade act on his finality? Did he choose his own exit? If so, who pulled him through death’s door?”

“Eduardo Duponce: Internist. Born, raised, lived, and practiced in Pas Christian, Mississippi. In addition to his private practice, he was committed to providing health care to the rural, indigent Black population. Apparently had some guilt over his upbringing. He was raised in comfort, and received a first -rate education, during a time of civil unrest in the Deep South.”

“I remember Eduardo. He left an impression.” Doc was again lost in thought. *Yes, I remember – a free man of color. Not descended from slavery. Such a bold statement in a time of heightened racial tension.* “Always pushing to be academically better than the rest of us. He was tall, thin, handsome, and proud. Almost Caucasian in feature—more white than black. Neither here -nor- there.”

More unfolded as Dickie read the file. “Eduardo was very familiar with health care and health care personnel in New Orleans. He had advancing sickle- cell disease. He was a ‘frequent flier’ at University Hospital. His last visit—the fatal one—was for acute pain, dialysis, and shortness of breath. He was found with his hand on a syringe filled with fentanyl sticking out of his IV access site. Medical Examiner forensics: toxicology confirmed overdose by bolus drug infusion.”

Doc stared at the photographs. *Gruesome, and tragic. But it made no sense.* “He was a physician. He had access to drugs. Why do it in such a public setting?”

“Maybe the pain became too great. Maybe he wanted to be away from his family.”

Doc flashed back to his own life. *Tragedies, obstacles. A slow death from alcohol versus a quick out with fentanyl?*

“Maybe, he was helped along. Do we have any photos of an alive Eduardo?”

As Dickie searched the WEB: “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know for sure. The scene just looks staged.”

Dickie found a host of leisure activity photos of Duponce, on the golf course. He could sense a light go off in his old boss’s head. “Chief?”

“What do you see. Right hand over left for the lethal injection. Look at his golf clubs. He’s a lefty. If he was planning it, why not have the IV in the non-dominant hand. Make it easy to reach over.”

“So, if not suicide, are you thinking about that pledge and euthanasia?”

“Or murder! So far, we have a disconnected ventilator and a drug overdose. Who’s next?”

Joseph D’Alos: Orthopedics, in Opelousas, Louisiana. Well-regarded professionally. He was the community ‘go-to’ surgeon. Active sportsman. Hunting, fishing, cycling. Lived alone. Never married. Relationship status unknown.

Doc was getting tired. “I am out of practice when it comes to concentration. I have been away too long.”

Dickie knew his boss well, and aware what he was about to say would jolt him back. “Dr. D’Alos had a complication in the operating room – as a patient!”

“Run that again!”

“He broke his leg cycling. He needed surgery. Had intraoperative bleeding issues. Saved by an astute anesthesiologist.”

“Details, Dickie!”

“D’Alos began to form excessive clots during the procedure. According to the records, ventilation became difficult.”

Doc’s forensic brain was reawakening. “Most procedures like his require blood thinners to do the opposite – prevent clots. Are we thinking heparin induced thrombocytopenia. HIT?”

“You guessed it Chief! Fortunately, the ‘gas passer’ figured it out. Stopped the heparin and reversed it. D’Alos made it through the surgery and was placed on oral anticoagulants – the good kind for his condition.”

“So far, he was a lucky guy. Survived HIT syndrome.”

Dickie burst the balloon: “Until he was found dead on the floor in the rehab unit.”

“Autopsy? Let me guess – pulmonary embolism.” Doc began to tap his fingers on the table: “Something’s not right, especially if he was on oral anticoagulants.”

Dickie turned the page. “It says here that D’Alos was being weaned off the blood thinner Xarelto. He was getting intramuscular Toradol for pain; and it also doubled as an anti -platelet blood thinner. Are you ready for the clincher? Toxicology found traces of Lovenox in his system.”

Fingers were now tapping harder and faster. “Lovenox is in the heparin family. If he got it, he was doomed to clot. How did that happen?”

“The only med noted was the Toradol. Hard to believe it was a mistaken medication. Should have been ‘red-flagged’.”

Now the fingers turned into a fist and hit the table. “Three dead. A ventilator mishap, a drug overdose, and a medication mistake. Too many coincidences. I sense a pattern of intent.”

Dickie opened the fourth folder.

Marlon Everson: Pediatric Surgeon. Lived in Spanish Fort, a suburb of Mobile, Alabama. Medical records show he was battling ‘relapsing and remitting’ multiple sclerosis. When in remission he could perform his surgeries. Real trouble began with his most recent bout. He was weak in the legs and suffered visual impairment. We know this because he went to the Ochsner Clinic, here in town. He went for some clinical trial. His standard meds were no longer effective. The trial drugs were not without complications – primarily respiratory. He signed on. Apparently, he got pneumonia, and aspirated. Basically, he choked to death during the night.

Doc interrupted: “No one was keeping an eye on him?”

“Nope. He was okay – then not!”

“And the autopsy?”

“There was none. Family was religious. Jewish. Wanted immediate release and burial. Since he was ill with MS, and fighting pneumonia, they succumbed to pressure, and signed it out as aspiration.

“Dickie. I’m not buying it! He should have been autopsied. It never would have slipped through on my watch”.

“What are you thinking, Doc?”

“I’m thinking, that’s four. All from our cohort. All recent. Not buying coincidence. Remember my old Chief? –‘Dead men do tell tales.’ “Marlon Everson deserves an autopsy! We need to get him exhumed.”

Field Trips

As the sun was rising, the bayou was coming to life. So was the intensity of the investigation. Doc was increasingly sure the cohort deaths were neither accidental, nor coincidental. “There seemed to be both a methodology, and a reasoning behind them. The questions were: Why? Who was next? And above all, who was behind them? And did this extend beyond the cohort?”

With renewed purpose Doc took control. “We need to leave the Lakefront and start ‘boots of the ground’ field work.” He could see that his team was enthused.

Dickie was ready ‘at the jump’ to work again with the boss he admired so much. Miranda and Sarah had seemingly put their differences aside and were also a go. They had done their ‘homework, having completed dossiers on the remaining ‘509 ers’. Bryce just wanted this to be over.

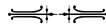
“Bryce. You and Sarah need to go to Pennsylvania. Speak to JJ’s family. Maybe a concerned personal touch from friends, former as they may be, might yield some info on his whereabouts”.

“Dickie. Get me the info on the coroner of the Mobile,

Alabama area. Also, get the address of the Everson family. We need permission to exhume the body, and a court order.”

He then looked directly at Miranda. “You and I will work together. Forensics and profiling. Hopefully this will have a better outcome for your career than Memorial. We will go to Alabama to find out more about the demise of Dr. Everson. Then we will go to Oregon and Ohio! Are you okay with this arrangement?”

She nodded in the affirmative. She was happy to have a doubles partner.



Bryce, and Sarah were on Frontier Airlines headed to the Trenton Mercer Airport, in New Jersey. From there they would rent a car and drive the one-hour to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. As much as Sarah hated the Pontchartrain Causeway Bridge, she hated airlines that weren’t as reliable as Delta!

Bryce deflected Sarah’s travel anxiety by opening the file on JJ. “Sarah, you did the research. Fill me in.”

She opened the dossier that she and Miranda had compiled.

“Jason James Vetter. Born Lehigh Valley Hospital in 1948, in a rural part of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It was, once upon a time, a mining community. Most of those who lived there had some connection to the steel industry.

“His family were of limited means. As the coal and steel industry abated so did employment. Only the young were retrainable. Others like JJ’s parents were on the dole.

“JJ was academically brilliant. Advancing through the local Liberty High School, he entered Lehigh University at the age of 16, on a full scholarship. School was of little challenge.

“Turns out JJ was also a child prodigy. He taught himself the piano. If he could hear it, he could play it. Perfect pitch.

“He took the MCAT, the medical school equivalent of the SAT, and aced it. Along with a perfect 4.0 grade point average, he was accepted to Tulane Medical School after only two years of undergraduate studies. JJ managed fine during the first two didactic years.”

Bryce interjected: “I remember the school liked to boast about his genius. Admission after only two years of undergraduate schooling. They overlooked his immaturity with respect to his older classmates. But by the third year, we were out of the classroom and onto the wards. He had a lack of social skills. It was difficult for him to relate to patients. He repeatedly showed up late for ‘scut’ rounds, which is the busy work of changing bandages, collecting blood etc. There were also rumors of inappropriate comments, made by him, about some of the patient’s conditions.”

Sarah finished with: “The *coup de grace* was when he was caught, on repeated occasions, stealing from the campus bookstore. This was bizarre to the Ethics Council. He was on a full scholarship, which included stipends for food and lodging. Why would he basically shoplift?”

Bryce had it locked down now. “The more they investigated, the more they realized he was in fact not what they imagined. Genius or not, he needed to go. JJ was expelled during his third year.”

The plane touched down without a bump. Sarah's flight anxiety was allayed by the intensity of what was before them. What happened to JJ? Where was he now?

They rented a car and pulled out of the airport and headed towards the Vetter family home. It was a plain house on a plain street in a very plain, and in fact non – descript neighborhood. They all looked alike. It seemed that it was not about possessions – for there appeared to be little. It was about community. Sarah and Bryce were soon to find out how much community mattered.

Climbing steps to a simple split ranch type of dwelling, they rang the bell. A truck was in the driveway, but there was no response. Again, they rang. Finally, a middle -aged, probably once—reasonably attractive woman answered the door. Sarah could not help but notice a sadness about her.

“Good afternoon. I am Sarah Teller. This is my husband, Bryce. We are looking for any information on the whereabouts of Jason James Vetter. We knew him as JJ. Is there anyone who can help us? He was a classmate of Bryce.”

Before an answer could be elicited, a weak but stern voice emanated from inside. “Go away. We have nothing to say!”

Sarah was undeterred. “It is imperative that we find JJ.”

Again, that voice rang out: “We know nothing about him anymore! So please leave us alone.”

An even quieter voice whispered to whom was most likely her husband. “Let's speak to them. Maybe they know something about our JJ.”

The man, weathered by years from a working in the coal mines, and beaten down by JJ's fall from grace, pushed

passed his wife and daughter, stared them down, and shut the door.

Bryce was about to pound on the knocker when that middle-aged female opened the door and exited onto the stoop. “Forgive my parents. This is a very insular place. To them, and the community, my brother was an embarrassment.”

Sarah picked up on the angst of the intrusion and tried to speak in as calm and non-threatening a voice as possible. “We are aware of his problems at school. Bryce, and I by extension, were friendly with him.”

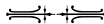
“How is that even possible? You all appear miles apart. Even at this age.”

“We were connected through music. Our very good friend, and their classmate, Jeffrey Arlade, was a pianist. He and JJ shared that. We used to listen to them jam together. JJ seemed to find a sort of contentment with the music and enjoyed playing with Jeff.”

“Why not ask that Jeff where JJ might be?”

“Miss.... Jeff has passed away”.

“I’m sorry. And forgive me. My name is Sandra Sue Jacobson. I am JJ’s older sister. If you want, we can go get some coffee in town and speak. It’s too difficult here for my parents.”



Settling into a quiet booth in the Lehigh Valley Diner, Sandra Sue faced them and began to recount the tragedy.

“This community was centered on mining. First coal, then steel. Generation after generation. That was it for most folk. Are you familiar with that movie ‘Rudy’? Just like that. Very little opportunity.”

The visuals were now very clear.

“Anyway. I finished high school. Got pregnant and married. My husband worked in the neighboring steel mills; until they closed. He passed away. Kids have moved away. It’s just me and my parents. The life here makes you old before your time.

“JJ was different. He was smart. Anything he tried he succeeded. Academics. Music. He was going to escape the mining life and go on to better things. The community – that is to say, the church – was rooting and praying for him. Young children were told to look up to him. There could be hope for them.

“When he was expelled, we all went into a tailspin. It was so embarrassing. My parents refused to go to church. Even to spend much time in public.

“JJ came home, after expulsion. There was no comfort available in this house. He talked of going to Mexico to finish school. This did not ameliorate the shame my parents felt.”

Sarah thought about Collette and Doc. *What he wouldn’t give to have his child back. JJ needed his family. How could they abandon him?*

“I tried to be an intermediary. I work at the library. I read a lot. I see the world wider than many here. It was to no avail. JJ was ostracized; shut out by the community, made worse by rumors about drugs. And let’s just say he ‘preferred the company of men’. This place was too provincial to understand alternative lifestyles. One-day, he was gone.”

Sarah placed her hand on Sandra Sue's. "I'm so sorry. We hate to be intrusive and open old wounds; but finding JJ is of the essence, and very time sensitive."

"I don't know where he is. He did go to Mexico. Whether he succeeded... who knows? I know he reached out to some Intern at the hospital - Charity? - who came from somewhere south of the border."

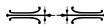
Sarah thanked her for being forthcoming and smiled: "SS and JJ. I think your parents' liked alliteration."

"Why is finding him so important?"

Sarah slid out from the booth. "Here is my cell number. If you hear anything."

Sarah did not want to increase the stress on a near broken family by stating out loud that JJ Vetter could be a suspect in the murder of four classmates - that they knew of. She left it at: "We have always felt bad about JJ. We are trying to just tie up loose ends in our class. There have been some deaths. We are class agents. We want to find out if he is okay."

Leaving the diner Sarah remarked: "I doubt she bought into our concern for JJ. She has enough to deal with in Bethlehem. We will never hear from her."

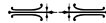


Bryce called Doc. "Interesting day in steel country. JJ really screwed up. The whole town was betting on a JJ Vetter success story. Their intolerance was epic! New meaning to 'shunning'. His sister thinks he may have gone to Mexico.

He contacted the intern from our cohort rotation. He was Mexican. I cannot remember his name.”

“Anatole Wasser- Gold! Come on back home.”

By the time they landed, a cell phone message told them to head to their own home. Dickie was back to the ME office and working from there on the QT. Miranda and Doc were headed to Mobile, Alabama.



Suspended FBI Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery found her way to Audubon Place. Turning right off St. Charles Avenue, she passed through the wrought iron gates that protected that most exclusive block in the city. Soon before her stood the mansion that was once part of the Touro dynasty, which had passed to the now -late wife of the former chief medical examiner of Orleans Parish.

She found him in the garage hosing off his car. “This is not a road trip for a Morgan Roadster. We have luggage. And air conditioning would be nice.”

Doc glanced up to see a red Mustang Convertible. “Not exactly government issue.”

“Well, seems I’m not, at the present, part of that club.”

“What do they say about women in red cars? ‘Don’t screw with me?’”

“Not to worry. I still have a gun. We will be fine”

Doc closed the garage and dropped his head as the Morgan, and its memories disappeared.

Miranda could feel his sadness. He positioned himself on the passenger side. All he said was: "Let's go!"

Miranda found her way to Interstate 10 and headed out from the Crescent City. She was open to conversation. Something to lighten the mood. "Hope this trip is worth it." The response was not what she was prepared for.

"Miss Montgomery. We have not finished our conversation about you."

Eyes straight ahead, she responded. "Not much to tell. You know about tennis. I was bored as a lawyer. I had a criminal justice degree from college. I joined the FBI."

Doc was not buying it. *Forensically, there was always more.* "What about family? No special someone?"

Miranda's foot was now heavy on the pedal.

"Not worried about getting a speeding ticket?"

"Nah. I'm in a red car and I have a gun. Plus, I still have a badge."

"Seriously, Miranda. Why the interest?"

"Why the hell not. Four deaths in four states in a short period of time. All with people who knew each other well. This is an investigator's dream."

"But you are dug in here, Miranda. Seems like more than just a case."

"Doc. I have great respect for you. And I feel for your tragedies. I've seen plenty in my line of work. But you are not alone in the sadness department. Growing up tennis was my everything. A normal girl's life went on hold. I'm sure Sarah told you that I was a college All-American, and on the professional circuit. I burnt out. My body was breaking down. Not advancing.

I was alone. Parental disappointment. Loss of sponsors. My world was crashing down. But I did not run away. I found another avenue to keep going. Law school and then the FBI.”

“We all cope in our own way. My life has little to do with yours.”

“Yes and no. Different circumstances – same outcome. We are alone.”

With that the conversation ceased between the two but continued in his head. *What was her motivation? Did the FBI become her family substitute – only to abandon her? Was this her way back? Were we now her family substitute?*

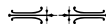
At the restaurant they were staring at each other. “Agent Montgomery. Let me give you some fatherly advice. You are still young enough for more than the agency.”

She smiled: “Dr. Brash. We are closer in age than you think. Besides, maybe I like older men. Even the ones who fell off the grid and need a good case to bring them back.”

“I’m not coming back!” *So, there it was. Desperately looking for a way back into some sort of family. I cannot be her ticket!*

The staring continued as the check was dropped on the table. It became clear that Doc had no money. Miranda paid the bill and smiled: “You are now a ‘kept man.’”

“No. Just a broke one.”



Back in the Mustang Doc pointed to the GPS: “Let’s start with the coroner. Follow Highway 90 into Mobile. It’s on 2451 USA Medical Center Drive.”

Arriving, Miranda was probing – again: “Pretty small office. Not like yours was.”

Doc was not biting: “It’s adequate for the population it serves. Mostly rural with minimal crime.”

Entering the lobby, they identified themselves to the receptionist, followed by the need to speak to the boss.

“I remember you. You are famous! Chief Medical Examiner of New Orleans.”

“Former. In the past. The pathologist please. It’s important.”

She retreated and returned a few minutes later. “Follow me please. And with no disrespect, everyone admired you.”

She was young and probably knew little of past events, other than water cooler gossip.

Behind a big desk, cigar in mouth, was the coroner – the non- medical elected administrator.

“What can I do you for? The pathologist is in court. Nasty case. Will be a while.”

Miranda introduced herself, badge in hand. “Why was there no autopsy on Marlon Everson?”

The coroner stood up, put his cigar down and said: “Little lady, I believe you are out of line and your jurisdiction!”

“Sir! I am FBI, meaning ‘federal’.”

Doc observed a tenseness developing. *This was not a situation to find out who has a ‘bigger stick’.*

“Everyone please ‘take- a -breath.’ We are here because there is the possibility that Marlon Everson may have died under nefarious circumstances.”

The coroner opened his laptop and brought up the file. “Everson, Marlon. Aspiration Pneumonia. Ochsner Hospital, New Orleans. Never our case. The big city boys should have handled it. Looks like they released the body to a funeral home in Alexander City. I believe he came from there.”

Back in the car Miranda was banging on the steering wheel. “That was a waste. What a bastard!”

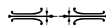
“Not a waste. We know where to go next. Now I remember why I fought so hard to eliminate the coroner and create the Office of the Medical Examiner. Forensic pathologists, not politicians. We have the address of the Everson family in Spanish Fort.”

Doc added: “Put the top down. Feel the breeze”. They headed out of the city toward the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay. Spanish Fort was rich in history and rich in demographics. Miranda checked out the area while plugging in the address. “Over 90 percent white.”

Nineteen minutes later they were on Old Spanish Trail turning onto Flintwood Circle. Finding number 3000, they parked and rang the bell.

Miranda commented: “Nice digs. USA Health Children’s and Women Hospital must pay well.”

“Enough. Surgery on children is stressful. Whatever he had, he earned. Give the family a break. They lost a loved one.”



A very polite housekeeper introduced herself and asked their business. “This is a house of mourning.” Miranda possessed

a quizzical look as she observed the coverings over the mirrors. Then she remembered that mourning in the Jewish faith could extend for a year.

Doc spoke: "If it is not too much trouble, we need to speak to Mrs. Everson. We are from New Orleans. It concerns her late husband."

Petite, and dressed in simple black, Mrs. Everson greeted the pair. "How can I help you folks?"

"I am Miranda Jayne Montgomery of the FBI, and this is Dr. Benjamin Brash from the Medical Examiner's Office in Orleans Parish, Louisiana. We are of the belief that Dr. Everson, how shall I put it? – may have been the victim of foul play."

"Please, come in. Call me CC – it's short for Carol Clarke".

Miranda mused. *Must be Southern or rural. These double initial names: JJ, SS, CC.? Holy crap! Benjamn Brash – BB!* Then she refocused.

"I was told he choked. He had weak lungs from the MS. The experimental therapy further weakened him. They said it was unfortunate. Bad luck. Marlon was sick. He was struggling. We just assumed."

"As you now know, I'm Ben Brash. I was a classmate of your husband in Tulane Medical School. In fact, we were together on our very first clinical rotation at Charity Hospital. I was, at one point the Chief Medical Examiner of Orleans Parish, Louisiana. I am no stranger to grief—professional and personal. But what I am about to tell you, and ask you is of vital importance."

Miranda finally shook off the double initials and observed

how CC Everson was captivated by BB. *What was it? The way he carried himself. The way he spoke.?* “What does this have to do with my late husband?”

“This is where it gets muddy. Back in school, a group of us became overwhelmed with the suffering we witnessed. We were young and not used to that kind of disease and death. We made a pledge, back then, to not let any of us suffer if we ever became ill. We think someone, we don’t know who, may be acting on that pledge – and killed Marlon.”

CC became limp in her chair. The housekeeper rushed in with water and demanded they leave. “She’s been through enough!”

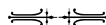
Regaining her composure CC asked: “Now what?”

Doc broke it to her as gently as possible. “Your husband never had an autopsy. His cause of death is speculative. I need to examine him. I need your permission to exhume his body and do a post-mortem. I know what I’m looking for. I will be respectful and limited in my examination.”

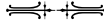
“Why single out Marlon? Surely others have become ill.”

“CC, we were a group of ten. Marlon makes number four. It would remove any doubt about coincidence; and place it into the perspective of a serial killer.”

CC nodded: “I understand. For us this would certainly bring closure to Marlon’s death. And if it helps you, then yes. But Marlon is not buried here. He comes from Alexander City. He is interred in his family plot.



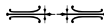
Doc placed a call to Mike Post, the Coroner of Tallapoosa County. His jurisdiction included Alexander City.



Miranda could see that Doc and Mike were well acquainted. Southern forensics often crossed paths. Many guilty parties were known to flee to New Orleans, to hide. He was aware of Doc's rise and fall; and guessed he had curiosities. She would make sure that never materialized. She introduced herself, showed her credentials—albeit out of date, and laid out the details of what they were looking for.

Things were slow in 'AC'. Mike Post was happy for the break in the boredom and abandoned his curiosity. "This is a small town. An exhumation will surely garner attention."

"We are aware. So, before anything happens, Mrs. Everson wants to visit, and again pay her respects to Marlon's parents. They need to be filled in on the importance of this disturbance to 'resting in peace'."



Marlon's parents insisted that CC stay with them, and her company could spend the night in the family weekend cottage on Lake Martin. It was just 20 plus miles from the city, and close to the Hillview Memorial Park Cemetery.

Miranda and Doc left the Everson home and entered the AL -63 South to Lake Martin. She realized that this would be the first time they would be alone. Multiple thoughts pierced

her brain. Talk about the case? Probe Doc's life after the Mardi Gras Massacre? Inquire about his wife? His relationship with his daughter? I am a profiler. Am I beginning to have feelings for him. How can I process this? I want to know more about him. Would he be receptive on any level? This was going to be a long night!

Lake Martin was a getaway playground for people of means. As the red Mustang convertible, GPS in hand, found the cottage, Miranda was mesmerized by the serenity of the very long coastline dotted with luxury homes, restaurants, and quaint hotels.

The Everson house was traditional, and Southern in its style: A large front porch with screened – in areas to while away the hours, Mint Julep in hand.

Dinner was takeout from Kowaliga Restaurant, located on the Lake. Although the two of them were fatigued, they knew they needed to prepare for the exhumation and autopsy. Burgers and fries from this old -school American style eatery fit the bill. *Again, on Miranda's tab.*

They set up on the porch and opened the files on what little they had on Marlon Everson. The postmortem would concentrate on the face and neck; petechial hemorrhages in the eyes; dilated jugular veins; and most importantly the hyoid bone. If cracked, then foul play for sure.

As they ate Doc once again began his 'profiling' on Agent Montgomery.

"How old are you, Miranda? I'm guessing early '40's. I can't believe someone as attractive as you, does not have a special someone. Never wanted a family?"

Miranda was caught a little off guard. She was not used to being on the receiving end.

“A little role reversal Doc? Asking, instead of answering? And, what about you? Hiding away?”

Doc realized he may have bitten off more than he could chew. But it was *too late*. Old wounds would most certainly be opened by the end of this evening.

“Really Miranda, what’s the back story?”

“Listen Dr. Brash! Life has been very unidirectional for me. I was driven by my father to use my tennis ability to get a first-class education and get ahead in this world.

“It was practice, all the time. No proms; no parties; no dates.

“Georgetown was the same. I needed to be on the team and stay competitive for my scholarship. I got so good; and was so driven, that I decided to enter the pro -circuit.

“I needed to win, to pay for the coaches and travel.

“I never reached the level of real major corporate sponsorship. It was lonely and grueling; but it was my only source of revenue. My only skill set. Then my body started to break down: Sprains, joint injuries, shoulder surgeries. I told you this. The rest you know: Law school, clerkships, FBI. Enough for you?”

Stroking his chin Doc responded: “Not really. You could have done more than just career.”

“Doc. This is getting way too personal. I dated. Nothing stuck. I even tried to store my eggs. I figured at some point I could have a child, even if there was no man. Unfortunately, it was bad luck with the eggs. So, there you have it.”

Doc realized he struck too close to home. *“Am I now open for a rebuttal’ and on the receiving end of some questions, and issues I don’t want to face?”*

Miranda gathered her composure. She was a professional. “Now it’s my turn. I moved forward as best I could. You ran away. Why? Why not fight back? Find out who was responsible for your daughter’s death?”

Doc was very pensive for minutes on end. Finally, he began talking: “Alone was too much for me. I never thought my life was going to be in Louisiana. I came from your neck of the woods. Middle class family. Law enforcement.

“I had a mentor. The Medical Examiner in your county – Nassau. He was educated at Tulane.

“I think he had plans for me. I was smart. I got a scholarship. It was from the Touro Foundation Endowment. Ironically, I married a descendant of that same family.

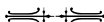
“That rooted me to New Orleans. There was to be no return home. My mentor, of course was disappointed. He wanted me to be his successor. He then plotted a course for me here. Med school, law school, pathology residency, fellowship in forensics

“Margo, my wife, was ill for a long time. She was a fighter. We even stored embryos with the hopes of having more family. She had treatments of all kinds that took a toll. Once she passed, all that remained was work, and Collette. When she died, I felt adrift. It just seemed pointless.

“For a while, I tried to search for clues. It was too painful; and filled with dead ends. I’m better off as I am now. Once this is over, I just want to disappear again.”

Doc was exhausted from this soul-bearing experience: “Miranda, here’s a final thought for the evening. Bryce is an infertility expert. If you ever wanted a child, he could find a way to make that happen. He is the best!”

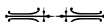
Retiring for the night neither Doc nor Miranda were sure of what they accomplished from probing and digging up the past. They certainly knew each other better. Maybe, they’d gotten closer. Or moved further apart. They still had a long way to go.



Both were early risers. Miranda found and made coffee. Doc was on the porch, lost in thought, as usual.

“Penny for your thoughts Doc? Thinking about the case-or us?”

Doc reached for his coffee. “Our personal lives will have to wait. We need to get over to the ME office. We will all go to the cemetery, then to the morgue, and then back for reinterment. It’s the least we can do for CC Everson.



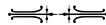
Hillview Memorial Park Cemetery appeared to be a very tranquil place to spend eternity. Rolling hills and lots of space.

Mike Post arranged to have a tent set up, to draw little attention to the somewhat gruesome task to follow.

The grave diggers were given little information, other than the need to certify the cause of death – not done in

Louisiana. Fortunately, the casket was not the traditionally Jewish simple pine box. This was a blessing – making transport easier and the possibility of the body being in a more examinable condition.

The casket was placed into a black hearse, which was non -descript, except for the Tallapoosa Medical Examiner logo on the side. Mike Post sat in the passenger seat. Doc and Miranda followed in her not -so -subtle red Mustang. Mrs. Everson would return home and wait for Doc's call.



Alexander City was 'small town' Alabama. And like most small towns everyone knew everyone else's business. The autopsy needed to be done quickly and quietly.

Doc inquired as to whether they were up to speed on "virtopsy"- virtual autopsy. With something between a smirk and a smile Mike Post assured them they were indeed 'modern'.

Doc was pleased. "If we can CAT scan and MRI Marlon, we may be able to glean enough information to rule in or out foul play without disturbing his remains."

Although the county had this, Mike had never seen it in action. "What are we looking for?"

Doc explained. "The CAT scan will look at his bony structures – particularly the hyoid bone in his neck. Strangulation often leads to fracture of the cornu. An MRI can look at the soft tissues of the neck for edema – also from suffocation. It

may be possible to see if there was any particulate matter in the bronchial tree and lungs. If these are inconclusive, then we will need a formal autopsy.”

Marlon Everson MD was now on the receiving end of medical technology. His body was carefully removed from his casket and wrapped in a protective shroud. He was placed in the CAT scanner.

“There it is! A fracture! He was strangled!” *Another murder. But how?*

Next was the MRI. “There is evidence of obstructions in the bronchial tree.”

Doc now had a theory. Miranda and Mike Post leaned in, so as to not miss a word from a master, at his best.

Doc spoke: “We need to find out who had access to his room. My thinking is that someone helped feed him and then put their hands over his face and neck. He not only aspirated—which is what the hospital signed him out as. He was also strangled.

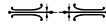
Mike sat there in awe watching a true forensic expert at work. “Doc. You interested in restarting your career in a quiet rural community?”

Doc looked him and sternly replied. “No way. This a one-off; and under duress. I will say no more.”

Miranda looked at Doc. “Now what’s our next move? We have suspects. Let’s get them.”

“Again, Agent Montgomery, not so fast. We have mounting evidence that my four classmates had untimely demises, and probably under less -than desirable circumstances. And it seems the culprit knows his - or her way around health

care and hospitals.” He looked directly at her. “No jumping the gun. We have a long way to go.”



Doc called Bryce and filled him in. He began freaking out. Sarah picked up the phone. She assured Doc it would be under control. “Listen Sarah. Call Dickie. Detail him. Once we have reinterred Everson, we will return to the city.”

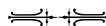
Sarah asked: “Should we convene at your home on Audubon Place? It would be nice to bring some life back there.”

Doc could not bear the thought and replied in the negative. “Your place. My house is no longer a home. Just an empty shell filled with many sad memories”.

Doc and Miranda thanked Mike Post for his help. He in turn exuberantly thanked Doc for ‘a most interesting afternoon’.

Marlon Everson was placed back into his casket, then the hearse, and finally to the cemetery. CC Everson was there to witness Marlon’s return, and to hear the truth.

Doc held her hand and talked her through his hypothesis. Miranda gave her assurance that justice would be served. They would find out who was committing these murders and put a stop to it.



Back in the fire engine red Mustang, with the top down, Miranda was taking in the warm Alabama air. She was also waiting for

Doc to speak- and speak of anything. The case. His life. His plans. He was an enigma to her. He was attractive – in a mature sort of way. And he was brilliant. But he was emotionally distant. She was developing feelings for him. *Never had a double's partner!*

Finally, Miranda spoke. "It's a long way back to the city Doc. Care for some conversation?"

Doc was still silent.

Miranda spoke again: "If you are sure we have four murders – and in four states- then I can call my agency for help in those jurisdictions. You've done your part – so you can leave. We have a potential suspect list."

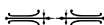
It seemed like 100 miles passed before silence was broken.

"Miranda. This case is far from over for me. These were, and are, my old classmates. This now has become personal. Maybe we have suspects; and maybe we have future victims. Bryce is my oldest friend. The thought of him being... and leaving Sarah a widow. It's too much to even contemplate. No, Miranda I am not done."

Miranda tried to hide her smile by remarking about how beautiful the countryside was. *He took the bait.* Doc was staying.

"And let's try and keep this with in our family. We 'll interview the four remaining members of our 509 cohort ourselves. We will find the truth."

The driver of the red Mustang clung to the word 'family'. This was something she had longed for. The ride home turned out to be more beautiful than the countryside.



Arriving at the Teller home in the quiet Garden District section of uptown New Orleans, the two were greeted with both a level of relief and anxiety. Bryce was relieved to know his paranoia was not just that. There was, in fact, a possible serial killer out there. The anxiety was in the next step.

Miranda was ready to charge ahead. Hopefully with her newfound partner. In her mind the other four were prime suspects.

Doc settled her down. "Again. We do not know if any were involved. It could be one. It could be more. It could be none of them. We need to proceed slowly and thoroughly."

Doc turned to Sarah: "Let's have the info you dug up on our remaining classmates."

One by one the "dossiers" of Pamela Prentiss, Jack Buchanan, and Patricia Jane Loftus were revealed.

Suspects

Sarah opened the dossiers that she and Miranda had compiled. Doc sensed the tension between the two. Their banter was like a prolonged tennis rally. He was hoping that they would become more like doubles partners as they worked together.

“Pamela Ann Prentis came from Lookout Mountain, an affluent suburb of Chattanooga, Tennessee. She was smart, possessed charm and beauty; and was both the high school homecoming and prom queen. Pamela applied, and was accepted to Columbia University, in New York City; and as we know, it was the ‘60’s and a hotbed of radical liberal activity.

“We believe that her parents were not pleased. But their disdain was tempered by a full academic scholarship. She was allowed to go North if she was Dean’s List and scholarship – steady. ‘There would be no monies for slackers and partiers in the ‘Big Apple!’

“She was an only child. Her father was a respected surgeon back home. He was a very demanding parent. He wanted her to follow in his footsteps; and attend his alma mater—Duke University Medical School.”

“At Columbia, Pam became involved in a host of feminist activities. ‘She ’burned her bra’ and was fervently pro-choice—having availed herself of those services. Her beliefs also extended the treatments of the sick and dying—including discussions on “compassionate care” and end-of-life services. She joined campus clubs that debated those matters.

“Apparently, she wanted a more ‘exploratory life’ than what existed in the conservative South.

“Despite her social ‘activities’, she maintained a high academic standing. So, we believe If it had to be ‘Southern’ to please her parents, then it would be the most liberal school in the most cosmopolitan city—Tulane University in New Orleans”

Doc finally spoke. “So, we have a debutante turned feminist, politely rebelling against a stern upbringing, with a predetermined future”.

Sarah pressed on: “Once again, she knew to stay in her parent’s good graces. She needed, and achieved, high grades throughout the basic science years. And by happenstance ended up on Ward 509 for her first clinical rotation.

“She matched for a residency program in family medicine in Los Angeles. And the icing on the cake—she joined the Kevorkian Society; where they advocated for end-of-life services: a.k.a. assisted suicide!”

Doc absorbed the information, exclaiming: “So those initial impressions of the advanced stages of illness may have motivated her to further a passion for the unfortunate.”

Miranda could not help herself. “And she no longer needed Daddy’s money nor cared for his approval.”

Doc was losing patience. "I appreciate the information and the effort. You need to put your feelings aside and speak in one voice. Work the same side of the net. Who's next?"

Sarah reached for the file. *Miranda may be the better player; I was going to control this set.*

"Jack Buchanan was Pamela's classmate and future husband. He came from Little Rock, Arkansas"

Sarah could not help herself as she lapsed into a reminiscence of Jack's college days: "He was very tall and extremely handsome!"

Miranda looked directly at her "partner": "Can you continue without going down memory lane?"

"He played basketball for Hall High School; and was elected a 'High School All -American'. Apparently when Jack Buchanan played, the city turned out. This was especially true when Hall played rival Central High."

Doc saw the intensity of this pairing and tried to dial down the rhetoric. "Let's keep to facts."

Miranda saw the opportunity: "Jack's dad was an inter-nist. He treated all comers, regardless of race or finances. This was very unusual in a city filled with civil unrest. In fact, while Jack was in elementary school, Little Rock made national headlines. In 1957, the 'Little Rock Nine', as they were known, were about to integrate Central High School. Governor Orval Faubus resisted. President Eisenhower invoked the Insurrection Act of 1807 for Domestic Law Enforcement."

Bryce finally spoke, trying to show support to his wife. "How is this helpful?"

Miranda gave him a look. Bryce receded. “Okay, go on”.

“Thank you! Jack loved what his father did. He wanted a career in medicine. Just not in Arkansas. Tulane needed a great basketball player. There were no athletic scholarships; but Jack was also an academic—and a perfect match.”

Sarah again smiled drifting back to college years. “Jack Buchanan was the all -American boy for sure. He was smart, handsome, and athletic. Girls swooned over him”

Bryce twinged. Sarah sensed it and returned to the job at hand.

Miranda picked up the dialogue. “Indeed, Jack cruised through college with great grades and test scores. He must have come to enjoy New Orleans as he obviously matriculated at the Med School. Again, his basic science years were easy—just like college. He and Pam casually dated during those first years. When they were both assigned to the 509 Ward they began to meld philosophically and physically - if you know what I mean.”

Doc wanted more than social innuendo. “This is not high school! Move towards something.”

Bryce saw an opportunity to finally contribute. He needed to take the spotlight off Miranda and support Sarah.

“Jack came alive when he hit the clinical years. He loved being at Charity Hospital. Just as his dad treated the indigent, so he wanted too as well.

“The hospital was jokingly called the “Big Free”—a play on words referring to New Orleans as the “Big Easy”. Jack felt at home. He used to affectionately pontificate on the hospital’s history which dated” back to the 1700’s.

“The competitive side of him liked the rivalry between Tulane and LSU (Louisiana State University). Both schools abutted opposite sides of the hospital and shared in patient care. In the past it had been divided by race. Now by school, right down the middle.

“Jack was not put off by the sight of horrible sickness and terminal disease. In fact, it ignited a spark in him to do more. He was unaffected by his classmates’ reactions.

“I doubt he even gave a second thought about the oath. I think Pam took it more seriously. She hated the suffering and mentioned on more than one occasion about ‘palliative care’, and some new organization called the Hemlock Society.”

Doc responded: “Now we are getting somewhere. Jack could be a future victim but an unlikely suspect. Pam possibly the opposite. Next one!”

“Patricia Jane Loftus.” As Miranda began to read from the next file, Sarah practically stole it: “I know Peppermint Patty very well!

“‘PJ’, as her family referred to her, grew up in Shaker Heights, Ohio. She often referred to it as Shelter Heights. Very private. Very protective.”

Bryce could not control himself. “I know the place. It is a suburb of Cleveland. They say there is an ‘\$ ‘sign where the letter ‘S ‘ should be. Very affluent.”

Once again Doc needed to try and keep things forensic. “Can we just try and state facts?” He looked at Miranda. “We are building profiles, aren’t we?” He then nodded to Sarah.

“PJ attended the Hathaway Brown School from Pre-K through twelfth grade. It was an all-girls private school established in 1876. Its motto – ‘Non Scholae Sed Vitae Discimus’ – ‘We learn not for school, but for life.’”

Miranda picked up on Doc’s cues. “Her father was a ‘proper’ lawyer. Not the slip and fall type. Her mother the ‘country club type’- always busy with committees and charity events or playing golf at the exclusive Shaker Heights Country Club.”

Doc was growing tired. “I’ve been dragged back for this?”

“May I? There is a point to this. Loftus was not particularly attractive and was often referred as ‘Plain Jane’. She put her energies into projects, just like her mother. She was also an accomplished violinist, who had hopes of a musical career.

“PJ matriculated to the music conservatory at Oberlin College—very well known in those circles. It was less -than -an- hour drive from home, and a parent’s watchful eye. Oberlin encouraged double degrees, as backup in case a musical profession did not materialize, as is often the case. And as we all know, many with aspirations of stardom end up playing at weddings, and other small social venues.

“Adjustment was hard at Oberlin. It was an extremely liberal school with some radical ideas – particularly when it came to Jews and Israel. This girl, with a strong conservative Jewish upbringing needed a break from an uncomfortable campus. Her parents allowed her to spend her junior in a study abroad program in London at Regents College, where she could earn credits towards a second degree in sociology. While in London she studied music at the college

conservatory, but also clerked in social work at the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children. This is where her eyes were opened to the world of medicine.

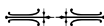
“Returning to Oberlin for her senior year she decided to apply to medical school. She wanted one that also offered the opportunity to continue with music. Tulane Medical School and the musically rich city of New Orleans offered both. The rest you know. She was part of that 509 cohort.”

Doc remembered something. “It was a small female class and there were plenty of men looking for companionship – and more. She was everybody’s good friend. Pam may have had the looks, but PJ won people over with her personality. I recall our intern warning us all ‘not to shit where we eat’ – directing that to the girls and the male house staff at the hospital. Despite that I believe she had a brief encounter with our resident – Jerry something.”

Bryce remembered an incident. “That resident was going to fail her after the breakup. She filed a harassment complaint. She passed, and he left her alone.”

Miranda stated her opinion: “That doesn’t really fit the profile of a killer.”

Doc rebutted: “You never know! Like I said before: Anesthesiologist. Pain management. And then add an unhappy event at school.”



They did not need to go over old ground regarding JJ Vetter. They just needed to find him.

The Hypocritical Oath

Dickie knew what was coming next—Doc was looking straight at him.

“Check the hospital –maybe they kept records. I’ll have Miranda lean on JJ’s high school and college. He would have needed to send transcripts with an application. We’ll also check if any MCAT scores were sent somewhere.”

Doc pointed to Bryce. “Find out who our intern was, and where he is. As I recall, he was from Mexico. This could lead us to JJ.”

Looking at Miranda, he announced “Saddle up. We are heading to Oregon!”

Road Trips

Southwest Airlines transported a former forensic pathologist, and an over eager former agent to Portland Oregon. During the 30-minute drive to the Veterans Hospital, Miranda spoke first. “What do we know?”

Doc reviewed. “Pam was a bit rebellious in her youth. She was involved in feminist causes. She married All -American Jack Buchanan. Both were idealistic about community service; and they turned away from affluence and Southern traditions. She had been involved in end-of-life discussions since college. She was also in contact with Jeffrey Arlade, after they graduated med school. All were in that 509 cohort. All took the pledge.”

Miranda felt they were closing in. “Both Oregon and California sanction end-of-life decisions and processes. Pamela Prentiss Buchanan could have ended Arlade’s life.”

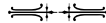
“Miranda let’s look before we leap. Yes, Pam and Jeff knew each other. Yes, she could have done it. He was ill. It does not mean she has been hopscotching through the deep South knocking off classmates. She was popular; with no class enemies to speak of. It’s a big leap.

“I doubt it is her, but she may move us in a favorable direction, by process of elimination.”

Miranda was not ready for dismissal. “What about her Mr. Wonderful?”

“Also, doubtful. I remember him quite well. Obviously good looks, smarts and athleticism made him a standout. He loved being on the wards at the hospital. He embraced the challenges of the sick and dying.

“He also was a pacifist. He avoided the draft and Vietnam by joining the Public Health Service. He worked for two years on an Indian Reservation in the Willamette Valley. That’s what brought the two of them to Portland. After his service was over, they opened a family medicine clinic and worked at the VA Hospital. It seemed that although he did not fight, he would do his part for those who did.”



Their rental car, not a red Mustang, turned onto Southwest U.S. Veterans Hospital Road and entered the large University Medical complex. They pulled into the circle of 3710 and entered the lobby, directing their attention to a uniformed woman who was bossing young Candy Strippers as to the daily chores of handing out newspapers and magazines, and oddly enough, selling cigarettes.

Doc lost focus for a minute. *He reminisced about medical school rotations in the New Orleans VA Hospital. So many patients suffered from COPD – chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and emphysema, from those unfiltered Lucky Strikes the army PX made so readily available. And now these young*

summer volunteers were selling the very things that brought the old soldiers here to begin with.

Miranda poked him. "Where were you, Doc?"

"I was lost in the irony of Veteran Hospital health care."

Miranda took the lead, introduced herself, and asked the receptionist where they could find Dr. Buchanan. The look they received was startling. Doc could see that something was not right. "Dr. Buchanan is not available. You would need to discuss anything related to him with Dr. Prentiss, his wife."

Doc whispered. "Something is off. We need to be cautious. I think we are in muddy waters."

The lady in uniform was able to locate Pam and directed them to the B Wing of Building One. On their way Miranda spotted an old man. She could barely get the words out. "He is smoking through a hole in his neck!"

Doc smiled. "That's the sad irony of the Veterans System. Give them unlimited access to cigarettes. Get them hooked. Treat their throat cancer. Give them more cigarettes. What a country!"

Miranda picked up on this. She tried her own version of 'gallows humor'. "I guess it's their own version of assisted suicide."

At the nursing station, Doc recognized the petite former blonde, who was now gray. Despite looking old and drawn, it was undeniably Pamela Prentiss writing her chart notes.

She must have felt their presence as she looked up at the uninvited strangers, as though they were invading her private space. As she stared them down, that male figure came

into focus. “Benjamin Brash? Is that you? What brings you to Portland?”

“Yes, it’s me. This is Miranda Montgomery. We need to talk. Events back home have led us here. We need to speak to you and Jack.”

The lines on Pam’s face told the story even before words would follow.

“Ben, there is no Jack. He has gone to the other side”

Miranda had little patience for histrionics. “What do you mean – ‘gone’?”

“My husband was in a terrible accident. He is dead.”

Brash was no stranger to tragedy. It confirmed his earlier intuition of ‘muddy waters’. *Get clarification, and tone down what he saw coming: a Miranda inquisition.* “Pam. I am sorry. What happened?”

Pam directed them to the staff lounge at the end of the hall of the fourth floor of the B Wing of Building One – the wing that housed the chronically debilitated. The wing where Jack died.

“Jack was riding his motorcycle back from Eugene. He had worked all day with the Indians of the Grande Ronde Federation Community. He thought of himself as their ‘medicine man’. Ever since his public health days he was committed to their well-being; and trying to fill in the gaps to their limited access to good health care. Anyway, he was hit by a drunk driver – an Indian, no less”.

The irony did not escape Doc. He lapsed again into thoughts of those veterans who walked the halls smoking their cancer sticks, and of Indians and alcohol. *America.*

After a painful pause, Pam resumed her tale. “Broken neck. Quadriplegia. At first, we tried to convince ourselves that he could recover. We both knew better. Stem cell treatments. Anything cutting -edge. But the injury does what the injury does. Muscle atrophy, bed sores, urinary tract infections. Deep depression for both of us. There was no recovering.”

Doc saw what was about to occur, as soon as Miranda opened her mouth. “Did you end Jack’s life?”

Pam broke down. Doc was less than pleased with Miranda’s lack of tact. He apologized by explaining her ‘FBI directness’. He was used to the emotion surrounding death of loved ones – both personal and professional.

“Pam. Talk to us. Jack’s demise was a surprise to us. We came to see you because of your end-of-life beliefs; and Jeffrey Arlade.”

“And others”, chimed Miranda.”

Doc stiffened at the affront. The suspended FBI agent got the hint and retreated.

“Pam, we know you were in contact, through the years, with Jeff. You must have known of his deterioration. His death was suspicious. Were you involved?”

“Ben, and whoever she is.” Pam hissed: “You have no right or authority to be intruding into my life. It has been hard enough.”

Doc tried to calm her down. “Pam. Let’s start over. First, I am sorry about Jack. I know firsthand about love and loss. However, we need to go down memory lane. Third year. Medicine rotation. Ward 509.”

Doc was good at reading body language. They were interlopers, and she was not up for storytelling. “Your point!”

“My point, Pam, is that we were a group of 10. You, me, Bryce Teller, Patty Jane Loftus, Eduardo Duponce, Marlon Everson, Joe D’Alos, JJ Vetter, your husband Jack., and Jeffrey Arlade.”

Pam was rising from her chair. “I’m not in any kind of reunion state of mind. I really need to attend to my duties. Thanks for the visit. And sorry for your troubles. I read about your daughter. I’m glad I’m not in that city anymore.”

Once again Miranda made her presence known, however unwelcome as it was. “Dr. Prentiss, I am FBI. We are here because of that group of 10. Five are dead; and all in a very short period. We believe their deaths were neither accidental nor coincidental. We think someone took it upon himself, or herself, to end their lives.”

Pam stared right back. One could almost see fire darting from her eyes, leaping towards a woman she was developing a rapid hatred of.

“You think I did this! You are nuts! And you, Brash. I would have expected more. You were a forensic pathologist and criminologist. Do your homework before you disrupt lives—that are difficult enough.”

Plainly exhausted from this intrusion and accusation, she slumped back into her chair.

Doc needed to take control of a situation that was rapidly spinning out of control. Much as he disliked talking about himself, he needed to create perspective and express sympathy.

“Pamela, you know little about my life since school. I lost my wife as well as my daughter. Coping became difficult. I fled the city and tried to disappear. I was dragged back. First as a suspect. Now as an investigator; and trying not to be a victim.

Miranda changed the tone. “Our role here is dual. Decide if you are a suspect or put you on alert as a possible future target.”

Pam was not to be swayed. “This is such bullshit. Check my travel. Jack and I have not left the Pacific Northwest”

Doc calmly began again. “First, we know that you and your husband had visited family back in Tennessee and Arkansas. So, perhaps you can try and refresh your memory. Second, and most important, you have been very vocal about end-of-life issues, basically euthanasia. Finally, we know you had contact with Arlade during his final days. It all makes a compelling story that is worthy of investigation”

Pam retorted. “Seems more like interrogation!”

Doc continued: “Not so. We are just following clues. Please tell us more about Jack and Jeff. And do you still hold those palliative care beliefs?”

“It is true that I was very influenced by a book called *Jeans Way*. I read it in 1978, while still in California. Derek Humphrey helped his wife commit suicide. She had an incurable and terminal cancer. She was in pain. I remembered all the pain and suffering we saw at Charity Hospital. It left an impression.

“I joined Humphrey’s Hemlock Society and followed the career of Jack Kevorkian. But he was too radical in his beliefs

for me, with his Thanatos and Mercotron ideas. I wanted to help people to not suffer and die with dignity. Not putting gas masks on them!"

Pam took a deep breath. "Of course, this was all theory, and I never put it into practice – until Jack."

Pamela Prentiss took in another deep breath. Doc thought it might be a catharsis of sorts. Something desperate wanting to come out. Clear the air, and her conscience.

"Jack was suffering. There was no recovery and no quality of life for a quadriplegic. Even before his accident we talked about dying with dignity at a time of one's own choosing.

"Since 1997 Oregon legalized physician assisted suicide. I hated that term. To me it was about an end-of-life choice. Jack was begging me to end his suffering." Now crying: "He had so much life. He was larger than life. He wanted me to go on, and remember him as he was, and not as is.

"So. Yes. I did it. I gave him the prescribed 'cocktail' on this very ward. I laid beside him and stroked his face- the only part of his body with any sensation. He died peacefully in my arms."

At this point Pam was very emotional. Doc had flashbacks of his wife Margo – and her battle with multiple myeloma. He appreciated that sense of pushing against the immovable – pain and death Sometimes he wished she would have just passed in her sleep. Peacefully. But she was not one to give up. Thoughts of assisted suicide were never part of any equation. He had sympathy for Pam.

Miranda pressed on. "What about Jeffrey Arlade? Did you

help him end his life? It was less than peaceful. His ventilator was disconnected. He basically suffocated!”

Pam stood up and looked directly at Miranda. “I visited Jeff. Towards the end he was giving up. Euthanasia is legal in California. We spoke about it. But I could not do it. Other than our bonds from medical school we had little in common.”

Interjecting, Miranda offered: “But you all made a pledge – to not let each other suffer.”

“I remember that pledge. We called it our ‘Hypocritical Oath’. Let me tell you. The feeling of ending a life – even a suffering one – is too much. I did it for Jack. I could not and would not do it for Jeff.

“I am not your girl. I am just a grieving widow trying to carry out my husband’s legacy. I have no family. No children. Jack was my life. Now it is the free clinic, the hospital, and the Indian reservation.”

Doc believed her. Shorter. Grayer. Gaunter. She had aged far beyond her chronology. She was not the effervescent prom queen he remembered.

“Before we depart, have you had any contact with any other classmates? Especially, those that took the pledge. Someone is acting on it.”

“I have spoken on occasion with PJ – Patty Jane. She is not well. I doubt she is your killer.”

Miranda continued to probe; “What’s wrong with her?”

Pam ended with a closed lip smile. “It’s her story to tell. If that is all, I wish you safe travels.”

Doc turned as they began to exit the ward. “Pam, be on the lookout! Someone is after us.”

The Hypocritical Oath

Miranda looked at Doc as they exited the VA. Once again, she was unnerved by the cigarette smoke pluming from surgical holes in the necks of old soldiers. "They are killing themselves!"

Doc ignored the observation. "Our list is getting shorter and shorter. Next, we go to Cleveland to check out PJ. And Miranda, try and show a little empathy. We are intruding into their stories unannounced."

Doc phoned Dickie to see about locating JJ. "We are leaving Oregon and heading to Ohio. We are far from done!"

Cleveland

The drive from the Portland VA to Portland International Airport was short in duration but long on conversation.

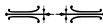
“Young lady. You need to calm down. You were a professional. Act like one. Confrontation will get us nowhere.”

“Well Doc, someone is taking lives. My job is finding that person. Sorry, if you don’t like my style.”

The former chief medical examiner understood Miranda’s gut reaction, but he had to remind her of her status. “I get it. But you are no longer active FBI. We are lone wolves in this. And so far, our suspects are in fact victims.” He turned to his partner and smiled at the irony. “If Pam had not ended Jack’s life would our killer have emerged to do it? Pam may have indeed saved her own life.”

Miranda concurred. “Two deaths in the same family would have definitely brought in the authorities. I think Pam is safe, for a while. What do you think she meant about PJ Loftus’s story?”

“I guess we will find out in soon enough.”



Delta Air Lines had a direct flight into Cleveland. From there it was agreed that they needed rest. The trips to Oregon then Ohio were physically and mentally exhausting- and all in one day.

They acquired reservations at the Holiday Inn Cleveland Clinic. Two adjoining rooms. This would allow a good night's rest, as well as proximity to where Patty Jane Loftus worked. Both the hotel and hospital were within walking distance on Euclid Avenue. As they checked in Miranda mused about the rooms. Doc had similar thoughts. *Close, but not that close.*

The debate over dinner was whether to announce their visit or catch her off guard. Miranda liked the element of surprise. Harder to prepare an alibi.

"Agreed, but I should take the lead and use an indirect approach. She was an old friend. The status is to be determined."

Miranda was trying to get into the mind of someone, who in the past was one of the most brilliant of forensic pathologists in the country. Her feelings were so mixed. She respected him. Maybe even began to like him. She, nevertheless, resented his copping out. Trying to put it all in place made for a confusing dinner.

Once again, they entered a hospital complex. This one however was known to be amongst the best in the United States. The sick and infirm" from all over the world would seek attention at the Cleveland Clinic.

Doc was going to use his medical credentials and an old-time friendship as a vehicle to locate Dr. Loftus. He was guessing she would be either in the operating suites or on the pain control unit.

A bewildered look came over Miranda's face while watching the surprise on Doc, as they were directed to cardiac rehab. Stepping off the elevator of floor number four they followed the red lines on the floor which guided them to a large set of rooms with the sign: 'Post Cardiac Surgery Rehabilitation Medicine'.

Miranda looked at Doc: "I thought she was in anesthesia and pain management."

"We'll find out. Maybe this is what Pam meant about a story."

The two were questioned, as they entered, as to their purpose for this visit. Both got a pass on the grilling. Dr. Benjamin Brash and FBI agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery had unchallengeable credentials. They were directed to a waiting area while Dr. Loftus finished her therapy session.

There, on a very sophisticated appearing treadmill, complete with wires, leads and monitors was Patricia Jane Loftus, MD.

Miranda watched the expression on Doc's face. He could see the changes that had overcome Patty Jane. "It's a far cry from 'Peppermint Patty - mascot of the class of '73. She is frailer and grayer than memory serves"

He was now thinking that. *Maybe he needed a closer look in his own mirror. And why was Miranda Montgomery still by his side? She could easily alert her old bosses. This was becoming more police than forensic.*

Miranda placed her arm on Doc's shoulder to offer some form of comfort. "Seems to be a recurring theme with your female classmates."

The therapist gave Dr. Loftus a thumbs up, detangling her from all the machine's wires and pads. As she was readying to leave, before her stood a person from a past long forgotten. "Ben?"

"Hello PJ. Yes, it's me, Benjamin Brash, here to visit you."

"When the star of our class, and the medical giant of the Bayou State comes to Cleveland, it can't be out of the blue – or a desire to suddenly catch up."

Staring at Miranda. PJ smiled. "Who's your date?"

"PJ. We have lots to talk about."

PJ laughed and then needed to catch her breath. "We certainly do."

She looked so frail to Ben. "What's going on here?"

Miranda could read his mind. *She was not the 'it girl' he remembered.*

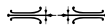
"Well Ben. I had a heart transplant. How's that for being on the other side of the operating table?" Catching her breath, she weakly laughed again.

"Why don't you and your date come to my house for dinner?"

"Fine. But she is not my date. We are professional associates."

PJ kept smiling. "Sure. Here's the address. See you later."

Doc and Miranda left the Cleveland Clinic with more questions than answers.



It was still morning, and Doc and Miranda were running on

fumes. Sitting in the rental car he turned to his 'partner'. "Let's get a bite to eat. We need to gather our thoughts and not frighten an already fragile - looking shadow of her former self."

Turning out of the massive parking structure facing the Clinic they headed down Euclid Avenue towards Larchmere Blvd. Google had directed them to Big Al's Diner. They needed a large breakfast and unlimited refills of coffee.

In a quiet booth facing each other, Doc spoke first. "Where is this all headed? This is now fully a police matter. I did my job. I ruled out accident and even coincidence. Maybe I got too excited, too early, in getting involved."

"Doc. These were your classmates. Your best friend was in distress. You stepped up. Don't you want to see it through?"

"What little brightness that existed in my memory has turned very dark. Just like the city I gave everything to. I see Pam. I see PJ. I see sadness. With that I see my family- and more sadness."

"But you also see Bryce. He is scared. You see Sarah. She was there for you. She is frightened for her husband." She put her hand into his. "And you see me. We are a team."

"Miranda. We are not a team. I am a washed -up, burnt -out half -person. If this is really about the pledge, you have your suspect list."

"Doc. I remember you from Katrina and Memorial. The city depended on you. And I must admit I was in awe of you. I believed in you to the point I defied my superiors. You had a very methodical way of finding the truth. We need that now."

Doc stared into his coffee shaking his head. What do you mean by ‘defied your superiors’?”

“Government was looking for scapegoats. They wanted convictions to placate the Black community. I landed on your side. The FBI was not happy. I did not give them the support they demanded from me. I believed in you then. I believe in you now.”

“Miranda, my cup is empty.”

She handed him the pot. “Then refill it. We have a killer to find.”

Doc took a breath and sighed. He realized he could not abandon Miranda. *What did she see in him? Why did she need him – or want him?*

‘Okay, let’s review. Ten individuals. What’s the commonality—other than the oath – taken so many years ago? Illness? Only Jeff was terminal. The others had issues, but none of them were ready to die, If the killer was acting like an angel of mercy, why go beyond Jeff? There must be more to the story beyond our initial intention.”

Miranda added: “So who’s left? Only JJ Vetter. Why would he even remember? He was gone and presumably lost contact with his former classmates. And it appears that PJ is not capable of travelling, much less committing murder.”

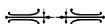
Doc interjected: “And she was like our mascot.”

Miranda gave him a look. “How very chauvinistic!”

She could see that Doc was now on the defensive and needed to claw his way out of the doghouse. “Not really. Put it in the context of the 1970’s. Medical School was a predominantly male institution. PJ was everyone’s good buddy. She

never had a significant other. She just was one of the guys. I agree. It's not her either. But maybe she stayed in contact with JJ."

Miranda smiled. "Dinner should be interesting."



Beachwood, Ohio is a serene suburb within a suburb. What Shaker Heights is to Cleveland, Beachwood is to Shaker Heights.

Doc and Miranda cleaned up at their hotel and drove the 20 minutes to PJ's house. Miranda 'Googled Beachwood'. "One of the best places to live in Ohio. Maybe I should apply for a transfer here."

Doc remembered that her family came from Shaker Heights. "I guess close but not too close to home, and family; being single - and now infirm."

A nice - sized white brick Colonial stood at a cul -de -sac on a street lined with maple trees in full bloom. They parked next to a Subaru Forrester. Doc thought to himself: *Like made for TV.*

They rang the bell. PJ invited them in. In the kitchen Doc was taken aback by the organization of all her medications. "Patty. Your heart. What gives?"

"What gives with you Ben?"

Doc needed to tread gently. He was not looking to get into his own story.

"That's for another day. Back to you. What happened?"

PJ seated them at the dining room table. Her housekeeper,

now promoted to post- surgery aide, brought in the food— high end take out. “Hope you don’t mind. Cooking has become a low priority. Jeanne here has enough to do helping me.

“I developed a progressive myocardiodopathy. Probable viral. After a while medication was not helping. Work was stressful. Had to stop and become sedentary. Things progressed and I was placed on a transplant list. As luck would have it, I needed mechanical support. I was put on an LVAD machine.”

Miranda’s feelings were somewhere between awe and confusion. She looked to Doc.

“Myocardiodopathy is an inflammation of the heart muscle. Often resolves.”

PJ just shook her head. “Not in my case. LVAD, stands for left ventricular assist device. It is a machine that takes over the pumping of the heart. Allows the muscle to rest.”

Doc continued: “How long were you on it?”

“Almost a year. I had a battery pack that allowed me mobility out of the house for 10 to 12 hours at a time. And I always had a spare. As you know, no battery, no survival!”

Jeanne, PJ’s aide, who was standing nearby interrupted. “Tell them about the accident!”

Doc knew PJ Loftus to be a careful person. She was an anesthesiologist. *Hours of boredom infused with moments of terror.* His curiosity was piqued. He smiled at Miranda. It seemed his cup was indeed refilling.

“Ben. I’m not sure what happened. My battery failed. The charger was not working. Fortunately, Jeanne had the spare

and knew how to change it. It was touch -and -go but the unit started pumping without much delay.”

Jeanne was a protective and loyal caretaker of all things PJ. “We immediately reported this to the hospital and the company. They found no malfunction.”

Miranda chimed in: “Pilot error?—so to speak?”

PJ was not pleased with this ‘presumption of carelessness’.

“Ben, you know that my life depended on that pump. That was my ‘bridge- to- a -transplant’. I would never forget to charge my power packs. They were my lifelines. And Jeanne here double and triple checked everything, every day.”

Agent Montgomery now slipped into high gear. “Dr. Loftus, if not an accident on your part, and not a fault of the charging mechanism, then there remains the possibility of sabotage?”

“That’s crazy! I have no enemies. Ben, you have known me, well forever. Plus, I have been ill for many years. Saved by the good fortune of a transplant. I am no threat to anyone”

Doc gently countered. “Any unhappy patients, or maybe vindictive families?”

“None that would bring someone to break into my house and know about LVADs.”

Jeanne observed PJ fatiguing and cut to the chase of the visit. “So why *are* you here?”

“Okay, here goes. PJ, remember we were a group of 10. Our first clinical rotation. Ward 509 at the ‘Big Free’.”

PJ sighed and then smiled. “I remember it well. It was a shock to virgin systems to say the least. We worked like dogs. But those patients loved us in our light- brown coats. We all

cared. We paid attention to their needs. I think they trusted us more than they did the white coats.”

Seeing that Miranda was lost, trying to grasp this discussion, Doc filled in the blanks. “All third year Tulane medical students wore beige lab coats to differentiate us from the interns and residents, who wore white coats.”

Doc looked at PJ. “Do you remember that pledge we took? We believe someone is acting on it.”

“You have to be kidding!”

“I wish I was. Jeffrey Arlade, Eduardo Duponce, Joe D’Alos, Marlon Everson. All dead!

“Bryce figured something was wrong when he went to the reunion. They listed off the deceased in the class and four of our 10 were there. Freaked him out. He is otherwise okay.”

“Why are you involved? Isn’t this a police matter?”

Doc sat back in his chair and looked over to Miranda. “It should be. Multiple deaths in multiple states.”

“That’s why I am here. I am former FBI Special Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery. We are trying to figure this all out without bringing in the authorities and the dispassionate invasions of privacy that go along with them.”

Doc shook his head. “It was not my desire to get involved. I was happy in my own misery – away from all this type of stuff”.

Miranda leaned in, looking straight at Doc, but speaking directly to PJ. “Bryce needed him. His wife, Sarah, needed him. We dragged him back. I was worried about the authorities jumping the gun and accusing Ben, and possibly Bryce?”

Doc regained his posture and sat up straight in his chair.

“Be that as it may, we are trying to find JJ Vetter. We think he could be our guy.”

“Why him?”

Doc tried to fill in the blanks. “Before JJ was expelled, he took the pledge with us. He could be extracting revenge on his classmates. Perhaps in his mind we should have gone to bat for him.”

PJ asked. “What about Pam and Jack?”

Doc continued: “At first, we thought it might have been Pam because of her ‘end of life’ views. That all changed when we found her.”

PJ looked concerned and confused. “Why?”

“Jack was in a horrific accident that left him quadriplegic. He was in a bad way. Pam euthanized him.”

PJ could hardly believe her ears.

Miranda calmed her down. “Physician – assisted end-of-life services are legal in Oregon. She felt she had no options. Jack wanted out of his incapacitated and permanent state. She did it.”

Impressed by Miranda’s composure Doc added. “She did it out of love – nothing else. It emotionally destroyed her. She is not our killer.”

“So, you thought I was running around the South killing my classmates?”

“We were working through a process of elimination. Which takes us to JJ. Any thoughts as to his whereabouts, or state of mind.?”

“Ben. JJ was a sweet kid. He was too bright for his maturity. The school should have worked with him. They threw him under the proverbial bus.”

Keeping the thread going, Miranda had a question.: “And his classmates?”

“No support from us. I guess we were too busy in our own worlds.”

“Do you think that angered him?”

“Not to a point of murder. No way.”

Doc wanted to know two more things. “PJ, have you had contact with him? Is there anyone else who in your mind could do this?”

PJ was exhausted from this interaction. She needed a break. Jeanne broke in and demanded they respect her recovery, and now enjoy a peaceful dinner with her.

Doc agreed. He needed a break as well, and time to process. He asked if he could take a walk and clear his mind.

While Doc was out, Miranda tried a soft approach with PJ.

“I’m sure you are aware all that Ben, we call him Doc, has been through. The loss of his wife was devastating enough. Add to this the murder of his only child. He lost it. Walked out on his life. We found him working on fishing boats on the North Fork of Long Island. At first, he was a possible suspect. He was defiant about being left alone. It became clear he was not the one.”

PJ asked. “Why didn’t you leave him be?”

“Because I worked with him during Katrina and the aftermath. I believed in him. I defied my superiors at the FBI and defended his testimonies regarding the Memorial Hospital disaster. I was suspended. It’s like the military – orders are orders. He was brilliant. And I made a promise to his friends, at

Collette's funeral, that I would find out who killed his daughter. He wasn't even at her funeral!"

"Maybe he does not want the life you imagine for him. But then, I do see that you care for him."

"PJ, both Doc and I have been through a lot. And I do care for him. I am hoping this helps him see value in his life."

. Miranda now felt comfortable enough to probe deeper into PJ's background. "We know you had a relationship with a resident that ended poorly."

PJ shook her head: "Understatement. He tried to fail me. The school reached an understanding with him. My good grade was reinstated. He was a veteran – just back from Vietnam. The residency program was not going to kick him out."

Miranda opened to PJ about being a profiler. "Tell me more about this resident."

"He liked to 'hit' on women students; promising them good grades and recommendations- for a price – if you get my meaning."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No way. After that incident we were told to stay away from each other- and we did. My rotations from then on were at different hospitals. You know he tried the same routine on Pam. Jack found out and told him to back off – or watch his back."

"What else? Anything could be helpful."

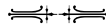
"Obviously he had anger issues. I guess front line service in Vietnam could do that. But nothing else."

Miranda switched gears: "Any information about JJ?"

The Hypocritical Oath

PJ could not fill in any gaps. “I tried to stay I touch. He was bitter. I believe he went to Mexico. I’m pretty sure our intern helped him. He was from Guadalajara. Anatole Wasser-Gold, as I recall. That’s it.”

As they were ending their ‘bonding’ session, Doc entered. “Ready for dinner?”



The drive back to the hotel was mostly in silence. Miranda sensed the sadness possessed by both Doc and PJ. She also felt like this group of 10 was cursed. That pledge of theirs was an unholy oath. It was supposed to be ‘do not suffer’ not kill each other! A ‘Hypocritical Oath’ was exactly what it turned out to be.”

Finally Miranda spoke. “PJ is a nice lady. For sure not our suspect.”

Doc gave her a glance and shook his head. “I knew that the moment we walked in and saw all her medications. She can barely make it around the block. If someone messed with her LVAD, we need to warn her to be on the lookout.”

Mirand revealed her conversation with PJ. “She does not think JJ has it in him to be a killer. Could there be an outlier? Someone who knew them. Someone who knew of the pledge. Other students? House staff? What’s the motive?”

“I don’t know. Commitment. Jealousy. Rage. But for sure our next move is Mexico. JJ still needs to be ruled in or out”

UNSUB – Unknown Subject

Doc and Miranda were now back at Bryce and Sarah's house in the Garden District of the quiet uptown area of New Orleans. Dickie joined them for dinner and got a recap on the peregrinations to Oregon and Ohio.

There was both relief and worry, as Doc unfolded the details of their journey, concluding with: "Neither Pam nor Patty Jane fit the profile of our suspect. And Jack Buchanan died from complications of a horrible traffic accident." In his mind there was little need to bring out the details.

Sarah interrupted. "If they are not our solution, then the problem still exists. What's the next move? Are the remaining members of that inane oath at risk?" She looked at Bryce, her concern impossible to miss.

Doc continued: "Who knows? We don't have a suspect, or even a clear motive. We must find JJ."

Miranda put her profiling hat on. "JJ is our most likely suspect. Especially if the motive is that pledge. JJ had the bitterness of rejection from not only the school, but of his classmates, who he may feel abandoned him. Like Ben said, he is either our most promising suspect; or like the rest of you, a potential victim."

Dickie had no real information to further the investigation regarding the true whereabouts of JJ. But he did have some other disturbing news to present.

Doc watched as Bryce's anxiety level was rising. "What could be worse than four dead classmates out of 10? Five if you include Jack!" He was not used to this kind of stress. It only worsened as Dickie laid out his discovery. "Remember Layne Edwards?"

Bryce took a deep breath. "What about Layne? He was in our class but followed us on Ward 509 in the next rotation. He was a nice kid."

Dickie placed the obituary that appeared in the Times-Picayune on the table. The headline, "Local Doctor, Civil Rights Activist, Age 55," spoke for itself. "As soon as it mentioned the class of 1973, bells went off."

"Was he sick?" Sarah probed. How is that related to our problem? People die every day, in case you haven't noticed."

Dickie continued. "Layne was a diabetic. He was in Touro Infirmary. He was having trouble regulating his insulin. He was found dead in his hospital bed. Not surprising, given the circumstances, he had an autopsy. The hospital could not explain why he suddenly demised under their care. The toxicology screen showed extraordinarily high levels of insulin in his system. Too high for what was being prescribed."

Doc asked Dickie if they suspected any foul play, even though he knew the answer. Dickie responded in the affirmative. "They analyzed his IV fluids and found insulin in what was supposed to be just regular Normal Saline and Glucose:

to keep him out of ketoacidosis. How it got there is under investigation, and very tight lipped.”

“How did you find this out?”

“I have contacts. They have been on the lookout for any other strange occurrences regarding your class. I told them about Everson’s death at Ochsner-and no autopsy – and the exhumation findings. A ‘friend’ in the pathology department at Touro gave me the heads up.”

Miranda had a question. “Any connection of this Layne person to your cohort? Did he have any associations with JJ?”

Dickie added. “All I know at this point is perhaps coincidence. Both Layne and JJ were gay. Did they have any sort of relationship? Who knows?”

Doc began to think out loud about larger themes. “Maybe what started out as some ‘angel of mercy’ wish fulfillment has now expanded to a vendetta on our class.” But what if anything, did the victims have in common?”

Glancing over to Dickie, Doc sensed bonded invigoration, working side by side with his old boss and mentor once again. “JJ is gay. Layne is gay- was gay. It was thought that Jeff may have been gay, as well as Joe D’Alos. Marlon was happily married as was Eduardo Duponce.”

Doc continued trying to connect the dots. “We know that Pam is not gay She was, from school to his death, smitten with her husband Jack. Patty Jane is single, but sexual proclivity unknown. Eduardo was married – but Black. Marlon was also married, and Jewish.”

Miranda jostled Doc. “Tell them about that LVAD incident with PJ.”

Bryce was already on edge, demanded “What incident!”

“Calm down Bryce. PJ had a heart transplant. While waiting she was placed on an LVAD. There was some sort of mishap where her battery pack failed to charge. Fortunately, her home health care aide/companion had the spare and knew how to replace it. She is fine and recovering well from her surgery.”

Dickie was quietly absorbing all of Doc’s thinking. *Just like the old days*. But his own investigative skills felt it necessary to add. “If we put Layne Edwards on our hit list, it is possible it could be someone else who knows all of you.”

Sarah glanced down at the obituary. “Layne was Black and active in the civil rights movement?”

Doc smiled at Sarah: “Excellent! Maybe our killer does not like outliers. Maybe another classmate. Or possibly an intern or resident that oversaw students on that ward.”

Miranda zeroed in on that possibility. “I agree. Our victims are all ‘different’ in the UNSUB’s mind. Black. Gay. Jewish. Sick. Weak.

Bryce looked at Miranda. “UNSUB?”

“UNSUB—refers to unknown subjects. Perhaps ours started out with the ill within the cohort – like Jeff. Honoring the oath. Then went after Patty. She was very sick. Now he/she is expanding into those perceived to be weak, or different.”

Bryce gathered his wits and looked directly and intensely at Doc. “Jerry Auerbach! He was our supervising resident. And he had that malignant relationship with Patty Jane.”

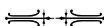
Miranda prodded. “What do we know about him?”

Doc looked at Dickie. “Locate any, and all information about Jerry Auerbach, while still searching for JJ.”

Doc turned back to address all of them. “The road now leads to Mexico. Seems like JJ was there- and maybe still is. Our intern, Anatole is from there. We need to check him out- and rule him in or out. Maybe he knows the whereabouts of JJ and has kept in contact with his senior resident – Jerry Auerbach.”

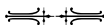
Bryce’s anxiety seemed to lift as he broke into a smile at last as he remembered Anatole. “He was a savior during that rotation. He worked like a dog doing all of Jerry’s ‘scut’. He took abuse from him for being foreign yet still buffered us from Jerry – who always had a chip on his shoulder.”

“You are probably correct. It is unlikely that Anatole would harm any of us. Jerry on the other hand is an open issue.”



Miranda and Doc were on the Robert Street porch. He needed the calm and quiet of the evening. “We need a strategy for Mexico. Will you be informing the FBI about the status of the case and possible travel out of the country?”

Under the present circumstances of suspension, she saw no need. “I am on the ready with you.”



Dickie was off to dig up information of JJ and Jerry.

Bryce needed to go back to work.

Sarah would remain at home on Robert Street, which could serve as a sort of command center for the next phase of the investigation. She would be able to get the information from Dickie and relay it to Doc, and vice-versa.

Miranda finally asked Doc something that had been on her mind continuously since learning about this almost incomprehensible oath. “What reasoning could have led 10 intelligent people to do this? What was it like in those early clinical years that were so hard?”

Doc took a deep breath. “It was like entering the Twilight Zone.” He paused. “Are you ready for a story? A story that formed our thinking, our outlooks, and even our personalities.

“In our day Charity Hospital was called the ‘Big Free’- not just for the state financing of indigent population health care, but also for the free- for- all it was.

“Interns and residents in their white coats and medical students in their beige ones. All treating and learning. Some will say at the ‘poor’ patient’s expense. No pun intended!

“The hospital was 18 floors with over three thousand patients, all in various stages of declining health. Most of these individuals waited too long to seek care. Add to that the shootings and stabbings. The emergency room and operating suites were beyond capacity -twenty-four-seven-three sixty-five.

Then there were the wards- like our 509. All open with no privacy except for mobile partitions for examinations.”

Miranda’s eyes were glued to Doc. She was absorbing every syllable.

“We had a sort of symbiotic relationship with the house staff. Notes were written in the charts—there were no computers—but by us on green paper. The residents wrote on white sheets. It has been said that the green sheets were far more thorough and informative than the white. Upon resolution – discharge or death- the green sheets were pulled and disposed from the medical record.

“You know the expression: ‘shit’ rolls downhill? Every dirty job fell to the medical students. It was called ‘scut’- chores performed repeatedly. Drawing blood. Taking cultures. Informing the interns of any issues. They, in turn, would inform the residents above them, who then presented the cases on daily rounds with the supervising attending physician.

“And so, it went, day after day. Add to this, book work and studying for exams.

“Our grades, and recommendations were often dependent on how those relationships went. For some of the women, a little flirting went a long way.”

Miranda jumped on this: “Does this include Pam and Patty Jane?”

“Yes. Pam played on her good looks while PJ curried favors with her personality.”

“Is this how PJ ran into trouble with that resident Jerry?”

“True. Anatole. Our intern warned all the medical students – men and women alike: “Don’t shit where you eat!”

“Meaning?”

“Do not mix business with pleasure. Men. Stay away from the nurses. Women; Stay away from the male house staff. Too many possible rabbit holes to fall into.”

“Like PJ?”

“Exactly. Pam knew how to use her looks to her advantage. Without getting involved. Especially with Jack hot on her heels. PJ on the other hand was always looking for a relationship. She was unattached, alone, and vulnerable. A pattern it seemed from high school on up. Jerry saw the opening and put the moves on her. She fell hook, line, and sinker.”

“What happened?”

“As the rumors went, he became abusive, and threatening. ‘Leave me and you fail’. She tried to break it off. Then HR got involved. Harassment. I think I told you this. It was swept under the rug. PJ passes, but nothing in Jerry’s file. Restraining orders as part of the terms of settlement.”

Done with his story, Doc turned to Miranda: “What about the FBI? Surely not the most comfortable working environment for women?”

“I handled it. Competition, like on the court. You dig in and try to be the best. I never allowed myself to feel threatened.” Then to lighten the mood, she added, “And besides, I had a gun!”

The conversation shifted. “Tell me about your intern, Anatole. He seemed to be a buffer for you all.”

“Yes, Anatole Wasser- Gold. He was always a gentleman. Very hard working and goal oriented. He wanted and American education to take back home to Guadalajara. That prestige translated into good positions in the hierarchy of Mexican medicine. He had little time or desire to hang at the Tulane Bar and Grill.”

Miranda looked perplexed. “What about it?”

Doc smiled. “TB&G is where everyone equalized. It was a pub of sorts across from Charity and the medical school. House staff and students shed their lab coats and socialized – and commiserated on equal footing. I’m sure this is where Jerry put the moves on PJ. A little attention and a lot of liquor!”

Miranda capped Doc’s statement: “And a ‘quid pro quo.’”

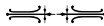
“Seems so. Anatole warned us that Jerry could make the rotation easy or rough. PJ learned that there was no free lunch – it all came with a price.”

Although Miranda was on leave of absence, she still was technically under FBI auspice. Crossing into another country was not in their jurisdiction.

“Miranda. Do not put yourself in jeopardy. I’ll take Bryce or Dickie.”

“Doc. Ben. Whatever, or whoever you are now. I’m in. I’ve seen it to this point. Not backing out now. Besides, I could use a ‘vacation’. Mexico sounds delightful this time of year. Maybe I’ll bring my bikini.”

Doc finally realized what everyone else knew. *She liked him.*



Dickie was glued to his computer, searching for any information that could lead to the location of JJ, as well as any background on Jerry Auerbach. He also found a website promoting the impressive credentials of one Anatole Wasser

The Hypocritical Oath

-Gold. A very cache surgical practice in a very posh section of Mexico City.

At the end of this day Sarah was booking flights for two.

The suspect list was narrowing and the victim list growing.

Mexico

Delta Air Lines would take them to Mexico City. The flight would take five hours and 54 minutes due to a stop in Atlanta, where the plane changed to Aero Mexico. This gave them plenty of time to learn about Anatole Wasser-Gold.

Miranda smiled at Doc and said, "Dickie does good work. He should get a job with the FBI."

Doc shook his head. "He was disillusioned with government law enforcement. Been there done that. He left and came to work for me. He was loyal and thorough. Dickie is the best."

"Maybe you were the best, and it rubbed off. It's always great to be part of a team. Like us, now. Right?"

Doc gave a weak smile and subtly shook his head in the negative. Then together, they read the dossier Dickie compiled on who the cohort called their 'buffer'.

Anatole Wasser-Gold was now a respected surgeon at the Hospital Medica Sur, located in the affluent section of Mexico City. He divided his time there and teaching at the Universidad Autonoma de Guadalajara- in the city where he was raised.

Miranda had a look of puzzlement as they perused Dickie's research.

“Wasser-Gold. Sounds Jewish. Why would Jews elect to settle in Mexico? Weren’t there large communities of immigrants in the US already?”

Doc, Jewish himself, was very familiar with the plight of the post-World War refugees. His roots stemmed from the First Great War. His grandparents, like many Eastern European Jews, migrated to America to escape the pogroms and rising threats of communism. He understood how lucky his family was to escape unharmed. World War Two was a different story.

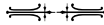
“When the war was over, Eastern European Jews were looking to relocate – away from the ravages of war and broken families. Some tried to go to Israel. Of course, at that time it was Palestine, and under British mandate. Only small amounts of Jews could enter – and a significant number ended up in DP – displaced person camps in Cyprus.”

Miranda was captivated. She grew up in the same county as Doc, but Garden City was primarily filled with churches and Christian parochial schools.

The history lesson continued. “The United States had a quota system that prevented many Jews from entering the country. The other choices were almost everywhere else. Some, believe it or not, went to China. Jeffrey Arlade’s family went to Argentina, which is ironic. Argentina hosted Nazi’s through the Odessa network, as well as Jewish refugees. So, many went to Canada, and others like Anatole’s family -Mexico.”

“This has been quite an education. But you are Jewish and lived in Rockville Centre, the home of the Catholic Archdiocese. Wasn’t it difficult?”

Doc smiled. "Yes. But we had two synagogues."



A very proper looking man in a military uniform asked the nature of their business in Mexico. Doc reached for Miranda's hand, smiled, gave over their passports and lied. "Vacation".

Miranda was envisioning that maybe business and pleasure could be mixed. Then she remembered Anatole's admonition. "*Don't shit where you eat!*"

Flagging a taxi, and hoping some semblance of English would be spoken, they were able to communicate their desire to go to the Medica Sur in the Polanco District.

Entering the driveway Miranda expressed surprise. "This hospital is beautiful. I could not imagine..."

"Don't be naïve., Doc interrupted. "This hospital is part of the Mayo Clinic Care Network. It is also a major teaching center for the Faculty of Medicine of the National Autonomous University of Mexico."

"Well, well! I guess you told me!"

"No. I just did my own research." He smiled at her. "You know- profiling."

Entering the lobby, Doc motioned to Miranda to let him do the talking.

"Hola, como estas?"

The recepcionista smiled, and responded: "Le puedo ayudar en algo?"

Doc sheepishly smiled back: "Hola is the best I have."

With a flirtatious smile and in perfect English: “How can I help you?”

“We are looking for Dr. Anatole Wasser-Gold. I am a very old friend of his. From our training days.”

“Let me try and locate him for you.”

After a few minutes she left her station and found them in the lobby. Smiling she informed them he was finishing his final surgery and would meet them in the lobby within the hour. Could she be of any other service?

Miranda could not help herself from smiling. “Doc. I believe you have a fan.” Then sarcastically – “Maybe when this all over you can hide out here.”

Doc did not like the inference, but let it slide. Then he thought that sometimes many a truth is said in jest. *Maybe I could disappear in Mexico. I could work the fields and fish off the coast.*

The two visitors sat in the plush lobby of the premier private hospital in Mexico City. Prominently displayed were very statesman- like portraits of prominent physicians including Dr. Anatole Wasser-Gold.

Miranda looked at the one of Anatole and then commented. “Another Tulane success story.”

“Yes. It looks like he has done very well for himself. Certainly not one to go revenge -seeking on the other side of the border. But you never know. Right, Miss Profiler?”

“Doc. You are getting edgier by the day! Look. There he is.”

Just like in his picture Anatole looked the part.

Meticulously dressed, and walking with the authority of a man in control and in charge.

Doc called out. "Boss man!"

Anatole looked around. Doc realized he had not heard that voice in decades.

Once again. This time in Spanish. "El Jeffe. Hola!"

Turning, Anatole spotted the two individuals he'd been told were there to speak with him. "Many years and many miles since I heard those words from that voice."

Miranda watched as Anatole went back in time. "You were one of my favorites. I knew you would rise above the others. And I offer condolences for the tragedies you have endured."

"Thank you. Meet FBI Special Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery."

Miranda responded. "Just Miranda. We are on vacation. Right, Ben?"

Anatole bowed and extended his hand. His demeanor changed. He was suspicious. "This is auspicious. The former Chief Medical Examiner of New Orleans and an FBI agent. What brings you to my door?"

Miranda was about to 'get to the point'. Sensing this, Doc gently gripped her wrist. "Senior Professor. We are looking for JJ Vetter. There was speculation that he asked for your help when he, let's say, had to leave our class."

Miranda could no longer contain herself. "And we need to know if you have any information on the whereabouts of your former senior resident Jerry Auerbach."

Doc saw that Anatole felt affronted by Miranda's brazenness and tried to diffuse the situation. "Jeffe. We are

investigating suspicious deaths in our medical school class. More specifically, our cohort of 10 from our first clinical rotation, with you and Auerbach. We are searching for clues and reasons for these sudden deaths.”

Anatole stared at them. “And this involves me, how?”

Doc calmly interceded. “It does not directly. We are following leads to finding JJ. He could be a suspect or a future victim.”

Anatole looked directly at Doc. “I am tired. It has been a long day. Let us meet for dinner. Perhaps, in a more civilized setting, we can sort this out. Where are you staying? I can make a call to the Gran Hotel Ciudad De Mexico. It is in the historic district. I will send a car for you at nine p.m. Dress is casual.”

Doc gave Anatole a hug. It felt good. Human contact. He was grateful for the hospitality from someone who really was only a memory. He then assured his ‘intern’ that Miss Montgomery would be on her best behavior.

“This city is beautiful- but do not wander. Like all places it can be dangerous.”

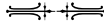
Doc and Miranda checked in without any difficulty despite an obviously- busy hotel filled with tourists. They secured a suite with two bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, and a sitting area.

Miranda mused. “Your man wields power. You know what they: power corrupts and....”

Before she could finish with ‘*and absolute power corrupts absolutely*’ Doc stopped her. “Miss Montgomery. Let’s be civil and polite. He is not a suspect. We need to jog his memory

and gather facts. We are guests in his country. He owes us nothing.”

She smiled. “Only if you call me Miranda.”



Dinner was late in Mexico. Miranda liked the change of pace. Doc must have felt likewise. “It is a time for reflection after a long day. Not like the US, where things always seem to be rushed.”

Miranda had also been put on notice by Doc before they regrouped for dinner. “Break the ice. Warm him up. We need him as an ally—not an adversary. I don’t think he likes you very much.”

Eyes blinking and running her hands through her hair. “Dr. Brash. Don’t be patronizing. I can be flirtatious.”

A Mercedes sedan was in the circle of the hotel. Anatole was there to greet them. Together they drove to Pujol. Anatole informed them that this was one of Latin America’s top restaurants.

The car. The clothes. The restaurant. The personal greeting from the chef. Doc concluded that Anatole was no stranger to the finer things in life. “You have come a long way from our days at Charity Hospital.”

“As did you!” He placed a hand on Doc’s shoulder, recalling all that had befallen him – and the aftermath.

Miranda softly moved her hair to one side, smiled, and outstretched her hand. “Dr. Wasser-Gold...”

“You may call me Anatole.”

“Anatole. Ben here told me about your Jewish heritage. I found the history so intriguing. How did your family come to reside in Mexico?”

Anatole settled in. As the courses progressed, he unfolded the story of his roots.

“Mexico has provided shelter to the Jews since the 1500’s, when the Conversos fled Spain and Portugal during the times of the Inquisition. Most settled in Mexico City and Guadalajara. My parents came to Guadalajara after the war. They could not get admittance to the US. It was either Canada or Mexico. They chose warm. This city was known for tequila, music, and Mariachi. They took a chance, opened a restaurant and raised a family.

“Guadalajara also had a well-established medical school. In fact, many Americans have been educated here.”

Miranda was becoming fascinated with this man. His story was mesmerizing. It was made even better with Mezcal Margaritas. She leaned a little closer. Doc was keenly aware.

“My family wanted me to be a doctor. Every Jewish mother’s dream, right?”

“The power in Mexican medicine lies in an American education. This separates the great from the ordinary. That’s where Tulane and Charity entered the picture. Medicine internship, followed by a surgical residency.”

Miranda asked. “You never had a desire to stay in America?”

“It was always a thought, but strong family ties overcame the ‘American Dream’. I came back home. I joined the

teaching faculty, Eventually, I wanted more and moved here to Mexico City. I still go back to Guadalajara. I owe it to family. I donate my services to the school and hospital. And now to your reason for this intrusion into my life – as pleasant as it's turning out to be.”

Now it was Doc's turn. “Let's talk about why we are here. Recount as best you can, the Mexican life of JJ Vetter.”

“I remember Mr. Vetter very well. He was hard to forget. Very bright. Very immature. But! I thought he had a good heart. I knew he wanted to be a doctor. He was adrift after expulsion. His family basically disowned him.

“I reached out to him and offered an introduction to entry to Universidad. He went and did well. He mastered our language. He became involved in community health projects. He was both remorseful about his past and grateful for the future.

After he graduated, I lost touch; until he resurfaced in Mexico City. It turned out that he—now Dr. Vetter—was gay. Guadalajara offered little. He found his way to the gay community in the Zona Rosa district.”

Doc interceded. “This has bearing on our interest in JJ. If you can try to remember our cohort.”

Anatole grinned: “It was also my first rotation as a ‘real doctor’. I had just come to America and Louisiana. How could I forget you all? We, as you say: ‘cut our teeth together!’”

“Anatole, of our group of 10, five are dead.”

Anatole was visibly shaken. “You think Vetter is involved?”

“Yes and no. Back then, when JJ was still in our group, we made a pact—a pledge, so to speak. When we saw all that

suffering, we decided not to let ourselves get that far, if ever we were to become so ill. JJ may be seeking revenge. On the other hand, he also fits the profile for becoming a victim. That's why we need to find him."

"Ben. That was a long time ago. Acting it out? No!"

"One would think that. Yet here we are. Jeffrey Arlade had ALS. His ventilator was disconnected. Eduardo Duponce had sickle cell disease. A syringe of fentanyl was in his arm. Joseph D'Alos had a pulmonary embolism after an orthopedic procedure. Had HIT syndrome, and yet, was given Lovenox. Marlon Everson had MS and was thought to have aspirated. In fact, he was choked and suffocated. Patty Jane Loftus was on an LVAD awaiting a heart transplant. She had an 'accidental battery failure'. Finally, Layne Edwards- not in our group - followed us to Ward 509. He had an overdose of insulin while in the hospital."

Miranda finally spoke up. "The commonality was weakness and stereotypes. Meaning either illness, or weakness, in the mind of the killer. Arlade and D'Alos were gay. Edwards, also gay - and Black- as was Duponce. Everson was Jewish. Patty Jane - Jewish, and sick- and slighted by your senior resident Jerry Auerbach."

Anatole was catching his breath. "And the others?"

Bryce Teller so far is fine. Pamela Prentiss was an initial suspect. She had personal views on end-of-life scenarios, and euthanized her husband, Jack Buchanan."

"You cannot be serious. I remember her as being so gentle."

"True, Anatole. Jack was married to Pam. He was in an

accident and became quadriplegic. He begged her to end his suffering. She is more of a victim than a suspect. That brings us to JJ.”

Miranda added: “And don’t forget Auerbach!”

Doc continued his thought process. “This all started when Bryce attended his reunion. The memorial section revealed the four deceased members from our cohort of 10. He flashed back to our pledge we took during that first clinical rotation.

“Agent Montgomery, here, is interested because the deaths crossed state lines: California, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. So far.”

Anatole looked straight at Doc. “What about you? Why are you involved?”

“That’s an interesting story in itself! Agent Montgomery thought I may have fit the profile for the ‘euthanizer’, given my background.”

Anatole responded quite firmly: “Really? I may not have seen you in decades, but I remember. You were among the best and the brightest, and you had a good heart.”

Doc smiled. “Miranda thought that since my life did not work out as planned; with my wife and daughter, I fit the profile of an angry and detached person capable of murder.”

“Que mierda! Such crap!”

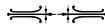
Miranda felt the need to calm Anatole. She realized that this was a huge burden put upon him. An invasion of his life and an involvement that was completely blind-sided. She reached out and held Anatole’s hands. “The good news is that Ben is not only *not* a suspect he is, in fact, invaluable to our investigation.”

Doc shook his head. “Not by choice.”

Miranda countered this statement. “Not by choice, but by necessity! We rescued him from his cheap bottles of bourbon. We gave him purpose. Something that was missing for a long time.”

Again, Doc shook his head. “Anatole. I am on leave from a new life I have chosen. Contrary to all my so-called ‘friends’, I am not returning to my former existence.”

Doc then turned and looked directly at Miranda. “Comprende?”



As dinner was concluding Anatole offered and lit up one of his favorite Monte Christo cigars. And offered one to each of his guests. They declined. “I really don’t know what else to say. I would run into JJ in Mexico City from time to time. I knew he was trying to get an American medical license.”

After a pause he offered further insight. “I think those ethical issues surrounding his expulsion were still creating problems.”

Agent Montgomery put on her profile face. “What about Jerry Auerbach?”

Anatole laughed. “El cerdo! – a pig. As you know I came to New Orleans from Guadalajara. I had a single focus: Get an American education. I felt blessed for the opportunity. You guys were my first interaction as a teacher. I took this obligation seriously.

“Auerbach was different. As I remember, he had just

returned from Vietnam. He talked about his experiences with a detached indifference. He used to refer to our patients like they were the enemy. No compassion. Demeaning slurs. To me he was racist and sexist, with no moral standards. And he was always trying to pick up the female students. I tried to keep them away as much as I could. In some cases, I failed.”

Doc mentioned Patty Jane Loftus.

“Yes. Like her. He would try and use his authority as leverage. Grades for sex.”

“Anatole, I know this is a reach. Do you think that Jerry Auerbach is capable of murder?”

Anatole put out his cigar. “Let me give you my best impression. It would be a leap for me to think of JJ Vetter as capable of murder. He was looking for redemption. With Jerry Auerbach and his probable PTSD; anything is possible.”

He then looked at agent Montgomery. “I believe you have more work to do. Take care of my amigo here. He is too special to be lost.”

Anatole hugged his favorite student. “My sincerest condolences for the tragedies you suffered. But here is some parting advice. My family also knows of tragedy. That’s why we are here and gained a new lease on life in Mexico. Fate moves us in directions we are unaware about. You need to go forward. You owe it to yourself – and others.”

Doc held Anatole and teared up. “I am alone.”

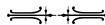
Anatole kissed Doc on both cheeks. “Benjamin, you are a mensch! And you are *not* alone. Look around. Find peace. Shalom.”

Crossroads

The flight back to New Orleans left both Doc and Miranda with plenty of time to think. Thoughts of the case were clouded by thoughts of each other and where their lives were headed.

Miranda was becoming more attached to Doc. And she was becoming more confused about her feelings. *Paternal? Fraternal? More? Was Doc a longed-for father figure? What about my career? Was he just a trusted colleague? Working side by side with the chief medical examiner – exhilarating. Was this case my way back into the FBI's good graces, or could it be a way out with Doc; to a professionally, and maybe a more personally fulfilling life? Anatole may be right. Doc should look around and see all that he has- not all that he has lost.*

Doc, meanwhile, was displaying a slight crack in his armor. There was an increasing attraction to this younger but very self-assured woman. *I am not ready on any level for any type of arrangement – personal or professional. I just want the case over- and out! My losses are too great and my grief too strong. Solo is my best medicine. In another time and another life, perhaps she could be more.*



They were now back at the Tell residence in the Garden District. The time for zeroing in was at hand. Suspects have been eliminated. It was now down to JJ Vetter and a new, and very promising Jerry Auerbach, the senior resident who presided over them.

Doc took the lead. "Mexico was enlightening. JJ was there for a time. He did get a medical degree in Guadalajara and then went to Mexico City. Anatole confirmed what we suspected from JJ's sister – he is gay. Anatole also thinks he may have contracted HIV/AIDS. He was seen at an infectious disease clinic, multiple times.

'Dickie, we need to find out if Vetter was able to obtain a medical license in the US—and in what states. We also need to figure out a way get authorization to 'invade' his medical history. If he has HIV/AIDS, we need to know. We need to find out if and where he was, and possibly now being treated.'

Bryce asked: "What about Auerbach?"

Doc continued: "Anatole remembered him. Not fondly. He called him out for what we kind of knew. Conclusion: Not a saint, and he could be vindictive."

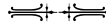
Bryce agreed. "Just ask PJ."

Doc ignored the comment.

Glancing over to Dickie. "Go over to the Veterans Affairs Office. Figure a way to get some background on Jerry Auerbach. If need be, ask Miranda to hack the computers.

"Bryce, go back to the alumni office. Check for any more deaths in our class. Then, use your faculty insiders to find out who came after us on Ward 509. There must be a roster somewhere. We know Layne Edwards did. Now he's dead. Just

like those in our group. Is that coincidence? I don't think so. If there are any others, then we focus hard on Auerbach. Vetter becomes a potential victim and not our suspect. At this point, all roads lead to Jason James Vetter and Jerome Auerbach."

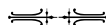


Like a well-deployed military unit, the assignments were made. Doc was at the helm, and they were glad he was their leader. He assured them—again—it was temporary.

Bryce went back to the uptown campus to check on his class. Hopefully beyond his cohort, the suspicious deaths ended with Layne Edwards. For him, the sooner this was over, and normal routines returned, the better.

Dickie left Robert Street with a little bit of a skip in his step. To work again with Dr. Benjamin Brash was an honor, and a pleasure he never thought he would have again. He would not let his old boss down. In some ways he hoped this would bring him back.

Miranda was not one to take orders, but she was secretly pleased. Perhaps Doc's leadership would provide hope for his return. She would dig deep into the life of Jerry Auerbach. Fantasy aside, the other reason she could not fail related to JJ Vetter. If Dickie could locate him; and if he is ruled out – then this becomes purely an FBI matter. She would have to report it. A serial killer is on the loose. A reinstatement became her reality.



Dickie hit a dead-end regarding JJ and a US medical license. “Apparently, he never even tried. After all the hard work to get a medical degree—not only in a foreign country, but in a foreign language”.

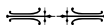
Doc agreed. “Many Americans who fail admission to American schools go to Guadalajara. They take the prescribed tests and have successful careers in the states. Why not JJ? Was he so damaged? Or was there something else? Maybe he is sick and unable to work. Keep digging.”

Dickie had calls into the HIV/AIDS clinics in Mexico City. Hopefully they would at least tell him if he was still there, or where he may have been referred to. He began thinking about possible obstacles. *This may be tricky. Even if it involves a murder investigation, there are rights to privacy.*

Questions and possible answers followed. *Where would he go if he was not welcome back home in Pennsylvania? Live like an ‘ex-pat’ in Mexico? Tulane must harbor bad memories, having been expelled from medical school. But what about New Orleans itself? A large gay community. A big music scene. Could he be right under our noses – literally hiding in plain sight? And totally unaware of all these events that are so pointing at him!*

Dickie called Doc. “I have a strange feeling. My gut tells me JJ is right here in NOLA! He is gay. He loves music. He may be sick. I need to check out music clubs and gay men’s clinics. Let me start in Treme.”

“Your gut often points your nose in the correct direction. Follow your nose. We have nothing to lose – but time!”



Faubourg Tremé was an area in New Orleans that dated to the eighteenth-century. It had been a cultural rendezvous for every person of every color and type. Once defined by prostitution in the red-light Storyville, it was now known for its soulful music.

Dickie liked music in any form, or genre and in whatever neighborhood and joint he stumbled upon. He would start on Frenchman Street and wander to Basin Street. So many live music venues, where 'Blacks and Whites' and 'Gays and Straights' jammed together.

Dickie knew about 'open mic nights'. Anyone could sit in and play. Night after night he made the rounds, speaking to both patrons and proprietors in search of JJ. First, he went to Kermit's Speakeasy and then onto the Ooh Poo Pah Doo Bar. More of 'maybe yes, maybe no'. 'Just not sure'. Finally, he caught a break at a club on Robertson Street. Harry, the legendary bar tender of the Candlelight Lounge remembered "a frail looking 'white dude' – called himself Dr. J. He used to come often. Felt like he could play his troubles away. Less and less now. He looked sickly."

Dickie asked: "Would you contact me if he shows up?"

"Sir, I don't mess into others' lives."

Harry reminded him of the sea captain on Long Island, when he was looking for Doc.

As he was exiting Harry yelled out! "You may want to go over to the clubs on St. Anne in the French Quarter."

"Why?"

"Lavender Line, man. Lavender Line."

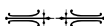
It had been a while since Dickie even thought about that area—St Anne bisecting Bourbon Street. In his heyday with

Doc, there were some post- Katrina murders. Then what bartender Harry alluded to clicked: gay bars and clubs. That so called ‘Lavender Line’ was a haven for the LGBT community.

Over what seemed an eternity, Dickie began bar hopping. This straight man hoped he could get some information or direction. From Bourbon Street to Royal Street to Chartres Street: Lucille’s; Napoleon’s Itch; Café Lafite in Exile. Bar after bar, and club after club – no luck.

Finally, an appropriately costumed doorman at the Voodoo Lounge on North Rampart thought he might have heard of a person fitting JJ’s description. “Check out ‘Mag’s 940’ over on Elysian Fields, in the Marigny-Bywater section of Faubourg-Treme.”

‘Mag’s 940’ doubled as a live music club and a bed and breakfast. *This had possibilities!*



Dickie immediately called Doc. “I think I found him! If my information, and intuition, is correct he is living, and playing piano in Treme. Can you believe it? Under our noses all the time.”

Doc was part surprised, and part elated – no more immediate travel. Miranda, of course, was ready to pounce. Doc cautioned patience and settled into a plan.

“We cannot scare JJ into running and hiding. He may be our number one suspect – or next on the kill list.”

Sensing the crescendo of emotions over Dickie's discovery, Doc laid it out.

"Bryce, you go with Sarah to that club. Be touristy. Hang there. See if you can spot and recognize JJ. Don't engage first, but respond in a friendly manner if he initiates. Miranda and I will be outside and ready to intercede if needed."

Miranda was ready to apprehend and arrest, patting her holstered Sig Sauer P226. Doc stopped her in her tracks. "You are no longer active FBI. No guns!

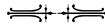
"JJ is sick and most likely alone. We can stop him if we need to. Let's feel him out—like the others. If it's him, he's yours and you can, inform the authorities and end it. If not, we may need him. Perhaps he has information about Jerry. It's a long shot—but one we need to take."

Bryce agreed. "If it's not JJ then it has to be Jerry."

Doc asked Dickie. "Any progress on Jerry Auerbach's military service and present whereabouts?"

Miranda interrupted and answered. "We are working on it." She assured Doc they would have a profile within a day.

"Good. In the meantime, we will pursue JJ; and see where it takes us.



Bryce and Sarah made way from their well-appointed home in the quiet, upscale Garden District, to the noisy musical beat of the Marigny section on the edge of Faubourg Tremé. There at 940 Elysian Fields was Mag's 940 Gay Bar and Guesthouse.

The place was lively and one where you could blend with anonymity if you were gay and liked music.

The mission superseded any feelings about lifestyle. They needed to try and identify JJ Vetter – a.k.a. ‘Music Man Dr. J.’

Sarah was more adventurous than Bryce and led the way to a table near the stage. “Two Hurricanes please.” She then turned to her husband. “Get with the program! Relax. Pretend you are at Pat O’Brien’s in the Quarter. Drink up. After a few you will be inhibition- free.”

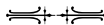
They settled in and watched the show. During the intermission and older and frailer version of a man, vaguely resembling the class photo of the entering class of 1973, took the stage and sat at the piano.

Bryce whispered. “The words may have changed but the melody lingers on.”

Sarah commented with a quizzical stare. “What are you talking about?”

“There is something about that man. Different, but the same. I’ve heard JJ play some of that music in the lounge of the Hawthorne Hall Medical School apartments, on Canal Street so many years ago – but it seems like yesterday. *That’s JJ!* What should we do? He is so close. We could reach up and literally touch him.”

“No, Bryce,” Sarah whispered. “This is like reconnaissance. Let’s see where he goes after the show.” Enjoying herself she gave her husband a nudge. “Meantime, have another Hurricane.”



The Hypocritical Oath

JJ -a.k.a.'Music Man Dr. J' played two sets of melancholy. He looked alive while 'tickling the ivories' but when he stood, he reverted to a half -dead skeleton, in clothes way too big for him.

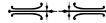
Bryce was almost in tears. "The 'incredible shrinking man'. What happened to him?"

"Bryce. I think everyone was correct. It's HIV/AIDS taking its toll."

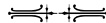
"Sarah. Why is he back in New Orleans? He can barely move himself about- much less orchestrate serial murders."

Sarah nudged her husband. "Let's see where he goes."

JJ did not have to go far. Mag's 940 also had guestrooms. They followed him through a set of faded green doors and down a dimly lit hallway, with voices echoing from rooms adjacent to the one that JJ entered.



Doc picked up the phone and took in the news. "Good work,Sarah. Come home. Miranda and I will meet Bryce. It's 'go time' to confront Jason James Vetter!"



Doc found humor in informing 'non -agent' Miranda that there would be little opportunity for her to use her Sig Sauer tonight.

They made their way to Mag's.

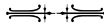
Bryce met them on Elysian Fields, out front. It was past

midnight, and the bar was closing. JJ was upstairs in one of the guest rooms. Sarah cozied up to the bar tender—played her part—and gleaned that the ‘Music Man’ indeed lives here.

The barman revealed to Sarah that: “He sleeps most of the day. Plays here when he feels like it and then goes out. Stays out most of the night.”

Miranda smiled. “I guess we’re going on a stakeout.”

Doc settled her. “Let’s not get carried away. We just want to see where he goes – and what he does.”



At around two a.m. JJ was on the move. A yellow cab picked him up in front of Mags and headed out of the Marigny towards Esplanade, located at the end of the French Quarter.

Doc, Miranda and Bryce followed. What they encountered was at first hard to process.

Bryce was the first to comment. “Well look at this. An old shack of a building with a huddled group of sick and infirmed individuals waiting for an equally looking sick man in a white coat.”

Over the next three -to -four hours those who entered left. The old man in the white coat was still inside. They looked at each other – all mutually curious.

Doc broke the silence. “It’s time. Let’s go.”

Friends or Foes

The building was about as bland as a building could be. Rickety. Paint peeling off its siding. Broken leaders and gutters. It fit right in. Blending into a community as broken as the building it was seemingly serving.

Doc was lost in thought. *Two broken men- former medical school classmates—about to confront each other. Friend or foe. Suspect or victim.*

Bryce muttered. “Hiding in plain sight. Under our noses all the time. If you recall, I was friendly with JJ in those early years of basic science. We had some shared interests, and mutual friends. I was into photography and spent time shooting and framing portraits of musicians – including Jeffrey Arlade and JJ Vetter—individually and as dueling duets. Never put together that those duets could have been more than music.”

They entered a now -empty waiting room.

A weak voice called out: “Who’s there? What do you want? There’s nothing of value here! Go away!”

Miranda could not help herself. “Or what! You’ll call the cops?”

Doc intervened. He called out through the waiting room

to the only remaining room with a light on. “JJ! It’s Ben Brash. I’m here with Bryce Teller. We need to speak to you.”

“Who’s the bitch? Did you bring down the police?”

“JJ. Bryce here. We have been looking for you. It’s imperative that we speak.”

“Why? You found me; and now turning me in for what? Helping the poor and the sick? Those with no money? No access to health care since Charity closed?”

Bryce continued to give assurance to JJ. “Not at all. In fact, we had no idea you were even *in* New Orleans. We have been looking for you all over the country.”

“And sunny Mexico!” added Miranda.

JJ allowed them to enter the room he sat in. He looked at the long-forgotten faces, paused, and continued his bitter line of questioning. “Why? I am of little importance to anyone—except maybe the helpless, hapless, and hopeless. They come through the only available door. Are you here to close that door?”

Doc cut in and changed tactics. “What are you doing JJ? You don’t even have a medical license to practice in Louisiana—or anywhere in the US.”

Doc looked and nodded at Bryce, who got the hint. He escorted himself and Miranda into the waiting room to allow breathing room for Doc and JJ to talk; yet remain close enough to intervene if needed. As they exited, Miranda could not help herself. “Practicing without a license is a felony.”

Doc did his best to ignore her. “JJ, how are you? It’s been a very long time. We heard you are ill. Are you getting treatment?”

“Why the concern? No one cared when I got the boot. As you know only Wasser-Gold helped me out. So why now?”

“I am no stranger to the dark side of life. I have had more than my share.”

“True. I read. News travels. I became aware of your personal tragedies. Condolences. And then you, like me became lost. But I found a calling—albeit late. I guess we all find maturity at our own pace. You, on the other hand, disappeared. And now you are back. Just like that. I don’t think so! What do you want?”

“Do you have any recollections of our first clinical rotation at Charity?”

“Of course. It’s ‘easy to remember, and hard to forget’ initial impressions. So what?”

“Do you remember our cohort- our fellow classmates on Ward 509?”

“I believe I do. Where is this going? Is your female friend out there to arrest me for trying to help those who are outli-ers to medical care?”

“Absolutely not! But we have concerns about your actions over the last few years.”

“Other than contracting HIV and developing AIDS? Trying to survive and give back. Why, again?”

Doc relayed the information regarding Arlade, Duponce, D’Alos, Everson, and Buchanan. “All dead.”

JJ leaned back in his chair. “That’s life. Right. Some live. Some die. Some get sick, like me. Some, like you, exist by ob-serving and living with suffering.”

“JJ. We believe that they were murdered. Remember the

pledge we made at the Tulane Bar and Grill? The shock. All that suffering.”

Now JJ began laughing, which was accompanied by wheezing. “Our Hypocritical Oath!”

“Suppose someone has enacted that oath. Suppose someone has decided when it’s time to die.”

JJ mustered up all he could for the laugh of a lifetime. “And you think it’s me? Good detective work! I am getting sicker by the day. I can barely breathe, much less parade around the country. I am just trying to survive.”

“But you must have harbored ill feelings. Expulsion and all.”

“Ben. Benjamin. Doctor Brash. Those feelings are long gone. Time and illness—facing death—gives one perspective. I have my music and my patients. I have little time or energy for anything else. That is my life now. You need to look elsewhere.”

“Believe me JJ, we did.”

Doc outlined the scenarios that surrounded the deaths in the cohort. The attempts to make them appear like anything but homicides. He recounted Bryce’s discovery at the class reunion, and how he became involved. First as a suspect, then as an investigator.

JJ seemed interested in the story. It certainly was a diversion from a life deemed dreary by most. “Ben, go on. This is more like an interrogation. But it fascinates me. At least for the moment. When the sun rises, I go to sleep. So, speed things up!”

Doc sat down directly across from JJ and looked him straight in the eye.

“The first death was Jeffrey Arlade. He lived in Los Angeles. He had contact with Pamela Prentis, who, in turn was involved with end-of-life treatments. Her views on euthanasia made her an early suspect. After me of course. And she did euthanize her husband! He was a deteriorating quadriplegic from a tragic accident; ironically, caused by a drunk Indian, from the very reservation he was rendering care to.”

JJ responded. “Pam never seemed the type. Always flirtatious. Never vicious. But I wouldn’t blame her if she did. I had some contact with Jeff early on. Music and all. I knew about his deterioration. And I’m sure you figured out that he was also gay.”

“I have to ask: Did you, do it? Go to LA and disconnect his ventilator?”

“I certainly sympathized with his plight. He was a friend and facing death can be a challenge. But I don’t believe in euthanasia. At least he is ‘at peace.’”

“Pam did think about it. But after dealing with her husband’s illness and ‘final exit’, she declined.”

JJ shook his head. “So, it’s not you and it’s not me! But maybe it is you; and this is all a ruse – a diversion. You have sadness and anger. I can see it.”

Doc took in a slow deep breath and contemplated the irony. *True enough. Maybe we were no longer suspects. But each in our own way were victims. Circumstances and fate manipulated our lives. We were different people, bonded by tragedy.*

“JJ. Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery, in the waiting room, believed it was initially me. She profiled me, at the cost of my privacy. She eliminated me, then recruited me.”

“So now what?”

“Let me finish. We next went to Ohio to see Patty Jane Loftus.”

JJ smiled. ‘Peppermint Patty’. I remember her. Bad blood with that resident, Jerry Auerbach. The only person I could imagine her killing would be *him!*”

“We thought of her. She was an anesthesiologist. Pain management. But she just received a heart transplant. Her life now is consumed with cardiac rehab.”

“Shit, Ben. This class is cursed!”

“It gets worse. PJ was on an LVAD bridge- to- transplant. Her power pack was sabotaged. She survived because of a backup battery carried by her ever-present aide.”

“Maybe Auerbach went after PJ. He was a nasty son-of-a-bitch!”

“Do you think PJ was gay?”

“Where’s that going? You think your killer is homophobic.”

“Possibly. We think that Joe D’Alos may have been gay, but publicly still in the closet. But it doesn’t explain Douponce and Everson.”

“Maybe, your killer hates anyone who is not white, straight, and Christian.”

“We thought of that too. That would also explain Layne Edwards.”

JJ chuckled. “I guess Bryce is off the hook- the all-American frat boy. Do you think that PJ and Pam are at risk?”

Doc responded. “Anything is possible. As are we. I’m Jewish and you are gay, and ill. And still no conclusive suspect – other than possibly Auerbach.”

“Ben. If you believe in this link to the pledge, then your suspect list is narrow—unless someone in the group talked about it - or overheard it - and was or is vicious enough to carry it out.

“One thing I can tell you for sure is that there was no love lost between Anatole and Jerry. He was always calling him a ‘wet-back’. Really pissed him off!”

“JJ, I tell you this as a fellow physician and former classmate. You look like crap! Are you getting any medical care?”

“I do what I can. Ironically, with no real employment, no insurance and little money. The gigs at Mag’s covers ‘hots and a cot’. Besides I think I’m beyond caring about vanity. I just want to help these people for as long as I can.”

“Where do you get the supplies for your clinic?”

JJ got up, without answering, and reached out to shake his hand. “Afraid?”

“Hardly.”

Doc left JJ after a handshake, and a hug. He joined Miranda and Bryce in the waiting room. “He’s not the killer but he’s not telling us everything.”

Miranda sat up. “Such as?”

“Where does he get his supplies and the meds? We need to dig in more on JJ. I would not be surprised if he and Jerry have crossed paths. We need to keep a close eye on JJ. And we need everything and anything on Jerry ASAP!”

The Road Back

Miranda Jayne Montgomery, suspended special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, entered the New Orleans headquarters at 2901 Leon C. Simon Boulevard.

She needed to get her thoughts straight. Since Hurricane Katrina and the Memorial disaster, she was suspended. Collateral damage for not playing ball politically. Even though she pushed to pursue the killers of the infamous 'Mardi Gras Massacre, she was still shut out. That case had gone cold as well as her current professional situation. Hopefully the winds would shift with the story she was about to tell.

Her boss, Bernard Nazzizzi, was pacing and staring at the door waiting for her arrival. He was contemplating a run for Louisiana governor and did not need any more controversy.

“Miss Montgomery, have a seat and start talking. Word on the street is that you have been very busy with your time away.”

“Remember Benjamin Brash?”

“I do. The legend who disappeared. And a part of the big case you crossed me on.”

“Well, I found him.” With that, she held up the file

chronicling a string of unexplained deaths surrounding the Tulane University Medical School class of 1973.

Nazzizzi straightened up in his chair. “You have my attention.”

“You know I have a history with tennis? I see your look. Hear me out. A woman I play with reluctantly told me about a class reunion her husband attended. During the ‘in memoriam’ section he became aware that four of his classmates had recently died.”

“MJ. This is not unusual.”

“Yes, it is. Turns out that these four were out of a cohort of 10. That’s 40 percent. In one year. The deaths involved Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, California, and an attempt in Ohio.

“And?”

“Boss, hang on to your hat. What I’m about to tell you is what movies are made of. Apparently, this group of 10 made a pledge in medical school to ‘provide comfort care’ to each other if they should become ill.”

Now Nazzizzi was bolt upright. “By comfort care – you mean like the Memorial case and trial.”

“Exactly! Someone from that group or class is euthanizing—no, actually murdering those with illness and deemed ‘not worthy of living’.”

“Deemed by whom?”

“That’s the point, Boss. I found Brash. He fit a profile. I ruled him out. Now he is helping me.”

“Really. And no communication with the office.”

“Chief, I was not exactly welcomed here. My source was

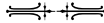
adamant about the innocence of Brash. I needed to do my vetting. Anyway, Brash did the forensics—he still has many resources. We have narrowed down the suspect list and are closing in.”

“Interesting. Any chance it ties into the ‘Fat Tuesday’ deaths?”

“Not sure about that, but Brash ties to both indirectly. The ‘Mardi Gras Massacre’ and that ‘Hypocritical Oath!’”

She could see that he was more than intrigued. And she could sense why. *Benjamin Brash: Renown forensic pathologist. Married into one of New Orleans’s most prominent Jewish families. Links to high- profile cases – past and present. – - This would be great for a campaign. Some way or another.*

Nazzizzi finally spoke. “How would you like back in?”



Miranda entered the area where computer magic occurs. She had learned how the game of politics is played. As with tennis, points become games, and games become sets, leading to a match, win or lose. It was now her serve and she had the momentum to turn things around. She found Albert Fisher engrossed behind multiple screens.

“Fish! How’s it going?”

Fisher did not even look up. “Just another day in information paradise.”

Her voice sounded familiar. Then he did look up. “Well,

well. Look who's here. I thought you were, as we say, 'persona non grata'."

"My dearest best friend. Let's just say that politics make for strange bedfellows."

"Cut the crap!"

"I'm back! I need your expertise."

Without any more small talk Miranda began to immediately state her case. "Jerry Auerbach MD. He is more than likely a prime suspect in a string of health-related deaths. He is off the grid. I need to find him. I need a profile on him. I need you to help me do the leg work."

"Miranda, I'm swamped. You think you can waltz in here and snap your fingers?"

"Fish. Nazzizzi just green-lighted it to the top. Its election time. I'm sure our boss would be very grateful for your help. Put your genius to work. It's important."

Her head was high and her posture straight. She had won this set and smiled at the thought that politics was like tennis. *It's all about positioning and looking for advantages and weaknesses.* Exiting the building the sun felt good on the face of the reinstated 'Very Special Agent'.

Jerome (Jerry) Auerbach

Three hours later, Albert Fisher had the goods just as she had expected he would. After all, he was the computer wizard from Cal Tech, and then at the University of Chicago. Unfortunately for him the FBI loved his skills and pigeon-holed him as their 'geek'. Hours, days, weeks extended to years, locked in a secure room behind multiple screens. He wanted more from the FBI. *This case could be my way out. If I become integral to solving the case and get accolades, I could go where Nazzizzi goes. I need to become indispensable to him. I'll do it for her.*

The deeper Albert Fisher dug the more worried he became.

When she returned, he wasted no time in voicing his concerns. "This guy is on the edge of crazy! You are getting in way deep."

Fish handed over the file. "Make sure Nazzizzi knows where it came from!"

Hands in prayer, agent Montgomery then blew him a kiss. "Thank you."

File in hand and seated in the Mustang, she headed

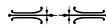
uptown. Somewhere along St. Charles Avenue, her curiosity, and Fish's concern got the better of her. She pulled over and opened the file. Time was ground to a halt. She became immune to the sounds of the passing streetcars filled with noisy tourists. Her concentration was only broken by a flashing light from a police car pulling up behind her. Realizing she was in a 'No Parking' zone, she flashed her badge and headed to Robert Street.

Triumphantly climbing the steps two at a time she entered the Teller residence, waiving the binder with Albert Fisher's research. "Let' dig in! And by the way I'm no longer suspended. Seems the FBI has taken interest in this case - and me."

Bryce interjected. "So, where does that put us?"

"Don't panic. My boss is afraid of any downside for his political aspirations. I can run the op with you all—on the down- low." She stared at Bryce. "No risk. If it bears fruit, then I need to bring him in."

Miranda Jayne Montgomery was back. She looked over to the one person she wanted a reaction from. All she got was an all-business poker face. Benjamin Brash wanted it all to end.



Jerome (Jerry) Auerbach.

Born - June 14, 1940 - Fort Bliss, Texas

Education- Texas Military Institute (1955-1958)

The Citadel. BS (1958-1963)

Texas Christian University. MD (1963–1967)

Internship – Charity Hospital, New Orleans (1967–1968)

Army -1st Lieutenant -Vietnam (1968–1971)

Residency- Charity Hospital, New Orleans (1971–1972)

Doc read the first page. “There’s nothing here that anyone with a library card could not ascertain. And what about the next 30 years?”

Miranda smiled. “It’s what’s *behind* the title page. Let me put it into context: Jerry Auerbach was born into a place of bigotry. And it progressed from there”

Bryce looked at the file and then at the agent. “What are you implying?”

Miranda elaborated. “No implications. Facts—that will complete a picture, that will paint a narrative, that will make sense and direct us.”

She could see the confusion in the room. They had been chasing potential suspects and analyzing data from victims for months.

“This is what I do. Foundations. May I continue?”

All eyes were now focused and directed to the special agent as she established the profile.

“Jerry Auerbach was born into a military life. Fort Bliss, occupied 1,700 miles on the Texas -Mexico border at the Rio Grande River.

“That’s 1700 square miles, with a population of basically 8000 white soldiers and families.

“Since the 1850s America’s ‘white’ interests were first and foremost. Protection of settlers from the Indians. Securing the border during the Mexican Revolution in the early 1900’s.

In WW II, the Fort prepared for Japanese POWS, as well as protecting 'master race' German scientists, soon to be used for the advancement of American rocketry in the neighboring New Mexico desert."

Doc was becoming irritated. "I don't need a history lesson. I need a profile!"

Miranda ignored the comment, and pressed on, determined to paint the full picture.

"There was not much for a kid growing up as a military brat to do. Jerry would frequently cross the border. Little kid, little trouble. Big kid, big trouble.

As his south of the border mischievous activities - 'booze, broods, brawls'- increased, the local constabularies became increasingly tired of arresting him—only to release him back to the military. Apparently, issues of jurisdictions saved him from serious jail time.

There were too many border incidents for the Fort Bliss Commandant.

Therefore, Artillery Crew Chief Jerome Auerbach, Sr. was given a choice, which was more like a directive. Either he, or his son would be going off the base.

Not willing to jeopardize his own career, Junior was offered his choice of the Waterford Academy for troubled teens, or the Texas Military Institute. (a.k.a. TMI) The latter was chosen."

Seeing that she had their attention Miranda plowed forward. "The records from TMI showed Jerry to have been a reasonably good student but again without discipline. There were repeated skirmishes with the 'townies'.

“Senior Auerbach reached a deal with the school. To remain Jerry had to complete the Junior ROTC program”—in hopes this would ‘straighten him out.’”

As the pages were turned the group could see that young Jerry adapted to the military regimens. “He even had the potential to become an officer. He liked being able to boss others around. However, unsealed records showed he often pushed the limits in the category of discipline, which implied hazing. Especially with minorities.”

Miranda read on. “With pressure from the superiors at Senior’s Fort Bliss, TMI pushed for Jerry Auerbach to be admitted to The Citadel, located in Charleston, South Carolina.”

Doc laughed. “The Peter Principle in its full glory. Promote him out of their hair!”

Miranda stared at the group. She could not tell if Doc was laughing with her or at her. “It’s a prolife! It leads us! Just follow!”

Her stare then redirected and zeroed in on Doc. “Psychological forensics.”

It seemed that Doc had gotten the message. He sat back in his chair and did what he was not used to doing – follow.

“Why is the Citadel important to our case?” She asked, waiting for a nod to continue. Agent Montgomery was now in full swing. This was her element.

“The Citadel was a bastion for the white military elite. Its origins were bathed in white supremacy. It was started in 1822 to defend the city against slave uprisings and contributed its student body to the Confederacy, as well as battles during Civil War.

“Jerry apparently became enamored with the history of the Citadel. He heard about secret societies within its walls. Groups designed to further and advance white elites into high places in business and government.

“This became frustrating to him. He was not from the proper background. Army brat – a ‘grunt’ in their eyes. He loved The Citadel. It did not love him back. If there were secret societies- they remained a secret.”

“Jerry was not to be ‘one of them’- -the elite. He would graduate with a commission as a second lieutenant. He liked giving orders but was not ready to take them, and in his mind be the ‘first to die’ in a battle – as most often second lieutenants were- leading the charge!”

“Jerry applied and was accepted to medical school, in his home state of Texas. He figured it was a guaranteed five years off, if you include internship, before he would owe service. He would be a doctor and not see action.”

Seeing that she had their attention, Miranda paused here for a moment. “How wrong he was!”

She pressed on. “As we know his internship was at Charity Hospital. His first encounter with New Orleans. As far as we can ascertain, it was uneventful. He must have feared dismissal and the draft.” Now is where it goes off the rails for Jerome Auerbach.”

“He owes service. He was commissioned and promoted to First Lieutenant – time served as a reservist during school. Here it takes a dark turn. Vietnam!

“Initially, Jerry caught a break. He was sent to Tokyo to

perform general medical work for the troops and staff stationed there.

“But, in the end, Jerry was Jerry. Comments and fights with, and I now quote from the official record: ‘those niggers and gooks’. It landed him in the brig multiple times. He was also caught pilfering medical supplies and selling them on the black market; and on occasion leveraging those in exchange for ‘female companionship’.

“Americans in Southeast Asia had enough on their plate. The commanding officer wanted Auerbach gone and put him on a transport to Da Nang. He would either shape up or die. The brass did not care.”

Exhausted from explaining the details of Auerbach’s life, Miranda sat down. She saw that Sarah was taken aback, thinking that Bryce had never realized his risk, and that Dickie was most likely hoping he would not have to track that crazy ‘son of a bitch’ down.

Doc put into words what they were all thinking: “Now what?”

Miranda returned a smile to Doc. “It gets better – or worse.”

Sarah looked at Miranda. “How much worse can it get?”

“Jerry was no better in Da Nang than in Tokyo. But he was a doctor, and they needed medical help. Once again, he was ‘shuffled out’ of his troubles. Jerry was assigned to a Ranger group as their medical officer.”

Sarah asked again: “How do you know all this?”

Miranda answered: “My boy Fish.”

Bryce chimed in. “Fish who?”

“He is my researcher at the FBI. I may have led him to believe I can help him out of data retrieval—and into field work. Anyway, Fish dug deep. Soon it will be clear as to why we need to find Auerbach.

“Fish found out that Jerry was involved in some covert activities. Activities that were not ‘kosher’ in countries we were not supposed to be in. Therefore, said atrocities could not be brought to light. Once again Jerry was shipped out.

Ironically, Jerry was sent back to Fort Bliss! Sort of where it all started for him. His father was retired and off -base, living in Florida.

“Jerry had one more year to be out of the military’s hair. He mostly towed the line—except for revisiting his old haunts on both sides of the border. Booze. Broads. Brawls.

He focused his off time taking flying lessons, as well as secretly ‘networking’ liaisons into black-marketing medical supplies.

Once discharged, Charity was obligated to take him back to complete his residency. However, he never finished. After the year with you all, and the Patty Jane incident - which was not the only one—he left.”

Dickie took a deep breath. He was complimentary - from one investigator to another: “Very interesting and complete—except for the more than 30 -year gap in time!”

Miranda was reading Doc’s mind. She could see he was putting things in order. “The gap only applies to us.”

Miranda concluded her profile of Jerome Auerbach.

“You are correct, Dr. Brash. Now we know that Jerry Auerbach is a racist, a bigot, who despises authority. He

needed to leverage any power he thought he had over others. If he knew of your pledge, that could have triggered a vengeance towards those he resents.

He may have viewed your class as males avoiding the draft. Privileged. Entitled. Like those in the secret societies at the Citadel. He saw action in the war. In his mind he eliminated the weak. Your class had females, Jews, and Blacks.”

Bryce raised a question well worth considering. “If he was so deranged, why did he wait for all these years?”

Miranda provided a chilling reply. “Maybe he *didn't*. Maybe there *are* others. Maybe his resentment of authority has manifested in other institutions that had power over him. I’m having Fish dig deeper into Texas Military Academy and the Citadel.

“In the meantime, we need to find him. At this moment in time your class is the bullseye of the target.”

Doc looked at the group and acknowledged Miranda’s yeoman’s effort. “Like I said before. I think JJ knows more than he is letting on. There is a connection somehow. And that connection brought to light the oath. I’ll bet somehow JJ triggered Jerry. What if our group was just part of a series of other misdeeds?”

Miranda sat back and smiled. She won this game and was well ahead in the set. Now for the match.

Borders and Boundaries

For a moment, the former Chief Medical Examiner of Orleans Parish, Louisiana felt like he'd never left. It was both exhilarating and uncomfortable. Memories, good and bad swept over him. The bad won out. *Solve the case. Leave it all behind—again.*

Benjamin Brash was thinking, methodically and forensically: *At first it seemed simple enough - albeit tragic. Someone was killing off members of the 509 cohort. Someone who knew of that so called 'Hypocritical Oath'. Bit- by -bit the surviving members were eliminated as suspects. Even the most obvious, beginning with himself, and ending with JJ. They were now all possible future victims. If not the 'oathers', then who? And why now?*

Doc needed more out of JJ. He had to be the link, whether he knew it or not. The UNSUB was pointing to resident Jerome "Jerry" Auerbach. They had a connection-past and perhaps present.

He headed over to Mag's. That part of the Quarter was quiet at this time of year. There were only a scant number of tourists bedecked in purple -and gold -beaded necklaces, looking for that original Cajun music. He was sure he would find JJ.

Doc sat at a small table out of view from the stage where JJ was jamming. His thoughts were like a free-for-all in his head. *How did such a brilliant 'kid' like JJ fall so far so fast? He was a genius. So much promise. What were his demons?* Then he thought of himself. *A meteoric rise and sudden fall. Different circumstances – similar endings. Maybe they were not so different. But maybe they were. It seemed that JJ was doing penance for sins past. Redemption or resurrection with his illegal, yet charitable work.* Doc sighed. He was okay wallowing in the abyss.

The music stopped. The lights dimmed, and the shadow of the pianist slowly and methodically exited the stage, cane in hand. Doc followed.

JJ turned. “And I thought you just came for the music. Any special requests? Otherwise, I wish to be left alone.”

“I believe we have more to talk about.”

“You said I am not your so-called ‘suspect’. If I am to be a victim- so, be it. My life is on the short end anyway.”

“JJ. I have hunches about things. I cannot get it out of my head that you and Jerry have a connection. That connection led him back to New Orleans—and to us. You need to come clean.”

JJ was still being elusive: “Not sure what you are driving at ‘Mr. Former Chief Medical Examiner’?”

“It’s ‘doctor’. We both earned the title, despite circumstances. I still have a great sixth sense. Maybe that’s what made me who I was. I know you are ill. And you were clear about your lack of available medical care and no health insurance. My sense tells me that you, nonetheless, have access

to the meds you require—and to whatever else you need for your clinic.”

The frail piano player inched up the stairs.

“JJ. Doctor Vetter. Your goals are noble. Your clinic serves a valuable purpose. Especially in the light of the closing of ‘Big Charity’. Where are you getting your supplies from? My money’s on Jerry Auerbach.”

JJ straightened up, turned, and spoke with a resonance that took Doc by surprise.

“Brash! I need my clinic to run. It’s all I have!”

“Yes. You have a purpose – which is more than I can say.”

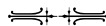
“And you, Ben. Why so involved? Why are my issues so important to you?”

“It’s not about me. Bryce’s wife Sarah dragged me into it. She was an anchor in my family when my wife Margo died. Believe me when I tell you that I was the prime suspect in the beginning.”

JJ laughed. “I don’t believe it.”

“It’s true. That FBI agent you met? She was convinced that I lost it after my daughter Collette was killed in that Mardi Gras Ballroom shooting. Now she is using my loyalty to our cohort – and you—to find the person responsible for the murders. You must come clean on Jerry.”

“Walk with me, Ben.”



The two former classmates, with shared tragedies, made their way to the shack of a building that JJ called his clinic.

“Believe it or not. I bumped into Jerry in a bar in Mexico City, sometime in the late 1990’s. We recognized each other. It was a wild period of my life, which as you can plainly see, I am now paying for.”

Doc was making progress. He felt the best strategy was to let JJ get it off his chest. Maybe this was something he had longed to do; without anyone who’d listen.

“We were two Americans in a dive bar in the Zona Rosa. We had some tequila and told our stories. I was trying to make my way back into the States and to get a medical license. He told me he was doing some *locum tenens* work on the Texas border.

“He was easy to talk to. He listened. Like you are doing right now. We spoke of our shared hatred of the systems that had turned us away.

As the day turned into evening, he told me he was living and working in the Brownsville, Texas area, and that he knew people who could help get me out of Mexico.”

Doc was glued to every word.

JJ continued. “Jerry was drinking his inhibitions away. He began to speak about his Vietnam experiences. The missions. The killings. The enemies. He was becoming increasingly graphic. Then he suddenly pivoted to the importance of getting rid of the enemies that threatened America. I wasn’t sure I was hearing him correctly. I asked him for clarification. What he more than implied was he believed he was fighting a new war. One to preserve a white heterosexual, and able-bodied America!”

JJ told Doc he’d left out the part where he was HIV positive.

“Why didn’t you get up and leave?”

“I was stuck there. I thought he could be a way back. I became curious about his reasons to be in Mexico City. He was initially evasive. He mentioned some business dealings that frequently took him south of the border. He would not elaborate.”

Doc listened intently, processing the narrative. It was fitting the FBI profile. Miranda had indeed done her job well.

“Then, what transpired? How did you end up here?”

JJ took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. It was like he was back in his Lehigh Valley church making a confession. A burden being lifted.

“Jerry worked for some clinics on both sides of the border. He had a small airplane and could easily cross from one private airstrip to another.

“We parted company. He gave me his address. Over time—I can’t even remember how long, I crossed over the border. I was alone. Any communications I had with the National Board for Medical Licensing fell on deaf ears. I was basically blackballed for reasons that made no sense. I paid for my transgressions.

“Jerry. took me in as his assistant. Strictly off the books. I did this because he said he had connections to help me get a license in the US. I was naïve, and desperate. I was tired of Mexico, and tired of trying on my own.”

“What happened next?”

“I got worried. Fearful. My illness was progressing. It was getting harder to get my meds without creating suspicions.

I was clearly not part of *his* white America. I also discovered Jerry was dabbling in chat rooms on the ‘dark web’. Conversations about ‘Social Darwinism’ and Master Races.

“I saw a communication from something called the ABT. I researched it—Aryan Brotherhood of Texas. He was ready to utilize his covert skills from Vietnam for the cause. I did not *want* to know the cause. I just knew it was time to go. I was genuinely scared.

“When Hurricane Katrina happened. I told him I wanted to go to New Orleans and help the displaced. It was so confusing, and no one was checking credentials. It backfired.

“Jerry had an idea: He would help me set up a clinic. He would be my supplier. I found out, too late, that my clinic would be a backroom distribution center for black market medical supplies on the Gulf Coast.

“I was trapped. But at least I was practicing medicine.”

Doc finally spoke: “You had no idea about any other activities he may have been involved in – like killing people?!”

“I was getting sicker! I found a calling. I put on blinders. He left me alone. I had limited interactions with him.”

“If Jerry knew you were gay, not to mention ill, he would have killed you.”

“I believe it. Maybe he did know but spared me because I had value.”

Doc felt empathy for his classmate. Maturity came late, and with a cost. He was ready to close the circle on prime suspect Jerome Auerbach.

Benjamin Brash, MD, JD, had a plan. Was JJ Vetter ready to hear it?

The Plan

A large mahogany table that adorned the dining room on Robert Street was now covered with the investigatory files representing months of work.

Unable to wait, Bryce posed the first question. “Are we sure it’s Jerry?”

Doc pointed to the gathered evidence. “The field has been narrowed. He is far and away our most likely suspect.”

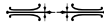
As the discussion progressed, both Doc and Bryce recalled times, back in the day, when Jerry was either flirting or hovering at ‘the Grill’. He seemed ever-present, even when unwanted. “He could have easily overheard our discussions. Our momentary disillusionment could have been his trigger.”

Miranda was more than willing to go to Brownsville and arrest him. He fit her profile. She was coasting on the euphoria of her profile, and was eager to wrap it up. And now, she had the authority. This was her way back into the good graces of the FBI.

Doc was more circumspect. “It’s a compelling narrative, but circumstantial. Even I know you could never get the needed warrants.

“Can you get your FBI guy to dig deeper into Auerbach’s

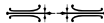
dark web interactions? We need to know more. JJ was totally spooked by his behaviors and comments. And yet, I believe there is still communication between them. Something is not adding up. Based upon our suspects *modus operandum*, JJ should be dead. He is sick. He is from a marginalized group. We need to get JJ to open more about his status with Jerry.”



Miranda paid another visit to her man behind the monitors. Albert (Fish) Fisher was not happy.

“So, you are back. Good for you. What about me? Here I am, still staring at screens. I am *not* your personal geek! My plate is full. You are not the only agent with requests and demands.” After a long pause, he spoke more quietly. “I thought we were a team.”

“Fish, I promise I’ll help you if you help me. You must trust me. Please, I need to know about Jerry Auerbach’s whereabouts and behavior patterns. I know you can do it. It’s important. Lives are hanging in the balance.”



Albert Fisher was good at what he did. He was the New Orleans bureau computer geek. Stuck alone in a room going nowhere, he constantly ruminated about his lot in life. *The only difference between my rut and a grave is the ‘depth of the hole’*. He longed for some excitement beyond data clicks.

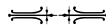
Reluctant, and somewhat angry, he continued his probe into the life of Jerry Auerbach. Suddenly his thoughts along with his spirits began to rise. *Lives were in the balance. I am part of the team. I am needed. I am important. Trust Miranda.*

Fish probed deeper and deeper into Jerry Auerbach. It soon became more and more disturbing. Auerbach had established connections with the Matamoros, a Tamaulipas Cartel in the Brownsville, Texas area. It seemed he acted like a mule for them. He used his plane to carry drugs and 'suspicious' people back and forth. In exchange they allowed him some side action of his own – selling contraband goods to clinics of questionable credentials.

Albert Fisher stood a little taller as he exited his pixelated flashing cocoon and handed his report to Miranda.

She was beyond pleased. "This explains the supply connections to JJ and his clinic. This could lead to something bigger. This will not go unnoticed. Please, keep digging."

The deeper Fish dug, the more sinister it became as he hacked into Jerry Auerbach's chat room interactions. Jerry was evil. Fish was having a momentary second thought. *Is this what I really want to uncover? This information could get us killed! Maybe a rut is preferable to a grave?*



Doc and Bryce concocted a plan to bring Jerry to the clinic and hopefully expose his actions regarding the 509 cohort. They entered JJ's clinic and waited for him to finish his 'patient' tasks.

Upon seeing JJ again, Bryce spoke first. “I admire your commitment.”

JJ laughed darkly. “Too little, too late. Once I’m gone, so is the clinic. I really thought I could do some good here. But HIV/AIDS might have other plans for me!”

Doc intervened. “All is not lost. Perhaps we can help.”

JJ looked them square in the eyes. “What can you possibly offer this late in the game?” Pointing to Bryce. “You going to take over the clinic? Leave the ‘ivory tower’ and slum with me?”

Doc brought the conversation back to their collective mission. “JJ, we think Jerry has been killing off members of our class; for sure with the original group of 10 from our third year in school. We don’t know why. Montgomery – the FBI agent is looking into that. What we do know is we need to bring him here.

“This is what we propose. Get word to Jerry that you are expanding services to include abortions. You need supplies. ‘Off -the -book’ supplies. You have a doctor—a former cohort classmate. Someone who has the skill set. Leak to Jerry that you are also ill and may need to ‘retire’. This classmate is willing to continue to be available for him.”

JJ looked at both with skepticism. “And where’s the ‘quo’ in this *quid pro quo*?”

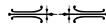
Bryce answered that question. “I’ll legitimize your clinic. I have clout. I’ll get you better facilities, staff, and supplies. Your clinic can continue to serve your constituency. Legacy JJ. Legacy.

Doc continued with his plan of action. “Jerry must know that Louisiana has strict abortion laws, and there is a high rate of pregnancy within the Black community. He would see this as an opportunity. He is an extreme racist. In his sick and twisted mind, he will not only be ending lives, he will also profit from it.”

This was a lot for JJ to process. Doc knew that he had been through rough times. Maybe this was pushing the envelope, but there was no turning back.

“Tell him that you found someone with connections to other so-called ‘clinics’ that need black market goods. This will be too good for him to pass up. Then hit him with your illness.”

JJ got the hint. “So, I am the bait!”



Sarah and Miranda were again in their usual positions on a porch. It seemed that most discussions and issues were resolved on the swings overlooking the greenery of the Garden District or the Lakefront. The steady rhythm, and the creaky to -and- fro, were the only sounds for some time.

Sarah broke the silence. “So, this is coming to a head. I hope Doc is not in too deep. I would never forgive myself if he got hurt. We dragged him into this.”

“I will not let that happen. I can see the love you all have for him. I must admit I have grown quite fond of him. No matter how this shakes out, I will keep him safe.”

Sarah looked at Miranda with a fondness she realized she

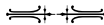
hadn't felt since they'd first met.. She realized that this hard FBI agent had a soft spot when it came to Doc. She wanted him back in the city as well.

More to-and -fro of the swings before Miranda spoke again. "It's a cruel irony for the man who spent his life searching for clues to allow the dead to 'speak'. To tell their story and bring resolution to families.

Sarah placed her hand into Miranda's. "And yet his story remains unfinished. While the murder of his daughter remains unresolved, he will have no peace."

After a long pause, Miranda began to tear up. "I know our start was rocky. But I want to be your friend. I want to be all your friends. This journey has introduced feelings I have never experienced. I feel like part of a family I had always longed for. I will find the perpetrators of that horrific massacre. I am a cold case expert. I will not rest until justice and peace is brought to Benjamin Brash."

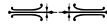
Another even longer pause, a deep inhale, and tears wiped away. "But one step at a time. We must resolve this case first."



Miranda's phone buzzed. Fish was at the sending end. "I have news. I know where Auerbach lives. I have his address. I also found a site he uses to communicate with the people he supplies. It was not an easy task. I would tread slowly, or you will spook him. He's dangerous!"

"Thank you, Albert Fisher. Great work! When this shakes out Nazzizzi will know how integral you were. He will put

your name on his speed dial. Keep digging. I'm taking it to him for a warrant."

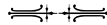


Bryce found JJ at Mag's, entertaining a small, but regular following. After the applause, he approached. "Any interest in a home cooked meal?"

JJ looked up from his only true friend—the piano. "Why so generous?"

"It's time we put our plan into action. Come up to my house. Have a meal with us. We can discuss our next steps."

With that JJ got to ride in a Rolls Royce for the first and only time in his life.



JJ entered the house on Robert Street. He looked at Sarah. "Very nice digs. Bryce has done well. Sometimes things work out—and sometimes they don't."

"If you like my house, you should see the Doc's, over on Audubon Place. That's a house!"

Once again, Doc refocused everyone on their mission. "Hate to break up the party. We have business. And that house you are referring to was never my house. It was always Margo's."

JJ responded with a smirk. "Rich or poor, it's good to have money—wherever it comes from."

“Enough banter” Doc barked. “The devil had its due with me too. JJ you are not alone in the misery department.”

Miranda informed the group that she knew where Auerbach lived, as well as the website he used to arrange drop-offs. She finished with a rhetorical question. “Are we still conjecturing about his guilt?”

Doc looked at JJ. “It’s time to reel in Jerry.”

JJ frowned. “Bait.”

Doc forged ahead with the proposed plan. “We need to keep harping on the abortions. Let him believe you have a significant number of clients. Money talks.”

JJ pointed out an important condition. “Jerry usually contacts me. Don’t you think he will become suspicious?”

Doc shook his head. “Greed wins out. Plus, when he thinks your days are numbered, he will try and act on it. After all, you were part of the cohort. And when he realizes your abortionist is another member of the cohort—it will be too much to resist. He’ll come.”

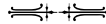
JJ hung his head low; “You don’t need to continue to hack into his website. I have his cell number.”

Bryce looked at him in disbelief. “You’re kidding! You know what’s going on! You know he is a prime suspect in murders of our classmates—your classmates.”

JJ was not going to be made to feel guilty. “Too bad. Why should I have trusted you at all? You came out of the blue with a far-fetched tale about some conversation in a bar from decades ago. You are presuming blame without definite proof. He was-is- my supplier. I needed him.”

Doc intervened. “You told us he that he scared you. That his behavior was erratic. You were happy to be out of Mexico and back in NOLA.”

“All very true. But at a distance. He filled a need.”



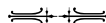
Fish’s probing into the life of Jerome ‘Jerry’ Auerbach revealed that he was a ‘hell-raiser’. He loved the strip clubs on Bourbon Street. He liked the brothels on the other side of the river.

JJ confirmed that he would indeed take him around where he could ‘get some action’. Straight action. Kinky action. “He likes the places I know.”

Miranda stood up: “Is everyone through? JJ, like it or not, we need to draw him out and find out if he’s our person of interest. Make the call. Invite him to the city to meet your new associate and go over details of your expansion. Tell him it will be worth the trip.”

After a pause and feeling more compassion for JJ, Miranda concluded. “If our calculations are correct—-and we believe they are—he will come after you. We will have your back”.

Bryce supported this. “And I will live up to my part of the deal. You will get your legacy, and maybe even a license.”



Miranda found Doc walking along the trolley tracks on St

Charles Avenue. "Where were you?" She then saw that he was crying.

"I went over to my house on Audubon Place. I walked around the property. Sat on our swing. The one I pushed Collette on. Climbed the stairs. Went right to the front door. I could not open it. Just too many memories."

Doc wiped away his tears and straightened up. "I really need Sarah to sell it. I must get out of this city! Why did I ever come back?"

"Maybe it's time for some new memories. Fate has brought you back to the city. To your friends. And to me."

"To you?"

"Believe it or not, yes. My initial suspicions were progressively replaced with admiration. Your willingness to help your friends. Your loyalty. And my memories of you in the Katrina and Memorial days came back and made me respect you even more. You belong here."

Doc cleared his throat and gave a weak smile. "Agent Montgomery. Are you saying you like me?"

"I would certainly like to get to know you better."

"Professionally or personally? I am damaged goods."

"We all have our own crosses to bear. That does not mean it has to be alone."

"I am not so sure. I spent so much time investing in a life here. Medically. Legally. Politically. Personally. And it all fell apart. I don't have the strength or the will to start over."

Doc became lost in thought. *My plan to return to New York. The derailment brought on by love. The dedication to my job and the emotional distance it cost with Collette.*

The Hypocritical Oath

“Ben, once this is over, we could dig deeper into what happened to Collette. Maybe with that resolution you will have the peace you need to return. I have resources. With your forensic skills and my background, we could do it.”

“I am not sure about digging through the scars and opening old wounds.”

“It’s better than retreating into bottles of bourbon.”

Miranda believed she was beginning to crack the hard exterior of Benjamin Brash. But the moment ended when Sarah found them. “That’s nice. You too, together.”

Doc looked at her: “Don’t get carried away. What’s up?”

“JJ reached out to Jerry. He was intrigued. He’ll meet him—and Bryce.”

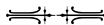
The Stakeout

Miranda informed the chief that another stakeout—this time at the clinic—would be necessary. She did not think anything dangerous might occur, but did not want to take chances. Not with Bryce. And certainly not with Doc. Nazzizzi agreed to provide a perimeter of security and armed backup. “Miranda, be careful. You are working with civilians. If anything goes wrong...”

Bryce was still less than happy. He was one of the most celebrated infertility specialists in the South, now posing as an illegal abortionist. If word got out—and misconstrued -his career was over. Without realizing it, he was muttering to himself: “That damn reunion. The memorial. The cohort. The pledge! How stupid we were, and how stupid am I for getting so involved.”

Miranda overheard Bryce’s quiet lament. She reminded him that the FBI had his back and would ensure that his professional stature would see no harm.

Now they waited. Waited for a call from JJ.



Looking like someone whose hangover had just stabilized to a tolerable level, Jerry Auerbach stumbled into Mags Bar and Bed.

JJ made himself presentable—after a long night of music, alcohol, and deception. Together they found a small street corner café with outdoor seating. The air was warm, and the sun felt good. During coffee and beignets, JJ again pressed his case to allow Bryce into the fold.

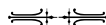
“Jerry. I told you I’m not well. Bryce is willing to keep my clinic.”

JJ could sense Jerry’s doubt, watching as he slowly swirled a finger in his coffee. “Why would he do that? Help a population he is trying to eliminate- if you get my drift.”

JJ paused. The ruse was falling apart. *He was smarter than that.* Then he made his case again. “I took him at his word. I have no love for Bryce Teller, but we go way back. I think he has some guilt for having ignored me during my fall from grace. I am willing to use him for my own ends.”

Jerry’s finger moved from the coffee to the powdered sugar of the beignets. He poked the dough and stared at the crowd. “I’m not really into your sob story. But I do like easy money. I don’t want to lose my distribution center - a.k.a.- the clinic- for ‘whatever’ I bring in from Mexico. - but I’m not totally convinced.”

Jerry rose from his chair and began to exit the café. He turned to JJ. “I’ll call you.” He ended this meeting with a sarcastic dig. “Use your piano tip money to pay the tab.”



The swing on the porch on Robert Street was rocking faster than usual, as was the back- and- forth pacing. Would the call come from JJ? Or was it game over, with Jerry in the wind.?

Doc was hoping to end it and leave NOLA. Miranda wanted to solve this case as well as where it might further lead; specifically, the possibility of cartel activity in the Gulf South. Bryce just wanted his golden life back.

The phone rang. The voice at the sending had an announcement. "The meet is on. Come to the clinic. Just you and Bryce."

Miranda assured Bryce she would be nearby with eyes on the clinic. "He is a sick person, but he's methodical. He is not going to be 'up in the air'. Either he'll be in or out. If he's agreed to meeting it means he's likely in."

Miranda rehearsed his story as they drove into the Tremé Faubourg area. Inside JJ and Jerry were waiting inside. "Just stick to the narrative."

Jerry initiated the conversation. "You look very familiar. How do I know you.? Other than by reputation, which begs the question: Why are you here?"

Bryce inhaled. Held it for a moment. Exhaled, and began the prepared mantra. "I was in your first rotation as a resident. It was my third year in school on the Charity service. Ten of us were assigned to Ward 509. Your ward with Anatole Wasser -Gold."

Jerry laughed. "You have a good memory. I barely remember those days."

Bryce continued, "When it's your first exposure to sickness, death and dying it's hard to forget."

“Okay. So, I know you and you know me. Why you? A big shot doctor in the city.” He pointed to JJ. “Why risk your career for this wreck of a man? Who is he really to you?”

Bryce found his rhythm. “We were a tight group. The ten of us. When JJ fell on troubled times, we abandoned him. We were struggling to stay in school. Vietnam.”

Jerry stared straight into Bryce’s eyes. “You don’t have to remind me about Vietnam. I was there. I was no draft dodger med student. You think you saw things about death on the wards. I know about death!”

JJ felt the temperature rising in the room. He needed to get back on track. “Dial it down Jerry. Remember, business is business.”

Bryce continued. “What you see on the outside is not the complete picture. I believe in ‘like-minded people’. You get what I am saying? I want to bring those into life. On the flip side I want to control the population of those not so ‘like-minded’, if you get my drift.” Bryce did everything he could to not vomit in his mouth, as he said words so contrary to his core beliefs. But he held it together. He was in it now. “For me it’s a win- win. I help JJ and I help the city.”

Jerry was quiet. It appeared he remained suspicious. “Again, why would you risk it all? I’ve read about you.”

JJ interceded and seized upon greed. “Jerry. If the clinic goes down, you lose your little distribution center.”

Now Jerry was pissed. “JJ, you just don’t know when to speak and when to keep your mouth shut.”

JJ saw his opportunity. “Jerry what are you going to do?”

Kill me? I'm already dying. I'm giving you an opportunity to keep your little venture going. I remember our conversations about your little white supremacy groups from Vietnam."

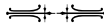
After a pause. JJ gave his final pitch. "Jerry. Make some money. Help me out. For the sake of our times in Mexico."

Bryce saw the opportunity to reel Jerry in. He was going to play his part to the max. "I have lots of influence around here. There are others like me. I know of other clinics that could use supplies of all sorts. You could expand. Of course, there would need to be something in it for me."

Jerry liked the dark side he was seeing in Bryce. "I never would have thought. College frat boy. Party boy."

Bryce was going to seal the deal. He found his beat. *Play the part*. He hated what he was about to say but he needed to say it. He could taste the acid coming up from his stomach. "Maybe girls should be nurses and Blacks should be orderlies. Each in their own place. Agree?"

Jerry smiled. "A real Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Maybe we could do some business. Let's you and me grab some dinner." He looked over at JJ. "We can leave the gay boy to his music."

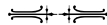


Bryce agreed to meet Jerry at 8pm at Tujague's Restaurant on Decatur Street. It was quiet and a fixed menu. No wasted time ordering. Straight to drinking and dining. And getting reacquainted.

Miranda had told Bryce that she and Dickie would be at another table. The restaurant was small. Eyes on him always.

“We have our weapons, but it is extremely unlikely anything nefarious would occur such a public place. Worst case scenario will be a Jerry ‘walk away.’”

Doc reminded him to bring up the cohort. “See his reactions to those who were ill. Draw him out. Let him ramble. Beyond that don’t push too hard. We are beyond playacting.”



Bryce arrived at the restaurant. Jerry was already seated in the corner. Unbeknownst to him two tables away sat FBI agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery and chief investigator from the Office of the Medical Examiner, Richard (Dickie) Brennan. They appeared to be an ordinary couple looking for a quiet dinner—except they were both armed.

After finding Jerry, Bryce looked around and remarked: “You like this place? Really outdated? I could have done better.”

“Sit down. We’re not here for fine dining. Let’s get to it. I really don’t get you. What’s it about? Surely not JJ.”

Bryce thought about Doc’s instructions. “It’s about loyalty. Loyalty to my cohort of 10, to my city, and its changing culture. First impressions are important. We all bonded. JJ should have been given another chance. Others have met untimely deaths. JJ’s illness is progressing. His time could be short. I feel a need to right a wrong.”

Miranda glanced over to the table. She could see that Jerry was uneasy.

Jerry appeared lost in thought for a moment then said, “I barely remember your group.”

Bryce named the members. Jerry’s back arched as he grabbed for his straight -up bourbon. The big gulp told him that Jerry’s memory had returned—with a vengeance.

“You know what Bryce? This isn’t going to work out. It just doesn’t sit well with me.”

“But what about JJ and the clinic? No loyalty to him?”

“None! Just another queer getting his just desserts. And the clinic? Who needs it? I’ll find other avenues. I have connections.”

With that, Jerry Auerbach got up. “Tab is on you. Bye”. He disappeared into the Quarter.

Bryce walked over to Miranda and Dickie and sat down in a bit of a shock. “I tried.”

Miranda comforted Bryce. She ordered him a drink as she removed the wire taped to his perspiring chest. “It was a long shot. But I think I heard enough to go after him for smuggling. Even if not our primary goal it’s a start. But we will need to keep a close eye on JJ. If we believe Jerry is our suspect—and still twisted enough to finish his quest of eliminating the weak, JJ’s a sitting duck.”

Limbo

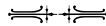
Miranda put the top up on her red Mustang. The air was too still for convertible driving. Almost stagnant. Just like the case. Driving to headquarters, her thoughts drifted back to tennis. *Matches and rallies that seemed to drag on. Ad in. Deuce. Ad out. When was the match point going to come?* She entered the secure lot on Leon C Simon Blvd. and headed to the office of the Chief.

“Boss. We are in limbo. Auerbach did not take the bait. I’m sure he’s our guy. I just need more time.”

Nazzizzi was pacing the room. “What’s your next move?”

“We know he is involved in cross -border smuggling. If we dig deeper there, maybe we can at least arrest him for that.”

The Chief smiled. “Like Al Capone. Couldn’t get him for murder but got him on tax evasion.” Miranda nodded, “It’s something.”



Miranda’s next stop was the data research room. There she found agent Albert Fisher in the dark, save for the light

emanating from the multiple computer screens—still hunting for information.

“Good morning, Fish. Anything more you can tell me about Jerry Auerbach? My case is as dark as your room.”

“Like I told you, this guy is a bad actor. Hates authority. Bad ass in Vietnam. Living along the border allowed him to meet some very evil characters. It looks like he does some trafficking in pharmaceuticals – and maybe even people. He uses his small plane to skirt the border and plays close to the Rio Grande. New Orleans is out of his usual pattern.”

Miranda nodded. “I’m sure he is prime for the multiple murders in the Gulf area. There must be a link.”

Fish looked straight at his potential escape from data research. “Remember our deal?”

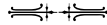
“Yes Fish. Please keep looking. He probably flew from Texas to his victims. Maybe you can track flight records.”

“Fine. However, if he flew VFR—visual flight reference—there may not be filed plans. FYI Miranda, this Auerbach spends a lot of time on the web. In fact, he is on some unusual sites on the dark side. He seems obsessed with the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas. He follows their activities.”

“Fish. This is great work. Any chance he does more than observe?”

Miranda left Fish with more questions than answers. *What sordid things was this Auerbach guy into? What was he capable of?* Turning, she smiled at him. She knew it could not be easy to spend hours digging into the dark recesses of

human nature. “You are more vital to this investigation than you realize.”



Doc and Bryce reconnoitered at Mags. JJ was playing. The music was melancholy. Soft and slow. Doc thought this was like a metaphor of his illness. They patiently waited while JJ received some applause—one of the few pleasures in a declining life that had been filled with loneliness and regret.

JJ was still at his piano leaning against the keyboard. He was listening and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Bryce spoke first. “Jerry would not buy into the plan. He is in the wind.”

Doc continued. “There is more bad news—he is finished with the clinic.”

JJ sighed. “That’s great. The clinic was all I had. You guys abandoned me in med school and now my source is gone. You all are like bad pennies. Just get lost. Please get out of what life I have left!”

Using all his strength to push away from the piano, JJ reached for the cane he now literally leaned on and made for ‘stage left’. “Goodbye and good riddance!”

Doc called out to him. “Listen up. All is not lost. We have a Plan B.”

“Not interested.”

Bryce stood and blocked his path. “Hear us out. Please. We are trying to stop a killer. We need you.”

“How convenient. Now you need me. And afterward, discard me like you all did before? I’m no longer interested in being a patsy.”

Bryce promised JJ that he would do everything he could to keep the clinic going, even if he needed to put his own money into it. And he would also continue to press the medical board to grant JJ a license. He pulled out the letter he drafted.

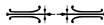
JJ laughed. “Reparations for past sins? I’ll hold you to it – all of it!”

Doc laid out his plan. “Call Jerry. Tell him how upset you are. Let him know what he has probably figured out—you *are* dying. Tell him you have nothing to lose if the clinic goes down. You will tell the police about his laundering through the clinic. If we have him figured out, he will come for you.”

“So. I am the bait—again. You are using me! I get to lose the clinic, and maybe my life!”

Doc tried to reassure JJ. We need to stop him. Your life is in danger. “The weight of the FBI is behind us. They want this guy. We are all taking risks.

Bryce interjected. “We are trying on all fronts. Stop a killer and provide redemption for you. Please, make the call.”



Doc informed Miranda that JJ was on board and insisted that he have around -the -clock protection. It was unknown when – or even if – Jerry would take the bait. “Jerry was like

a hurricane, bearing down on the city. We need to be ready for landfall.”

Miranda promised to make it happen.

Agent Montgomery went back to Chief Nazzizzi. Fish’s deep web dives convinced her that there was even more to Jerry Auerbach than just serial killings. She believed he had some connections to the Aryan Brotherhood and maybe even to some cartel activity in Mexico. The plot was thickening, and she had the bait to reel in a really big fish.

The group gathered at Bryce’s house. Doc and Miranda reviewed the plan. It was now a waiting game.

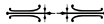
Miranda was all -In on many fronts. It was her way back into the good graces of the FBI. A triumphant return, and a poke into the eye of the attorney general who pushed her post-Katrina downfall. It was also a growing responsibility to the people she had grown fond of, and most likely was putting into danger. She therefore took it personally to keep strict eyes on JJ Vetter while he maintained his routine. A front row table at Mags; and agents perched on a bench outside the clinic despite the late hours. Wherever he wandered, her team was not far behind. Up and down Bourbon Street. In and out of The Sho-Bar; the 500 Club; Ricks; and Yayas. As she maintained the vigil, a constant thought kept creeping through. *JJ was a time bomb that would explode, either by the hand of Jerry Auerbach or by AIDS, and the hand of God.*

Either way it would soon be over.

Days turned into weeks. Radio silence. Could it really be that Jerry Auerbach—racist, bigot, white supremacist,

trafficker, and probable serial killer had vanished? All that effort.

Special Agent Montgomery could see that the once-great forensic pathologist and criminologist was losing patience and regressing. She saw him revisiting sites of haunting memories: The Sheraton Hotel where the Mardi Gras Massacre took place. The Dispersed of Judah and Metairie Cemeteries, where his wife and daughter were interred. Most worrisome was seeing him one night staggering out of the Roosevelt Hotel – home of the Sazerac Bar—and disappearing again. *He had come so far.* Time was running out.



Everyone wanted Doc to stay. Miranda could see that. *Working with him was interesting and exciting.* She admitted to herself, that somewhere along the way that she was attracted to him. *So, what if there was a 15-year age difference?* Something inside her said she needed to hold on to him. She found him on the porch. “I can’t convince you to stay. I know we can find a way to get him.”

“I’m done. I’ll leave it in the hands of the FBI. We had our time. I have to say I have grown fond of you Agent Montgomery. But this city haunts me. I need to take my leave.”

It appeared to be of little use. Doc was going. No forwarding address.

Ending

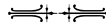
Just everything seemed over, JJ called. “Jerry is coming for one last drop—in two days.”

Miranda informed her boss that a protective perimeter would be needed. Based on a presumed track record, JJ would be in danger. Wanting an inside person—dressed as a patient in the waiting room- she volunteered.

Doc did not trust Jerry’s timetable. “He will surprise JJ. There will be *no supplies*. He’s coming to complete his task.”

Bryce looked at Doc. “Let’s finish it! Then your life is your own.”

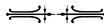
Doc acquiesced. “We need to be on the lookout. Starting now!”



Miranda asked Fish to try and track any small engine aircraft from the Brownsville, Texas area airports that filed any flight plans towards New Orleans. She also asked him to try and find out if any plane that matched Jerry’s aircraft left on visual flight reference—where no plan was needed.

Doc went over to Mags. There, JJ was sleeping off the

previous evening's playing, as well as his night clinic work. He presented the plan. "Miranda will be costumed as a patient in the waiting room. Bryce and I will be with you - on the auspices of continuing the abortion supply discussion. Agents will be outside. If he implies or tries anything, he will be subdued and arrested.



Agent Fisher found Special Agent Montgomery leaving the Chief's office. "Bad news! Jerry's plane is missing from his hangar. To me it means he is already on his way to somewhere."

"Fish, check all the private airfields surrounding New Orleans. See if a plane matching his landed—and when."

Miranda called Doc. "I think he may already be in the city."

"Jerry knows JJ's schedule. We need to put more surveillance at Mag's Bar and the clinic. Someone should tail JJ if he goes on his occasional peregrinations through the quarter. Who knows how he might try and eliminate him?"

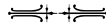
Bryce pondered scenarios. "How could he do it? Would he even try-knowing we are suspicious?"

Doc repeated all of the possible scenarios. "Forensically speaking, he could suffocate him in his sleep. Afterall JJ is beginning to show signs of weakening. He could inject him with something and push him into the heavy night crowd in the Quarter. Or he might try something at the clinic. It's a free -for -all."

Bryce continued. “If he is our suspect in the 509 murders; why stop with JJ? What about us? What about Pam? And he never succeeded with PJ. Will he try again? Maybe his trip here is a false flag, and he went to them instead.”

“No. we pissed him off. And I think it goes beyond the cohort. He’s coming here!”

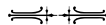
Doc’s head was pounding. *I am ready for this to be over. Find the truth out about Jerry. The other cohort members would be safe. If Miranda has greater interest in Jerry Auerbach, it was her and the FBI’s business.*



Bryce and Doc placed themselves at the clinic. Mag’s Bar had eyes on it, and JJ had a tail. Miranda would come over during night hours, disguised as a patient.

Bryce was surprised at how efficient JJ was in the running an off -the- books clinic with no medical license. Someone was turning a blind eye. Perhaps the community at large was happy that the indigent citizenry received help, in whatever way possible. Seemed no one cared about the funding either -legal or otherwise. Live and let live- “Laissez les bon temps rouler”—let the good times roll.”

As evening turned to night, the level of Bryce’s anxiety level rose. “JJ should be arriving soon. Miranda’s not here. Something is wrong.”



Miranda was running late. She received a frantic call from her man Fisher. “This just got worse—on a number of levels.”

“Spit it out, Fish. I’m on the clock!”

“The Chief got your warrant. Auerbach’s house was entered and searched. Very disturbing. There is a room filled with picture composites from Tulane Medical School, the Citadel Military Academy and the Texas Military Institute. There are big X’ marks on some, and circles on others. Your man has a hit list!”

“Shit, shit, shit!”

“Gets worse! I don’t really know how your friend Doc is going to react. Seems Jerry had linked into sites on the dark web that relate to that incident in New Orleans during that Mardi Gras fiasco. He may or may not have been involved, but either way he knew of the chatter.”

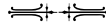
“Bad news is bad news. I need to get to the clinic. Bryce and Doc are there waiting for JJ. Jerry would not be far behind.”

Miranda called Chief Nazzizzi and outlined the unfolding situation.

And yes, her suspicions that there was more to Jerry Auerbach than what was on the surface were legitimate. And her instincts that it linked back to Doc were also true, *but why did it have to be that?*

She needed to get to the clinic ASAP. How suddenly everything had escalated! It was no longer a forensic puzzle. Hate crimes and cartels land in the lap of the FBI—and Special Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery. Lives of her newfound friends were at stake!

And her promise to keep them safe.



It was eerily dark and quiet. The stakeout crews were hidden in their places. She planned to enter the clinic and hide in plain sight. The plan was in motion, and Jerry was a loose cannon who could explode at the slightest provocation.

Upon entering she became aware that something was terribly wrong. She smelled gas.

“Doc! Bryce! JJ!”

No response. Miranda covered her face and opened windows. She found the stove and shut off the jets.

Lying on the floor were her guys - all three of them. They were unconscious but breathing. She opened every window and pulled them one -by- one to the front door and out onto the porch. Panic was setting in. She could feel her pulse pounding with each breath. As seasoned and as used to tragedy, as she was, this was too close to home.

Miranda called her FBI backup team. “I need a BUS! Now! Three men down!”

The ambulances screeched in, ready with the oxygen. “What the hell happened? You all were supposed to be on the lookout!”

“Boss, we watched the doors all evening. There were some comings and goings of patients waiting for the doctor. Auerbach must have arrived before us and waited until your guys arrived.”

Miranda sat down by the ambulance, head in her hands.

She was in tears as she thought about the possible losses that could have occurred. *How could I have put them in such danger?* The paramedics were getting ready to push off to the hospital. She was assured they would be fine, “Each one will have one hell of a headache. Fortunately, there was no explosion.”

By now Sarah and Dickie were on scene. Miranda looked at her and tried to apologize.

Dickie checked out his comrades who were now awake and slowly becoming more alert. “Apparently, Jerry tasered Doc and Bryce as soon as they walked in. JJ was a little worse off given his health issues coupled with the surprise sedative darted into him. They will survive—all is good.”

Sarah gave Miranda a little push. “Luck was on our side today. Jerry almost killed three more. This is way beyond us. Bryce is out. And so is Doc. If you have enough evidence, go, get him yourself.”

“Sarah. You are right. This is on me. I’m accountable.” She ended the confrontation, but not the buzzing in her head. *This spun way out of control. What was I thinking? Civilian lives put into harm’s way. I should have turned it over to NOPD and FBI. I’m better than that. Did my feelings for Doc cloud my professional judgement?*

The ambulance left – without Doc, and against their medical advice. He was now pacing and gesturing. “He figured us out. I’ll bet he thinks he has completed his sick task. He is probably on his way out of the city. I need to find his plane!”

Doc pulled Miranda aside. “If he thinks he succeeded with us, he may go back after PJ Loftus, and then Pamela Prentiss.”

Miranda sucked in some deep air- exhaled -and then gave him the other news. “There are larger issues with Jerry Auerbach. Some of them link back to you—or maybe your family.”

“What does that mean?”

“Ben. Agents raided Auerbach’s home. They found evidence pointing to hit lists. Past and future. There was a big circle around your picture.”

“Agent Montgomery. You think this is all on me?”

“Not at all! That sick bastard was on a vendetta. He targeted any authority figure, weak person, or minority. However, my data researcher found information implying that Jerry was at least aware of the plans for the massacre that included Collette.”

Miranda watched as the armor that defined the Doc cracked wide open, revealing something not seen since they found him on that boat on Block Island. A spinning man about to lose the control he resurrected for his cohort. He sat down sweating and breathing deeply to avoid a meltdown. Finally, he gasped. “Do you think Collette was targeted?”

“Who knows? But there is more to Auerbach than the surface incidents of the 509 cohort.”

Doc looked at Miranda with wide -open eyes. He Inhaled and stood up. “Let’s go!”

Miranda saw vengeance. It scared her. “Ben. This is out of your territory. The FBI will handle it. I also need to inform the NOPD. The attempted murders at the clinic were a local issue. You have done enough. This has gone too far.”

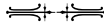
“No.! I’m in it. I’m going with you. I need to confront Jerry

Auerbach! You need to be careful in what you reveal to NOPD about JJ. We brought him into this. He will lose his clinic and could go to jail for practicing without a license.”

Miranda tried again to take Doc out of a potentially dangerous situation. “Let the authorities finish it.”

“I’m going after him, with or without you.”

Special Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery was outwardly distraught, but privately elated to still have Doc by her side.



Miranda pulled her phone out from her tattered disguise and frantically called Albert Fisher. “Fish! We are in the crapper here! Auerbach slipped by us. He almost killed three more people. People I put in harm’s way. I need to find him before he leaves the city.”

Fish was quick on the response. There was an adrenalin rush as he realized he was at last indispensable to the team. “Miranda. I’ve been tracking his plane. It’s at Lakefront Airport. Twenty-two minutes away from you.”

“I owe you big time. Call the control tower. Stall his take-off—in anyway you can.”

Miranda then called her boss with a renewed sense of authority that grew from her deep sense of responsibility. “Alert the NOPD. But tell them to cool their jets. Don’t panic Auerbach. You know how they can be. Jerry Auerbach must be taken alive.”

The Chase

The Agent and the former Chief Medical Examiner were now speeding out from Canal Street. She ran red lights and deftly avoided oncoming traffic. With a quick merge onto the I-610 heading towards Slidell they continued their zig through traffic passing Crowder Blvd and onto Hayne. Ahead was the Stars and Stripes Blvd, and beyond there, the Airport. All this time she was mentally running scenarios to get Auerbach—without getting anyone killed.

They entered the terminal. Ahead was ‘Messina’s at the Airport Restaurant’.

Miranda begged Doc to remain calm. It was their best chance to get him alive. She peeked into the restaurant and scanned the room, just the way she had been trained. *Avoid collateral damage.*

Sitting casually, as if it was just another normal day, was their man. He was sipping a coffee; patiently waiting. Miranda breathed a sigh of relief. Fish had succeeded in the delay.

But Doc was in a rage. “This bastard not only killed my classmates. He knows something about the death of my daughter”.

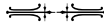
“Ben, I’m ordering you—no begging you- to stand down

and let us do what we do best. The police and the FBI are, as we speak, surrounding the terminal. We will get him.”

Doc was out of control. The thought of Jerome Auerbach escaping again was more than he could process. He pulled away from Miranda and ran into the restaurant.

A momentary panic set in. Jerry bolted from his seat, pulled a gun, and fired into the air—sending the waiting passengers rushing onto the tarmac. Doc stood his ground and faced Jerry Auerbach.

An unpredicted and potentially unforgiveable scenario flashed through the mind of Special Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery: *Doc was a hostage.*



The NOPD squad cars were now on the tarmac, blocking the runway. Miranda tried to ameliorate the rising powder keg situation. She picked up a bull horn and called out to him. “Jerry, there is nowhere to go. It’s over! Let’s end it without more casualties.”

No response.

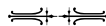
Confrontation

Jerome “Jerry” Auerbach was a soldier. He was used to battle. And he had leverage – Benjamin Brash.

Miranda was relieved to see that Albert Fisher had arrived on the scene. He was needed to establish a communication link to Messinas. Tensions were high. Lives were in the balance. He was no longer staring at screens. It was real and frightening. Miranda witnessed his fear and tried to break the ice. “Be careful what you wish for.”

Jerry picked up the phone. “No interruptions. Doc and I have some things to discuss. Then we will be getting on my plane.”

All Miranda could do at this point was watch, wait and pray. She wanted Auerbach alive, but Doc was the priority. This felt like trying to save a member of her own family. The NOPD snipers had been given the go. As Miranda had emphatically stated: “Only with a clear shot. No collateral damage!”



Former first lieutenant and senior resident of cohort 509

positioned former resident Benjamin Brash as a protective shield. This was combat. And, if anything, he was a survivor.

Sitting face to face Jerry began to smile. Doc failed to see the humor. Words spilled out. "What is this all about? What did our class do to you? What do you know about my daughter?"

Jerry was taking it all in. His silence was further enraging all of Doc's inner demons. *Margo, Collette, Arlade, Douponce, Everson, D'Alos.*

"Doc. Relax. Have a coffee."

"Were you targeting me? Why?"

"I remember you. Benjamin Brash. Always so self-important. The leader of your group."

Doc settled down, Forensically, he knew enough to let him ramble on. Maybe he would learn about Collette. Even if it was to be the last thing he would ever hear.

"All of you. So privileged. Dodging the draft and the war. Leaving it to me. No, Ben. You all were just low-hanging fruit."

"Meaning?"

"I fought those gooks in Vietnam for America. I believe in the strength of white America. No room for the weak and the inferior- the sick, the Blacks and the queers. And yes, I knew about that incident that killed your daughter."

"How?"

"Not important."

"It is to me."

"Aryan Brotherhood Ben. Purification. I saw what they did. I knew I had to join the fight."

"So, running drugs and people across the border wasn't

enough? Seems counterintuitive to bring the non-whites into 'your' America."

"Some things you do for principle—and some things you do for money."

Ben sat there in silence. In his forensic mind he put it all together: *A psychopath. Probably a sociopath as well. Living a low-level criminal life and fantasizing on the dark web. The Mardi Gras Massacre must have been another the trigger to his latent PTSD. His call to action.*

"Again, Jerry. Why us?"

"Why not you? I had to start somewhere. In Vietnam, I killed strangers. I wanted it to be more personal. Feel the rush of life ebbing away."

"So, you made your own hit list." He waited for the reaction. "One way or another it will end here."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. If I go down, I'm taking you down with me."

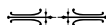
"Guess what, Jerry? I don't care. I have nothing to live for."

"What about your FBI agent buddy? Isn't she worth living for?"

Jerry could see that he hit a nerve. Doc was silent. His posture changed, but no verbal acknowledgement was forthcoming.

After a long pause Jerome Auerbach spoke again "Enough of this. We are leaving. Together."

Jerry picked up the phone. "My shield and I are going to my plane. Stop me, and I kill him."



Jerry exited Messina's and began to walk across the tarmac, with a gun pressed against Doc.

Doc saw the sniper beginning to take aim and yelled out. "Don't shoot him. Our conversation is ongoing!"

Miranda tried to hold the sniper back. She saw it play out in slow motion.—like an overhead slam aimed directly at her opponent.

The shot was taken.

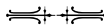
Jerry went down. His gun went off, hitting Doc in the chest.

Miranda ran out to the bodies on the ground, almost forgetting her training in approaching an active situation. Then she remembered. She pushed the gun away and checked their pulses. Jerry Auerbach was dead.

She heard herself scream "Doc is alive!"

She put pressure on his wound and thought of his other close call in JJ's office. "Stay with me Doc. I cannot lose you. I need you."

Airport ambulances screeched onto the scene. EMT's placed an IV into Doc and began to push fluids. Miranda insisted on riding with him as he was rushed to Tulane Hospital.



Maisy Claire was on duty as the stretcher arrived. Doc went straight into surgery.

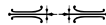
Miranda reported the incident to Chief Nazzizzi.

Bryce, Sarah, and Dickie were alerted. They found

Miranda in the waiting area, with blood still on her hands and clothes.

Sarah went face -to -face with the FBI agent. “What the hell happened? How is Doc?”

Miranda was trembling, which was a side Sarah had never witnessed. “Ben is in surgery—life threatening. He went after Jerry. He was out of control. She was now crying. “Jerry knew about the Mardi Gras Massacre- and Collette. I could not stop him.”



Doc was recovering in a private room at Tulane University Hospital, alone with his thoughts. *What was next? What should I do now? My friends were safe. Jerry is dead—and with him the end of that infantile pledge. Also, there is a lead regarding my daughter. Should I press on, or retreat again? Maybe Mexico this time.*

Miranda entered quietly. “Hello Ben. Is it safe to come in? Do I need my gun?” After a pause. “Or I could get my racquet - if we are still double’s partners.”

He was not unhappy to see her. He had become used to her voice, and her mannerisms. But he had resolved that he was ill-prepared for any life other than solitude. He gave a faint smile. “I’m progressing. I’ll continue my recovery wherever I find myself residing.”

A definite sadness was easily read on the FBI agent’s face. “Are you positive? After running all over the country and

getting shot, why not recover here? We could listen to JJ play his music. Maybe find some more clues into the Mardi Gras ...”

She was about to say ‘massacre’ but caught herself- ‘event.’”

Another pause. “We were a good team.”

Doc smiled again. “Professionally, or personally?”

Miranda asked if she could sit beside him on the edge of his bed. “I like the way you think. Through it all, these last few months were exhilarating. You sparked something in me that I have not felt in a very long time. Benjamin Brash – I like you.”

“Miranda. The thought had crossed my mind. Bryce, Sarah, Dickie, and now you, are all important to me. But the city has such difficult memories. My wife, to a long and painful disease. And my Collette—the remaining bright light that was going to bring life back to an empty house—murdered. And with Jerry dead, so are the leads. I don’t think I have it in me to press on.”

Miranda saw Bryce and his wife in the lobby. Sarah was still harboring anger at the jeopardy Doc was put in. Bryce was a bit more pragmatic. “Ignore her”, he said reassuringly.” She will get over it. All’s well that ends...

Sarah cut him off. “Lucky!”

Miranda then asked about JJ.

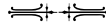
Bryce resumed the current state -of -affairs. “He’s fine. I do have my work cut out for me. A deal is a deal. Come hell or high water I’m going to get Tulane to fund his clinic as an outreach program. Also working on getting the state board to grant him a license to practice legitimately. It’s worthy, agreed?”

“That’s great.”

“His disease is progressing. I’m praying that he can get some pleasure out of his remaining days. Sarah is going to reach out to his family. With hopes of a reconciliation. Any shot – no pun intended- that Doc will stay in NOLA?”

“I tried. He’s not having it. Maybe you can do better. You have history.”

With that FBI Agent Miranda Jayne Montgomery exited the hospital and drove to FBI headquarters. Passing an antique car, she thought of Doc’s old Morgan, and him. Shaking her head she pushed her foot down on the accelerator. Paperwork. Lots of paperwork.



Doc’s favorite couple stepped off the elevator and opened the door to his room. Sarah gave him a hug, which was a combination of love and relief. “Will you stay with us while you recover?”

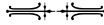
“No thanks. Sell the house on Audubon Place. I’m never setting foot there again. I’ll let you know where you can send me the proceeds from the sale.”

Sarah could not hold it in any longer. “What about Miranda?”

“What about her?”

“Come on, Ben. Even I can see you have feelings for her. It could be a new start. Bury the past. Be with people who love you.”

Benjamin Brash MD. Former Chief Medical Examiner of Orleans Parish, Louisiana stared out the window, as if he was already gone. “Another place-another time.”



Miranda met Sarah for lunch at the New Orleans Tennis Club - where it all began for them. “I wanted him to stay. I was hoping for leads into the Mardi Gras Massacre. Also hoping that the time together would further strengthen our bond—professionally, but most of all personally.” She admitted to Sarah that despite age, he was a force of nature. She had fallen for him.

“Miranda, I am no FBI profiler, but it was pretty obvious.”

Sarah also wanted her Ben to find a new life, and renewed happiness. After her best friend succumbed to disease, she became the surrogate mom his daughter, later to be tragically killed. She was going to do her best now to try and make happiness happen again for Benjamin Brash.

Together, Sarah and Miranda decided to make one last pitch to keep him where they thought he belonged.

Entering the Medical Center, they made their way to the floor where Doc was recovering. The room was empty. Only a letter remained.

Denouement and Legacy

Sarah Bess Kohl Teller took control of the denouement. A final team dinner and a reading of the letter, left behind by Benjamin Brash.

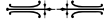
As arrangements were being made, she could not shake the emotional ride of the last few months, and the part she played – both deliberate and inadvertent. *Her husband's shocking discovery at the medical school reunion, followed by the fear that her best friend's husband was the initial prime suspect. The chance meeting with the FBI agent who betrayed her trust—but then became an ally. Then, there was the frantic call to Doc's lead investigator and confidant. It was like a rising tide overflowing the banks of the Mississippi and then receding.*

O'Neil. The long time Touro family waiter at Antoines was once again preparing the private Proteus Dining Room. Sarah's sadness was obvious.

“Everything okay, Mrs. Teller. I got it all right?”

“Absolutely. Just the way the Doc liked it. In fact, please set a place for him.”

Both O'Neil and Sarah smiled, knowing the seat would remain empty.

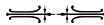


Sarah welcomed them. Glasses were raised. She nodded to Bryce.

“Before Sarah reads the letter, it is only befitting that we honor the memory of Jeffrey Arlade, Eduardo Duponce, Joeseoph D’Alos, and Marlon Everson. Murdered members of the 509 Cohort. May they rest in peace.”

Bryce then cast eyes directly to a very sad FBI agent.

In turn Miranda spoke. “Jerome – Jerry- Auerbach is dead. But we still have much to learn. Not only about these senseless sociopathic killings, but also about his relationships with white supremacists. There seemed a connection to the Mardi Gras Massacre. If it somehow involved the death of Collete, I will find it. I owe it to Ben.”



Sarah opened the letter. With a shaky voice she began to read.

“To my friends:

They say that time heals all wounds.

I want you all to find the time to heal.

I want you to move forward.

I wish I could be a part of that process.

But it cannot happen!

The Hypocritical Oath

The city that befriended me no longer brings warmth to me. Only the cold reality of loss. Loss of my wife. Loss of my daughter.

Bryce- *You must keep your part of the bargain. JJ deserves the second chance we promised. Get funding for his clinic. Use your influence to get him the license to practice legitimately. We abandoned him in our selfish youth. Amends need to be made. He was part of our 509 cohort. You survived. He survived. We kept Pam and PJ alive as well.*

Sarah- *You have always been there for me. Without you Collette would never have grown into the beautiful woman she was. You were the best surrogate after Margo's passing.*

You need to do two things for me.

Find a way for JJ to reconcile with his family in Pennsylvania. He should not depart this world without them knowing how much he has given to this community, and to us.

You have also forged a friendship with Miranda. Keep it.

Dickie- *My most trusted ally and confidant during my tenure in the Medical Examiner's Office – and throughout this ordeal. Without you, it would not have ended the way it did. I will miss you. Work with Miranda to let the other families who suffered loss from the wrath of Jerry know that we found the truth. Help Miranda follow leads. Maybe Collette will find peace.*

Miranda- *speaking of Dickie- he would make a great addition to your team. He will never let you down.*

I will never forget you. Another place. Another time. I believe there could have been something for us. Although I just cannot be there, I want to offer you something of me.

When Margo was diagnosed, and before her treatments, we stored embryos. We had hope. I know you long for a family. It cannot be with me—but it can be with a part of me.

Bryce is the leading expert in infertility. If there is a way to give you a family, it would be under his care. Nothing would make me happier. That would be a legacy and a forever bond for us.

I have left, to forget New Orleans. I will never forget all of you.

Again, glasses were raised. This time to toast a true leader, and a friend.

“Au Revoir, Doc. Bon Voyage.”

Epilogue

The Aftermath

Acceptance is the final stage of grief. Bryce, Sarah, Dickie, and Miranda all had reasons for Doc to return to his adopted city. Some had even hoped he would resume a career. After all he was a legend in the New Orleans medico-legal community.

None of that was to be.

Time stops for no one.

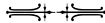
Bryce Teller lived up to his promise. At the commencement ceremony for the current graduating class, Jason James Vetter was granted an honorary degree from Tulane Medical School. He then was given permission to take the state licensing exam. He passed with ease.

With the backing and funding from the University and the city, JJ's clinic grew and prospered, to help the indigent and the displaced.

Sarah Teller made a trip to the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania. She was able to tell the story of JJ's involvement in stopping a serial killer, and all the good work he was doing for the city of New Orleans. The family was given a paid trip to see JJ receive his degree – and make peace.

The house on Audubon Place brought in a good sale price. After all, it was the residence of not only a prominent and historic New Orleans family, but also of the former Chief Medical Examiner. Sarah had the funds placed in escrow.

Richard Brennan now works hand in hand with agent Montgomery and the FBI. Together they are contacting the Citadel and TMI regarding their mysterious deaths.



Miranda Jayne Montgomery continues to probe for information regarding the 'Mardi Gras Massacre'. Her free time is often spent parked outside Doc's former home on Audubon Place, deciding if she is ready to be a mother.

She has not given up on Benjamin Brash. She is a profiler. If any leads are promising, she will find "the Doc" and together they will bring him closure.

Then who knows?